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'The elephant in the room or five blind men, 3 women and an elephant' Truth?

Introduction

Let us listen to the voice of a young British policeman, writing an account of 'truth' and 'lies' in the colonial India of the 1930s. In 'Shooting an elephant' George Orwell notes:

'A story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it become. Some people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away.'
(Orwell [1936] 1977: 267)

Reading this piece of journalism at another side of the world in Leicester UK, having just returned from Shanghai China, and some 85years –a lifetime – later I am struck by the blindness of historical positioning. While Orwell was clearly sympathetic to economically disadvantaged peoples the world over, risking his life fighting for equality and social justice in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, he was bound by the mores of his time and the thought patterns of his socio-cultural background, rooted in logic and scientific knowledge. As, to a degree, we all are. Pondering Orwell's text here highlights the notion of Truth, authenticity, the real thing, according to written and verbal accounts in specific contextual circumstances, which impacts on what we should do, how to act.

In other words Orwell raises questions of concern for the social role of the museum in the twenty-first century. What is the place of emotion and cognition in remembering and recording past events? How might new embodied knowledge(s) emerge and operate within wider hierarchies of power and control that shift over different epochs and locations? Who adjudicates between the rights and responsibilities of humans as they clash with each other and the rights of other animals at local and global levels? What competing factors might impact on different interpretations and representations of self and other that are made over distances in time and space? These are the broad themes – why, where and when questions – the paper attempts to address with reference to the mission underpinning some contemporary museum practice.

The paper also points to museum silences. In the UK, when we speak of 'the elephant in the room' – the title of this paper – we are referring to a glaringly obvious problem that everyone seems oblivious to. The elephant in the room is impossible to miss and so the people there must be deliberately ignoring it. It stands as a metaphor for the issues, problems or risks groups of people are reluctant to address. I suggest that emotionally charged topics, controversial and taboo subjects, religion and politics, sexual orientation, 'race' and ethnicity may be considered as such elephants for us in the museum.

In terms of structure first the distinction and nuances between truth and fiction, history/herstory and story will be unpacked with reference to key philosophical

perspectives and international examples. Next some illustrations from the realm of art will be outlined since museums of anthropology have benefited from collaborative effort together with creative people. Finally some concluding remarks and suggestions for best practice will be made.

Stories and Herstories/Histories,

In this section I shall relate first a traditional story taken from the Indian subcontinent and then a contemporary herstory taken from a geographical area of the UK where almost 50% of the population have Indian heritage (<http://leicester.gov.uk>). In continuing with a story – a fiction – I point to the fuzzy boundaries of Truth. My main concern here is to examine the potential for museums of anthropology to expand upon their social role and to impact positively on the wider world.

Perhaps opposing views of Truth, what counts as truth and what fiction, have clashed throughout history and perverted the course of ‘Social Harmony’, which is the ICOM 2010 conference theme where an earlier version of this paper was delivered. Certainly in the anthropology museum, the question of who holds the right to pronounce on Truth, who is traditionally empowered to speak, who is required to listen, and why, has long been ‘Challenging to the Museum’ and led to ‘Challenging Museums’, as the ICME-ICOM 2010 conference sub theme recognises. Similarly, the relation between the tangible object of display or storage and the immaterial context of story and history remains a somewhat contested zone.

Writing and speaking here on these matters, my philosophical position is at the ‘frontiers’, beyond the ‘either-or’ binary thought of the Enlightenment (Golding 2009). It questions the tightly defended borderlands between story and history, truth and fiction, to open up the museum discourse to a wider range of perspectives, especially those in touch with the imagination – artists, writers, musicians and storytellers. This is also a political location for me. While my politics are left of centre I observe the political nature of all writing with Michel Foucault, who notes as we remember ‘One ‘fictions’ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth’ (Foucault 1980: 193).

In short, speaking of Truth in the context of anthropology and the museum I elude to stories and herstories or histories; voices and silences; the tangible and the intangible. Following the traditional story I shall relate a contemporary herstory/history, centring on 3 women in the Midlands, the region of the UK where I now live and work. This herstory/history is worryingly typical of the twenty-first century where culture clash increasingly seems to hinder social harmony. Investigating the museums’ social role I shall question the extent to which museums may profitably pronounce on the body politic and take responsibility for social change. In my brief paper I can do no more than highlight certain points for discussion. I shall range across large fields, encompassing belief, philosophy, art, politics religion, gender, sexual preference and ‘race’ that I contend anthropology and ethnographic museums may usefully comment upon.

