BLACK STORIES MATTER. LIVERPOOL INTERNATIONAL SLAVERY MUSEUM AND MULTIMODAL REPRESENTATIONS OF A CONTROVERSIAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

In the light of the relatively recent efforts and teaching programmes to reshape the study of history both from a more comprehensive perspective and through a non-white lens, the opening of Liverpool's International Slavery Museum (ISM) in 2007 represented a milestone. Both the ISM in the UK and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), which opened in Washington, DC, in 2016, foregrounded a new way of representing the challenging legacy of slavery. Yet, neither the imperialist/colonialist perspective, with its dire aspects, nor the emphasis on the enslaved people as victims to be pitied and redressed, are prioritized; the focus is rather on their individual identities as resourceful and resilient human beings and on their past and recent achievements. Such complex and multifaceted messages are conveyed through a plurality of artefacts and interactive exhibitions and videos which, especially in the case of the NMAAHC, unfold in an iconic architectural structure. One major representational objective is to unveil longstanding biases and omissions in the narration of history as it is traditionally organized in the school curricula. From a multimodal discourse analysis perspective, the present study investigates how the ISM's poly-social-media communication modes manage to engage visitors, through the synergy of (virtual) artefacts, verbal narratives of slavery, visuals and music that dynamically shape the contemporary semantics of the new emerging racial literacies, and attempt to promote change at societal level.

> *I began to be bugged by the teaching of American history, because it seemed that history had been taught without cognizance of my presence.*
> James Baldwin (1963)

1. Introduction and aims

In such terms did the author James Baldwin reflect on the inadequacies and lacunae of his education (WGBH 1963), conveying the need for a fairer representation of 'Negro' history in relation to the 'American Promise'. Before Baldwin, Carter G. Woodson [1] had

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[1] Carter G. Woodson was the second African American to earn a PhD in history from Harvard, in 1912, after W.E.B. DuBois, who was a proponent of Pan-Africanism and took part in the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

experienced the same frustration at how black people were underrepresented in US history. In 1915, Woodson and Jesse E. Moorland founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now the Association for the Study of African American Life and History) to encompass the accomplishments of African Americans, and their efforts led to today's national Black History Month (which has occurred each February since 1976). This has been an increasingly successful educational initiative. During the recent protests and riots about the black deaths caused by police shootings in the US, also fuelled by the new media and mainly led by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the demand for black history courses has constantly risen. To give one example, after the shooting of the African American student Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, (August 9, 2014) and the ensuing prolonged riots that devastated the city, educational, cultural and artistic projects and syllabi were developed there (Rogers 2016; Swartout Klein 2015) to promote hope and liberation through transformative socio-educational action. Interestingly, in that 'teachable moment', the role of critical discourse analysis in bringing about change through the efforts to build a comprehensive racial multimodal literacy was recognized as being central to it (Abbamonte 2018).

The main aim of Black History Month[2], both in the US and the UK, is to reshape the study of history both from a more comprehensive perspective and through a non-white lens. If black people enter the school curriculum only through their enslavement, the history of both their previous achievements and of their contributions to US democracy is left out. Furthermore, an almost exclusive focus on major figures such as Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, or Barack Obama is not exhaustive, whereas a notion to be foregrounded is that black history is also American history and European history, and should not be confined to one month of study in the curriculum. The murder of George Floyd in the US on 25 May 2020, with the prolonged ensuing protests, triggered a closer analysis among historians of the way the African diaspora is narrated. The British-Nigerian historian David Olusoga has pointed out how British and European cultural-educational institutions still describe the history of slavery from the perspective of the history of colonialism and imperialism, laying great emphasis on British abolitionism, rather than from the perspective of black history. Black History Month notwithstanding, longstanding biases and omissions in the general curriculum have apparently not been deconstructed[3].

A strong expression of awareness of this complex heritage was represented by the opening of Liverpool's International Slavery Museum (ISM) on August 23, 2007 – the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade (though not of slavery itself) and the date of the annual Slavery Remembrance Day. The ISM, which has attracted millions of visitors, encompasses aspects of both historical slavery, with its enduring impact, and contemporary forms of slavery as well as ongoing awareness-raising initiatives, such as the travelling Journey to Freedom multimedia exhibition. The ISM location in Albert Dock (Liverpool), at the centre of a World Heritage site near the dry docks where

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[2] This usually occurs in February in the United States and Canada and October in Ireland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The initiative is now spreading to other countries, e.g. Italy.

[3] David Olusoga in Conversation: Black History Matters. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDO1bdT47Rc&ab_channel=TheBritishLibrary.

18th-century slave trading ships were accoutred, has a tangible iconic value [4]. Whilst acknowledging the city's role in the transatlantic slave trade – much of Liverpool's maritime history was built on it – the ISM aims at challenging such legacies dynamically through engaging events and campaigns that utilize evocative language, such as 'Ink and Blood: Stories of Abolition', or 'We Are Setting the Truth Free' [5], reinforced by and reinforcing visual representations.

