


MA MASTER'S RESEARCH PAPER

**Negotiating The Other:
Museum Exhibition And The Construction Of Heritage In Marginalized Groups**

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1. INTRODUCTION

To look at museum exhibition is to look at both sides of a communicative exchange: display as cultural production, exhibit viewing as viewer consumption. The designer and the viewer, each making meaning in their own situated way, communicate through this medium, the exhibit. Museums constitute an imagined citizenry through representation in public exhibits, and their audiences attend and build unique responses. Museum exhibitions render a rhetorical function. They offer a spectacle of truth, enshrined with authority, which communicates human meanings, values, identities and relationships, chosen and frozen as an ideal. This allows them either to encompass all individualities - or to exclude some. But because of this authority and its rhetorical claims, the museum becomes a site for contestation of these claims, a forum for public debate. Their potential lies in engaging these cultural and heritage debates as public sites for both visibility and contestation or even participation: to display cultural imagining and to serve as locations for face-to-face negotiations of those imaginings.

How heritage messages are conceived and presented at museums, and how people make sense of and debate these messages is an overarching concern of this paper. For the purposes of this report, heritage is defined as the cultural legacy, including tangible and intangible histories and practices, that is handed down from the past within a community, and which is an essential element of an individual's and a community's sense of identity. Museums operate as sites where people experience and learn about their heritage. But a central concern is how these public institutions encompass marginalized groups within this construction of heritage, identity and community. The focal point of those interactions between museums and people is their exhibitions. This essential communicative tool of museums, this media of production and consumption of meaning, is the point of interest for this paper. As the place where the interests of both sides of the communicative exchange converge, exhibitions reveal the tensions within the system, and the process by which changing ideas about heritage and community are negotiated. Exhibits can be seen as texts anchored in the contexts and processes of their production and reception. Or they can be seen as the dialogic space in

which a political relationship unfolds. This paper offers insights into how the political nature of communicative practices underlying the production and consumption of museum exhibitions affects the heritage of marginalized groups. How exhibitions come into being - their modes of production - how they communicate as texts and how they are used or read is illuminated, using as a case study a particular museum exhibit about African-Canadians entitled *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom*. Developed by the Department of Canadian Heritage to be displayed in Toronto, the exhibit was installed at the Royal Ontario Museum in 2002 and is currently on view at Black Creek Pioneer Village. The research encompasses the circuit of communication as it relates to the conditions surrounding the conceptualizing and negotiation of this exhibition: what is presented, why it is presented, how it is presented, to whom, and how it is received.

The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom exhibit has a unique history and can be considered a new approach in museum exhibition. The exhibit was sited at a museum and an historic site but developed by an agency external to both; created using a consultative committee of African-Canadian non-experts; tells a non-mainstream story; employs technologies not normally found in history museums, and attracts ethnic audiences who rarely set foot within museum walls. The study looks closely at the negotiations enabled throughout the process: the planning of the exhibition, how the public make sense of the communication presented there with special attention to ethnic and Black responses to the presentation, and their reactions to the intended and unintended messages presented by exhibit planners. Inherent in this evaluation is an analysis of the effects of the unique exhibition technology/media employed to communicate the message. This enabled a description of the communication product (the exhibit), the discursive practices (conditions of production and reception) and the larger sociocultural processes at work in these public institutions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to facilitate a broader understanding of how museums present and negotiate constructions of heritage in their exhibitions, it is important to place exhibit production and consumption within the context

of the scholarly literature in the broad areas of museums, representation and exhibition, with particular focus on minority groups and heritage, identity and community. Central to this inquiry is the ongoing academic discourse rethinking the role of museums and exhibition. The International Council of Museums defines a museum as “a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment” (<http://icom.museum/definition.html>). This encompasses a broad range of facilities that house material evidence, from art galleries to ethnographic institutions to science centres to living history sites to parks and zoos. The definition focuses on curatorial functions related to material objects - collecting, conserving, studying, interpreting and exhibiting (Weil, 1990). However, these public institutions also serve as powerful ideological tools, generators of meaning and centres for public debate, not simply as repositories for curatorial study (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). A central debate has arisen between those who position museums as institutions for the study and display of objects and those who see museums primarily as places to tell stories (Karp, 1992, Weil, 1999, Witcomb, 1997). A divergent perspective positions museums 'contact zones,' fora for social relations and community development (Bennett, 1998; Clifford, 1997; Fuller, 1992; Jeffers, 2003).

Museological preoccupations in current practice have been focused on reshaping the existing institution to deal with two linked pressures: the need for revenue-generation, and the need to serve new publics. As Western museums faced declining attendance and a squeeze for public funding during the 1980's, they turned increasingly to corporate investment and tourism revenues. The result was an increasing commodification of the institution and a concern with visitors as consumers (Rottenburg, 2002; Weil, 1999). The production of heritage and culture for consumption, especially as tourism sites, has received considerable scholarly attention (Dicks, 2000; Graham, 2000; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Hewison, 1987).

At the same time, the institutions have been under pressure to democratize their spaces and embrace the multi-ethnic nature of the Western nations they inhabited, pushing them to consider their relationship to non-

traditional publics (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Museum research has correspondingly been focused on the nature of the visitor - who they are, how to attract them, and what to serve them. The first visitor studies were instrumental in approach - demographic studies and evaluations of visitor responses to exhibits (see for example, Linn, 1983; Loomis, 1987). It then became apparent that the "general public" was actually a diverse group of people who were coming to museums for social outings, education, leisure and simple pleasure. Numerous studies focused on families, (for example Butler, 1989; Dierking & Falk, 1994), and the types of social interactions taking place among visitors (for example Falk, 1991, Falk & Dierking, 1992). This yielded useful information about why people visit museums and how exhibitions are used.

The underlying concern for attracting visitors also brought a basic questioning about why people stayed away. Hooper-Greenhill's work consistently points to historic public perceptions of museums as exclusive, dominant-culture institutions that foster outmoded, transmissive communicative styles through their representational practices (1992, 1994, 1995, 1999). Criticisms of museum representation and especially their use of objects have come from many quarters including post-structural critiques, (Bennett, 1995), postmodern analysis (Carr, 2001; Crimp, 1995), post-colonial theory (Clifford, 1997; Simpson, 1996) and feminist critiques (Marcus, 2000; Porter, 1996). These critiques have focused on the authority of the museum to determine and impose how history, community identity and communal memory are represented in public through exhibitions. Recently, scholars and practitioners have discussed how museum practices could share the authority and move towards social inclusiveness especially of ethnic minorities (Sandell, 2002; Weil, 1999; West, 2002). These studies led to an awareness of how people bring their own viewpoints, social circumstances and educational backgrounds with them to construct the museum experience (Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Dicks, 2000).

The ideological framing of history, community and identity has been a concern of historians, geographers and cultural studies researchers. Stuart Hall had crucial insights that laid the groundwork for research into the functioning of museums as sites of official culture, sub-culture and identity formation (for example, Hall,

1993). Tony Bennett's seminal book on the cultural function of museums in 1995 sparked the debate within museological circles about museums as places of dominant-culture social and political practices. Sharon Macdonald, a specialist in social anthropology, has produced several books and papers and edited several others on the politics of exhibit displays and the political/societal factors influencing construction of museum narratives (1998; 2002). Dicks (2000) insightful paper and follow-up book offer some of the best examples in the literature of the application of Hall's notions about identity construction and communication processes embedded in heritage sites.

The concern with visitors has affected the scholarly debate over the role of museums as collector or communicator. The traditional collections orientation implies an emphasis on academic research into material culture, natural history and art. The communicator model emphasizes the importance of visitor education. Hudson's (1975) social history, one of the first to view the museum from the visitor's point of view, looked at how museums initially begrudged public entry and only slowly came to be seen as public educational instruments. Hooper-Greenhill (1995) notes the traditional focus on collections led many curators and other museum staff as late as the 1970s and early 1980s to be suspicious of museum educators, their inherent values and objectives, and their teaching methods. Today, with professional emphasis firmly on education, large body of international work on museum education has now emerged in the areas of informal learning environments and constructivist learning theory (for example Falk & Dierking, 2000; Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2000; Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1999; Schauble et al, 1997). The latest area of educational interest is new media, with researchers investigating the effectiveness of things such as interactive media and web sites in allowing museums to communicate more effectively (for example Baer, 2001; Prochak, 1990).

In Canada, the museum professional community provides administrative research, through their professional journals, into practices, visitors (eg: Soren, 2000) and evaluation (eg: Lockett, 1991), but published scholarly material specific to Canadian museums is thin. Cultural studies and policy researchers in Canada

have been on the vanguard of research into cultural production and representation, especially in relation to minorities, national identity and citizenship (for example Tator & Henry, 2001; Bannerji, 2000; Manning, 2003). But scholars rarely focus on Canadian museums as the subject of such identity construction, and treat them in broad categories with other forms of identity production. The exception has been the work of a few Canadian anthropologists and museologists devoted to the study of First Nations cultures, their representation, post-colonial theory and the restitution of cultural property (for example, Ames, 1992; Haas, 1996; Harrison, 1997; Phillips & Johnson, 2003; Phillips, 2003).

The interaction between minority audiences and public institutions, in Canada and elsewhere, has been problematic. Studies have shown an extreme case of disconnect between dominant society interests and the interests of the Black community in museums and other leisure settings (for example Floyd et al, 1994; Falk, 1993; Philipp, 1999). Some art galleries and science museums, particularly in the U.S., have studied what images, messages and techniques ethnic audiences respond to as part of their focus on visitor development (Rasheed et al, 1997; Newkirk, 2001). Museums are portrayed as 'white' spaces that unconsciously embed racist inferences in their texts and exhibits (Tator & Henry, 2001; Thompson, 2000). Some Black writers point out that museums are still the very institutions that promote and maintain the power differential between white and black people through their collecting, representation and organizational practices (Small, 1997). Agyman elaborates on how the presence of non-whites in heritage environments, either as topics for display or as audiences, is received by traditional museum-goers with shock or amusement because of perceived incongruity (Agyman & Kinsinan, 1997). In the UK, specific policy direction has resulted in recent years in revised policies and strategies for social inclusion not only to address exclusionary representation, but to boost multicultural audiences (Mason, 2004). But others portray these attempts to extend inclusivity by adding ethnic elements as "simply extending their center outward until the whole world is sucked into a universalist void (Hilden, 2000:11)." The largest body of research related to museums and minority cultures surrounds attempts to revisit failed or controversial exhibitions. Both the Smithsonian, in 1992, and the Royal Ontario Museum, in 1989-90, for example, were sites of vociferous contestation of

exhibits on African topics. Several books, papers and articles have been written to evaluate what went wrong and how to avoid these mistakes (Reigel, 1996, Butler 1999, Arnoldi, 2001; Phillips, 2002). Butler delves most deeply into the issue, looking at institutional/structural reasons for the poor communications and recommending changes.

Research into museum exhibition as a medium of communication has focused on its pedagogical effects. Much of this literature on exhibition is devoted to the conditions of reception - in other words, research on how exhibits affect visitors as well as how visitors learn, perceive and construct meaning. Falk & Dierking, Hooper-Greenhill, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for example, have written extensively on exhibits as engines of meaning. As Stuart Hall points out, an exhibition provides a "framework for interpretation" using three-dimensional objects on display to create meanings which, knowingly or unknowingly, reflect the perspectives its creators (1997:3). One of the first writers to comment on exhibits as a means of communication was a Canadian, Duncan Cameron, whose musings on museum theory are viewed as seminal (1968, 1971). Hooper-Greenhill's work draws on communication theory, examining and adapting models such as Shannon and Weaver, Schramm and Cameron to apply to the underlying process in museum exhibition (1994). Exhibits themselves are extensively reviewed in museum journals from the professional critic's point of view, and a few include semiotic analysis (for example Todd, 2004). A few writers have demonstrated how dominant cultural codes in exhibitions embed ideology (Crang, 2003; Hilden, 2000; Hodge & D'Sousa, 1999).

Museologists have done some work into conditions of cultural production in a broad ideological sense (eg: Hooper-Greenhill, 1992), but little on the conditions surrounding specific exhibition planning and development as vehicles that construct perceptions, except in an instrumental sense (Diffey, 1998).

Ethnographers and anthropologists - those people whose field research is often presented in exhibit form - devote considerable scholarly attention to exhibit production. Most are interested in the ways in which the 'private' side of culture that they encounter during research practice are filtered and transformed into 'public'

writings or exhibits (Shryock, 2004). Shryock also offers intriguing insights into the way ethnic cultures present a 'public' face of their cultures through the mass media in order to protect the 'off stage' areas of privacy or intimacy where real culture is produced. His observations can be translated into the process used by any culture, including the dominate one, to produce exhibits offered as the 'finished product' with the warts and troubles of the conditions of production removed.

It is within this anthropological context that research following the entire circuit of communication, warts and all, is located. The issue of the contextualization of texts (such as exhibits) is important to the ethnographers (Ortner, 1995). Ozyurek (2004), for example, attempts to follow an exhibition from conception through production, text and reception and the interrelationship of these stages, in order to analyse what nations, in this case Turkey, show and not show in their public definitions of their culture, as well as audiences' complex interpretations of those definitions of nationhood. But his analysis falls short on the production side - there is no clear presentation of the development and decision-making related to scripts or visuals or design of display elements. Texts must be anchored in the processes of their production - in the connections and influences that gave them life - and, of course, in their reception - in the cultural baggage viewers bring with them. Thus exhibits can be shown as dialogic spaces in which a political history of negotiation unfolds through all stages of communication. These key elements, of negotiation through all moments of the communication circuit, becomes the focus of my research.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

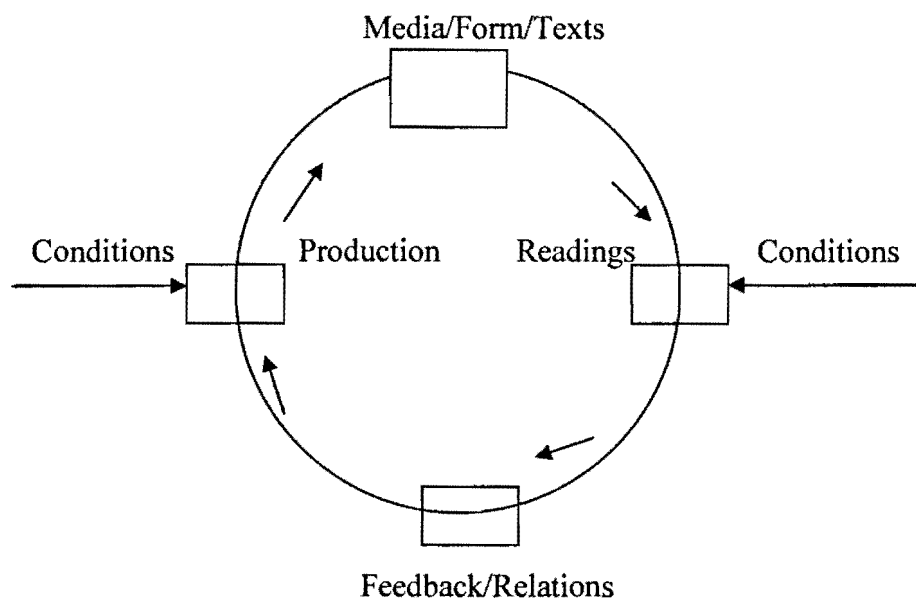
It appears that there is a lack of work about museums which connects and compares the broad context and negotiation of production of messages with the context and negotiation of reception of messages. There is little that tackles exhibits as forms of communication that reflect and construct perceptions. In particular, there is little study of Canadian museums and the possible disconnects between exhibitions as media of communication and Canadian multicultural or minority groups. My project addressed these gaps by asking:

How are ideological museum practices of message creation translated into actual communications, specifically Park's Canada's Underground Railroad exhibit, and how do minority and dominant cultural visitors to this exhibit make sense of these messages and relate them to their construction of identity?

This investigation has an interpretive focus - it makes social and individual observations of a particular situation. I am interested in revealing factors that influence the production of messages by institutions and its interpretation by audiences, thereby enabling both sides to dialogue about heritage more effectively. My interest is rooted in the belief that messages will be understood in different ways by different members of the audience depending on their own reality but influenced by levels of meaning embedded in the production phase and shaped by the form of media chosen to convey the message. In a broader sense, I will also be looking for structural issues in the production, presentation and reception of exhibits which will enable us to clarify how the process works, and ultimately contribute to changing how exhibit planning works for the benefit of minority groups. Thus there is an aspect of action in the goals of this research – although it has been undertaken independently from the agency, Parks Canada is interested in the results of this research.

In order to address these research questions within an analytical framework, a cultural studies model of communication, the 'circuit of culture' advanced by Johnson (1987) was adapted. Encompassing the political, economic and cultural contexts and practices of both production and consumption of media, Johnson's model provides an ideal and workable framework in which all segments of production, circulation and consumption of cultural products can be shown as interrelated yet separate moments, “different sides of the same complex process (p.45)”, subject to intense negotiation through all the moments of the circuit. Three particular moments in the communicative circuit that underlies the UGRR exhibit were studied and the fourth moment implied by the undertaking of this study.

FIGURE A - Circuit of Communication
(adapted from Johnson, 1987)



My research examined how meanings were actually constructed by planners, government historians and a consultative committee; how they were presented through written and designed exhibit media; how they were interpreted by visitors to exhibit at its two locations, the Royal Ontario Museum and Black Creek Pioneer Village. There were, then, three parts to the exhibit study: production research, media analysis, and audience research. This paper will comprise a fourth element of the circuit - the feedback needed to inform future production practices. Within this framework, both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed to offer a triangulating base of data.

The conditions specifically related to the exhibit's planning and production were investigated using two methods, secondary and archival research including histories, meeting minutes and planning reports, and qualitative interviews of planning committee members and exhibit designers. Interview questions, using a grounded theory approach, ascertained intentions and conflicts underlying the strategies of exhibition and distinguished key areas of meaning that contributed to the design of survey questions for the viewers/audience (see Appendix B for interview questions). Seven members of the exhibit's consultative

committee who did not work for National Historic Sites were contacted for interviews. Four agreed to be interviewed, one declined and two did not respond to repeated contacts. Of the agency employees and consultants, the project manager, the planning consultant, the script writer and the production designer/fabricator were all interviewed in detail. Some follow-up discussions were also held by email. None of the names of the interviewees are indicated in this report, except for the project manager, Rob Watt.

The media itself, the object theatre, was considered as text. A semiotic analysis of the exhibit (following Kress and van Leeuwen) identified intended production strategies/codes and obtuse strategies/codes. The siting of the exhibit, the media used, its visual setting, use of people, images and objects, and its positioning in relation to the audience were studied. The resultant 'reading', from the researcher's analytical point of view, demonstrates how the exhibit media could carry intended as well as unintended messages. Qualitative interviews with the designer and writer also contribute to this section of the paper.

