Negotiating the Other:
Marginalized racial groups
and narratives of Canada

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Museums are important public sites for the mediation and authentication of heritage knowledge. But as authoritative sites, what is presented and what is not can have a major impact on how a society sees itself. In Canada, the state and the museum community have formally acknowledged the changing demographics of its citizens and the contested nature of national identity. But while museums have taken some measures to build bridges with marginalized racial communities, embedded bias is revealed upon closer analysis of exhibition practice. This paper asks: where do these groups fit within the institutional construction of national heritage and identity? How is communal heritage knowledge produced and represented, and how do people make sense of and internalize that knowledge? How does the communicative process inherent in museum exhibition-making affect the construction of heritage of such groups? And, how might institutional processes be altered to enable museums as more democratic public spaces of knowledge construction that make possible *new* articulations of heritage, identities and citizenship? My paper examines the evolution of a particular case study, an exhibition developed by the department of Canadian Heritage about the Underground Railroad developed by an active committee of African Canadians. The paper explores how this exhibition process both built bridges with non-typical knowledge producers, and made public aspects of history once not considered a central to Canadian community identity. The story of the conception, development, installation and use of this exhibit casts light on how heritage meanings are negotiated, produced, consumed and reconstructed through an interplay of dominant and marginalized groups. Key to this paper is a discussion of *negotiation* and *expression* of collectivity as essential to the identity formation, citizenship and democratic practice.

Through their exhibitions, museums and heritage sites offer highly selective portrayals of society. What is exhibited, what is not exhibited and how it is exhibited at these sites can have a major impact on how society legitimizes certain versions of history and society – authenticating who belongs and who is 'othered'. Museum display is a public act, a performance about social identity, and its public-ness makes it consequential. Public exhibitions are texts that have meaning, but they are also stages on which political relationships unfold. Who gets to speak on this stage have historically been the well-educated or well-positioned few – they were spaces of white culture. How might non-white minorities gain access to these spaces, not just as outsiders being allowed in by white culture, but as producers, subjects and users in their own right? This paper explores one particular museum exhibit on the Underground Railroad – the escape by thousands of fugitive slaves from the U.S. to Canada in the mid-1800's – which was developed by Canada's National Historic Sites agency and a committee of African Canadians. Displayed from 2002 to 2005 in Toronto, this exhibition was an institutional attempt both to build bridges with non-typical knowledge producers, and to broaden the national narrative to encompass aspects of history once not considered central to Canadian community identity. The broader research project studied the entire circuit of communication – the conditions of production, the exhibit as text, and conditions of reception. This paper aims to cast some light on the process through which the African-Canadian committee made use of this public stage, negotiated heritage meanings, and created both a representation and a forum.

The exhibition, called *Underground Railroad, Next Stop Freedom*, had a unique history. It was sited at Canada's largest museum, the Royal Ontario Museum, but developed by a national government agency, National Historic Sites. It was created using a consultative committee of African-Canadians; it told a non-mainstream story; it employed 'object theatre' technologies not normally found in traditional museums, and it attracted minority, non-white audiences who rarely set foot within museum walls.

Since the 1970's, there has been considerable struggle within Canadian museums to include ethnic minorities in the national vision but by and large, non-white minorities - non-Europeans - were rarely included in the mix. When they were, there were sometimes embarrassing results, for example the Royal Ontario Museum's controversial exhibit *Into the Heart of Africa*. In that case, violent protests erupted over what was interpreted as a racist representation. National Historic Sites had, until the late 1990's, only one national designation devoted to Black history - a single plaque commemorating the Underground Railroad erected in 1928, despite the continuous presence of people of African descent in Canada since the 1600's. The Underground Railroad exhibit was instigated in December 1998 as one of several new commemorations across Canada about African-Canadians in history. National Historic Sites, for the first time, decided to use what it saw as a more inclusive, collaborative approach – African-Canadians were invited to sit at the table and formed the majority on the project planning team. Interviews with committee members revealed an interesting dynamic of power that evolved both among the participants and with the agency as the project became politicized and the articulation of 'authentic' heritage became a thing of negotiation. This paper will outline some of this struggle involved in 'making' public knowledge, then compare their intentions with to how visitors actually responded to the exhibit.