On the other side of the Atlantic, a similar need for representation, acknowledgement and visibility was perhaps the most important motivation for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) project, which finally opened on September 24, 2016 on the National Mall in Washington, DC, after decades of struggles. A priority for the NMAAHC is to represent the enslaved Africans not only as victims but also as resourceful human beings through the exhibition of artefacts and the unfolding of various kinds of narratives in a symbolically charged architectural structure, arranged in narrative form. To give just one clear example, we can consider the iconicity of the NMAAHC's façade, since it features the 'Corona,' a three-tiered inverted pyramid shape inspired by the Yoruban Caryatid, which the US representative John Lewis defined as "the story of our lives wrapped in a beautiful golden crown of grace." Both the NMAAHC (which limitations of space do not allow me to describe in this study) and the ISM are aiming to rescue generations of black people from anonymity by representing not only the inhumaneness of slavery, but also how ingenious and resilient the people were who endured it through a variety of interactive exhibitions showing how optimism, hope and spirituality are conveyed in African culture.

A challenging, overarching research question is the extent to which non-verbal iconicity may constitute new and highly productive semantics. This study investigates the strong symbolical aspects and features of ISM's polymedia communication modes, gauging the iconic significance of its galleries and the ways in which they create narrative constructions. More specifically, the study explores how historical, (ideo)logical meanings are developed through the positioning of artefacts within a synergy of narratives, visuals and music, and how all this dynamically interacts with verbally expressed semantics. Innovative ways to engage visitors range from apps, social media and 3D object exploration to recordings and videos, with a focus on the importance of spreading both oral histories/stories of slavery and trauma and empathic, affectual reactions. Through the lens of MDA, and with insights from media and narratology studies, aspects of this virtually interactive and productive polymedia environment will be investigated, and the entailed sociocognitive implications discussed.

2. Methodology

Increasingly, multimodality shapes everyday communication practices, enhanced by the multiplicity of resources of the contemporary mediascape, with its plurality of

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[4] The ISM occupies the third floor and part of the basement of the Merseyside Maritime Museum. See https://www.visitliverpool.com/things-to-do/international-slavery-museum-p138901.

[5] By dismissing redemptive narratives of Atlantic slavery and the national myth of British philanthropy and white abolitionist efforts, the curators of ISM are 'setting the truth free', arguing in favour of African resistance (Bernier and Newman 2013: 7).

channels, embedded media and their associated affordances, and the emergence of 'supermedia' (e.g. a mobile phone showing a movie, etc.), with the (dubious) effect of multiplying meanings. This also entails notions of multi-/cross-mediality and amplifies the dimension of what Madianou and Miller (2012) define as a polymedia environment, where users and producers (or 'prosumers') can choose their favourite medium according to the communicative situation they are enacting.

In line with previous analyses of museums from socio-semiotic, discursive, cultural and cognitive perspectives (Bezemer *et al.* 2012; Stenglin 2009; Hofinger and Ventola 2004; Pang Kah Meng 2004) – all relying on the resources of multimodality – a broad multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) approach was adopted for the present investigation.

In addition to the specific literature on multimodal analyses (see, among others, Bateman 2014; Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014; Kress 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; van Leeuwen 2008, 2013), some of Barthes' (1957: 110) seminal notions were also considered for investigating aspects and features of ISM's communication modes:

> Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a lexis. We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech, etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something.

In 1957, Barthes (1957, 1973) anticipated the need for a lexis of visuals. Also, in relation to his analysis of modern myths, he scrutinized the propensity of political power to shape knowledge by 'naturalizing' cultural-ideological myths out of purposefully shaped social value systems, such as the myth of French imperialism and of the white man's superiority, both at visual and verbal levels. Such and similar myths can be unveiled/denaturalized through the tools of multimodal (critical) discourse analysis, and these museums are meaningful cases in point.

Furthermore, a major challenge in the MDA research domain is investigating how non-verbal means interact with language and language-in-context, thus multiplying meaning. In developing new frameworks for multimodal analyses, Liu and O'Halloran (2009) and O'Halloran (2008, 2011), taking trajectories from both SFL and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) studies (i.e. their grammar of visual design), showed how cohesive image-text relationships can be by integrating different modes rather than simply linking them, i.e. foregrounding the intersemiotic texture (ITx) as the crucial property of coherent multimodal texts. Concisely, we can say that a wide range of interpretive tools and notions is now available to associate the visual and other non-verbal features with lexico-grammatical choices, including:

  - Information Value – consistent with the traditional Given-New dynamics of verbal information
  - Salience and Framing – mirroring the Theme-Rheme dynamics in verbal language
  - Intersemiotic/intrasemiosic repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and
  - Meronymy and collocation across visual and verbal choices.

