

## National Programmes Conference 2019

4 November 2019

### Introductions and Keynote: Bonnie Greer

**GEORGIA MALLIN:** So, you are probably wondering why this event, why at the BM? Each year we in the National Programmes Team host a conference. Each has a different theme, designed to be useful, relevant and interesting to the sector at large – so we use the spaces that we have here to bring a lot of excellent speakers from across the country together. This is funded by the Vivmar Foundation who have been supporting us since 2010.

The theme of the conference changes each year, and this year it is something close to our hearts. We disseminated the call for papers in the hopes we could bring together a conversation that is respectful, honest, open, non-defensive and intersectional as far as we can, we were so pleased with the response we got.

We hope that this tone carries through the day and everyone leaves having found something useful, interesting, provocative, or having had a good conversation to take back with them to their own work, whatever and wherever that may be. We aim to make the conference accessible to the colleagues, and we welcome your feedback. So, find the team if you have ideas and talk to us throughout the day.

I will now welcome our Director, Hartwig Fischer, to the stage to say a few words. Thank you.

**HARTWIG FISCHER:** Welcome everybody to the British Museum. It is great to see so many wonderful colleagues in the BP Lecture Theatre today.

This year we developed the National Programmes Conference 2019 to explore the current museum practices within the context of our rapidly changing times, changing nationally and internationally. We will focus on issues of representation, and power within the sector with emphasis on disability, class, gender race and sexuality.

With these issues in mind, we will discuss the realities of museum work and how people are affecting change within their organisations. For today's event, we have sought to provide a platform for colleagues to openly share their work, their experience, their research and their ideas of how UK museums can address both their own histories and those of their communities. Public discourse on issues around diversity and representation within museums, is vital for the development and the relevance of our work.

From the base in communities, in the press, in Parliament, to crucial sector level reports, these conversations cannot be ignored. They have immense significance for museum, not only for the museum practice but for the principles of our continued existence. Museum histories and present-day operations are intimately bound up in the UK structures of power. We are mostly public institutions, funded and founded to good by government, universities, historical societies, worthy individuals and diverse forms of philanthropy. Debates around inequality and representation have direct ramifications for museum, to what we do, what we signify, and the stories that we choose to tell. These issues come into play across all areas of our work.

The National Programmes Conference 2019 brings together practitioners from across the country to explore how museums and cultural institutions are actively responding to the debates and participating and shaping them. When they too have inherited the complex legacy of the eras in which they were founded. We may not be able to change those histories but we can acknowledge them. Through today's event we will showcase what is currently being achieved in our aim to work with them productively. We are delighted so many contributors from across the UK, arts and cultural heritage sector are here today. We are grateful for them for sharing time and expertise and we look forward to critical and reflective preparation, case studies and practical example, discussions and creativity.

Before the sessions begin, I have the great pleasure of introducing our keynote speaker, Bonnie Greer.

For those of you who are not familiar with her work, Bonnie is an American-British playwright, novelist and critic. Her plays have been produced on BBC Radio 3 and 4, BBC 2 and the West End. She has won the Verity Bargate Award for Best New Play and shortlisted for the John Whiting Award and for all of her remarkable work she was awarded an OBE in 2010. Bonnie has been a regular contributor to BBC 2's Newsnight Review and Question Time. You might have seen her most recent Question Time appearance a few weeks ago, that saw her go viral in Ireland – if you have not, don't miss out on it, it is super powerful!

Bonnie has been a Deputy Chair of the British Museum, serving two full terms as Trustee from 2005 to 2012 and continues to work with us and is passionate about making positive changes in the museum sector. We are absolutely delighted, Bonnie, to have you with us this morning. Thanks for being a part of our conference. I know you will launch us into the day with a radiating speech with your wonderful intelligence and warmth. Thank you for being with us.  
(Applause)

**BONNIE GREER:** I will stand behind the podium but I am standing on tip toes ... and also, I have rewritten this thing a thousand and times, you get nervous, so to the museum goer who tweeted on my Twitter feed that she was nervous today about doing her breakout speech, I will not say who you are, I know you are here, I am nervous too. You never stop being nervous.

Thank you, Hartwig, for what you said. I forgot that actually, I have not been here in a way in all of those years – in a sense when you have been a Trustee for a long time, it is like a divorce. I have never been divorced but you have to be away for a while, you just have to just not be there, otherwise, you are poking around and dusting. It is good to be back. If I stumble while reading the notes, it is because I can't read my own writing!