The questions of 'why' and 'what' to represent involved prolonged argument, over a two-year period. Committee members had to move from a multitude of personal points of view to construct something quite different – a public display of collective identity. The committee members possessed a complex mass of identities, allegiances, and power relationships – a range of hyphenated Blackness. One committee member, for example, described herself as Canadian, Caribbean, hetero-female, feminist, African, celebrity, historian, academic and a single mom. But the construction of a 'public face', projected for public consumption,

involved both suppression and overemphasis of certain ideas or perspectives. While committee members, on one hand, reacted against a stereotypical identity imposed by white culture, on the other hand all felt a need to speak in a unitary fashion for a hypothetical Black community, and to present a unified public face. What emerged was a position that seemed to stress an anything-but-white kind of perspective – an expression of voice as *not* the expert or authoritative white curatorial voice. The dynamic and negotiations that resulted in an anything-but-white strategic identity reflected the shared interest of the participants to portray a history where Blacks exercised agency. The institution had imagined a straightforward commemoration that would show Canada as a liberal nation that rescued slaves. But, for the African Canadians on the committee, the exhibit took on important objectives of achieving respect and asserting active *history-making* by people of colour – not as victims or charity-cases of whites.

But by focusing on positive Black agency, and avoiding stories that victimized, the question of ongoing racism in Canadian society, starting with the presence of slavery in early Canada, was correspondingly downplayed. Negotiations instead focused on *which* story of Black agency to communicate through the exhibit – famous people and public events, or, heroic day-to-day lives of the Everyman? The *constructedness* of history became apparent to committee members as they tried to transform their sense of lived heritage into a formal public account of Canadian history. What was *not* to be exhibited, not put on stage was subject to heated debate. And in the end, the group chose a particular, positive framing, a performance that smoothed out the edges, simplified, glorified and mythologized, rather than dwelling on the gritty or difficult reality. This management of a mainstream public face emphasized a 'rags to riches' story, a dream of freedom in a new land, and the creation of a Black culture in Canada that was 'superior' to that in the U.S. A few committee members did interpret this as a 'domestication' of identity to allow its acceptance in broader society – 'Uncle Toming' in American vernacular – a derogatory image of working for and within an exploitative system. And, in the end, one committee member quit over this decision.

To convey this particular narrative, the consultative committee pushed for a storytelling exhibit mode called an 'object theatre', with a holographic female narrator in a dramatic, sound-and-light-show, theatre setting. While this technique is firmly rooted in the heritage exhibit tradition of National Historic Sites, this object theatre would be installed in Canada's flagship Royal Ontario Museum, which tends to employ the object-text-and-panel approach. It looked at the escape of many slaves over the border and their urban experiences in Toronto through the eyes of a holographic Deborah Brown, a real woman who fled slavery in Maryland in the 1850's.

How this presentation communicated was evaluated in two ways, by doing a semiotic 'reading', and by analyzing how audiences received the exhibit. The reading cannot be elaborated here, except to reinforce that visual design choices had a large impact on both connoted and obtuse communication, especially within this immersive, experiential media form. The choice of settings, objects, images, characterizations, inherent effects of media and the positioning of the audience in relation to the exhibit all reinforced the celebratory, Everyman tone. By directing the audience, by showing objects and images life-size, by immersion in an exciting environment, and by conveying an emotional personal experience, the object theatre controlled the gaze.

To compare the intentions of the committee with audience responses to the exhibit, participant observation, questionnaires, and informal conversation were used over a ten-day period to gauge reactions. I found that the viewing of the exhibit was a process of reception made complex by the media form, but also and importantly by the diversity of motives and backgrounds audience members brought to the experience, and their active production of meaning.

The media form deeply affected most visitors. Regardless of age, most people stayed, absorbed, in the object theatre right through to the end of the 25 minute show. Visitors cited two major sensory impacts: an attention-grabbing enthrallment and an immersive conversation. Audience attention was arrested by dominating the senses, by showing objects life-size and in three dimensions, and by immersion in an environment. And, audiences were drawn into a sensation of reality through the attentive narrator, a life-sized video projection. Sitting in the dark, the viewers engaged with the narrator who seems to address them as individuals. The audience not only gave the presentation its undivided attention, but left the theatre with a sense that this story was authentic.

How audiences responded to the meaning conveyed by the exhibit seemed to be expressed in three ways. Some relayed what they saw as the basic facts of the historical events; others cited the personal story of the narrator as the underlying message, and a third group offered a more philosophical or political summary like the injustice of slavery. There was clearly a difference in these readings based on race, and, to a certain extent based on age. Understandings seemed to be positioned along a continuum from an 'alien' framing, or history of the Other at one extreme, to a 'parallel' framing, or personal memories, on the other end. While most respondents were somewhere in the middle, positioning at the two extremes depended on race. White audience members tended towards an alien framing, most strongly voicing this in one of two ways: expressing the liberal view of how nice it was that Canada helped the slaves, or, voicing moral outrage that the show's positive perspective ignored the struggles of Blacks. Black respondents tended to adopt a strong parallel framing. All but two of the Black respondents specifically applauded the upbeat, celebratory tone. The only voices *protesting* the celebratory tone were young people of both genders, in their twenties, and all of these, except one couple, were white. They criticized the cosy, well-dressed pioneer image of the central character, as one said, "re-invented, fictionalized and caricatured."