A traditional tale

The traditional Indian folktale I want to tell is adapted from a Jain version, although it is popularly retold in many faiths including Hindu, Sufi, Moslem, Sikh and Humanist.

This version of the tale concerns three blind men and an elephant. Perhaps I should more correctly state in this telling ‘some’ blind men, as the precise number is a matter of dispute. In an eighteenth century Japanese Ukiyo-e painting by Hanabusa Itcho (1652–1724) there seem to be eight blind monks and in a twenty-first century wall relief from Thailand there are six blind boys. Well, I relate what the African American poet Audre Lorde would term ‘one women’s telling’, of an Indian tale, written at my computer in the UK – a route you may note as true to travelling theory (Lorde 1996; Clifford 1997).

When three blind men met an elephant in the dining room they soon started to argue. Each challenged the other about elephant nature and appearance: stroking the ear one described a flat fan-like creature; another holding the leg spoke of a thick, round tree trunk; while the third gripping the tail declared they had stumbled upon a long, hairy rope. Clearly all were correct and also wrong because each noted only the part and not the whole animal, nor the context of the room, house, street, city, nation, world in which it dwelled.

In another version of this tale my Jain friend Dr Atul Shah notes five blind men arguing heatedly about the elephant from their individual perspectives. Shah adds a man holding the trunk describing a huge snake and a man touching a side telling of wall (Shah 2007: 66). The value of the tale for me, drawing on the work of Shah, seems to lie in the Jain notion of *Anekant*. This concept translates as ‘Many-sidedness’ or ‘Multiple view-points’, which is seen in the diverse faith versions and in the narrative itself. Taken as a metaphor for polyvocality in the challenging museum the tale may be regarded as pointing to the complexity of Truth as viewed from individual standpoints and from broader perspectives.

Anthropology museums may usefully approach the live telling of tales such as this in their interpretive work, and this was an important part of my professional practice with anthropology collections at the Horniman Museum London, where we were concerned with celebrating cultural diversity, as well as drawing attention to similarity and difference between and within cultural groups (1992-2002). Such storytelling can be viewed as part of an interpretive toolbox. Written text panels outlining such tales may also be seen as useful interpretive devices in forging points of contact between the intangible heritage from which the material culture on display in museums emerges and enhance the learning experience of audiences.

Points of contact

Working from traditional belief systems and the material culture attached to it; perhaps the broad possibilities and potential of the challenging museum can be explored. My experience in the anthropology museum shows tale-telling with artifacts and active listening, which vitally includes critical thinking and questioning, forming an essential part of an exhibition and an interpretive programme. Ideally, employing a full range of human senses, in addition to the usual looking at artifacts, touching, smelling, speaking about them and hearing a culture bearer’s viewpoint, further enhances understanding of traditional culture for audiences (Golding 2009).

For example, referring back to the Jain version of the story we may envisage cultural experts leading a session: smelling Indian spices, preparing ‘Prashad’ (food) such as samosas and eating them with a drink of mango lassi, trying on a sari, balancing our

bodies to sit on a silken cushion with shisha glass work, employing our musical intelligence playing the tabla, and kinaesthetic intelligence dancing with ankle bells and finger cymbals (Gardner 2000). Dr Shah speaks of his seven-year old son proudly carrying such a role at his school during a Diwali celebration, which he contends helped to progress intercultural understanding there. My own understanding of Jainism has been greatly increased through my deepening friendship and practice at temple with Shah (Shah 2007: 70) Yet it might be questioned whether the temple and the school, while sharing certain features (the organization of objects and an overriding education agenda for instance), are not sites that are fundamentally different in kind from the museum, in the way missions are progressed. To what extent is it possible to meet across those frontiers I mentioned earlier?

What seems important to stress here? Interrogating the blind men and elephant tale for points of contact or appreciation of different elephant aspects, with my fellows in India and the wider world, I aim to more fully appreciate the ties that bind us as human beings, without eliding our differences. It is in respectful dialogical exchange that according to my theory of feminist-hermeneutics we may to note our similarities through our differences, thereby discovering ways in which we may make common cause and challenge injustice, which I have discussed elsewhere (Golding 2009). Here it seems useful to note how the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has helped the development of frontier theory grounded in feminist-hermeneutics. Freire speaks of the human creative power inherent in debate and discussion for ‘making culture’ anew. This creativity marks critical thinking, ‘someone who intervenes’ and who being capable of intervention in the socio-cultural space is ‘able to change the world’ (Freire 2007: 97).