When I hear the word "diversity" I ask myself, diverse from what? From whom? I think sometimes that we should play what I call the Diversity Game and go around the room and ask each person who they're diverse from? Odds are, that there are some people who may not think so, and will call it diversity! I have been in that situation. Once, in an organisation that I really wanted to be a part of, when I first moved here, it was explained to me that actually the organisation was only for people of African-Caribbean and African background. And one of their goals was to diversify from me an African American, because of all matters of black culture and so forth, so I could not be a

part of it. I got that, I understand that completely but it was a bit devastating. So, here I was, a desirable object of diversity in one place, and I was the diversified in another.

If your museum is just using the word "diversity" and you are not investigating it, then I will say you are not doing diversity, you are in the diversity business. It has quotas, as it can get funding, and I will call these your diverse folks, who then can be your spokespeople or human shields for when the museum is bombed (not literally but when it is hit) in that then the diverse people become human shields or they become mouthpieces or they serve as cultural flagellators against you, or they help you to comply – that lovely word "comply" – once you have diverse people, and everything and everybody is put in a box.

That's the diversity business. It's a racket, and it's crooked. Museums should do health checks to make sure that they're not in the diversity business because it's toxic. Once, a wheelchair-bound painter who worked at a gallery I was associated with announced, "You know what? I'm actually fine, it's this building that is disabling me." So the gallery listened, with intent. They heard her and they kept hearing her until they could listen. Not with pity, nor out of interest, or in the spirit of diversity, they listened. And listening with intent, in a sense, they became her and then what happened, is that they made the building less disabling. We were less disabled too.

After Hartwig and I were part of the panel here, almost a year ago, he said, "Let's kick some ideas around and see if you can come back and do something here." So, we met for the occasional lunch, and talked and exchanged books. I had bagsful of weeks, he had bagsful of books and one day we decided that reclamation was the drive underpinning almost everything that is happening today from Trump to Brexit, to Restitution, to non-binary, to Me Too, to everything.

So this idea that we came up with, it is going to be tested, in a series of panels, starting in January and extending into March 2020 under the banner 'The Era of Reclamation', a sign of the times. The first panel will consist of women of African descent. Some of them curators and some of them associated with global museums. There is also going to be an archivist, from a museum dedicated to black British history and culture and it is funded by black British people. There is going to be a professor of history and then me. And another panel will have, the Secretary of the Smithsonian and Hartwig, who will be in conversation (I was going to say, confession) in conversation with me, about their work and thinking about this question. And there will be a panel of Generation Zs and Millennials, discussing museums and what they mean, if anything, to them.

This is the beginning of that question of reclamation and hopefully we will continue in other forms and in other ways. This is happening because Hartwig and the museum listened with intent, the intention to implement, to do. It is a collaboration that has extended agency to me, with no filters, nothing, but has allowed me to extend agency out to others, who would not come inside of this house, for various reasons.

So, I want to have a shout out and a thank you to Hartwig and the British Museum and to Freddie Matthews and Bryony Smith for allowing me to do this and to say, this is the beginning, I hope, and not the end.

Diversity is creation and it is also destruction. The building that the artist said disabled her had to be destroyed, bits of it, in order to change this. Often this destruction is metaphorical, in other words, a museum's idea of itself can be destroyed as diversity sheds a new light, shows a new

way. Uncertainty often also comes with this destruction and I am saying to you, walk with uncertainty, bond with uncertainty. And this may sound counterintuitive, but diversity can liberate us from other boxes and bags and categories and send them up into smoke.

A museum can do that, the objects can do that, because they themselves are centres and holders of change. They are mutable, they are mutability. In a diverse museum environment, storytelling and scholarship stand as equal fulcrums of community interest and who come together, all of us, around our shared human history. This coming together now changes the objects; diversity encourages this. In this, diversity uses labels only as sound-posts, as way-stations, not as definitions.

Can we live with no categories? I don't know. I am from a generation that gave all of you categories, we gave you the word diversity too. I have an answer to this, maybe it's not for me to answer, but it seems to me that a diverse environment puts this question on the table without fear, because a diverse environment is a safe environment. That is one of its hallmarks.

Finally, I want to say this, that museums are engines of cognition, they encourage thinking and they encourage the expansion of thinking. They are also places of emergence.

What is emergence? Emergence is the thing that arises from the encounter of two different entities, neither one on the surface is related, but when they come together, they create the emergent which is greater than themselves. An example, Chauvet Cave in southern France, I have never seen it and maybe I probably will, but I dream about it, I dream about it, the way I dreamt about the Parthenon frieze, when I saw it in Encyclopaedia Britannica. And my late father, a guy who didn't have much education because he grew up in rural Mississippi in the 30, he would get that encyclopaedia to educate us and we saw the objects here, we saw the British Museum.

So, in this cave of Chauvet, there are paintings on it, lions, hyenas and there is a Venus there – they figure it's a Venus because she has a vulva. They are the result of human encounters, something outside of themselves, something different, something strange and the result, what they did is the result of emergence. It made them human, because they saw something in another place outside of themselves. Therefore the collection expands and deepens humanity by virtue of where it is, the new place. And we, like the prehistoric cave dweller, are gazing in awe at that which we did not make and we make it become ourselves and we hand that new self on to generations and find our common bond in the past, in the present, so that we can make a future.

Thank you very much for listening to me this morning and have a great conference, thank you.  
(Applause)

Can I also add, I told you I wrote this thing a thousand times, I will probably get in trouble for saying this, but I will say it, I think that what is important about what we do – where we are – is that we understand, as closely as we can, that we need to defend our museums, we need to defend our collections in place. That is very important to me and I think it is important to this idea of emergence and of thinking, as not only who we are, but in the world to come, because our children and grandchildren are global people and as a globalist, I say a global people. So we need to understand what a collection in a place is about, and how we can make it stronger and how we defend it. Thank you. Yes.

**GEORGIA:** We have lots of time for questions from the floor. There are two roving mics going around, so please put your hands up if you have questions for Bonnie.

**BONNIE:** I can say a lot of provocative things!

**GEORGIA:** We should have put some plants in the audience!

**BONNIE:** Hartwig is a plant!

**FLOOR:** Bonnie could you say a bit more about that notion of emergence? Because emergence is a kind of bringing things across the horizon into visibility, or into something that becomes part of your life?

**BONNIE:** Emergence is a scientific term that defines sort of the thing that is between two different things that are not related to one another and, you know, if you are a writer or a playwright like I am, or a painter or a musician or whatever, we are doing it all the time. It's about dreaming, it's about making a new thing, and I have always been trying to understand why some of the objects in the museum mean something to me – why should they mean anything to me? And, in investigating that in myself, I have come to learn new stories about myself, as human being and also about who I am and what I am. And that new thing is what we do all the time, as human beings, and that is what expands our human agency – it expands our intelligence, it expands our conversations with ourselves and with each other and we do it all the time, we do it all of the time.

So, I think we need to see an object in a place where it didn't "come from", in quotes, as a centre of emergence, of that expansion of human consciousness, of that expansion of human encounter and defend that, which I think is very important now to do. So that, if that makes sense, if that is clear to people? A hand has emerged.

**FLOOR:** Thank you, Bonnie, I just want to ask an opinion from you, I have sort of become really loath to use the word diversity. It really pains me and upsets me that something like this has become so toxic. We love biodiversity, we love diversity of foods, we love diversity of music and so on, but when that diversity is attached to human beings who create all of those thing, the cultures that lead to that, it's become so toxic as a phrase, so sad the other day to listen to Lenny Henry of all people saying exactly the same thing and yet I can find that, if you use diversity nowadays, it's almost two words, diversity and then train, they just suck the life out of everything.

**BONNIE:** That is what I am trying to say!

**FLOOR:** So I just want to hear your opinions on the fact that I find the notion of diversity in nature and amongst human beings and culture and society to be actually really, really enriching and perhaps we need a new vocabulary to describe the value of diversity which is something that enriches us, that enlightens us as human beings.

**BONNIE:** That is beautiful, thank you. I think what happens, particularly in an environment like this is that people are educated to a certain standard and you just fall back into, we fall back into our educational boxes, we fall back into how we got our Masters, our PhD, all of this sort of thing – we go there because it's a safe space, it's a definable space and then from that place, you can launch papers, books, conferences, all of that and it doesn't allow for thinking, it doesn't allow for



ambiguity, it doesn't allow for pushback, it doesn't allow for redefining, if that is necessary at all. I really meant it when I said at the beginning, there should be a conversation at the beginning to say this is a diverse environment – who is it diverse from? Old white men. How old does this 'he' have to be?

It is those kinds of things, if we ask ourselves the question, we break down what we are. You are absolutely right. I am tired of hearing it. I think this is a beautiful day, it will be a beautiful day but if we can think about, as somebody said to me, having a bonfire of the identities, I think that it is a useful thing to have once a year in a museum.

**FLOOR:** Hello, Bonnie. I'm Mark. Can I just say, you are a legend, and your put-downs on BBC QT, they were phenomenal!

**BONNIE:** I didn't hire this guy!

**FLOOR:** Excellent. I wanted ... I was hesitant to ask but yes, you seem like you are willing!  
(Laughter)

In what you were saying about, well, everything, with being local, the diversity and diversify, what are your thoughts on repatriation? Dare I ask?

**BONNIE:** Yes, you can ask them. These are just my thoughts, so as they say, when you know in America, they have these drugs. They sell you the drugs and they spend 15 minutes disclaiming everything that the drug is supposed to be, including, you could die! So this is my disclaimer, this is me. This is not anybody else, nothing else.

**FLOOR:** As you said on BBC QT, we have good social sciences in this country. You said that on QT.

**BONNIE:** OK. Oh! I have a concept that I call Meta-African. I have talked with various people about this. I have finished a series for Audible called 'In Search of Black History'. I read history at university, so I know the trope, the shape, the signposts. But I learned a lot, especially from Professor Olivette Otele, who is a part of our conversation in January. There is a lot of ambiguity in African history. If we deny Africa that ambiguity, then we deny Africa agency. Africa, and you know, you say that word, and it is not a country, of course ... but I think we need a conversation.

There is another factor missing at the table. That's what used to be called the diaspora. I don't use that word diaspora, I think it is too pretty. I am not a diaspora, I was kidnapped and brought here, a whole lot of folks played a part in that. So when we talk about that, I want to talk about that first. I think there is truth in reconciliation that has to happen all the way around before we get to the next stage so. That's how I feel. And I think also, too often, when the questions are brought up, I think that museums are too involved in what I call the scramble for Africa response, where they immediately go back to 1871, everybody starts calling out from there. We need to have a bigger table. Then I can talk about that, that's how I personally feel.

**FLOOR:** Thank you.

**BONNIE:** Thank you, Mark.

**FLOOR:** Hello. I was wondering, it follows on from Mark's question, how you may have reacted or felt at the resignation of Ahdaf Soueif as a Trustee and if you can recognise some of the British Museum, that she felt was present, that led to her resignation. Can you reflect on that at all?

**BONNIE:** Obviously I don't recognise it, I wouldn't be here, would I? I don't mean that flippantly, I mean obviously I don't. I haven't given it a lot of thought. When people resign from boards it is a lot of your own feeling about it, and you are right to do that. I think it is a powerful thing that she did, that she needed to do. Before I came on the board, I was asked to come on the board all these years ago, by Neil McGregor. I told people, the first thing they said was, "How can you be in there?" I had to ask myself that every day. I do ask myself that every day. And it is everything that I have just said in my speech, really. It is about encouraging emergence. It is about looking at the next generation, for me. So, I respect what she did. I respect her. It was her personal choice, and this is my personal choice. I think that is what diversity is.

**FLOOR:** Hi. The way you spoke about the theme of reclamation really resonates with me.

**BONNIE:** Why? Why? Honestly, why?

**FLOOR:** Because the way you talk about those movement, pulling them together in one place and drawing the connections between them, things like Me Too. I curated a LGBT women's history programme. It was labelled as PC across all of the movements we are seeing a growing push back and resistance to them. I wondered what your thoughts were on that?

**BONNIE:** To?

**FLOOR:** To the reclamation movement as a whole, the movements you mentioned and how to overcome and persist through it?

**BONNIE:** We can?

**FLOOR:** How to overcome that resistance, to persist in the face of it?

**BONNIE:** I believe in the theory of, that you don't resist anything. That you make the institution built, so that it can take it and get bigger. I don't think you resist anything. These things are valid questions and valid points of view. So the museum becomes stronger as a result of that. I don't have a specific answer to that other than to say I think you never make a museum or an institution resist, I think you take it and get stronger as a result.

**FLOOR:** Hi. It's great to see so many amazing museum professionals in the room, however when we talk about equality and diversity in the museum sector, there is a lot of us that are probably programmers that run programmes that work with directly with our audiences, how do we not make ourselves feel like a cog, a small cog in a very large machine? How do we carry on that equality and diversity across our audiences and embed it in our museums, to feel like we are actually creating that positive change that you speak about when you feel, sometimes, that you do not have that power to create that legacy? Or if you do, you have a very small power to create a, an amazing project with a small group, that once it is done and dusted, that legacy is over. I

am sure that is something that will be talked about today, however, I feel how do we keep that conversation going?

**BONNIE:** Thank you for that question, it's a brilliant question. I think we need to have a table of honest conversations. Now I know this is people's jobs, professions, and all that stuff and that is real thing but somehow and some way, a museum from the director on down has to have a means by which we have honest conversations. We don't have, if we don't have them, we ain't going to be around in 20 years. We have to have them. They have to be conversations, as I said, listening with intent and with equality. So when you sit down at that table with your director, you are sitting as an equal. You have information that you are going to impart and that director has to listen and the director listens and gives information back to you. We have to do that. And unless, if we don't, we are not going to be here.

Georgia is telling me to leave!  
(Laughter)

**GEORGIA:** I'm so sorry!

**BONNIE:** Bye everybody. Really, have a great conference, I hope you all disagree with everything I have said! That begins the conversation. Thank you very much.  
(Applause)