Audience analysis took the form of observation and questionnaires (see Appendix C). The audience research was undertaken in two sessions, one at the Royal Ontario Museum in February-March 2003 and at Black Creek Pioneer Village in June 2005. A total of 35 questionnaires were received at the ROM and 37 at Black Creek. The audience questionnaires were then interpreted to identify similarities or divergences in interpretations between producers and receivers. What messages planners intended and how people actually make sense of and internalize the communication, are compared and analysed to offer insights into the communicative process of this exhibition. Finally, the paper considers ways in which the practices of exhibit planning and design, as exemplified from the UGRR exhibit, could be modified to accommodate marginalized publics, and suggests directions for further research.

Several limitations were identified from the outset, due to the limited scope of a masters research project. First, all members of the planning and consultative committee were not available for interview. Secondly, the exhibit itself was a fairly simple one, restricted by a small budget. What the committee envisioned, and

what they were actually able to construct were somewhat different. Thus economics not identity politics became an overriding factor in what the committee was able to communicate and in how many people were actually able to see the exhibit. For example, while it was observed that visitation by African-Canadian audiences was low, it is not possible to definitively say why. Was this because the institution of the museum is an inappropriate place to reach Black audiences, or because there was no money for marketing, they simply did not know it was there? Additional limitations lie in the use of a survey to gather information from the audience, and the sample size. Ideally, a comprehensive and long-term analysis of a large sample of visitors over an extended time covering both tourist-season and regular day use with infinitely cooperative subjects would give the most diverse data. Also, it is acknowledged that in-depth audience interviews would have produced “thicker” data (Geertz, 1973), but time and scope of this project limited the gathering of this information. The decision to survey rather than interview was also made because of the random nature of exhibit visiting and thus the difficulty both of finding visitors willing to spend more than a few minutes responding to questions, and of setting up interview situations acceptable to Ryerson Ethics Board requirements.

Data collection is reported here in three sections. The production section begins with a description of the political and economic background that resulted in the exhibit project, then an elaboration of the results of the archival and interview research. The study of the exhibit as text begins with a background discussion of displays as a social practice, then the results of the designer interviews, and concludes with a detailed reading. Finally, the audience section discusses the nature of exhibit audiences and the construction of meaning, and details the results of the visitor observations and surveys.

4. DATA COLLECTION

A. Conditions of Production

The production of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* exhibition fits within a larger framework

of Canadian identity politics and discourse where Canada's multicultural identity is defined, represented and contested. As repositories of Canada's cultural past, museums and historic sites represent and speak for the public in matters of history and heritage. While early Canadian institutions offered a formal, Anglo-centred, dominant culture view of history, since the 1970's there has been considerable struggle within the museum community to approach the concept of museum presentation from a more 'democratic and decentralized' point of view (Zemans 1996). Numerous attempts were made to include ethnic minorities - anyone not British or French - in the national vision (for example the Canadian Museum of Civilization's Hall of History) but by and large, 'visible' minorities - non-Europeans - were rarely included in the mix. When they were, there were sometimes embarrassing results, for example the Royal Ontario Museum's controversial exhibit *Into the Heart of Africa*. In that case, violent protests by African-Canadians erupted over what was interpreted as a racist representation (Henry, 1995). Despite the continuous presence of Blacks in Canada since the 1600's, Canadian history in public institutions almost totally ignored peoples of African descent. National Historic Sites had, until the 1990's, only one national designation devoted to Black history - a plaque commemorating the 'Fugitive Slave Movement' erected in 1928. The scattering of locally-operated historic sites along the American border in southwestern Ontario, such as the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' tourist attraction, were the only other permanent Black heritage sites (Russell, 1997).

In the late 1990's the Canadian government initiated a significant policy shift that opened the door for more diverse imagining of Canadian identity and heritage. Canadian arts, culture and museums were reframed as social goods that supported cohesion in society, and some museums and sites undertook efforts to collaborate with Canadian ethnic and visible minority communities to develop exhibitions, for example at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Phillips, 2003). The primary federal department responsible for articulating social cohesion was Canadian Heritage, the umbrella department for arts, culture, heritage and multicultural programs, including Parks Canada, on the federal level. The parlance in the policy planning context became, how can Canadians, including new ethnic Canadians, make a social investment or acquire social capital through participation in cultural/heritage programs?

It was within this policy milieu that Parks Canada became involved, in 1997, with a United States government initiative related to the Underground Railroad (UGRR). The U.S. National Parks Service requested the participation of the Canadian Department of Heritage in a Study Tour of UGRR-related museums and historic sites in the U.S. and Canada. Their aim was to correct a perceived imbalance of African-American stories in American cultural institutions. Since Canada was the destination for UGRR refugees, Canadian Heritage was asked to join the network of institutions interpreting this story. From the beginning, the aim was to consult not only U.S. agency partners, but with the African-Canadian community and stakeholders as well. A memorandum of understanding between Canadian Heritage and the U. S. National Park Service was signed in May 1998 committing both to a number of projects, some designations of national historic significance, sharing of research information, and enhancing the marketing and presentation of UGRR history and sites (Ricketts, 1999). Canadian Heritage was represented by two of its agencies in this, the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (NHSMBC) and a division of Parks Canada, National Historic Sites (NHS). In December 1998, the NHSMBC recommended designation of several new national historic sites and persons of national historic significance to commemorate the Underground Railroad in Canada. Two new national historic sites related to the theme were named in Ontario, the Buxton Settlement near Chatham and the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church in Amherstburg. The Minister also designated Thornton and Lucie Blackburn as persons of national historic significance; recommended several plaques marking sites, person and events, and included UGRR themes at several existing National Historic Sites in Ontario (Ricketts, 1999). One specific, and unusual, recommendation addressed the need for some kind of presentation about the UGRR in Toronto. Recognizing that the overwhelming majority of UGRR refugees settled in urban areas including Toronto, the NHSMBC stated that: "...a presentation of the UGRR urban settlers should be developed and installed in a museum or other appropriate location in Toronto through consultation with the Ontario Black History Society (Canada, 2000: 4)" The Executive Secretary of the Board pointed out that it recommended this unusual form of commemoration "because of the scope of the subject; and chose Toronto because very few sites remain in

Toronto that are associated with this important chapter of Canadian history (M. Audy, email, June 27, 2005).” The Board also realized that an exhibit in Toronto could potentially reach a huge audience (Canada, 2000).

The Ontario Black History Society (OBHS) was specifically mentioned in their recommendation because it had been involved in a series of meeting with the Board and the Minister's office in their campaign to raise awareness about the black history of Canada. The OBHS, under its President Rosemary Sadlier, had been responsible for the establishment of February as Black History Month, beginning in 1996, and actively pursued the goal of a Museum of African Canadian History. Their assertive political voice resulted in the NHSMBC's decision to recommend several commemorations, including the 'presentation', in Toronto.

Subsequently, Parks Canada historians and project staff took on the planning of the commemoration, something they were accustomed to doing. But their 'UGRR Strategy' proposed management objectives that contained a new twist to planning that had not been attempted before, stating:

1. The Minister of Canadian Heritage has approved the HSMBC recommendation that UGRR sites in Canada should tell the story from a Canadian perspective.
2. All research and presentation undertaken by the Government of Canada will be done in full consultation with the associated communities, using the most up-to-date research and oral history, and reflecting diversity of opinion where such exists.
3. Parks Canada presentation of sites, persons and events associated with the UGRR in Canada will focus on issues related to the establishment and development of African Canadian communities rather than on the flight from slavery.
4. To present the UGRR story, Parks Canada will incorporate an innovative approach to telling this story. (Ricketts, n.d.)

The government, in its efforts to ensure a product that would meet the approval of the public, wanted full consultation with the ethnic group represented, something they had not done before. It asked key stakeholders to sit on a consultative committee that would have significant input into the planning of the exhibit. According to the project's manager, "because there was a real possibility of someone playing the race card, we took the consultative route right from the beginning (R.Watt, e-mail interview, June 23, 2005)." Echoing this, one committee member voiced, "It was very deliberate, it was a very conscious move

on the part of Parks Canada to get stakeholders involved, people from the African-Canadian community especially, and, people who were involved in culture and heritage."

The project was assigned a historian, an African-Canadian, to do research and come up with names of people to serve on the committee. The manager was to assemble a committee who would meet every two months, hire a planner to come up with a concept of what the 'presentation' would entail, and oversee the design, production and siting of a final product. It was given a year-to-year budget allocation that eventually amounted to about \$450,000 including specific capital funds plus a full-time project manager and a shared historian, with the expectation of an opening by February 2001, which was revised to 2002.

When Parks first sat down with the consultative committee in November 1999, participants included two academics with a background in Black history, the president of the OBHS, a writer on Black history, a filmmaker and representatives from the Ontario ministries of Education and Culture. Parks Canada sent three staff including the project manager, an historian and a senior bureaucrat at National Historic Sites. Of those 10 people, six claimed African-Canadian heritage. Parks wanted people who could bring expertise to the table and contribute to the project, as well as represent the African-Canadian community. From the beginning, the OBHS was concerned whether the 'right' people were on the committee. Their concerns related to the lack of 'independent' members and the presence of members who were not UGRR descendants.

According to the OBHS representative,

Was that the right grouping of people to be on that? No. Because there were people on the committee who were being paid. And there to do work. There were people on the committee who were government representatives who are paid to have a particular mandate. And then there was myself. I mean not that there were adversarial opinions, but it just skews the points of view, the negotiations, in a way that may or may not be the best for the process.... I just raise that as a question.

The OBHS was also concerned that there were too few UGRR descendants on the committee, people with 'lived experience.' The project manager received written complaints from a woman in the African-Canadian community about the lack of descendants on the committee (and the presence of the Caribbean members),

and from a Black heritage site manager from southwestern Ontario who wanted representation in the group. While the OBHS was named as the primary partner in the project, the project manager did not want the Society to dominate the direction of the committee. Several committee members voiced a similar concern and noted ongoing internal conflict between the OBHS representative and non-descendants on the committee. Said one participant,

I think that what happened at the beginning was that [the OBHS] thought there shouldn't be anyone else around the table. And that even if there was, [its] views would prevail. I think [they were] a bit shaken about that part way through.

But another member maintained,

Those people who were there were people who were actively working in the developing of Black heritage, Black educational materials and primary research for history for the city of Toronto plus education in that field. They were the best people in the city for that.

Committee members arrived for the project with different interests and objectives. Harmonizing the diverse interests on the committee was not easy. Parks had objectives imposed from the outset by the Board and refined in their UGRR Strategy. Committee members had other ideas and there were tensions between differing agendas. Most of the African-Canadian representatives understood the inherent power of this medium, were keen to maximize its benefits and take advantage of this shot at a public stage. Said one participant,

I also got the feeling after a while ... that some people on the committee were just delighted to be there, providing input, and understood just what this was all about. And some people had come there hoping to prevail with very strong viewpoints about what should happen and how things should be done.

One of the Jamaican-Canadian participants was clear about her agenda for the exhibit. "My agenda was to tell a critical story!" she said, admitting she began the exercise with a political agenda partly motivated by the crisis created by the ROM's *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit 10 years previously. As an active protestor in that case, this committee member wanted to ensure a fair and equitable recounting of African-Canadian history. Another historian in the group wanted to ensure the telling of the 'correct' story, and felt the Black history of Toronto should be placed first and foremost. Others on the committee generally shared these

concerns. Some expressed the additional hope that they would be hired to do research or writing or creative production for the exhibit. The Ontario government Culture representative expressed the agency's objective to support their client, the OBHS, hoping the project would "give them some exposure." That ministry was also keen to partner with the federal government and felt it should be at the table for any dealing with its provincial government institutions, the ROM and Black Creek.

The OBHS had a more complex relationship with the project and the federal heritage agency. The Society's original purpose in dealing with the NHSMBC was to have the Thornton and Lucie Blackburn homestead in downtown Toronto dedicated as a National Historic Site, preferably with the nearby Sackville School set aside as a UGRR museum. According to the OBHS committee member, "The federal government was not interested in doing that. So instead of doing that they decided, 'we'll commemorate the personalities and not the place', which basically means there would be no money and no hold on the land." The federal government instead dedicated a simple plaque to the Blackburns and recommended the Underground Railroad exhibit in Toronto, which the OBHS could eventually own. With bitterness, the OBHS committee member commented,

There was a big event where it [the exhibit] was announced at Enoch Turner Schoolhouse. And it was quite exciting because I was thinking we were finally going to hear and this was the first step. And it was VERY disappointing to find out this...

The OBHS interpreted the exhibit proposal as a way for the federal agency to avoid any significant investment of money to acquire land in Toronto. Even as sites in southwestern Ontario were elevated to Historic Site designation, the Society's only reward was a site-less exhibit project. The OBHS was disappointed with this setback and approached the exhibit committee with caution and suspicion.

Whatever the personal and institutional agendas of the participants, the purpose of the committee as stated by the federal government was consultative. Rob Watt, the Parks Canada project manager, said bluntly,

The committee was a sounding board for me and the project. As a white guy, I was not about to place my values on their story. Because there was the potential for the subject to be racially charged, I needed a group of people who represented the Black community and who could speak on their behalf.

I needed a committee to lend credibility to the whole project and to the whole process of exhibit development. We needed "buy-in" from the Black community.

As one of the historians on committee pointed out,

Parks was not in a position to figure out what to do in downtown Toronto. They had no land-base or expertise in Toronto. They did not have any research about Black history in Toronto. Nor were they cognizant of all the ins and outs of the political issues regarding the African-Canadian community in Toronto. The reason the advisory group was constituted was largely to do with the fact that this was a minority group that has been disenfranchised for a long period of time and they did not want to make a mistake.

But Parks did not empower the group to make decisions or vote on issues. The committee did not make budget or hiring decisions. This was not a governing committee in any way. The project manager looked to them for guidance, then made his own recommendations to his superiors, in this case a senior steering committee.

While the committee was not empowered to direct the project, they debated and made important recommendations about a range of issues that gave a framework for the design of the exhibit. As one member quipped, "what is the use of having all this expertise if you didn't listen to them?" Watt admitted himself that "The committee became more involved in content than I originally thought they would... The consultative committee had input in the tone, the breadth of the story, what should or should not be included in the story. They did not have a veto. However I was not about to ignore their advice." That was a classic understatement as the group plunged into fervent negotiations on the nuances of *their* history.

Committee minutes and interviews reveal some of the collaborative dynamic in which the Parks professionals shared power with the committee at large. The Underground Railroad was an entirely new subject matter for Parks, and unlike most aspects of Canadian history and prehistory, the agency had little internal expertise. This was an advantage since there were no preconceived notions of white expertise, and it allowed the committee to take a fresh approach. The committee members themselves and their extended communities were also seen as sources of knowledge for stories, artifacts, and photos. Parks hired two African-Canadian historians (one of whom was involved in the *Into the Heart of Africa* protests) and a non-

Black expert to undertake original and secondary historical research. One of the historians hired to do the research commented:

.... [National Historic Sites] are normally used to having projects where there is a book or a body of work as the authority for the subject. They were in a shock I think when they discovered that there had never been a book on Toronto Black history so we were starting from primary source material rather than secondary. And it was not evident until about a third of the way through the process that they really did need professional historians to provide new data that had not yet been done before. They had to divert a portion of the budget toward research that they didn't anticipate.

The research team was a good one, but had one problem - two were members of the consultative committee. Said one, "I questioned at the time, not out loud, why they would retain us on the committee at the same time as hiring us, which is unusual. But we were not involved in any voting or anything." This, however, did become a source of discontent within the committee, especially on the part of the OBHS member who said, "I think the people who were paid should not have been on the committee. If they were staff then they should have been treated as such." The promotion of certain participants to staff gave them authority and an 'inside' position not shared by all members of the committee and resented by the OBHS. Not only was the Society feeling a bit on the outside of this committee, after assuming that they were the prime players in the process, they came to feel that Parks was ignoring them:

Every decision was made by Parks Canada....And you know I would say that's probably a fair way of looking at it. And certainly when it's, you know, when you pay, you get to call the tune. But if you are planning to go through the process, and it's going to be more than just *calling* it a process, you truly do have to include the voices, they need to be included and you do have to listen to those voices once they have been expressed.

Increasingly, the OBHS came to feel ostracized by the rest of the committee and several members went out of their way to characterize the OBHS position as "whining."

The other issue that came as a surprise to members and consumed much of the early meetings was the siting of the exhibit. Several members expressed shock that a large federal agency was boldly creating an exhibit but had no place to put it. Said one,

Well I thought it was just amazing! This was the federal government! They should be able to find a place! The federal government is powerful; there are many buildings in Toronto! And Rob Watt is, like, "Well, not really."

The OBHS expressed surprise as well, and gave notice that there was no space on their premises for an exhibit. "It's sort of like, OK, have a baby, but I don't know if you are going to have a house to raise the child in... there were lots of issues and I really don't think there was forethought. It was just, OK, we have a mandate to create an exhibit and, by golly, that's what we are going to do." The issue was particularly irritating to the OBHS because from the start they had emphasized the need for a physical location in Toronto to commemorate the Underground Railroad. To discover that Parks had no idea where the exhibit would go was unfathomable to them.

It took a full year, from November 1999 to Oct 2000, for the committee to find a suitable location for their exhibit. Throughout this period, many possible locations were considered and rejected including Harbourfront, St. Lawrence Hall, the University of Toronto, Todmorden Mills historic site, the British Methodist Episcopal Church, the Ontario Science Centre, the Textile Museum and a number of other locations. The eventual site, the Royal Ontario Museum, was only endorsed by the committee after considerable acrimonious debate. The ROM offered the project their Canada's Peoples Gallery for a period of two years. It had approximately 1100 square feet of space within the gallery itself with a foyer entrance area of another 450 square feet, and was located on the lower level of the museum. Parks pointed to the advantages of the ROM site including support facilities such as washrooms, access to food, gift shops; the ability to handle large groups and those coming by bus; an established education program with the infrastructure to deliver school programs; and maintenance and security staff for the exhibit.

But the choice of the ROM did not sit comfortably with several committee members. From the beginning, the *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit loomed in their discussions. Both government representatives and 'civilian' committee members tread carefully around subjects related to what they called "the ROM's past record." When it was discovered that the offered space was a small, basement location, committee members voiced their frustrations. One member refused to accept the site and commented how this symbolically placed them "in the back of the bus again." The size of the space and its basement location

was not only difficult to deal with from a design point of view, but it was perceived as an affront to African-Canadian dignity. The committee held a series of three meetings in October 2000 to deal with the ROM's offer. A vote was held on October 17, and committee minutes state, "as a result of the vote, it is now clear where the committee stands. They feel that they can not support the locating the exhibit in the ROM if the museum only offers us the Peoples gallery, with no additional space." Both the committee and the OBHS wrote letters to Parks Canada expressing their concerns with the site. At the next meeting, intense negotiations continued. One member reiterated "that the ROM didn't understand the importance of the project and what it needs to accomplish. The project wants and deserves respect and recognition (Oct. 27, 2000)." Yet, most felt that the venue offered security, maintenance and school program support, and felt it was too late to go back to the beginning and search for another site. Finally, the Ministry of Education representative proposed a compromise, outlined in the October 27 minutes:

1. Accept the ROM due to its infrastructure, with a semi-permanent exhibit
 2. Embrace the ROM's new commitments to Canadian history (resulting from its managerial planning)
 3. Prepare a traveling exhibit to be displayed at the Marketplace [a Parks Canada trade show exhibit]
 4. Engage in an aggressive communication plan to explain project expectations
 5. Encourage satellite locations around the city by the heritage community to develop complimentary exhibit stories
 6. Get the exhibit up and running!!
- (UGRR meeting minutes, Oct 27, 2000)

The key to this compromise was the possibility of additional square footage elsewhere in the museum and a series of satellite exhibit sites including the Blackburn site, St. Lawrence Hall and Osgoode Hall. A letter of acceptance was approved by the committee and signed by Parks and by the OBHS. A first draft reflects the concerns of the committee:

We have noticed in the media that William Thorsell is endeavouring to transform the ROM. As this is the beginning phase of the Underground Railroad Project, we would invite you to be a partner, and the first host of the exhibit. We invite you to join the Underground Railroad Consultative Committee which is made up of several members including the Ontario Black History Society, which continues to provide interpretation of African Canadian history.

