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If the Museum is the Gateway, who is the Gatekeeper?

Bernadette Lynch

Head of Education, The Manchester Museum

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When a museum curator was asked recently to define his role in the museum, he answered without hesitation, 'I work with people to claim back pride in their past, recognise their role in shaping the present, and engender the knowledge, power and confidence to change the future'.¹ This is 'social inclusion', in its current interpretation, in action. But how free are museums to make it a reality? What is it that prevents people of all cultures and socio-economic backgrounds from fully accessing the power of the object? While claiming it has reformed, the museum has consistently appointed itself to define what is permissible engagement with objects within it. If we are to examine the limitations this imposes on real social inclusion, we must first re-examine what lies behind the institutional prohibition of a fully inter-cultural exploration of a museum's objects.

We might go further to ask, why should museums include the 'excluded'? Charles Saumarez Smith, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, questions the use of museums as 'instruments of social amelioration...those who visit [museums] don't want them to be used instrumentally. They want them to be open-ended, under-programmed places for individual experience'.² So why make the effort to be engaging, interactive and inclusive?

In 1840, The Manchester Natural History Society, which formed The Manchester Museum, was short of cash and so, according to the minutes of their February meeting, opened the Museum to the public. The police were asked to be present in order to protect the 'Property of the Society'. In the next minutes of 14th February, the Chief Constable and his officers were officially thanked for keeping all in order by allowing admission to 'no more than ten at a time'.³ Some claim that social inclusion agendas in museums are no different today - created to address dropping attendance figures during a funding crisis, but in no way threatening the collections. Despite best intentions, how legitimate are claims currently made in support of 'social inclusion' and 'access'? How useful are these terms, or do the terms, and the newest initiatives used to address them, erect more subtle barriers than the ones they purport to eliminate?

The past is everywhere a battleground of rival attachments. Consultation with diverse communities in Manchester has already highlighted the need for change in content, approach and interpretation within The Manchester Museum. Museums need the help of 'other' perspectives in order to bring about this change. The Manchester Museum's community partners have challenged the concept of 'access' itself. As one community leader on the Museum's Community Advisory Panel put it, 'Access to what and by whom? Who decides?' Furthermore, 'access' and 'inclusion' suggest that the Museum, as gatekeeper 'allows' access to something so valuable as to be critically unchallenged. Even a university museum surrounded by the cultural capital of the university, must allow, it was pointed out, that 'access' may include access for voices that may prove to be critical of the university's own assumptions and perceptions of knowledge and truth.

In this paper I will attempt to take a critical look at social inclusion policy and practice in museums. To do this, I will take one case-study - the 'Telling Our Lives' refugee women's project at The Manchester Museum - and briefly analyse it in relation to the Museum's past and present ideology and practice. I will then go on to examine the issues raised in the 'Telling Our Lives' project in terms of the ethics of oral history practice in museums. Finally, I will examine the possible benefits of social inclusion work both for museums and for communities.

When we think of the terms 'included' or 'excluded', we think of a place, a nation, perhaps a national or cultural community with a boundary: a place set against other places. As Salman Rushdie has claimed, we are all becoming migrants belonging nowhere in particular. Through wandering, we find ourselves drawn to places, relationships, situations, where we might be allowed to negotiate a workable identity - for our identity is frequently in transition and we look for that which completed us in the past. We trawl through old picture albums, sift through attic drawers, riffle through the detritus of life in search of clues, for something we can take hold of that says, 'Here I am, this is me'. And it is with this unexpressed, unrealised, quest in mind that we wander, half-asleep, into museums.

Within The Manchester Museum's current mission statement, Access and Learning policies, social inclusion is prominent. Through community

consultation, priority has been given to working with women and young people from excluded communities and in particular with socially, culturally and linguistically isolated women in the area of Manchester surrounding the Museum. According to recent research, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in Britain are three times as likely as white women to be housewives or full-time mothers. Only 54% of Pakistani women and 40% of Bangladeshi women speak English fluently, compared to 75% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi men. Over 97% of 16-24 year olds speak English fluently in each ethnic group - except that one in eight young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are not fluent in English. ⁴ For women of all ages among recent refugees and asylum seekers, such as Somalis, Kurds or Afghans, these figures are, of course, much higher. Consequently, their social isolation is even more acute, leading to mental depression.

