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TELLING 'ANOTHER' STORY: WESTERN MUSEUMS AND THE CREATION OF NON-WESTERN IDENTITIES

Contemporary museums are 'among the most successful leisure venues in the world' (Falk 2009: 21). At the same time, they are cultural forums, where people's [hi]stories (understood both as reconstructed pasts and events) can be discussed in informal and public ways, and where personal memories are materialised and shared, through collections (Pearce 1998). This is particularly true when museum exhibitions are concerned with local communities and their history; indeed, museums and their collections become a remarkable resource for local communities, which may strengthen their sense of place, shared history, and identity.

The present paper is based upon the idea of Western museums as informal cultural forums. Specifically, it is concerned with Western museums, non-Western collections and the formation of local identity. I will argue that the formation of cultural identity can happen when a group engages (with museum collections) through their collective memories and [hi]stories; through objects and by providing opportunities for recollection and remembering, museums can capture and exhibit the most transitory, precarious and even difficult aspects of human life (Chen 2007).

I will assert that contemporary Western museums can be considered as places where both memory and history contribute to the process of remembering and identity formation, through objects, in a public and accessible way. In addition, I will underline the importance of museum collections in relation to community cohesion and to the re-definition and 'preservation' of different cultural identities in the current British social and cultural context.

Contemporary Western museums and the relationship between history and memory

In order to set the framework for the discussion, I would like first to define the concepts of 'history' and 'memory'. In the context of this paper, 'history' and 'memory' are considered as two complementary and yet different concepts; they are two matching aspects of the cultural

process of remembering and the one can implicate the other, without excluding it. Therefore, although bearing in mind their substantial differences, I intend to acknowledge the way that these differences can contribute to a more complete recollection, vision and representation of past events and object interpretation.

By and large, history as a discipline is based on written evidence of a pragmatic and often chronological description, 'constructed by a historian [a sort of re-teller], located at some considerable distance – … both personal and temporal - from the events or epoch being narrativized' (Gable and Handler 2000: 238). On the other hand, memory is mainly based on oral accounts and sources (which may include folklore) and presents a more personal and direct connection between the individual, events and objects; as Frisch points out, memory is 'living history, the remembered past that exists in the present' (Frisch 1990: xxiii). A further and conventional difference between history and memory is that history is considered to have a mainly academic connotation, in opposition to memory, which is the mere account of 'personally experienced events' and, therefore, does not have a primary, academic nature (Gable and Handler 2000: 238). However, by looking at events (and the objects that may symbolise them), both from an academic, historical perspective and from a 'memory perspective', we can gain not only a deeper insight into their historical and social context, but we can also stimulate a cultural awareness of them.[1] As for instance, in the case of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, where, throughout the three galleries ('Africans before Slavery'; 'Enslavement and the Middle Passage'; 'Legacy'), slavery is presented through objects and peoples' memories, not only as being a part of British history but also as a historical and social set of events that have led to a shared contemporary cultural heritage, in terms of stories, music, carnivals, and local traditions.

The museum, through its collections, [hi]stories and attached memories, stimulates the awareness of historical facts (e.g. how and why slavery happened; how it was terminated and what its legacy is), but also aims to strengthen the identity of the British black community and encourage awareness and desire to pass onto future generations the memory of a past that should not be forgotten but rather remembered in order to be avoided. In this museum, history has taken the form of personal memories (e.g. the memory of an ex-slave; the memory of a Black British

person currently living in Britain and whose ancestors were slaves), which 'can illuminate how individuals, ethnic groups, political parties, and cultures shape and re-shape [through time] their identities – as known to themselves and to others' (Thelen 1994: 1118).

History and memory not only contribute to the general knowledge of the past, but in socially constructed environments (such as museums) they can also help people to engage with their own past, stories, identity and historical heritage in order to develop a better understanding of the present; indeed, as Eviatar Zerubavel explains 'like the present, the past is to some extent also part of a social reality that, while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our own subjectivity and it is shared by others around us' (Zerubavel 1999: 81).

In museums, in order to bridge 'the strictly personal and the absolutely universal' histories and memories, the narratives (of events, of collections) should be made accessible and consumable by a wider public, who can then freely relate to and contribute to it in a more practical/effective way (Frisch 1990; Zerubavel 1999). However, how effectively are museums bridging personal and universal memories and histories, especially when they are dealing with non-Western groups and non-Western collections?