So while audience members had differing readings of this exhibit, I would suggest that this was more about who *they* were and what baggage they brought to the experience. That a white person could read this as "Canada did good" as opposed to a black person "Deborah did us proud" versus a young white person who says "this is a whitewash," is notable. The exhibit affected them deeply but in ways that seemed to reinforce their pre-existing beliefs and mythologies, whether of nationalism, or the noble black slave, or, societal oppression.

This account of the negotiations around the fugitive slave exhibit illustrates the difficulties inherent in trying to bring about a more democratic way of enacting group identities through museum exhibits. Did it disrupt or challenge what and how historical narrative gets displayed in museums, how people comprehend what is their heritage, and what is legitimized as heritage? While the disruption of 'white' ways of meaning-making – ways of knowing, showing and seeing – were important to this committee, new problems emerged. This exhibit seemed to be guilty of "mainstreaming," the legitimizing of an élite view of success that celebrates only one perspective of a complex story. While there were complex articulations and contestations in committee, the in-public performance was a cleansed view of 'safe' Black culture that minimized negative political overtones. By playing this game, was this committee simply 'managing' difference, consigning racism to the past, and creating a new, mythologized version of Black heritage? While public displays in sites like museums have the power and authority to signify and redefine identities, these 'mainstreaming' practices can inherently negate this power.

Audiences, for their part, are not able to see the conditions of production – the negotiations and decisions – behind a representation. They must judge the text, or in this case the theatre presentation. This is an inherent problem in exhibit-making: audiences do not see the negotiation and complexity of production, only the generalized representation. In this case, the storyline and media form deeply affected audiences, but they seemed to rely on pre-

existing attitudes in negotiating what was communicated and did not display any change in attitude when they left.

So can a media form like an exhibition, which seems to simplify and purify complex narratives and reinforce existing bias, possibly be transformative? I think the potential here lies in focusing on *process*, on the negotiations themselves, not the final representations. For example, I cannot discount that for the members of the consultative committee in this project, the process *was* transformative. The committee room became a neutral meeting place where a diverse group of African-Canadians could assemble, share, disagree, come up with solutions about what heritage meant to them. Committee members have since gone on to actively participate in other heritage-defining African-Canadian projects. One woman recently received a Governor General Award nomination for other ground-breaking historical research into minority culture. This process of engagement is important.

For National Historic Sites, this was a new *process* of exhibit planning they had not previously attempted. Staff had to learn how to negotiate siting, content and medium with a committee of amateurs. And this initiated a process of other Black history designations, done again in consultation, and some attempts to hire African Canadian staff as managers and historians. On a national scale it reinforced a new Systems Planning process that recognizes other versions of heritage.

While the effect of this exhibit on audiences cannot be said to be transformative, what was engendered was a basic level of awareness about Black history as part of a national narrative. For example, white visitors emerged almost unanimously saying "I had no idea there were Blacks in Canada back then." Only three individuals in this study seemed to have their ideas challenged or transformed – three Black children and teens took to heart that this story *could have been theirs*. "I could have been a slave" was their chilling response.

But what was missing was an interaction or negotiation between those highly engaged people on the committee, and those viewers who came to the exhibit. How can audiences somehow see and appreciate the complexity of the struggle the committee had? Audiences might have been initially moved and excited, but is it possible to keep the momentum going? The process of production was invisible to viewers who had no recourse to enter a dialogue with those who spoke the message.

Collaborative efforts like this case study might have the potential to create multi-vocal exhibits that bring hidden complexity of identity, community and nations into view. But how to truly engage a sense of *exchange* between producers and viewers is the focus of my continued research. It is here that the process to renegotiate, redefine and represent who belongs in a national community will have a more lasting effect. An acceptance of internal contradictions rather than a reliance on bland, univocal positioning; an emphasis on process not product; and a return to face-to-face modes of communication are all possibilities for a richer, more nuanced exploration of heritage in the museum setting. We must look at ways institutions can perform, enact, engage and produce heritage as a process or a forum that bridges or facilitates more effectively those with stories to tell and those wanting to engage with that heritage or offer their own narratives on the public stage.

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