Indeed, verbal resources are only one of the many semiotic elements at stake in the communicative entities (multimodal texts or artefacts, ads, videos, architectures, etc.) that are the typical objects of MDA studies, which, however, mainly consist of verbal comments and analyses. Thus, in the attempt to account for both linguistic and non-linguistic factors through the medium of verbal writing, a number of images or screenshots from videos are included in MDA studies, though there are some inevitable losses in the descriptions of the communicative efficacy of other modes (auditory, tactile, olfactory, movement, rhythm). Seemingly, we still need to enhance our metalanguage (topic-specific categories, following topic selection, tailored tools, suitable definitions, etc.) for a comprehensive approach to these multi-layered, multi-texture communicative entities.

Overall, depending on the textual/discourse genres or artefacts under investigation, other (or additional) analytical resources can be utilized to render the identity and tonality of the multimodal entities under analysis and their (cultural-ideological) messages/meanings. In considering research methods for multimodality, Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hippala (2017: 40), given the interdisciplinary nature of this research domain, favour flexibility:

> Most methods can be used for a variety of different kinds of research questions and so the selection of methods may be made rather flexibly. It is often the case that several distinct methods can be usefully applied to a single research question, and so particular approaches can in fact benefit by considering their objects of analyses from several different methodological perspectives. […] Our own position on this matter is clear enough: methods should be seen as tools for addressing particular kinds of research questions and therefore be deployed as such, that is, in the service of research questions and not because of a particular disciplinary preference.

Depending on the object and purposes of the investigations, some tailoring of the available analytical resources can make the analyses more specific, especially when so complex an entity as a museum with strong ideological purposes is under observation. Indeed, comprehending the dynamics of history museums, which are often defined as mediums of spatial storytelling (Lu 2017)[6], or, more colloquially, as storytelling machines, provides some insight in this field. Predictably, the works of classical, structuralist narratologists (Roland Barthes, Vladimir Propp, Algirdas J. Greimas, Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov, etc.) now need to be implemented with the new notions of postclassical narratology, i.e. transmedial narratology and cognitive narratology (Herman 2012, 2013)[7]. More specifically for this study, as Bateman *et al.* summarize (2017: 314), "narrative, as a fundamental human capacity for making sense of the world, is not essentially tied to language, […] similarly, visual and multimodal artefacts are endowed with the ability to tell stories without any or with only a little involvement of

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[6] "Museums commonly adopt storytelling in their interpretive framework by use of audiovisual techniques to convey the meanings contained within artefacts. In addition to audiovisual mediation, this study demonstrates the idea that museum architecture itself can also be regarded as a medium of spatial storytelling, specifically of historical time, which is manifested spatially and cognitively for museum visitors" (Lu 2017: 442).

[7] Interestingly, in his *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* (2013), Herman advanced two research questions: how do people make sense of stories across a variety of media and genres, and how are stories used to make sense of the world? However, dealing with such issues lies outside the scope of this study.

verbal text". As we shall see in the data sections, narratives can require the active engagement of the visitors at a variety of levels as viewers, readers, listeners, and tellers.

Finally, the overarching interpretive dimension for museums is *re-semiotization*, i.e. the typical "process of almost all complex semiotic productions, from buildings to operas, from museum installations to films" (Bateman *et al.* 2017: 231). Indeed, exhibiting/rebuilding an artefact such as a slave log cabin or shackles for children means re-semiotizing artefactual proofs into pedagogical instruments.

3. Observational data [8]

3.1. *The International Slavery Museum – the context*

The mission of the ISM is explicitly proactive: enslavement in its various forms cannot be situated in the past, nor is the interest for slavery circumscribed to black culture and people, and it is necessary that we all remember/learn and act, including young people. Through collections, archives, exhibitions, research and campaigning, the public is engaged with contemporary human rights issues at the (inter)national level. As David Fleming, the Director of National Museums Liverpool, declared during his speech at the opening ceremony (August 23, 2007), the ISM was not a neutral space but a place of commitment, controversy and campaigning. Indeed, by the 1780s, Liverpool had become the European capital of the transatlantic slave trade, and consequently one of Britain's wealthiest cities. Hence the need for the ISM to renounce 'neutrality' in favour of socio-political engagement. As Dr Richard Benjamin (2011), Head of the ISM, stated,

> a recurring theme was that the museum had to carefully balance the horror and often visceral presentation of transatlantic slavery against a backdrop of resistance and indeed African and Black achievement [9]. [...Thus, the] Black Achievers Wall, encompassing achievement across the arts, sciences and sporting world [...has avoided] associating African and Black history with transatlantic slavery solely, or indeed with a solely negative history. The ISM has a leading role to play in the fight to stop the growth of racism [...with its] dangerous legacy [... by shaping] the way that museum visitors interact with the entire museum experience [...] collecting impressions and experiences that will "make sense" later in conjunction with other experiences and activities in their lives.