Between 1984 and 1992, the French historian Pierre Nora led a collaborative project, which examined the concepts of the French nation, nationalism, national identity, as well as the relationship between history and memory.[2] Since the outset of his work, Nora denounced a discontinuity between the past and memory: this discontinuity was determined by social conditions and was emphasised by 'an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a past that is gone for good' (Nora 1989: 7).

However, over the past twenty-five years, Nora noticed that 'every country, every social, ethnic or family group has undergone a profound change in the relationship it traditionally enjoyed with the past' (Nora 2002: 1); the respect for the past has been interlaced with a sense of belonging; the collective consciousness has become a more conscious expression of the individual self-awareness. In the context of this change, 'history' and 'memory' may appear to be in fundamental opposition; this is because memory 'is life, borne by living societies', while history

is a deliberately fabricated reconstruction of what is past, and what is no longer (Nora 1989; Nora and Kritzman 1996). In addition, Nora believes that, in contemporary society, every social group redefines 'its identity through the revitalisation of its own history' and not through its memory; as a consequence, there is very little memory left, which has been eradicated, substituted or even manipulated by history (Nora 1989: 15).

Therefore, in order to keep some traces of 'original' memory, society collects it through organised images, speeches, and any visible signs, including in our case, museum exhibitions. However, these 'collections of memory' are too artificial and definitely not spontaneous, and there is a need to rely 'entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image' (Nora 1989: 13). Contemporary societies, indeed, have created an 'industry' of memory, which pretend to keep records of the past in the unpromising attempt of recalling and re-evoking the 'lost experience which once attached to them' (Benton and Cecil 2010: 21).[3] Consequently, since memory has to rely on materiality, its 'repetition'/recollection and 'transmission' also need to happen in material, three-dimensional places.

Within this context, it is legitimate to ask how non-Western collections in Western museums contribute to the understanding of the relationship between history and memory and, more specifically, to what extent non-Western collections in Western museums can trigger accurate memories of a shared past and cultural heritage.

Non-Western collections, in the West, are part of a difficult past; generally speaking, they are the result of Western colonisation, in non-Western countries. Such objects have been brought to the West, to Europe, as trophies or looted items and have become symbols of religious missions, political campaigns or imposed labour − as for instance many of the objects displayed in the galleries of the International Slavery Museum. For centuries, non-Western objects have been displayed as curiosities; they have been studied as typological specimens that could shed light on the progress of human thought; they have been appreciated as intriguing pieces of primitive art and the perception of non-Western people has been 'saturated by fantastic notions of exotic and bestial… people' (Scott 2007: 2; Nzegwu 2000).

If we consider, for instance, African collections in Western museums, African objects have been (and often still are) at the core of the debate 'Art or Artefact?', with the answer depending on the perspective (artistic or anthropological) adopted in the situated cultural Western hierarchy.[4] Often, in museums in Britain, African material culture is exhibited in displays that emphasise the artistic component of objects (as for instance in the Sainsbury Galleries at the British Museum, London or the African Worlds Gallery at the Horniman Museum, London) belonging to cultural groups frozen in time and space. This art-centred interpretation, furthermore, flattens the African groups' cultural diversity and distinctiveness into general, Pan-African, broad categories − as for example 'African Masks' or 'African pottery' (Catalani 2009). Steven Conn considers this approach as not ideal, but it is 'at least a truce in the political fights over non-Western objects in museums. In fact – Conn continues − in reclassifying objects from anthropology to art, the assumption is that we, as Westerners, will appreciate both the objects and the makers of those objects in the way that we value our own history and traditions' (Conn 2009: 37). Indeed, once such objects have been moved from their original context and relocated in a new environment (as in a museum), they become part of the shared cultural heritage of the new, hosting society. However, going back to the focus of our discussion (how non-Western collections in Western museums contribute to the understanding of the relationship between history and memory), it is possible to state that it is the 'voice' given to collections that transforms individual memories into collective [hi]stories: 'the notion of a collective memory [in fact] implies a past that is not only commonly shared but also jointly remembered…. By helping to ensure that an entire mnemonic community will come to remember its past together, as a group, society affects not only what and who we remember but also when we remember it' (Zerubavel 1999: 97). The next section of this paper, therefore, will consider the voice that should be given to collections and the process of identity formation in the Western museums.