These are optimistic viewpoints. Yet, examining contemporary meanings and positionings, perhaps the limits of the challenging museum can be revealed. Discussion at the museum forum may equally expose incommensurability, the potential clash of socio-cultural perspectives – the elephant in the room – the difficulties and dilemmas that societies and museums ignore or silence at their peril. A second tale may illuminate this point.

A contemporary herstory/history of 3 women

My second herstory/history is set in three different cities in England: Birmingham, Leicester and London. There are elements of Truth in the story, which recall – as an auto-ethnography – events over the three months of writing this piece and that ‘distant country’ the past, some three decades earlier. The events I relate also connect with imperial history and the legacy of racism that Imperialism and colonisation of India has wrecked on both nation states today.

The first woman and the second woman are young – mid twenties. I would regard them as conventionally beautiful – with fine features – huge expressive eyes that listen intently and often-smiling mouths. These women are both very smart and one, following her first class BA degree, won a scholarship to follow museum studies at a prestigious UK university. The third woman is middle aged – late fifties. She is not regarded as beautiful – with features that are too small but she shares the skill of woman museum studies at the prestigious UK University and the second woman is her daughter who works in local museums.

The story concerns the EDL (English Defence League), formed in June 2009 as a local street movement, following a demonstration organised by al-Muhajiroun (now known as Islam4UK) and including members of Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamaah, against British troops returning from Afghanistan. These extremist Muslim groups held up banners declaring 'Baby killers' and 'Butchers of Basra' as the British soldiers, some dead in coffins, passed through the streets of Luton. The EDL currently has 80,000 supporters on Facebook. Jon Crueders, the Labour Party MP who won back the seat of Barking and Dagenham from the openly racist BNP (British National Party) at the 2010 general election observes, the EDL 'taps into a politics born out of dispossession but anchored in English male working class culture of dress, drink and sport', without targeting a purely racial identity like the BNP. Indeed they employ a language of 'inclusion' and boast about their Sikh leader, their Jewish division and their lesbian and gay faction.

These women react in different ways to the emergence of right-wing organisations such as the EDL, who have now held over 30 demonstrations across the county. The first woman, alone in Birmingham, England's second city, after London, fears for her safety when she is confronted by EDL demonstration on 5th September 2010. The racist taunts of 'No to Islam' and 'No more mosques' were hurtful her and confusing, since she felt herself to be *both* British *and* a devout nicab wearing Moslem of Pakistani heritage. She was grateful and we feel lucky to escape unharmed. A month later the elder woman stands with UAF (Unite Against Fascism) on 16th October. Together with her daughter, her partner and women in the Asian workers union she listens to rock against racism musicians. Looking proudly at her daughter she remembers an earlier time in London, when in 1977 she was in her twenties when the BNP (British National Party) attempted to march through her hometown, and were shown to be such a tiny minority of the British public there.

You may have guessed that I am the older woman – the mother and the teacher – in this herstory/history. All three of us are concerned to explore ways of challenging prejudice in general and racism in particular at the museum frontiers. We want to enquire how, if at all, can museums help to build bridges of understanding between and within diverse cultural groups? We hope it is possible for museums, working in collaboration with external agencies and individuals, to overcome taken-for-granted, stereotypical views of 'other' cultures and beliefs in the wider society beyond the museum walls. Yet we need to observe our key strengths as museum professionals, which I would argue are our collections, tangible and intangible, when acknowledging the extent to which our influence can be affective in challenging the intertwined discourses of racism, sexism, poverty and poor educational attainment. It may be viewed as part of our educational responsibility to illuminate rights and responsibilities. We need to balance the rights of one group to freedom of speech against the affect it may have on another.

While Ted Cantle's research points to racism and prejudice feeding on poverty, poor education and lack of contact between different cultural groups, who often live in completely 'separate' spheres, my own collaborative antiracist and antisexist practice also observes museum learning programmes contributing to the raising of educational achievement for people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Cantle 2002; Golding 2007; 2009). However, to date the power of the museum to tackle poverty remains to be demonstrated. The museum is also worryingly quiet, if not silent on

racism, notably against Muslims, although it is not alone as an institution in this stance.

