

INTRODUCTION

With Joscelyn Gardner's exhibition *White Skin, Black Kin: "Speaking the Unspeakable"*, both Barbados and this Museum are taking bold steps into uncharted waters, and have willingly joined with the artist to invite you to join in a unique three-way 'conversation', between / amongst Barbadian art, heritage and identity. It is the kind of conversation which goes to the core of what I think is the most important statement in Gardner's work; namely, her desire to draw the links between artistic expression and the struggle against the results of colonial rule. After more than three hundred years of colonial domination, Gardner's graphic images and gentle interventions continually remind us of why it is still necessary to resist the consequences of this same domination.

The exploitative practices of slavery and colonialism, by uprooting, disrupting and rejecting foreign cultures, exerted a powerful grip on the West Indian consciousness, whose repercussions are still felt today. Nevertheless, it is still possible to examine the positive gains of the Caribbean people in recovering their heritage, and moving beyond a simplistic rejection of Western heritage, to a transformation of this inheritance through a process of remembrance and reconstruction. But what are the characteristics of such a contested heritage? Stuart Hall has postulated that Heritage is:

a discursive practice [...] one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory. Just as individuals and families construct their identities in part by 'storying' the various random incidents and contingent turning points of their lives into a single, coherent narrative so nations construct identities by selectively binding their chosen high points and memorable achievements into an unfolding 'national story'.¹

Museum curators are often regarded (and regard themselves) as custodians of memory, and thus 'authorized' in specific ways to interpret this collective experience on behalf of the local population. However, in most communities, organizations, and institutions elderly people can be found who remember past events leading to current status and conditions. The value of recording 'oral histories' of direct, 'lived' experience is thus self-evident. But when such opportunities do not exist, given the distance of time between the end of slavery and the beginning of independence, how can this absence of experience be addressed? The parallels between the role of the artist in "storying individual memory", and that of the museum in "constructing collective identity" become clear. *White Skin, Black Kin* thus puts the individual in the lead role, offering suggestions and insinuating alternative views which make it possible for the audience to pursue their own truths and establish their own parameters in the gold-mine (or is it the minefield?) of memories that is the museum. As "Museumist Artist" Fred Wilson has stated, traditional "*Ethnographic displays create a distance between cultures that doesn't need to be there. This difference cuts off any connections and flattens out the complexity of our relationship in favour of exoticism*".ⁱⁱ Individual, collective, and national memories are even more credible when we can cite evidence of Aristotle's laws of association: primacy, recency, and frequency.

Both the context of the installation (multiple spaces, multiple layers, multiple levels) and the multi-media nature of the exhibition require that the viewer simultaneously pay attention to a multiplicity of sounds and images. Historian Elsa Barkley Brown has compared this history 'conversation' to a jazz improvisation:

*History is also everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms played simultaneously. The events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events. In fact, at any given moment millions of people are all talking at once. As historians we try to isolate one conversation and to explore it but the trick is then how to put that conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others - how to make this one lyric stand alone and at the same time be in connection with all the other lyrics being sung.*ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a much more complex selection of memories, kinships, and circumstances being displayed and quoted here. *White Skin, Black Kin* invites you to view the spectator sport of history "re-lived" through imagined reenactment within the apparent neutrality of a museum gallery. The common-sense notion of spectatorship implies being an innocent, neutral bystander. But Gardner makes us uncomfortably conscious and even painfully aware, in a very real way. The Museum becomes an active site of contestation of histories, memories and identities. "Spectatorship" actually requires that we actively participate and take a position about what we are seeing. We need to make decisions about what our choices will be. Which one of the multiple images are we going to concentrate on first? Which whispering voice are we going to ignore? As John Berger has suggested, seeing is not a passive activity. "*The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe;*" and then he adds: "*To look is an act of choice*" and further "*We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves*".^{iv}

The insertion and juxtaposition of objects and images allude to, as well as re-invent, a complex national identity, embedded in a deliberate insistence on the invisibility and the absence of the 'other'. Barbadian national culture ("here" and "there") has primarily defined itself not only by what it is, but - even more importantly - by what it is not. This perception extends from the colonial convention of identifying as creole any individual - African or English - born in the island. But the shared identity implied by the name, did not extend simply to a shared, but rather a mirrored experience - Black/ White; Rich/Poor; Present/Absent. The artist has sought to reveal this denial and unveil a past which has remained voiceless, invisible in a national, political, cultural, gendered, sexualized, and racialized context.

Again, recalling the words of Elsa Barkley Brown, Joscelyn Gardner 's intervention has "*put that [creole] conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others - ...[making] this one lyric stand alone and at the same time be in connection with all the other lyrics being sung*",^v and resulted in the kind of 'cultural collaboration' which I have envisaged for many years, and which I wholeheartedly welcome.

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ⁱ Stuart Hall, 'Whose Heritage? Un-settling The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-Nation' text of the keynote address given on November 1st, 1999 at the national conference ' Whose Heritage? The impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage, Manchester, England, in *Third Text*, vol.49, Winter 1999-2000.

ⁱⁱ Donald Garfield, " Making the Museum Mine: An Interview with Fred Wilson" in *Museum News*, May/June, 1993, 48.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elsa Barkley Brown. "Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons for Women's History," *History Workshop Journal*, 31 (Spring 1991), 85-90.

^{iv} John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Viking Press, 1973.

^v Elsa Barkely Brown, *Ibid*.