

Topic three: Corporeal memories - the values and dangers of remembering the body

This article examines the representation of the Middle Passage. A variety of media have responded to the difficulties of finding a means to place the Middle Passage in the minds of their audience. The reactions to these depictions have been diametrically opposed. Whilst some have found the representations liberating, conversely others have used these as a further means of oppression. The wider effect on society of portraying human bodies in pain on the slave ship is therefore assessed in this piece.

Representing the Middle Passage

The representations of the Middle Passage in various museums, literature and artworks have been variously lauded and denounced. The difficulty in portraying the horror, brutality, survival and strength of the forced transportation of the enslaved across the Atlantic is often considered to be beyond the means of our language and systems of communication. Even the ability to comprehend the physical and emotional trauma experienced by those captured and enslaved is thought by some commentators to be impossible. A number of museums have nevertheless attempted to challenge these notions by providing visitors with a depiction of the Middle Passage. These depictions usually focus upon remembering the pain and suffering of the human body: a corporeal memory. The previous displays at the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery in the Merseyside Maritime Museum and the Wilberforce House Museum, Hull, both drew visitors into a space where they were asked to contemplate the Middle Passage. Liverpool's display featured an empty mock-up of a ship which visitors could walk through, whilst the Wilberforce House Museum created a section of a slave ship complete with life-size dummies, and a soundtrack of sailors abusing the enslaved whilst the waves crashed against the ship. The new International Museum of Slavery in the Merseyside Maritime Museum also features an attempt to represent the Middle Passage. The hull-shaped, curved walls enclose the visitor as screens repeatedly show pictures of chains on bodies with blood and mucus covering the ship floor. Visitors to the museum have remarked upon the powerful and distressing nature of the representation. Whilst for some this consideration of the Middle Passage forms the most significant part of their visit, the wider effect on society of displaying and witnessing this display remains largely unquestioned. The social value and impact of representing the corporeal memory of the Middle Passage must be addressed. What does this memory mean for groups and communities within Britain and does this visceral memory form a means of recognition or another form of repression?



The reconstructed interior of the slave ship The Zong
(48KB)

Representation through suffering

The desire to 'feel' and 'touch the past' is often expressed by many visiting museums and commemorative sites. In the context of traumatic pasts this is usually thought to enable a greater connection with those who have suffered. Strength and self-definition can be drawn from connecting oneself to a painful history, either through a character or an event. This accessibility is highly important for those who use this period of history to draw upon for their own sense of selfhood and identity. To realise a connection with a history which contains suffering and pain is considered to state something not only about who and what we remember but also about who and what we are. Identities can be forged within complex and painful histories. The notion of victimhood is indeed highly significant in contemporary struggles for recognition, as to state association with those who have suffered is to reinforce claims of acknowledgement and respect. The ways in which complex and traumatic periods of history are presented to the public whilst highly problematic are also highly valuable in the formation of identity. How pain and suffering are communicated through museum displays is a complex issue as conveying notions of corporeality through texts, images and material culture can be subject to a variety of criticisms of essentialism, morality, titillation and authenticity. What is also of concern is how this visceral memory will be communicated to groups and individuals who do not access this period of history or particular character as important in their own construction of identity. What are the results of depicting a physical sense of the past to those who don't invest in that past?



The Middle Passage:
International Slavery
Museum, National
Museums Liverpool
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It might be considered in some respects that to enable the self and the other to join together in witnessing suffering might be a means to heal social divides; to provide an interhuman perspective rather than a specific, limited history. The manner in which this corporeal history is consumed however might contradictorily be used to further suppress and oppress a group or minority seeking to have their voices heard. During audience surveys conducted during the opening weekend of the International Slavery Museum, National Maritime Museum, Liverpool, a number of participants spoke of a desire for the museum to present 'the feel of slavery', the physical brutality of enslavement. Whilst a number of these were those who identified themselves with the African Diaspora, a substantial number were those who stated themselves to be 'white British.' These individuals also stated they 'knew Africa', that they had visited African countries several times and had seen the slave castles and market places. Whilst this might indicate a drive for understanding and a desire to make the pain, torture, rape and mutilation of slavery

prominent within society, the same interviewees also expressed, paradoxically, attitudes incompatible with such sentiments. Comments such as, 'blacks enslaved other blacks', 'the cotton plantations were better than the jungles of Africa' and, 'if it wasn't for slavery they would be a hundred, two hundred years in the past', were also expressed by the same individuals. The desire for, as one participant stated, 'to have the smell of blood', should therefore be considered rather less than a humanitarian gesture.