We would like to accept the offer of the Canada's Peoples Gallery to host the exhibit and look forward to working together to overcome the gallery's spatial challenges. We are committed to the delivery of educational programming that will take place in the exhibit gallery.

It is an appropriate time for members of the ROM and the general public to be reminded of

the significance of Black history surrounding us. We look forward to a satisfying partnership and working together in this important endeavour.
(UGRR meeting minutes, Oct 27, 2000)

Looking back on the decision to accept the ROM, most participants had mixed feelings. One member pointed out,

I think we recommended the ROM for two reasons. One was the prestigious location and the other one was.... not to give them a chance to make up for their past 'indiscretions', but it would be nice to go in there and do an exhibit the way it should be done.

But the individual who most strongly objected to the location was resigned to the fact:

Many people said we should have rejected it because it's an insult to the Black community and the ROM already insulted the Black community and this was a further insult - the exhibit was in the basement and people had to go to the basement to see the exhibit. But the bottom line is, we didn't have an alternative.

For its part, the ROM seemed determined to offer goodwill and overcome the negative feelings. A ROM staff person joined the consultative committee and several employees participated in an educational subgroup of the committee. Members presented the ROM representative with requests that Black history be included in future ROM master planning, and that UGRR be incorporated in other exhibits, school programs, public programs and web site. The committee also asked to be included in the development of the school program support materials.

Siting the presentation was not the only contentious issue the committee had to face. Deciding what the presentation should say and what form it should take emerged as more difficult to negotiate than was first imagined. These had to be decided not only within the conditions of budget and time frame, but also within the context of relationships within the African-Canadian community. The expectation of 'stakeholders' within that community was complex and coloured by the cloud created by the past experience of *Into the Heart of Africa*. There was a sense in the committee that the UGRR exhibit had important community objectives of saving face and making up for past problems. Said one of the historians,

People were threatening to resign from the committee because of the site... We wanted it to be big and grand... And this was the one time that this was gonna happen for this community, so make it big,

make it like Pier 21 [the national historic site on immigration in Halifax]. The feds spent a lot of money on Pier 21. Then we had to face the 'reality show'. People didn't walk away because we felt it was still a wonderful opportunity. That it was important to tell the story. I know, for example, one man who was asked to join the committee and he absolutely refused when he heard about the budget... He just said, "No, I don't want to do that. Black people should be more respected than that".

But the community also saw the exhibition as potentially beneficial for Black creative workers, and many eventually worked on the project as artists, researchers, producers, actors and musicians.

The community and the committee representatives were divided on the scope of the story to be told. Would it reflect a national Black history story or a local one? Would only the struggles of UGRR descendants be told, or the broader perspective of Caribbean or even African immigrants to Canada? Would the elite community members be represented, or an Everyman type of story? And, most contentious, would the story be uplifting and celebratory, or gritty and hard-edged? If this was a one-shot chance to represent the African-Canadian community on Toronto's public stage, what face would be shown? The agency had imagined a straightforward commemoration of an event that would show Canada as a liberal nation that rescued slaves. But as the project became politicized between and among the participants, and as its claim to authenticity in the eyes of the African-Canadian community became a thing of negotiation, coming up with a story became problematic. As the project manager commented in his typically understated fashion, "the committee became more involved in content than I originally thought they would." From the early stages, Parks Canada was concerned that the exhibition illustrate several universal themes, in particular, freedom, immigration, and refugee experiences. The April 2000 minutes indicated their desire for the content of the exhibit to "relate to modern Canadians so that they could share a common experience and empathy for the story, and indeed the visitor's own background." As a federal agency Parks wanted some kind of national story about Black history in Canada stretching back to the first documented African resident, Mathew DeCosta in the 1600's. The Interpretation Plan (Canada, 2000), produced by a consultant, outlined three thematic areas to be addressed by the presentation: the impact of the Black settlement experience on Canada, a history of Black settlement from the 1600's to 1860's, and Toronto and the urban environment. The Plan also made it clear that key parts of the story were Canada's Act against slavery in

1793, that fact that Black settlers were offered the official rights and privileges enjoyed by white settlers in 19th century Canada, and that Black freedom-seekers were one of the earliest groups of political refugees to come to Canada.

While those particular themes, strongly political in overtone, were accepted initially by the committee, over the process of the consultation African-Canadian points of view came to the fore. At an early stage, participants argued whether the story should represent a variety of Black experiences or the particular story of UGRR survivors in Toronto - what one member deemed the 'Caribbean' story or the 'Canadian' story. The OBHS strongly felt that, as "one of four founding races of Toronto," the descendants of free and enslaved Blacks who had resided in Toronto since the 1700's should be the focus of the story. Not everyone in the group, however, would agree to this:

The Caribbean history people, they had a political agenda to push. But this really was about the UGRR. This was identified as a UGRR project. And while those other concerns are good to debate and part of an ongoing development of the way Black history interpretation was approached in Canada, it really wasn't valid in this case.... [they] came in there to fight something too and that was for the position of modern Canadian Black history and this storytelling that was going to go on in the ROM.....

It quickly became clear however, despite the political agenda of a minority of the members, the government and most members supported the Underground Railroad focus. But, it was not clear until close to the end of the planning stage, whether to tell a national story or a Toronto story. The original directive from the NHSMBC had been a presentation IN Toronto, not ABOUT Toronto. The debate over national/city revolved around whether Toronto's unique history as the only site of urban refugees would be adequately recognized - a national slant could end up mostly recounting a rural experience. On the other hand, a Toronto-centred approach might 'take away' the emphasis from the other Black history sites, particularly in southwestern Ontario, and ignore Parks' national mandate and the usefulness of the exhibit as a potential travelling exhibit. The final decision came as a result of the African-Canadian historians' detailed research:

Then we realized that Toronto was one of the main centres on the Underground Railroad, certainly had perhaps the largest black population in the 19th century, but there wasn't much about Toronto's Black history. Black history [research] was centered in Amhurstberg and Chatham and those places. And Toronto was tremendously important, the anti-slavery society was founded in Toronto, Toronto

was really happening at that time! So then we came back to Toronto, that the story would centre around Toronto.

The national/local debate also represented a more fundamental dialectic that sat in the background of committee meetings - whether to address elite or vernacular themes. Certainly their discussions reflected ongoing debates in the wider museum field: whether to tell 'history' or 'heritage' (see Dicks, 2003; Hewison, 1987). Indeed, some argue this is a central difference between heritage sites, like those administered by Parks Canada, and history museums such as the ROM. One has a vernacular focus and the other formal history - whether to tell a narrative of the day-to-day existence of Everyman, or whether to document events and individuals who moved society as a whole. The final exhibit tries to marry both perspectives. The fact that this presentation from a 'heritage' agency installed an exhibit in a more formal 'history' institution had interesting effects, to be discussed later in this paper. In the committee process, the OBHS had particular difficulty with this debate, wanting to emphasize community leaders in a more traditional telling of historical fact.

I mean on the one hand you don't always want to celebrate the most well known people, but on the other hand, you know, indigenous knowledge, regular people, these are good things to do too.... It would depend on whether the thrust was....to do indigenous knowledge of the everyday person, or whether it was to be the person who was a little bit larger than life but was definitely part of Toronto in that time. For example, should have the Anderson Abbott story have been told in more detail and then the story of Ann Marie Jackson, whoever that is? A more highly visible, well-known person, and an everyday? With equal weight, would that have been better? I don't know.

The historians and the design team both pushed for the Everyman focus of the presentation with the OBHS as lone dissenting voice. Up to the very last moment the OBHS member tried to insert the story of the 'larger than life' characters into the storyline and protested when prominent doctor Anderson Abbott was not mentioned in the final script. The historian of Caribbean descent was clear about her vision of the matter:

So we knew that the story was the UGRR in Toronto ... to look at the lives of the immigrants who settled in the city - their accomplishments as they developed a community in Toronto and so on, so that was pretty exciting. We were going to focus on people....

The appeal of Everyman lies in the way 'ordinary' members of the audience can connect to these individuals. Thus the exhibit could hope to convey some of the more universal objectives of Parks - the desire to relate to modern Canadians so that they could share a common experience.

But interestingly, the seemingly 'private' side of the everyday that was being shared with audiences was still an idealized one. The rough or intimate side of everyday life was still not the subject of the story here, and this too came under debate. That part was kept private and the audiences were exposed only the domestic or nostalgic view of their culture - the heroism. This framing of the story became a source of contention: was it to recognize the hardships of life and racism they faced in Canada, or was it to be a celebration of the accomplishments of the refugees when they arrived in Toronto? The committee was divided, but settled on a celebratory tone. The decision was born of the committee's desire to counter the myth that Blacks were victims and to demonstrate their agency in their own freedom. They also wanted to assert through this public medium that African-Canadians and their history had achieved status in Canadian society. Some call this a "false harmony", seen as a cleansed or nostalgic view of a difficult past and lacking in political punch (Hodgins, 2004). The committee's division on this subject mirrors as well wider discussions on the process of cultural display as we shall see later. Committee minutes of December 2000 affirmed "Everyone concluded that this should be a positive exhibit and should allow visitors to go home with positive feelings." A committee member commented:

There has been plenty about why the black community failed, and there has been plenty of stuff written about how badly people were treated. What hasn't been written is the success story of people surmounting all of that and REALLY achieving wonderful things! You catch more flies with honey than vinegar anyway! I think everybody on the committee, while we didn't want to whitewash the negative side of life for black people, we wanted to make children, and members of the public, interested in the achievements of Black people because that is what leads to more interest in history.

The decision was to come back and haunt them in the summer of 2001, when a member resigned from the committee during an angry meeting after his more negatively toned script proposal was rejected. While Parks turned down the proposal during the tender bidding process for the exhibit production, members of the committee were confused by the event and interpreted the conflict as a rejection of his material.

Negotiating the storyline and venue monopolized a huge amount of the committee's time and energy. The question of how the story would be told, what type of presentation they envisioned, was not addressed until

late in the process. The government representatives and planning consultant worried about the seeming impossibility of pulling together a traditional museum exhibit as time and money was eaten up. The consultant expressed his concerns:

I had been brought in as a consultant to do something very specific, which was to turn a commitment to interpretation into an actual exhibit - which is pretty specific stuff. You can't afford to spend too much time in the ether debating theoretical issues...

The Ontario government representative expressed frustration with the process, citing amazement with what he thought was Parks Canada's seeming inexperience with exhibit design process. He pointed out that a simple process like acquisition of artifacts for exhibits required a considerable amount of research and time. The historians, for their part, reminded the project manager that there was no research upon which a Toronto story could be told, and that new primary research was essential for the exhibit to tell a credible story. The pressure was on to come up with concrete ideas of what was needed, on the ground, to make the 'presentation' a reality. So the entire committee was drawn into the design negotiation, another level of responsibility for the group that Parks had not anticipated and had never done before. A committee member remarked,

Oh we advised on every level of what was going to happen, I mean from brochures right through to what the logo would be to how public programming would be delivered. Certainly we debated at considerable length whether it was going to be an interactive exhibit, whether it was going to be static, whether it was going to be a video, what the audience was going to be, how that audience would be handled.

The debate culminated in a new proposal of an 'experiential' or 'object' theatre, a non-traditional media form involving film, objects, sound and a narrative story that the planning consultant hoped would satisfy the varied needs of the consultative committee. The project manager said,

I think that when [the consultant] came up with the idea of an experiential theatre, it was a turning point in the exhibit process. Otherwise it would have been just another flat panel exhibit. The committee wanted something that was going to be substantial, something that was going to make people stand up and say this is good and we can take pride in it.

The planning consultant positioned the object theatre as a good solution to the committee's needs:

Well, that's the analysis that goes into the planning of the approach. You find out what story you've got to tell, what artifacts you've got to work with, you find out what *space* you've got to work with, and, above all, you find out what audience you are approaching and what is going to work with them.

All this is overlain by budget. This is the skill of a planner, to bring all of those things together. I'm not sure the object theatre was just sort of a idea that was pulled out of the sky by the committee and agreed on - a lot of the development of that was us as planners.

The experiential theatre was accepted by most on the committee because of its potential to captivate audiences, especially children. One member summarized their feelings:

... we were just so depressed after looking at [the ROM venue]. It was so tiny. So that was the main reason that the idea changed from the traditional exhibit to an experiential theatre..... For that space an experiential theatre would work, it wouldn't be tremendously amazing or fabulous it was so small, but for that space you couldn't mount a full exhibit with text and visuals unless you wanted to feature just three people. So that seemed to be a great compromise. ...Also people thought that the experiential theatre idea would go down well with the kids who were coming to see the exhibit. You know... you have to be really into it to stand there and read the text and look at the visuals and so on. But you can watch a movie, it will engage you and draw you in.

Others pointed out that the cost seemed to be excessive and were unsure that a high-tech approach would be necessary. The OBHS representative remained sceptical of the technique, saying,

Also the decision to go with an interactive exhibit ... was very expensive and added to the cost even though there really wasn't a whole lot of money available to do the whole project, supposedly, and no additional funds could be found, supposedly. So why go with something so expensive because the cost was significantly going to the manufacturer of the interactive exhibit?

Regardless of the mixed feelings, time and money pressures resulted in the speedy acceptance of the experiential theatre idea and the contracting of a production company. Two members of the committee were hired to undertake primary research into the storyline and potential images and artifacts. The others continued to regularly meet to discuss and approve the approach to the story, scripts, and the film and design at various stages. This process seemed to go very smoothly due, according to some on the committee, to the professionalism of the production firm, moving one participant to remark on the 'brilliant' job of the company and to offer to kneel down and kiss the feet of the script writer. The hard feelings engendered by the irate departure of the committee member who had written the first script had made everyone nervous. Placing the project in the hands of the designers and producers was a great relief to the project manager and the committee. When the new writer quickly came up with an innovative script that seemed superbly written and answered most concerns, the project picked up steam. The committee as a whole met three times in November and December 2001 to review and agree on the title of the presentation,

script, storyboards, and the design and content of introductory signage. They also provided input and approval into the panels planned for the four 'satellite' signs in Toronto, a small exhibit from the Buxton collection that the ROM had accommodated just adjacent to the Parks theatre, and a school package and web site. A series of meetings and in-studio consultations worked out the set design, images, actors, reviewed the rough film and sound track and followed the project right through to the installation and opening to the public. Between October 2001 and April 2002 the entire presentation was completed, installed and opened with a gala reception, a remarkably speedy conclusion to the production phase. The whole team was exhausted, but all felt that the product was a good one. The project manager was elated and convinced that African-Canadians would have a sense of ownership of the project. Watt commented,

It was in fact planned by white guys; written by a white guy, and produced by Steve Shaw Productions. However, there was extensive consultation all the way. The professionalism of all the people involved carried the day. I think that the committee felt that they had all these professionals working on the project for them, the Black community.

In the end, this invitation to an African Canadian consultative committee to have substantial input into the end product had taken the project beyond the traditional Parks Canada exhibit planning process and into an evolutionary hybrid. The production moved from being a controlled, in-house representational project, to a public project with great symbolic meaning to the minority group it depicted. How this translated into a communicative medium on the ground and was viewed by audiences is the subject of the next section of this paper.

B. The Exhibit

Cultural display is a particular social practice that makes ideas visible and places them 'in public' for others to see (Dicks, 2003). Cultural display can take myriad forms for diverse purposes - from public ceremonies to tidy lawns to advertising and more. An exhibit like *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* brings into public view ideas about community. Public presentation in other forms might make statements about identity, status, solicitation or community belonging. Cultural display is about the visual, about showing, seeing, and being seen. This generates questions about what is being shown, who is doing the

showing, who is looking and why. Thus analyzing what is visible in displays and how they act as visual means of communication can reveal important information about social and community structures, processes and relationships.

Museum history and heritage exhibits are a particular type of cultural display; an institutional social practice that can memorialize and animate the spirit of a place or the voices of its peoples (Dicks, 2003). They offer rhetorical and discursive presentations of community that can, as we have seen, be subject to complex negotiations during their planning. But as ideas are translated into tangible form, into the actual texts and media used by the exhibit, the intentions of the planners are interpreted and modified. Ideas are inevitably condensed, simplified and sometimes fragmented because of the material limitations of the form. Order and hierarchy is imposed on ideas, and rhetorical modes of communication are emphasized. In museum and historic site exhibitions, objects, whether artifacts or art, are the central items of display. Objects shown in public embody or represent ideas using two broad methods. Historically, objects were removed from their context, and positioned as trophies frozen in time, imbued with an 'aura' of authenticity or art (see Bennett, 1998; Hallam, 2000). Recently, museums have moved away from situating objects as examples of 'the best' and instead using them to represent or illustrate ideas or cultures. Here, mimetic display techniques often strive to place objects in reproduced environments. These two approaches to the public presentation of objects are exemplified in two different kinds of public history institutions: museums and heritage sites. Each offers a different vision of the role of display and techniques of exhibition.

In museums such as the Royal Ontario Museum, knowledge is held and transmitted from the authoritative curator. This specialist with an ethnographical or historical background might view the institution as a custodian of historical knowledge, usually about the dominant culture with interpretations of lesser or marginal cultures. The curator builds objective, detail-oriented, historically-accurate, didactic portrayals of events, people or ethnographic cultures. Display projects are in-house almost 'private' affairs, where control of the texts is of utmost importance to ensure accuracy and a preferred reading (Hodge & D'Sousa, 1999).

The emphasis rests on codified knowledge of the 'progress' of history, of elite personalities and monumental events, or sociocultural subjects seen as 'other' and observed from outside (Hooper-Greenhill, 2003).

Displays rely extensively on the reading of text expressed in a passive, anonymous, institutional voice (Coxall, 1997). And, the geography or spatial arrangement of all parts of the display works in concert to convey meaning (Crang, 2003). Two exhibit forms are commonly used in the museum: text panels with professionally designed backgrounds clustered around a central object or set of objects; and the discovery room, an assortment of curios displayed in settings that encourage touch.