Cultural translation: understanding, misunderstanding and incommensurability

Baroness Warsi, co-chairman of the Conservative Party UK speaking at the University of Leicester on 20th January 2011 declared Islamophobia to have ‘passed the dinner table test’ and be a ‘socially acceptable’ form of racism today (available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/haveyoursay/2011/01/is_islamophobia_now_socially_acceptable.html>, accessed on 1st February 2011). Warsi accused the media of superficiality when discussing Islam and warned against a simplistic binary division of Muslims into moderates and extremists, which fuels misunderstanding. She worried that terror offences committed by a small number of Muslims were used to condemn all who follow Islam, although she urged Muslim communities to be clearer in their rejection of those who resort to violent acts.

In the museum, especially the museum of anthropology, attention to religion is made through collections and situated within the wider context of ‘a way of life’, which is dynamic. Contemporary views from individuals within the culture displayed are thought to enhance representation and visitor understanding. Certainly at Horniman my experience is positive in this regard (Golding 2009). However, I wonder if our overriding framework for representing ‘other’ belief systems is largely one of celebration, which misses an opportunity for broader public analysis and fresh perspectives through dialogical exchange at the museum forum space.

Hans Georg Gadamer’s metaphor of conversation, as probing dialogue not mere chatter, is helpful here. He speaks of the to and fro movement in genuine or ‘fundamental conversation’, which ‘is never the one we wanted to conduct’ but one we ‘fall into’ or ‘become involved in’, that recalls the power of objects to hold us in their thrall (Gadamer 1981 [1965]: 345). In this ‘successful conversation, partners become bound to one another in a new community’, which involves partners reaching an understanding not simply through ‘total self-expression’ and ‘assertion of one’s own point of view’, but actively listening for the other’s meaning. Such engagement changes both partners. It marks ‘a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were’ (Gadamer 1981 [1965]: 341).

The value of such dialogical work in the museum forum lies in the way we may come to greater self-understanding then. It is the site of the museum that provides a new ground where we may open to scrutiny our taken for granted perspectives or prejudices, which arise in what Gadamer terms a tradition (socio-political history), and come to some recognition of the other’s place in a different tradition. He states.

A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him [sic]. Contrariwise, to have a horizon means not to be limited to what is nearest, but to be able to see beyond it.
(Gadamer 2004 [1960]: 269).

In other words Gadamer’s optimistic thesis notes how the individual range of vision may be gradually expanded and previously limited horizons of understanding may be opened through deep meeting with another in all the fullness of their being. Yet a hermeneutics of suspicion may wonder if in human contact there are certain

incommensurable features, such as cultural/religious beliefs, that inevitably lead to conflicting perspectives and even violent conflict as media images of the EDL protests have shown? Can museums promote new ways of thinking about cultural differences and similarities that might prove conducive to intercultural and cross-cultural dialogue, even with such extremist groups such as the EDL? Perhaps by drawing attention to the long history of mixture and movement that comprises 'English' heritage? I have never attempted to engage with declared racists in the museum and while I admire my younger colleagues who believe it is a vital task to do so, I am fearful both for their safety and for pushing the museum into such frontier regions.

While I want to warn my young colleagues against relativism, which has been described as 'excessive tolerance' or 'charity' cultural translation, it seems vital to heed Talal Asad's caution against '*intolerance-engendering interpretation*' that would hinder intercultural understanding (Gellner 1970; Macintyre 1970; Asad 1991). In brief the nub of the argument here draws on Wittgenstein to highlight understanding – 'grasping the sense' of something – as inextricably interconnected with experience and the ability to 'do' something within a 'form of life' (Winch 1958: 15). In other words criteria of intelligibility and understanding arise out of particular forms of social life, which raises the question of how to build bridges of interpretation between different forms of life.

To illustrate this point, there is a need to employ some empathetic imaginative effort to understand, what at first seems to a western blinkered perspective, somewhat odd; for example 'a twin is a bird', not 'like a bird' (Gellner 1970: 34; Macintyre 1970: 65; Evans-Pritchard 1956: 131). In the west we may readily agree to metaphorical 'likeness', drawing 2 things together in new and unusual ways may startle us into fresh understanding. Indeed this may be regarded as a part of the work of, even the genius of, artists, which we will look at presently. Cultural translation here involves more than the mechanical reproduction of different terms in different languages. It moves beyond the notion of one mind approaching another mind, a consideration of purely abstract ideas, towards a harmonization with intention, that engaging the senses in a dance or playing music may better serve (Asad 1991: 159). This idea certainly resonates in my own case, when growing up in the 1970s music, dance, dress, food provided powerful pathways to engaging with African Caribbean culture in London. In my museum practice too, embodied knowledge(s) and shared understandings arose from finding points of contact between lives, which were subsequently enlarged and made more coherent.

