Black stories matter – Liverpool International Slavery Museum and multimodal representations of controversial heritage

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Abstract

In the light of the relatively recent efforts and teaching programmes to reshape the study of history both from a more comprehensive perspective and through a non-white lens, the opening of Liverpool’s International Slavery Museum (ISM) in 2007 represented a milestone. Both the ISM in the UK and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), which opened in Washington, DC, in 2016, foregrounded a new way of representing the challenging legacy of slavery. Yet, neither the imperialist/colonialist perspective, with its dire aspects, nor the emphasis on the enslaved people as victims to be pitied and redressed, are prioritised; the focus is rather on their individual identities as resourceful and resilient human beings and on their past and recent achievements. Such complex and multifaceted messages are conveyed through a plurality of artefacts and interactive exhibitions and videos which, especially in the case of the NMAAHC, unfold in an iconic architectural structure. One major representational objective is to unveil longstanding biases and omissions in the narration of history as it is traditionally organized in the school curricula.

From a multimodal discourse analysis perspective, the present study investigates how the ISM’s poly-social-media communication modes manage to engage visitors, through the synergy of (virtual) artefacts, verbal narratives of slavery, visuals and music that dynamically shapes the contemporary semantics of the new emerging racial literacies, and attempts to promote change at societal level.