In heritage sites such as Black Creek Pioneer Village, the exhibits tend to be framed in a different manner in order to communicate process and environment. Historic sites attract people looking for more for the medium than the message - the experience of the living farm or living house or living vernacular of some sort. Specialists with professional exhibitry knowledge, usually following economic objectives related to tourism, look at exhibits as a subjective, thematic experience (Dicks, 2000). The visitor here is served not by historiographic detail, but by familiar, often populist themes of the life of Everyman delivered through a visually and experientially arresting media. Embodied communicative techniques are essential, through immersive experiences, hands-on activities or first-person conversations with staff (Crang, 2003). Films and costumed staff complement activities and in-situ exhibits, augmenting the intimate and personal feel of the site. History and community are seen as a walk-through environment. The presentation techniques tend to convey a nostalgic and idealized sense of social relations and processes of the era (Dicks, 2003).

In the case of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* exhibit, the invitation to the consultative committee to have substantive input into the end product took the exhibit beyond both museum forms and into an evolutionary hybrid. The consultative committee pushed for a non-typical museum exhibition technique - a storytelling mode called an 'object theatre' or 'experiential theatre', with a holographic female narrator in a dramatic theatre setting. This display technique combines the 'aura' of authentic objects with the 'experience' of a mimetic environment and elevates both into theatre. The object theatre has created

some controversy in museum circles because of its perceived inauthenticity or 'Disney' effect (see Dicks 2000, Soto, 2003, Wallace 1996). The form is a multi-media experience that includes the use of film, lighting, sound, music, automata and objects orchestrated to tell a narrative story related to a particular theme. In the Canadian museum experience, the method was pioneered by Science North, a science and technology museum in Sudbury, Ontario in the mid-1980's. While it is firmly rooted in the venerable heritage tradition of telling stories through slide shows and film, the medium also derives its shape from the kind of automatron entertainment found in Disney theme parks. Since that time, the object theatre has found a home world-wide in science and technology museums and heritage parks, but rarely in traditional museums. The form of the object theatre allows these sites to frame their communication in a way that both educates and entertains. Bella Dicks' study of the Rhondda Heritage Park in Wales (2000) offers an excellent perspective on the use of object theatre in a living history site. Her observations support the contention that the object theatre form has inherent characteristics that are manipulated by the producers and produce observable effects on audiences. Visitors are offered a range of multi-media technologies that bombard the senses. She describes the objectives of the producers as telling a story while "constructing a highly visual and auditory environment that will hold the visitor's attention and have 'impact' (pg. 214)." She quotes a member of the design team,

... we sit people in a black room and it's magical ... what you illuminate is what people see. So you can use the place as you want to use it ... portraying the bits that fit into the story ... the place becomes a theatre (pg. 214).

Control of the environment is key in the theatre, by dominating the senses, by showing objects life-size and in three dimensions, and by immersion in an environment - a strategy deemed by Dicks as "holding the gaze" (pg. 215).

It is interesting to see how the exhibit plan for *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* originally taken by the planning consultants - with panels, artifacts and graphics reflecting a museological approach - did not sit well with some in the consultative committee and was reworked over the course of the project into the object theatre. The Ontario Black History Society was most concerned about retaining a traditional

approach that would commemorate events and prominent personages. Undoubtedly the NHSMB also had this in mind when they recommended the UGRR designation. But the team, and especially the researchers and the professional consultants, wanted to shift the making of meaning from a didactic representation of standard historical information to the affective telling of an individual's story. This is not inconsistent, since this exhibit was planned by 'heritage' agency and merely temporarily installed in a 'history' institution. As well, both the consulting planner and the production company had 'heritage' backgrounds so not only favoured an education/entertainment medium, but proposed an 'Everyman' slant to the story. The multi-media approach they selected uses a stimulating interplay of audio, video projection, theatrical lighting effects, sets, and artifacts to convey a personal narrative. The storyline for the exhibit tells of African-American ex-slaves who settled in Toronto. The exhibit looks at the story through the eyes of Deborah Brown, a real woman who fled slavery in Maryland in the 1850's. The presentation is more emotional and involving than a traditional museum exhibit. As with cinema, the viewer, sitting in the dark, engages with the narrator Brown, a life-sized video projection. Her narrative is supplemented as attention is drawn to other parts of the stage-focused lighting on artifacts, voices, film, and music.

When the production design specialist was hired there were only six months left to complete and install the exhibit. The designer had to translate the objectives, storyline and preferred exhibit technique of the committee into something that would be open to the public by April 2002. Parks had tendered the project in the summer of 2001 and, because they were using the object theatre approach, selected a production company who specialized in developing films and 'experiential' environments for heritage sites. They found a company who had actually created a similar multi-media show for a historic site on Grand Cayman Island in the West Indies using the input of a similar community advisory committee. According to the owner,

I think they based their decision on the fact that we had experience with a similar subject matter because in the Cayman show half of the story was African-based and half was European... It was an interpretive show. It was the only Historic Site that they have down there.... It didn't exist before we arrived, and then they refurbished the house and part of it was the visitor centre, which is what we did the multimedia for.... That's basically where it has its roots - because part of the story was slavery.

Not only had the company done similar projects using similar themes in a committee setting, they brought to the project a populist perspective of the purpose of heritage sites and interpretive exhibits.

I think, from my perspective, the purpose was to tell the story in as entertaining and dramatic a way as possible. I've been doing these things...for a long time [since 1980]... In my mind this was the best approach to make the story entertaining to a wide variety of people. A lot of school kids were coming to the place and we had to do something that was going to hold their attention, and a traditional exhibit with copy panels and things like that wouldn't have done it... people tend not to read too much anymore...

The company brought to the exhibit a writer who was able to seize the material provided by the historical research team and translate it into an immensely popular script. The writer was adamant that the script represented the specific desires of the committee, and in particular, the wishes of the team of three researchers -two African-Canadian and one white historian. These three, two of whom had also sat on the committee from the beginning, were able to carry their knowledge of the positions and negotiations within the committee into the design phase of the project. This continuity ensured that the concerns of the committee were reflected in the final product on two levels: the broader committee reviewed the script, the storyboards, voices and rough edits of filming; and the research team either provided or decided on script content, actors, images, props, sets and music. This was a significantly different process of script and design development than is normally the case both at the ROM and at Parks Canada.

The creation of the UGRR presentation began with the writing of the script. The script emerged from what the writer called the "intellectual and historical content" established by the committee's objectives and storyline, and from the previous script that had been rejected by Parks Canada. The historical researchers provided the writer with literally stacks of primary material including contemporary accounts of fugitive slaves. The writer took a narrative approach to the material to offer an "emotional and approachable" framework for the historical content. He outlined three possible narrative approaches:

We can do that by using a wholly fictional character who could move back and forth in time and can be everywhere within the period; we could use the so-called 'voice of God' kind of narrator, the omniscient narrator; or we could find a historic, period character whom we knew existed and who would have been witness to some of these events.

Drawing from his experience in the Cayman project, the writer developed a central trope of an old woman storyteller of the period who could act as the voice of the site.

In the case of the Grand Caymans, we identified elderly women as the Caymanian storytellers. And so I sat down and listened to hours of tapes in the archives of these older women telling stories. So I got a sense of the rhythm and the syntax, how they told stories, and then took the material that was given to me by their consultative committee. ... in this case it was a fictional character, but she tells the story which is both a cultural and a historic story. So that was part of the attraction.

The UGRR historians and the committee readily agreed to the use of a female storyteller and one researcher had already found the perfect choice - Deborah Brown. According to the writer,

They had found someone who did actually exist, they knew where she lived, they knew that she had come north as a fugitive slave; they knew nothing more about her. They knew that she was illiterate; she had worked as a washerwoman. But they were comfortable with the idea that she was at least a historically realizable character.

Once the central character was established, the critical historical information could be conveyed from her point of view, the view of an African fugitive slave. The story flowed in the first draft and only required minor negotiation after that point:

It's a matter of paring down. You establish this is going to be 15 minutes long. You have to make choices. I don't make content choices. That's not up to me. I say, 'something in here has to go. Something has to be emphasized or de-emphasized or you're not going to get to your overall time and audience objectives,' but I'm not going to tell you. I'll say 'this appears to me to be stronger' or 'we have to talk about such and such.' And we will talk about it.

The committee as a whole approved the script and the search for artifacts and images followed. The production and design consultant described the process:

The story has got to be the most important thing. Once you've identified what's the story, then at that point... you look at the story and say "what DO we have?" Sometimes there are objects, but in this case there weren't any, maybe one or two. ... We always try to use as much authentic materials as possible, archival material, be it photographs or illustrations or paintings or etchings or whatever from the period itself. And in some cases we are able to do whole projects using just that. But in this case there was material that got them [fugitive slaves] up to the Canadian border but once they got across into ... [shrugs]. So we had to do a lot of re-enactment shooting. That's why we did that. We re-enacted the escape and all that.

As the historians had pointed out early in the process, there was virtually no primary research about Black history in Toronto, consequently they had to undertake detailed research at the same time the film and design process was underway. The historical team was responsible, for the most part, with finding all visual

material. Their findings often guided the script revisions and the film shoots. A fortunate discovery of a newspaper photo of the main character's home, for example, resulted in its use as a major set device. One of the historians describes how some of the research proceeded:

We divided the research into sections, and we wanted to look at political life, religious life, everyday life. So for example everyday life, ... you feature someone like Ann Marie Jackson who was a poor woman, who was a washerwoman, and so we chose the tools of her trade. What would she use as a washerwoman? She'd have a tub, she'd have a scrubbing board, she'd have those bars of soap...

Production design, the physical decisions about the sets, lighting, film and still sequences, sound and music was undertaken by the company with input from the committee at storyboard and off-line stages, and with ongoing input from the three historians, the project manager and Parks staff. Because of the nature of a multi-media production of this kind, the vision in the mind of the production manager cannot truly be visible until all elements are drawn together - on opening day. The OBHS member complained that the process was a bit rushed for her and that she felt she was making final changes to the content of the project at the last minute. Parks at this point was determined to "just get it done," by deadline. But, according to one committee member "there were no surprises," since consultation had continued along the way. What they had been shown was, by and large, what they got, and most were pleased with the result. One member, a historian who followed through to the end, commented,

It achieves probably 75% of what I would have liked to have seen and probably 75% of what everybody *else* would have liked to have seen. But we tried to make a compromise that was effective and I think we came up with a very effective presentation.

As a final move of affirmation of their position as producers and of their acceptance of the content of the exhibition, the committee and everyone who contributed to the planning and production were acknowledged in a special panel outside the theatre. This admission of authorship and dialogic process is an 'authentication' of the display, as well as, undoubtedly, a confirmation of the internal politics of the committee. Audiences can read that real people are addressing them, not a passive institutional voice nor an anonymous hired exhibit specialist nor an authoritative but isolated curator.

How well did the designers translate the will and desire of the committee into a "visual grammar" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996)? What motifs and techniques did they use to communicate ideas? The quality of the translation is the mark of a good designer. Visual design, especially of a three dimensional thing like an exhibit, is rarely analytical. It relies on creative sensibilities to pull it together with little clear awareness of exactly how the communication works (Julier, 2000). Design is about the relationships between objects, images, spaces, and, in this case, film, lights and music. It is a culturally specific practice. No matter how hard the committee and historians tried to get the content right, the form of the media with its inherent communicative effect, and the way in which ideas are creatively expressed, are a product of design. The committee watched the experiential theatre during the gala opening and over the next few months, and in generally, most felt that it communicated their wishes. But this is the point in the communication circuit where audiences come into play, where production meets consumption. Audiences, however, are not able to see the conditions of production, the history and negotiations behind the text. They can only judge the text itself, the exhibition or in this case the object theatre presentation. And this is the point at which we look at what is presented; this text from which audiences will make their own meanings.

"Reading" the Exhibit

My aim now is to offer an additional 'reading' of this exhibit using some of the strategies offered by Kress & van Leeuwen and Roland Barthes to give a more analytical description and critique of how it works as a communicative medium. This deconstruction will unravel the interactions between various elements of the object theatre, from verbal messages to visual images. It must also be understood that, as Barthes admits, "the number of readings of the same lexia...varies according to individuals (Barthes, 1991, pg. 35). That is, the analysis offered here is only an example of possible interpretations. But by applying these techniques to the UGRR exhibit we can gain some insight into how visual and experiential cues could offer a range of meanings, some unintended, that result from both the conditions of production and the material effects of the design.

Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) offer a framework for the analysis of visual images that looks for underlying relationships in its elements. Their framework looks at factors such as the generation of narrative meaning along directional vectors; taxonomic and analytic relationships; the interaction between the subject and the viewer; the modality or authority of the image; compositional factors such as location, weighting and framing, and rhythm or in the case of film, pacing. Barthes (1991) writes about the conscious and unconscious effects of visual images. His semiological methodology interprets levels of meaning in images, looking at the 'denoted' meanings - the informational story intended to be communicated - and the 'connoted' or inferred or the symbolic meanings intended by the producers. Both the denoted and connoted meanings imply that the audience possesses sufficient tools or the correct socialization or habitus to interpret those meanings. But Barthes also posits a third level of meaning, that of unintended signification or obtuse meaning, that "seems to extend beyond culture, knowledge and information (pg. 44)". It is this level of meaning that offers rich fodder for the interpretation of the experiential displays like the object theatre. The following analysis, then, focuses on the communicative impact of the UGRR exhibit on the experiential level, using ideas both from the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen and Barthes' levels of meaning.

Key to this analysis is the notion that meaning-making is an exchange or dynamic interaction between producer and viewer. The communicative properties of an image or object or sound or film clip can be interpreted differently by each. Obtuse signification, for instance, can lie either within the producer's unconscious use of visual and experiential cues, or the observer's culturally-induced reading of the cues. Treating museum displays as experiential discourse allows the analysis of the communicative meaning-making of presenter and viewer, and the relationships between them. Those doing the presenting embed a complexity of meaning in what is shown, and a complexity of meaning is read into the viewing depending on who is doing the seeing. But I argue that what is being presented drives the discourse more than the meaning-making desires of the viewer. In its position of authority, the museum or heritage site sets the agenda for the audiences to follow and focuses its attention on making sure the audience understands the

message. James Clifford (1997) for example, demonstrates how the very media and objects selected for use in museum representations are themselves communicating relations of power. He positions ethnographic display practices as the invention of culture, not the representation of it. Anthropologist Julie Marcus' (2000) race and gender study of Aboriginal exhibits at the Museum of Sydney also found that the visual strategies employed by museums were not free from unconscious racist messages. Despite attempts by that museum to deliberately tell a story that avoided dominant narratives, the underlying effect of the organization, selection of media, and visual framing of the display used by the museum curators had the opposite effect. Their use of specialist visual techniques served to direct and exclude meanings. She concluded that the choice, organization and design of exhibit media carry messages other than 'content'. In another similar Australian example, Hodge & D'Sousa's (1999) semiotic analysis of the Western Australian Museum Aboriginal Gallery also revealed many design assumptions in the exhibit's use of space, language, images and objects that ignored social, cultural and political contexts and could unconsciously communicate racist meanings. Ironically, even as the museums in these examples were trying to relinquish control over the 'content' of their exhibits, they remained firmly in control over HOW they expressed that content - their techniques of exhibitry. Thus visual and experiential cues conveyed unconscious meanings embedded in the design and the exhibit form.

Parks Canada and the consultative committee developing *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* tackled this power relationship by altering how they went about their business of exhibiting, while at the same time clearly wanting to control how the audiences read the exhibit. Their biggest step was transcending the reading of texts by using storytelling as their medium of communication in this object theatre. Kress points out that with the historical dominance of the literary in the West, our ideas are primarily mediated in a literary form. The traditional historiographic museum exhibit is a clear example of this. But different media have different areas of facility. Oral media such as storytelling, communicating through sound and vision, have affective, non-cognitive, emotional effects. As Dicks observed in the case of the Rhodda heritage site, by turning the message into a personal narrative, employing narrative film

techniques and using drama, an immersive environment and sensory control came to the fore. The encounter with history becomes more emotional and engaging than with traditional museum texts. The criticism levelled at this type of exhibitry is the "Disneyland" critique where history is simulated, a drama set on a stage with little relation to authentic events. Using this type of medium the audience derives an experience of excitement, drama and purpose which might not bear any relationship with the authentic, historic experience of 'real' slaves like Deborah Brown. On the other hand, the use of this type of medium does engage the viewer and may lead them to identify with the characters and themes, and to pique their interest for more information. So a narrative object theatre such as *The Underground Railroad, Next Stop Freedom*, does have a basic attribute which will influence the meaning-making strategies of its audience: non-cognitive, affective communication.

The producers were openly committed to using an affective approach. Their goal, as expressed in the exhibit's Interpretive Objectives (Canada, 2000) was to tell the 'real story' of the Black immigrant's experience in Canada (see Appendix A). These objectives included:

- counter myths regarding the UGRR;
- emphasize the contribution and participation of the Black community, women and people's individual power;
- enlighten the public on the importance of the social and historical impact the UGRR had on the psyche and development of Canada;
- sensitize the audience to the Black experience.

The 'denoted' or the first level, informational message of the presentation tells of enslaved African-Americans and their quest to live as free men and women in Canada, with a focus on those who settled in urban areas such as Toronto. When they made it to Canada, the narrative outlines and the title proclaims, they finally believed they had achieved freedom. But with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, every northern American was bound by law to return known slaves to their former masters. From that point the

Underground Railroad to Canada had many more passengers, for Blacks in Canada had been free as immigrants since 1793. The story is told by fugitive slave Deborah Brown who describes her escape, Toronto of the 1850s and 60s as she saw it, the story of the Underground Railroad refugees that settled in York Township, and the contribution they made to their new community. She also details the story of one man, John Anderson, who the local government almost sent back to the U.S. under the Act and subsequent abolitionist efforts to keep the man in Canada. The story ends with her comments on the U.S. Civil War and its effect on Black individuals and communities in Canada.

While the exhibit employs a strong story narrated by Brown and illustrated with film clips and artifacts to convey the denoted message, the producers also introduced symbolic meanings on the connotative level. These reflect Parks Canada's Interpretive Objectives to "sensitize" the audience to the Black experience and "enlighten" the public on the impact of the UGRR on the Canadian psyche. As we have seen, the symbolic positioning was a crucial point and subject to debate by the consultative committee. The intent of some members was not to frame Canada in a complimentary light, but to cast the accomplishments of Black immigrants in a positive manner-two very different positions. On an informational level, the written text for the show gives a factual, relatively real account of life for the ex-slaves and of those who succeeded in Toronto. But on the connotative level the focus is on Canadians welcoming poor immigrants to its shores. The use of a Black female narrator, Deborah Brown, whose costume and use of colloquial language symbolically evokes the reality of the refugees' life, but who was clearly well-settled in Canada, conveyed, symbolically, the right message for most of the committee. She would lend credibility and 'visual impact' to the text - the idea of actually seeing a Black woman in period dress would be strongly symbolic of the idea that Blacks even lived in Canada in that period. Two other symbolic connotations were used. The Underground Railroad is in itself a travel and journey metaphor, in a sense indicating a progress to new heights, new perspectives and new worlds. The travelers on the slave 'train' over the border were seeking a new, improved place in the world. A second metaphor symbolizes Canada, the destination of their journey: the North Star. The large visual title at the entrance to the exhibit uses the Little Dipper superimposed

behind a ragged cluster of escaping slaves- indeed, an early title for the exhibit was "Following the North Star". Deborah says in the opening sequence,

We stole away in the black of the moon. We didn't take nothin' just a hatchet and some bread in a sack. We walked 'til I about give out. When my legs couldn't go no more we laid by 'til starlight. We knew the North Star, how it would lead us out of slave country.