Perhaps what we need to emphasise here is the exciting possibility of allowing ourselves to be powerfully affected, to expand and deepen our sense of ourselves through engagement with the culture of the other. Yet, we might ask, what sensory bridges of engagement might exist between EDL and Islam4UK, or less extreme positionings? For Asad understanding, or mis-understanding, crucially needs to be understood as occurring within different global power structures. This engenders the need for us in the museum to critically examine our own positioning, as well as the location of our audiences, in the hierarchies of wealth and control.

Returning to the extreme cases of working with the EDL and Islam4UK in the museum space, the care for taking seriously differences between and within specific

politico-cultural contexts, which is central to relativism, needs to be balanced with the need for developing sharing spaces to highlight points of contact between and within the myriad groups who make up the British. This in turn entails the possibilities of intercultural dialogue engendering a stronger sense of belonging to a wider circle for those living narrow forms of life.

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Perhaps the roots of contemporary English racism in disaffection and social poverty was a part of the 'elephant', the other side of our creature, which was simply unable to see at the outset of writing this paper. In my theoretically grounded practice I stress the importance of standing firm against social injustice and protecting human rights. Here I might be said to risk clinging to one part of the elephant – injustice – and claiming that this part is 'The Elephant'. It may be argued that the complexity of Truth as viewed from individual standpoints and from broader perspectives is no less relevant when we promote the 'universal human rights and values' of the 'West', against those of the 'other' who Stuart Hall notes are seen as the 'Rest' in discourse, which of course always lies within hierarchies of power (Hall 1993: 275-320). Thinking of the elephant and discourse, which always selects and silences, I shall further interrogate the boundaries of the museum's socio-political role through a brief review of creative collaborations with artists.

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Interculturalism. Artists, the Senses and Difference

While some museums have long promoted the idea of 'intercultural dialogue' (ICD), this notion has been significantly developed throughout Europe since 2008 when the White Paper was published

(http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper_final_revised_EN.pdf). A social cohesion approach, outlining Unity in Diversity as an overarching concept for European citizenship is notable since 2008. National efforts and transnational activities such as conference have resulted in a range of policy approaches to ICD throughout Europe. In policy documents the emphasis is on 'celebration' of difference, but the need for more fundamental rethinking of 'all the fundamental functions of a museum – from collection and conservation to exhibition strategies – from an intercultural perspective' is also highlighted

(http://www.interculturaldialogue.eu/web/files/14/en/ExeSumSHARING_DIVERSITY.pdf). The importance of constructing 'policies to improve the diversity of staff and governing boards in order to build real intercultural competencies, as well as to share some of the responsibility for exhibitions and their interpretation with external stake-holders' is also noted. The example of The Museum of World Culture (MWC) in Gothenburg's, 'Advantage Göteborg' project, is offered as a model of excellence in this respect. This project successfully engaged Swedish people with heritage in the Horn of Africa over a period of two years to produce a powerful self-contained display within the *Voices from a Global Africa* gallery (Lagerkvist 2007; Golding 2009). MWC is to be congratulated for honestly dealing with the contemporary legacies of colonial history, such as racism, that caused considerable tensions and threatened the work.

'Advantage Göteborg' is a special project although anthropology museums, over the last three decades, have been increasingly employing contemporary artists to comment on ideas and issues that are difficult to express in an exhibitionary space with established curatorial knowledge. Collaborative effort with source communities and creative people has been regarded as helpful to increasing the range and depth of

interpretations. Now let us briefly outline some pieces, which illustrate what the sterling work of the Museum of World Culture (MWC) in Gothenburg, Sweden. These examples, taken from the opening exhibitions in 2002, are exemplary in attempting to present different aspects of our elephant.

In the gallery *Voices from a Global Africa* a video of Bob Marley plays on a loop at a cinema section, the Black British critical theorist Paul Gilroy comments on some of Marley's songs at a computer, traditional musical instruments from Africa are displayed in glass cases soaring high into the space. Opposite the Marley section a wealth of information on enslavement is available in different forms: a video projection of waves crashing at the seashore, with changing factual text on enslavement; computer terminals with information on resistance to slavery through the ages and commissioned art pieces. It is at the other end of the *Voices* gallery that computers show a range of videos relating aspects of the present-day lives of Swedish people with heritage in the Horn of Africa, made during 'Advantage Göteborg', are shown. On the walls all around there are commissioned art works from contemporary artists.

