THE TRAVELLING MUSEUM OF BARBERTON: MAKING DIALOGUE WORK IN A RURAL COMMUNITY MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary museum theory calls for dialogue as a means of making museums multivocal and representative of larger audiences. Dialogue is seen to be a break with prior modernist practices and epistemology. However, in most cases what is meant by dialogue and how to implement it is not made clear.

I proposed using the Community of Enquiry Approach to dialogue in the development of the Travelling Museum. The Travelling Museum is a community museum based at 'The Centre' on the land of the Swazi chief in Emjindini. I was concerned that labelling the community and associating the museum with the chief could perpetuate essentialised ideas of what it meant to be Swazi. I was also conscious of not wanting to be the 'outsider expert' and for the museum to be developed by the community it was intended for. It was for these reasons that I decided to employ the ideas of dialogue.

While implementing dialogue through the Community of Enquiry, I started to question whether this method of dialogue could become normative, and whether it excluded or silenced certain members. I wanted to locate this approach to dialogue on a larger theoretical base, in order to understand how dialogue challenges and departs from modernism and moves into postmodernism. In order to do this in the Report I explore postmodern and modern theories of knowledge and difference.

My research method is to use critical incidents. These are moments of noticing or jarring in my practice, which when interpreted allow me to interrogate theory and practice. The first incident questions my openness to the other where I raise concerns of relativism. The second and third incidents address issues of power and access in museums.

I conclude by recommending a new role for the museum. No longer in a role of cultural authority, museums can take on the new role of artist. As an artist the museum can be multi-partial and act as social commentator, provocateur and catalyst for change (Gogan, 2005, p.60 ).
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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1:</td>
<td>Introduction and Research Method</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2:</td>
<td>The Barberton Museum</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3:</td>
<td>The Development of the Travelling Museum</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4:</td>
<td>The Community of Enquiry Approach to Dialogue</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5:</td>
<td>Critical Incident 1 – Postmodernism does not equate relativism</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6:</td>
<td>Critical Incident 2 – The other and Framing Difference in Postmodern Dialogue</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7:</td>
<td>The ‘Museum as Artist’ Approach to Postmodern Dialogue</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8:</td>
<td>Reflection on Research Method and Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES


Figure 1: Map of South Africa showing Barberton. On: www.barbertonmanor.com/Pictures/Misc/BM_Map-

Figure 2: Map showing Barberton, Barberton township and Emjindini Tribal Authority region. Google Earth.com.

Figure 3: Barberton town showing the jacaranda trees in bloom and the Makhonjwa Mountains in the background. On: www.southafrica.org.za/images/thumbs/fundi-barbeton280_t.jpg&imgrefurl

Figure 4 (right): A valley in the Makhonjwa Mountains which contain the evidence of the earliest life forms on the planet. On: www.aatravel.co.za/images/mountains_barberton.jpg

Figure 5: Stone, K. (2009) A Tribal Council meeting held at the Chief's homestead.

Figure 6: The Shangaan River Club: A Feast of Culture. Flyer.

Figure 7, 8, 9: Sikhonde, B. (2009) Objects from the Barberton Museum’s ‘Swazi’ display.

Figure 10: Sikhonde, B. (2009) The ‘progression of ‘Man’’. Barberton Museum.

Figure 11, 12: The Hunterian Museum’s collection of essentialised facial features of ‘tribes’. On: www.wits.ac.za/files/rese363807e07234b6e8e4203cf022a84bf.jpg


Figure 14: (unknown, 19th Century) Barberton Museum

Figure 15: Sikhonde, B. (2009) Barberton Museum. Original date and title unknown.

Figure 16: (unknown, 19th Century) Photograph of a picnic party, showing an ingeboekeling in the foreground holding a baby. Barberton Museum.

Figure 17: (unknown, 19th Century) Photograph showing servants and possible ingeboekeling on a picnic. Barberton Museum.

Figure 18: Stone, K. (2009) The members of the Travelling Museum

Figure 19: René Magritte, The Treachery of Images. 1928-1929. On: http://math2033.uark.edu/wiki/images/a/a1/Treachery.jpg&imgrefurl
**Figure 20:** Stone, K. (2010) The Swazi Traditional Dance and Dress box being performed at the Barberton Swimming Pool for a school group.

**Figure 21:** Stone, K. (2009) Objects from the Local Memories Box

**Figure 22:** Stone, K. (2009) Objects from the Sangoma Loan Box

**Figure 23:** Stone, K. (2010) Performing the Sangoma Loan Box at the Ummemmo (annual Swazi Cultural Festival held at the chief's residence).

**Figure 23:** Nkosi, N. (2009). Leon Samuels at Heritage Day Celebrations.