The Little Dipper/North Star is also described in African colloquial terms as the "Dipping Gourd". The sound track features a recurring song "Follow the Drinking Gourd" that will "carry us to freedom", linking the idea of hope and freedom in Canada. And as the final lines of the presentation echo, "free at last, free at last" one cannot help but read Canada the North Star in a benevolent light.

The casting of Canada as a symbolic site for refugee freedom, connoted by both the North Star metaphor, is directly linked to one of the Interpretive Objectives, to instil a "sense of personal connection to the stories of Black immigrants and refugees". The notion discussed in planning meetings was to go beyond the symbolism and make non-Black audiences "self-identify" with Brown's story, or to see themselves in her place by appealing to their own ancestry as immigrants or refugees. The committee felt that audiences would not connect with Brown's story in a real way, and with the reality of the Black ex-slave's life, unless they were able to personally identify with the immigrant story. Thus the underlying connotation of the storyline was seen as "refugees in Canada", a story that would be symbolic for all Canadians and convey the "Canadian psyche" aspect of the message. In fact, early drafts of the script included a whole segment at the end where faces of new Canadian immigrants would connect the dots between Brown and today's immigrant experience. This heavy-handed denotation was rejected for a connotative-level of message implied by the narrator, and by the design of a single panel outside the theatre with modern photos and texts about modern Canadian immigration.

While understanding the UGRR presentation on a denotative and connotative level assumes that we have arrived at the preferred reading of the production, it is the third level of meaning that involves an analysis of the unintentional visual impact of exhibit that shows how alternative readings might occur. It is here that we

look for things not said or items not intended or meanings formed in different ways, which reveal much about the final effects of the show on audiences. The denotations and symbolic connotations outlined above, for example, have their own unintended interpretations. The inherent historical baggage of the Underground Railroad metaphor, for instance, is the implied passiveness of the Black passengers, rather than assertive self-help. Canada the place of hope and freedom connoted by the North Star metaphor and freedom declaration can be seen by some as patronizing. One committee member confessed to being "embarrassed" by the "free at last" line, which places the words of Martin Luther King into the mouth of Deborah Brown:

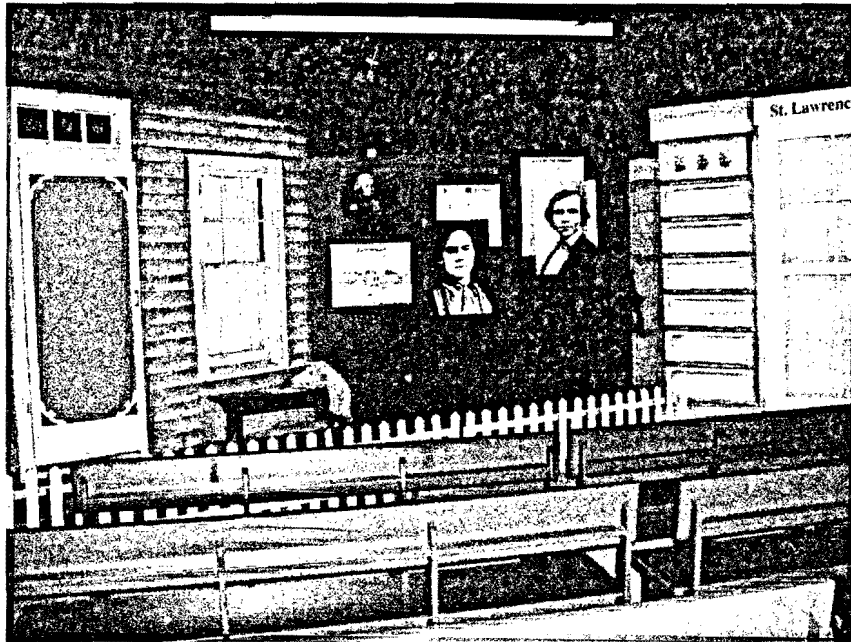
I know in the end it's a bit stereotypical, you know... the "free at last" - it's so embarrassing, but some people really like it... it's like "oh, come on!"

Following Kress & van Leeuwen, additional factors are used below to describe the exhibit presentation and to discuss some of its unconscious significations. These include:

- the *setting* of the display, including vectors and compositional factors like location, weighting and framing
- the characteristics and placement of the *objects* and other display elements;
- the *media* or technologies and their inherent effects;
- the still and moving *images* employed, and factors such as relationships, modality and rhythm;
- the *people* in the display and how they look, act and interact;
- the *positioning* of the audience in relation to the display and interaction of the subject and viewer.

Visual cues for any exhibition start before the visitor even arrives at the door. One could argue that the largest visual form at play is the architecture of the institution itself: that through its form, people begin to construct some idea of what that museum's message will be. The visual impact of the Royal Ontario Museum is sublime: an imposing, limestone structure with huge entrance doors and impressive lobby strike the first-time visitor with awe, wonder and intimidation-the sense of authority is clear. But then to reach the UGRR exhibit, the visitor must travel through galleries, hallways and escalator to the basement of the museum. The unstated message that was uncomfortably felt by the consultative committee when they were

shown this space was "stuck in the back of the bus again". From the beginning the siting reinforced their fears, the notion that this was not an important element of Canadian history. But at the same time, the audience could interpret this location in a way that brings them into the headspace of the Underground Railroad refugee-out of place, unfriendly, uncomfortable.



PIC 1. Stage setting and seating for The Underground Railroad Next Stop Freedom object theatre.

This contrasts profoundly with the atmosphere designers created for the exhibit itself. The UGRR presentation is shown continuously with a 5-minute break in between. Audiences enter the theatre and get a sense of what the show entails through its stage setting. The stage uses simple, pioneer furnishings and house fronts; muted natural colours and rustic materials; and soft light levels. A picket fence separates the audience from the stage. Folk music "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and African spirituals are sung in the background as viewers wait for the next show, and a single spotlight highlights a small cluster of artifacts. There is no visual clue as to what will happen next, since the props on stage do not clearly spell out the nature of the exhibit, but the setting is obviously theatrical, preparing the viewers for some style of theatre presentation. The setting for all filmed sequences also reflects the pastoral rural atmosphere: pioneer homes,

furnishings and costuming were used to set the stage in a very theatrical way. The effect of this atmosphere brings to mind a nostalgic pioneer village. It clearly avoids conveying harsh political realities that perhaps more urban and gritty settings would convey. The use of a rural setting rather than an urban one is curious, since the stated objective of the show was to draw audience attention to the urban Toronto story of the refugees. This idealized visual setting jibes with the story of hardship told by Deborah Brown on screen, and softens its impact. If the design of the stage had been a poor, city, St. Johns Ward street, more characteristic of the ex-slave experience, the story might have been set in a different, less positive light. It appears that the compromising of the so-called 'real' story of the Underground Railroad begins with its stage setting.

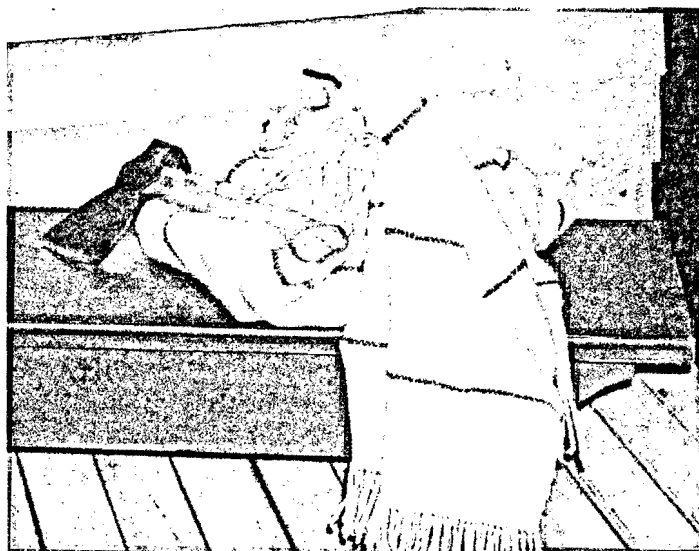
The choice and placement of each element on the stage demonstrates the significance of framing. The selection of items was made by the researchers and designers, but subject to circumstances of budget or happenstance - in this exhibit a 'shopping list' of preferred items was drawn up and researched but not always possible to acquire. The objects in the exhibit were seen as supporting the message, rather than a collection of important artifacts driving the message. The placement of all elements tells a visual story. The set is divided into three equally-weighted parts. Centre stage is dominated by a vintage printing press. Behind the press on the walls are a scattering of large portraits and archival documents. To the left is part of a clapboard house with bench with pioneer objects, window and a screen door opened to face the audience. On the right is the exterior of a prosperous public building with windows, in this case the St. Lawrence Hall. A film screen goes up and down when needed in the centre of the stage. The narrator appears framed by the screen door at left and another filmed speaker, African-Canadian abolitionist Henry Bibb, appears framed in a window of St. Lawrence Hall.

The printing press is prominent at centre stage as are the photos of two successful Black Toronto publishers behind. Governor John Graves Simcoe's portrait hangs on the wall along with key documents related to U.S. slave laws and a large bird's eye view of Toronto in the 1860's; and a cluster on everyday objects rests

on the bench. Significant in their absence are any objects related to enslavement - shackles, weapons, boxes used for human smuggling. These were discussed in the early stages but rejected, a source of contention among the consultative committee. There is no visible indication that the Underground Railroad or slavery is the subject of this show except for the name of the presentation. The objects and images clearly emphasize the positive viewpoint: the printing press and publishers' portraits show a pride in the intellectual and political efforts of the Black settlers in Toronto. The portrait of Simcoe and other graphics present a positive spin on Canada's liberal position on the slave laws and the UGRR. The cluster of settler items on the bench, outside of the quaint home and screen door, evokes a simple, pastoral existence. There are no material signs of the struggle for freedom, poverty or evidence of the difficulties of life Blacks faced when they arrived. The most prominent objects represent Toronto's Black publishing community, a brief activity in the mid 1860's, but give the impression of permanence by the objects' central position.



PIC. 2 Printing press and portraits of Henry Bibb and Mary Ann Shadd.



PIC. 3 Pioneer implements. The hatchet and blanket are essential parts of the narrative.

The theatre performance itself is like a sound and light show. 'Shock and awe' effects in a controlled environment are key. By dominating the senses, by showing objects life-size and in three dimensions, by immersion in an environment, audience attention is arrested. The audience is drawn into a sensation of reality through dialogue with an attentive narrator who seems to address them as individuals. Thus the medium lends itself to two major sensory impacts: an attention-grabbing enthrallment and an immersive conversation. The audience not only gives the presentation its undivided attention but leaves the theatre with a sense that this story was authentic. At the same time, the heightened dramatic effect impresses on the audience that the story of these individuals was exciting and extraordinary when perhaps in real life it may have been characterized by tedium and ordinariness.

Sound is an essential part of this experience that gives a cultural experience. There are two key aspects in this display, the music in the background and the voice of the narrator. The choice of music seems exceptional in this production, from incidental music to the use of the Nathaniel Dett Choral. The use of African voices lends a presumed authenticity to the production, especially the theme song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd." The voices are foregrounded to add atmosphere, emotion and depth to the narrative. The

choice of narrative voice is more problematic for several reasons. A voice-over explains the providence of the narrator's accent, that 1930s recordings of American ex-slaves were used to guide the actress. But without that explanation the accent seems contrived. The committee had argued over the accent, pointing out something else that a white viewer might not catch. Said one committee member,

I didn't like Deborah Brown's voice.... It's a moot point because it's out there, but the person happens to be of Caribbean ancestry and I notice it and it takes away - I know it's virtual, it's not real anyway - but it does take away because I'm hearing this and I'm hearing.... it's just not the right voice. I know what people sound like. I know what some of my older relatives sound like, they don't sound like her... A Jamaican would just cringe. It's like listening to people who speak bad French when you know what good French is supposed to sound like. You just know.

Sound in the case of music or accent does have an impact on the viewer that might not have been considered by the designers. Certainly, the reaction of Caribbeans was not anticipated and is one area of consultation that was missed. The possibility that the use of an authentic accent might imbue a sense of inauthenticity, as was this viewer's reaction, is another unconscious element of communication that must be anticipated in the design of experiential media.

When the show begins, an interplay of spotlighting highlights various parts of the stage and creates forceful directional vectors. The eye is drawn from left to centre as the narrator's comments and actions at left are reinforced by film or stills or highlighted objects, documents and portraits at centre stage, a vector typical of Western reading. The movement of the eye also keeps the viewer's attention engaged. The right side of the stage is rarely used, and when it is, the viewer is somewhat startled. This gives extra dramatic impact to the character who appears and speaks about abolition.

But the action on the central screen, which goes up and down when needed, carries the most obvious visual impact. Interspersed use of film and still images changes the tempo and rhythm of the production, visibly slowing down with the use of archival illustrations. Viewer engagement starts up again when presented with the filmed re-enactments of fugitive slaves and people settling in Toronto. The use of slow pans across the stills assists in keeping audience attention, and has the additional effect of directing the eye. But the use of

panned still images detrimentally affects the impact of the slavery-related shots - the style of pan consistently misconstrues the meaning and impact of many of the stills. For example, a 18th century etching meant to illustrate the lives of people in Africa before slavery lingers on two white colonizers before panning to an African king. In another, a shot panned from the feet of a slave up his body to his neck with a spiked, iron collar, does not rest on the head long enough for one to grasp what it is. A shot of a woman being beaten rests too long on her face without conveying the fact that she is being beaten. So the result is a tempering of the slavery story in the early part of the presentation.

Filmed live-action re-enactments that have no dialogue are introduced throughout the presentation. The first segment shows the escape of Deborah Brown and her husband Perry from the U.S. The narration is particularly strong, incorporating an historical account of an escape to Canada. The sequence does succeed in drawing the viewer into the film, but don't convey the difficulties expressed by the words and dramatic music. The actors are clean and strong, and again a sense of pastoral, "pioneer village" innocence comes through. Subsequent filmed segments retain the pioneer village sensibility. But the cinematic effect draws the viewer in - the 'experience' of a mimetic environment, presented as theatre, says 'performance'. When we see a performance we recognize it as 'not real'. But despite its clean, staged attributes, the viewer seems to accept the film clips in an affective way and is drawn into the story. We enter into that unreal world and seem willing to believe in it; we become enthralled. And part of what we are willing to accept is the simplicity of life of the Everyman, and their apparent success in Canada. Deborah and her husband seem to bear no scars of their escape, and do not seem to suffer from the grinding, tedious and prejudiced world that early Toronto would have been. While we see no evidence of life as 'fun' or even as 'social', we certainly get the sense in the filmed re-enactments that Blacks were economically successful. Much of the imagery of Blacks in Toronto is about the successful people. Instead of evidence of the difficulties of life Blacks faced in Toronto we see objects and images of 'successful' blacks which carry an unconscious indication of values - that true status means succeeding and being recognized and rewarded in white society. Is this, then, the 'real' story of the Everyman, or the story of the few who achieved middle class material success?

The viewer's relationship with the narrator Deborah Brown is pivotal - how we respond to her determines how we make meaning of the show. Her style of address disrupts any complacent spectatorship by visitors - she insistently returns their gaze and demands their interaction. Deborah is positioned as an old Black woman, intended to connote sympathetic refugee female. She is depicted in a manner that was non-threatening to white women and non-sexual to men. Viewers place themselves beside her, on the front porch and through that 'physical' experience of this non-threatening woman, unconsciously position her in a more personal and familiar way - in terms of subject position, more of a grandmother. One is touched by her first-person narrative and is willing to accept Deborah as teller of authentic stories. But the cosy, well-dressed pioneer image of Deborah Brown contradicts some of the words she speaks - that visually, the reality of extreme hardship on the Underground Railroad and in Toronto simply does not come across. If one takes a closer look at her, one might discern a more troubling identity-that of a kindly WHITE pioneer grandmother. Rather than depicting Black refugees as having a different culture, are they instead displayed as white people with black skins and a strange accent?

It seems this exhibit has the effect of creating myth through its visual communication. A new mythology of the noble Black settler might be said to have replaced the old stereotypes. The overall experiential effect of this exhibit seems to counteract some of the intentions of its producers. The end result strongly communicated by this experience is that Blacks did well in Toronto. My reading suggests that this is a performance of 'safe' Black culture that minimizes or places in the distant past negative political overtones, but at the same time by using a narrative theatre-style that immerses the audience we convince them that this story is authoritative. Whether audiences share this interpretation will be seen in the next part of the paper.

C. Conditions of Reception

Richard Johnson points out that the reception of symbolic forms - including media products - always

involves a contextualized and creative process of interpretation in which individuals draw on the resources available to them in order to make sense of the messages they receive (Johnson, 1987). How audiences negotiate meanings out of media offerings is the field of reception analysts (Ang 1995; Morley, 1992). According to Ang, "audiences are seen as 'producers' of meaning not just consumers of media content: they 'decode' or 'interpret' media texts in ways that are related to their social and cultural circumstances and to the way in which they subjectively experience those circumstances (160)." Hall refers to this procedure as the 'decoding' of texts. In Johnson's model, the reading of the texts is a separate moment in the communication circuit subject to specific conditions that range from the concrete or particular to the abstract or universal, including lived cultures and social relations.

Viewing a museum display is a process of reception made complex by two specific conditions, the intricacies of the medium itself (particularly a multi-media approach such as an object theatre) and the diversity of motives and interpretations audience members bring to the experience. While we have discussed the production history and communicative characteristics of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom*, we now turn our attention to the nature of the people experiencing the exhibit.