Telling Our Lives

The 'Telling Our Lives' refugee women's project initially came about for reasons of emotional health. Somali and Sudanese women, through area health workers, identified their inability to talk about their cultural heritage as a prime factor in their depression. They felt isolated by their lack of proficiency with the English language and their inability to talk to their English-speaking children. The University of Manchester School of Medicine's Primary Care Unit, and the leader of a local Somali refugee women's group, together approached the Museum. The Museum later involved the English Language Centre at the University.

The refugee women are 'displaced'. There are many nuanced meanings of 'place', involving belonging, association and community. Being 'at home' or 'in place' has a range of meanings but universally refers to an environment in which individuals are embedded. This is normally overseen at the top by a superstructure and at the base by a whole lot of methodological attitudes. When we speak of 'included' or 'excluded' in reference to museums, we are referring to exclusion from a culture, a museum hegemony, and an environment.

For refugees of war, such as the Somali refugee women, 'home' is an elusive concept. Khadra (full name not listed for reasons of confidentiality) walked to a camp in Ethiopia for 20 days with her four children to escape the war in Somalia. After four years there, living on one meal a day with no other identity, as she says, but that of another 'refugee' among many, they were sent, through the efforts of a brother living in England, tickets on a Lufthansa flight. Frankfurt airport with everything closed on a Christmas Day is a strange introduction to the culture of western Europe. After that, there were three unannounced relocations in England by the Home Office before being settled in Longsight, Manchester. It has, she says, taken her eight years to feel any sense of 'home' in Britain. Ask Khadra where home is, and she will say 'Somalia'. Ask her to explain this home to you and she will bring you an object - something she carried with her on that arduous journey, like a talisman. Her object says: 'This is me'.

Culture refers not only to where one belongs, but also to what one possesses. Museums know this well. The idea of 'possessing' the collection

was deeply embedded in the language of museology from its earliest inception. In December 1824, ivory admission tickets to the early Manchester Museum collections were issued to those designated as 'members' by virtue of belonging to the prestigious Manchester Natural History Society. Members of the Museum were from then on, for a period of time, referred to as 'proprietors'.⁵ Later the Museum was to add to this language of possession, as in other Victorian museums, with the introduction of the title of 'keeper' of the collections (in reference to its academic/ curatorial staff) - a practice significantly unaltered to this day.

Professor Thomas H. Huxley, the renowned biologist, in his early designs for the Manchester Museum's galleries, proposed rows of glass cases full of objects, behind which the 'keepers' would work on their collections, hidden from public view. According to his vision, the public, in ambling down the centre aisles of the galleries, would occasionally witness a white gloved hand, much like a conjuror's, emerging from the back of the case. This was the keeper extracting an object, which would presumably become the subject of academic study and contemplation. It would be returned just as inexplicably at a later point.⁶

When Suzanna Taverne resigned as Managing Director of the British Museum in September 2001, she was quoted in *The Times* as saying, 'There is a priesthood of curators, who look after the relics. There's this notion that only they can be the intermediaries between the relics and the public'.⁷ Huxley's design, though never realised, is a useful metaphor for the continuing prohibition exercised by most museums in the development of gallery exhibits and displays which restricts imaginative, intellectual and emotional access to objects. Until we tackle the prohibitions surrounding exhibit development and interpretation, social inclusion initiatives are still playing in the margins of museums, not within the main text.

Bennett suggests that political effort should be devoted to transforming the relations between museum exhibits, their organisers and the museum visitor:

*'...it is imperative that the role of curator be shifted away from that of the source of an expertise whose function is to organise a representation claiming the status of knowledge and towards that of the possessor of a technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within it.'*⁸

The museum becomes an instrument of public debate. To achieve Bennett's model of this new curator/ facilitator, there is a gate yet to be negotiated.

It was Foucault who helped museums and other cultural institutions understand that ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely, their configurations of power, also being studied. With the help of communities, we need to examine the academic authority of the museum. Echoing Foucault, Said adds:

'...there is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated. It is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it

*establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions and judgements it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analysed.*⁹

For this purpose, museum advisory panels have been established in recent years to include representatives from communities and academics who pursue a post-colonial museum interpretation. Sometimes such panels are set up in relation to the development of particular exhibitions but, more frequently, their purpose is to contribute to a general analysis of the museum's interpretation. In one early discussion in The Manchester Museum's community advisory panel, the panel was unanimous in stating that the museum's first priority is to 'never presume'. By this we may understand that the museum should never presume it knows, knows best, knows everything. Other issues they raised were of 'hidden' histories and the potential for the museum to be a place where the un-represented and the mis-represented could have a voice. Behind this is the notion that while dominant ways of telling (his)story tend to privilege domination itself - that is telling the story 'from above' - histories as hidden or lived experience can often reveal much more about the intricate dynamics of power, interaction and dialogue.