Constructing identity and the museum

In the context of identity construction, museums are particularly interesting because of their nature. Western museums, in fact, are artificial, educational, recreational institutions, in a continuously changing world (Pearce 1998). Throughout centuries, museums have 'evolved' and reshaped their nature and, especially in the twenty-first century, museums are linked 'more and

more to civic identity and economic development' (Conn 2009: 56). The core ideas of 'educational' and 'curatorial' institutions are always two pivotal features of contemporary museums; however, what characterises contemporary museums is a strong emphasis on the concepts of access (e.g. physical, intellectual) and social inclusion, as well as an emphasis on the importance of the source communities, identity and their role in the interpretation process. Furthermore, the concepts of source communities and identity are very important, because they emphasise the interplay between the [hi]story and memory of cultural groups as well as the leading role of those groups in the interpretation process.

The term 'originating communities' or 'source communities' refers both to 'those groups in the past when [museum] artefacts [now on display] were collected as well as to their descendents today' (Peers and Brown 2003: 2). Generally, in the past the term 'source communities' was used to refer to indigenous peoples in the Americas and in the Pacific; however, due to the multicultural and multiethnic nature of contemporary Western societies, the term is now applied to every cultural group from whom museums have collected artefacts, including: local communities, diasporic groups, immigrant groups, refugees, and religious groups (Peers and Brown 2003). In the contemporary museum scene, these terms are also very important because, as Laura Peers and Alison Brown explain, 'the concept recognises that artefacts play an important role in the identities of the source community members, that source communities have legitimate moral and cultural stakes or forms of ownership in museum collections, and that they may have special claims, needs or rights of access to material heritage held by museums' (Peers and Brown 2003: 2). It is in this way that source communities are socially accredited for an authoritative knowledge of their objects. Additionally, the idea of museums shifts from an understanding of a monolithic, academic institution towards a more socially-oriented custodian of a shared cultural heritage.

Therefore, contemporary collaborations (between museums and source communities) are based, or in principle should be based, on an equal commitment and shared authority towards the material interpreted and represented and not only on a mere consultation on terminology or geographical provenance. For instance, let us consider African diasporic groups, currently living in the United Kingdom.[5] African diasporic groups constitute an aspect of the historical and

cultural memory of traditional African cultural heritage, outside Africa. Their knowledge is an essential social resource that can strengthen the cultural potential of collections and enable (inside and outside museums) the mediation and transmission of cultural heritage between individuals (Western and non-Westerners) and a shared experience (Appadurai 2007). As a consequence, many exhibitions – displaying traditional African objects – are now done in consultation with the local African community. This means that, increasingly, there is a shared commitment 'to an evolving relationship between a museum and a source community, [a relationship which] involves the sharing of skills, knowledge and the power to produce something of value for both parties' (Peers and Brown 2003: 2).

More frequently, members of the African Diaspora are involved in the process of object identification and, to a certain extent, in the one of interpretation; objects, indeed, need to be defined, not only in terms of their biographies, but also in terms of their original narratives, which can tell the story of a cultural and social relationship between past and contemporary users (Pearce 1998). In fact, although 'biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure' (e.g. in which circumstances the objects arrived in the museum; who was the collector), objects can become culturally and socially relevant only when the memories and [hi]stories attached to them are revealed (Kopytoff 2007: 67). Since 2004, the Manchester Museum (Manchester), for example, has started a project called *Collective Conversations*. Throughout this ongoing project, informal conversations between museum professionals and diverse groups or individuals of local communities (including migrant communities and African groups) were filmed. Participants were asked to talk about some objects from the museum's collection and also discuss the meanings that they hold for them. Some examples of previous conversations have included: a discussion with the Yorùbá Chief Adelekan on the significance of a Babalawo, a Shango staff and a Gelede Mask, and a conversation with a member of the Manchester Museum Community Advisory Panel on how museum objects can be used to help to relate to different cultures and people.[6]

Additionally, through museum collaboration, different source communities maintain their sense of community and assert their social, political, and economic identity and importance in the cultural context that they live. This is because, as Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Sam Lucy have

stated, the idea of identity 'is inextricably linked to the sense of belonging' (Diaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005: 1). Through 'identity', people define themselves as belonging to a specific group and, at the same time, they redefine and reshape the way that they want to be perceived by other groups (Falk 2009). For example, previous research carried out with members of the Yorùbá Diaspora living in Britain and their relationship towards Yorùbá traditional religious objects displayed in museums has shown that the perception and understanding of being Yorùbá today in a Western society has been affected by implicit, rooted, Christian and postcolonial stereotypes (Catalani 2009). In the new society, diasporic Yorùbá groups have tried to re-define themselves by underlining their 'divine' origins (by calling themselves 'the children of Oduduwa'), by strengthening their tribal pride and by often concealing their religious traditions from Westerners. This attitude has strongly affected the way members of the Yorùbá Diaspora relate to their traditional religious heritage in Western Museums. Actually, the people involved in the research tended to distance themselves, at least on the surface, from their traditional religious objects in order to reinforce their new Christian identity as well as their new social Western identity (Catalani 2009).

