

Impact case study (REF3b)

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| Institution: University of York |
| Unit of Assessment: 30, History |
| Title of case study: Transatlantic Slavery: Influence, Legacy, Representation |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The History Department at York has a long-standing commitment (embodied in the work of James Walvin, Simon Smith, Douglas Hamilton, Henrice Altink and Geoff Cubitt) to path-breaking research into the history and memory of transatlantic slavery. Our researchers have worked closely with museums and educational practitioners to establish a ‘virtuous circle’ in which research: (i) influences the content of heritage and educational presentations; (ii) reflects on those presentations, gauging public response and prompting stakeholder debate; (iii) provides constructive feedback to museums and others. This impact case study shows how research by members of the Department has contributed to each stage of this process. Professor James Walvin’s research publications from 1993 until his retirement in 2005 revealed how slavery has shaped the nature of contemporary British society, a body of work that significantly contributed to the slave trade’s inclusion in the National Curriculum in 2008. In addition to his on-going record as an exhibition curator, historical advisor and commentator on slavery, he advised and helped create the York AHRC-funded ‘1807 Commemorated’ project (2007-9), principle investigator Laurajane Smith (Archaeology) and co-investigator Geoff Cubitt; Data Management Group Walvin. This project helped heritage professionals and other stakeholders understand and analyse the extensive museum activity on slavery generated by the 2007 Bicentenary of the Act Abolishing the Slave Trade, and led to innovations in museum practice and new collaborative relationships within the sector.</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>A conference held at Yale University in 2010 celebrated Walvin’s achievement as ‘one of the great scholars of the transatlantic slave trade, and a pioneer in [...] unearthing the history of Black Britain’. His major research publications demonstrated the critical importance of African slavery to the formation of Atlantic societies [1]. Walvin (at York 1993-2005, Emeritus Professor since 2005.) unravelled the close connections between the international traffic in consumables like tea, coffee and tobacco and the developing sense of Englishness [2], and used the life of a prominent black abolitionist to probe the previously neglected complexity both of slavery and the movement for its abolition [3]. His work was instrumental in highlighting the centrality of slavery to Britain’s emerging great power status, and in uncovering the role of members of the African diaspora not just as victims, but as ‘settlers’ and participants in the formation of new national societies. His contribution was recognised by the award of an OBE for services to scholarship in 2008 and by his selection as the <i>invité d’honneur</i> representing Britain at the official ceremony in May 2012 marking the French <i>Journée nationale</i> commemorating slavery and its abolition. Walvin’s extensive experience as curator and historical advisor for exhibitions on slavery or abolition shaped the research questions for the ‘1807 Commemorated’ project, which received a £325,860 AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship Grant, PI Smith and Co-I Cubitt (1993-present, Senior Lecturer, then Reader) [8]. This examined the challenges faced by museums in presenting ‘difficult’ histories. The research combined analysis of exhibitions with in-depth interviews of museum staff and community representatives and qualitative and quantitative analysis of 1,498 visitor exit interviews at seven museums: the International Slavery Museum (Liverpool), Wilberforce House Museum (Hull), the Museum of London Docklands, the National Maritime Museum, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (Bristol) and the British Museum. The first four of these institutions hold the most substantial permanent displays on transatlantic slavery in the UK museum sector. The five museums for which statistics are available show a collective annual footfall of over 9.5m between 2009 and 2011. This intensive research was contextualized through visits to roughly sixty other institutions, and more limited data collection on a further c. 120. The academic outputs included a special issue of the influential museum studies journal <i>Museum and Society</i> [4], and an edited volume of essays from the project team, museum practitioners and other stakeholders [5]. Formal reports (not in the public domain) were written for each of the seven core partner institutions. In addition, this promoted discussion of the challenges of curating difficult histories among museum professionals, community representatives, academics and other stakeholders.</p> |

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Cubitt was centrally involved in the organisation of this research and publication, and lead author of the introduction to the co-edited volume. He had particular responsibility for leading the research elements focusing on exhibition content (including narrative, use of objects, and spatial arrangements), and the broader survey of exhibitions across the country. It was at his initiative that the latter became an important aspect of the project as a whole. His publications have: used material from the project to analyse the practical and conceptual issues posed by the presentation of atrocity materials in museum displays [5a]; analysed museum strategies for representing the vital but contentious theme of slave resistance [4a]; and examined the ways in which museums in 2007 sought to make the history of slavery locally meaningful [6, 7]. These publications were based on detailed on-site analysis of exhibition content and publicity materials, supplemented by curator and visitor interviews. Together, they offer an analysis of museum representations of difficult history that engages both with the practical dilemmas confronting museum professionals and their varied strategies for negotiating these dilemmas.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] J. Walvin, *Questioning Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1996)*

[2] J. Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997)*

[3] J. Walvin, *An African Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano* (Continuum, 1998)*

[4] 'Museums and the Bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade', special issue of *Museum and Society* 8, no 3 (2010). (Includes [4a] G. Cubitt, 'Lines of Resistance: Evoking and Configuring the Theme of Resistance in Museum Displays in Britain Around the Bicentenary of 1807'. 143-164.[Refereed Journal])

[5] L. Smith, G. Cubitt, R. Wilson and K. Fouseki (eds.) *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*: (New York: Routledge, 2011). (Includes [5a] G. Cubitt, 'Atrocity materials and the representation of transatlantic slavery: problems, strategies and reactions') [Externally Refereed]

[6] G. Cubitt, 'Bringing It Home: Making Local Meaning in 2007 Bicentenary Exhibitions'. *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 2 (2009): 259-275. [Refereed Journal]

[7] G. Cubitt, 'Museums and Slavery in Britain: the Bicentenary of 1807'. In *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, edited by Ana Lucia Araujo. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.[Externally Refereed]

*Submitted to RAE 2001 in which York was graded '5'

[8] *Key Grant*: 'Commissioning, production, content and audience reception of bicentenary events commemorating the abolition of the slave trade in the UK, 1807-2007' AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, £325,860 (2007-9): <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funded-Research/Pages/Commissioning-production-content-and-audience-reception-of-bicentenary-events-commemorating-the-abol.aspx>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The above research has had a highly significant national and international impact during the REF period largely in the fields of museum practice and in the educational and public presentation of slavery.

1. Museums: The '1807 Commemorated' project was designed to produce dialogue between academics, museum professionals and others concerned with representing the history of slavery and, as a Knowledge Transfer grant, to have significant impact on museum practice. In 2008 its research findings were the basis for discussion at three workshops and one conference, bringing together staff from the seven partner institutions, community representatives and other stakeholders, including museum professionals, academics and heritage administrators. On the basis of its research, the project team was commissioned and funded by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the public body charged with promoting improvement and innovation in the museum sector, to run a series of one-day workshops for museum practitioners in the different MLA regions. Seven regional workshops were held in 2009, attended by a total of 50-60 practitioners. These disseminated research findings and promoted discussion of the lessons to be learnt by the museums and heritage sector from the experience of the bicentenary. On the basis of these discussions, we established a website jointly with the MLA to supply an online 'toolkit' and other resources for museums and heritage practitioners dealing with difficult histories. The toolkit contains four resources, "Communities", "Exhibitions", "Audiences" and "Practitioners". All continue

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to be used, with 60, 30, 16 and 4 downloads of them respectively (Jan-Jun, 2013). [A]

The project has had a significant impact on practices within our seven core partners. In 2009, we organized workshops within each museum to present and discuss institution-specific findings. The museums determined the format: some preferred small meetings with a few key staff, while others preferred larger gatherings. The workshop at the Museum of London Docklands, for example, was attended by museum staff, community representatives and museum advisory group members. The report to the AHRC noted that the museum's then Director, David Spence, had stated that 'London Museum in Docklands has used data gathered during phase 3 [i.e. the visitor interviews] to inform floor and interpretive staff of the difficulties some audience members have with traumatic content, and floor staff are using this information to help mediate visitor responses. The Museum...has also used information from the fellowship in producing the policy document: *The Making of London, Sugar and Slavery: a toolkit for community participation, Museum in Docklands.*' In November 2012 he added 'that the findings of the report have informed the processes adopted by the Museum in the creation of its Consultative Group and their work on the generation of a new gallery at Museum of London Docklands, working title 'Many East Ends', particularly the insight from the 1807 Commemorated visitor surveys...' 'Many East Ends' has significant Arts Council funding and is scheduled to open in 2015.' [B] The Director of the International Slavery Museum (Liverpool), Richard Benjamin, states that the project has helped his museum form working partnerships with staff at other institutions, and that its findings are informing future gallery development, in particular the immersive installation on the Middle Passage, a central feature of the museum. [C]

The project's impact on museums quickly reached beyond the core partner institutions. Tyne and Wear Museums, for example, drew on our research in framing the evaluation report on their own 'Remembering Slavery 2007' project. [D] The 2009 MLA workshops made a specific effort to engage with the distinctive needs of the numerous smaller or regional museums that had addressed the history of slavery two years previously. For example, feedback from Epping Forest District Museum stressed that the information produced by the project had changed the way they would approach future exhibitions with an emotive subject matter, especially those involving local groups. They cited the project's data on audience responses as 'an important contribution to evaluating the ways in which local museums can engage visitors with societal issues', and highlighted how the discussion of the problematic issues involved in the display of chains and similar objects (an important focus of Cubitt's researches [5a]) as helping to 'give a wider understanding to [sic] visitor needs and expectations.' [E] The project's reach has been international. Addressing Museum professionals, the prominent museums consultant and communities specialist Bernadette Lynch cites the project as presenting 'the most thorough and revealing research' on the impact of the bicentenary in the museum sector'. [F] The website of the Tracing Center on Histories and Legacies of Slavery (a US-based organization promoting awareness of the extent of complicity with slavery in American society) cited Cubitt [7] as offering a series of 'lessons [which] can serve as guide posts for the upcoming [2013] US sesquicentennial commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation'. [G]

2. Impact on Education and the Public Understanding of Slavery:

In 2008 slavery was introduced as a compulsory element of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3 taken by all year 8 students. Walvin played an important role in this. His research publications were quoted in Parliamentary Debates and he was subsequently invited to participate in discussions with the then Minister of Education, Alan Johnson, and subsequently sat on a government committee chaired by the then Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. [H] He disseminated his earlier research findings to the public through publications (e.g. *A Short History of Slavery* [Penguin 2007], *Slavery to Freedom* [Pitkin 2007], *The Slave Trade* [Thames and Hudson 2011]), which were designed to meet the specific needs created by this change in the curriculum. He has continued to play a major role in further initiatives to embed slavery into educational programmes, both in Britain and elsewhere. For instance, he collaborated with the Gilder Lehrman Institute for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition at Yale University on the 'Middle Passages' project, which brought high school teachers from Africa, the United States and Britain together at a series of summer schools between 2010 and 2012. (The third, hosted by the Department of History at York, had 28 attendees; roughly similar numbers attended the other two sessions.) As organiser and co-teacher, Walvin helped the participants develop individual teaching

plans on the history of slavery that would be implemented in their home institutions upon their return. In 2011-12, he was also involved as lecturer and tutor in the Transatlantic Teachers Programme organised by The National Archives and the University of Virginia, which introduced high school teachers from the US and UK to primary sources on the history of slavery and enlisted them in the production of detailed online teaching materials incorporating this knowledge. [I]

York's transformative research on slavery is also presented for wider educational and public dissemination through on-line media. In addition to the joint website with the MLA, the '1807 Commemorated project' established a website [J], presenting reports, discussion pieces, interviews and other material relating to the project and to the bicentenary. These two websites have proved successful in shaping the awareness of slavery's history among a broader interested public. Between August 2011 and July 2012 alone, the main project website had more than 310,000 hits from over a hundred countries. To give an example of how visitors have used this material to further transform the public understanding of transatlantic slavery and abolition, it may be noted that the companion website for the updated 3rd edition (2011) of Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*, a best-selling critical introduction to the analysis of visual culture widely used in undergraduate courses [K], organizes one of its key exercises for readers (Discourse Analysis I) around materials from the two project websites. This has in turn led to use of these materials in course design by, for example, Dr. Phaedra Livingstone (Museum Studies, Univ. of Oregon). Dr. David Lambert of the University of Warwick also highlights the 'wealth of resources' on the project website and uses Cubitt [7] as core reading for a seminar on museums in his third-year American Studies course on 'Slavery, Memory and Memorialisation'.

Finally, Walvin's research expertise has made him a key contributor of text and advice to a major new website project co-ordinated by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The 'Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Remembrance' (SSTR) project will provide a convenient, comprehensive, and easy-to-use online guide to major museums and sites dealing with slavery and the slave trade across the world, promoting online public access to objects and displays and providing a convenient switchboard for museum professionals to exchange information and ideas. Its Vice President writes that 'The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has drawn extensively on the published research of Professor James Walvin of the University of York in shaping its educational programs related to slavery, the slave trade, and historic sites and museums. We have been delighted to involve him in our major new on-line initiative [SSTR], which we will shortly launch as a joint CWF-UNESCO website. Recognized internationally, Professor Walvin's publications and expertise are a most important component of building scholarly content on the site and making contacts with museums and sites around the Atlantic rim and elsewhere.' [L] Like the '1807 Commemorated' websites but on an international scale, SSTR simultaneously promotes an enhanced public knowledge of slavery's history and facilitates discussion across the museum sector. Research by York-based historians contributes significantly to these twin objectives.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [A] <http://www.york.ac.uk/1807commemorated/>;
<https://www.york.ac.uk/usagestats/awstats/1807commemorated/>
- [B] AHRC KT Fellowship, Final Report, 30/11/09; email correspondence: Director, Museum of London Docklands to Geoff Cubitt, 19 November 2012
- [C] Director of the International Slavery Museum (Liverpool), email correspondence
- [D] <http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/slavery/files/research-zone/REMEMBERINGSLAVERYEVALUATIONREPORT.pdf>
- [E] 1807 Commemorated Questionnaire returned after MLA workshop
- [F] 'Reflective debate, radical transparency and trust in the museum', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 28:1 (2013), 1-13
- [G] <http://www.tracingcenter.org/blog/2012/09/lessons-from-the-british-commemoration-of-the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-2/>
- [H] <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070320/debtext/70320-0004.htm> (Column 687)
- [I] <http://www.yale.edu/glc/mpi/> [Middle Passages website]
- [J] <http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/>
- [K] <http://www.sagepub.com/rose/discourseex2.htm>
- [L] Letter of James Horn, Vice President of Research and Historical Interpretation and Director of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 25 July, 2013.