For 'Telling Our Lives', the keeper assisted with research into the museum's ethnographic collection before the project began. This unearthed, amongst other intriguing Somali objects, a large collection of archival photographs from Italian Somaliland taken by an Italian photographer during the Second World War. Once the project was underway, the women, to their obvious amazement, were allowed to work with and even handle these photographs. They were encouraged to explain the photographs from their own perspective. There was a great deal of nostalgia for well-remembered or part-remembered landscapes and obvious pride in being able to tell something new to museum staff.

Museums and memory

People arrive at the museum gateway as seekers, intimidated, looking for something which they may have no language to express - perhaps looking for an affective experience through the objects they are presented with in that highly controlled and controlling space. It is not difficult to realise that these objects are standing for something, representing something else, and that the museum experience can be, by its very definition, a frustrating one. Greenblatt writes of the museum as a 'memorial complex', a cultural machine, 'that generates an uncontrollable oscillation between homage and desecration, longing and hopelessness, the voices of the dead and silence.'¹⁰ This is the stuff of suppressed memory that Freud alludes to in his paper on memory, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through'.¹¹

Does the museum, while pretending to help us remember, actually help us to forget? Thomas de Quincey, following a visit to The Manchester Museum in its earliest days, recorded the following observation: 'Heaven be praised! I have forgotten everything; all the earthly trophies of skill and curiosity...Nothing survives, except the humanities...'¹² It seems that we remember that which touches us.

The Museum would normally have provided anthropological text with the Somali photographs. In this case, there was none. The photographs arrived at the Museum, by donation, some years ago with no documentation other than 'Italian Somaliland', the date, and name of the photographer. The anthropologist, James Clifford writes that anthropological accounts (many of which find their way into museums) are, 'de-emotionalised, presented as apart from the observer who entered only as the independent witness, setting the scene and authenticating it'.¹³ In this case, the 'Telling Our Lives' project introduced emotion to museum interpretation.

The Somali photographs freed the women to speak; the women freed these anonymous photographs so that they suddenly had meaning. When faced with the photographs, these very reticent women had a great deal to say. The memories came flooding back. The subject of one photograph suggested a girlhood of herding and milking goats. 'I always hated it!' laughed Fatima. The trees and camels inspired a burst of singing related to the women's times spent, after working all day, sitting together to henna and sing, under a tree for shade. Engaging with the photographs also inspired memories of loss - leaving homes, losing everything, always worrying about someone missing. (Most of the women are in Britain without their husbands). As Jette Sandahl, curator at the National Museum of Denmark writes, we have opportunities to share and experience in the museum our, '...stories of the darkness and light, of the night, the longings, dreams, joy, the humour and fears, the labour, the rest, the grief. At its best and most courageous, museum work mirrors this kind of ambivalence and emotional reality.'¹⁴

The Somali women were given disposable cameras to take home to record their own most precious objects, so as to be able to talk about them at the Museum. One woman photographed her curtains, which she'd made herself, another a bowl she brought from Somalia. Some were photographs of everyday things assembled together on a table. The Japanese have a term 'kawai-soo', meaning the pity of things, the sadness of the private, personal lives revealed in everyday objects. Amongst the photographs was one of a hairbrush belonging to a Muslim woman whose head is always covered when in public. Laid out on the table, these everyday objects are eloquent in the sense that life can be seen as a collection of 'stills', and nowhere more than the 'still lives' collected in museums.

Like the borders of land or place, there are boundaries which define what is intrinsic or extrinsic to a culture. It is not just people but ideas, perceptions, interpretations, emotions and everyday experiences that are, more often than not, excluded from the culture of the museum. Sandahl has discussed the fact that:

*'In our homes all of us own things of a symbolic value that have often lost all connection to the original function. The objects as well as the emotions around them may be inherited from previous generations, or we may have "cathected" them in our own lives and contexts ... Objects become symbols or metaphors for specific activities, epochs, situations, relationships in people's real lives, and as such they "recognise" objects in museums.'*¹⁵

D.W. Winnicott, in *Playing and Reality* wrote, 'Maximally intense experiences take place in the area between the material and the fantasy.'¹⁶ According to Ludmilla Jordanova, 'The "knowledge" that museums facilitate has the quality of fantasy because it is only possible via the imaginative process...objects are the stepping-stones towards fantasies, which can have aesthetic, historical, macabre or a thousand other attributes.'¹⁷ It can be argued that most of life is lived in an emotional 'no man's land' between material reality and fantasy. This in-between state is what may have been evoked in the Somali women by the photographs.