The desire for the representation of the corporeality of slavery within white British communities might be considered as a desire for entertainment and theatricality. A number of interviewees also mentioned the Jorvik Viking Centre in York as an example of what could have been done at the International Museum of Slavery. This particular museum has made a name for itself by presenting the sights and smells of Viking-age York. This concept of performance and theatricality is informative as it reveals wider social processes. The desire for a visceral display in museums depicting slavery derives perhaps not from a wish to empathise more with those who were enslaved, but from a motivation to negate the potential empowering memory that a display of the history and legacy of the slave trade might provide for those of the African Diaspora. Ironically, stating the need for more suffering to be displayed, to have the smells and sounds of slavery, or to have actors with chains and manacles around their bodies present for an audience forms a powerful counterpoint to claims of recognition for the brutality of enslavement.

Portraying a corporeal memory enables individuals to use the image of suffering and brutality to draw upon in present-day discourse. The bodies of the enslaved become nothing more than capable of carrying and communicating pain. Effectively, the images of horror are used to state that although the history of enslavement is being recognised and the histories and status of those of the African Diaspora publicised, the moment of weakness or pain has still been witnessed. In a sense it forms a means of oppression as this desire states that the suffering has still been observed; regardless of drives for self-definition the locus of power has still been stated. This interpretation of corporeal memory entails that the underlying meaning is that power was once asserted over another and that power still exists. This reflects the fear that some members of the white community in Britain feel concerning greater recognition of the complicity and debt of Britain regarding the history of African enslavement. It is an expression of power and dominance as the previously reassuring boundaries of society appear to be eroding.

Neurotic responses to the empowerment of others

The notion of theatricality and performance is especially important when considering this response to the corporeal memory of enslavement. Freud (2003) drew upon the same issues of theatricality in his methods of psychoanalysis as a means to examine the roots of the neuroses in his patients. This method of psychoanalysis focused on retrieving the repressed memories, fears and desires that were constricting individuals from operating in society. In literature and performance studies psychoanalysis has been used to examine particular scenes and dialogues and significantly the function of art in society. Freud (1997) himself wrote on the psychoanalysis of drama and the 'pity and fear' that Aristotle (1984: 2317) stated was evoked in the audience. Freud (1997: 87) stated that for drama or any form of performance for the audience the prime factor is "blowing off steam." Witnessing a performance, according to Freud, provides a means for the audience to briefly live the life of another, with the safety of the knowledge that we can always return to our



The Middle Passage:
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own situation. 'Being present as an interested spectator at a spectacle or play does for adults what play does for children, whose hesitant hopes of being able to do what grown-up people do are in that way gratified' (Freud 1997: 87-88). It is for this reason that Freud (1997: 87) uses the German word 'Schauspiel' meaning dramatic performance, with a hyphen "schau-spiel", separating the two components of the word, "schau" meaning spectacle and "spiel" meaning play.

Significantly Freud also points to what he termed 'psychological drama', a spectacle that represents the repressed desires in certain individuals. In this instance the dramatist portrays characters and situations which evoke the latent causes of neuroses of an individual or even wider society (Freud 1997: 91). Those in a state of neuroses find that witnessing such a performance breaks down the fragile system of repression which they've constructed. 'The spectator must be a neurotic, for it is only such people who can derive pleasure instead of simple aversion from the revelation and the more or less conscious recognition of a repressed impulse' (Freud 1997: 91). The neurotic therefore acts upon the performance where they witness their repressed fears and drives being acted out. The performance serves to bring these problems to attention, as reactions emphasise the individual's failure to accommodate and address these urges. Following this we can therefore ascertain that the desire to have a corporeal memory of enslavement for white British audiences may relate more to the repressed fears of loss of power. The 'desire' to witness the brutality of the slave trade is a means of reinstating the power and dominance of a particular group over another.

The aspiration to see and feel the past is beleaguered by more than questions of whether it is possible or morally correct to attempt to show the pain others experienced. It is hampered further, as it is accessed by others to construct a process to further repress those seeking to use that memory as a means of recognition.

Debate

This article raises a number of questions, amongst which are;

- Is it appropriate to find a means of representing the Middle Passage?
- What effect does the representation of the Middle Passage have on those who connect themselves to the African Diaspora and those who do not?
- How can the Middle Passage be portrayed to the public in a manner which can be accessed and accepted?

The arguments in this article are of interest to those involved in the representation of enslavement and the problems of historical memory. In responding to these questions correspondents should consider practical as well as theoretical alternatives. This discussion

point will also lead to a future study within Phase Three of the 1807 Commemorated project, to participate in this study please provide your own thoughts and experiences regarding the representation of the Middle Passage. This article should be thought of as a provocation for the visitors to 1807commemorated to challenge their own ideas and perceptions regarding the representation of the memory of abolitionism and enslavement.

Respond to this article email: arch-1807@york.ac.uk

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