A dangerous legacy, indeed. Over the centuries (from 1500 to about 1865), Liverpool ships carried about 1.5 million enslaved Africans across to the Caribbean and North America, returning to Europe with sugar, cotton, coffee and tobacco. Through this dire trade triangle, involving three continents, Liverpool became wealthy. The history of slavery is not free from some paradoxes, but an examination of such paradoxes lies beyond the scope of this study [10]. To show the worthiness of dissenting attitudes, space

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[8] In our research domain, there is an increasing tendency to adopt the language of 'hard sciences'. Hence, it could be useful to specify that our data are observational, rather than experimental, since in our studies and research we have no control over the variables, i.e. we collect data and make inferences, but we do not change the independent variable to check how this affects the dependent variable unless, for example, we do an experiment in second language acquisition using a control group.

[9] Apparently, this required a degree of censorship.

[10] Understandably, the thorny issue of the involvement of African elites in the enslavement process

is given in the ISM's exhibitions to both the abolitionist movement (led by Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce) and the resistance and rebellions of the enslaved Africans. Yet their revolts were frequently doomed by the unequal power balance and led to ferocious punishments, as the logbooks of slave ships reported.

3.2. *Discourse and attitudinal positioning*

Perhaps the most effective and concise illustration of the need for a slavery museum in Liverpool is conveyed through the speech delivered by Fleming to celebrate the opening of the ISM on August 22, 2007. His address attributes an intersubjective value to the event and the meanings of the museum by reference both to emotional responses and to culturally-determined value systems. The following excerpt is analysed following the Appraisal framework (White 2015) to evaluate Fleming's utterances in more detail. These are categorized according to the notions in the legend below (with some inevitable overlapping) [11].

> **Appraisal framework**
> ATTITUDE
> - **Affect** (positive+ negative-)
> - Judgement +..
> - *Appreciation* +..

> The day will come when it is impossible to imagine⁻ a ***pleasant and articulate* Black Liverpool teenager**+ being excluded from his school⁻ for resisting racial hostility and physical attacks⁻ from his white schoolmates.
> But that day *has not yet come*⁻.
> The day will come when it is impossible to imagine⁻ an African American woman, here to give a lecture on behalf of the ISM and accompanied by her young son on the streets of Liverpool, *being called "nigger"*⁻ by a young white boy.
> **Sadly**⁻, that day has not yet come.
> The day will come when it is impossible to imagine⁻ that a young man should be *murdered by white thugs*⁻ on the streets of Liverpool simply because he was black.
> **Tragically**⁻, that day has not yet come, neither in Liverpool, nor in any other British city.

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was not commented on, though it is represented (but not foregrounded) in the museum (e.g. in the Davenport papers in the Archives Centre's collections, which include letters from slave traders with details of their negotiations with African tribes). Furthermore, the 1830 US census included 3775 free blacks who owned 12,740 slaves (Newman 2013). This lacunae are probably due to the possibly questionable responses to this side of the history that could improperly use such involvement and actions to lessen the moral burden of the European system of transatlantic slavery. Yet, perversely, these partial omissions project a monolithic image of the African people as simply the passive victims of Europeans.

[11] The description of the resources for evaluation in English in the AF is rich and multi-layered, as can be appreciated by looking at the synoptic contents of the 'framed version' at https://www.grammatics.com/appraisal/appraisaloutline/framed/frame.htm. It is feasible to utilize more resources for textual analysis at the same time by highlighting the different evaluative and discursive features cohesively interacting within the same text. Yet, for readability's sake, when annotating a text, it is expedient to select the more functional set of descriptors, which in this case was Attitude, with its sub-systems Judgement, Appreciation and Affect. Some overlapping, e.g. between positive Affect and positive Appreciation, may occur. Furthermore, annotation is clearer when it is selective; in other words, if every noticeable word is highlighted, the effect can be confusing.

And it is because that day has not yet come that **the ISM is needed⁺**. It is needed, yes, *to help illuminate⁺* one of the <u>darker, more shameful and neglected areas in our history</u>⁻, an era in which this city played a pivotal role.

As well as this, it is needed because <u>the consequences of that era are all around us</u>⁻ in the shape of a rich and vibrant multi-national, multi-racial Atlantic world, but also **in inequality of opportunity, racial prejudice, ignorance, intolerance and hatred**.

And these **evils will not be overcome through denial**⁻ or through wishful thinking. <u>They have to be tackled head on</u>, and the most potent *weapon at our disposal is education⁺*; the essence of museums, and the ***essence of the International Slavery Museum⁺*** (Fleming 2007).

The rhetoric of this address is simple and direct, based on repetition ("the day will come") and crescendos (e.g. "sadly", "tragically", "evil"). Fleming's dominatingly negative judgement of the state of things entails notions of social sanctions for the dire consequences of the legacy of the slave trade, and he intends to weaponize the educational potential of the ISM to fight such 'shameful' conditions.