In another gallery the HIV-Aids exhibition showed diverse aspects of this virus within seven themes: Denial, Rage, Hate, Despair, Sorrow, Lust, Hope, which highlight the emotionally charged nature of the topic. Artists from around the world were commissioned to produce work relating to what is a global problem, often in humorous ways, so that as visitors our emotions are not simply left in despair when we exit the gallery but are rather urged to approach the world in hope.

Outside of the anthropology museum the North American artist Felix Gonzales-Torres addressed the theme of love and loss from a personal perspective of one whose lover was dying of aids. *'Untitled' (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* represented the artist's partner, Ross Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. This installation comprised 175 pounds of sweets, which corresponded to Ross's ideal body weight. Visitors to the work were encouraged to take one of the sweets, wrapped in colourful shiny papers and piled up. The pile diminished in amounts that parallel Ross's weight loss during his last fatal illness. Gonzalez-Torres specified that the pile be perpetually replenished during the installation, in a creative act that may be seen as death defying and in some metaphorical way a God-like granting of eternal life.

Another 'untitled' piece used pounds of the Italian chocolate Baci-'Kiss', spread out in a dazzling silver carpet, which visitors were again asked to take. In this piece a gay man gave a 'kiss' to 'others'. Williams College Museum of Art held an exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's *'Untitled' (Placebo)*, 1991 (December 1, 2007-March 23, 2008) in observance of World AIDS Day, December 1, continuing a 16-year tradition at the museum. Andrea Gyrody, Williams Graduate Student in the History of Art, Class of 2009 commented

Over the four months of its unraveling, *'Untitled' (Placebo)* will give us the chance to reflect not only on the continuing AIDS epidemic, but to contemplate the universal experiences of illness, death and loss that the sculpture in part symbolizes (<www.williams.edu>).

What is striking for me in these pieces at MWC and at Williams is the way the mind and the body is more fully engaged than is usual in the traditional museum. Issues of hugely important contemporary significance – enslavement and HIV-Aids – are brought to consciousness through the body. In engaging multiple senses: vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch with objects I would argue that we are truly alive and able to operate at our peak in the current moment. The profound resonating in the things of the world we experience in the here and now may be termed an aesthetic experience. It certainly opens us to critical thinking, which following Freire I regard as vital to the museum experience.

I would further argue for the possibility of this museum experience to promote reflexivity and active participation in the world beyond the gallery space. My frontier theory of feminist-hermeneutics aims for museum visitors to think critically about what they read in the newspapers and see on the TV, not to take what they see in print as unquestioned Truth. I envisage empowered visitors rising up against injustice as active citizens, to safeguard our human rights and change the world for the better!

Religion, belief and sexuality

[But this brings us back to my side of the elephant.](#) Liberalism inclines us to the relativist position, the notion that there are a multiplicity of views and a plurality of Truths. Yet I, an atheist, am troubled by relativism. It seems to leave us without a firm ground to say the Nazis were wrong, the EDL are misguided, the Malawian government should not imprison men for reasons of their sexual preference.

I would like to see museums joining *Amnesty International* and *Outrage!* in calling for the release of Steven Monjeza & Tiwonge Chimbalanga, who in March 2010 faced up to 14 years jail on charges of homosexuality. (http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.asp?ActionID=682&LetterID=633). Others may prefer museums stand with the Christian Church in Malawi and condemn homosexuality. Perhaps the majorities of museums shy away from either position and prefer to remain silent on such contentious issues, although some may get caught up in controversy.

Chris Ofili's beautiful, jewel-like painting in cow dung – The Holy Virgin Mary – is a case in point. Catholics were offended with the association of Our Lady and excrement when this work went on show at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999. The depiction of The Virgin as an African woman may also have been a cause for concern in a world where Her image is predominantly white.

More recently the Iranian born artist Sooreh Hera, aimed to expose what she alleged was the hypocrisy regarding homosexuality in Islam, specifically that married Muslim men frequently have sexual relations with other men (notably in Iran and Saudi Arabia). Her photographic work 'Adam and Ewald' is a piece, where she invited two Iranian men to pose in states of undress, they asked to wear masks, to disguise their identities and avoid reprisals from the orthodox community. Sooreh Hera selected veil masks reminiscent of the ones seen in traditional paintings of the Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him) and his son-in-law Ali. The potential outrage this depiction may cause in the Muslim community led to the Gemeentemuseum's director Wim van Krimpen refusing to exhibit the piece. He told reporters 'certain people in our society might perceive it as offensive', which of course disappointed the artist, who felt her

freedom of speech to be impinged.