Oral history

One must always ask, however, is such work 'social inclusion' or social intrusion? In much of the world, the organisation and dissemination of knowledge, as in Somalia, is based on an oral as opposed to a written tradition. The 'Telling Our Lives' women's project at The Manchester Museum is essentially, by definition, an oral history project as all of it is recorded and saved on video. There is a growing awareness that oral history work in museums is a process that needs analysis, fraught as it is with unequal relationships and questions of control. 'It's hard to be critical of something that's seen as a very good thing', remarked one oral historian recently. Oral history work has a long history in museums and is consequently, due to social inclusion agendas, experiencing a revival. We must be ever cautious against what Passarini calls the 'facile democratisation' and 'complacent populism' of oral history projects which encourage people to 'speak for themselves', but which do not see how memories might be influenced by dominant histories and thus require critical interpretation.¹⁸ That critical interpretation can only be done in collaboration with the women themselves.

The project's original aim was to look at stress reduction and 'well-being'. At an international Visitors Studies conference at the Science Museum in London in 1993, Lisa C. Roberts made a plea for 'experimentation on methods of evoking and measuring the affective domain', in order to 'lay out a framework for thinking about affect'.¹⁹ In 'Telling Our Lives', we have begun to look at the psychological framework of the project in discussion with the women and with advice from Leeds University Psychological Observation Studies. We are experimenting with methods that involve the group learning independence and self-reliance through taking control of the session evaluation, helping in the measurement of their own transformations, should they occur, over time. The project is now into Phase Two, with the addition of Sudanese, Afghani and Iranian women, on the suggestion of the Somalis. The most significant transformation is that the Somali women are taking control in 'initiating' the newly arrived women (refugees and asylum seekers) into using the museum.

We live in a society and work in institutions that privilege rational, cognitive forms of thought. As museum and gallery professionals, most of us have been trained and socialised to think and know in those ways. To talk about social inclusion initiatives through, for example, fostering *affective* learning is to run up against an entire epistemology that has shaped what we think and even how we think. While discussing unchanged and unchallenged

academic paradigms in *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal notes that 'fundamental challenges to disciplines tend to come from outside'.²⁰ In its small way, the Somali women's project has provided just that. This is what the 'excluded' can do for museums.

Yet, most museums continue to enjoy the authority of a dominant ideology: the structured expression of Western (European) rational ways of representing material culture and thought. Historically museums moved from the Renaissance *episteme*, as termed by Foucault, to the modern epistemology with the emergence of the modern sciences. Things ceased to be arranged as parts of taxonomic tables and came, instead, to be inserted into the flow of time, to be differentiated in terms of the positions accorded them within evolutionary series. It is this shift, as Bennett argues, that can best account for the discursive space of the public museum. Objects are arranged, to this day, as a part of evolutionary sequences (the history of earth, of life, of man, and of civilisation) which, as Bennett tells us, 'in their interrelations, form a totalising order of things and peoples that is historicised through and through'.²¹ The Manchester Museum classification system, begun by Professor Boyd Dawkins in the late 1800s, was based, as in many Victorian museums, on the two principles of Time and Evolution and founded around the evolutionary concept of 'progression'.²²

The Victorian museum provided a context for visitors to rehearse the ordering of social life, to 'civilise' themselves, 'treating the exhibits as props for a social performance aimed at ascending through the ranks, to help keep progress on path'.²³

Is the experience of the Somali women in the museum one of learning the social order and their place in it? Are they there to challenge or even disrupt it? Real social inclusion allows for questions to be asked that inevitably challenge the museum orthodoxy, at the very least through the introduction of new cultural perspectives. The Somali women know all about extinction; they fear the extinction of their personal and cultural memory. They came to us to ask for our help, as a sort of 'memory-house'. But they have come to a place, the museum, where the threat of extinction is all-pervasive. In the nineteenth century museum the prospect of extinction was posed in many ways; through the depiction of the history of life on earth in natural history displays and, of course, in the futures of non-existence that ethnographic displays projected for colonised peoples, such as the Somali and Sudanese. If the museum is about memory, it's also about memory-in-the-making, the living contribution to history on the part of all of us. The Somali women brought together their memories of Somalia, the museum's interpretation of Somalia, and the Somali refugees' lived experience within Britain today. The Somali women have taken their objects and stepped out of the glass case, claiming the right to express a living, breathing culture within the museum and the city. The challenge is for the museum to find ways to incorporate this into its interpretation.