3.3. *The historical modulation of the space and multimodality*

In the ISM, slavery is *re-semiotized* as teachable history and represented through the artefacts and videos deployed in its galleries, encompassing not only historical transatlantic slavery and chattel but also contemporary forms of slavery. Its official website provides free access to virtual tours of the galleries, which are also available on YouTube [12], and shows the available multimodal resources (images, billboards, paintings, dioramas, videos, audios, written texts, spaces for children's activities, etc.). The public has some opportunities to interact with the artefacts and archives in the galleries. Although the ISM aims to engage the whole community in its proactive dimension, special attention and resources are dedicated to young people. In 2020, virtual classroom workshops and resources were made available online, using Microsoft Teams as a delivery platform. Coordination between teachers and museum experts is required, so as to provide pupils with useful information and crafts templates before the workshops, where they are engaged in activities based on real artefacts. The visual dimension and multimodality, rather than multimediality (only the use of Microsoft Team is allowed), play a central role in these teaching activities that are also intended to promote team work among pupils (e.g. role play, crafting, drawing, quizzes, discussions and decoding puzzles). The sociocognitive dimension of such 'make-them-see/do' initiatives and activities is apparent.

Here follows a concise description of the galleries and main areas, with some details regarding their multimodal resources [13]:

  - The Life in West Africa gallery displays West African socio-cultural achievements before the arrival of the European slave traders. It includes the replica of an Igbo family compound, pleasantly decorated with captivating lively colours, and large enough for

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[12] See, among the others accessible via YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Mg1HxjpCHk and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Mg1HxjpCHk.

[13] The dynamics of the resources can be appraised by watching the virtual tours, available on the museum's official website and via YouTube.

small groups to enter. Thus, the narrative of a sophisticated lifestyle can unfold at a spatial level.

- The Enslavement and the Middle Passage gallery features a walk-in audio-visual display about the eight- to ten-week journey across the Atlantic (i.e. 'the Middle Passage'), showing the atrocious living conditions on board slave ships. In the vivid, affectual description of Jessica Moody (2015: 3):

> Upon entering the Enslavement and Middle Passage gallery, the visitor is met with far more raucous noise; a layering of voices from videos, and 'The Immersion', a creative film representation of the Middle Passage, and of course, any further noise from engaged visitors. Actors tell stories as 'slaves', from narratives and first-hand accounts, injecting prominent visual and audio representations of the experience of enslaved Africans into the museum space. 'The Immersion' dominates this gallery, in its central location (the film is projected inside a circular walled enclosure which visitors can enter on either side, but equally could avoid entering altogether) and through the noise of the film. The film itself includes blurred and fractured images of black actors, bodily fluids; blood and vomit, jarring screeching sounds which through their ambiguity could be the screams of human beings, or the scraping mechanics of the slave ship on its voyage through the Middle Passage – the horrific journey from Africa to the Americas, and the symbolic site given central significance by this video, and by museum representations of the history of transatlantic slavery more generally.

This description conveys the sense of the immersive experience and the audience's engagement in the physical representational space of the museum with its polymedia affordances.

- The Legacy gallery features both reminders of the persistence of racism after the abolition of the slave trade and examples of the contributions of people of African descent to the societies and cultures of the Americas and Europe. The Black Achievers Wall has TV screens that play videos where academics and celebrities discuss issues of freedom and slavery.

- The Campaign Zone is a community space where current human rights campaigns can be discussed and supported. It hosts temporary exhibitions on contemporary forms of exploitation and slavery, thus defining the museum itself as a campaigning institution.

3.4. *Visual art and re-semiotization*
An interesting and easily graspable example of re-semiotization is the permanent 'Challenging histories: Collecting new artworks' exhibition [14], which features works by artists such as Kimathi Donkor and Alison Welsh, who have responded to the history of transatlantic slavery by offering new perspectives on and insights into its legacy. More

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[14] A virtual tour and videos are available at: https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/whatson/international-slavery-museum/exhibition/challenging-histories-collecting-new-artworks#section--the-exhibition.

Figure 1. Queen Elizabeth I and George Washington – revisited under non-white eyes

specifically, in the 'UK Diaspora' collection, Donkor questions the typical portrayals of historical figures such as Queen Elizabeth I or George Washington, who are typically represented as glamorous icons and dignified national heroes despite their connections with the transatlantic slave trade (figure 1). The artist challenges this shared attitude and punctures their classical images by framing their portraits with nails, adding iconic objects such as pins, chains, ropes, and money and by scratching their surfaces.

On the same representational canvases, we can see both the dignified stereotypical images of the historical characters and the iconic objects denouncing the economic advantages they drew from slavery, which visually challenge their right to be represented as national heroes. As Donkor forcefully said, "I wondered if glamorous movies about Queen Elizabeth I, or portraits of George Washington on the dollar bill, made us forget how they and others masterminded slavery? As a person of both African and Jewish heritage, I wondered what I'd think if Germany tried to put Hitler on the Euro?" (Liverpool Museums n.d.).

3.5. *Old architecture, new messages*

The positioning of the ISM exhibits along the thematic galleries creates a historical narrative, which is not mirrored by the exterior structure of the museum. Apparently, no semiotic continuity is to be found between the architectural dimensions and the contents of the ISM in Liverpool, whereas a strong inter-semiotic connection can be found between the structure and the artefacts of the NMAACH in Washington. Below are some images to convey both this lacuna and the tonality of the ISM's artefacts.