In my final example I bring us, appropriately, to Shanghai, where an earlier version of this paper was first delivered. In September the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye took a similar view to Hera when his right to artistic freedom was curtailed by the organizers of SHContemporary, the city's largest contemporary art fair, who banned his pigs, tattooed with Louis Vuitton logos from the show. The media declared 'China loves its pigs, and Shanghai has said NO to pig cruelty

(http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aoMT3vp_BxBM&refer=muse). Bloomberg further explained how workers, escorted by security guards, dismantled the pig sty at the Shanghai Exhibition Center at 11:30 a.m. Xin Beijing Gallery's manager Yu Tiantian, the dealer of Delvoye's work wouldn't say if the government had ordered the ban. Gu Zihua, spokesman for SHContemporary, declined to comment. Wim Delvoye told reporters 'It's unbelievable how aggressive they are becoming in stopping this show... We have collectors who've traveled to China all the way from Europe to see the pigs. They're very disappointed.'

The Delvoye pigs were bred on a farm outside Beijing and the tattoos were intended to grow with the animals. Finally the animals' skins would be sold for around 7,500 euros (\$10,600) a piece. A spokeswoman for Delvoye's Xia Jie told how a 'canvas, marked with Walt Disney characters, was sold to Chanel SA and made into two bags, displayed at the fashion group's Feb. 26 Mobile Art exhibition in Hong Kong' (eugenetang@bloomberg.net).

These pieces of art have shocked audiences into feeling a strong emotion and led to them taking a specific action in the world. I suggest it is the aesthetic experience of world art that can have a powerful affect, moving us to deeper more profound thought and to a feeling of closeness to others, even if we do not share their religious belief.

Now to end my paper I should like to take you far away from the cruelty to animals, the unkindness to Muslims and gays that I have immersed you in. I invite you to Leicester, to a frontier space, which lies for me between museum and temple, faith and belief.

Jainism in Leicester

My remaining slides will take you on a short aesthetic walk through the peaceful and sacred spaces of the Jain Temple in Leicester. In this final section I should like to problematise the notion of source communities. In this context, I point to the case of the Jain 'community' in Leicester, which like all social groups is by no mean totally unified or heterogeneous.

First let me offer some historical background to Jainism in Leicester, which points to the long history of migration that is characteristic of the UK, despite EDL claims to the 'purity' of the 'white' race. In the UK, as in other European countries, waves of migrations have long impacted upon the urban landscape in terms of culture and belief. The city of Leicester in the English Midlands, where I now live and work, was established around AD50 by the invading Roman army as a military settlement. Originally named *Ratae Corieltavorum*, on the Fosse Way Roman Road the town was strategically well placed for trade and grew in importance to become one of the

largest towns in Roman Britain as the remains of the Roman Wall and Baths at the Jewry Wall Museum site.

Leicester city lies on the River Soar and at the edge of the National Forest. In 2006, the population was estimated at 289,700, the largest in the East Midlands, whilst 441,213 people were recorded as living in the wider Leicester Urban Area. Leicester is place where wide ranges of belief systems are evident. Today there is a rich diversity in the ways we dress and the foods we eat as well as in the architectural spaces we inhabit for our work, entertainment, daily lives and worship. The large ethnic minority population (Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Jain) are largely of South Asian heritage, immigrating to the UK from Uganda and Kenya after WW2. The Jain community that I would like to outline comprise less than 1% population, although as they are often counted as Hindu in the Census the precise number is difficult to confirm (Shah 2007).

In 1988 Leicester City gained distinction as the site of the first Jain temple to be built in Europe, following eight years of development. The temple on Oxford Road beautifully incorporates the earlier Congregational Church building dating from 1865.

Our Leicester temple is home to the first Jain centre in Europe, which brings together in one building all the main sects of Jains for worship and study. While different Jain groups have separate temples to practice their faith in India, they share same site in Leicester. Differences lie within as well as between communities for Jains here as elsewhere. In terms of attitudes to outsiders for example, Jains entering the Main Hall have respectfully asked my friend and colleague Dr Ann Davis and I not to enter the Main Hall space, but to return at less busy times, whereupon we were hustled in and towards the altar by an Elder, who told us ‘I am the first Jain in Leicester’, come, come’ and preceded with his story of flight from Uganda after WW2.