People visit heritage institutions for myriad reasons, and once they get there, apply their own particular cognitive and affective skills towards their experience of it. The preceding reading of this exhibit is that of one idealized audience member, or be precise, my reading. My intention in looking at this exhibit was to critique it. Most viewers do not have this inspiration when they encounter a museum presentation, but instead have their own range of motivations. They might arrive to be educated or to be entertained, to have a social experience with family or guests or to demonstrate their pride of place or culture or status. Or they might be there for all of the above or none of the above. They might come specifically to see this particular exhibition, or might show up by pure chance. The audience is never an undifferentiated mass because there are so many reasons for them to be there in the first place. Dicks (2003) argues that most cultural displays are underpinned by the logic of the consumerist world: visitors to heritage institutions are active consumers,

not passive receivers. They busily construct for themselves what they want to get out of a presentation. She also points out that as visitors to heritage sites are becoming more active, more like shoppers; the institutions themselves try to respond to all possible motivations using varied interactive and immersive techniques to attract and communicate with consumers. Once they arrive, for whatever motive, every aspect of a museum visit can influence how they experience the visit, and derive meaning from it - museum architecture, its surroundings, parking problems, admission fees, visitors' physical comfort, ease of wayfinding, the nature and style of signage all influence visitors' interpretations. And, each visitor will negotiate all parts of the museum or its exhibits in an independent manner. John Urry points out that visitors "connect together exhibits not intended to be linked, they read exhibits as prescriptive when they are not intended to be, and they mostly do not describe the exhibition in ways that the designers had intended (Urry 1996:54)." Visitors might loiter at one location for a great deal of time, then pass by other displays to go to the next room. A visitor, depending on his social and individual character, will give different signifying weight to images and texts. Not only do visitors arrive with varied expectations and motivations, each audience member brings their own personal baggage, whether cultural or social or educational, and processes their experience of an exhibit from that perspective. Their particular cultural assumptions, level of previous knowledge, attitudes, values, and personal agenda for a visit all act to shape their interpretation. In this way, the visitor actively participates in the production of meaning.

The function of museums as an instrument of education has been recognized since the 19th century (Bennett, 1995; Hudson, 1975). How museums act as informal learning environments has been the focus of much research in recent years. Research into museum learning has focused on 'meaning making' and in particular, constructivist approaches to learning where visitors actively participate in the production of meaning (see Hein, 1998, 1999; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Silverman, 1995). The contemporary view of learning is that people construct new knowledge and understandings based on what they already know and believe. In museums, visitors don't necessarily comprehend what is intended by an exhibit or program, nor do they necessarily learn in a sequence predetermined by the structure of the subject or the way the exhibit

developers present the material. The visitors make meaning based on the new experience and how it fits into what they already have in their minds. Constructivism recognizes the importance of individual meaning making and makes it a central aspect of museum practice (Hein, 1999). Museum evaluation tries to find out what visitors bring with them, discover the meanings they make of exhibits, and alter content and design based on visitor reactions (Lockett, 1991). In a way, one can look at the effort by Parks Canada to include a consultative committee in the UGRR exhibit development as a form of audience evaluation where African-Canadian community members voiced their opinions on the exhibit's meaning before it was installed.

Hooper-Greenhill (1999: 13-14) also points out that not only does an individual bring to an exhibit their personal experience, they might share cultural understandings with others in their "interpretive communities" or ethnic or identity group. Each community shares "systems of intelligibility" that constrain and shape them using their own specialist knowledge, their modes of classification, or familiar concepts to render what they see intelligible to themselves. Display techniques using collections and traditional text and glass case displays, for example, may be incomprehensible to some individuals or groups who do not share 'museum literacy' skills possessed by Western elites. On the other hand, exhibit techniques such as the object theatre might make the meaning more readily intelligible to a greater number of people through the use of an emotional, narrative form. Dicks' study of the Rhodda Heritage Park demonstrates the producers' intentions in the employment of the medium, and discusses in detail the effects of the techniques in evoking responses. But she is careful to draw attention to the audience's control over the making of meaning according to their own terms; that while the medium elicits predictable immediate responses in the viewers, how they 'decode' the message or what they go home with or the remembrances they create in their minds are subject to their own personal and group idiosyncrasies (Dicks, 2000: 215).

So what were audiences looking for when they attended *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom*? And how did they "make meaning" of this presentation? The discussion below addresses the nature of audiences in both locations, the ROM and Black Creek, visitors' questionnaire responses, and observations

about how some audience members made meaning of the show. From the beginning Parks Canada had in mind specific target audiences for this museum display. Their perceptions of the characteristics and needs of these visitors coloured their siting, planning and design of the presentation. The Interpretation Plan itemized the intended audience members as:

- a) Educational - school groups, teachers and librarians, but especially Grade 7 because the Underground Railroad is on the curriculum for that grade.
- b) Special Interest Tours - especially Black History tours because of their level of interest.
- c) "Self-Identifiers" - this general audience can be anyone who feels some aspect of the story relates to their heritage or personal experience. (Canada, 2000)

The consultative committee and the design/production team, for their part, visualized an even more idealized public for this presentation, and when questioned, had difficulty articulating their idea of who they were addressing through this exhibit. "General public" and "school children" were named by several as their audience. Their responses seem to demonstrate a vision of audience as mass. They were presenting a message, but seemed less conscious that different individuals might perceive it in different ways.

It is possible to surmise that Parks' three audiences, since they are diverse in character, would read the texts in their own unique way. The "Educational" groups arrive at an exhibit prepared by their teachers with knowledge of context and a set of questions to answer. They might find the UGRR show - at 25 minutes - a bit long to sit through (although they would be confined to stay there for the duration), but the multi-media technique is stimulating with a clear story and easy to follow. For logistical reasons, the effects of the show on school children could not be pursued in this study. Neither exhibit locations kept statistics on school visits, although a staff member in the ROM Education Department indicated the exhibit's development sparked the creation of a grade 7 lab and lesson on the UGRR to compliment the Ontario curriculum. The object theatre was not used formally in these Black History Month programs, although groups attending that school program were encouraged to observe the theatre component on their own. The staff member indicated that "the theatre component was too long for school groups," and opined, "I thought it was amazing the ROM did the program it did." "Special Interest Tours", the second target audience, are beloved

by most heritage site staff - this audience usually has a familiarity with the subject matter, they come armed with expectations and stay, asking questions, the longest. Parks specifically wanted to include in this group those Americans on Black History bus tours. These viewers would most likely strongly identify with the people depicted in the story, having personal experience with some of the attitudes depicted in the presentation. Again, no formal statistical information was kept on whether the bus tours found their way into the ROM or Black Creek, and no bus tourists were observed during the periods of on-site research. The third audience, "Self-Identifiers", are the most difficult of audiences to consider, since the exhibit producers already defined that these are people who feel a sense of community or shared personal experience with the UGRR refugees. In effect, by so closely defining this group, Parks removed from its audience anyone who might view Deborah Brown and her community as 'the other'. Perhaps they had hoped that the effect of viewing the presentation might turn some of the average museum-goers into self-identifiers. In reality, the object theatre was visited, for the most part, by people who did not fit into any of Parks' target categories, according to informal discussions with staff at their sites, and observations made during site visits. Their reasons for being there did not include school tours or bus tours, and only a few came to revisit a personal heritage experience. The nature of the visitors who do attend, and who were studied during this research, are detailed below.

The investigations of audience reaction to the exhibit were conducted in February and March of 2003 at the Royal Ontario Museum, and August 2004 and June 2005 at Black Creek Pioneer Village. Participant observation, questionnaire, and informal conversation were used to gauge reactions to the presentation at both sites. Visitors could enter and leave the theatre from one entry area at which the research instruments were used. The ages of the audiences in both locations ranged from infant to the elderly. At the ROM, 345 visitors were observed to enter the theatre and stay for a significant amount of time (more than 5 minutes) over the course of 16 hours in a 5-day period. At Black Creek Pioneer Village, 254 visitors were observed to enter for a significant amount of time over a 5-day, 12.5-hour period of time. A total of 35 surveys were collected at the ROM and 37 at Black Creek. Because interviews were not used in this study, it is

impossible to infer why all visitors came and what they got out of it. The research relies on informal and subjective observation of visitors and on cryptic responses in the questionnaire. This study also only includes those willing to fill out the survey, or stop and chat. (Note that visitors inevitably wanted to speak to the researcher. When they are on holiday, tourists seemed especially keen to talk to the researcher as a 'local'. Some comments below reflect these very informal and subjective conversations.)

An important first observation, which applies to both locations of the presentation, is that most arrived by chance and few with the intention of seeing this exhibit. Note that this contrasts with the Dicks study where almost all visitors arrived with an expectation of what they would see. Because the UGRR exhibition was a temporary installation, visitors were expecting a ROM or Black Creek heritage experience, but not specifically an encounter with Black history OR with an object theatre. Of the 68 who responded to the question, only eight indicated they came intentionally to see this presentation, all of these at the ROM. Three said they came knowing about the show from friends or family and two had seen a CityTV feature about the exhibit. All of the visitors to Black Creek were there to enjoy the collection of heritage buildings and were surprised to see a multimedia presentation on African-Canadian history.

Informal observations of visitors at both sites revealed basic information about the character and habits of viewers (see Appendix D). Two related observations stand out from the participant observation part of the study in both locations. First, audiences, regardless of age, stayed in the theatre for a significant amount of time, in many cases (about 80%) right through to the end of the show. Second, reactions of many audience members in the theatre can only be described as 'absorbed', even the young children. Audience members chose to sit down and make a significant investment of time when they could have easily stood at the side and not committed themselves. One can compare these observations with the visiting habits casually observed at the ROM's 'Canadiana' didactic exhibit next door to the object theatre (and from previous experience) - there many visitors used a hunt-and-peck method that amounted to less than 30 seconds at each exhibit area.

Observed visitors who stayed more than 5 minutes were roughly listed in three groups, White, Black and Asian (anyone not obviously Black or Asian was classified as White). The majority of observed visitors were White (80% at ROM, 68.5% at Black Creek). Black visitors made up a similar proportion at each location (ROM 11.5%, Black Creek 10.5%). The rest were classified as Asian (ROM 8.5%, Black Creek 16.5%). The visitation pattern of Asian visitors was interesting. At the ROM, a large number of unrecorded museum-goers were perceived to be of Asian ethnicity, but many peered into the theatre and did not stay. At Black Creek, all Asian visitors who arrived while the researcher was there came as members of organized groups. The attendance by one Asian ESL class might account for the difference in the percentage of Asian visitors at Black Creek. Informal observations also categorized visitors in age groups with similar patterns at both locations: approximately 11% seniors, 26% under 25 and 63% somewhere in between. Young couples in their twenties were more frequently seen at the ROM. Black visitors here were predominantly woman, sometimes attending on their own. Black Creek had more groups of families with out-of-town relatives (for all ethnicities), which was not unexpected in the tourist season.

Tabulated results of the 72 questionnaires received are presented in Appendix D. The following is an annotated summary of that data, beginning with demographic information. Of the individuals who filled out the questionnaire, 62% indicated female, 38% male. Four age categories were offered: 0-18 (10%), 19-30 (16%), 31-50 (22%) and 50+ (16%). The only discrepancy between the ROM and Black Creek sites in the age category was a higher number of people in the 19-30 group at the ROM and more seniors answering at Black Creek. The majority of respondents were from the Greater Toronto Area. Sixty per cent of respondents indicated some variation of "white" for cultural group, while 36% said they had African Canadian, African American or Caribbean roots. The high number of Black respondents in the survey is worth noting, perhaps indicating a higher emotional investment in the show. Sixty-seven per cent indicated university or college-level education. Teachers and students led the list of occupations, while other primary employment included nursing, managerial, professional and retired.

While the overwhelming majority filling out questionnaires indicated that they "Enjoyed it very much" or "Enjoyed it", only three expressed neutral on the subject of enjoyment and no one indicated that they disliked the presentation. Of these three neutrals, one was a teenager remarking her boredom with the show's media, and two were from white, female seniors. One expressed disappointment that the show was "somewhat laundered" and the other that there was not 'more' to the exhibit. Respondents described what they thought was the underlying message of the presentation in three basic ways. They gave a statement of what they saw as the basic facts of the historical events, they talked about the narrative of Deborah Brown's story, or they offered a more philosophical or political summary. Those who took the philosophical or political perspective cited the injustice of slavery, that all people are created equally, and that people should be free. The historians in the audience noted the UGRR story in Canada, or the Toronto perspective on that story. Six people mentioned the political or legal aspects of slavery such as the Abolition movement. Several respondents specifically noted the little-known story of American slave catchers coming over the border to snatch fugitives in Canada. This idea of Americans imposing their laws on Canada seemed to rouse either fear and nationalism in some informants and was the number one historical fact singled out by Black informants as important information. A retired Black woman, accompanying Asian ESL students, had three informed notes about what points stood out in her mind "That couples escaped together, that there was such a thing as slave catchers, and that the British government intervened to stop the return of fugitive slaves." Another Black American woman expressed surprise that slave catchers came across the border. One 11-year -old black boy disliked that fact "that the slave catchers wanted to use the colour people as they were nothing."

Many, none of them Black, wrote in their surveys about their pride in Canada, even listing this as the underlying thrust of the presentation. One middle-aged white couple felt the story was about "How Canada played a huge role in freedom of slaves. Canada's humanitarian influence." Another older woman from Toronto but with an Egyptian background addressed her pride in Canada perspective. The underlying

message for her was "How Canada used to be a refuge for slaves" and "The kindness and human touch of Canadian government." She also commented "It made me proud to be Canadian." A young high school female added "The freedom of slaves and Canadian pride about being diverse" as the basic message of the show.

Those who singled out the narrative story took a personal perspective on the underlying message. The story of people fighting for freedom, and of one woman's personal story of that fight was overwhelmingly listed as the main message. Respondents cited "people struggling to make do/live/survive" as the thrust of the story. The personal story of Deborah Brown had profound impact on many. A young black girl, a teenager from the U.S. wrote: "I think the underlying message of this presentation was having hope and being strong in order to achieve your dreams." She was impressed by the way the fugitives "kept their hopes up" and that there was a happy ending. Two other young girls, one visiting from Jamaica and another a 10-year-old black girl from British Columbia, also reflected personally on the subject matter. The first wrote that the show was about "How we are lucky not to be slaves." Said the second girl, "If no civil war happened, I would be a slave."

When asked why they liked the theatre presentation, respondents offered a range of perspectives with their answers. "Learning new things" was one predominant motivation. But the multimedia approach with its changing focus and visuals, and the engaging, personal narrator were the most popular responses. A middle-aged white female liked "the fact that you felt a part of the film, not talked at." A retired Dutch visitor echoed, "It made real the stories we've been told." A middle-aged African American woman summed up both: "An interesting format - I love the format following an actual account." Pride in Canada was a response of several white people, like the older man from Toronto who indicated that his ancestors had long been in Canada and wrote, "Made me proud of [my] Canadian heritage."

The questionnaire included a separate question asking visitors to specifically state what they liked and

disliked about the show. The answers for "likes" mirrored the comments above, stressing the interactive media and the personal experience of history embodied by Deborah Brown. Additional points raised included their pleasure with the Canadian side of the story and, in particular, the local, Toronto details. Several expressed interest in the historical photos of African-Canadian immigrants and the Black music from the period. Some noted their disappointments, usually about the need for more details or wider information. A few expressed the desire for a less positive story, saying that the show "perpetuated inaccuracies" or "laundered" the story. Curiously, only one Black respondent protested the upbeat storyline. One Black father whose family had "come up through the Underground Railroad to Nova Scotia," said "I think most people have an idea generally of the bad, and it's the good that people tend to forget." Another old Trinidad-Canadian, in an informal conversation, strongly identified with the immigrants whose hard work helped them succeed, like he did himself. He rejected the idea of oppression and was not offended that Canada was cast in a good light because he had succeeded here. The voices protesting the tone were predominantly young white people of both genders in their twenties. Said one, "Rose-coloured glasses! Only briefly glossed over racism in Canada. Presented Civil War as a slavery issue!" An ECE grad who seemed very familiar with the story wrote, "Should have talked about the struggles in Canada. Not everything was easy for them - they were still seen as non-people, and the racism & hardships in finding jobs and settling in predominantly white towns... such as Owen Sound." (Note the use of the word 'they'.) Another woman in her twenties offered, "I thought it perpetuated inaccuracies - Lincoln as having been an upstanding abolitionist, the Civil War as having been fought for a noble cause (abolition rather than the capitalist struggle and resource squabbling); the glorification of blacks in the military. Relevant contemporary stats on how blacks are faring today would have given some (less rosy) perspective." Interestingly, one white senior wrote that she thought the story was a *white* point of view. The only other negative point that was expressed in the surveys related to the production values of the object theatre, in particular the quality of the actors. Again, this was a criticism of younger members of the audience who might be inclined to judge the show from a media-savvy point of view. For example, a twenty-something TV producer commented, "the acting was sub-par; the whole 'multi media' aspect was low tech enough to

be unnecessary - just make a film." A white teenaged girl commented she didn't like "the lady in the side door, actually the acting in general was horrible!"

The visitors were asked to respond to a series of scaled questions where they rated the questions from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The answers indicated that:

- Viewers of all ethnicities either Strongly Agreed or Agreed that they learned something new.
- They agreed that the exhibit made them think about the UGRR in a different way. Black audience members were slightly skewed towards a Neutral response, presumably because they were more familiar with the UGRR story.
- Audiences Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed that the information in this presentation was exaggerated or not authentic. All Black respondents except one bored teenager responded very strongly to this question.
- Those who answered were predominantly neutral when asked if they could identify with some of the stories Deborah Brown told (although ROM respondents and Blacks were more likely to claim that they identified.) Several respondents left this question blank.
- All viewers' reactions were evenly spread when asked if the immigration story here is similar to their own or their ancestors. ROM respondents were more likely to disagree with the statement. Caribbean Blacks also tended to indicate that this was not similar to their immigration story.
- Visitors overwhelmingly agreed that the multi-media technique was the best way of telling the story, and disagreed that the object theatre was too exciting or dramatic. Black audience members were more likely to Strongly Disagree that the show was too dramatic.

Summary

The overwhelming response to this object theatre presentation was positive. Viewers engaged with the apparently real, personal experiences of the narrator, and enjoyed the multimedia technique of presentation. They felt they learned something new, and were pleased that the Canadian story was told. The most commonly word used to describe the show was "relevant." The authenticity of the story was strongly supported, especially by Black visitors. Important to this authenticity is that this was a local story of a real woman. "It happened right here," wrote one woman.

The committee's decision to support the object theatre approach lead not only to the attraction and retention of audiences, but the invocation of strong affective and cognitive responses in the viewers. In other words, not only did visitors stay in the theatre they came out feeling strongly about the message. Survey responses indicate that audiences emerged with strong opinions on some of the issues that were negotiated by the committee - the media, the first-person storytelling, the celebratory tone, Black agency and some of the denoted and connoted messages that the committee wished to convey. Less clear are the effects of the presentation on the committee's desire to dispel myths and to encourage the public to identify with the story and emerge with a more inclusive vision of Canadian history. This is partially due to the fact that survey methodology cannot draw out the kind of interpretive responses that detailed interviews would elicit. Further research by means of audience interviews would have improved the results and are recommended in future.