Information value	Screenshots of site/artefacts
Its location in the Albert Dock, which harboured the slave ships, has a symbolic topological value.	
The framing of the ISM galleries within the traditionally British architecture of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, with its neoclassical portico suggesting the greatness of the Empire, is an (involuntary) paradox.	
The billboards or banners of the numerous exhibitions 're-frame' the function of the building.	
The replica of an Igbo family compound allows an immersive experience in the sophisticated African lifestyle.	
In the visual density of the museum, traditional paintings and artefacts coexist with more challenging exhibits.	

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For example, this classical oil painting of a ship employed in the slave trade	
is integrated with a tridimensional diorama of its interior, displaying imprisoned black bodies and a boat carrying more of the same 'cargo'. A derogatory hyponym.	
Neck/wrist shackles – the salience of the real thing.	
Syncretically, the oil painting, diorama and shackles are displayed in the same showcase – these are metonymic props for the dire narrative of 'how to proceed' in the trade.	
A copy of carefully inked documents of the Port of Liverpool, listing the ships employed in the slave trade – the tidiness of evil.	
Significantly, the 10th anniversary of the ISM in Liverpool was celebrated with the exhibition 'Ink and blood'.	

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An 18th-century ivory tusk showing chained slaves – a covert protest? Complacency?	
A 19th-century teapot depicting an amiable British couple having tea with a young black servant in the background – an idyllic re-framing of the presence of African 'servants' in the UK. A reassuring hyponym.	
A visual representation of the European exploitation of Africa, for educational purposes.	
A photo of a wealthy British family in Nigeria at Christmas 1923, surrounded by semi-naked black bodies depicted with the letters of Christmas greetings – nobody too merry. A sinister meronymy.	
Diorama of a sugar plantation in the Caribbean – different areas, managers, and buildings are in the background. A segregated microcosm.	
The comprehensive, fast-evolving Black Achievers Wall – a different prism.	

Table 1. Traditional pre-existing architecture and iconic exhibits of the ISM

The involuntary contrast between the imperialistic-looking architectural structure of the ISM, which occupies a floor of the old Merseyside Maritime Museum, and its multimedia artefacts promoting innovation and protests against lingering forms of racism and inequality has not attracted criticism. Hence, seemingly, such a contrast does not hinder the ISM's function as a space for campaigning. In the visual compactness of the museum, artefactual proofs are effectually situated in multimedia contexts and displays to better convey both the brutality of Atlantic slavery and the resilience and successes of the enslaved people and their descendants, proudly represented on the Black Achievers Wall, which constantly welcomes new achievers. The efforts of the curators of the museum to 'set the truth free' is tangible also through its collections of historical documents (mostly available through the archives). There is neither indulgence in the modern national myth of Britain as the country that launched the enlightenment and abolished slavery (Dearden 2014), nor is the role of cities such as London, Liverpool and Bristol as key ports underplayed. Such ports created wealth from slavery, thereby providing the basis for Britain's economy as a whole, e.g. the Manchester mills utilized cotton, which was produced in the US cotton plantations by enslaved people who had been transported there through the Liverpool slave trade.

Yet, in 1862, in an unexpected turn of events, during the American Civil War, Lancashire mill workers refused to spin Confederate cotton, picked by US slaves, and many of them faced starvation [15].

3.6. *The Journey to Justice Exhibition* – black stories matter
This ongoing travelling multimedia exhibition was hosted by the ISM from October 5, 2018 to April 7, 2019, given both its common interest in the US civil rights movement, which deeply influenced UK institutions, policies and people (also inspiring subsequent women's, peace and gay liberation movements), and its shared set of values related to the need for promoting social and civic engagement in the UK. Furthermore, their affinity in style and artistic communication modes is apparent, and the ISM's official website currently displays a link to Journey to Justice (JtoJ) activities.

Launched in 2013, JtoJ moves along the dimension of political and pedagogic activism, based on the vision that everyone needs to promote/ensure social justice, starting with the UK, which is considered as a place of increasing inequality in need of active intervention. According to JtoJ's motto, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly (Martin Luther King, Jr.)" (see Journey to Justice 2019). By focusing on the inspirational personal stories of some of the less famous people involved in the US civil rights movement, JtoJ has been attempting to show how social justice campaigns can be led by local people as well, thereby connecting with local UK histories of previous campaigns for change. Indeed, the movement deals with many issues of contemporary racism and lack of opportunities/freedom by organizing local exhibitions and activities in schools and universities in many cities across the UK, utilizing a variety of resourc-

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[15] In 1863, Lincoln praised the workers for their act of "sublime Christian heroism, which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country", and sent US relief ships packed with provisions sent by grateful Americans (https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2013/feb/04/lincoln-oscars-manchester-cotton-abraham).