For source communities, the access to, and engagement with, their cultural heritage in museums is pivotal (Peers and Brown 2003). This is not only because they can define and consolidate their cultural and social identity within the 'adoptive' social context, but also because they can start to define themselves not only as members of the Diaspora or of an ethnic minority group but mostly as effective citizens of the new cultural community; for instance, not 'Africans in Europe' but Europeans with an African background. Reclaiming, even if only in intellectual terms, the ownership of their cultural material culture is a way to reconcile different cultural groups with a difficult and shared past (e.g. the Western colonial expansion) and legacy; it is a way of establishing fixed referential cultural points through museum collections that then become depositories of encoded generational memories (Parkin 1999; Scott 2007). Museums, therefore, can provide the social framework for an effective and interactive sharing of historical consciousness and collective memories.

However, in relation to the museum interpretative process, it is inevitable that museums and museum exhibitions draw on cultural assumptions as well as on the resources of people who

make the exhibitions; the curator's voice, indeed, is still extremely predominant. Furthermore, in museum exhibitions, the choices of what to display or not are made to tell some stories and to ignore others. This interpretative 'selection' is carried out in order to appeal and give voice to a specific source community and unfortunately to neglect another (Karp and Lavine 1991). Additionally, these interpretative selections are very much influenced by the current museum agendas or curators' preferences. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask, notwithstanding the increasing collaborative approaches between museums and source communities, as to whose [hi]stories and memories are really told in the Western museums? I believe museum curators still largely act as the official spokesmen of those [hi]stories and memories, in an inclusive intercultural environment. However, these are the general [hi]stories and memories of the place where the museum is hosted; they are the [hi]stories and memories of the cultural differences and different cultural things displayed; they are narratives that 'contemplate the meanings of continuity and change' (Conn 2009: 19).

Concluding observations

Contemporary museums are full of ordinary and special 'things': from our own culture, from distant people, from different periods. However, it is through those ordinary and special things that we, as human beings, express 'our constant need to re-create our world, constantly reworking, reinterpreting and remaking… our physical surroundings organized by internal narrative' (Pearce 1997: 2). Furthermore, it is in these powerful, ordinary and special things that people's histories and memory lay. Throughout this paper, I have been looking at Western museums as social contexts, where the interlacing of memory and history can contribute to inclusive cultural discussions. I have also considered how non-Western groups, by re-claiming an intellectual ownership towards their collections in Western museums through collaboration, can strengthen and shape the process of identity formation within the new, hosting society. Nevertheless, it seems that the official spokespersons of the narratives are still the museum curators. In his novel *The museum of innocence,* the Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuc explains that 'the power of things inheres in the memories they gather up inside them, and also in the vicissitudes of our imagination, and our memory' and indeed, museum collections are indeed very powerful things (Pamuc 2009: 324).[7] However, only a joint narrative of the hosting society

and of the hosted group can provide a homogenous and complete perspective on a shared heritage and unravel the often forgotten [hi]stories and memories.

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[1] Provided that there are enough oral sources available on the topic.

[2] The original work, *Les lieux de mémoire,* counts seven volumes. The volumes have been published, in French, between 1984 and 1992. However, the English translation (*The Realms of Memory*), counts only three volumes, published between 1984 and 1998.

[3] 'Museums, archives, cemeteries, collections, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders − these are boundary stones of another era, illusions of eternity' and they are all part of the memory industry (Nora 1989: 12).

[4] With the term 'African objects' I refer mainly to sub-Saharan African objects.

[5] The terms 'diasporic groups' define dispersed ethnic groups, living outside their homeland (Tölöyon 2003).

[6] Due to the positive responses of the local community, the project has developed into a permanent film studio, *The Contact Zone*, which was opened back in September 2007 with a ceremony led by a Yorùbá chief. The videos of the *Collective Conversations* are available online on the Manchester Museum website: http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/community/collectiveconversations/.

[7] Orhan Pamuc received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006.