Rethinking the museum

Culture, as in the museum, is a system of values 'saturating downwards almost everything within its purview', as Said has written, 'yet paradoxically culture dominates from above without at the same time being available to

everything and everyone it dominates... it moves downward from the height of power and privilege in order to diffuse, disseminate, and expand itself in the widest possible range...'24 The Manchester Museum's Annual Report for 1860-61 stated: 'To the educated families of Manchester and surrounding Towns, it must be of importance to have ready access to a building wherein is seen so much that elevates and expands and humanises the mind; whilst at the same time those with very limited means are not excluded.'

It adds that, despite being open to the public, the museum is not there 'to pander to a mere idle curiosity, but to make it subserve the purpose of being, to every person who wishes to obtain some knowledge of the structure of the earth and of the forms of animated existence.'²⁵ While rhetorically committed to 'self-improvement' for the working classes, the Museum's control of the gateway was total.

We must always remember that this museum culture, from the 1800s to the present day, is neither absolute nor neutral. It is the result of human action, human attitudes and beliefs. It cannot be divorced from ethics in terms of how it was created, how it continues to exist, and how it is used today. Instead of simply focussing, through social inclusion initiatives, on new methods of working with an existing idea, the museum must become a forum for working with communities to attempt to re-think the museum idea itself. In order to do this, it requires not only consultation with the museum's stakeholders, but a robust cross-disciplinary theoretical examination. A university museum has this potential.

It is perhaps obvious but always worth being reminded that unequal relationships exist between and within communities and countries. Misinformation and misunderstanding are rampant with regard to many issues. These prevent understanding and are dangerous, as has been shown in the recent riots in Oldham in the North of England. It is essential to learn about and from each other, and it is the responsibility of museums to address these issues. This is the fundamental project of social inclusion. The notion of 'mutuality' is increasingly central to the thinking, approach, and action of groups working on the ground within the many inter-cultural communities in Britain and could be adopted by museums to help undermine the inequalities that still exist behind social inclusion policies. However, if museums are genuinely interested in comprehension, we cannot separate from this the impact of national and international policies, mechanisms and institutions. The lack of coherence within these, as well as local conditions, must be comprehended and analysed. Museums do not exist in a vacuum and they cannot hope to play other than a small, but perhaps significant role, in addressing issues of exclusion. These terms, however, have a much wider resonance within economically 'excluded' communities, not only throughout this country but worldwide. As Jaya Graves of the Manchester based 'Southern Voices' - an inter-cultural advocacy group that promotes trans-cultural dialogue - reminds us: 'Sustainability, inclusion and global citizenship all figure highly on the National curriculum. More importantly, they are essential to our future.'

Museums must continue to ethically weigh the merits and examine the

language of 'social inclusion' and 'access' policies and initiatives, in the light of very real and valid questions of power and control. Museums cannot continue to set themselves apart, to play the role of gatekeeper allowing access but must enter into genuine creative partnerships between people in and out of the museum to our mutual benefit. It is imperative that the role of curator be shifted away from that of gatekeeper to collections, so that communities can begin to use resources to make statements within exhibitions. The museum, in order to succeed with social inclusion work, must articulate clear values and purposes that people can respond to. It is no longer possible to hide behind feigned authority. The museum has to be prepared to seek objectivity while recognising the essential subjectivity of human experience. In terms of social inclusion, the museum and its history of collecting and representation is its own best subject, one that museums must be unafraid to share with communities. In this way, the 'excluded' will push through an open gateway.

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Bernadette Lynch grew up in Ireland, is a Canadian citizen, and currently lives in England where she heads the Education Department at the Manchester Museum. For more than fifteen years she curated programmes and education-based exhibitions, heading education departments in museums in western Canada. She became involved in issues of social and cultural inclusion in Canadian museums, specifically in representation for Native peoples and was active in CAGE, Canadian Art Gallery and Museum Educators and in the Canadian Museums Association. She became involved in challenges to museum collecting policies in the form of articles, conference papers and theatrical 'dialogues'. She wrote and co-presented a play for museum professionals entitled 'Object Lessons', which she and her colleagues presented at professional and academic museum conferences in Canada, the U.S. and Great Britain. These debates led her to return to academic studies in order to explore a theoretical basis for this critique of museums. She is currently interested in issues related to 'social inclusion' agendas in museums in Britain and in the psychoanalysis of the museum encounter.

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