Figure 2*. What is Journey to Justice?* Inviting the audience

es (photos, music, poetry, artworks, films, interviews, zines, interactive features and installations).

In this initiative, which includes training courses for educators, activists, artists and young people, there is a great emphasis on multimodality – music and songs play a particularly important role [16] – as can be seen on the dedicated website and social media channels. Here follow some visual highlights from JtoJ's website (figure 2).

Recognizable iconic images of solidarity and captivating brilliant colours are utilized to encourage one to start the journey through the easily flowing images and embedded videos. Below are a few selected images from the informative Vimeo video [17] that has recorded not only school activities and social meetings and protests, but also other videos from the news or films. As discussed in Section 2, the table below is an attempt to account for both linguistic and non-linguistic factors in the same textual space synoptically, though with some inevitable losses due to the requirement to 'narrate' non-verbal resources (e.g. music, the moving and abundance of the frames, the rhythm, the concentration of information, etc.) with words rather than 'show' them directly, as Page (2010) made clear.

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[16] Concisely, the much investigated role of music in Black History and Culture deserves new and specific studies for the contexts under analysis, since music and songs have been and still are so important in Black History both as an intra-group form of communication/transmission, identification, development, or even survival, and as a powerful means for bridging communication gaps across cultures. Furthermore, as regards the transition from musical 'grammars' to verbal grammars, some interesting if somewhat challenging reading could be Leonard Bernstein's Norton lectures at Harvard (1973), which focused on the importance of interdisciplinary values insofar as "the best way to know a thing is in the context of another discipline". Fascinated by the idea of a worldwide, inborn musical grammar, in these six lectures, Bernstein proposed a number of analogies between musical language and linguistics, aesthetic philosophy, acoustics, etc.

[17] Vimeo is a popular online streaming video platform, first established in 2004, which does not have ads and relies on user-generated fees. Although its estimated 170 million visitors per month cannot compare with YouTube's 1 billion, Vimeo is known specifically for creative artistry.

Information value – engagement	Salience of the visuals in synergy with words
Engaging the community and the audience in learning civil rights. The purple colour, a favourite in African American culture*, frames all shots.	
The teachable moments, religious pluralism, and schoolchildren engaged in activities and singing.	
A leitmotif is the billboards and banners, where written words, images and colours intersemiotically convey the meanings and aims of the campaigns.	
An activist illustrates the exhibition, with its lively coloured informative billboards in the background.	
The video includes a news report on the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., thus acting as supermedia. The iconic value of the rallying cry 'I AM A MAN' is foregrounded.	
Episodes of the journeys to freedom of the fugitives from slavery (here Frederick Douglass, 1846) are illustrated with photos, informative bubbles, and lessons within the overarching intersemiotic texture of the exhibition.	
The words of King are here foregrounded as both signifiers (the clarion voice of King + graphics) and signified. These are words that the previous song had anticipated intersemiotically. Applause and music complete the message.	

* E.g. the 1982 novel *The Color Purple* by American author Alice Walker, and the setting of the Marvel movie *Black Panther (2018)*, where purple and violet colours dominate.

Table 2. Screenshots from the introductory video of JtoJ

The artistic tonality of such exhibitions and initiatives as are displayed in the film contribute to making the language of the protest more intense and iconic, shaping signifiers that help the specific goals to explain themselves within the overarching intersemiotic texture of such communicative events. Furthermore, a major emphasis is laid on the need to train educators, as shown on the website on the same page where the introductory film is embedded (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Engaging the audience

Clearly visible links to a range of activities and information are within easy reach to convey the sense of community and the need for immediate (inter)action. The user-friendly interface, with its highlighted rectangle, inviting the user to click 'View More', conveys the sense of immediacy.

Through the polymedia environment displayed in the film, which is accessible from anywhere on the website, the organizers and curators of the artistically framed initiatives of JtoJ want to create a proactive dialogue on the intertwined questions of race, agency, equality, history, and the contemporary context with its pervasive lack of opportunities for some groups and areas. Their expectation is that people will leave transformed, especially through the personal stories of less famous people, and wanting to learn more and share their stories.

Storytelling has played a pivotal role in JtoJ, which began as a movement in 2012 when Carrie Supple visited the Little Rock High School Historic Site in Arkansas, where she "heard recordings of African American parents who chose to send their children to a formerly all-white school there in 1957, despite the danger […] and she wanted to tell those stories of courage in the UK"[18]. Supple's beliefs in the power of common

[18] See https://journeytojustice.org.uk/homepage-section/about/.

people, "people like us", to challenge injustice found great support, and thus the need for sharing personal stories was prioritized in the movement to both awaken public memory about past struggles and move from the personal to the global. In the training and resource sections, materials and examples abound on how to tell an inspiring story more effectively and guide learners to do the same with the stories they want to share. Interestingly, digital storytelling is also used to share stories of the civil rights movement and engage young people; a platform was made for sharing people's voices and stories [19], which is in line with the considerable value attached to storytelling in our mediascape.

4. Concluding remarks

The key messages conveyed through the display galleries are polarized on the long-lasting negative effects of the dehumanizing transatlantic slave trade, which created a permanent and enduring injustice through a coerced African diaspora that variously affected the histories of Africa, Europe and the Americas. Yet major emphases are not laid on black victimhood, but rather on their resilience: how they resisted and rebelled at every opportunity, and how successful they managed to be, as the Black Achievers Wall highlights. The vision of the ISM also focuses on the experience of individuals, using the narratives of the enslaved and those involved in the trade in engaging filmic representations, as well as the stories of less well-known people engaged in the fight against slavery. The need for a shared understanding and commitment to fight the contemporary forms of racism, sexism and the lack of opportunities is also represented, as well as the will to change the present situation.

Yet according to Andrews (2019), slavery museums will have no significant impact on racism in Britain, where too much attention is given to white saviours, such as William Wilberforce, instead of truly understanding Britain's role as

> the premier slave-trading nation, in a system that enslaved a minimum of 12 million Africans. [… For example,] the gun industry of the Midlands was so essential to slavery that it was often remarked in the 18th century that 'the price of a slave was one Birmingham gun'. It is estimated that 150,000 guns from Birmingham were sold in the trade, not to mention the shackles that were also produced in the city. London was not only an important site for ships but also finance. Without insurance, there would have been no voyages, and companies such as Lloyd's of London underwrote slave-trading voyages. […] In order to make abolition possible, **slave owners were paid reparations** in the largest government bailout in history … which at the time **was 40% of the national budget of the Treasury**. The government had to take out a loan from the Bank of England so large that it was only paid back in 2015. Consider the absurdity and cruelty of the descendants of enslaved people actually paying through our taxes for reparations to the owners of our ancestors [my bold].

Contrarily, no reparations were given to the enslaved people for their labour and the grievous damage inflicted on their bodies and minds.

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[19] See http://curiositycreative.org.uk/.

Apparently, there is no easy way out of systemic racism and colonialism, with its legacy of enduring poverty and inequality. We could say that Andrews contributed to 'unveil' the national myth of redemption through abolitionism – a myth that David Cameron had famously advocated in his 2013 speech, "Britain is an island that has helped to clear the European continent of fascism and was resolute in doing that throughout the second world war. Britain is an island that helped to abolish slavery". A controversial statement, to say the least. The historian Olusoga (see Introduction), in his *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* (2015) documentary, showed detailed evidence of the generous compensation slave owners received from the government during abolition (representing a total of £17 billion in today's money), visually demonstrating through a pinned map how much slavery permeated Britain, with slave owners not only in the more affluent classes but also the lower-middle classes, spread all over the country [20]. Olusoga had already disclosed another dark side in the process of abolition: *apprenticeship*, i.e. a further period of unfree labour for former slaves [21]. Yet Olusoga's approach and projects, which focus on individual stories, are centred on the notion of historical repair, "acknowledging this history, naming it, must be part of the process of coming to the table to negotiate meaningful forms of reconciliation" [22].

Somewhat differently, in Andrews' view, the proposal for a new Slavery Museum in London to challenge racism, endorsed by its mayor Sadiq Khan, "is not going to have any impact on racial inequality", yet he adds, "We should support a new museum because it is an important step in telling a truthful story about Britain" (Andrews 2019). Andrews's vision on such issues, well-grounded in documented socio-historical studies, represents a realistic (hence pessimistic?) attitude, based on the status quo, which is different from the transformative proactive attitudes that move the activities of the ISM and JtoJ. Their campaigns aim to engage and align the community with their shared values of social justice, involving especially young people and children, through a multimodal polymedia environment, where everybody can choose a favourite expressive medium, which is a form of expressive empowerment. Through the importance given to inspirational stories and personal narratives, which members of the engaged communities are invited to share, participants can see themselves as part of the campaigning museum community. Sharing a story can thus function as a cognitive achievement on the way to personal growth and capacity to promote social progress.

Furthermore, through a sophisticated use of multimodality, the iconic value of the language of the campaigns is intensified and its transmission becomes immediate. Indeed, an overarching communicative feature of the exhibitions is the intersemiotic synergy between artefacts and words both spoken, written, and sung, or even artistically engraved on stone walls. Overall, the ISM and JtoJ achieved their aim of creating new transformative meanings by re-semiotizing loci, words, and tools of past iniquity into instruments of education and progress – apparently, such is the stuff that the International Slavery Museum is built on.

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[20] See https://www.bbcstudios.com/case-studies/britains-forgotten-slave-owners /#:~:text=Made%20 in%20an%20exclusive%20partnership,attitudes%20to%20race%20in%20Britain.

[21] See the Legacies of British Slave-ownership project https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-legacies-of-british-slave-ownership/#:~:text=Last%20year%20the%20Legacies% 20of,of%20Good%20Hope.

[22] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDO1bdT47Rc&ab_channel=TheBritishLibrary.

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