Now I must ‘come, come’ to a close! Let me begin to draw some concluding remarks and raise some questions on belief for our ICME group. At the outset of this paper I mentioned the importance of the blind men and the elephant tale for me lay in the Jain notion of *Anekant*, which translates as ‘many-sidedness’ or ‘multiple view-points’ that I related to polyvocality in the museum context. In emphasising ‘multiple perspectives and the non-absoluteness of truth’ Jains demonstrate great ‘tolerance and respect’ for other faiths and belief systems, which resonates in the respectful dialogical exchange of feminist-hermeneutics (Shah 2007: 34; Golding 2009). Importantly there is no discrimination towards gays or anyone else in the religion, where individuals directly access the God-head, without an intermediary priest.

People of faith, and people of no faith like myself, have of course, very different experiences. Dr Shah asks us as museum professional to take faith seriously, not simply to appreciate the aesthetics of the objects. While I readily and respectfully agree with this request at the temple I must admit to feeling at times as if I am living in a different world from people of faith. I hope I respectfully engage in prayer and certainly feel some feelings of peace, as I do at yoga, but do I perhaps engage in the ritual worship almost as if it is a theatre? Is this not disrespectful? How, if at all, can we approach each other’s belief systems, whether religious or political, at a deeper level? Is the case of gaining intercultural understanding through objects of religion or

through discussion with those who uphold extremist politics even more difficult when we are thinking of children?

I contend that the museum – its exhibitionary practices and programmes – can validate and celebrate cultures and peoples, as well as disparage and silence them. From a feminist-hermeneutics perspective, I would argue in educational terms for the transformative learning power of the museum, that can move us from the safe but limited zone of what we know, to broader futures beyond, which can occur when we are open enough for our horizon to be ‘fused’ with another (Golding 2009).

The museum is a vital site for the possibility of such fusion since, in 2006 Trevor Phillips, Head of the Commission for Racial Equality, informed us of a worrying trend that ‘younger Britons are more exclusive than older Britons’ (Phillips 2006). He cited a troubling statistic where 95% of white Britons surveyed said that all or most of their friends were white and 55% could not name a single non-white friend. Museums can provide access to a rich complex world from which diverse objects, stories, her/histories emerge.

Conclusion

I have suggested with some examples that engaging the whole human: mind and body, senses and emotions, was key to some fusion of horizons, which involves imaginative engagement to progress inter-cultural understanding. As Christina Kreps observes the ‘emotional force of objects and the cultural force of emotions’ can provide a platform for ‘cross-cultural comparison since all humans have the capacity feel emotions and express them various medium include objects’ (Krepps 2003: 152). However I observed with some examples that while objects may move us closer to each other’s horizons and open new pathways to cross-cultural understandings, they may raise vastly different emotions and feelings in individuals and communities. I contend that museums have important if difficult work to do and specifically highlight Mary Warnock’s recent work here, that promoting empathy as an emotion is key to our moral understanding and vital to civil society and citizenship (Warnock 2010).

In conclusion, this paper questioned to what extent museums might act as democratic spaces, sites for respectful dialogical exchange and creative dialogue, where diverse meanings might be considered. I have worried over engaging those with polarized views in the museum but, instead of seeking consensus, perhaps we may just aim to encourage debate as Lagerkvist and Luke have advised (Lagerkvist 2006; Luke 2006). Working in the dialogical frontier space of the museum let us develop critical thinkers, reflecting on the ways the past impacts on the present and future, to perceive many aspects of the elephant, not a single perspective.

I opened this paper with a piece of historical journal writing and I should like to close with a creative text, to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of museum studies and their importance in connecting real and imaginary realms. George Orwell’s novel *Animal Farm* chillingly highlights the fragility of the oral tradition in preserving historical memory and the importance of writing as a guarantee of truth claims in the west. Orwell states:

A few days later, when the terror caused by the executions had died down, some of the animals remembered – or thought they remembered – that the

Sixth Commandment decreed: ‘No animal shall kill any other animal’. ... Muriel read the commandment for her. It ran: ‘No animal shall kill any other animal, without cause.’ Somehow or other, the last two words had slipped out of the animals’ memory. ... ‘readjustment’ of rations never a ‘reduction’. But doubtless it had been worse in the old days. They were glad to believe so. ... There was nothing there now except a single commandment. It ran: ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS. (Orwell 1976: 68, 83, 99)

In *Animal Farm* Orwell writes of interconnection, how truth, power and knowledge are inextricably linked in the socio-political world. For me as a museum professional he emphasizes not only the importance of the law enshrining the human rights and responsibilities of all citizens, but also the need to promote literacies – critical thinking, reading and writing skills inspired by material culture and intangible heritage – in democratic forum spaces.

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