Certain characteristics of the object theatre contributed to the observed reactions of the audience members who responded to the UGRR research questions. A key cinematic effect was the heightened feeling of empathy that many respondents felt - a personal connectedness with the central character that occurred across ethnicities but seemed mostly present in female audience members. Whereas more traditional exhibit forms insert a layer of mediation between the raw material and the visitor's experience, in film the watcher is draw directly into the material and seems willing to suspend disbelief accordingly. As discussed

previously, the mixed-media, theatrical, intimate format of the UGRR exhibit might break down some of the distancing by the viewer by the way it encompasses the audience in an intimate setting. It also removes the objectification produced by writing it down, and makes it oral and personal. At the UGRR presentation, the room is darkened, the vision is directed and controlled, the narrator seems to speak to you directly, and each person absorbs the story individually by sight and sound. Oral traditions require that information be easily communicated through engaging narratives with stock phrases and memorable passages of wisdom. All senses are richly implicated, and memory and group identity are the most important determinants of oral medium effects (Ellis, 1999). Here, visitors expressed an emotional connection with the message that undoubtedly would not have had such a dramatic impact had a less cinematic technique been used to tell the story. And, its use of a single, credible, local voice to represent someone who lived the story gives it credibility with the audience.

But some in the audience questioned 'where is the content'? Visitors were divided, many appreciating the humanist approach, but just as many looking for more critical content and more historical detail, reflecting the conflict which originally divided the consultative committee. Expectations on the part of some audience members also came into play, one commenting that the object theatre was nice, but where was the 'real' exhibit? One Black respondent even intimated that the object theatre approach instead of a traditional exhibition communicated the unspoken message that the Underground Railroad story (and by inference the Black history story) was unworthy of formal, textual museum exhibit treatment. But few others shared this view.

The central character of Deborah Brown and the actress who portrayed her sparked a great deal of interest. It was her first-person narrative and her real-person character that seemed to touch many of the audience members, yet infuriated others who observed, "told through a real-life character - Deborah Brown - who has been re-invented, fictionalized and caricatured." The actress and her accent generated several comments, a few writing that the weakness of the actress and the strange nature of her accent detracted from the

presentation. Yet others commented appreciatively on her accent - one Caribbean man saying, "Deborah Brown was great. I think it captured the American accent. The way she would say "hmmm!" it's so typical! It's the black people's way, in the old times." A middle-aged white nurse with a Trinidadian husband wrote, "I liked the narrator. She stated the facts but showed she was above it without bitterness. She was full of grace." One teacher pointed out how the personal narrative humanized the story and told it from a survivor's point of view, and she especially liked that it told a woman's story. Another commented, "If you didn't have the drama you would feel you were being lectured at. The personal story certainly makes it easier to keep your attention." This affective first-person approach is sometimes criticized in the literature as promoting a synchronous, populist past to nostalgic audiences (Hodgins, 2004). But there was no nostalgia in people's reactions. The fond comment on the narrator's accent was the only one that even remotely sounded nostalgic. This was not the 'good old days' for either whites or Blacks in the audience. Deborah made you feel comfortable, but she did not invite pity. Some were so drawn into her story that they expressed a desire to 'know what happened to her'. Wrote one African-American, curious about her biography, "The thing I was looking for was I would like to have seen where her family lived - continued to grow. Maybe some people left Canada."

The personal style and address used by the narrator emphasized the positive tone of the presentation, raising the issue of whether or not the presentation was exaggerated or unduly celebratory. Some respondents felt that they perceived the tone to be too optimistic or one-sided, or in the words of an Ethiopian woman it did not show the "unpleasant side". She related she had been in Canada for 10 years and had hardships, implying that she related to the story from that point of view. Yet others strongly felt the opposite, with one young Black woman writing "the optimism was appropriate because the Underground Railroad was a positive light in horrible dark circumstances." An interesting comment made by a young couple with Caribbean roots indicated that they were slightly concerned that the presentation, which they also perceived as too optimistic in tone and style, would be 'authenticated' by its very presence in a museum. The great majority of respondents felt the story was a "fair acknowledgement of persons and events shown" rather

than "an unreal or exaggerated account of the events that happened," or even "a somewhat optimistic view of persons and events shown."

Audiences emerged from the theatre stirred up by the "struggle for freedom." Respondents repeated the word "freedom" throughout the questionnaire. The agency of the individual Black person seemed to be recognized. Audiences don't see Deborah Brown talking to white officials, but to other Blacks. As the young Black boy said, he liked "that the slaves worked together as a team." The John Anderson case and the possibility that Americans could cross into Canada to take back escaped slaves raised more commentary than the upbeat story of Blacks succeeding economically in Toronto. This is an example that clearly shows different readings of the same subject. Blacks specifically mentioned this idea of slave catchers as horrific and two young girls framed it from the point of view that THEY could be slaves. Several white people, on the other hand, expressed pride in Canada since Anderson was spared from returning to the U.S. The story of prosperous Blacks did not seem to come across as vividly (demonstrating how my reading in section B was also culturally contingent).

Because of the production history of this exhibit, we can accept that there is no single 'preferred reading' that reflects a hegemonic worldview, and which is passed directly from text to reader. What we want to understand is how the life of UGRR refugees are imagined by visitors - whether they are seen as temporally, spatially and socially removed from the lives and concerns of visitors in 2005, or whether, conversely, visitors find ways into the story which produce historical understanding and insight. A visitor's understanding of the story can be 'the runaway slave' as an image embedded in the past and distanced as 'the other' with no connection to the present, or they can look at the presentation as a people whose lives and concerns they can understand and identify with. Museums promote this disconnect between the object being viewed and the viewer in many of their exhibitions (Dicks 2000). Dicks theorizes that heritage display is interpreted in gradations of otherness located between biography and culture. At the biography extreme, displays are seen as personal memories of the adult self. At the other extreme, heritage display is seen as a

history of other cultures. She generalizes different forms of reading related to this concept of self/other which depend on the social relations/lived culture of the readers. She proposes three categories of reading, the alien framing, the parallel framing and the ambivalent one. (Dicks 2000) If these are applied to the UGRR presentation, in the first, visitors hear only the discourse that turns the story into that of 'other'. In the second, they enter Deborah Brown's story and community and view it as 'self', something Parks Canada was hoping would happen. In the third viewers remain 'on the fence' not feeling strongly either way. One survey question attempted to glean which point of view was adopted by the audience. The survey question asked,

Would you say this presentation made you think of:

- A film or TV show I have seen before
- Histories I have studied of other people/cultures
- Histories of lives of ancestors
- Memories of stories my relatives told

This question was designed to try to identify in a direct way where the individual fell on the scale between self (biography or memory) and other (history). Nineteen of those who answered indicated the last two categories. Of these all were of African ancestry except for three people. One was a teenaged, male, Asian student also identified strongly, indicating both 'histories studied' and 'histories of ancestors'. He commented "everyone should be free and have the right to do things," and "it was filled with passion and history (I love history)." It appears from this question that visitors took these positions depending on their cultural knowledge, most specifically, whether the viewer was Black or not. Parks and the committee did not articulate that the Black viewers might read the exhibit differently than white viewers. Yet the real audience divisions in terms of comprehension or reading seemed to be racial. Despite the best efforts of the consultative committee, many of the white audience members maintained an alien framing in one of two ways. The older white viewers expressed a liberal view of how nice it was that Canada helped the slaves, and younger white viewers voiced moral outrage that the show's positive perspective ignoring the struggles of Blacks. Neither group gave the impression from the survey or informal conversations that they identified

with the stories or embraced Deborah's experience as similar to their own. Black visitors, however, assumed a more parallel framing. Most Blacks seemed to appreciate and approve of the depiction of Deborah, using words like 'poignant' and 'captivating'. A few white respondents also seemed to adopt a parallel framing, achieving a level of self-identification. A retired nurse from Hamilton took her comment that "all should be treated equally" very personally. She verbally told about growing up in poor row housing and remembering "grandmother Washington" a Black woman in north Hamilton. "This doesn't just apply to blacks," she said. She was well meaning and proud about Blacks, and her own family, doing well. But the majority of respondents seemed ambivalent in their response, neither distancing nor identifying with the story.

One further cultural difference might also be discerned from the survey (although there were not enough responses to positively identify a trend), and that is an age difference. Some visitors in the 0-18 age group were swept up and even disturbed by the emotional content of the theatre. All of the respondents who selected "sad" to describe the show were children. One very interested 11-year-old Black boy, visiting with his very disinterested mother, watched the presentation one and a half times, and laboured long over his questionnaire. He obviously strongly reacted to the subject matter, even commenting that the media technique made the story too emotional for him and he found it both sad and optimistic. Respondents who were in their twenties, however, were most inclined to react in a strong political way to the story, to be cynical about the narrator and the multimedia technique, and to condemn perceived biases in the show. Seniors, on the other hand, were the audience members most likely to voice pride in Canada and approval of Canadian anti-slavery policies, and to miss entirely the points in the film where Canada was implicated in racist actions. These responses seem to reinforce Dicks and other museum researchers' theories that different interpretations are a product of an individual's social and cultural background.

5. DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

The preceding chapters have illustrated how Parks Canada took a consultative approach to the creation and

display of cultural heritage, and how diverse communities viewed and interpreted those imaginings in intended and unintended ways. The data collected in this study of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* indicates that negotiation was important throughout all moments of the communication circuit. Negotiation implies give-and-take between two or more parties. The intentions of the producers did not simply translate into what the visitors actually took away with them. Dialogue and exchange occurred not only within the process of production but within the meaning making efforts of the audience, and between the producers and the audience through the exhibit. The communicative process was characteristic of the give-and-take of human interaction and social spaces - more like an inconsistent, argumentative conversation than a smooth transmission of intent from sender to receiver. This negotiation resulted in an unsettling communicative situation: a non-typical story of planning and design, an exhibit technique that was laden with information and emotion, and an unusual audience profile and reaction.

We have seen that the producers' intentions in producing this exhibition were not unanimous or clear. *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* was proposed by the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to tell a part of Canadian history that had not been interpreted before but whose telling was fraught with political danger. No clear 'expert' voice emerged in its telling. The history was not a source of nostalgia or even nationalism. A multi-vocal group who had no previous experience in exhibition design guided its creation. They argued and could not come to a consensus on what the message should be. The presentation was eventually sited in a venue with a shady past in this subject area and an ingrained historiographic attitude when it came to the history/heritage debate. Designers further interpreted these mixed messages to come up with their own vision of how the story should communicate. Yet by this very cacaphony of voices and perspectives, a more human version of history prevailed. There was no official voice here, but a mixture of perspectives that were revealed in the exhibit 'reading' undertaken in section B: rural settings mixed with political themes; narrative conversations contradicting visual content; a storyteller embodying both white and Black. Viewers made diverse meanings of the exhibition, situated in their own expectations and social history. Age, framing and racial distance factored into their readings. The affective

enthralment and conversational style of the medium strongly influenced their perspectives.

But what does this say about the purpose of cultural display and how such display should be undertaken? What commentary can be gleaned from this one case study? It is possible to understand the function of this particular heritage display in terms of remembering (memorializing), honouring (we are special), and preserving (safekeeping) the Black experience and thereby contributing to individual and community identity-building. How these functions are interpreted emerges from the multi-level negotiations that happened in each moment of the communication circuit. Here we return to the exchange between production and consumption. The problem with any exhibit is that it must first involve someone wanting to put things up on stage, "on display". The audience then responds to it. The committee wanted to express themselves in terms of remembering, honouring and preserving Black experience, putting out messages to be transmitted. In a more audience-centred view of this dialogue, the public would generate the exchange, wanting to know certain things, certain information or experiences. So whose interests are served in this case, the State and Blacks wanting to speak; or the public wanting to know? We know that most visitors were surprised to discover this exhibition and had little awareness of the African experience in Canada. So the force behind this particular exhibit was the State's goal, embraced by the consultative committee of African-Canadians, to bring Black history to a public stage. In their view, regardless of the content, as long as all audiences were made aware that Africans had been Canadians throughout the settlement history of this country, then some contribution to identity-building was achieved. And that basic level of awareness was reached, with visitors to *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* emerging from the show almost unanimously saying "I had no idea there were Blacks in Canada then." So too on an institutional level, the process of developing this exhibit impressed on the staff and administration of Parks, the ROM and Black Creek that this was a legitimate part of the Canadian story. Thus African-Canadians' desire for access to the public stage was achieved.

But once a general awareness had been achieved, the negotiations began in earnest over the details and

nuance to be conveyed - what Black experience was being remembered, honoured and preserved? The committee wanted to dispel myths and stereotypes around Black history, and in particular about the Underground Railroad story. Divergent interpretations emerged about whether to take a heritage or history approach, an Everyman or 'important people' tack, and how to demonstrate the self-help and agency of the fugitive slaves. Audience reactions were mixed on this front, with most deeply affected by the common woman story of Deborah Brown but some taking her plight and flight as an example of courageous self-help while others swelled with pride at Canada's good deed. The discussion of the unanticipated visual communication of the exhibit demonstrated how the design, created by white designers, affected possible interpretations of the narrative. Thus the audiences, as well as the producers, emerged with conflicting views of the intentions of the exhibition depending on the nature of their own position or gaze. Because the designers did not adequately consider the vested nature of the gaze of individual viewers - and in particular the inherent differences between the white and Black perspectives - the exhibit was read in several different ways. Some in the Black audience emerged with the sense that "we Blacks had our own community then and we helped each other." White viewers had the tendency to say, "I am so proud of what Canada [white people] did then. We were so different than the U.S." But these issues were negotiated, both positions were communicated and a complexity of reaction was generated. The committee's disparate views and the visitors' wide-ranging cultural baggage were brought together and facilitated through this exhibition, so the result was open-ended. Whether audiences were able to transcend their individual differences and achieve a broad or common response to the story is difficult to ascertain without in-depth interviews. But certainly an affective reaction to the personal story of Deborah Brown, of her humanity, seemed to be common to all visitors.

Looking closely at the intentions of producers as well as the expectations of viewers allows us to theorize the underlying nature of public display. Regardless of the topic, what is placed to be read 'in public' by any cultural group has a particular framing, a tendency to draw a portrait that smoothes out the edges, homogenizing, rather than revealing the gritty or boring reality. Whether the story is history or heritage,

Everyman or 'important man', or heroic Black settlers or Canada the good, we do not want to show the greyer shades of our private selves in public. Ethnographers, used to observing both Everyman and 'important man', heritage and history, note that any community, when asked to place its story on a public stage, reacts performatively (Shyrock, 2004). What is placed 'on stage' in an exhibition is a particularly mythologized depiction of that community or story. No dirty laundry here, the public face of heritage masks the private, intimate side of life, whether the objective is to remember, honour or preserve. Whatever story the producers of exhibits and the consumers of exhibits choose to portray and view, it will not have an intimate edge, especially in a museum setting. Writers in the museum world remark upon the celebratory or positive nature of exhibits developed by ethnic groups (Hooper-Greenhill, 1997). What they do not mention is that 'white' exhibits too reflect this 'happy ending' point of view, whether it is entailed in the march-of-progress stories or feting the spoils of military or colonial campaigns, or in more recent times, exhibitions about nuclear war in Hiroshima or sweatshops in modern California. The exception to this is exemplified by the Holocaust museum, a new type of official memorializing that seeks to draw viewers into the private, intimate stories of life and death. Yet even these displays invoke a heroic tone by the elevation and placement of the victims 'in public'. In *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom*, the committee negotiations focused on which positive framing to use and who would present and exercise ownership over the story, Blacks or non-Blacks. The history that the African-Canadian community was willing to share 'in public' was a cleansed view of their world. The 'struggles' were recognized, but hope and freedom was the biggest story. Black everywoman was portrayed but she was good and kind and noble and asexual. In the audience, the disagreement involved which positive perspective to recognize - the noble slave or the noble nation. Few respondents resisted the positive depictions, whatever the framing, except the 20-something viewers who interpreted Brown as a caricature. Whether it is possible to characterize which people are more willing to expose the 'private' side of community to public display, and whether young people have a different view of what is acceptable to present as a public face, would be a useful topic for future study.

But if Parks and the committee, and even the audiences, had a constrained view of what was acceptable to

be viewed in public, how is it possible that the committee could successfully 'dispel myths' about Black history in Canada? What did the committee mean by 'the real story'? Clearly they meant the story which they as African-Canadians found acceptable. They felt the positive perspective deserved to be told and did not dwell on negative issues or experiences. Even then, this was still a lingering question with some. The committee's OBHS representative expressed doubts in hindsight:

"FREE AT LAST!" I think that continues the myth of the UGRR and it's positive and hopeful and part of that message is true - certainly it drew people here [to Canada]. I think the other side of it is, then, how were people then treated? Being given your freedom or being allowed to be free isn't the same as living a full life in equality and respect with other people. And I guess that's the side that's missing and so how do you get that in too?

Audiences' perceptions of what was the 'real' story was a product of internal negotiations that depended on their visiting motivations, expectations and personal background. Viewers were awakened to the reality that slaves settled in Canada and aroused by the portrayal of African peoples' struggle for freedom. They were excited by John Anderson's story of slave catchers and political drama, moved by Deborah Brown's recounting of her struggles to settle in Toronto, intrigued by the object theatre medium and proud of the role of Canada in the UGRR story. But the meanings made by audiences were divided along racial lines, and to a certain extent by age. Those who saw themselves in the portrait - self-identifiers - seemed to have a 'heritage' view of the story where the personal struggle of the heroic woman came to the fore and was related directly to how they themselves felt about their lives. Said one African-Canadian visitor who responded personally to the narrative and expanded on its application to his life:

When you are seeing the different changes in the way people are treated and you relate it to today, I think it's important to have something like this so people can stay in touch with their so called heritage and not just take it for granted.

As we have seen, this parallel framing or self-gaze contrasts to the alien framing or the consumer-gaze where history's events and personalities are objects for commentary external to their identity formation. But their framing of the story is also complicated by their expectations of what they will experience in the individual institution. Some audience members, for example, brought different expectations to their ROM and Black Creek visits - the first a 'history' museum and the second a 'heritage' site. At the ROM, some

visitors expressed that the object theatre was nice, but where was the 'real' exhibit? In their perception, a didactic panel/object display was the media form a museum like ROM should present. Their reactions revealed unconscious expectations of what media forms a 'real' museum should use. Where this most keenly alters the viewers' reactions is in those who are inclined to identify with the story - the Black audiences. One Black visitor expressed a concern whether the ROM might not feel this subject matter was worthy of a 'real' museum exhibit. Another said, "We thought there would be more." No such perceptions were recorded at Black Creek; in fact several African-Canadian respondents indicated pleasure in discovering that filmed sequences were set at the pioneer village, as it gave a sense of immediacy and reality to the show.

