

**A Labour of Love: The Politics of Presenting Contemporary Art  
as Part of Commemorations to Mark the United Kingdom's  
Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007**

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PhD (Visual Cultures)

**First Draft Submitted**

November 2017

**Resubmitted**

May 2018

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## Declaration

Declaration of Authorship I, Richard Anthony Hylton hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Hylton', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Signed

Date            9 July 2018

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the role played by contemporary art in commemorations organised to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007.

It argues that, besides representing an unprecedented commemorative event over seen by government, it was also indicative of how certain political, social and cultural practices around 'race' and multiculturalism, under New Labour, assumed a hitherto unseen level of prominence and institutional validation.

Centred on a number of key exhibitions and other commemorative material and programmes produced for the bicentenary, the study explores themes relating to Black Britain, inclusion politics, national remembrance and commemoration, British history, artistic intervention, institutional critique, the role of Black artists, public collections, contemporary African art and the ethnographic museum. The study draws on and examines a range of discourses and practices involving government, funding agencies, galleries, museums, journalists, researchers and historians.

This study contends that rather than being merely a moment of reflection and celebration of multiculturalism, the bicentenary's contemporary art programme epitomised, in microcosm, the problematic ways in which skewed notions of diversity were normalised in British society. The conclusion also considers the wider influence and implications of the bicentenary regarding ongoing discourses and practices in Britain about the relationships between slavery, history and contemporary art.

**In memory of**

**Marie-Louise Hylton (1936-2010)**

**Neville George Hylton (1928-2015)**

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## **Acknowledgements**

My sincere thanks to my supervisor Dr S. Ayesha Hameed for the unstinting support, constructive criticism, reassurance and enthusiasm she has offered me over the past four years.

I am thankful to my employer University for the Creative Arts for supporting my research and enabling me to take periods of extended leave.

I am extremely grateful to Laura Corballis for her thorough copy-editing, suggestions and comments all of which have been of enormous benefit to me. I must also thank graphic designer Urjuan Toosy for the patience and diligence she has given typesetting this thesis.

This research has been a monumental and at times an overwhelming undertaking. It could not have been completed without the support of my family. My partner Heather has, over the past seven years, consistently offered encouragement and listened to my ideas and anxieties, as well as looking after our children Ivy and Erroll. I am forever grateful for the allowances they have made and for the love and understanding they have given me throughout.

I am very grateful to my internal and external examiners, Astrid Schmetterling Senior Lecturer in Visual Cultures in the Department of Visual Cultures, at Goldsmiths College , University of London and, Professor Eddie Chambers, Department of Art and Art History, University of Texas at Austin. Their exceptionally close reading of my thesis, comments and suggested revisions and corrections have greatly aided me and enhanced the study.

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## **Preliminary Note**

In this study, the term *Black* is used to denote people of African, African Caribbean and South Asian heritage. For reasons that are both historical and contemporary, the use of the term *Black* merits some explanation and contextualization. Terminologies used to describe people who came to Britain from former British colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia in the post-war years have changed and evolved. Official descriptors such as 'Negro', 'West Indian', 'Pakistani' 'Indian' and 'coloured', were largely replaced by 'Afro-Caribbean', 'African and African Caribbean', 'Asian', 'South Asian' and 'people of colour'. Terms such as 'immigrant' 'ethnic minority' and 'minorities' appear more impervious to change. Culturally and racially stratifying, such terminologies also appear at odds with notions of racial equality. The liberal use of the term 'minority' belies the principal role race and racism have and continue to play in British society. There is nothing minor about the innumerable ways in which race and racism modulate daily life. Despite the inclusion of 'black' in the now commonly used term 'black and minority ethnic' (BAME), a pejorative undertone persists.

This historical context informs my preference for using the term 'Black people' and 'Black artist' (with a capital 'B', unless quoting from another source, in which case the original spelling is kept). Although the varied and often times problematic use of the term 'black' has not advanced any form of consensus, in my view compelling political reasons exist for using the term 'Black', rather than 'black' or 'black and minority ethnic'.

In Britain's visual arts sector, racialized terminologies have also undergone change and alteration. Nevertheless, they too remain problematic. 'Ethnic arts', 'minority ethnic curators' and 'culturally diverse artists' reflect changes in phraseology but equally the capacity for such nomenclature to remain tethered to language that is simultaneously vapid and pejorative.

Pakistani-born British artist Rasheed Araeen used the term 'Black struggle' and 'Black Consciousness' to acknowledge a wider political realm.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, he sub-titled his seminal exhibition *The Other Story, Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain*. Other commentators have reasoned against or expressed unease with the use of the term Black. Gilane Tawadros wrote in the exhibition catalogue *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*:

One contentious issue raised many times within this publication is the use of the word black and indeed its spelling. Many terms or expressions could have been used throughout this publication. The general editorial position has been to use the term black (with a lower case *b*) as referring to peoples of African, Asian, South East Asian, Latino (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban) or Native American descent.<sup>2</sup>

Gen Doy expressed reluctance to "refer to black artists as Black artists, since many would not accept a community of interests exists between all artists who are black."<sup>3</sup> Doy also argued that it "seems unfair to burden black artists as a group with expectations and conditions which are not demanded of white

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1 Rasheed Araeen 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness in Contemporary Art in Britain Seventeen Years of Neglected History', *The Essential Black Art*, Chisenhale Gallery in conjunction with Black Umbrella, 1987

2 Gilane Tawadros and Emma Dexter, 'Foreword', *Mirage Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, Institute of Contemporary Arts and INIVA, London 1995

3 Gen Doy, 'Introduction' *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*, I.B. Tauris: London and New York 2000, 9

artists.”<sup>4</sup> Alliances between African-Caribbean and South Asian artists were, it should be remembered, a response to “institutionalized British racism”.<sup>5</sup> In light of these complexities (shifts and changes across the political and cultural terrain) Eddie Chambers cautioned against “a definitive use of the word, noun and adjective, ‘Black/black” acknowledging “it is unlikely that there will ever exist a settled and universally accepted definition of the term.”<sup>6</sup>

Black artist is used throughout the study, including in Chapter 4 when discussing the exhibition *Uncomfortable Truths*, which included British, Caribbean, African American and African artists. In Chapter 6, I primarily use ‘contemporary African artist(s)’ rather than ‘Black artist(s)’, as this more helpfully describes the particular history of contemporary African art’s emergence in the 1990s in the west. However, it is important to be mindful that the term ‘contemporary African artist’ is itself not self-explanatory. The exhibition *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (explored in Chapter 6) is a case in point. The exhibition included white South African artists Marlene Dumas and William Kentridge, Swedish-born Loulou Cherinet who is of Ethiopian heritage, British-born Eileen Perrier, who is of Ghanaian parentage and Allan deSouza, who was born in Kenya to Indian parents.

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4 Ibid.

5 Tania V Guha ‘Walking in cruseoe’s footsteps: Margins and mainstreams in critical theory’, *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British art by artists of South Asian descent*, 2001, 21

6 Eddie Chambers, ‘Preliminary Note’, *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain*, 2014, xvii

## **Introduction**

### **Race Towards the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

British heritage is the heritage of a nation of nations, shaped through waves of migration and diaspora, wide-ranging imperial histories and contemporary flows of globalization.<sup>1</sup> — Jo Littler

How is it being – and how should it be – transformed by the ‘Black British’ presence and the explosion of cultural diversity and difference which is everywhere our lived daily reality?<sup>2</sup> — Stuart Hall

Racism rests on the ability to contain blacks in the present, to repress and deny the past.<sup>3</sup> — Paul Gilroy

In the United Kingdom, events organised to mark the *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007* involved national and local government, regional and local organisations, community groups, human rights organisations, schools and universities, and religious bodies, most notably the Church of England. Organisations from the cultural sector, particularly a wide range of local, regional and national museums, played key roles initiating and staging a combination of historically orientated projects and exhibitions, as well as programming several contemporary art exhibitions.

The deployment of contemporary art in these commemorations is the central focus of this research. Its staging took various forms, the most prominent being exhibitions organised and presented primarily but not exclusively in museums.<sup>4</sup>

My investigation will focus on the extent to which curatorial and institutional practices employed in the programming of contemporary art for the bicentenary

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1 Littler, ‘Introduction, ‘British heritage and the legacies of ‘race’, 2005, 1

2 Hall, ‘Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain’s Living Heritage’, 2000, 3

3 Gilroy, London, 1987, 12

4 Venues for contemporary art exhibitions included the British Museum and V&A Museum in London, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, New Art Exchange, Nottingham and Nottingham Contemporary and Ferens Art Gallery, Hull.

derived from certain cultural agendas of the New Labour government. Although the bicentenary marked an official moment in the pluralising of British history, it was not without significant problems. This study will illustrate some of these problems in relation to government agendas, commemoration, remembrance, institutional practice, history, and contemporary practice.

The bicentenary brought together academics and the museum sector, with numerous curators and historians responding favourably to the project of bringing transatlantic slavery history to greater public attention. Such a union was apparent in various bicentenary initiatives. For example, the Royal Mail's stamp series and the Royal Mint's commemorative £2 coin were both accompanied by pamphlets drawing heavily on academic research.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, historians, academics and museum curators all took part in producing exhibitions such as 'The British Slave Trade: Abolition Parliament and People', 'London, Sugar and Slavery', and such publications as the National Maritime Museum's *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum*. Several academics and historians also gave their support to a series of television and radio programmes, further contributing to raising the public profile of the bicentenary itself, but also more generally to increasing awareness of the transatlantic slave trade.

The range of critical reflections on the bicentenary offered neither a panacea nor a consensus on how national institutions dealt with it. Amongst some of the

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the Royal Mint's commemorative £2 coin was accompanied by an illustrated brochure, which included texts written by Tony Tibbles, Keeper, Merseyside Maritime Museum.

bicentenary's more avid critics, such as historian Marcus Wood and social activist Toyin Agbetu, the event represented an opportunity for debate and dissent. The prevalence and level of critique generated was such that 'critique' could itself be, not only a residual component of the bicentenary programme but, in the vein of 'self-reflexivity', an intrinsic part of the initiative. In this spirit, I bring attention to the dearth of analysis and consideration about reggae's role in remembering slavery, suggesting a certain historical and cultural myopia, and to how the role played by contemporary art in the bicentenary, though prominent, failed to attract much in the way of critical analysis. Critics and commentators took time to examine for example, how museums addressed the history of abolitionism and slavery, and how the BBC's Abolition Season portrayed Britain "as an untroubled, vibrant multicultural society, where equality and social justice are available to all".<sup>6</sup> 'High Anxiety 2007 and Institutional Neuroses', by Roshi Naidoo, highlighted the contradictory aspects of the bicentenary, which, in entering "public heritage culture" like never before, attempted to tell the story of British involvement in the slave trade, within institutions wedded to promoting "normative notions of 'Britishness'".<sup>7</sup>

Forums for critique were dominated by organisations involved in the bicentenary. *1807 Commemorated: the abolition of the slave trade*, an online project and subsequent publication, offered space for curators and critics alike to consider the uses of contemporary art in the bicentenary.<sup>8</sup> However, such

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6 Wilson 'Remembering to forget: the BBC Abolition Season and public memory' <https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/media/analysis/remembering.html> [accessed 14 October 2017]

7 Naidoo, 'High Anxiety: 2007 and Institutional Neuroses', 44

8 See 'Introduction', *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*, eds Laurajane Smith, Geoff Cubitt, Kalliopi Fouseki, Ross Wilson, Routledge, London & New York, 2011

analyses largely bypassed any critical or historical perspectives on the ways in which contemporary art and artists were employed.

In examining the ways in which contemporary art was used as part of the bicentenary, I wish to offer an alternative reading of the cultural politics of the bicentenary, which not only assesses aspects of the commemorative programme but also many of the dominant critiques it generated about commemoration in the public domain. I also aim to explore the extent to which the 're-telling' of a 'national story', via contemporary art, represented an often-overlooked aspect of contemporary art criticism as it intersects and overlaps with artistic practice, government agendas, arts policy, art history, and institutional, curatorial and programming agendas.

Even during the heady days of the 'diversity drive' and the embrace by the art establishment of a select number of Black artists (which occurred almost simultaneously with the emergence of the bicentenary), the routine programming pathologies of many of the actual venues involved ordinarily overlook the practice of Black artists. What brought about this brief moment of tokenism? Why was the prominent role assigned to Black artists not scrutinised in the critical discourses and debates? How do we explain contrasting presence between Black and white artists in the bicentenary's contemporary art programmes? How might the role of contemporary art in the bicentenary be considered as embodying a certain 'normalisation' of diversity within the cultural terrain, whilst simultaneously perpetuating racially skewed curatorial practices?

It is in this context that a reading and critical assessment of contemporary art's role in the bicentenary needs to be considered.

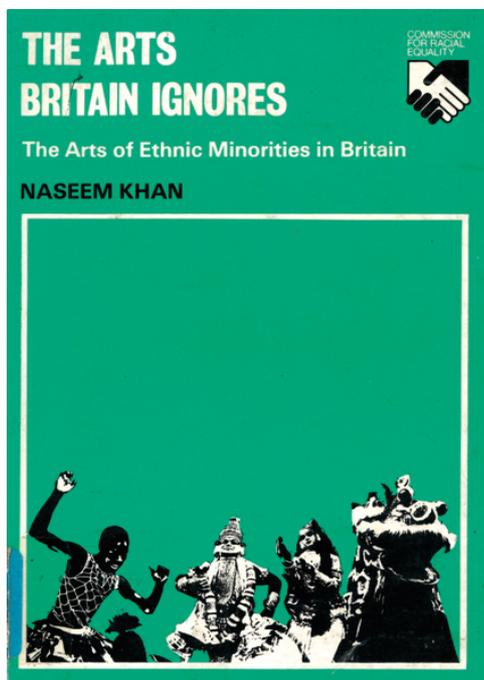


Fig 1. The Arts Britain Ignores:

The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain. Front cover 2nd Edition, 1978

Naseem Khan's study *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*<sup>9</sup> [Fig. 1] from 1976 marked a significant moment in official and enduring attempts to bring race relations ideology to bear on the arts. Khan's study formulated and gave credibility to the notion of 'ethnic arts'. Artist and writer Rasheed Araeen was at the time the most vocal critic of Khan's report, viewing it as a "recipe for cultural separatism".<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the promotion of racially separate funding and arts provision based on ethnicity would become a favoured modus operandi of various local government and regional and national arts-based funding bodies. Under New Labour the Arts Council's promotion of

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9 Khan, 1976

10 Araeen, 'The Art Britain really Ignores', 1984, 101

cultural diversity along with 'quality' and 'access' and 'public benefit' became top funding criteria; however, its application exacerbated rather than allayed practices of tokenism and exclusion in the arts.<sup>11</sup>

The subject of 'race' has a legacy in British history dating back centuries.<sup>12</sup>

However, post-Second-World War immigration to Britain, heralded by the arrival of the ship *Empire Windrush*<sup>13</sup> in 1948, [to be discussed in Chapter 2], provided the touch-paper that would ignite debates around 'race-relations' for the remainder of the century and into the new millennium.

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11 Dyer, *Boxed In: How Cultural Diversity Policies Constrict Black Artists*, 2007 and Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector – A Study of Policies, Initiatives and Attitudes 1976-2006*, 2007. These were critical studies about the Arts Council's promotion of cultural diversity.

12 Peter Fryer notes that in 1601 Elizabeth I issued a proclamation declaring that she was "highly discontented to understand the great numbers of negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm..." Fryer, 12, 1984

13 Originally named MV Monte Rosa, the German owned ship operated as a cruise liner in the early 1930s, before being commandeered by the Third Reich during the Second World War. Following Germany's military defeat, Britain took ownership of the vessel and renamed it Empire Windrush. It was then used to transport servicemen to various parts of the British Empire. Empire Windrush's arrival in Britain in 1948 with 492 passengers on board, the majority of whom were immigrants from Jamaica and Trinidad, signalled the beginning of post-war immigration from the Caribbean to Britain.

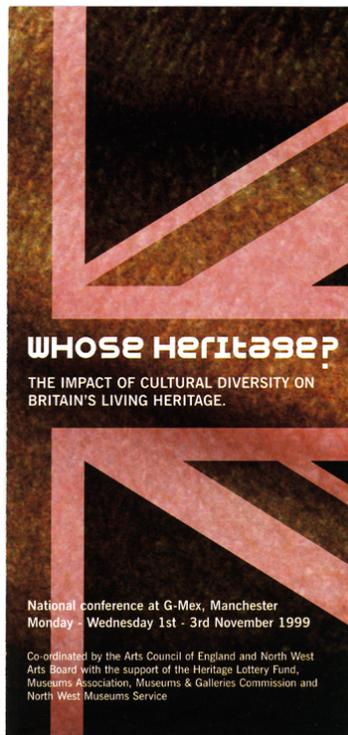


Fig 2. Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage, 1999, conference brochure

Stuart Hall's conference paper from 1999, *Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-Imagining the Post-nation*,<sup>14</sup> [Fig. 2] represents an important moment in bringing together debates on heritage and contemporary culture during the formative period of the New Labour government. It was a clarion call for heritage and culture to better reflect multi-racial Britain. It spanned themes on post-war migration, national identity, devolution, cultural diversity, the British Empire and globalisation. A brief synopsis is useful here for two reasons. First it provides a reminder of the condition of contemporary British culture and heritage in late 1990s Britain. Secondly, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF),

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<sup>14</sup> Delivered as a keynote address for the national conference Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage. Co-ordinated by the Arts Council of England's (now Arts Council England) National conference at G-Mex, Manchester, Monday – Wednesday 1st –3rd November 1999, North West Arts Board with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Museums Association, Museums & Galleries Commission and North West Museums Service. Hall's paper was subsequently published in *Third Text*, Winter No.49, 2000

established in 1994, would by the early 2000s assume the mantle for diversifying British history, again because of New Labour's intervention. Most significantly, HLF would invest £20 million in the bicentenary for a wide range of initiatives, including new and newly refurbished museums, exhibitions, research and community projects. This illustrates how the priority of diversity extended beyond the arts into the heritage sphere.

In *Whose Heritage?* Hall mapped out a series of ideas focused on the arts, culture and heritage, which argued the case for rethinking how 'British Heritage' could and should be formulated in relation to multicultural Britain. By multicultural Britain, Hall primarily, though not exclusively, meant "so-called 'ethnic minority communities' from the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent... [who] have transformed Britain into a multicultural society."<sup>15</sup> Hall defined 'British Heritage' as relating to "the whole complex of organisations, institutions and practices devoted to the presentation of culture and the arts", and posited the "active production of culture and the arts as a living activity, alongside the conservation of the past"<sup>16</sup> as key components for recalibrating how British heritage should be understood and practised.

Rather than being hermetically sealed and impervious to societal change, the nation is, according to Hall, constantly being constructed. Heritage is not a fixed entity, but a "discursive practice" in which "the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory".<sup>17</sup> The skewed and partial telling of the story of post-war Britain portrayed colonisation and slavery, not as a "formative strand

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15 Ibid., 9

16 Ibid., 4

17 Ibid., 5

in the national culture”, but consigned it to “an external appendage, extrinsic and inorganic to the domestic history...”<sup>18</sup>

In 1999, the year of Hall’s paper, the *Transatlantic Slavery Gallery* in Liverpool, and the exhibition *A Respectable Trade*, organised by Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, represented the limited forays of institutions beyond what Hall called the ‘whiteness’ of British heritage. In this context, the idea of “collective social memory” is important to the bicentenary.

Despite the evident myopia of dominant forms of British heritage culture, Hall identified two slow motion “revolutions” which, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, precipitated a change in institutional attitudes and approaches toward the “activity of constructing heritage”<sup>19</sup> domestically and internationally. Firstly, in British culture the “democratization process”, started to include customs and practices of “ordinary everyday British folk...alongside the hegemonic presence of the great and the good”, and although not unproblematic, such developments had “democratized our conception of value”.<sup>20</sup> The second revolution involved a critique of the “Enlightenment ideal” and the “growing de-centering of the West and western-orientated or Eurocentric grand-narratives”, notably manifested by the emergence of contemporary African art in the West (discussed in Chapter 6).<sup>21</sup>

In *Whose Heritage?* Hall’s strategic summation of what was required to transform ‘The Heritage’ in Britain included “massive leverage of a state

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

committed to producing, *in reality rather than in name*, a more culturally diverse, socially just, equal and inclusive society and culture, and *holding its cultural institutions to account*.<sup>22</sup> Aspects of such recommendations had already begun to appear with the Year of Cultural Diversity.<sup>23</sup> Launched as Decibel in 2003, this nationwide festival focused “on ethnic diversity resulting from post-war immigration, with a focus on arts and artists from African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds”, and proposed “opportunities for increased access into the mainstream.”<sup>24</sup> Basic questions had failed to be asked about the suitability and strategy of such an initiative. How would Decibel’s agenda engage with the mainstream? Why was this initiative deemed necessary? Was it productive to categorise artists/curators as ‘culturally diverse’?<sup>25</sup> Arts funding, gallery programmes, employment and training, public patronage and cultural production all appeared to be touched by the priority status now given to ‘cultural diversity’. The Arts Council assertion that the “arts cannot shut its eyes to the strictures of the Stephen Lawrence Report or the legal demands of the new Race Relations (Amendments) Act”<sup>26</sup> was followed by unprecedented levels of funding under the rubric of cultural diversity.

Motivations for undertaking this study stemmed from research I carried out during the early 2000s, which led to the publication of *The Nature of the Beast*:

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22 Hall, ‘Whose Heritage?’, 9 [Hall’s emphasis in italics]

23 The launch of Decibel in 2003 was delayed by three years. It was scheduled to launch in 2000 as the Year of Cultural Diversity but was postponed until 2002 and rebranded as the Big Idea, then this name was also scrapped. See Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast*, 2007, 20

24 Ramamurthy, 2002, 3

25 Hylton, 2007, 20

26 Framework for change: Moves towards a new Cultural Diversity Action Plan (consultation document), The Arts Council of England, 2001, 1

*Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector – A Study of Policies, Initiatives and Attitudes 1976-2006.*<sup>27</sup> This book assesses the impact cultural diversity had on Black artists but stopped short of the bicentenary year. In bringing ‘diversity’ to bear on conceptions of national identity and of British history, as I argue in this thesis, the bicentenary represented an apotheosis of New Labour’s inclusive politics. *Chapter 2: A Labour of Love* draws from a wider range of literature and places contemporary art and visual culture at the centre of its narrative.

This study draws on the work of numerous writers and practitioners and brings different literatures and ideas into dialogue with each other. These span cultural theory, art history, art criticism, music, and slavery commemoration. Stuart Hall’s and Paul Gilroy’s contributions across the spheres of politics and culture have been key. Hall is also instrumental in mapping debates on heritage and British history. Rasheed Araeen, Eddie Chambers and Kobena Mercer offer differing and sometimes conflicting narratives which have informed the visual art context. Contributions to the field of slavery and public commemoration by Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, John R. Oldfield, James Walvin, and Marcus Wood play an important role in this research.

A significant portion of material utilised in this study is derived from a relatively recent period, namely New Labour’s time in government between 1997 and 2010. However, given the historical nature of this study, the provenance of

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27 *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector – A Study of Policies, Initiatives and Attitudes 1976-2006*, Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts, University of Bath, 2007

debates and practices and material (visual art, cultural theory, history, commemoration, ethnography) extends back to the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The emergence of slavery exhibitions and initiatives in Britain's museums sector during the early 2000s, culminating in the bicentenary in 2007, can be more fully understood if viewed in relation to manifestations of and attitudes towards British history, slavery remembrance from earlier periods.

*Chapter 1: Excisions: Reggae, Slavery and Contemporary Art* is primarily dedicated to connections between reggae and visual art during the 1970s and 1980s, largely excised from dominant discourses on slavery and public memory in British history. It argues that such modes of cultural expression, coupled with subsequent work produced by Black practitioners during the 1980s and 1990s, represent a hitherto unacknowledged form of public remembrance. Part III of this chapter, *Contemporary Art and Critique*, introduces the framing and reception of contemporary art within the bicentenary. This aims to illustrate how the bicentenary's historical focus continued a form of erasure of Black history and identity.

The shift from the exclusionary politics of Thatcherism to the inclusionary politics of Blairism is not a decisive break. New Labour's deference to the free market was a continuation of Thatcherite values. During the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, the Arts Council supported various Black projects including Third Text, the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, and Institute of International Visual Arts. Also, during the early to mid 1980s, the Labour-controlled Greater London Council's (GLC) unprecedented but ultimately prescriptive funding for exhibitions and projects involving Black

artists was motivated and guided by its anti-racism agenda. Some of the curatorial agendas manifested in the bicentenary have their roots in institutional practices dating back to Thatcher's Britain.

*Chapter 2: A Labour of Love: The Politics of Inclusion and Commemoration in the Age of New Labour* explores the emergence of and responses to a politically inclusive agenda across social, economic and cultural spectra.

Harnessed to various areas of government and the cultural sector, notably the newly named Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Arts Council, this signalled the mainstreaming of certain conceptions of 'diversity' previously unseen in Britain. The chapter compares and contrasts the various ways in which British political parties and governments, namely Conservative and Labour have approached issues of race, immigration and multiculturalism. The chapter also examines the politics of British commemorative culture, in relation to remembrance, slavery and post-war immigration to Britain heralded by the arrival of the ship *Empire Windrush*.

The emphasis on critiquing the nuances of heritage and commemoration in terms of what aspects of history are remembered can usefully be viewed from another perspective to Hall's. Objects and visual representation can, contrary to preserving or bringing a 'forgotten' past to the fore, potentially act as a means of *forgetting* rather than for remembering. *The Art of Forgetting*<sup>28</sup> and *Blind Memory*<sup>29</sup> offer two contrasting views of how the object and the visual can conspire to encourage a 'collective forgetting' of the past. The relationship

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28 Forty and Kuechler, 1999

29 Wood, 2000

between remembering and forgetting can be considered in relation to the emergence of commemorative orientated events in Britain during the 1990s and 2000s. *Chapter 3: State of Remembrance: Commemorations by the Royal Mint, Royal Mail and the BBC* examines contributions from three state-owned institutions, thereby offering a national perspective on how the bicentenary was marked. The chapter argues that, whilst unprecedented and signifying a pluralistic account of British history, these respective modes of commemoration were problematic in framing and commodifying this past.

The politics of inclusion, championed by New Labour, were implicitly and explicitly expressed in the narratives of the bicentenary. However, institutions that staged contemporary art exhibitions did so in ways which were not only a response to government diktats, but also part of an inherited and long-standing modus operandi, premised on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as well as tokenism and opportunism. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the themes artistic intervention and institutional critique, Black artists and public collections, and contemporary art and the ethnographic museum. Individually, each chapter considers contemporary art exhibitions staged as part of the bicentenary. The bicentenary gave prominence to Black artists. Justification for this approach could perhaps be understood in terms of transatlantic slavery featuring in the work of various contemporary Black British artists over the past thirty years.<sup>30</sup> However, the specificities of this (art) history were largely absent from the bicentenary's commemorative narratives. The thesis argues that the conspicuous presence of Black artists within the bicentenary's contemporary art

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30 For example artists: Mary Evans, Godfried Donkor, Tam Joseph, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney

programme was emblematic of the limitations of state-managed inclusive culture.

*Chapter 4: Intervention and Critique* focuses on two exhibitions presented at the Victoria & Albert Museum (henceforth V&A), London and Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery which, in different ways, used contemporary art as means by which to question histories and legacies of slavery, the slave trade and the roles played by museums.

*Chapter 5: Terms and Conditions* explores the use of Black artists' work held in public collections. The exhibitions *Crossing the Waters*, staged at Cartwright Hall, Bradford, and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, organised by the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester offered decidedly different approaches.

*Chapter 6: Flagship: Romuald Hazoumè's La Bouche Du Roi* considers the British Museum's acquisition and presentation of this major installation. It pays attention to the emergence of contemporary African art in the West during the 1990s and considers Hazoumè's exhibition in relation to abolitionist iconography and the legacies and contemporary practices of the ethnographic museum.

My research comprises close analytical reading of artworks, exhibitions and publications featuring various presentations of contemporary art, in tandem with an explication of the various curatorial rationales behind these projects.

Analysis also gives special attention to the institutional contexts.

*Conclusion: Beyond the Bicentenary* reflects on the legacy of the bicentenary and summarises arguments and assessments in the preceding chapters. It also

considers the nature of material generated since the bicentenary and considers how this has contributed to subsequent debates and scholarship relating to slavery and public memory.

The study aims to bring different forms of history and visual culture into dialogue. It primarily focuses on five exhibitions and commemorative initiatives produced by Royal Mail, Royal Mint and the BBC. This approach aims to bring a number contemporary art exhibitions and texts into dialogue with what I consider to be a key set of social, cultural and political concerns. Such an evaluation of contemporary art was wholly absent within the bicentenary and remained largely so in subsequent literature. I have carried out in-depth critiques and research in relation to a select number of exhibitions. The arguments and insight offered on these are, I believe, applicable to the wider list of exhibitions.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Excisions: Reggae, Slavery and Contemporary Art**

## Introduction

### Slavery and Public Memory in Britain

We urgently need a more exhaustive account of how slavery, imperialism and colonialism contributed to the formation of modern British cultural styles and aesthetic tastes. — Paul Gilroy<sup>1</sup>

The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. Rather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic activity. — Andreas Huyssen<sup>2</sup>

Black artists have been particularly susceptible to being excised from all manner of narratives, even, ludicrously, their own. — Eddie Chambers<sup>3</sup>

This chapter argues that whilst traditional discourses on slavery and commemoration were challenged and subjected to greater scrutiny during the 1990s and early 2000s, such perspectives have themselves consistently negated the role played by particular forms of artistic and cultural expression

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1 Gilroy, *Picturing Blackness in British Art 1700s – 1990s*, exhibition brochure, 28 November-10 March 1996, Tate Gallery

2 Huyssen, 'Introduction: Time and Cultural Memory at Our Fin de Siècle', in *Twilight Memories, Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995, 3

3 Eddie Chambers, *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain*, Rodopi, 2011, 3

which emerged in Britain during the 1970s. The chapter contends that rather than being merely an accidental oversight, such excisions are emblematic of a wider myopia surrounding slavery and commemorative discourses, which in Britain have routinely ignored the foundational role played by reggae music and Rastafari and visual art. This seminal period marked the emergence of particular forms of Black political consciousness in the Caribbean and most significantly in Britain. This chapter offers a more politically urgent understanding of commemorative discourses and evidence of the ways in which music and visual art have referred to slavery in Britain, questioning the more benign and depoliticised image of Black British identity subsequently offered by the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007.

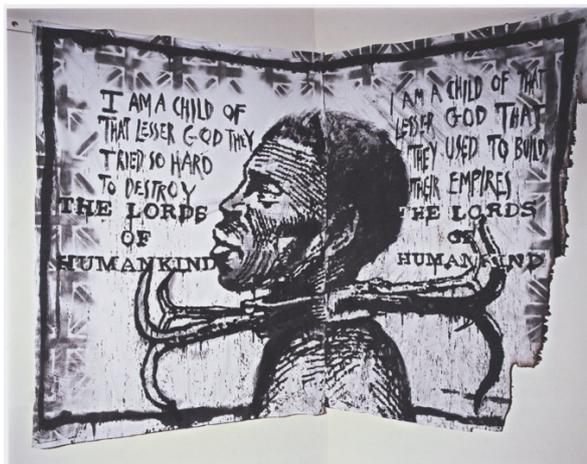


Fig 1. Donald Rodney *The Lords of Humankind (Part one)* 1986

In his essay, *The Art of Donald Rodney*, Eddie Chambers provides a critical assessment of the ways in which the messages found in reggae music of the 1970s would ‘charm’ a number of young Black British artists working in the early 1980s. Chambers cites Rodney’s explanation of his work *The Lords of Humankind* 1986 [Fig 1.] as indicative of this influence. Rodney used large,

singed cotton sheets as canvas for recreating the graphic depiction of a shackled slave. Rodney would recall in an interview: “I burnt the flags, that’s what that’s about. Burning that type of history... I love that phrase – “burning an illusion” – that’s probably why I use burning a lot.”<sup>4</sup> Rodney’s reference to *Burnin’ and Lootin’*<sup>5</sup> was, for Chambers, significant in several ways. Written by Bob Marley and performed by The Wailers<sup>6</sup>, the song recounts in the first person, the experience of an individual who awakes to find himself caught up in a threatening situation: “This morning I woke up in a curfew; O God, I was a prisoner, too – yeah! Could not recognize the faces standing over me; They were all dressed in uniforms of brutality.” The song progresses to describe how, in response to this act of oppression, there will be burnin and lootin of “all pollution”.<sup>7</sup> For Chambers, in *Burnin’ and Lootin’* the riot act undergoes a form of political and spiritual rehabilitation, from its negative connotations to an altogether more positive embodiment of resistance and a righteous rejection of the ‘system’. Such contemporary social commentary was characteristic of a particular brand of reggae, termed *roots reggae*. Rodney’s visual appropriation of The Wailers’ song was characteristic of the ways in which roots reggae’s potent lyrical expression would, in the early 1980s, find an equally potent equivalent in contemporary art.

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4 Op cit. Eddie Chambers, ‘The Art of Donald Rodney’, Donald Rodney: Doublethink, Autograph, The Association of Black Photographers, London, 2003, 22

5 “Burnin’ and Lootin’” from Burnin’ by The Wailers, 1973, Island Tuff Gong Records

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

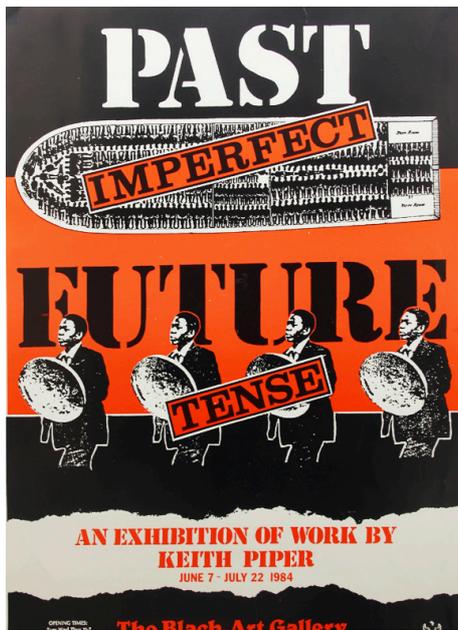


Fig 2. Keith Piper Past Imperfect/Future Tense poster, 1984

Artist Keith Piper, like Rodney, drew inspiration from reggae. In his 1984 solo exhibition *Past Imperfect/Future Tense*<sup>8</sup> at The Black-Art Gallery, Piper designed a dramatic poster, deploying the exhibition's title in spectacular graphic fashion [Fig. 2]. In a poster font, the word PAST is printed in white on black background, directly below which the word IMPERFECT runs diagonally in red across an image of a slave ship. Below that, in black uppercase script, the word FUTURE, over an image appropriated from a riot scene depicting the unlikely combination of a school-boy holding a metal bin lid, as a shield. This image is repeated four times and emblazoned in black on a red background across two of the four images of the school-boy is the word TENSE [Fig 2.]. Some years later, Piper would reflect on how, in Britain of the 1970s with reggae, dub poetry and Rastafari in the ascendency, the "image of the 'Dread' replete with the markers of a particular type of rebellion has always exercised a

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<sup>8</sup> *Past Imperfect/Future Tense*, June 7-July 22, 1984, The Black-Art Gallery

particular type of attraction.”<sup>9</sup> Such attraction did not extend into the few but dominant forms of slavery commemoration which existed in Britain at this time.

Despite the emergence of roots reggae, dub poetry and visual art offering new perspectives on slavery’s legacy, Britain’s cultural establishment was still loathe to commemorate slavery in Britain. The spirit of remembrance as expressed in reggae emerged in the 1970s, some one hundred and sixty years after abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Notably however, roots reggae and visual art, have, in Britain largely remained outside of discourses around public memory and slavery. Of all the modes and traditions of slavery remembrance, roots reggae represents one of the most potent forms. Reggae’s unique and lasting global appeal as well as its impact on popular culture make its excision from certain commemorative discourses and writing on slavery and public memory in Britain particularly significant. In the anthology *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, James Proctor poses the question whether looking back functions as a way of not dealing with the “black British present/future”.<sup>10</sup> Proctor was referencing the post-war story of *Empire Windrush* (discussed in chapter 2) and the often overly celebratory framing of its fiftieth anniversary. However, as people live everyday with the consequences of past events, history is perhaps the only means by which it is possible to understand and contextualise present conditions. The expurgation of roots reggae and visual arts from certain discourses around public memory carries wider political and philosophical implications related to how we remember the past and understand the present. In his book, *Roots and*

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9 Keith Piper, ‘Introduction: Step into the Arena Black Art & Questions of Gender’, *Step into The Arena Notes on Black Masculinity & The Contest of Territory*, Exhibition catalogue, Rochdale Art Gallery, No date [circa 1991], 6

10 James Proctor ‘General Introduction’, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, An interdisciplinary anthology, Manchester University Press, 2000, 2

Culture: Cultural Politics in the Making of Black Britain Eddie Chambers

explains how roots reggae would itself become central to “constructions of Black British identity” and a critical ingredient which inspired “Britain’s dub poets and some amongst a new generation of Black artists alike.”<sup>11</sup>

This chapter is divided into three parts and explores the reasons and significance for reggae’s and visual art’s excision from certain forms of British cultural history. One characteristic shared between roots reggae and visual arts was their ability to draw comparisons and to interweave narratives between slavery and contemporary society.

*Part I* explores the foundational role played by reggae in the remembrance of slavery and its influence on artistic practice in the early 1980s. Originating in Jamaica and followed by its emergence in Britain during the 1970s, roots reggae music would become indicative of ‘dread’ culture and would also take place before an international audience, what Paul Gilroy described as being “as diverse as Poland and Polynesia.”<sup>12</sup> Music journalist Lloyd Bradley considered the period of roots reggae as “one of the most fertile and widely appreciated phases in Jamaican music’s history.”<sup>13</sup> Amongst its many ‘messages’, roots reggae was unapologetically righteous and fervently critical of contemporary social and racial injustices. Integral to this music was the ways in which the story of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery was presented to an international

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11 Chambers, ‘Picture on the Wall’, 2017, 188

12 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, Hutchinson, 1987, 157

13 Lloyd Bradley, ‘Pressure Drop’, *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King*, Penguin, 2000, 265

audience through Jamaican groups such as The Wailers, Burning Spear, and Culture, and British groups such as Steel Pulse, Aswad, and Merger.

*Part II* considers how artists initially influenced by roots reggae would represent slavery in their work during the 1980s and 1990s. After the heyday of roots reggae from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, the subject of slavery would continue to be a recurring theme in the work of several Black British artists, including Donald Rodney and Keith Piper, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Stuart Hall summed up the politicized art by young Black artists in the early 1980s as opening up the “floodgates to a veritable deluge of independent shows and exhibitions in photography and the visual arts.”<sup>14</sup> This work would take several forms and would draw on an array of visual material and media, from painting and sculpture to video and installation, and photography and collage. Thematically this work would also encompass a formidable range of concerns, from the appropriation of slavery iconography and Pan Africanism, to questions about patriotism, nationhood, migration, Christianity, sport and popular culture.

Just as roots reggae had interwoven narratives pertaining to both contemporary Black *sufferation* and the legacy of slavery, likewise, contemporary artists such as Donald Rodney, Keith Piper, Mowbray Odonkor, Mary Evans, Godfried Donkor and Tam Joseph were in the vanguard of a similar approach in contemporary art. Like reggae, the seminal contribution made by these artists to both British art and commemoration has almost without fail been absent from

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14 Op. cit. Chambers, 2017, 203; Stuart Hall, ‘Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments in Post-war History, History Workshop Journal 61, Spring 2006

dominant or 'official' discourses.<sup>15</sup> *Part II* revisits a number of works produced during the 1980s and 1990s and argues that their excision from discourses of art history and commemoration is symptomatic of a wider political neglect. Presented in a range of different solo and group exhibitions, gallery and non-gallery-based projects and even within an artist's studio, individually and collectively, this activity is a testament to the enduring and changing ways in which slavery would be considered a legitimate and important subject matter worthy of public manifestation. The period covered and nature of work explored, though formally disparate, and often occupying different kinds of public spaces and in some instances public collections, collectively represents a formidably important legacy. Much of this work was also produced during the years in which Britain endured successive Conservative governments whose hostility toward Black people was well documented, particularly in regard to their alienating and exclusive concepts of British history and Britishness. Nevertheless, the work produced represents an important part of British art history, not least because it was artists rather than government who were the primary catalyst for its production.

*Part III* centres on the bicentenary and in so doing considers historical excision via two contrasting contributions. These were Stuart Hall's essay *Afterword: The Legacies of Anglo-Caribbean Culture – A Diasporic Perspective*<sup>16</sup> and the research project *1807 Commemorated*. Hall's essay, published in the exhibition

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15 A rare and important account of the relationship between Black visual arts practice and slavery is Gen Doy's *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*. I.B.Tauris: London New York, 2000

16 Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*, Yale Center for British Art with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007

catalogue *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*, represented one of the few attempts to bring a historical perspective on contemporary art to the bicentenary. The research project *1807 Commemorated* attempted to provide a critical overview of the activities staged as part of the bicentenary and sought to ask questions about the political, cultural, social, contemporary and historical significance of the event.

The deployment of historical art collections and artefacts was one of the key ways in which the history and representation of slavery and slave trading were considered during the bicentenary. The pronounced and seemingly earnest ways in which museum collections were considered legitimate subjects for the re-evaluation of both slavery and institutional complicity, contrasts sharply with how the *history* of contemporary art was itself overlooked. Although contemporary art played a key role in several historical exhibitions,<sup>17</sup> its own re-evaluation and history was rarely considered a worthy topic of investigation. Throughout the bicentenary, the legacies of reggae and contemporary art produced by Black artists was all but bypassed, by institutions, critics, research projects and artists themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> These exhibitions included *Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art*, Victoria and Albert Museum; *Human Cargo: The Transatlantic Slave Trade, its Abolition and Contemporary Legacies* in Plymouth and Devon, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, Whitworth Art Gallery (all of which will be examined later in this study).

## Part I

### Roots Reggae: Remembering the Past and Dealing with the Present

Across the events and literature produced during and following the bicentenary in 2007, there was little acknowledgement of the foundational role played by reggae in remembering slavery in Britain. A concert in Liverpool by the Mighty Diamonds represented one of the few official manifestations during the bicentenary.<sup>18</sup> In years to follow, Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* would be cited in post bicentenary publications, not least for being "an iconic rendition of the return to slavery as a constitutive element of blackness."<sup>19</sup> However, although not entirely overlooked in relation to the bicentenary, such relatively fleeting acknowledgements reflected how diminished reggae's significance was despite being a fulcrum of Black political awakening and cultural expression in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s.

Although the history of slavery had been explored, in all its brutality, in numerous academic and scholarly accounts often painstakingly assembled,<sup>20</sup> this body of work would not make its mark in the 'real' world or public domain in quite the same way as roots reggae. Equally, whilst ideas of commemoration and remembrance had assumed conventional modes of dissemination (such as the museum, church service, radio programme and anniversary event), in roots

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18 In the government bicentenary brochure, the Mighty Diamonds – Reggae Legends were listed as performing at the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, 24 March 2007, Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007, HM Government, Department for Communities and Local Government Publications, March 2007, 13

19 Catherine Hall in *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, 2010, 194

20 For example: *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1518-1865*, Daniel P Mannix in collaboration with Malcolm Cowley, Longmans: London 1962; *Sins of the Fathers: A Study of the Atlantic Slave Traders 1441-1807*, James Pope-Hennessy, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1976

reggae, the subject of slavery would receive some of its most vivid and articulate expressions. The sounds of slavery can be traced back through archival records and found in the 'field' audio recordings of blues singers and slaves' testimonies.<sup>21</sup> Such 'authentic' material represents not so much commemoration as 'evidence' of a brutal past. In sound, roots reggae was unlike any musical genre which had gone before it and that would come after it; it presented a hitherto unseen and unheard form of remembrance about slavery which exceeded the conventional narratives of abolitionism and imagery of the kneeling suppliant slave.

In post-independence Jamaica, the economic crash and political unrest are credited with precipitating popular music's closer affiliations with the Rastafari music of roots reggae.<sup>22</sup> In Britain, roots reggae predated the explosion of rioting in 1980s, making its messages hugely portentous. More specifically, Ernest Cashmore noted that "reggae most surely represented the most articulate and invective form of protest music to ever emerge out of the Caribbean."<sup>23</sup>

It is not possible to consider reggae's relationship to slavery and commemoration without first acknowledging the influence Rastafari had on its development in both Jamaica and then in Britain. The Caribbean writer George Lamming observed:

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21 *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*, Shane White and Graham White, Beacon Press, 2005

22 *Rastafari The Dreads Enter Babylon 1955-83*, Soul Jazz Records

23 Ernest Cashmore, *Rastaman: The Rastafari Movement in England*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1979, 101

Rastafari has extended from a small and formerly undesirable cult into a dominant force which influences all levels of national life [...] The Rastafari has dramatized the question that has always been uncomfortable in Caribbean history, and the question is where you stand in relation to your blackness.<sup>24</sup>

Arguably no one did more to raise this question than Marcus Garvey, whose Pan Africanist philosophy coupled with his political actions are widely attributed with providing the grounding for the emergence of Rastafari. Lamming also believed that the Rastafari movement “carried with it a certain continuity from the days of slavery, a continuity of resistance and confrontation with white racism.”<sup>25</sup> In the context of commemoration and remembrance vis-a- vis slavery, the significance of Rastafari cannot be easily overstated. Although Rastafari, like Christianity, drew heavily on the teachings of the Bible, it distinguished itself by extrapolating antithetical interpretations. One of these fundamental differences was the principle that Emperor Haile Selassie I was the Living God, the second coming of the Messiah. Ernest Cashmore explains how:

The call to dismiss conventional Christianity and investigate the possibilities of a salvation on this earth primarily through fighting for recognition was a powerful message indeed, and one which many Jamaicans would have listened to attentively.<sup>26</sup>

In every respect, Rastafari and roots reggae turned traditional modes of remembrance on their head, without reference to abolitionist ‘heroes’, benevolent Christianity or the suppliant kneeling African, which had for so long shrouded the legacy of slavery. The attitude and approach of Rastafari inspired

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24 Op. Cit. George Lamming quoted in Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*, Africa World Press, Inc., 1987, 1

25 Ibid.

26 Cashmore, 116

music was such that these songs were neither concerned with a formal recounting of specific historical times and dates or timelines, nor paying tribute to heroes of abolitionism. Burning Spear's *Old Marcus Garvey*<sup>27</sup> provided a clever history lesson in listing important figures in Jamaica's slavery and post slavery history, whilst bemoaning Garvey's seemingly ever diminishing stature in contemporary Jamaican society.<sup>28</sup>

Although neither the legacies of Rastafari religion or roots reggae were considered significant contributors to Britain's commemorative tradition around slavery, both have nevertheless been the subject of extensive and prolonged analysis across the fields of sociology, music journalism and cultural studies. Such accounts would, during the 1970s, explore the growing appeal of Rastafari in reggae music in Jamaica and then in Britain. The sheer range of literature published about the Rastafari movement and its impact in Jamaica and Britain from the 1970s to the present day is testament to its influential impact on the Black diaspora. In the 1970s, sociological readings sought to explain the growing appeal of Rastafari doctrine amongst the Black working class and disenfranchised youth in Britain. From religious and political awakening, to African consciousness and Pan Africanist sensibilities (Cashmore, 1978; Pryce, 1979, Campbell, 1987), this literature would highlight the impact reggae music had in disseminating the message of Jah.

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27 'Old Marcus Garvey', Marcus Garvey, Burning Spear, Island Records, 1976

28 The Jamaica Observer carried an article 'No one remembers old Marcus Garvey' which reported the "low-keyed ceremony to honour Jamaica's first national hero", Wednesday 19 August 2015, [http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/editorial/-No-one-remembers-old-Marcus-Garvey----\\_19224435](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/editorial/-No-one-remembers-old-Marcus-Garvey----_19224435) [accessed 8 April 2017]

The fascination and impact of the Rastafari movement in Britain would also, with some consistency, extend beyond sociological or Pan Africanist orientated studies to analyses considering the Rastafari movement within the wider sphere of British popular culture (Hebdige, 1987; Jones, 1988). Such an abundance of critical thinking and writing was reflective of the reach and impact Rastafari had on British society. Ernest Cashmore described this as “a peculiarly English cross-fertilisation of Rastafari ideas and values.”<sup>29</sup> Eddie Chambers summarised the significance of the 1970s Rastafari movement as “one of the largest and most important contributory factors in the cultural making of Black Britain.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore “reggae was the principal means by which the detail of Rastafari spread from Jamaica to Britain, and indeed across the world.”<sup>31</sup> Recounting slavery’s brutal history was innate to reggae’s lyrical narrative in both countries. Burning Spear’s *Slavery Days* stoically recounted this legacy: “Do you remember the days of slavery? And how they beat us/And how they worked us so hard/And they used us/ 'Til they refuse us.”<sup>32</sup> Roots reggae also insisted on linking the history of captivity, the middle passage, and ‘the crack of the whip’ to Black people’s contemporary travails. In this way, roots reggae presented a more dialectical view of slavery. Rather than being merely the past, the ongoing harsh realities of life in contemporary society (sufferation) were fused and interwoven with slavery’s brutal past. Take for example *Slave Driver* written by Bob Marley and performed by The Wailers:

Slave Driver, the table is turning,  
Catch a fire so you can get burn  
Ev’rytime I hear the crack of a whip

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29 Cashmore, 107

30 Chambers, 2017, 100

31 Ibid.,96

32 ‘Slavery Days’, Burning Spear, Island Records, 1975

My blood runs cold,  
I remember on the slave ship  
How they brutalise the very souls  
Today they say that we are free  
Only to be chained in poverty,  
Good God, I think it's illiteracy  
It's only a machine that makes money.<sup>33</sup>

Time and again in reggae, the relationship between slavery and contemporary society were interwoven in lyrics. In the late 1970s, and at the height of its global predominance, Cashmore noted: "There can be no doubt that reggae, with its sometimes acidic statements couched in apocalyptic idioms, started from the perspective of a black Jamaican looking at the society around him and reflecting on 'what is wrong?' and what can be done about it?"<sup>34</sup> Culture's song, *Two Sevens Clash*<sup>35</sup> from the eponymous album was characteristic of this approach. Written by the group's lead-singer and songwriter, Joseph Hill, the song's lyrics were a subtle fusion of mysticism and prophecy, old-fashioned terminology (such as St. Jago de la Vega which today is known as Spanish Town) and social commentary:

Wat a liiv an bambaie  
When the two sevens clash  
Wat a liiv an bambaie  
When the two sevens clash

My good old prophet Marcus Garvey prophesied, say  
"St. Jago de la Vega and Kingston is gonna meet"  
And I can see with mine own eyes  
It's only a housing scheme that divides<sup>36</sup>

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33 Slave Driver' lyrics by Bob Marley from the album *Catch a Fire*, by The Wailers, 1973

34 Cashmore, 103

35 Culture, *Two Sevens Clash*, Joe Gibbs, 1977

36 Ibid.

The expressions of political consciousness in reggae music would become an outlet and a source of inspiration and identification. Through roots reggae and the influence of Rastafari, contemporary social ills in Jamaica and Britain were expressed in terms of 'sufferation'. In Britain, sufferation was emblematic not only of the sufferings of the Black people globally, but also more specifically of several social, economic and political factors which had created a particularly fractious relationship between Black people and the state. This first generation of young Black Britons to be born in Britain faced a social and political system that appeared decidedly against them, in terms of education, job prospects and the state's tendency to characterize them as socially deviant. A profoundly hostile environment embodied by an unrestrained use of state power by the police was exerted on the Black community and Black men in particular. Such conflicts would flare up during the 1970s but would dramatically come to a head during the 1980s, most notably in the Bristol and Brixton riots of 1980 and 1981.

By the mid 1970s, Bob Marley would be at the epicentre of roots reggae's global appeal. British roots reggae groups also began to emerge. Often originating as backing bands for high profile Jamaican acts such as Culture and Burning Spear, groups like Aswad, Steel Pulse, Misty in Roots, Reggae Regulars, Tradition, and Black Slate would claim international success in their own right. Two of them, Aswad and Steel Pulse, formed in 1975 in London and Birmingham respectively, characterized the way children of the 'Windrush' generation aligned themselves to the philosophy of Marcus Garvey and Rastafari. Integral to this was an avowed affinity with Africa and people belonging to the African diaspora, as well as political defiance which eloquently described the problems facing Black people in 1970s Britain. Whilst their

immediate social context was central to their early recordings in ways not too dissimilar to their Jamaican counterparts, both Aswad and Steel Pulse would make slavery an integral part of their lyrical material.

In Aswad's *Drum and Bass Line* of 1982, the lyrics simultaneously project an image of the dance floor, the physical act of dancing to *the rhythm of the drum and bass line* in an almost hypnotic act fused with memories of slavery's brutality:

In a different style  
Dub plate spinning all the while

What the people wanting  
Dub plate till a morning

That's what they all are shouting for  
Can you hear them?  
Seems they just can't refuse it  
Just go to bounce and use it  
Seems they were born with rhythm, within

And you couldn't give up now  
You know you couldn't give up now  
Couldn't give up now  
Dancing to the rhythm of the drum and the bass line

To the question that you're asking

You couldn't give up now  
You know you couldn't give up now  
Couldn't give up now  
What you do, dancing to the rhythm  
of the drum and bass line<sup>37</sup>

*Drum and the Bass Line* evokes the image of slavery as an integral part of real life experience in Britain. The significance of the dance floor and pulsating

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37 'Drum and the Bass Line', Aswad from *Not Satisfied*, Columbia Records, 1982

*riddims* goes beyond merely entertainment, they also evoke the horror of the crack of the whip:

It's clear to see my friend  
Time before when we use music  
To cool our very soul  
And when slave master beat I with the whip  
And he made I jump and twist  
We use that music to cool us down, I say

Steel Pulse's *Not King James Version* similarly weaves narratives about slavery and the contemporary predicament facing Black people when they declared:

Slavery came and took its toll,  
In the name of John Bull Dog.  
Said we turned our backs on God,  
Lost the powers that we had.  
Now our backs against the wall,  
Ask ourselves about the fall.

Rise, rise, rise!  
Hold on to your culture!

Like its Jamaican counterpart, roots reggae in Britain explored problems in contemporary society for Black people. Steel Pulse's album *Handsworth Revolution*, from 1978, was an example of this but also of British reggae's irreverence and rootedness *inna Inqlan*:

It was foolish to build it on the sand  
Handsworth shall stand, firm – like Jah rock – fighting  
back  
We once beggars are now choosers, no intention to  
be losers  
Striving forward with ambition  
And if it takes ammunition  
We rebel in Handsworth revolution<sup>38</sup>

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38 *Handsworth Revolution*, Steel Pulse LP Mango Records, 1978

Such forceful expressions in British roots reggae reflect the extent to which Black people in Britain and further afield, notably on the African continent, faced innumerable struggles. Equally, such lyrics hold dear the belief that Black people should also stand proud and not be cowed in the face of such adversity:

Dread we are for a cause, deprived of many things  
Experienced phoney laws, hatred Babylon brings  
We know what you got to offer, we know what's  
going on  
Don't want no favours, 'cause there is still hunger  
Innocent convicted, poor wage, hard labour  
Only Babylon prospers and humble suffer  
They are brothers in south of Africa  
One black represent all, all over the world

Can't bear it no longer, blessed with the power  
Of Jah Creator, we will get stronger  
And we will conquer  
And forward ever, and backward never  
Handsworth Revolution  
Handsworth Revolution  
Handsworth Revolution  
Revo- Revo- Revolution<sup>39</sup>

Such messages of resistance and defiance from the mid 1970s, characterised British reggae. Groups such as Steel Pulse and Aswad were 'home grown', formed by adolescents attending secondary school in England's two largest cities, Birmingham and London. Riding roughshod over polite conventions of resistance and stoicism, which their parents, the Windrush generation, did well to navigate and pursue, the *yout* were avowedly at odds with the harsh realities of British life, which they were not going to tolerate. Their songs combine lyrical expression and an inclination towards vivid interconnection between the traumas of the past with those of the present-day.

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39 Ibid.

Roots reggae and Rastafari continue to be explored in music journalism, sociology and cultural studies, highlighting its cultural, artistic, social, spiritual and diasporic significance in relation to slavery. By comparison, public memory and commemorative practices and discourse have, in Britain, largely excised reggae's legacy. Instead, literature, theatre, television and museums have, largely without question, been considered as the 'natural' and legitimate habitat for slavery commemoration. Slavery's emergence within the public realm was part of the museum sector's engagement with what Jo Littler calls "legacies of race", which explored "connections between museum display, imperialism and colonialism" as well as displaying "interest in refashioning British heritage."<sup>40</sup> Despite such moves, the profound significance of reggae and Rastafari has somehow slipped through what might appear to be the all-inclusive, all-embracing net of commemorative discourses and practices.

One cause of being overlooked may be timing. On the one hand, roots reggae's and Rastafari's emergence came long after British commemorative practices around slavery, such as they were, had already been set in stone, both metaphorically and literally.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, new contemporary commemorative practices (in literature, television, theatre, exhibitions and

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40 Jo Littler, 'Introduction', *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'*, 2005, 5

41 Historian J. R. Oldfield has noted that "Britons have been led historically to place particular value on the nation's tradition of humanity, as represented by a limited number of specific (white) individuals." Oldfield identifies two such monuments at Westminster Abbey, erected in honour of William Wilberforce in 1840 and Zachary Macaulay in 1842. He also cites Charles Buxton's memorial drinking fountain from 1865 and Wilberforce House Museum which opened to the public in 1906. See 'Sites of memory: abolitionist monuments and the politics of identity' *Chords of Freedom*, 2007, 56

academia) which began to reshape that stone followed roots reggae's heyday.<sup>42</sup> The case for recognizing roots reggae's influence and relevance is compelling, not least because it came before the bicentenary in 2007. There could hardly have been a more *public*, more *populist* and what Paul Gilroy termed "sophisticated and politically engaged" artistic form. Roots reggae had an astounding global audience. In Britain, Rastafari, its bedfellow, had a profound appeal as a "popular phenomenon."<sup>43</sup> The role played by reggae in the commemoration of slavery provides reason to question traditional concepts of commemoration. As mentioned earlier, young Black artists such as Donald Rodney and Keith Piper would be influenced by and drawn towards the political expression of roots reggae. As Eddie Chambers notes: "It was, though, within the realm of disaffection and marginalisation that a Black-British cultural identity saw its strongest germination" and through Black youngsters would produce an "astonishing range of artistic practices, which sought to comment – with poise, certainty, and composure on their newly developed state of being."<sup>44</sup> Other practitioners would also generate art works during the 1980s into the late 1990s about slavery, the middle passage, the slave ship and British history. However, just as reggae had been excised from discourses on slavery and its commemoration in the bicentenary, so too were the legacies of visual art history. Transitioning from sound to visuals, from popular culture to the environs

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42 Notable works of fiction about slavery and the slave trade include: Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge*, 1991; Philippa Gregory, *A Respectable Trade*; 1995, Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger*, 1992. The late 1990s and mid-2000s also witnessed a growing interest in slavery from museums and academia, for example: the national education initiative, *Understanding Slavery* (USI) 2003, and Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Such activity would notably increase in the years leading up to and beyond the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade 1807-2007.

43 Gilroy, 1987, 187

44 Chambers, 2017, 76

of 'high art', is not, in commemorative terms, the leap it might appear.

Importantly and also somewhat ironically these legacies belong to Black artists.

The excision represents a microcosm of the ways in which Black people are more generally marginalised from mainstream society.

The main aim of this thesis is to examine the role contemporary art played in the bicentenary. However, such an analysis not only requires an assessment of events within the bicentenary but also an appreciation of commemoration and remembrance outwith this specific context. If the bicentenary was about commemorating the past, re-looking at objects, collections and texts from the past, this revisionism should also include an examination of the wider ways in which slavery has been remembered and explored in contemporary British art.

## **Part II**

### **Contemporary Art, Slavery and the Public Domain**

This section considers how the subject of slavery was explored by a number of artists during the 1990s. This exploration includes a publicly sited commission by Donald Rodney, exhibitions by Keith Piper and Godfried Donkor, and singular works by Mowbray Donkor, Mary Evans and Tam Joseph. Produced between 1990 to 1999, together this work is not thematically representative or cohesive. Spanning, site specific and multimedia installations, painting, collage and wall hangings, these works reflect both the enduring and informal ways in which slavery has figured in different artistic practices. Where Rodney or Joseph would frequently return to the subject, the practices of Piper and Evans, appear, albeit in radically different ways, to emerge from slavery. Where Rodney and Joseph have sought new ways of appropriating slavery's

iconography, for Piper and Evans, the legacy and trauma of slavery inflects the political and contemplative.

Whilst reggae influenced both Rodney and Piper's early works,<sup>45</sup> other ideas and influences such as the body and religion came to prominence in their later works on slavery.

In the early 1990s, Rodney and Piper each produced, within a year of each other, works which used as their starting point the interwoven histories between monarchy and slave trading. Other individual works by Odonkor, Evans, Donkor and Joseph are also explored here in terms of the spaces they occupied, as temporary public exhibitions or as becoming part of national art collections.

Such a differentiated body of work, presented in an equally differentiated number of public spaces, with differing artistic and curatorial agendas illustrate how traditional discourses around British history were challenged. Equally, an examination of the particular kinds of public spaces these works came to occupy (public galleries, collections, studio spaces, Black galleries) is crucial to understanding their significance and hitherto unheralded contribution to discourses of commemoration and art history. Analysis of these art works and the contexts within which they were displayed represents a form of counter narrative to dominant discourses around British (art) history and the politics of the legacy of slavery in British public memory.

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<sup>45</sup> Rodney's early work took various forms: painting (*100% Cotton, The South's Favourite Cloth*, 1982), sculpture, (*Middle Passage*, 1984) and mixed media (*Systems of Slavery and The Lords of Humankind*, 1986). Piper's poster for his exhibition *Past Imperfect/Future Tense* (1984) and his photo text work (*Go West Young Man*, 1987) epitomised the ways in which history and contemporary social commentary would be interlaced.

## Visceral Canker

As part of *TSWA Four Cities Project*,<sup>46</sup> [Fig 3.] an ambitious non-gallery based exhibition, Rodney presented *Visceral Canker*, utilising bodily fluids and ideas of disease and invasion. Rodney was invited to produce a new work in Plymouth and elected to use the Battery, at Mount Edgcumbe Park in Plymouth. Rodney's interest in Plymouth and specifically the Battery was based on a series of overlapping themes including maritime and slave trade histories. Originating from Tudor times, this coastal defence system underwent a series of significant structural reinforcements during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century at the request of Prime Minister Lord Palmerston government, to further enhance the ability of the British navy to repel what was then a real threat of foreign invasion by the militarily expanding French Empire.<sup>47</sup>

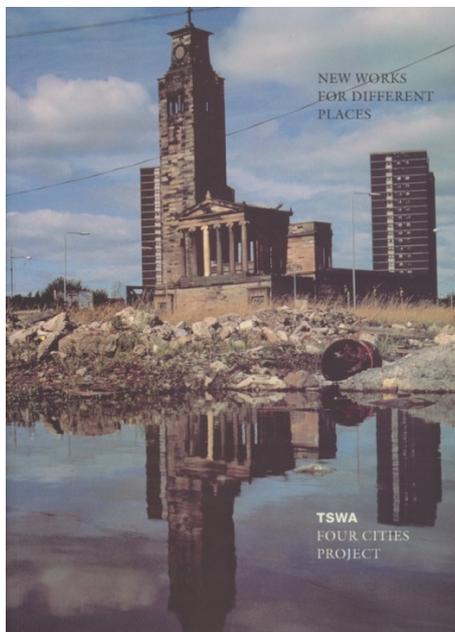


Fig 3. *TSWA Four Cities Project*, 1990, catalogue cover

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46 *TSWA Four Cities Project* took place in four cities in the United Kingdom: Derry, Glasgow, Newcastle, and Plymouth, involving twenty-six international artists, 4 September-28 October 1990

47 [http://www.castlesfortsbattles.co.uk/south\\_west/garden\\_battery.html](http://www.castlesfortsbattles.co.uk/south_west/garden_battery.html) [accessed 23 March 2018]

*Visceral Canker* [Fig. 4] is a mixed-media work comprising two specially fabricated heraldic coats of arms, belonging to Plymouth born Sir John Hawkins (also Hawkyns), and Queen Elizabeth I. As a son and freeman of Plymouth, Hawkins was England's first successful slave trader "to line his pockets by trafficking in black slaves."<sup>48</sup> Although Britain would not lead the trade for another hundred years, in an act of self-serving benevolence, Queen Elizabeth I loaned Hawkins the use of one of her naval ships, the *Jesus of Lubeck* to purchase and capture slaves on his second such voyage in 1564. Far from being a voyage shrouded in mystery, Hawkins was positively encouraged to flaunt his brutal brand of piracy and kidnapping, courtesy of a coat of arms which was considered "a singular honour for the city of Plymouth" and gifted to Hawkins for his voyage on the *Jesus of Lubeck*.<sup>49</sup> Depicted within Hawkins' heraldic design were three shackled slaves.<sup>50</sup>

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48 Peter Fryer, 'Those kind of people', *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, Pluto Press, 1984, 8

49 Culture refer to the *Jesus of Lubeck* in their song *Too Long in Slavery* from the LP *International Herb*, Virgin Records, 1979. This highlights once again the roles played by visual art and reggae music in remembering slavery.

50 Fryer. 1984, 8

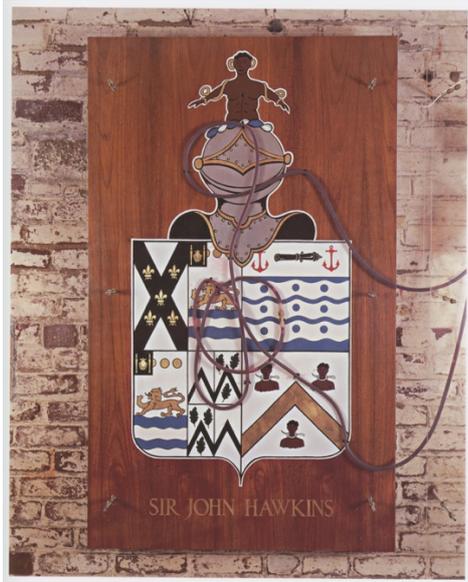


Fig 4. Donald Rodney *Visceral Canker*, 1990,  
1 wood Panel 'Sir John Hawkins', 155 x 91cm, silicon tubing, blood bags, electrical pump

In *Visceral Canker*, Hawkins' and Queen Elizabeth's coats of arms were reproduced on wood and installed in one of the damp, dark and dank chambers of the Battery. Bolted to the stone walls, both fabricated heraldic arms also have a series plastic pipes running loosely over their surface back to a pumping mechanism attached to a large sheet of clear perspex, which is also secured to the masonry. The assortment of interconnected lengths of electrical cabling, silicon tubing, electrical motor and blood bags simulate the process of a blood transfusion. The mechanised propulsion of body fluid functions as a metaphor for the enslaved body being, quite literally, the life blood of the slave trade. As a sufferer of the blood disorder sickle-cell anaemia, blood transfusions were also a regular part of Rodney's life.<sup>51</sup> No known cure exists for sickle cell anaemia. It

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<sup>51</sup> The National Health Service describes this condition as follows: "Sickle cell disease is the name for a group of inherited conditions that affect the red blood cells. The most serious type is called sickle cell anaemia. Sickle cell disease mainly affects people of African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Eastern Mediterranean and Asian origin. In the UK, it's particularly common in people with an African or Caribbean family background. People with sickle cell disease produce unusually shaped red blood cells that can

primarily affects people with an African and African Caribbean background. In *Visceral Canker* the blood transfusion becomes a form of allegory for sickness and disease. Equally, what Rodney refers to as the “uselessness”<sup>52</sup> of the Battery, as a redundant naval defence mechanism itself becomes a potent metaphor for his own failing body, or the uselessness of his ‘bad’ blood.

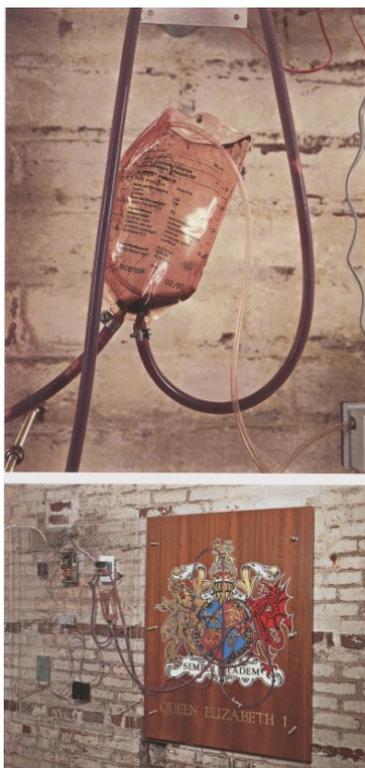


Fig 5. Donald Rodney, *Visceral Canker*, 1990,  
1 wood Panel ‘Queen Elizabeth 1’, 122 x 91cm,  
silicon tubing, blood bags, electrical pump

It had been Rodney’s intention to use his own blood in this work. However, at the time of the exhibition, there existed considerable unease about the threat posed by infected blood. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, public anxiety

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cause problems because they don't live as long as healthy blood cells and they can become stuck in blood vessels. Sickle cell disease is a serious and lifelong condition, although long-term treatment can help manage many of the problems associated with it.” <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Sickle-cell-anaemia/Pages/Introduction.aspx> [accessed 31 March 2017]

52 *New Works for Different Places*, TSWA Four Cities Project, 1990, 124

around AIDS<sup>53</sup>, often fuelled by the media, generated what was in many respects ill-informed and often specious attitudes towards notions of public safety and decency. Plymouth local authority ordered that, to prevent “unnecessary offence to public sensibility”,<sup>54</sup> Rodney had to use fake blood rather than his own. As observed by Virginia Nimarkoh, “the idea of exhibiting ‘damaged’ blood in a publicly funded venue was not considered worth the risk of bad Press, despite sickle cell anaemia being a congenital blood disorder rather than a disease transmissible via the exchange of bodily fluids.”<sup>55</sup> It was not possible to discern by sight alone, the use fake rather than real blood, Nimarkoh opined that such an unforeseen concession “undoubtedly compromised both the aesthetic and conceptual” premise of *Visceral Canker*.<sup>56</sup>

Rodney’s use of (fake) bodily fluid still carries a wider resonance, as part of an ongoing use of various aspects and representations of his body (x-rays, scar tissue and skin) as traces and fragments of a physically tormented and decaying body. Rodney’s articulation of personal and collective pain and suffering are presented via what Amelia Jones describes as a “dispersed subject”<sup>57</sup> in which the entire body undergoes trauma, violation or transformation.<sup>58</sup> *Visceral Canker* [Fig 5.] stages metaphors of pain and suffering. Rodney’s reference to blood, be it his own ‘fake’ blood, or the blood of

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53 AIDS is an abbreviation for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

54 *New Works for Different Places*, TSWA Four Cities Project, 1990, 124

55 Ibid.

56 Virginia Nimarkoh, ‘The Image of Pain: Physicality in the Art of Donald Rodney’, *Donald Rodney: Doublethink*, 2003, 89

57 Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 1998

58 For example, American artist Bob Flanagan’s sadomasochistic performance ‘YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE’, 1991, in which he nails his penis to a stool, or Orlan’s ‘Omnipresence’, 1993 in which the artist undergoes facial cosmetic surgery as a live performance, broadcast to an audience watching via a monitor.

slaves offers an altogether different form of narrative relating to bodily fluid. As one historian put it: "Sickness and death were central to the African experience aboard the slave ship."<sup>59</sup> In *Black Ivory*, James Walvin describes how a slave's "life was nasty, brutish and short; marked from first to last by pain and suffering, their demise often coming early and painfully."<sup>60</sup> There were numerous miserable diseases that wreaked havoc amongst slave communities. "Most spectacular, because most visible and ugly, of the slave diseases were perhaps yaws and smallpox, though neither was the main killer of slaves."<sup>61</sup> "Bloody flux", dysentery by another name, was one of the primary killers of slaves on board ships and on land. Blood in relation to the slave trade becomes a symbol of endless contagion and of as Walvin writes: "The slave trade was, paradoxically, both the sustenance and the bane of the slave communities."<sup>62</sup> The illusion of contagion and with it the threat of invasion and disease is also a metaphor for xenophobia. Despite the inherent element of compromise, *Visceral Canker* still carries a multiplicity of meaning generated not least by the geographical and historically loaded context in which it was presented:

Rodney was empathising with the tormented slaves of Hawkins' coat of arms as much as he was empathising with the royally despised blackamoors of the sixteenth century London. Furthermore, he was declaring that what Hawkins and Elizabeth I represented had an enduring relevance and an historical continuity to the ways in which Plymouth existed as a modern city, and the ways in which

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59 Marcus Rediker, 'From Captives to Shipmates', *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, 2007, 273

60 James Walvin 'Disease and Death', *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery*, 1992, 135

61 *Ibid.*, 138

62 *Ibid.*, 143

Britain existed as a twentieth century country – a country in which the sentiment of ‘If they’re Black, Send them back’ continues to be freely and liberally expressed.<sup>63</sup>

Despite having endorsed and sponsored early ventures in slave trading which precipitated the arrival of Africans to England as slaves, Elizabeth I expressed her displeasure at the presence of “those kinde of people” in her realm and requested they be sent back.<sup>64</sup> What was essentially unvarnished [racial] hostility would, in decades and centuries to come, be revisited in sentiments expressed not by British monarchy, but politicians such as Peter Griffiths in 1964, Enoch Powell in 1968 and Margaret Thatcher in 1978.

### **A Ship Called Jesus**

Keith Piper’s solo exhibition *A Ship Called Jesus*, [Fig 6] an immersive mixed media installation, took place at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in 1991, and considered the relationship between Christianity, slavery and the formation of Black identity. Where Rodney’s *Visceral Canker* considered the trauma of slavery through an allegory of the diseased body, Piper’s *A Ship Called Jesus* uses the slave ship as a metaphorical conduit for a spiritual journey, charting the evolutionary role of Christianity across the Black diaspora. This journey is both traumatic and redemptive in its quest to provide reasoned and contemplative reflection about the violent, unforgiving and irrevocable spectre of slavery. The catalyst for Piper’s immersive multi-media installation was the influential role religion played in his early life. He states: “In common with many

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63 Op. cit., Chambers, ‘The Art of Donald Rodney’, 2003, 32

64 Op.cit., Fryer, 8

other contemporary Black artists, I am a product of a fundamentalist Black Christian upbringing.”<sup>65</sup> Whilst rooted in Piper’s religious upbringing, *A Ship Called Jesus* is also the product of an artist who had, in the 1980s, taken his “cues from strands of reggae music that by the mid to late 1970s had come to dominate”<sup>66</sup> and were steeped in a Rastafari belief system. In this respect, *A Ship Called Jesus* represents a progressive, rather than outright oppositional assessment of the changing role of Christianity in the African diaspora, or what Piper described as a “gentle examination of three particular historical phases in the relationship between peoples of African descent and the Christian Church.”<sup>67</sup> The exhibition’s journeys from past to present; from Christianity’s role as moral justification for slavery, its appropriation and ultimate subversion by insurrectionists, such as Nat Turner in 19<sup>th</sup> century America to becoming, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what W.E.B. Du Bois described as “the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.”<sup>68</sup> Christianity would also become a rallying point of civil rights in 1950s and 1960s America, in which Martin Luther King Jr was “compelled to carry the gospel of freedom.”<sup>69</sup>

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65 Keith Piper, ‘Black Art/Black Church’, exhibition catalogue, *A Ship Called Jesus*, Ikon Gallery, 1991

66 Chambers, *Roots & Culture*, 2017, 188

67 Piper, ‘Black Art/Black Church’, exhibition catalogue, *A Ship Called Jesus*, Ikon Gallery, 1991

68 W.E.B Du Bois Op. Cit., ‘Of the Faith of the Fathers’, *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, Milton C. Sernett (ed.), Duke University Press, Durham, 1985, 311

69 Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963”, *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, Milton C. Sernett (ed.), Duke University Press, Durham, 1985, 431



male Black radical writers of the 1960s such as George Jackson and Leroi Jones, as well as by the content and orientation of a whole generation of Black British poets and writers who had emerged during the 1970s. Added to this, I would argue, was a sense of aesthetic bleakness derived from growing up in the West Midlands during the industrial recession of the late seventies and early eighties, which was able to match well a fashionably anti-craft values, anti bourgeoisie art establishment posture which many of us were making in a vain attempt to cultivate.<sup>71</sup>



Fig 7. Keith Piper, *A Ship Called Jesus* 1991, 'A Pirate' (left) 'An English Queen' (right) Computer montage on board 4 x 2ft

Piper's overview illustrates how, in thinking about this exhibition in relation to historical excisions and commemoration, histories are aggregated, as historical, cultural, artistic and commemorative entities which together inflect the meaning of how slavery is remembered in Britain. In *A Ship Called Jesus*, Piper also brought the relatively distant legacy of slavery to bear on contemporary Britain. The Church of England would assume a central role in commemorations staged

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

as part of the of the abolition of the slave trade, intrinsic to which was its much-publicised apology for the Church's involvement in slavery.<sup>72</sup> What was not acknowledged was how racial hostility toward Black churchgoers in post Second World War Britain had resulted in the formation of Black churches in Britain.

*A Ship Called Jesus* represents an exploratory journey through image and text. Kobena Mercer described it as “psychic processes of mourning, which seek to redeem and repair the losses that bring all identities into being through rituals of separation.”<sup>73</sup> In its examination of the relationship between Christianity and slavery, *A Ship Called Jesus* is both meditative and politically driven. *The Ghost of Christendom* includes a series of computer-generated imagery, central to which are images appropriated from historical paintings of Sir John Hawkins and Elizabeth I [Fig. 7]. The fragmentary nature of composite and individually framed imagery alludes to religious iconography such as crosses and stained-glass windows as well as burial sites and headstones. This fragmentation also includes an assortment of biblically loaded imagery in which the atomised Black body is portrayed in various sacrificial modes. *The Rites of Passage* presents a

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<sup>72</sup> Commemorating 2007 had been part of the church's internal discussions since 2004, but it was in February 2006 that the Church of England's General Synod announced that it had unanimously passed a motion to “apologise” for its role in the slave trade and slavery. This announcement was described by the BBC News Channel as coming “ahead of commemorations of the 200th anniversary of the Slave Trade Act 1807”. The Daily Telegraph reported that, although the motion had been opposed by the Right Reverend Tom Butler, Bishop of Southwark, because he feared “the Church becoming the “national scapegoat” for slavery when the whole country should share the guilt”, it was nevertheless passed having been supported by “speaker after speaker, including Dr Williams [Archbishop of Canterbury] and the Archbishop of York, Dr. John Sentamu.”

<sup>73</sup> Kobena Mercer, ‘Anatomies of the Body Politic, Its Central Nervous System: 1991-1996’, *Relocating the Remains*, Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997, 66

dramatic dark pool of water measuring some thirty feet in length. Reminiscent of a ship’s hull, as a dark expanse of opaque liquid, it also functions as a metaphorical coffin<sup>74</sup> for the disappeared, the forgotten bodies. A series of simultaneous montage projections with imagery drawn from family albums and the public realm of popular culture produce what Jean Fisher calls an “almost hallucinatory visual panorama and soundscapes.”<sup>75</sup> Professor Gen Doy identifies the inherent challenges presented in Piper’s installation:

The viewer has to work to piece together an understanding of the images and sounds. History is not offered as an easily consumable linear narrative, but as something that must be constructed from a sometimes confusing and fragmented flow of material.<sup>76</sup>

At the time, *A Ship Called Jesus* was Piper’s most expansive and ambitious venture into time-based work, which enabled him to montage, cut, paste and merge a veritable range of visual and historical iconography producing a visual cacophony. Whilst slavery lies at its core, the ‘voyage’ undertaken in *A Ship Called Jesus* considers a complex set of ideas which shift between past and present, history and economics, morality and religious redemption. However, what Doy interpreted as “sometimes confusing and fragmented flow of material” could also be understood as Piper’s intention to express the unresolved legacy of slavery in contemporary Britain. Kobena Mercer considers Piper’s work in the wider context of the nation state, looking at how Britain, unlike post-Apartheid South Africa, had never even attempted to face up to its brutal past and

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74 Jean Fisher, ‘Diaspora, Trauma and the Poetics of Remembrance’, 2007, 201

75 Ibid. 201

76 Gen Doy, ‘Economies, Histories, Identities’, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Post Modernity*, 2000, 83



time, rightfully selected for these projects. Equally, that both were making work exploring the legacies of slavery make it profoundly important, not least because such a public and prestigious platform had in the 1990s been rarely made available to such artistic concerns. *Trophies of Empire*, staged in 1992 by Bluecoat Gallery and involving both Rodney and Piper was, in some respects, a break from the institutionally habitualised approach towards programming Black artists in a *self-referencing* manner.<sup>81</sup> But it was, in comparison to the TSWA and Ikon Gallery projects, a far more prescriptive and mannered affair, conceived as it was, as part of a ‘critical’ response to Columbus’ Quincentenary celebrations and the official formation of the European Union. By 2007, things had changed sufficiently for the bicentenary organisers to give a prominent role to Black artists. And yet, group exhibitions such as *Uncomfortable Truths* and *Crossing the Waters* (discussed in a later chapter) were reminiscent of the ways in which Black artistic practice was homogenised in survey-type exhibitions.

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81 The multi-site project *Trophies of Empire*, 1992, was the closest any institution in the UK came to presenting a group exhibition which specifically sought to explore the legacies of slavery and Empire in contemporary art. Led by the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool and artist Keith Piper, *Trophies of Empire* was devised in part as a critical response to Columbus’ Quincentenary and the official formation of the European Community, both of which took place in 1992. Whilst many of the participating artists were Black, *Trophies of Empire* was notable because it also presented works by Black and white practitioners exhibited side by side. *Trophies of Empire* was not without its detractors in terms of its curatorial approach and fixation with the ‘1992’. However, what was notable about the exhibition was how its purpose and politics were articulated in terms which were necessarily antagonistic not only towards empire and imperialism but also the Conservative government.



catalogues, Chambers noted:

Well, I think the 'No war but Class War' part is probably self-evident, or self-explanatory. In terms of 'No art but Black Art', what I'm trying to say is what I've been saying for a number of years now: that the only kind of art that is important in the black community, is art that focuses on the black struggle and sees itself as an integral part of our struggle against racism. So really the slogan is a summary of the idea that our art should have a politicised agenda.<sup>85</sup>

Chambers' *modus operandi* also served to bring ideas pertaining to culture and history through Black artistic practice to greater public attention.

Simultaneously, his approach, whilst advocating for Black practice, knowingly did so in ways which expressed irreverence towards dominant attitudes and polite sensibilities of the mainstream art world. Outlining his approach towards the exhibition *History and Identity*, Chambers explained:

For Black People, 'history' refuses to be a lifeless and dull conglomeration of boring dates and events [...] 'identity' has an urgency and a relevance which is literally worlds away from the self-indulgent individualism that many white people take it to be. Who we are as Black individuals becomes one and the same as who we are as Black people, and *vice versa*.<sup>86</sup>

The themes explored in Chambers' exhibitions at the time were expressed in direct, lucid and politically motivated ways. Expressing his ideas in such forthright terms, Chambers consciously and intentionally formulated his curatorial outlook in opposition to dominant modes of expression. The

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85 Eddie Chambers, 'An Interview with Petrine Archer-Straw', Annotations 5: Run through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers. Eds. Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke, London, Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999, 21

86 Op. cit. 98

presumption of a white art world and white perspective, as a default mind set, was to be challenged rather than indulged. Sarat Maharaj provided an insightful interpretation of Chambers' acerbic approach:

Eddie bites the hand that feeds him? His adroit if uneven responses highlight the fraught business of targeting the liberal art and culture industry whose non-racist credentials are otherwise taken for granted... He is often outspoken, a bit bruising. But his views contribute to the payoff: a climate of steady updating, appraisal and revision of liberal approaches to cultural diversity – clarifying needs and improving concrete art, and culture provision and possibilities in an evolving, 1990s multiculturalism in Britain.<sup>87</sup>

Just as roots reggae had ridden roughshod over the idea that Black people should accept their lot in British society, so too Chambers' curatorial approach exuded irreverence towards how exhibitions could be conceived and framed. It is within such a context that it is possible to see the appeal of Mowbray Odonkor's painting *Self-portrait with Red, Gold and Green* given its exploration of identity, not as a fixed entity but as contingent. However, the triumvirate of exhibitions in which Odonkor's painting was included were, thematically speaking, very different. From providing a conceptual framework for what type of practice could be considered to be *Black Art* in the survey exhibition *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, to the figurative exploration of *History and Identity* and then the decoding of the relationship between *Black people and the British Flag*.

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87 Sarat Maharaj 'Black Art's Autobiography', Annotations 5: Run through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers. Eds. by Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke, London, Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999, 6

These exhibitions reflected Chambers' ability to think of curating as Black artistic practice, not fixed but fluid and agile in the ways in which it could be read.

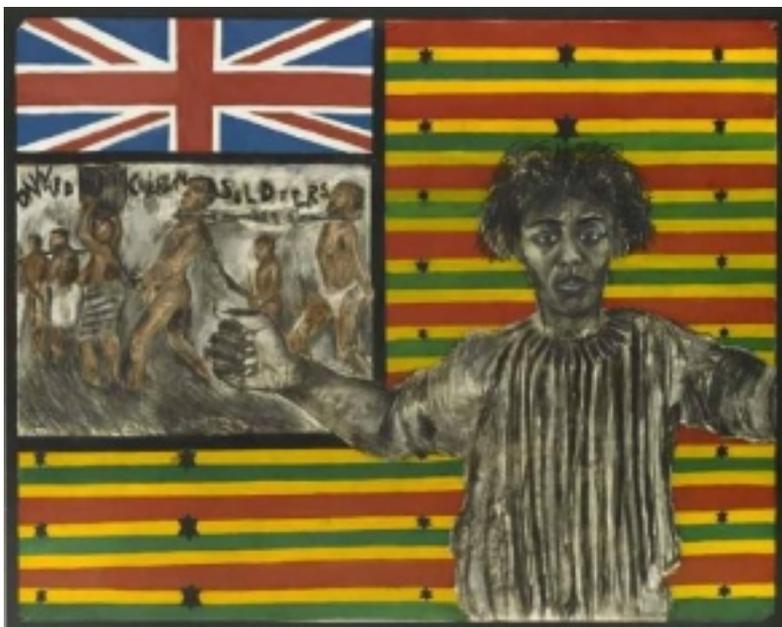


Fig 8. Mowbray Odonkor, *Self-portrait with Red, Gold and Green*, acrylic on paper, 177.5 x 145cm

*Self-portrait with Red, Gold and Green* has four distinct components. A drawing of the artist rendered in black and white stands facing out towards the viewer; arms outstretched, she points to an inlaid drawing of men and women in a slave coffle being marched to their grim destination. We know they are about to be forcibly loaded on a slave ship. Inscribed across the scene are the words, 'Onward Christian Soldiers', evoking a stoical but satirical tone. Above this image is a full colour rendering of the Union flag. Both images are framed with thick flat lines of black paint. This framing device enhances the appearance of a painting existing within another painting. This juxtaposition of Union flag and the manacled Africans takes up the top left portion of the composition, while much of the rest of the painting comprises a horizontal pattern of Pan-African colours,

red, gold and green. The colours and pattern surrounding the figure, who stares out at the viewer, are also a repetition of Ghana's national flag. Replete with black stars on every gold strip, each appears distinct to the next. Odonkor's use of red, gold, and green and the black star refers to Ghana's Pan-Africanist inspired flag, designed following the end of British colonial rule. The scale and repetition of design, which dominates the painting and forms the backdrop against which the protagonist stands, exceeds the traditional composition of a national flag, as if to accentuate a Pan-Africanist sensibility above and beyond that of a national identity. Odonkor's use of Ghana's national flag references her Ghanaian parentage. Therefore, although born and brought up in Britain and therefore a British citizen, Odonkor visualises her identity as exceeding Britishness, to one that incorporates both her Ghanaian heritage and Pan-Africanist outlook.

The work considers how different aspects of history can be brought together to project a fuller and more accurate account of identity. The four components of the work are individually loaded with meaning; the artist, shackled slaves, the Union flag and the Ghanaian flag. But it is in their aggregation that Odonkor insists we see and understand the individual and collective meaning. Wrote Odonkor:

The piece is about Black people born and/or brought up in Britain, consequently finding ourselves more familiar with British culture and beliefs than that of our fore parents. Yet the drive to claim ones [sic] spiritual inheritance is a moving force. The work was made in acknowledgement of the suffering endured by our ancestors, together with the strength and compassion which helped them through all. The British flag represents imperialism and colonialism, in the name of which atrocities were/are performed

against Black people. The red gold and green of the large flag signifies the spiritual roots of Black people being in Africa.<sup>88</sup>

Odonkor's painting could be seen not only as a critique of history, but also as an attempt to create a more authentic but defiant self-portrait that could reconcile elements of personal and political history.

### **Art and the Image of the Slaveship**

Whilst Donald Rodney and Keith Piper had led the way in using the image of the slave ship, it would also be a recurring trope of remembrance used by several other Black artists long before the bicentenary. The slave ship, including the *Brookes* (explored in Chapter 6), was utilised by several artists. Both Donald Rodney and Keith Piper used it in early work. Mary Evans, Godfried Donkor, and Tam Joseph would each produce works in the early to mid 1990s evoking the image of the slave ship. Where Evans' approached it through duplication, Donkor sought out a less familiar depiction. For Joseph, the slave ship was represented through inference.

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88 Eddie Chambers, *Black People and the British Flag*, exhibition catalogue, unpaginated, 1993

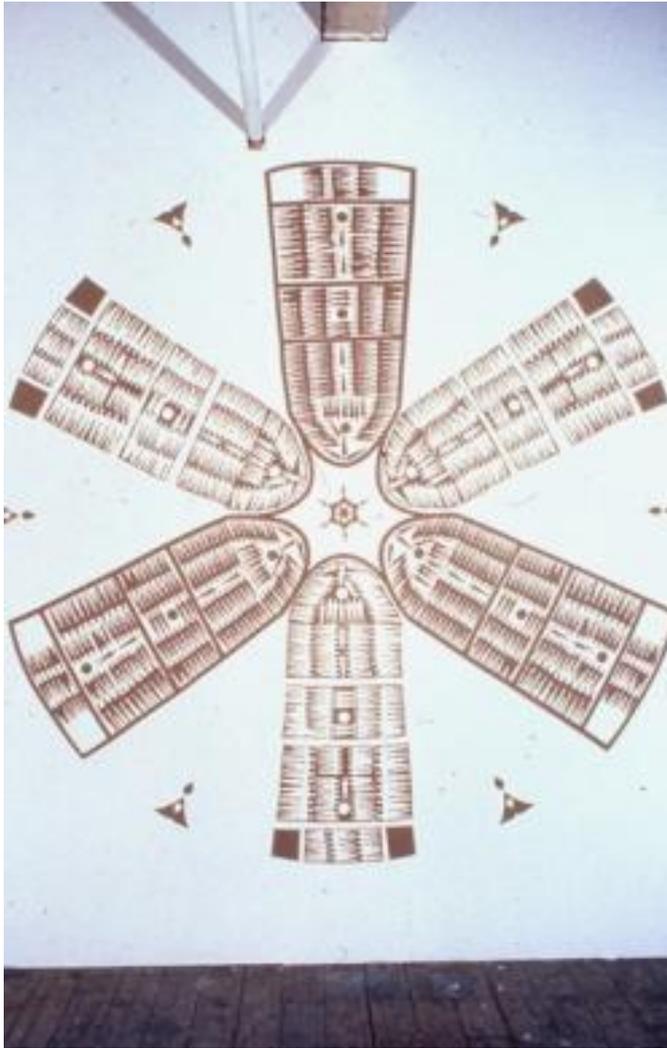


Fig 9. Mary Evans *Wheel of Fortune*, 1996 craft paper, 250cm diameter

Mary Evans has over the course of two decades, produced numerous installations relating to the legacy of the slave trade.<sup>89</sup> Although *Wheel of Fortune* (1996) [Fig 9.], was only ever actually constructed and documented within her studio,<sup>90</sup> it is nonetheless a remarkably perceptive and even playful

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89 *Moving Worlds, A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, Volume 7 Number 2, 2007 and Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History Since the 1950s*, I.B. Tauris, 2014

90 In response to my email inquiry to the artist, Mary Evans explained “You’re right I’ve never shown *Wheel of Fortune*. It’s interesting that lots of people are intrigued by that piece but hardly anyone has seen it! I made it in my studio in 1996 and it was only up for three weeks as I needed the wall space to do something else; but haven’t made it in a public space. I suppose I’ve had the opportunity to remake it since 1996 but I tend to always want to work on current ideas and that work was made a long time ago although it is still very relevant to my practice.”



Godfried Donkor's montage series *Slave to Champ*, begun in 1992, drew on an alternative diagrammatic image of the slave ship originally published in 1832. Taken from *Section of a Slave Ship Walsh's Notes of Brazil*,<sup>92</sup> the slave ship depicted in *Slave to Champ* is a simpler illustration [Fig 10.] Each of the works features a full-length photograph of a Black boxer standing over an engraving of the slave ship. Commonly presented in boxing pose, fists aloft, the likes of Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight champion, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and Mike Tyson each individually tower over a slave ship. In juxtaposing this 19<sup>th</sup> century engraving with a twentieth century publicity shot of a Black boxer, Donkor fuses together two seemingly antithetical images. Where the former portrayed the Black in dehumanised and anonymous terms, the latter depicted individuals in all their 'supreme' glory. Equally, although generated from different times and produced in radically different media, they both functioned as promotional devices. Visually striking, these compositions also project a level of ambiguity and paradox. Are the slave ships containing these prize-fighters? Or, have they broken free? Each work projects a sense of compassion. However, the backdrop and the series' title remind the viewer that exploitation and commodification are also an integral part of this story. Keith Piper has observed that: "From its very beginning the 'prizefight' has been invariably an affair sponsored by a social and economic elite but contested by individuals from the very bottom of the social spectrum."<sup>93</sup> Piper's *Transgressive Acts*

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92 From Walsh's notes of Brazil <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-7508-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, The New York Public Library [Retrieved 13 April 2017]

93 Keith Piper, *Four Corners, A Contest of Opposites, Boxer: An Anthology of writings on Boxing and Visual Culture*, Institute of International Visual Arts 1996, 71

(1993), and *Four Corners: A Contest of Opposites* (1995), consider the often diametrically opposed but media constructed identities of Black American boxers, such as Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. In *Transgressive Acts*, Piper characterises this in biblical terms as ‘A Saint’ and ‘A Sinner’. Donkor’s composite of slavery and boxing iconographies also seeks to draw such distinctions, leaving open interpretation.



Fig 11. Godfried Donkor, *From Slave to Champ I*, 1992, Mixed media on paper, 62.7 x 47.5 cm (24 11/16 x 18 11/16 in.)

Over the course of 1990s and up to 2007, Donkor would produce numerous series of *Slave to Champ* [Fig 11.]. His first series was exhibited in an eponymously titled exhibition at The Art Exchange by East Midlands African Caribbean Arts (EMACA) in 1999.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Godfried Donkor, *Slave to Champ*, The Art Exchange by East Midlands African Caribbean Arts (EMACA).1 - 30 October 1999

Whilst the slave ship was central to works by Evans and Donkor, Tam Joseph's *Under the Sea, Under the Sea* (1995) contemplated the legacy of the Middle Passage in an altogether different way. With remarkable acuity and visual economy, Joseph's painting considers the 'site' and horror of the slave trade without reference to conventional slave iconography but via a depiction of a vast expanse of calm shimmering blue ocean.

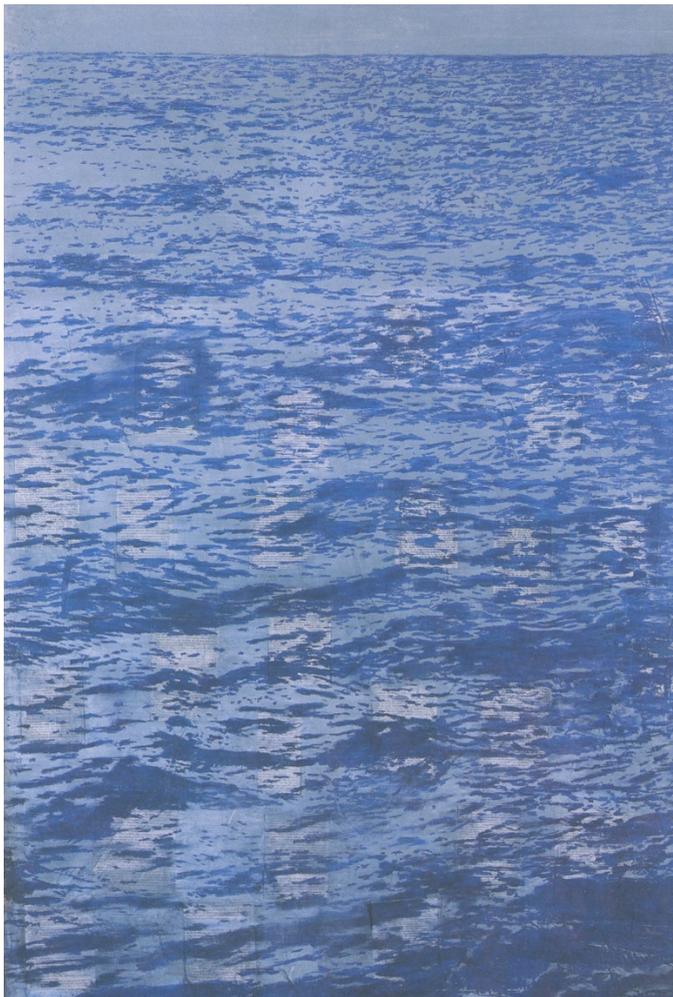


Fig 12. Tam Joseph, *Under the Sea, Under the Sea*, acrylic and paper on canvas, c1995, 244 cm x 168 cm

In its use of repetition, the painting's title, *Under the Sea, Under the Sea* [Fig 12.], evokes a tone that is both insistent and incredulous. Yet this painting is not only about loss; it is also about what has come from journeys across the

ocean. The barely discernible typed words from pages of books pasted on to the canvas and which emerge from the waves belong to Black luminaries such as Marcus Garvey, Toni Morrison, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James and Franz Fanon. In her essay on Joseph, Hiroko Hagiwara describes these pages as “the chanted echoes of people who had to cross the ocean from Africa in time of slavery [sic], and from the West Indies after the war.”<sup>95</sup>

The work produced by Donald Rodney, Keith Piper, Mowbray Donkor, Mary Evans, Godfried Donkor and Tam Joseph emerged outside of any state-led initiative. However, in surveying the different types of imagery and contexts within which these works were produced and exhibited, it is possible to consider them as ‘documents’ and acts of commemoration and remembrance. The varied but enduring image of the slave ship in the work of contemporary Black artists also questions historian Marcus Wood’s problematic assertion (to be discussed in Chapter 6) about what he describes as the “endless recycling” of Brookes.<sup>96</sup> It also goes beyond slavery being remembered via the image of the slave ship. Emerging from the early 1980s against a backdrop of roots reggae, visual art commentaries on slavery have also been an examination of contemporary culture, representation and the changing politics of Black identity.

A number of British practitioners (notably Keith Piper, Godfried Donkor, Mary Evans and Lubaina Himid) who produced work in the 1980s and 1990s related to slavery, would participate to varying degrees in bicentenary exhibitions. Much

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95 Hiroko Hagiwara, ‘Here History Unfolds’ from exhibition catalogue *Tam Joseph This is History*, Eddie Chambers, 1998 [unpaginated]

96 Marcus Wood, *Significance Silence: Where was Slave Agency in the Popular Imagery of 2007? Imagining Slavery* Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield Eds., *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, 2010, 164



so too, contemporary art produced in Britain dating back to the early 1980s offered a veritable range of imagery and ideas which highlighted Atlantic slavery's historical and contemporary relevance. Equally, such work also countered those portrayals of slavery in British history in which the Black subject was the silent and suppliant victim.

### **Part III**

#### **Contemporary Art and Critique**

Even though the bicentenary generated a number of solo exhibitions involving contemporary practitioners<sup>100</sup> in Britain neither individually nor collectively did they elicit a comparable text. This is particularly significant given that during and around the time of the bicentenary, museums and other venues hosting exhibitions generated a range of scholarly publications on slavery, artefacts and art collections.<sup>101</sup> Stuart Hall's essay *Afterword: The Legacies of Anglo-Caribbean Culture – A Diasporic Perspective*<sup>102</sup> was one of the few attempts to provide a historical perspective on contemporary art and slavery. In this regard and within the bicentenary context, Hall's essay was a unique contribution. The publication in which it was included was a substantial work of historical and scholarly importance. *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario*

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100 These were by Keith Piper, Godfried Donkor, Graham Fagen, Anissa-Jane, Sonia Boyce and Romuald Hazoumè.

101 These included *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People*, edited by Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin and James Walvin, Edinburgh University Press for The Parliamentary History Yearbook Trust, 2007; *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum*, Edited by Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth, National Maritime Museum and Lund Humphries, 2007

102 Stuart Hall, 'Afterword: Legacies of Anglo-Caribbean Culture – A Diasporic Perspective' *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*, 2007

*and His Worlds*<sup>103</sup> was produced by the Yale Center of British Art as an exhibition and publication. It took as its starting point twelve hand-coloured lithographs created by the white Jewish Jamaican artist, Isaac Belisario Mendes between 1837-1838. Belisario's compelling series of lithographs, originally published as *Sketches of Character, In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica*, portrayed "figures on the streets of Kingston: flamboyantly attired performers of dance, drama, and music participating in holiday masquerades, as well as itinerant tradesmen and laborers."<sup>104</sup> These images capture an aspect of nineteenth century Jamaica around the time of slavery's final abolition there, and as such bring a unique insight to the study of the legacy of slavery, emancipation and resistance. The editors of *Art and Emancipation* noted that to "examine Belisario's images seriously is to investigate the nature of Jamaican culture, ethnicity, and politics at the moment of emancipation."<sup>105</sup> In this publication the historical context and significance of Belisario's art was examined by a number of historians, exploring Jamaican Jewish identity, Britain and the British Empire, the representation of the enslaved, and Afro-Jamaican music and art. This substantial historical document included a plethora of texts, etchings, prints and paintings, which together form a history of colonial Jamaica, and also the "transmission" and "transformation" of different aspects of African culture within a slave-based society.<sup>106</sup>

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103 *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*, Yale Center for British Art with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007. The exhibition took place at Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, 27 September - 30 December, 2007

104 *Ibid.*, 1

105 *Ibid.*

106 *Ibid.*

*Art and Emancipation* constructs a picture of the social, cultural and historical context within which Belisario's lithographs were produced. Published within what was essentially an (art) historical study of slavery, Hall's critical reading of this visual legacy contains a profound sense of ambivalence towards Belisario's problematic representation of the Black subject. He begins with Belisario, who came from the "trading, merchant, professional, and artistic middling classes of urban colonial society" rather than the "plantocracy, whose wealth and power derived from the slave economy."<sup>107</sup> Having returned to Jamaica from England, where he had been educated and trained as an artist, Belisario became a commissioned artist. For Hall, this journey was reflective of Belisario's 'double life' in which the "different worlds" he inhabited gave his "assured, topographical perspectives, the well-judged distances and scenic vistas" as well his "splendid plantation paintings" a diasporic view. Equally, such works rendered Black people invisible: "African figures are wholly subordinated in scale and consequently seem diminished in significance."<sup>108</sup> By comparison, for Hall, Belisario's *Sketches of Character*, offer both ambiguity but also evidence of the particularly English influence found in the depiction of 'characters' such as the 'milkmaid', 'chimney sweep' and 'Jonkonnu' masquerade which art historian Veerle Poupeye described as being part of:

a tradition that dates from the plantation period when the slaves were allowed free time around Christmas....These so-called fancy-dress Jonkonnu characters were not just imitating, but also parodying the Jamaican plantocracy and its 'European' culture or, to paraphrase the St Lucian author Derek

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107 Ibid., 179  
108 Ibid.



Another dimension of *Art and Emancipation* concerns the politics of its staging. Although included in the publication, contemporary art was not included in the actual exhibition. This may have been a blessing in disguise, not least because curatorial attempts at combining historical and contemporary art have tended to be problematic and tokenistic affairs, particularly in regard to Black practitioners, as they have functioned as the main means by which major institutions could incorporate Black practitioners into exhibition programmes. Exhibitions such as *Krishna, the Divine Lover*<sup>114</sup> (discussed in Chapter 4) staged at the Whitechapel in 1997, have often clumsily and opportunistically attempted to bridge the formal and conceptual chasms between historical and contemporary art, which has resulted in presentations that are both culturally skewed and incongruous.

Despite making a critically nuanced contribution to *Art and Emancipation*, Hall's was the only text amongst nearly a dozen to consider the historical significance of Black contemporary artists' practice. The other texts responded to one white artist (Belisario); thus, making work of Black British artists appear to occupy a subservient role. The exhibition *Art and Emancipation* is also worth considering in relation to notions of audience, in particular to the bicentenary's wider ambitions of audience engagement. Given that the exhibition was generated by the Yale Center for British Art in the USA, it was inevitable that this would be its primary exhibition venue. However, given its thematic subject matter, British

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114 *Krishna, the Divine Lover*, A National Touring Exhibition organised by the Hayward Gallery, London, in which Indian miniature painting produced over four centuries charted the life of this Hindu god. The exhibition included the artists Sutapa Biswas, Maqbool Fida Husain, Perminder Kaur, Dhruva Mistry and Amrit & Rabindra KD Kaur Singh. Tour venues: Whitechapel Art Gallery 30 May - 27 July 1997; Huddersfield Art Gallery 30 August - 12 October 1997; City Museum and Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield 25 October - 30 November 1997; The Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton, 13 December 1997 - 25 January, 1998.

and Caribbean slavery history, the exhibition could have also been a perfect fit for a museum in Jamaica, if not Britain. However, financial considerations and the attendant issue of museum standards, may have been particular factors which prohibited the exhibition's tour to Jamaica. Museums in Jamaica do not have the same financial muscle as the Yale Center for British Art, and therefore cannot comply with costly display and environmental regulations that govern the display of such exhibitions. Nevertheless, it could be argued that a counterpoint exhibition focused on contemporary art would have been an entirely reasonable proposition, particularly given the largely disparate nature of such exhibitions in the bicentenary.

In the 1990s the Head of National Touring Exhibitions at London's South Bank Centre would declare that:

...opportunities for the British public to see art from Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean are rare... Since the old colonial networks of cultural exchange have diminished, the British have perhaps too readily turned their backs on the people they once presumed to rule. As a result, a dialogue which could have been enlightening, between two communities sharing a common history, the (ex) colonisers and colonized, has been abandoned.<sup>115</sup>

Although such a sentiment typically masked the establishment's culpability and complicity in generating a debilitating indifference toward Caribbean art, it does nevertheless carry an element of truth. Since the early part of the twentieth century, innumerable opportunities had presented themselves that would have enabled greater links in terms of British and Caribbean contemporary art. Unlike

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115 Roger Malbert 'Introduction' New World Imagery, Contemporary Jamaican Art National Touring Exhibitions, Hayward Gallery, and Arts Council Collection. 1995, 7

the variable ways in which young Black Britons had willingly succumbed to the influence of Jamaican roots reggae and Rastafari, the same opportunities were not forthcoming in the visual arts. The careers of Caribbean artists such as Ronald Moody, Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling had consistently been stifled by art establishment indifference. Much of the significant and ‘heavy lifting’ in terms of exploring the British Caribbean (or what Hall referred to as the ‘diasporic imaginary’) had been done by the *Caribbean Arts Movement*, but this legacy and history and many of the artists involved were considered by the British art establishment as surplus to requirements. After the BBC,<sup>116</sup> the museum sector contributed the majority of events organized for the bicentenary. Several notable attempts were made by museums to re-present histories of the slave trade and slavery. Wilberforce House Museum, Hull underwent its first refurbishment since 1983, the second was completed in time for the bicentenary. This new display was intended to be a more expansive presentation “positioning William Wilberforce in context amongst the many other abolitionists and resisters who were involved in the struggle to abolish the slave trade and slavery in Britain and the Colonies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries”.<sup>117</sup> The National Maritime Museum, London, re-modeled a number of its galleries as *Atlantic Worlds*.<sup>118</sup> Several museum exhibitions would also combine contemporary art and historical collections, with the intention of revising and, in some cases, revealing for the first time how their collections were implicated in

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116 The BBC ran programmes across its television, radio and online platforms. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/> [accessed 13 April 2017]

117 ‘Prime Minister of Barbados official (sic) opens Wilberforce House Museum on abolition Bicentenary’, 25.03.03, Hull Press Office, 2007

118 <http://www.rmg.co.uk/see-do/we-recommend/attractions/atlantic-gallery-slavery-trade-empire> [accessed 13 April 2017]



not just in literal terms but more so as a psychological state: “the miseries of urban life and the way in which they were associated with mental slavery.”<sup>122</sup>

*Mind- Forg'd Manacles* seeks to decode Blake’s esoteric treatise on materialism and redemption whilst also aligning its deeply symbolic and other worldly imagery of white gods, mythological white figures, poetry and writing to portray to slavery. Much of the material brought together for *Mind-Forg'd Manacles* was drawn from the public collections held at the British Museum. The intentions of such an exhibition in expanding scholarship, interpretation and public knowledge of history could themselves be considered legitimate and worthy. However, the absence of an equivalent historical view of contemporary art some of which is itself held in public collections is made even more problematic, enacting as it does a tacit depreciation in the value and memory of work by Black contemporary artists.

In the bicentenary, the exclusion of a historical view of contemporary art’s relationship to slavery was one thing. However, the absence of criticism about this exclusion was quite another, not least because it was accompanied by a research initiative responsible for analyzing the ways in which abolition, slavery and history were formulated in 2007. Reviews of exhibitions were largely bereft of any historical contextualization. It was as if Black artists’ involvement in museum-based exhibitions such as the V&A and the British Museum was a normal affair. Funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Knowledge Transfer Fellowship 2007-2009, *1807 Commemorated: the abolition*

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122 Ibid. Bindman explained that Blake was also commissioned to produce part of a series of etchings and engravings to accompany the writings of mercenary soldier John Gabriel Stedman. These gave Blake some insight into the barbarity of slavery. A handful of the etchings attributed to Blake including *A Negro hung by the ribs to a Gallows*, 1796 graphically illustrate the cruel and inhumane treatment of slaves.

*of the slave trade* was a two-year research project involving a group of academics based at University of York within the *Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past* to “comprehend the public memory of the bicentenary”.<sup>123</sup>

Launched in 2007, *1807 Commemorated* also involved collaboration with six national museums and was established “to both map and analyse public debate and activity regarding the bicentenary.”<sup>124</sup> The project’s online output included reviews and commentary on the bicentenary. *1807 Commemorated* was the single most resourced project charged with providing a critical evaluation of the bicentenary.<sup>125</sup> Written by the project’s core researchers (such as Dr. Michael White referenced in Chapter 6) and other university academics it offered a mixture of both favourable and critical views of bicentenary projects.

Despite its research on the depiction of slavery in museums as part of the bicentenary, beyond exhibition reviews, *1807 Commemorated* did not examine the role of contemporary art. Just as reggae and contemporary art from the 1970s and 1980s had not been considered as legitimate modes of remembrance, so too, aspects of how contemporary art functioned in the bicentenary were summarily ignored. Why were Black artists prominent in certain aspects of the bicentenary, yet absent in others such as the production of the Royal Mail’s commemorative stamps and Royal Mint’s two-pound coin? How did the V&A’s exhibition *Uncomfortable Truths* relate to the wider curatorial

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123 *1807 Commemorated* The abolition of the slave trade, <https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/>

124 <https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/about.html> [accessed 14 April 2017]

125 This included interviews with historian James Walvin, Clare Short MP, Francesca Davies, Equiano Project, Tony Tibbles, Director of National Maritime Museum Liverpool

practices of the museum *vis-a-vis* Black practitioners? The prominent role played by Black practitioners in the bicentenary was itself problematic, not least because such prominence stood in sharp contrast to the routine ways in which Black artists were excluded from or marginalized by museum programmes more generally.

A number of white artists participated in bicentenary exhibitions. These included Graham Fagen (the only white artist to receive a solo exhibition during the bicentenary)<sup>126</sup> Christine Meisner, Melanie Jackson and Jyll Bradley. More generally, outside of the bicentenary, the relative absence of work by contemporary white artists and corresponding significant contributions made by Black artists about the enduring legacy of Atlantic slavery, highlights an unspoken pathology. Furthermore, even though institutions such as the British Museum and Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery consulted with Black organisations or Black individuals in the production of their respective bicentenary initiatives, the racial dynamics relating to contemporary art and slavery remained largely unexplored by *1807 Commemorated*. An in-depth analysis of these particular racial dynamics falls beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that whereas the politics surrounding museum displays received notable analysis<sup>127</sup> comparatively little consideration was given to the pathologies surrounding the raced nature of slavery and contemporary art.

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126 Graham Fagen *Downpresserer* Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow 14 March - 28 May 2007

127 The anthology publication produced by the research project, *1807 Commemorated* considered the politics and “sensitivities” of exhibiting certain collections, objects and displays related to colonialism and the portrayal of the enslaved. *See Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, Cubitt, Smith and Wilson, 2011, 6

In 2011, *1807 Commemorated* culminated with the publication of *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*, an anthology of essays by project researchers and invited contributors. This sought to:

reflect on the complexity and difficulty of museums' experiences in presenting and interpreting the histories of slavery and abolition, and to place these experiences in the broader context of debates over the bicentenary's significance and the lessons to be learnt from it.<sup>128</sup>

In this anthology, several artists and curators were invited to offer their interpretation and assessment of their involvement in the bicentenary. However, because the voices of those heard in this publication were essentially the very same as those who participated in the bicentenary, any real sense of critique became compromised because of an underlying need to validate if not justify their involvement. Christopher Spring and Raimi Gbadamosi offered interpretations of their participation in the bicentenary.

In his essay, 'Art, Resistance and Remembrance: A Bicentenary at the British Museum',<sup>129</sup> Spring, Curator of the British Museum's African galleries explored the events which led to the museum's involvement in the bicentenary. Central to his essay was an exploration of what he referred to as the "curatorial experience and the curator's journey" which was part of the "campaign to purchase the artwork *La Bouche du Roi* by Romuald Hazoumè".<sup>130</sup>

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128 *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*, Eds. Laurajane Smith, Geoffrey Cubitt, Ross Wilson and Kalliopi Fouseki, 2011, 2

129 Chris Spring, 'Art, Resistance and Remembrance' *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, 2011

130 *Ibid.*, 191

Personalising his involvement with this initiative, Spring established a tone for his reflections, which centred on three key issues:

First, as curator of the African galleries at the British Museum, trying to think of ways in which such a monstrous, protracted and on-going atrocity as the slave trade could be made the subject of an exhibition. Second, as an artist and writer responding to a subject that has often been deemed indescribable and impossible to depict, how I might go about trying to communicate something of the slave trade's evil nature within my own work. Finally, as a human being who had learned a little about the subject as part of my professional life, but was suddenly presented with the depth of my ignorance, the breadth and depth of the emotional and psychological legacy of the slave trade and the bravery of those who resisted it and continue to resist it to this day.<sup>131</sup>

While these key issues relating to *La Bouche du Roi's* staging at the British Museum were expressed in seemingly candid terms and as a matter of personal importance they also inadvertently revealed other characteristics most notably the museum's aspiration towards appearing apolitical. This was reflected in Spring's almost casual acknowledgement that despite being curator of the museum's African galleries, in terms of the history of the slave trade he "had learnt a little about the subject as part of" his professional life.<sup>132</sup> In the context of the bicentenary commemorations and what was often referred as the politically sensitive issue of commemoration, *La Bouche du Roi* further embodies the institution's apolitical cultural agenda. On the one hand, the British Museum has prided itself on its display of African art and artefacts providing in-depth studies of its collections. On the other hand, the presentation

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131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

of scholarly-type exhibitions have historically eschewed wider political explanations such as slavery and colonisation.

Uncoupling its collections of African art and artefacts from wider political readings (explored in Chapter 6) has been key to the British Museum's strategy for legitimising its holdings. Spring presented forthright views about the slave trade's relationship to the British Museum. He described as emotionally and politically fraught the museum's attempts at consulting with "African heritage community groups" about devising a fitting commemoration for the bicentenary.<sup>133</sup> However, rather than seeing the museum's role in preserving, framing and financially benefiting from its holdings, Spring presents an altogether more equivocal interpretation:

It is not hard to see why the British Museum might arouse such resentment...some of the museum's African collections are regarded as having been acquired through force of arms or through colonial oppression, the natural successor to the slave trade.<sup>134</sup>

Another notable characteristic of Spring's account was to describe, as a "campaign",<sup>135</sup> the processes by which *La Bouche du Roi* became both the British Museum's and the bicentenary's flagship contemporary art exhibition. Spring used the word 'campaign' in relation to "the working party" which was "set up to oversee the British Museum's response to the bicentenary" and which

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133 Spring, 198, 2011

134 Ibid.

135 The use of the word campaign initially appears to relate explicitly to the funding campaign conducted to purchase the work. The purchase was made possible by a number of external funders, including the charity *ArtFund*, who contributed £30,000 (of £100,000) ArtFund: The national fundraising charity for art <http://www.artfund.org/what-we-do/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/9798/la-bouche-du-roi> [22 January 2013]







harmless assertion, in its polite way, it implicitly delimits Black British identity and turns away from seminal politics and creative expression towards a more vapid and depoliticised entity.

Shaped by conflict, hostility and creativity, rather than *contributions* Black Britons have had an *influence* on British society. Nothing would be more antithetical to New Labour's conception of a contribution to the nation-state than Rastafari. As Paul Gilroy argued: "The growth of the movement, particularly during the 1970s, would appear to confirm the potency of culture as a conductor of political ideologies and the overdeveloped world."<sup>143</sup> Although the global appeal of roots reggae and Rastafari would be on the wane by the mid 1980s, its emergence and particular influence in Britain, underwrites its pivotal role as a "popular phenomenon"<sup>144</sup> from a period when *Black Britain* came of age. Its promotion of historical and cultural awareness is also foundational to commemorative discourses on slavery.

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143 Gilroy, 'Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism', 1987, 187

144 Ibid.

## **Chapter 2**

### **A Labour of Love: The Politics of Inclusion and Commemoration in the Age of New Labour**

## Introduction

It is only possible to speculate what form, if any, commemorations to mark the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007 might have taken had the New Labour government not been directly involved. Perhaps there may not have been a commemoration. Since the Act received Royal ascent in 1807 and came into force in 1808, years, decades, nearly two centuries had come and gone during which, time and again, successive British governments exhibited little interest or inclination towards commemorating any anniversary of it. Much of the commemorative material, such as statues, plaques, coins and events produced by public institutions to mark the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery had been generated sporadically and without the involvement of government. However, in 2007, the British monarchy, the Church of England, Royal Mint, Royal Mail and the BBC all made significant and unprecedented contributions. The cities of Kingston upon Hull and Liverpool invested time and effort in presenting their respective programmes, *Wilberforce 07* and *Liverpool Remembers Slavery*. The Heritage Lottery Fund contributed £20 million to the bicentenary, which included awarding capital grants of over £1 million each to the *International Slavery Museum* in Liverpool and *Wilberforce House Museum* in Hull. The British Museum raised £100,000 to buy the installation *La Bouche du Roi*, created by Benin artist Romuald Hazoumè, whilst the V&A presented an international contemporary art exhibition. Both exhibitions would form the lynch pin of these institutions' commemorative programmes.

The *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007* was, above all else, centred on Parliament's own achievement in voting to abolish what had

been, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, state sanctioned slave trading on a colossal scale. However, the Act did not bring an end to state sanctioned slavery. Parliament took a further twenty-six years to outlaw slavery throughout the British Empire. Even then, after the *Slavery Abolition Act* in 1833, emancipation did not take full effect until 1838. During this time, in British colonies, the enslaved had to endure a further five years of what was euphemistically termed ‘apprenticeship’ but which was, in all but name, a continuance of slavery.

Despite slavery commemoration’s inauspicious legacy and profile in Britain, New Labour invested a great deal in the belief that 2007 was an appropriate time, and that national commemoration an appropriate form, through which to reflect on Britain’s role in the Atlantic slave trade. Such a backdrop provides a context for why the bicentenary was both significant but also problematic. In 2005, New Labour won a third consecutive election. Notwithstanding winning with a substantially reduced majority, it was still an unprecedented feat for the Labour Party. Therefore, serendipity played its part with the Labour Party government third term coinciding with the bicentenary year. However, there was never a government more primed and seemingly more predisposed to initiate such a national commemoration. Underwritten by the Deputy Prime Minister’s Cabinet Office, the Home Office, the Department for Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Culture Media and Sport, without New Labour’s instrumental involvement, fewer organisations would have been inclined to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

The role and contribution made by a number of organisations will be examined in subsequent chapters, whereas this chapter will look at how inclusion and

commemoration functioned in the bicentenary. Part I, *Politics of Inclusion*, explores the ways in which inclusion politics were an important part of New Labour thinking. Spanning race politics, the Macpherson Report, arts funding and the rise in diversity culture, Part I provides a political and cultural context for the bicentenary. Part II, *The Politics of Commemoration*, considers the ways in which commemorative culture, war, media and *Windrush*, all play an important role in understanding both histories and contemporary commemorative culture. Having committed to commemorating the bicentenary, New Labour's commemoration event was beset by a number of problems, not least the compartmentalising of slavery and slave trade and colonialism. The *abolition of the slave trade* cannot be fully understood in isolation from the abolition of *slavery*, which equally cannot be understood without recognising the rise of British colonialism. These interrelated histories bring different meanings to ideas of British humanitarianism.

Taking place two years into the government's unprecedented third term, the bicentenary was not orchestrated as a 'vote winner'. Equally, there is no evidence of the British electorate requesting the bicentenary year be formally acknowledged. Various individuals and campaign groups may have promoted the need for wider recognition of Britain's role in slavery and the slave trade, but not a state backed commemoration of the bicentenary. Targeted funding and the implementation of various forms of community consultation as "a standard policy response in the museum sector to social inclusion initiatives"<sup>1</sup> made the bicentenary the epitome of New Labour's inclusive agenda. It appeared

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1 Laurajane Smith and Kalliopi Fouseki, 'The Role of Museums as 'Places of Social Justice': Community Consultation and the Bicentenary', 2011, 97



Under New Labour and with the aim of being, 'for the many, not the few',<sup>4</sup> Britain's political, social and cultural terrain would, in perception at least, shift away from the right-wing conservative politics which had dominated British politics (under Margaret Thatcher between 1979-1990 and John Major between 1990-1997) and was 'indifferent to inequalities',<sup>5</sup> and inclined to exclude and alienate those it perceived to be socially, culturally or sexually incompatible to its 'traditional values'. By comparison, Tony Blair's New Labour government embraced and actively championed national devolution, gender equality and gay rights,<sup>6</sup> presenting a more inclusive political outlook.

Notwithstanding the punitive nature of the exclusionary policies and outlook of Thatcher's government, from the early 1980s through to the 1990, it also made attempts at racial inclusion. The Conservative Party election campaign poster in 1983 illustrates how Thatcher's government sought to address and appeal to Britain's Black voters. The poster depicted a Black man dressed in a suit and tie standing with arms folded staring back at the viewer. Below him and printed in bold uppercase were the words: LABOUR SAYS HE'S BLACK. TORIES SAY HE'S BRITISH. Although under the Conservative government the 'sus law'<sup>7</sup> had seen its most recent and punitive application during the early 1980s, the advert claimed that the Tories fulfilled their promise to abolish it. Under the sub-

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4 Chris Smith, *Creative Britain*, 1998, 2

5 Anthony Giddens, 1998, 12-13

6 An example of this was New Labour's repeal in 2003 of Section 28, a law prohibiting the promotion of teaching homosexuality in the United Kingdom introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1988.

7 'SUS' law (meaning suspected person) was Section 4 of the 1824 Vagrancy Act. "It allowed police to arrest a person on suspicion of loitering with intent to commit an arrestable offence. No other crime had to be committed, there was no need for a victim, no need for any witnesses beyond the two police officers." Martin Kettle & Lucy Hodges, *Uprising*, 1982, 91









made New Labour both appealing and unappealing. Eric Shaw's study, *Losing Labour's Soul? New Labour and the Blair Government 1997-2007*, encapsulated this paradox, arguing that New Labour was for some best understood as "an ambitious project to modernize social democracy" whilst others considered it as prioritizing "the needs of the private wealth-creating sector over the public-wealth-consuming sector."<sup>20</sup>

Ruth Levitas' *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour* (1998) considered the growing significance and contested definitions of social exclusion within British political discourse. She argues that social exclusion can be understood through three different discourses: poverty, morality and social integration.<sup>21</sup> However, Levitas questions the extent to which New Labour's definition of social exclusion is predicated on presenting the root cause of exclusion as a peripheral rather than an endemic social problem. Levitas argues that this approach leaves prevailing social and economic inequalities (generated by neoliberalism) intact, rather than open to greater scrutiny. In relation to 'Third Way Politics': "Inclusion and exclusion have become important concepts for analyzing and responding to inequality because of changes affecting the class structure."<sup>22</sup>

Whilst reflecting a range of critical outlooks, New Labour's political project is, in this study, particularly concerned with how 'inclusion' became a determining force in promoting 'cultural diversity', 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism'. Despite New Labour's unprecedented role in embracing diversity, particularly through

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20 Eric Shaw, 2007, 2-3

21 Ruth Levitas, 'Three Discourses of Social Exclusion' 1998, 7

22 Giddens, 1998, 103

the cultural sector, such critiques have been subsumed within political analyses of New Labour. Rarely would these ventures to explain the significance of New Labour's engagement with and approach to 'race' politics and multiculturalism.<sup>23</sup> Few commentators would, during this time, consider the impact of New Labour's economic policy on its Black citizens. However, the politics of race was an important dimension to the New Labour project, in being inextricably linked to both economic and social mobility and its value in inclusion and equality.

New Labour actively championed neoliberalism and viewed the role of the free market, rather than nationalisation, in largely positive terms. On the other hand, 'solutions' for alleviating social and racial inequality were wholly reliant on state intervention. The role of *social democracy* is of interest here therefore because it was within this sphere of government that New Labour articulated, through law, policy and culture, its view of cultural diversity. Ultimately, the ways in which inclusion would be manifested in the arts sector were contradictory. The arts became one of the notable arenas in which the practice of diversity could be realized. However, rather than challenging exclusionary practices of institutions, inclusion meant establishing what were essentially racially delineated initiatives under the guise of 'cultural diversity'.

### **The Impact of Stephen Lawrence**

Post-war Britain presented many challenges to those Black immigrants who had ventured to settle in the 'mother country'. Employment and housing were

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<sup>23</sup> See Andrew Rawnsley's *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour*, Penguin, 2010 and Eric Shaw's *Losing Labour's Soul? New Labour and the Blair Government 1997-2007*, Routledge 2007

accompanied by sometimes indifferent and neglectful treatment at the hands of the educational system. Peter Fryer explained how this situation would endure for subsequent generations:

In key areas of employment, housing and education, those born in Britain of Asian and West Indian parents face – as their parents have faced since arriving here – ‘a very substantial amount of unfair discrimination’.<sup>24</sup>

Compounding such problems was an ever-present reality of unprovoked racially motivated violence. Attacks on Black people have taken various forms and have become an integral part of the Black British experience, “cowardly hit-and-run attacks on individuals or houses, with an occasional eruption of mob violence”.<sup>25</sup> Antiguan-born carpenter, Kelso Cochrane, was one such settler to Britain in the mid 1950s who would pay the ultimate price of racial violence on the streets of Notting Hill, London in 1959.<sup>26</sup> Violence came with alarming regularity and did not abate with the emergence of a Black population born in Britain. Attacks continued to be meted out on Black people:

Between 1976 and 1981, 31 black people in Britain had been murdered by racists. They included Gurdip Singh Chaggar, aged 18 stabbed to death in Southall by a gang of white youths; Altab Ali and Ishaque Ali murdered in Brick Lane, Michael Ferreira, murdered in Hackney; Akhtar Ali Baig, murdered in Newham; Mohammad Arif and Malcolm Chambers, murdered in Swindon...<sup>27</sup>

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24 Peter Fryer, ‘The new generation’, 1984, 387

25 Ibid., 380

26 Kelso Cochrane was fatally stabbed in a racially motivated attack on Golborne Road, North Kensington, London on 17th May 1959. No-one has ever been convicted of his murder. *Murder in Notting Hill* Mark Olden, Zero Books, 2011

27 Fryer, 395

Whilst some perpetrators of these and other murders were successfully prosecuted it has also been the case that racial motivated attacks and murders have gone unpunished. This has included catastrophic violence used by the police.<sup>28</sup>

It is within this context that the murder of eighteen-year-old Black teenage south Londoner Stephen Lawrence, in April 1993, carries particular significance.

Stephen Lawrence was the victim of a vicious racially motivated attack by five young white men. Stephen Lawrence was the eldest child of Doreen and Neville Lawrence who, like many other Jamaican-born people, emigrated to Britain to begin a new life. Doreen Lawrence (nee Graham) was nine when she arrived in 1961 and Neville Lawrence was nineteen when he came a year later. The couple met in London and married in 1972. They had three children, Stephen born in 1974, Stuart born in 1976 and Georgina born in 1982. In 1993, Stephen Lawrence was studying at Blackheath Bluecoat School and Woolwich College with aspirations of going to university and of becoming an architect. This all changed on the evening of Thursday 22 April 1993 when on his way home, accompanied by his friend Duwayne Brooks, Stephen was fatally stabbed whilst waiting for a bus in Eltham, south east London.

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<sup>28</sup> The hounding and ultimate slaying by police of David Oluwale, led to his body being recovered from the River Aire near Leeds in May 1969. The suspicious circumstances surrounding Colin Roach being shot to death in the entrance of Stoke Newington police station in 1983, the raid on Cynthia Jarrett's home on the Broadwater Farm Estate which led to her cardiac arrest and death in 1985, the suffocation of Joy Gardner by police and immigrations officers in 1993, Michael Powell's death in 2003, whilst police custody in Birmingham, and the police shooting of Mark Duggan in 2011 are some examples of the state's role in extra judicial killing of Black people in Britain.

Over the course of two years, both public and private prosecution cases against the five suspects collapsed.<sup>29</sup> The cause of these failures would eventually be attributed to a bungled, corrupt and racist police investigation. Unlike the many racially motivated crimes and murders which had taken place in post-war Britain that had gone unpunished and ultimately faded from public view, the case of Stephen Lawrence has continued to remain in the public eye over the course of two decades. One commentator observed: “The debate about race in Britain will never end, but it has been transformed by the case of Stephen Lawrence.”<sup>30</sup> Another noted how “the name Stephen Lawrence is seared into public memory”.<sup>31</sup>

Barely two months into its first term in power, the New Labour government announced that it would commission a public inquiry into the Metropolitan Police and the Crown Prosecution Service’s mishandling of the investigation into Stephen Lawrence’s murder in 1993.<sup>32</sup> Although John Major had replaced Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, his government’s intransigent refusal to acknowledge and act on the evident failings of the police and judicial system in

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29 In 1994, the Crown Prosecution Service announced that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute the murderers. In 1996, during the Lawrence’s private prosecution took place at the Old Bailey the trial judge found Duwayne Brooks to be an unreliable witness in his identification of Neil Acourt, Luke Knight and Gary Dobson and the case against the assailants collapsed. See Cathcart ‘The Trial’, 1999, 260-272

30 Brian Cathcart, ‘Verdict’, 1999, 416

31 Kester Aspden, *Nationality: Wog The hounding of David Oluwale*, 2007, 7

32 This announcement was significant because, although the teenager had been murdered in 1993, Conservative Home Office minister at the time, Peter Lloyd, had refused to launch an inquiry into what had been considered in various circles to be both a brutal racist murder and a blatant miscarriage of justice. See Brian Cathcart, *The Case of Stephen Lawrence*, Viking, 1999



Notwithstanding the collapse of a private prosecution in 1996, and a humiliating Public Inquest in 1997 into Stephen Lawrence's murder, the Lawrences' continued to exude a defiant and dignified public stance. The day after the Public Inquest, described as a "mockery" of the British legal system,<sup>35</sup> the Daily Mail, "a conservative paper with no great interest in crimes against black people",<sup>36</sup> ran a front page [Fig 1.] depicting photographs of each of the five suspects with the headline:

MURDERERS.  
The Mail accuses these men of killing.  
If we are wrong, let them sue us.<sup>37</sup>

The headline, which did not name Stephen Lawrence, was intended, so the Daily Mail claimed, to entice the accused to pursue libel action against the newspaper during which they would have to prove their innocence. The collapse of the first murder trial and subsequent failure of a private prosecution effectively meant that five suspects were free to walk the streets. The Daily Mail declared that: "The Lawrence case threatens to damage race relations and the reputation of British Justice."<sup>38</sup> Stephen Lawrence became symbolic of the social and political injustice in the failure of the system to protect all its citizens. More significantly, it confronted a nation which had failed and was continuing to fail Black people.

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35 "The inquest into the death of the murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence degenerated into a "mockery" of the legal system yesterday when five young white men refused to answer any questions relating to his death." 'Wall of silence from white youths at Lawrence inquest' the *Independent*, Wednesday 12 February, 1997

36 Cathcart, 1999, 137

37 *Daily Mail*, Friday 14 February 1997.

38 Ibid.

The New Labour government set the terms of a public inquiry which were:

To inquire into the matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence on 22 April 1993 to date, in order particularly to identify the lessons to be learned for the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes.<sup>39</sup>

Chaired by former High Court judge, Sir William Macpherson, who had been selected by the Home Secretary Jack Straw, Macpherson was assisted by three advisors.<sup>40</sup> The main inquiry sat for fifty-six days over a seven-month period, between March and September 1998. In February 1999, The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry was published as The Macpherson report and it contained a damning indictment of every aspect of the Stephen Lawrence murder; it would “criticize the police over first aid, scene management, contact at the hospital and family liaison”.<sup>41</sup> The report listed seventy recommendations for promoting “zero tolerance” towards racism.<sup>42</sup> It noted: “Any long-established, white dominated organisation is liable to have procedures, practices and a culture which tend to exclude or disadvantage non-white people.”<sup>43</sup> Although the killers of Stephen Lawrence had walked free, the reverberations of the Macpherson report would be the catalyst for an amendment to the Race Relations Act 1976. Introduced by New Labour, the Race Relations Act (Amendment) 2000 added a legal obligation for public bodies to promote ‘race equality’. New Labour’s

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39 Cathcart, 311

40 John Sentamu, the Anglican Bishop for Stepney, Tom Cook, a former Deputy Chief Constable of West Yorkshire and Richard Stone a London-based doctor and chair of the Jewish Council for Racial Equality.

41 Cathcart, ‘The Verdict’, 1999, 403

42 *BBC News*, Wednesday 24 March 1999, ‘Lawrence: Key recommendations’ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/285537.stm> [29 July 2017]

43 The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny, February 1999. Cathcart, ‘Verdict’, 1999, 404-405



appeared no publicly funded body would be untouched by the Stephen Lawrence case.

### **Critical Voices**

Paul Gilroy's public lecture, *Joined-Up Politics and Post-Colonial Melancholia*,<sup>49</sup> offered a timely and critical intervention to how, despite New Labour's 'popular' election victory and seeming embrace of multiculturalism, the politics of 'race' and cultural diversity were still in need of critical assessment. Gilroy's paper considered how race had historically occupied a marginal position within British politics. For Gilroy, both the political left and the right sought, albeit in different ways and sometimes for different reasons, to write 'race' out of the political debate. New Labour's role in establishing the public inquiry which led to the publication of the Macpherson report, although significant in terms of providing some level of state recognition of 'institutionalised racism', was in Gilroy's view undermined by a belief that the 'problem' of 'race' could be 'fixed' and therefore rendered surplus to ongoing political debate:

Nobody seems inclined to acknowledge the ways in which race-thinking has shaped the wider common assumptions of political culture – its premium identities; its shifting sense of nationality; its ideas of belonging, of progress, of democracy and, indeed, of history.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, despite the seeming emergence of a more progressive and inclusive

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49 Paul Gilroy, 'Joined-Up Politics and Post-Colonial Melancholia', *ICA Diversity Lecture*, 16 July, 1999, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

50 *Ibid.*, 14

political culture, according to Gilroy, this political and cultural terrain still failed to consider or acknowledge how Britain's colonial legacy made "race-thinking" an integral part of its history, heritage and contemporary politics. Where Gilroy argued that 'race' should be considered as integral to the British body politic, journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown considered how multiculturalism and its attendant discourses had become irrelevant and even counterproductive to contemporary Britain. In *After Multiculturalism*, commissioned by the Foreign Policy Centre, Alibhai-Brown primarily argues that concepts of multiculturalism which had emerged from post-war immigration were in need of re-evaluation. Alibhai-Brown considered how theoretically and practically multiculturalism had become stunted because it had not evolved and was still viewed as being exclusively for and about Britain's Black and Asian population:

The multiculturalism debate no longer connects. It doesn't offer a shared narrative of who we are today and what we stand for; it doesn't speak to young people or capture their identities, aspirations and the way they feel about the world. When the key issues transforming identities and opportunities include Europe, globalisation, the internet and cultural crossover, interactions and fusion, it too often had little or nothing to say about these. Multiculturalism is a simpler, narrower concept built around assumptions of the past – and one which holds us back.<sup>51</sup>

Although Alibhai-Brown's report included often hyperbolic and unproven assertions<sup>52</sup> it did identify the extent to which, by the late 1990s, debates

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51 Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, 2000, 3-4

52 "It is true that there is less overt and deep-seated racism in London than in Marseilles or Rostock, but claiming that our race relations are incomparably superior to those almost anywhere else is too often an excuse for complacency and inaction.", Ibid., 8. Alibhai-Brown compares a capital city with two comparatively smaller cities in France and Germany and offers no evidence to support this claim. Her assertion also seems oblivious to the Stephen Lawrence murder which took place in London.

around multiculturalism were increasingly being expressed in terms that exceeded the delimited fields of 'race relations' and identified a "need to collectively reimagine ourselves and our society, recognising both our diversity and our collective resources."<sup>53</sup> Alibhai-Brown's *After Multiculturalism* was a continuation of arguments being made for a more expansive view of 'race' and multiculturalism in Britain. The aforementioned *Joined-Up Politics and Post-Colonial Melancholia* by Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall's *Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage*<sup>54</sup> were two lectures delivered in 1999, two years after New Labour's landslide election victory, which epitomised the ways in which both politics and culture had become central to rethinking ideas of nationhood and Britishness.

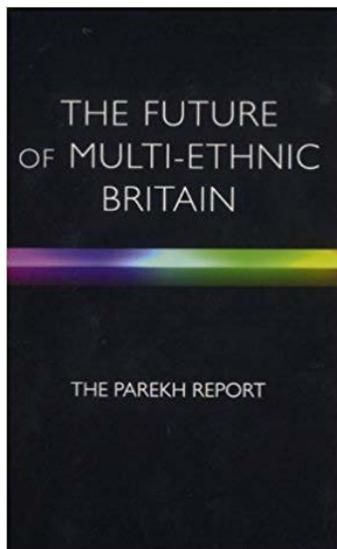


Fig 2. The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report, cover 2000

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53 Ibid., 'The New Approach', 57

54 Paul Gilroy, 'Joined-Up Politics and Post-Colonial Melancholia', ICA Diversity Lecture, 16 July 1999, ICA, London; Stuart Hall, 'Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage'', Re-Imagining the Post-Nation, Keynote speech, 2 November 1999, at national conference *Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage*, Manchester, England

The Runnymede Trust established the Commission on The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain which would produce the Parekh Report [Fig 2].<sup>55</sup> Its purpose was to analyse the condition of “multi-ethnic Britain” and to “propose ways of countering racial discrimination and disadvantage and making Britain a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity.”<sup>56</sup>

Alibhai-Brown, along with Stuart Hall and other individuals drawn primarily from academia, as well as from the fields of crime, law, journalism, criminal justice, health and education, were invited to “analyse the current state of multi-ethnic Britain and to propose ways of countering racial discrimination and disadvantage and making Britain a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity.”<sup>57</sup>

The report positioned the subjects of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ at the centre of its analysis. It was not intended to be read or considered as being just about or for Black people or ‘minorities’. Instead, the report presented what it considered to be “fundamental beliefs” pertaining to equality, which should be “shared by most people in Britain” but which could not “flourish” “within a structure of deep economic or social inequalities.”<sup>58</sup> The report analysed policing, education, employment, racism, inequalities and immigration.

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55 *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, The Parekh Report*, The Runnymede Trust, Profile Books, London, 2000

56 *Ibid.*, x The report noted how: “The very language used to describe and define race relations in Britain is a source of considerable conceptual and political muddle. Such terms as ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ signify fixed blocs and obscure the fluidity and heterogeneity of real life.”

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*

Such thinking was also apposite given how devolution resulted in the formation of a new Parliament in Scotland and National Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland. The Parekh report described the changes brought about by national devolution as representing a “turning point” in the history of England, Scotland and Wales.

Many of the arguments and suggestions posed by the report were not unreasonable, not least the importance of rethinking Britain as a *multi ethnic* nation, as opposed to one which merely tolerated *ethnic minorities*. The extent to which racial inequality could be measured and needed to be challenged throughout Britain’s institutions was a central plank. In particular reference to the arts the report asked:

Who should receive resources to express themselves, and gain access to platforms where they will be heard, through literature, film, painting and music? Who should be represented in the collections of art galleries and museums, the repertoires of theatre companies, the programmes of local art centres? These are questions that cultural policies have to address.<sup>59</sup>

Such events are important as they provide a wider cultural context for thinking around the promotion of ‘cultural diversity’. The most visible manifestation of this change was within the cultural sector, where New Labour’s championing of multiculturalism was part of a wider championing of a modern, forward looking Britain which was itself anathema to preceding Conservative governments. Jo Littler has pointed out:

In the early years of Blair, the Department of National Heritage became the Department of Culture, Media

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59 Ibid., 160

and Sport (DCMS) and the archaic and Thatcherite connotations of the word 'heritage' were dropped, as swinging New Labour claimed to represent thrusting hyper-modernity.<sup>60</sup>

In *Creative Britain*, Chris Smith, then Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, identified “access, excellence, education and economic value” as key themes for his new government department, which were what he described as part of a “profoundly democratic agenda, seeing cultural access as one of the egalitarian building blocks of society.”<sup>61</sup> Published little more than a year into New Labour’s first term, everything about *Creative Britain*, from its title and glossy dust jacket (adorned with reproductions of Damien Hirst’s paintings) to its upbeat tone,<sup>62</sup> reflected the ways in which central government sought to be seen to identify with “the new spirit of modern Britain”.<sup>63</sup> The backdrop to this “new spirit” was characterised by a sense of national ‘optimism’ (fuelled by favourable media coverage) following New Labour’s landslide election victory. In cultural terms, this “new spirit” was embodied, albeit briefly, by ‘cool Britannia’, also a largely media-generated phenomenon, which typically involved promoting particular brands of contemporary British pop music, art and fashion, as emblematic of Britain’s cultural rebirth. New Labour was quick to align itself to this media inspired mood.<sup>64</sup>

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60 Jo Littler, 2005, 5 [The correct name is the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.]

61 Smith, 1998, 2

62 This collection of speeches was published by the literary publisher Faber and Faber, rather than by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

63 Smith, 1998, 2

64 Although presented as modern and contemporary, ‘Cool Britannia’s’ reliance on the Union Jack could also be considered a nostalgic retreat into Britain’s past.

## Cultural Diversity and the Arts

Beyond its desire to support culture in all its guises, in its formative years in government, New Labour was also eager to establish an agenda for supporting the arts which went beyond pecuniary and market orientated tendencies, what Chin-tao Wu described as “Thatcherising the Arts Council”.<sup>65</sup> Promoting the economic benefits culture could bring to the British economy, New Labour also actively promoted the idea that culture had a role to play in the government’s wider political aspirations:

Why any government that is thinking seriously about the future has to address the issue of how it will recognise and support the role of creativity in nurturing society, and of society nurturing creativity. Why creative activity and culture are necessity for social cohesion, for economic success, for personal fulfillment and freedom.<sup>66</sup>

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, New Labour’s influence on the cultural sector was prominently manifested in the gallery sector. The opening of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, and Tate Modern, London amongst others and the availability of increased levels of lottery funding enabled widespread gallery refurbishments. This period was described in 2005 as the ‘Golden Age’ by Sir Christopher Frayling, chair of the Arts Council. In doing so, he was acknowledging how under New Labour, “contemporary visual arts have enjoyed not just a sustained period of productive activity, but a much higher profile than ever before.”<sup>67</sup> However, Frayling’s praise for New Labour was tempered by one of the main thrusts of his speech, which lamented the

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65 Chin-tao Wu, 2002, 65

66 Smith, 1998, 27

67 Christopher Frayling, “The Only Trustworthy book... Arts and Public Value” 2005, 16

Department of Culture, Media and Sport “becoming increasingly more ‘hands-on’ in its involvement with the arts. Noting that the “government evolves the policy framework but it is not supposed to interfere with the implementation”,<sup>68</sup> Frayling was in effect reprising arguments in favour of maintaining the ‘arm’s length principle’ which had, at least since Margaret Thatcher’s reign as Prime Minister, become increasingly difficult to maintain. However, even then, public subsidy of the arts was subject to a level of scrutiny previously unheard of, as Chin-tao Wu argued.

A common trait of cultural diversity initiatives, dating back to the 1980s, has been the extent to which these initiatives have been generated from institutions, rather than by the individuals, organisations, or groups who are ordinarily identified as the prospective beneficiaries of such schemes. The relationship between the initiator and initiated is also characterised by a ‘top down’ approach. Such relationships between the initiator and initiated are of course not limited to ‘cultural diversity’ schemes. They could be said to be an integral part of how the state legitimises its schemes, and the guise under which it claims to ‘empower’ the subjects/beneficiaries of these schemes.

In his book, *Regeneration: The Story of the Dome*, Adam Nicolson considered the wider machinations that took place in the earliest stages of what would become the London Dome project built with huge public subsidy as part of the UK’s millennium celebrations.

The state invents an idea: tells the country about it; it requires a body other than itself to express a demand for it; offers to part-fund that body; then insists that the body, although independent of government,

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68 Ibid., 15

should not be entirely free to do what it likes with an idea which it never had but which it must nevertheless claim as its own.<sup>69</sup>

The provenance of a ‘top down’ approach to the arts, as we know it today, though 95 born under John Major’s Conservative government (with the Dome and the ‘Arts for Everyone’ scheme), found a form of apotheosis under New Labour, as suggested by Frayling. However, another form of ‘top down’ approach to cultural diversity and the visual arts arguably dates back to the early 1980s and to a period in which London was controlled by a socialist driven Greater London Council (GLC). By the mid 80s, the GLC eagerly claimed itself to be “the first local authority in the country to develop a policy for black arts and to respond to the needs and concerns of black artists with actual resources.”<sup>70</sup> During its five years in power, between 1981 and 1986, the GLC dedicated an ever-increasing level of funding for exhibitions and events involving Black artists. Although in real terms this funding only ever represented a small fraction of the GLC’s total expenditure on the arts, it did, nevertheless, represent an unprecedented level of financial patronage and support. Coming in the form of grant-aid, exhibitions and commissions, the GLC offered various opportunities for what it frequently referred to as ‘black arts’. During the GLC’s time in power, Black artists were themselves actively involved, in London and further afield, in organising a significant number of exhibitions and events, mostly outside of conventional exhibition spaces. In adopting this independent approach, these

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69 Adam Nicolson, ‘Getting Something Started’, 1999, 48

70 Greater London Council “Black Arts – Future Policies and Priorities”, *Report by Principal Race Relations Advisor Director of Recreation*, box 2 of 2, ACGB/32/9 Black Arts White Institutions, Arts Council of Great Britain archive, Victoria and Albert Museum  
point 9, (n.d.) p 3

artists, whilst by no means endowed with significant financial resources, showed themselves to be both resourceful and more than capable of mounting a wide-range of exhibitions. Despite this, the GLC adopted a very particular form of patronage towards Black visual artists and conflated its anti-racist agenda with its support for Black artists *en masse*. The GLC's support for Black artists was also predominantly predicated on *initiating* activity for these artists. As Eddie Chambers observed: "What made the intervention/contribution of the GLC so important and an intriguing aspect of mid 1980s Black visual arts activity in Britain was that it was the GLC staff/employees who directly initiated and directed the projects in which Black visual artists were involved."<sup>71</sup>

In *the Nature of the Beast*, I noted that the GLC's approach:

...paid little attention to potential differences and conflicts between art forms and artistic concerns presented. Instead of considering these issues as possibly determining factors in shaping the nature of any given project, the organising principles for supporting Black artists focused almost exclusively on their 'Blackness' as the single and most important legitimating factor for their inclusion.<sup>72</sup>

Although these artists may have individually benefited, in the short term, from participating in such ventures, by the late 1980s, for the majority, London galleries continued to offer only marginalised and tokenistic forms of engagement (notable examples being 'The Thin Black Line' at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London in 1985 and 'From Two Worlds' at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1986). The GLC's approach ultimately did little to impact positively

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71 Chambers, 1998, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 159

72 Hylton, "The GLC: Anti-Racism and the patronage of Black visual artists", 2007, 48-49

on the attitudes or policies of London galleries towards Black practitioners.

Following the GLC's abolition in 1986, the Arts Council would become, in the context of an art world still largely indifferent or hostile towards the majority of Black artists, the chief protagonist in the strategic support of Black artists. From the late 1980s through to the late 1990s, although far from purely progressive, Arts Council patronage of Black artists was decidedly more nuanced, less prescriptive, than that offered by the GLC.<sup>73</sup> Within the Arts Council this was characterised by the thinking found in the Visual Arts department and the Cultural Diversity Unit. Where the former, initially at least, tended to respond to artists/ curators' initiatives (resulting in the emergence of Third Text and the African and Asian Visual Artists' Archive, Autograph and INIVA), the latter became preoccupied with producing often ineffectual and insipid reports and 'policy' documents about cultural diversity which positioned Black artists as an essentially self-referencing entity. This resulted in a strategy championing the establishment of 'black' arts organisations, as a satisfactory means by which to challenge art world racism and exclusion.

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<sup>73</sup> Where the GLC was a government body, accountable to its constituents as well as central government, the Arts Council was accountable solely to central government.

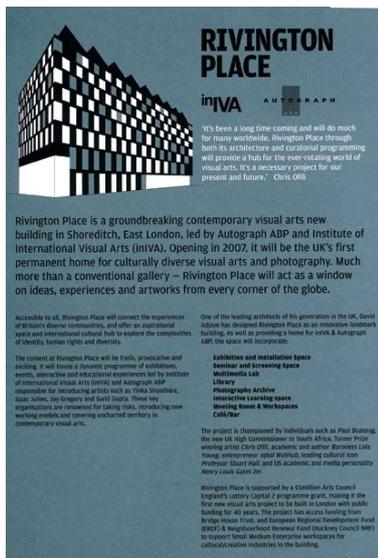


Fig 3. Rivington Place promotional leaflet, no date (c2004)

By the end of the 1990s, it was the approach of the Cultural Diversity Unit that assumed dominance in Arts Council thinking. Although a handful of Black visual arts organisations born under the watch of the Visual Arts department continued to exist (and even thrive during this time), the ethos which had enabled their emergence was, if not completely abandoned, increasingly marginalised, in favour of the Cultural Diversity Unit's agenda. This agenda manifested itself in several ways. The small number of Black visual arts organisations funded by the Arts Council saw their annual grants increase; additional funding opportunities for these organisations from the Arts Council also appeared. The year 2000 was designated as the year of cultural diversity in the arts, part of which was an Arts Council initiative which, after various false starts, was eventually called *decibel*. Appended to this name, as if in the form of a rallying cry, were the words "raising the voice of the culturally diverse artists in Britain". In 2001, £29 million out of a £90 million Arts Capital Programme was allocated

to Black, Asian or Chinese arts organisations [Fig 3.].<sup>74</sup> In 2006, the 'Inspire' fellowship programme, a "positive action training scheme", was launched by Arts Council England, "aimed at addressing the under-representation of minority ethnic curators in London's museums, galleries and arts organisations."<sup>75</sup> These seemingly multifarious and significantly endowed initiatives established the Arts Council as the chief protagonist in the promotion of 'cultural diversity' in the British gallery system. The development of building-based projects for 'culturally diverse artists' alongside refurbishments and new builds taking place in London, Birmingham, Gateshead, and Walsall, suggests that cultural diversity was, in the arts at least, being realised most emphatically as a separatist rather than integrationist entity.

### **The Impact of 9/11 and 7/7**

The abolition of the slave trade had been characterised as an example of British and more specifically Parliamentary humanitarian and moral virtue. New Labour's support for national commemorations to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade carried wider significance. It projected New Labour in favourable terms, as a party and government, which exemplified and could illustrate its inclusivity and promotion of racial tolerance. Black people, those of African and African Caribbean heritage had become the acceptable face of New Labour's brand of diversity. This was made explicit when, as previously quoted,

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<sup>74</sup> In London, new buildings/organisations promoting 'cultural diversity' in the arts include: Rivington Place (which houses the Institute of International Visual Arts and Autograph, The Association of Black Photographers), Rich Mix, Bernie Grant Arts Centre and The Stephen Lawrence Gallery.

<sup>75</sup> The Inspire Fellowship Programme, *Information Pack*, 2006

Blair described the bicentenary as an opportunity for “us to recognise the enormous contribution of Black African and Caribbean communities to our nation”.<sup>76</sup> However, a series of seismic domestic and international events, during the early 2000s onwards would impact greatly on government attitudes toward diversity and multiculturalism in Britain. Britain’s ‘Asian community’ notably those described as Muslims would feel the full force of this negativity. The Bradford riots<sup>77</sup> in July 2001, provided initial evidence of the limitations of government ideas and policies relating to inclusion. However, the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001<sup>78</sup>(from now on 9/11), followed by the New Labour government’s decision to support the United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003<sup>79</sup> set in motion a growing open hostility towards (British) Muslims. This climate was intensified following terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004, and then in London on 7 July, 2005<sup>80</sup> (from

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76 Tony Blair, 'A message from the Prime Minister: Foreword', *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act*, HM Government, Department for Communities and Local Government Publications, 2007, 1

77 The Bradford riots took place during 7-9 July 2001. Whilst some disturbances and clashes between white and Asian communities had been reported in other northern towns in England such as Oldham and Bury around this time, Bradford witnessed the most devastating rioting. The riots in Bradford followed the Home Secretary’s decision to block attempts of a British National Party march through the city.

78 A series of coordinated attacks in which four passenger airliners were hijacked from flights on the east coast heading to Los Angeles and San Francisco on the morning of 11 September 2001. Two planes were flown into the two towers of the World Trade Center. Another plane was flown into the Pentagon. The fourth plane crashed in Stonycreek Township, Pennsylvania on route to Washington D.C.

79 The research initiative 1807 Commemorated noted “In a time when the actions of Britain in Iraq and Afghanistan are criticised, when anti-terror laws appear to curtail individual freedom and when environmental and economic pressures highlight the damage caused by 'British' interests, the memory of the abolitionists provide a haven for those wishing to define a sense of identity and self.”

<https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/discussion/memory.html> [ Accessed 15 April 2018]

80 Four British citizens exploded bombs in 2005 on various parts of London’s public transport network. The bombings had a catastrophic impact, killing 52 people and injuring several hundred others. The four assailants who conducted these suicide ‘terrorist attacks’ were believed to have been motivated by ‘Islamic extremism’, as

now on 7/7). At precisely this moment, New Labour was celebrating Britain as a multicultural harmonious nation. This was exemplified by London's successful bid to host the 2012 Olympics (which was announced on 6 July 2005) and in which diversity and multiculturalism were key selling points.

The wider impact of 9/11 and 7/7 fall beyond the remit of this study. However, it is necessary to briefly acknowledge how these events relate to ideas of diversity promoted by New Labour and subsequent Conservative governments. African and African Caribbean people had become more widely accepted and celebrated by a form of diversity authorized by government. Where Britain's African Caribbean population was once synonymous with being anti-authority and living proof of the failings of a multi-racial country, it was now the 'Muslim community' who would be thrust into this role and characterised as *persona non grata*. Thus, having openly embraced Britain's ethnic diversity, New Labour would begin to re-evoke attitudes towards 'race', the 'alien' strain and anti-patriotism, reminiscent of the Thatcher era. In a speech explaining how, in the government's view, "separateness" had created an atmosphere of "grievance" in Britain, Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government offered this problematic appraisal of multiculturalism:

...there are white Britons who do not feel comfortable with change. They see the shops and restaurants in their town centres changing. They see their neighbourhoods becoming more diverse. Detached from the benefits of those changes, they begin to believe the stories about ethnic minorities getting special treatment, and to develop resentment, a

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retaliation against British involvement in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, in 2001 and 2003 respectively.

sense of grievance.<sup>81</sup>

Such unvarnished sentiments reprised the sort of racial hostility once expressed by Thatcher's governments<sup>82</sup>. Also, in its anti-immigration stance it set the framework for Brexit.<sup>83</sup> Kelly's divisive comments were also imbued with inadvertent irony, given that they were made as part of the government's launch of its Commission on Integration and Cohesion.<sup>84</sup> Holding such contradictory political positions was not unique to issues of race politics. It was very much in keeping with the paradox of the wider New Labour project, whereby the creeping influence of free market economics was not seen as oppositional to values of state subsidy and social democracy.<sup>85</sup> The government's establishment of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion epitomised New Labour's increasingly contradictory position on the subject of multiculturalism. Kelly's thinly veiled vindictive assault on a stratum of the British Asian population (shopkeepers and restaurateurs) coincided with publicly funded initiatives which sought to promote certain concepts of cultural diversity.

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81 Ruth Kelly, BBC News Channel, Thursday 24 August 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5281572.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5281572.stm) [Accessed 10 May 2009].  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5281572.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5281572.stm)

82 For example, in a Granada TV interview in 1978 organised to mark her third year as party leader, Margaret Thatcher declared that "people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture". Such sentiments were reprised by David Cameron in 2015 when, as Prime Minister, he described migrants living in unofficial camps in Calais as a "swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs, it's got a growing economy, and it's an incredible place to live".

83 The referendum on 23rd June 2016, the British public voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.

84 The Commission on Integration and Cohesion was established by the Government in June 2006.

85 Stuart Hall identifies this in terms of New Labour's reverence for the *market place* and application of 'active government', 'New Labour has picked up where Thatcherism left off: Blair's project has been to absorb social democracy into neo-liberalism', *The Guardian* Wednesday 6 August 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics> [retrieved 29 May 2017]

Nevertheless, public and government attitudes towards Britain's Muslim population would change. Even though 'terror attacks' in Britain such as 7/7 had been carried out by British citizens political discourse sought to tacitly apportion blame:

We know that these people act in the name of Islam but we also know that the vast and overwhelming majority of Muslims here and abroad are decent and law-abiding people who abhor those who do this every bit as much as we do.<sup>86</sup>

The 'Muslim community', 'radical Muslims' and 'moderate Muslims' became popular refrains to encapsulate and stigmatise. Other commentators would go further to portray Britain as a nation gripped by an Islamist fervour.<sup>87</sup> Although racial segregation had for decades been allowed to become a normalised part of northern towns and cities such as Bradford, Oldham and Blackburn multiculturalism and particular aspects of cultural and religious difference were now seen as alien and suspect.<sup>88</sup>

Since 9/11 and 7/7 the focus has been increasingly on how to create 'social cohesion' in the context of anxieties about 'the terrorists within' and a series of Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Acts have laid down new policies which recognise the need for managed migration (to allow for the required forms of

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86 BBC News Channel Thursday 7 July 'London bombings toll rises to 37' <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4661059.stm> [accessed 20 April 2018]

87 See *Londonistan: How Britain Created a Terror State*, Melanie Phillips, Encounter Books, 2006

88 Will Woodward, 'Racial Muslims must integrate, says Blair PM backs attempts to limit wearing of veil in public Praise for Tories over progress on race relations' <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/dec/09/religion.immigrationandpublicservices> Guardian 9 December 2006 [Accessed 20 April 2018] "Mr Blair sympathised with Jack Straw, the leader of the Commons, who provoked controversy by announcing that he asked Muslim women to remove their veils when coming to his constituency surgeries in Blackburn."

skilled labour) alongside draconian restrictions on entry.<sup>89</sup>

No sooner had the cultural sector begun to bear the fruits of the government's inclusive agenda with various flagship projects<sup>90</sup> that New Labour turned its back on multiculturalism. At the precise moment when the New Labour government was expressing antipathy towards notions of multiculturalism it was seemingly and unequivocally championing cultural diversity. Via the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Britain's publicly funded arts sector would generate a raft of 'affirmative action' initiatives targeting Black and Asian people, spanning employment, funding awards and exhibition opportunities. This period also witnessed new building-based arts organisations such as Rivington Place and the Bernie Grant Arts Centre in London, New Art Exchange, Nottingham, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, presenting what had become known as 'culturally diverse arts'. Kobena Mercer offered a relatively upbeat assessment of this situation, expressing the view that Britain had changed for the better and that "'culturally diverse' arts, in one form or another" were now widely available.<sup>91</sup> Artist Sonia Dyer, on the other hand, viewed this 'diversity culture' as counter-productive to racial equality, tethering Black artists and Black people to racially specific initiatives.<sup>92</sup> As New Labour began to distance itself from multiculturalism, the initiatives made possible under its

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89 Catherine Hall, 'Afterword: Britain 2007, Problematizing Histories', 2010, 195

90 "Black, Asian and Chinese arts were today given a significant boost from lottery funds as the Arts Council of England announced that 60 projects worth over £90 million have been admitted to the Arts Capital Programme. Of this, £29 million has been allocated to Black, Asian or Chinese arts organisation." Arts Council of England, Press Release, 12 June 2001

91 Kobena Mercer, 2007, 66

92 Sonja Dyer, *Boxed-In: How Cultural Diversity Policies Constrict Black Artists* 2007, Unpaginated

watch compounded the sort of racial *separateness* which it now considered to be divisive rather than conducive to a cohesive society. Far from enabling racial equality, such developments effectively legitimised and institutionalised racial separatism.

## **Museums and Slavery**

Since the opening of the *Transatlantic Slavery Gallery* in 1994 and a slow move towards *diversification* of British heritage, a greater sense of urgency had begun to be instilled in museums. With various financial inducements offered by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, institutions such as London's National Maritime Museum (NMM) were instructed and encouraged to accelerate their process of *diversification*. NMM's *Trade and Empire Gallery*, opened in 1999, attempted to re-configure orthodox presentations of British naval history, as part of its attempts to acknowledge aspects of the slave trade and slavery history. Although such developments were relatively modest and long overdue, they were nevertheless met with some public hostility. Writer and historian Douglas Hamilton recounted public response to the NMM's attempts at diversification:

The problem for museums in the late 1990s (and which to an extent remains the case) was the danger of alienating the traditional audience. The launch of the NMM's Trade and Empire Gallery in 1999 unleashed a number of vitriolic responses, notably in the pages in some of Britain's more right-wing newspapers. A series of commentaries and outraged letters in the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Mail on Sunday* attacked the 'political correctness' of an exhibition that Telegraph readers described as disgraceful, shoddy and crass... the NMM was also confronted by more liberal commentators, who, while less strident in tone, were nonetheless critical of some elements of the display. One argued that the NMM had 'more than a little catching up to do with

those [exhibitions] in Bristol and Liverpool'.<sup>93</sup>

While Hamilton's insight was intended as a summation of the problems faced by the museum, it also inadvertently gave an interpretation of what constituted the 'traditional' audience. Nevertheless, in 2003, NMM followed the development of the *Trade and Empire Gallery* by spearheading the Understanding Slavery Initiative (USI, Fig 4.), which involved a number of national and regional museums in "effective teaching of the transatlantic slave trade in schools and communities."<sup>94</sup> Although by no means the only such school orientated educational material to be produced in recent times,<sup>95</sup> this initiative was nevertheless a significant development. It represented the first to involve a number of public museums in England which had not previously addressed the history of transatlantic slavery within their exhibition or educational programmes. USI was also significant because it was government funded by the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF).<sup>96</sup> Established in 2003, USI was devised to explore the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its social, economic

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93 Douglas Hamilton, 'Representing Slavery in British Museums: The Challenges of 2007', 128-129, 2010

94 NMM, Publicity 2003

95 For example, *Living Through History* was a series of educational books aimed at GCSE pupils. Included amongst its 24 issues were *The Abolition of the Slave Trade* by Allan Leas and *The Scramble for Africa* by Trevor Rowell. This series was originally published by 'Batsford books for schools' during the late 1980s.

96 USI was at the time jointly funded by the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), and described as "part of the Strategic Commissioning National/Regional Partnerships Programme. Five museums are working in partnership to promote and support the effective teaching of the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade in schools and communities through resources that fully reflect many historical and contemporary perspectives on this major part of world history." The five museums involved were Hull Museum and Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool, The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives and National Maritime Museum, London.

and cultural context, and to support the Key Stage 3 History and Citizenship curriculum. Although part-funded by DCMS, it was not conceived with the bicentenary in mind. Nevertheless, David Lammy MP would cite it as evidence that: “Education and youth involvement [was] a key element in 2007.”<sup>97</sup> The relationship between education and ‘understanding slavery’ would continue to be highlighted in a variety of ways in the build up to and subsequent launch of the bicentenary, culminating in Lammy declaring that:

The teaching of black and African history has always been part of the curriculum. But it needs great improvement. To help teachers to do this, the government has provided nearly £1 million for the development of the Understanding of Slavery Initiative [sic].<sup>98</sup>

Whilst USI was in receipt of Government funding from 2003, such subsidy was not, contrary to the impression given by Lammy, awarded as part of any long-term strategic commitment for improving perceived educational shortcomings in ‘understanding slavery’ in English Museums and the educational system. In an interview given to *Museums Journal* by USI’s Project Manager, Maria Amidu, the interviewer captures the precarious and uncertain existence of the initiative: “From year to year, no one quite knew whether the money would come through to carry on, so at each stage Amidu had to re-apply for the job.”<sup>99</sup> This sort of uncertainty and insecurity was not uncommon in the arts. However, whilst millions of pounds were being ring-fenced for Black, Asian and Chinese arts projects, USI had a precarious existence, despite being touted as a major

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97 *Hansard* “Slavery (Abolition Anniversary)”, Column 414WH, (Lammy), 13 December 2005

98 Speech to the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation in Hull, 18 May 2007, [http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference\\_library/minister\\_speeches/](http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/minister_speeches/)

99 Felicity Heywood, *Museums Journal*, March 2007, 22-23



and contemporary art exhibitions, and in some instances a combination of both, these were accompanied by conferences, talks and other public events. They explored a range of themes, as reflected by titles such as *Uncomfortable Truths – The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*, and *The Transatlantic Slave Trade, its Abolition and Contemporary Legacies in Plymouth and Devon*. These exhibitions could have taken place in any year and at any time. However, presented by institutions which had previously shown little inclination to explore the subject of slavery, they were testimony to the power of New Labour's inclusion agenda.

## **Part II**

### **The Politics of Commemoration**

This section considers the politics of commemoration from several different perspectives, looking first at why certain anniversary dates are attributed with greater significance. Why is the one hundred and ninetieth anniversary of the passing of the abolition of the slave trade act be deemed less significant than the two hundredth? The compulsion for marking anniversaries may seem incidental to the broader politics of commemoration. However, such 'traditions' can illustrate how commemoration has become driven by media interests as by a need to remember and mark certain historical events. For example, Britain's military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq saw an increase in commemorative culture, a corollary to which was how the Remembrance Poppy, once a relatively humble and momentary form of remembrance, became a symbol of commemorative culture's commodification and justification of warfare. Such considerations provide a cultural context for the bicentenary, even though,

unlike the annual event of war remembrance, national commemorations for the abolition of the slave trade were fixed to the bicentenary. This section also considers the *Windrush* generation, and how post-war immigration has rarely been viewed in relation to colonial and slavery histories. Having established the historical context for New Labour's decision to back the bicentenary, the section then examines how New Labour framed the bicentenary and harnessed it to its political agenda. It concludes a survey of media responses to the bicentenary.

### **Noughts and Zeros**

Acts of commemoration are particularly sensitive occasions for assessing the balance of change and continuity within the culture at large.<sup>101</sup> — David Simpson

History is often framed as a collection of definitive periods the 40s, 50s, 60s and so on. Although often used as shorthand on closer examination, 'decades' also have a tendency to drift beyond their numerically assigned parameters. Such slippages of time are commonly known as 'long decades' and defy overly simplistic classification:

You can ask a dozen different people and you'll get a dozen different starting dates. The sixties, I always think, didn't really get going until about 1964, and didn't end until about 1972 or 1973. The early 1960s were, in every way, the fag end of the fifties-post-war austerity, drab, predictable... and not very imaginative or stylish.

You see, the 1940s didn't end until about 1956. Then it was the 1950s until 1963 or '64 or so.<sup>102</sup>

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101 David Simpson 'Introduction', 2006, 1

102 Anthony Frewin, *London Blues*, 1997 quoted in Jonathon Green, *'Introduction', All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture*, Pimlico; London 1999, i

The practice of attributing particular significance to certain anniversary dates appears to come as second nature. A tenth, twentieth or fiftieth anniversary automatically attracts greater attention or fanfare. Of course, the actual roots of such commemoration are archaic but enduring and tailor-made for contemporary society. The accession of Elizabeth II to the throne in 1952 has been celebrated by the Silver Jubilee in 1977, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of her reign, the Golden Jubilee in 2002 for the fiftieth, and the Diamond Jubilee in 2012 for the sixtieth anniversary. As David Simpson notes “nothing is more amenable to political and commercial manipulation than funerals, monuments, epitaphs, and obituaries.”<sup>103</sup> ‘Paying respect’ assumes a more duplicitous meaning with events such as the tenth anniversary of 9/11 or the twentieth anniversary of Stephen Lawrence’s murder. For those who lost a wife, husband, partner, sibling or child on 9/11, the ramifications of this tragedy are part of *their* daily reality. Likewise, since 22 April 1993, the family of Stephen Lawrence has had to live each day with the consequences of his murder and the failure of the legal system. What function does a media spectacle of events and personal trauma bring to the idea of remembrance? David Simpson suggests that commemorative acts are opportunities for “assessing the balance of change and continuity within the culture at large”.<sup>104</sup> Shifts in political climates and culture are however not bound to tenth or twentieth anniversaries. They usually occur at unspecified times and not at the behest of the media.

The death of Princess Diana in 1997 precipitated a spontaneous outpouring of

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103 Ibid., Simpson.

104 Ibid.

public grief, rarely seen at the time. Thousands of people queued to sign condolence books and line the funeral route from Kensington Palace to Westminster Abbey. Television cameras articulated the range of 'ordinary' people affected by Diana's tragic death. Often in tears and grief stricken, ordinary people patiently waited their turn to throw flowers towards the slow-moving funeral cortege.

Spontaneous and mournful gatherings, condolence books, public shrines, a minute silence (or 'spontaneous' applause) are today part of the lexicon of public expressions of grief and rituals of news coverage. The one-minute silence or spontaneous applause has now frequently been deployed at the beginning of Premier League football matches.

In Britain, Remembrance Day has, since 1919, been an annual commemoration of the ending of the First World War in 1918. Originally established in memory of the many millions from Commonwealth countries who died in this combat, during the 20<sup>th</sup> and now 21<sup>st</sup> century, Remembrance Day has become a vehicle for commemorating the many hundreds and thousands of other service men and women who died in the line of duty, most notably during the Second World War. New Labour's support for and involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, brought fresh urgency to its marking. In 2006, with the backing of Gordon Brown, New Labour introduced Veterans' Day, (renamed Armed Services Day in 2009) as an official annual commemoration held in June to honour former servicemen and women.<sup>105</sup> The

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105 Neil Tweedie "Brown will champion Veterans' Day for every June 27", *The Telegraph*, 13 February 2006







passengers primarily from Jamaica and Trinidad. What became known as the *Windrush Generation* marked a new chapter in the evolution of Black presence in Britain. The steady influx of immigrants to post-war Britain (particularly from the Caribbean, Africa, and the Indian Subcontinent) symbolised Britain's desire to capitalise on labour shortages. This Black presence also highlights the extent to which the history and remembrance of slavery had been excised from British history. During the course of the next two decades people came from Britain's Black Commonwealth countries. Many of those from the Caribbean came with the intention of a temporary stay.

Integral to the new wave of Black settlement, started with *Windrush*, were changing ideas about Britain and Britishness. Equally, *Windrush* heralded a new and enduring racialisation of post-war immigration. Although Black people had lived in Britain for centuries, the British government's liberal post-war immigration policy came under increasing critical scrutiny. As Paul Foot noted in the mid 1960s, "Political reactions to the process of immigration have been shaped to a significant extent by pressure groups formed with the main purpose of campaigning against immigration."<sup>106</sup>As a result of increasing political pressures, successive Conservative and Labour governments took it in turns to introduce various punitive Acts that attempted to illustrate a commitment to 'controlling' the flow of (Black) immigrants to Britain. In light of this, the government sought to head off criticism of punitive immigration laws with the

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<sup>106</sup> Paul Foot "Anti-Immigrant Organizations", *Immigration and Race in British Politics*, Penguin, 1965, p 195







Britain can therefore be understood beyond simply being about seeking gainful employment. However, not even Britain’s now dysfunctional rule in the Caribbean was seen as noteworthy at the time. Nor was Caribbean migration considered an economic and historical consequence of slavery’s inextricable link to Britain. Although it would have made sense at this time to offer a wider context and explanation of Caribbean immigration to Britain, there was a pronounced absence of any public memory of Britain’s role in the slave trade and slavery. Whilst the defeat of the Nazis and the end of the war in 1945 had brought national jubilation, in 1948 people in Britain were still facing very real hardships in coming to terms with suffering, loss and continued rationing as a result of the conflict. In this context, the idea of remembering slavery or even understanding the hardships faced by other people of a darker complexion who, though technically British, lived several thousand miles away was implausible. However, even as the decades progressed and Britain began to relinquish control of huge swathes of its Empire, in Africa and then the Caribbean, the continued arrival of migrants to Britain did not impact on the marginal to non-existent public profile of slavery in British history. However, history books from the past and present have eagerly recounted how:

The anti slavery movement was the first genuine mass movement this country had seen. It held appeal for almost all classes and sectors of British society. From labourers to lords, from domestics to duchesses, support for the abolitionist position reached a level unprecedented in Britain’s history.<sup>114</sup>

This observation from *Britain’s Slave Trade* by S.I. Martin is characteristic of the enduring legacy of British abolitionists. Potter Josiah Wedgwood's widely

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114 Martin, 'The Political Legacy', 1999, 107

circulated image of the suppliant kneeling slave accompanied by the words ‘Am I Not a Brother?’ became a familiar image of the enslaved African. Although British history portrayed white abolitionists, such as William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson, and the wider abolitionist movement in exalted terms, this was not enough to sustain slavery as a prominent, important and enduring part of British history. Even the publication of noteworthy autobiographical texts such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African* and the letters of Ignatius Sancho, which had been published with some success and critical acclaim in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as notable historical studies such as C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins* (1938), Eric Williams’ *Slavery and Capitalism* (1944), Daniel P Mannix’ (with Malcolm Cowley) *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1518- 1865* (1963) and James Pope-Hennessy’s *Sins of the Fathers: A Study of the Atlantic Slave Traders 1441-1807* (1967), could do little to mitigate what was in Britain “a profound ignorance of an episode that spanned several centuries and led to the creation of the African Diaspora.”<sup>115</sup> Such material had, like the history of slavery, become rather marginalised in dominant historical narratives. In the absence of a tradition of commemoration history books have perpetuated an abolitionist myth [Fig 7.].

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115 Chambers, 2017, 134

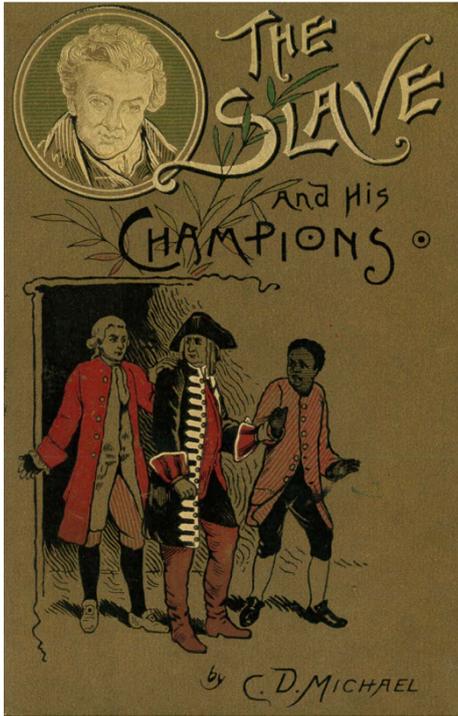


Fig 7. The Slave and His Champions:  
Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce,  
and Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, 1891 C.D. Michael, book cover

It is a moot point whether greater public knowledge of slavery's enduring legacy in Africa and the Caribbean before the *Windrush* generation would have countered state and public antipathy towards post-war Black immigration.

Where 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain had campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade and then slavery, it was still a country which gave shelter to racist views of Black people. Although once 'accepted' as slaves or servants, emancipation dissipated the need for 'pity' and 'condescension'. In his book, *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Race Relations in English Society*,<sup>116</sup> Kenneth Little recounts how the British abolitionist movement considered Black people in largely abstract terms, as a 'cause' rather than as real people. By the twentieth century and with successive waves of post-war immigration,

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116 Kenneth Little, 1972

Black people had, in Britain, begun (again) to symbolize a different cause – of social and cultural conflict.

Until New Labour was elected into government in 1997, the closest the British state came to publicly addressing or commemorating Britain's role and legacy in slave trading and slavery were Hull's Wilberforce House Museum and the Merseyside Maritime Museum's *Transatlantic Slavery Gallery* [Fig 5.], in 1906 and 1994 respectively. Emerging eighty-eight years apart, these separate institutions illustrate the extent to which public commemorations of slavery were marginal to Britain's official national story. Nevertheless, as local council led initiatives, which opened at the beginning and then towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they also reflect sharply contrasting approaches to how the story of slavery was told.

The story told in the Wilberforce House Museum centred on the contributions made to the abolitionist movement by William Wilberforce. The building was his birthplace in 1759. He went on to serve for over forty years as an independent Member of Parliament for Yorkshire (1784-1812) and then Bramber (1812-1825). Early in his political career he became the leading figure in Parliament for the campaign to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. Wilberforce led this Parliamentary campaign from 1789 through to 1807, when the Slave Trade Act was passed. Despite Wilberforce's specific contribution to abolitionism, he was described as a "slavery abolitionist" or noted for "his role in the Anti-Slavery Campaign". As historian John Oldfield has noted, "Wilberforce's name became a by-word for 'Abolition', although, ironically, Wilberforce actually had very little







From the first anniversary of the Slave Trade Act in 1808 to its fiftieth in 1857, its centenary in 1907 to its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 1957, there were no national commemorations. In his book, *Chords of Freedom: Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery*, John Oldfield noted: “Significantly, anti-slavery ceremonials in Britain have never been recurrent or ‘calendrical’ in character, as they were for a time in the United States and as they continue to be in parts of the Caribbean.”<sup>126</sup> Oldfield also noted that despite a “little ceremony” at Westminster Abbey, held at the behest of African students studying in London, the centenary of the abolition of the slave trade “passed with barely a murmur” and: “Perhaps just as striking is the lack of interest taken in the centenary by the Government or government agencies...”<sup>127</sup> The commemorative events that had been held in Britain tended to focus on the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 (also known as the Emancipation Act 1833), because as Oldfield asserted: “Emancipation was considered the greater moral victory, a grand imperial gesture that had subsumed all that had gone before it.”<sup>128</sup> By the centennial year of the abolition of the slave trade, Britain’s attentions had turned towards other forms of self-interest in the form of colonial rule.

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126 Oldfield, 2007, 88

127 Ibid., 9

128 Oldfield cites 25th and 100th anniversaries of the Emancipation Act 1833, *Chords of Freedom: Commemoration, ritual and British transatlantic slavery*, Manchester University Press, 2007, 88









countries, to respond to what our Prime Minister has called a “scar on the conscience of the world.”<sup>136</sup> MacTaggart explained that the Prime Minister had “launched the Commission for Africa in order to help drive forward Africa’s development and increase its prosperity” and how the Government had, since it took office, “more than doubled our aid budget” which would enable it to “increase aid for Africa to £1 billion” by 2005.<sup>137</sup>

As a member of the Government, and as the Minister responsible for calling for this debate, MacTaggart was not only in a position to offer up various reasons for why Government wanted to support some form of bicentenary commemoration, but also to use this debate as an opportunity to identify relationships between existing Government policy and the proposed commemoration. To this end, MacTaggart did two things. She spoke about various activities relating to the bicentenary that she claimed were already underway and she also highlighted what she saw as the wider significance, for Britain, in commemorating this bicentenary. MacTaggart also expressed this forthright view:

Slavery has existed in many forms and in many civilizations throughout the world and across the centuries, but the Transatlantic Slave Trade was different. It was one of the first examples of institutionalised racism. No other slave system was so regulated and so determined by the matter of race.<sup>138</sup>

Despite offering technically accurate descriptions of the slave trade,

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136 Hansard, 'Struggle Against Slavery': Column 144WH (MacTaggart), 14 October 2004

137 Ibid. Column 144WH

138 Ibid, Column 144WH











historical exhibitions.<sup>151</sup> Artists and academics would also contribute to the panoply of exhibitions and publications generated by the bicentenary.

### **Conflation of Commemoration**

The abolition of the slave trade was often described as heralding the emergence of the humanitarian movement. Ironically, the bicentenary commemorations held to acknowledge this achievement were not generated by such a grass roots movement or any widespread desire to mark this historical achievement. Equally, given the extent to which the British establishment had for centuries been implicated in supporting human exploitation on a global scale, it is perhaps evident why Church and Monarchy were willing to participate in 2007. Offering expressions of guilt and regret and participating in public acts of commemoration were effective and not unduly onerous forms of endorsement. Numerous other public institutions, such as the commercially minded contributions made by the government's companies, the Royal Mint and Royal Mail provided a further level of endorsement. Other endorsements came from those who may have previously shown little or no inclination to engage with Atlantic slavery history but could quickly capitalise on the various opportunities, including funding, made available during the bicentenary.

Confusion about the bicentenary generated a certain level of criticism, much of which was published in academic journals and books sometime after the event

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151 The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol, received £770, 000 towards the exhibition *Breaking the Chains: The Fight to End Slavery*. The exhibition opened 23 April 2007 and ran for approximately two years. Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery and The Equiano Society jointly received £650,000 towards the exhibition *Equiano; An extraordinary Life from Enslavement to Best Selling Author*, 29 September 2007-13 January 2008



Often truculent, churlish and superficial in tone, such coverage adhered to editorial bias of any given newspaper.

### **Media Response**

For some commentators, the bicentenary did not go far enough in acknowledging Britain's culpability as a colonising force, its continuing racial inequality or the nation's failure to reconcile its humanitarian self-image with its brutal colonial history. Others vehemently set upon the bicentenary as proof of how far notions of 'political correctness' and anti-patriotic fervour permeated the nation. Eliciting negative or dismissive responses from the press was itself indicative of the extent to which, despite being described as 'everyone's bicentenary', and despite its subject, there was no consensus or insight offered about the actual national commemoration.

*Daily Mail* columnist Melanie Phillips epitomized the predictable and limited value of bicentenary commentary. Phillips argued that Britain's role in abolishing the slave trade represented "one of the most principled and inspiring events in this country's history" but that Church, state, the BBC and museums should stop the "Britain-bashing".<sup>154</sup> Her casual and seemingly clumsy fluctuation between two radically different pieces of legislation (the abolition of the *slave trade* and of *slavery*), exemplified both her agenda and disregard for the legacy of British slavery. Her comments that the BBC was "running programmes about

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<sup>154</sup> Melanie Phillips, 'Yes, slavery was evil. But this orgy of breast-beating is utterly absurd' Monday March 26, 2007

slavery for weeks” and “could barely contain its excitement at the opportunity for so much Britain-bashing”<sup>155</sup> were typical, and disingenuous in view of her role as a long-time panelist on BBC radio’s *The Moral Maze*, where she had contributed to an episode about the bicentenary.<sup>156</sup> Despite having introduced her article in terms of Britain’s role in the abolition of the slave trade, Phillips offers the implausible and nonsensical view that: “Slavery has been turned into yet another attack upon the west. But it should not divide us in this way.”<sup>157</sup> Such vituperative commentary functioned to express disdain towards those who dared criticise British history, and to belittle and diminish the scale and lasting impact of Britain’s role in the African holocaust.

In *Racial Equality in Britain? Don’t Make Me Laugh*, Times columnist, Alice Miles considered the shortcomings of the bicentenary in different terms. Despite the Commons being “united in self-congratulation”<sup>158</sup> for Miles, the bicentenary failed to address wider contemporary social issues afflicting what she referred to as “ethnic minorities”:

According to figures from the Office for National Statistics, ethnic minorities are more likely to live in low-income households (half of black Caribbeans do, for instance. Compared with a fifth of whites). Black people are far more likely to live in social housing than any other ethnic group: less likely to have a bank account, stocks and shares and savings. Yet the employment rate of black men is only five points below the national average, while the employment

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155 Ibid.

156 *The Moral Maze*, BBC Radio 4, 11 March 2007. Presented by Michael Buerk with panelists Ian Hargreaves, Melanie Phillips, Anthony Grayling and Clifford Longley

157 Ibid.

158 Alice Miles, ‘Racial equality in Britain? Don’t make me laugh’, *The Times*, Friday March 23 2007, 19





Guyana. All were savagely repressed.<sup>166</sup>

Attempts to disentangle the slave trade from slavery, British humanitarianism from British colonialism, rarely achieved traction in wider public debates in the media. The disruption of “orthodox histories”<sup>167</sup> about the British Empire and New Labour’s embrace and subsequent about turn on multiculturalism are key to the bicentenary. The cleavage between the national commemoration and ‘race politics’ was one way that the bicentenary was framed within a wider contemporary social context, though such nuances were largely ignored or misrepresented by the media.

### **Summary**

The confluence of social, political and cultural factors enabled the bicentenary to take place in the way it did. It was imbued with particular significance, bringing together through inclusive and commemorative practices, as never before, narratives pertaining to abolitionism, multiculturalism and British history.

In 1980s Britain, Thatcher’s continual espousal of ‘traditional values’ coupled with post-industrial decline had become the catalyst for a “heritage revival”<sup>168</sup> which invested much in the value of stately homes, tourism and a particularly conservative idea of national identity, but was resistant to exploring its existence within a multiracial nation. