

Response Paper to *Beyond Management* by Stephen Weil
presented by Alissandra Cummins, Barbados Museum and Historical Society
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BACKGROUND:

J.A. Froude wrote about the British West Indies in 1888 saying that “ *in the Caribbean there has been romance , but it has been the romance of pirates and outlaws[T]here are no people here in the true sense of the word.*”. (1) Froude’s perspective as a British historian was not unusual, in that his obvious superiority enabled him to comment superciliously on the lack of a recognisable heritage, while at the same time his ethnocentrism would not permit the acknowledgment of either indigenous Amerindian or recently enfranchised African as ‘real people’ , capable of engendering a real history to any place.

The process of emerging as a true people then, involves both the valorization of existence/experience and its authentic representation in the annals of history , in the exhibition halls of the museum. The shadow of Froude and colonial history in general, makes it imperative that when addressing notions of Caribbean identity , that we first or simultaneously address those specific historical conditions which legitimized notions of a cultural vacuum. Various manifestations of exile and many consequences of this sense of cultural inadequacy still haunt Caribbean cultural phenomena . In the words of the legendary Bob Marley there is still a need to “*emancipate yourself from mental slavery*”,(2) a need which both audience and academic alike, are increasingly expectant that Caribbean museums can and must address.

Barbadian writer George Lamming articulated the issue thus : *If people are shaped by the view that they are made into history by some chosen few who are the real makers of history, you stabilize the relation of the dominant and dominated... if we could but succeed in planting in people, not only the idea but the fact, in their consciousness, that*

they are the makers of history, then you alter the relationship between them and those who hold them in their hands.(3) In essence, the modern Caribbean museum has grown with the realization that they have a role to play not simply with deconstruction of colonial notions of history , but with the construction of community empowerment through the exploration of and involvement in the reconstruction of untold national histories.

Introduction:

Stephen Weil's paper offers a framework for the development of standards of excellence for today's museums, through a thorough examination of the assumptions, and even the mythologies underlying museum maintenance(and I mean this in the most basic sense of the survival tactics outlined by the speaker), and management. Much of what I have to offer to you today stands more or less as a case study for many of the issues raised. However, there is one sense of difference in terms perhaps of the level of questioning what the speaker refers to as "the worthiness of the institution".

While it exists at the institutional level more often than not, in countries which are very small such as in the Caribbean, the questioning of the ends and the means of any one museum's existence must in some sense impact on other agencies at the national level. Thus the institutional must necessarily find resonance in the national priority. Indeed, it would be virtually impossible to do otherwise, despite the range between governmental and non-governmental entities.

Stephen Weil has examined the relevance of some of the key tenets of a museum's worth and value within society. However, I must point out that while a small core of Caribbean museums were created in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a growing majority were created following the initiative of independence in the 1960s, and has continued to increase some three decades later, as some nations are maturing in terms of their vision and national identity. This reality has equal weight, and in some instances, greater priority than the objectives Mr. Weil has outlined. Nevertheless, they are for the Caribbean people linked with the fiscal and community responsibilities he has so ably addressed.

My paper will therefore offer some perspectives on the state of play within the Caribbean region, as well as in Barbados as a particular case study, while both governments and communities wrestle with issues of identity versus insularity, self-worth and self-empowerment in the task of constructing histories and heroes, as part of the process of nation-building. The establishment of appropriate standards of practice in the museum management field are thus very much part of the process as the expectant audience must be enabled to appreciate, as much as how to measure success and satisfaction with the product.

Caribbean Museum Development:

Much of the region's material culture of the past 500 years is of foreign origin, and these institutions face a special challenge in the management, interpretation and care of these collections, while at the same time effectively balancing this vision of West Indian life through the expansion and growth of the non-archaeological indigenous collections. Incidentally, the high level of archaeological activity within the region has had a tremendous impact on regional museum development. This has disturbing connotations for the way in which Caribbean collections are being created, and their perceived relevance and value to the population, struggling to put a recognisable face to the picture it presents of itself, particularly in museums.

The last two decades have been a period of growth, excitement and possibility, without necessarily consistency in the creation of national infrastructure. Some heritage institutions have wrestled creatively with controversial Caribbean subject matter. For example the array of smaller "community" institutions like the "culture houses" and the "negga houses" in Antigua and Barbuda, which have sought to give indigenous meaning to issues of race, class and identities in their countries. As a consequence of these activities, the public has experienced exhibitions that explore Caribbean migration, slavery and emancipation, folk culture and labour practices, representations of race in Caribbean art, urbanization and community development, and the dynamic intersection of race and gender. The exploration of aspects of both historical and contemporary life in museums has contributed a vibrancy and relevance that has invigorated many of the nation's cultural institutions, and sparked invaluable collaborations between museums and communities.

New Caribbean museums developed within the last ten years, such as those in the Cayman Islands, Bahamas, and Belize, have begun to shift their involvement with local communities into a new paradigm that recognises the importance of developing long-term and mutually reciprocal relationships. Nascent museum structures such as those in St. Lucia and St. Kitts and Nevis have also elucidated similar motivation behind their approach to national museum development. Movement in this direction is crucial because it is not easy to tell an evocative and nuanced history without the knowledge and respect of the living community. This paradigm of shared responsibility recognises the difficulties and the benefits of community influence in the development of exhibitions, programmes and collections. This is not to suggest that curators abrogate their scholarly and professional obligations. Rather that they embrace a new way of thinking that accepts the notion that strong exhibitions and programmes often grow out of balancing the tensions between community memory and academic history.

However new museum- community paradigms are not enough. Interpreting Caribbean history, indeed all Caribbean cultural heritage, can benefit greatly from the creation of an internal environment that encourages innovation, creativity, and respect for differing cultural perspectives. Interpreting Caribbean history in new ways could mean an explicitly interdisciplinary approach to the past that enriches the traditional processes and visions of historians by adding the vision of folklorists, artists, art historians, ethnomusicologists and archaeologists. So far the implementation of this partnership has been rather sporadic and uneven. Even more significant is the willingness of the cultural entities to stretch the parameters of traditional western museum interpretation. Experimenting with content, manipulating the role and use of objects, marrying new technologies with traditional interpretive devices such as storytelling and carnival and expanding visual opportunities can lead to programmes that provide insight, engagement, learning and real understanding about the importance and centrality of race, class and gender in Caribbean culture.

Director of the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology (Guyana), the late Dr. Denis Williams' poignant statement that "*the destruction and removal of our cultural heritage will not cease until everyone views it as a personal affront*" reverberated in the consciousness of Caribbean cultural workers, during the first regional workshop on Illicit Traffic in Cultural Property, organised in 1997 by CARICOM and UNESCO. A lack of respect for cultural patrimony has been greatly exacerbated by the relative rarity of protective legislation which has both resulted from and resulted in an official

ignorance, and ,it must be said, indifference which has made the Caribbean vulnerable to the rapacious attentions of modern day pirates. Recent initiatives such as the ones mentioned above, have slowly begun to change things. However, this situation clearly cannot be rectified with the promulgation of legislation alone.

From the perspectives of cultural democracy, self empowerment and self determination, the past decade has been marked by a growing realization and acknowledgment by institutions that are managing cultural heritage, of the role of the local people in the preservation, continuation and management of their own cultural heritage. The countries of the Caribbean are uniquely poised to develop a shared vision for redressing the cultural inequities resulting from the colonial era. It will not be easy for it is the people themselves who must be made aware of this opportunity and be empowered by their contribution. Remember we are talking about 500 years of cultural and administrative imposition to overcome.

One of their strengths in this engagement is the experience in the shared and evolving challenge of the post-colonial discourse. Indeed, it is in a rather unique position because societies in the Caribbean are largely transplanted and ultimately, transformed cultures. The context and the contention therefore, of what constitutes national identity forms an essential part of both a conscious and subconscious debate on the core mission and role of museums. Their weakness in my view, has been, particularly amongst the older institutions, a reliance on imposed models of authority. An insistence on a type of organisational structure, virtually impossible to achieve or sustain, that does not take account of indigenous experience and knowledge, that does not acknowledge national or regional priorities. This has led in some instances unfortunately to stagnation and irrelevance.

It is against this background that the role of the region's museums in promoting and facilitating reconciliation between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples should be examined. Particularly in relation to establishing national and regional ethical codes of professional practice, the reexamination and rationalisation of our exhibited views of ourselves, the conceptualisation and establishment of training programmes reflective of a mutual respect and recognition of traditional values, and the negotiation of constructive partnerships in working to redress the imbalances in the current practices of cultural heritage management, counterpoint the development of appropriate cultural

policies at the national and regional levels. Museums and local communities must work together to redress the imbalances of cultural representation at all levels.

Caribbean museums have a fundamental role to play in addressing the erosion of cultural self esteem. Caribbean cultures continually encounter what Amar Galla calls "*the tyranny of stereotypes*" often defined in "*dichotomous oppositions, ...black and white, indigenous and transferred.*"(4) Caribbean museums are in a position to alleviate such intransigence through the recontextualisation of their collections, interpretations and exhibitions with reference to the surviving tangible and intangible heritage resources in the respective communities. Thus, the Caribbean heritage community must become reflective mechanisms for consciousness-raising. More importantly, we must rethink the museum concept in a post-colonial context. Stuart Hall has defined the Heritage as "*a discursive practice... one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory.*"(5) Cultural policies can and should be innovative and creative, and should challenge the status and sterile rhetoric of the conservative and reactionary elements of heritage management practices in societies emerging from a post-colonial environment.

Barbados : A Case Study for Museum development in the 21st century

Three centuries of colonial domination and control confirmed Froude's assertion of a cultural vacuum needing to be addressed. British Council Art Officer John Harrison making his first visit to Barbados in 1947 was informed that art simply "*did not exist on the island*", and he later reported, it was also "*implied that Barbadians were art-hating rather than art-loving and...that there [was] a certain complacent indifference*" .(6) The British Council established in the post 2nd World War West Indies openly articulated the propagandist motives meant to secure cultural as well as political supremacy: "*to explain to colonial people those aspects of British civilization, knowledge of which is not naturally transmitted through the administrative link, and to aid by sharing of British educational, social, and administrative , that progress towards self government which Britain pledged to maintain*".(7) Generally regarded as a saviour in the cultural desert of Barbados, and the 'spiritual home' of the colony's cultural societies, the Council did not completely escape controversy but it was an instinctively critical response which did not receive wide popular support but was rather regarded with suspicion. Thus this organization was essentially empowered to establish the criteria by which Caribbean culture would be defined and validated without radical change for decades to come, since its resources comprised the foundation of most local arts agencies formed at that time.

In the early 1970s a National Gallery had been identified as an essential phase in the development of the historical, non-governmental Barbados Museum, however focus

remained on the historical society and the concept received little attention or support. The Art Collection Foundation (later the Barbados Gallery of Art), a private trust, was established in the 1980s specifically to acquire an art collection “for the benefit of all Barbadians”. In the early 1990s the National Cultural Foundation was charged with the responsibility for developing plans for the national gallery, with a committee representative of all the cultural institutions on the island. None of these initiatives however resulted in the much anticipated institution.(8) The National Cultural Policy for Barbados (1995/96) finally endorsed the need for a national gallery. When the Hon. Mia Mottley, Minister of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture announced the establishment of a National Art Gallery Planning Committee, this policy directive was confirmed in 1999 with its inclusion in the ruling Barbados Labour Party’s manifesto ‘Agenda for the 21st Century’. This document articulated their intention to establish not merely a national gallery, but a national heroes gallery and national standards for museums. It was a window of opportunity rarely offered to affect cultural policy at a strategic stage.(9)

It is revealing that at the same time that the National Gallery and National Heroes Gallery committees were established, another committee on national reconciliation was created. Charged with addressing perceived tensions between the various racial and ethnic groups which make up the population of Barbados, and providing guidelines for reform as well as simply a forum for open and honest debate. Ironically, the proposal of the National Heroes Committee for the removal from the centre of Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, of an early 19th century bronze statue of Lord Nelson, has been the greatest catalyst for generating ongoing debate. Although commissioned by the citizens of Barbados, and subsequently a well-known landmark (famed for pre-dating the statue in Trafalgar Square in London), it is now regarded as incompatible with contemporary notions of Barbadian heroes. Trafalgar Square, now renamed National Heroes Square is not the right home for the defender of the faith of slavery.(10) There are others, both black and white, who argue passionately for its retention either on the basis of historical accuracy, maturing sophistication of an independent nation, or simply for tourism.

Critical for the development of all these new institutions has been a broad ranging consultative process with the various interest groups, both regionally and nationally. Consultations with potential partner agencies and institutions as well as public opinion surveys have been revealing, not so much for what positions are taken with respect to the new institutions, ranging from suspicion to extravagant expectation, but for what is not understood, expected or anticipated of these new organisations identified as a ‘national gallery’ and a ‘national heroes gallery’. (11) Such terminology, although politically successful in arousing public interest in the concept and clarifying government’s motives, still suffered for being the received wisdom of another time and place and therefore lacked the intellectual rigour or reference to local knowledge, which only close examination and analytical debate on the historical and cultural interpretations of such organisations could reveal. (12) It has been a challenging exploratory process. Thinking has evolved in terms of a broader conceptual framework of National entities, rather than a singular building housing a permanent collection. Thus, it is understood that although we at present refer to these new structures as a “National Art Gallery” and a “National

Heroes Gallery” that eventually the nomenclature will be rooted in our history and the anticipated, or explicitly stated requirements of the local audience. (13)

The primary focus will be on establishing an infrastructure running throughout society envisioning integration of these new entities into community experiences, in order to foster increased interaction between the cultural heritage and the Barbadian public. Limited availability of financial resources in both the public and private sectors to support existing infrastructures do not support the creation of one central monolithic structure, which eventually becomes impossible to adequately finance. Thus a philosophy has evolved which espouses as a core ideology strategic sharing of resources and cooperative programme development.

We are also questioning traditional chronological and authoritative narratives in the presentation of the permanent collections where this approach serves to validate one monolithic ongoing history. But in addition to a philosophical tenet, this approach becomes one of necessity due not least, to either the non-existence or the unavailability of essential work. With a symbiotic relationship with sister institutions, the burden of establishing ‘authoritative’ historical collections and interpretations is a shared responsibility, allowing greater liberty to provide opportunities for the presentations of diverging scenarios utilizing shared resources. Basically the intent is to establish a more open, flexible structure that can fluidly adapt or re-present itself.

Today, 34 years after independence from Britain, Barbados is at the crossroads of redefining or perhaps, defining for the first time its history and culture. Such debate has assisted in the articulation of our ideas for the structure and purpose of a National museums system, which move beyond nineteenth century origins and assumptions.(14)

Conclusions:

What is needed is a new synthesis, a new integration that encourages visitors to see that exploring issues generally, and multicultural Caribbean history specifically, is essential to their understanding of West Indian history as a whole. Museums can perform a valuable service by demonstrating how issues of race, gender and class have touched, shaped, and informed, historically, the experience of all West Indians. Museums must explore the clashes, conflicts, compromises and cultural borrowing that is at the core of the Caribbean past. By examining how people have

struggled and negotiated throughout history, museums can better contextualize the contemporary situation of museum visitors. The audience can then partake in a richer, more complex and ultimately more satisfying cultural experience. There are many challenges to crafting effective exhibitions and programmes that explore and interpret Caribbean culture. Not least of which is the many different meanings that West Indians can glean from that experience. The Caribbean museum profession has made great strides in the last decade. We must continue to take risks and explore difficult questions in order to provide a more inclusive understanding of the region's past .

In conclusion, the conviction must be supported that museums have a crucial role to play not only in preserving, managing and interpreting cultural heritage but also in modeling community relations strategies. It is important that the profession avoid romanticizing the past, depicted as comprising solely of upwardly mobile heroes, to whom racism and discrimination were merely obstacles to overcome. While that scenario did occur, it was the exception and not the rule during much of the Caribbean's history. What is needed is a commitment to explore the full range of Caribbean experiences, including, the difficult, ambiguous and controversial episodes. It is essential that the harsh realities of life be seen side by side with achievements and victorious struggles. The ultimate role and responsibilities of museums will be determined by how well they integrate and interrelate with the diverse cultural heritage of the people they represent with the vision the Caribbean community has of itself, its past and its future.

NOTES

1. J.A. Froude, The English in the West Indies or The Bow of Ulysses, New York, Charles Scribner and Sons, 1888, p.347
2. Bob Marley, Redemption Song
3. George Lamming. In the Castle of My Skin, 1953, New York, rpt. Collier, 1980
4. Amareswar Galla, Issues for Museums in Post Colonial Societies, in Occasional Papers of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, Calgary and Bombay, May No.1,1993
5. Stuart Hall, Whose Heritage?Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-nation, in Third Text, vol.49, Winter 1999-2000
6. John Harrison, Last Thoughts on Art in the British Caribbean ' in the Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, XIX: II, 1952, pp.53-57
7. Annual Report , The British Council,1950-51
8. This section of the paper contains extracts from an unpublished collaborative paper by Alissandra Cummins, Allison Thompson and Nick Whittle – “(De) Constructing a National Gallery in the Caribbean.”presented at the Annual Congress of International Association of Art Critics , London, September, 2000
- 9.-14. Ibid