Where the two ways of framing become less clear - and more negotiated - is in audiences' perspectives on Deborah Brown. Deborah's story seems to combine an Everyman story and an 'important man' story - a woman's story that seems both ordinary and important. Deborah's portrayal deeply affected all respondents, for good or bad, and regardless of whether they gazed at the presentation with alien or parallel framing. Her lived experiences connected on a visceral level, whether the observer was a sympathetic African-Canadian or a distanced white tourist. Even the young people who disparaged her depiction reacted very strongly to her presence. The question that still remains, however, was whether this seemingly authentic woman, constructed in a convincing manner by the cinematic effect, was a homogenous, 'safe' performance of Black culture. By her very believability and personal connection with viewers, she may have embedded a new mythology in their minds. She might convince viewers that Canada is the North Star, a place where people can be free, without interrogating whether that was true, without reconciling the upbeat and heroic effects of this narrative with troubled history of acceptance of Blacks in Canada. Is it enough that viewers walk away from the exhibit realizing that African have been a part of Canadian history for generations, or should they also realize that they were not accepted as full members of society in that period? Deborah's convincing performance highlights the effectiveness of this type of medium, this experiential theatre, in creating affective responses. But does it as well desensitize audiences and take this woman's struggle out of context? The results suggest that any cultural display, by putting a story out 'in public', will have a tendency to

portray a positive perspective that both desensitizes and decontextualizes the subject matter but because of its authoritative position will be accepted as authentic. Audiences were inclined to accept the authority of this cultural display and make their own meanings based on its truthfulness. This is partly because the presentation's location in an institution gave it authenticity, as the young Black couple pointed out in the last chapter. Audiences also had the impression that this was a closer approximation of truth because it was planned by a committee of African-Canadians for an institutional setting, and because the immersive, face-to-face theatre experience communicated reality. Does this authority remove the possibility of contestation or participation? Again, this was difficult to ascertain because of the lack of in-depth visitor interviews. But because of the range of responses to the presentation and evidence of some debate generated by younger audience members, the results suggest that the exhibit did become a public site for negotiation and resistance for some viewers.

In several ways, this form of cultural display offered the minority group it depicted a new level of engagement with heritage institutions. *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* project gave African-Canadians a chance to develop their own version of official culture on a public stage, regardless of the tone of that presentation and the level of control by the agency. Myth-making, but a story that was not only the one they wanted to tell, but was viewed, interpreted and accepted by Black audiences as credible, and, was conveyed using a storytelling, cinematic technique that was applauded by producers and users as innovative and appropriate. This was a new form of exhibit planning that the agency had not previously attempted. The requirement that they and their expert staff negotiate siting, content and medium with a committee of African-Canadian amateurs was unique. The level of involvement by the African-Canadians in media research, design and production of the object theatre medium was unprecedented at Parks and National Historic Sites. It was a formal recognition of their right to have their versions of their stories on public stage.

When the exhibition opened, the heritage theatre approach, sited at the history museum, was unusual and

attracted the attention, engagement and some resistance of Black and non-Black audiences. The qualities of the experiential theatre approach seemed to be more accessible to a wider profile of viewers, including those like Black audiences and children who are not regular museum-goers. The presentation drew new audiences to both the ROM and Black Creek - Africans from Canada, the U.S. and the Caribbean. The show offered a not-previously-attempted method of looking at Black history through the eyes of a person situated and involved in that era. She came across as a new hero, dauntless but folksy. The stories she told were a version of the facts that audiences accepted as truth because of their relationship to her. With this comes the realization that truth can have many variations depending on who is telling the story and who is listening to it - that is the complexity of human social relations. Remembering, honouring and preserving Black history became a personal experience. Black audiences drew a sense of identity both from the historical details of the narrative, and from their interaction with Deborah as a role model. This identity was inferred not just on a personal level ("I could have been a slave") and but also on a group level in the sense of shared experience ("It's the black people's way, in the old times").

But another important result of this exhibit process was the degree of community development that it engendered. Display of heritage can act to present and consolidate communities in a process whereby people together identify their needs, create change, and exert more influence in the decisions which affect their lives. In this case not only did the African-Canadian community define what they thought was important in the exhibit content, but through the very act of coming together as a unit to plan and produce it. The committee room became a neutral meeting place where a diverse group of African-Canadians, some of whom had been here for generations and some of whom were born on another continent, could assemble, share experiences, work together, disagree, come up with solutions and find a vision to present to other Canadians. Members of the committee have since gone on as professionals and volunteers to actively participate in other heritage-defining African-Canadian projects which build upon their experiences with this small exhibit. On an institutional level, the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board and Parks Canada have gone on to refine and expand the way they designate and represent Canadian history to include

minority groups - community development on a national level. Their new Systems Plan sets a high priority on the telling of minority and non-typical histories, and consultative approaches to cultural products and programs have been instituted.

6. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The forgoing analysis of the communicative process inherent in the production and consumption of this exhibition is offered with an awareness that methodological issues complicate the interpretations. This study was limited in the amount and detail of data collected. Interviews with two committee members, the Ministry of Education representative and the film producer whose script was rejected would have offered perspectives that could not be represented here. The lack of formal interviews with individual visitors and the paucity of statistical information from the host sites limited the study's understanding and interpretation of audience perspectives.

Within these constraints, however, this paper can offer a descriptive and critical look at the process of heritage display, using the case study *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom*. Its intent was to explore the relationship between exhibition production and reception with a particular interest in how non-dominant groups participate in the process. This unusual example of production, media and reception suggests ways in which current practices of exhibit planning and design could be modified to accommodate marginalized publics. Museums and heritage sites cannot be seen as neutral institutions distanced by scholarly objectivity. Cultural display is a public act, a performance about social identity. The public nature of display makes it consequential. Exhibits are products of very particular social conditions and practices where societies place 'in public' displays dedicated to identity-building through remembering, honouring and preserving. It is a stage that has the power to influence individuals, communities and society as a whole. Who gets to speak on this stage have historically been the well-educated or well-positioned few; they have been spaces of white culture and the preserve of academics or experts in exhibitry. Non-white

minorities must have access to these spaces - not just as outsiders being allowed in by white culture, but as producers, subjects and users in their own right.

But the analysis of this particular case suggests a number of broad implications that underscore and perhaps undermine the democratization of production, presentation and reception of heritage exhibits. To move the heritage institution from a white space to an inclusive space would not be a simple process of adding cultural groups, and further research would be essential to clarify the ramifications of the following points:

1) Move from expert to collaborative means of planning displays. This project entered the public sphere not as the authoritative work of a particular museum or a curatorial voice, but as a collaborative dialogue between a range of minority stakeholders, and in a broader sense initiated agency-wide structural and policy changes in how National Historic Sites represent heritage. This was a significantly different process of script and design development than is normally the case at National Historic Sites, the ROM and Black Creek. A collaborative approach - that was more than simply consultative - brought new voices into decision-making, installed a new type of media, and resulted in networking among African-Canadians with an interest in history and heritage. Collaboration and negotiation does not mean simply adding Blacks to a space we continue to treat as white. Nor does it simply propose evaluating what minority audiences want or need and offering it back to them. It implies the integration of marginal voices to the institutional organization at all levels and in all processes. Whether these institutions have the will or the capacity to institute such changes, and what measures they could realistically undertake is a subject for further research.

2) Realize that abbreviated, idealized or contradictory stories will be placed on view. The adoption of a collaborative committee shaped the form and the content of the UGRR exhibit. But no matter who does the planning, the 'bias' of selection and refining - and presenting or not presenting - continues. When the UGRR exhibit production was negotiated and its public story mediated, it was translated, homogenized and idealized, while at the same time conveying competing or contradictory stories through its visual style. In a

larger setting, the public face offered by an individual display might be a unitary or symbolic one; or it might be a contradictory one. Or, the voice conveyed by one exhibit might contradict the stories told in another display. Both possibilities reflect the variety of social positionings involved with remembering, honouring and preserving cultures. The key here would be the acknowledgment by the presenter of their cultural perspective. Think of it as a return to authorship, not authority; a conversation, not a lecture. This would imply a revolutionary change in attitude by institutions and audiences of all ethnicities to overcome deep-seated expectations of the inherent authority of heritage institutions and their pedagogical practice. It will also imply that access to the public stage must be fully democratized, especially that minorities within the minorities are not silenced. Research into the internal dynamics and politics of ethnic consultative groups such as the UGRR committee would be useful in this regard. Audiences, for their part, would have to understand the positioned nature of the presentations and bring to bear their own meaning making skills in negotiating or contesting these representations. Whether this level of comprehension is possible, especially in a tourism setting, is questionable since even now most visitors to heritage sites do not even question the underlying authority or the content of displays presented to them.

3) Know the effects of the medium that is used. By raising an awareness of the specific communicative effects of media forms, the right choices of media can be made to accommodate meaning making in heritage institutions. This understanding will improve the exchange of information in the institutional setting and lead to the recognition that a range of mediated and non-mediated, conscious and unconscious, communication contributes to the public discourse of heritage. In the case of the UGRR object theatre, the choice of this narrative-driven, directed and emotive media pricked reactions in the audience who either understood and responded to its humanist approach, or stirred mildly negative reactions related to lack of or inaccurate 'content'. Research into the specific characteristics and effects of object theatre leads to an understanding of which situations would be most appropriate for its use. Using this type of medium, the audience derives an experience of excitement, drama and purpose that might idealize the historic experience of 'real' slaves like Deborah Brown. On the other hand, the use of this type of medium does engage the

viewer and leads them to connect emotionally with the character and pique their interest to learn more. The siting of this kind of affective exhibit in the ROM and the possibility that audiences expected a different type of medium at that institution also suggests that audiences can be challenged by new media. But if they leave wanting 'more' then possibilities for supplemental media should be explored. Heritage institutions must also realize that they are supremely visual and take into account the visual elements of their displays even before they think of text. Otherwise, even though the process of planning and design becomes more accessible or democratic, the inherent effects of their chosen media could negate this. In the case of the object theatre, for example, it is a new technique that allows museums to show the narrative side of history in performative and emotive way. Research is needed to look at the unconscious visual and experiential power of different display media, how and why each element can be used by designers, and the ways in which each media form relates to different audiences.

4) Consider the viewers and their motivations and expectations. Cultural display is more an act of presentation than a response to audience demand. But communication is the goal, so the wants, needs and characteristics of users must be understood. With the democratization of heritage display, the viewers will take a range of positions just as producers will present a variety of positions. Heritage sites need to not only understand how each media form communicates, but what different people and cultural groups are seeking from their heritage experiences and how they make meaning of them. Visitors to heritage institutions might want critical engagement or superficial consumption; or perhaps cognitive understanding of history or affective experience of heritage; or an entirely new approach to the past that is culturally specific. This area of research has undergone intensive study by sociologists and museologists in recent years, but has not been applied significantly by museums and historic sites. Museum professional journals suggest that the lack of application of audience and learning research is due to severe budget constraints. This study of the UGRR exhibit suggests two areas of research related to reception. The first is the issue of self-identification and the extent to which that concept appropriates or denudes the social knowledge that makes a culture unique. The second area of interest is whether age, gender or cultural group affects what audiences consider acceptable

for heritage display, and in particular how these factors relate to views of what is 'private'.

A central argument in this circuit of communication analysis of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* has been the importance of negotiation and dialogue to the success of the exhibition as a communicative process. There was no singularity of viewpoint or one-way transmittal of ideas here; a multitude of perspectives and positions emerged not only in the conditions of production, but also in the conditions of reception. Even the media itself, the object theatre, offered the perception of dialogue in its immersive, conversational narrative style. The success of the UGRR exhibit with visitors emerged from this perception of dialogue: that the presentation was developed as a result of dialogue and that reaction to it was a thing of dialogue. The idea of inviting participation, negotiation, and involvement in the presentation and reception of cultural display, all essential elements of democratic practice, would suggest that museums and heritage sites can serve as non-exclusive institutions. The path to this kind of democratic practice is messy and complex and will be subject to much disagreement from stakeholders at each stage of the communicative circuit - much like the UGRR exhibit process. But by changing the way history and heritage is imagined, negotiated, presented and debated in public displays, heritage institutions may serve the public interest and contribute to an ongoing process of societal change.

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APPENDIX A

INTERPRETIVE OBJECTIVES - UGRR EXHIBIT

The presentation's stated interpretive objectives were:

1. Through a range of media, personal services and the use of archival material and artifacts, present the story of Blacks who came to Canada via the Underground Railroad and settled in urban areas of present day Ontario, particularly Toronto.
2. To ensure the identified target audiences gain a significant awareness of the story, and to set audiences on the course towards understanding and appreciating that heritage. The messages should:
 - counter myths regarding the UGRR;
 - emphasize the contribution and participation of the Black community, women and people's individual power;
 - enlighten the public on the importance of the social and historical impact the UGRR had on the psyche and development of Canada;
 - sensitize the audience to the Black experience.
3. To instill in audiences a sense of personal connection to the stories of Black immigrants and refugees, ranging from the general level of citizens of Canada and Toronto, to the level of individuals with detailed genealogical relationships to characters in the story.
4. To encourage audiences to continue to explore the stories through visiting related sites or pursuing further reading and research.
5. Through the development of partnerships and sponsorship, encourage other organizations and individuals to provide support or services reciprocal to those provided by Parks Canada, and to enhance and enrich the program.

APPENDIX B

UGRR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A set of questions that relate to 3 things, the creation of the committee, the committee itself and how it worked, & the exhibit

COMMITTEE

1. Can you tell me how this idea for an exhibit began?
2. How and when did you get involved in the consultative committee?
3. How would you describe the purpose of the committee? (Did this change over the course of meetings?)
4. What did you see as the most important issues facing the UGRR consultative committee?
5. How did you resolve these issues?
6. Can you suggest one thing you or Parks Canada may have learned from this consultative process?
7. Do you think it is s this a good way of develop museum exhibits? Would you do it again?

EXHIBIT

8. How would you describe the purpose of the exhibit?
9. What did you want audiences to learn from this exhibit? (or go away thinking or feeling?)
10. Do you think the presentation achieves this?
11. Tell me what you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches used to tell the story in the exhibit?
12. Do you know how audiences responded to the exhibit?
13. What will the OBHS do with the exhibit once it is closed at Black Creek?

APPENDIX C**Underground Railroad Exhibit Questionnaire**

I am a student in the York/Ryerson Joint Program in Communications and Culture and I am conducting research to evaluate the effectiveness of the Underground Railroad exhibit at Black Creek Pioneer Village. I would appreciate it if you would take 5 minutes to fill out the questionnaire below to give me an idea of your reactions to this presentation. This will help me in the writing a research paper.

1) Why did you come to see this exhibit? (please check one option only):

☐ I came by chance ☐ I came especially to see this exhibit

2) Did you know much about the Underground Railroad before you saw this presentation?

☐ yes ☐ no

3) Can you describe three things that stand out in your mind about this presentation?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4) Briefly describe what you think was the underlying message of this presentation.

5) On the following scale please tell us what you thought of this presentation? (please check one option):

☐ Disliked it very much ☐ Disliked somewhat ☐ Neutral ☐ Enjoyed it ☐ Enjoyed it very much

Can you describe why? (What did you like most? What did you like least?)

6) Would you say this presentation made you think of (please check as many options as apply):

- ☐ A film or TV show I have seen before
- ☐ Histories I have studied of other people and other cultures
- ☐ Histories of lives of ancestors
- ☐ Memories of stories my relatives told

7) Do you feel that the tone of this presentation is (please check one option only):

- ☐ that of a fair acknowledgement of persons and events shown
- ☐ a somewhat optimistic view of persons and events shown
- ☐ an unreal or exaggerated account of the events that happened

TURN OVER

8) If you were describing this presentation to a friend, which three words would you use? (Circle three)

useless exciting uncomfortable fun relevant
noisy boring optimistic uninteresting good for kids
interesting doesn't relate to me attractive confusing

9) Can you indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements about our presentation:

(Strongly Agree SA Agree A Neutral/don't know N Disagree D Strongly Disagree SD)

- I learned something new from this presentation SA A N D SD
- This exhibit made me think about the Underground Railroad in a different way SA A N D SD
- I found the information in this presentation to be untrue or exaggerated SA A N D SD
- I can identify with some of the stories Deborah Brown told. SA A N D SD
- The immigration story here is similar to my own or my ancestors'. SA A N D SD
- The multi media technique is the best way of telling this story. SA A N D SD
- The multi-media technique made the story too exciting and dramatic. SA A N D SD

Do you have any other comments you would like to share?

Thank you for your help. I ask that you fill out the following information about yourself to help me know who is coming to this presentation.

Age: ___ 0-18 ___ 19-30 ___ 31-50 ___ 50+

Gender: ___ F ___ M

Residence: City/Town _____ Province/State _____

To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did your **ancestors** belong? _____

Occupation: _____ Education Level: _____

APPENDIX D
INFORMAL OBSERVATIONS:

TABULATIONS

	ROM	Black Creek
Entered theatre	345 visitors	223 visitors
Stayed to end of show	300	150
Ethnicity		
White	80% (275)	68.5% (153)
Black	11.5% (40)	15% (33)
Asian	8.5% (30)	16.5% (37)
Age		
25-45 yrs. old	64% (220)	61.5% (137)
Over 50	10.5% (36)	11.5% (26)
Under 25	25.5% (89)	27% (60)

QUESTIONNAIRES

Why did you come to see this exhibit?

Came by chance 60
 Came especially to see this exhibit 8
 (Why? Word of mouth 3 TV 2 Other Reasons 3)

Briefly describe what you think was the underlying message of this presentation.

HISTORICAL FACTS

- HISTORICAL perspective of UGRR story in Canada – 13
- The TORONTO perspective- 8
- Political or legal aspects (eg: abolition) – 6
- slave catchers – 5
- Treatment of slaves - 5

NARRATIVE STORY

- People fighting for or escaping to FREEDOM, – 29
- People achieving dreams – 4
- people struggling to make do, live, survive, – 5
- the PERSONAL story of Deborah Brown – 8
- I might have been a slave – 2

PHILOSOPHICAL

- injustice of slavery – 4
- all people equal - 3
- Pride in Canada – 10
- People should be free – 5

On the following scale please tell us what you thought of this presentation?

Enjoyed it very much
 Enjoyed it
 Neutral 3
 Disliked it -
 Disliked it very much -

Why did you like it?

HISTORIOGRAPHIC

Learned new things – 12

Like this subject area – 2
 Local subject or people – 2

NARRATIVE STORY

Real/Touching/Personal/engages audience – 7
 Uplifting – 2

PHILOSOPHICAL

People can be free 1
 Proud to be Canadian or Canada better than U.S. – 7

TECHNIQUES OR EXPERIENCE

Variety of visuals/multimedia – 21
 Well-presented – 2

What did you like or dislike?

Likes?

HISTORIOGRAPHIC

Facts – 9
 Local history aspect – 8
 A Canadian story – 4
 “Enlightened view of history”, 1,

NARRATIVE STORY

Personal experience of history – 23
 Way people responded to adversity – 5
 How the story is told - 9
 Happy ending 1

TECHNICAL OR EXPERIENCE

Photos of Canadian historical blacks – 4
 Multimedia – 20
 Music – 8

Dislikes?

More about struggles – 2,
 Perpetuated inaccuracies or glorification or laundering - 4
 Needed more detail or wider info. – 7
 Long or boring or multimedia not great - 3
 Language or accent bad – 2
 Acting bad - 5

Words to describe it?

Interesting 43	Uncomfortable 3
Relevant 32	Attractive 3
Exciting/dynamic 15	Frustrated 1
Optimistic 12	Angry 1
Good for Kids 9	Inaccurate 1
Fun 5	Proud 5
Sad 5	

Can you indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements about this presentation:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral/don't know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree					
	1	2	3	4	5					
I learned something new from this presentation						1	2	3	4	5
						25	27	2	1	-

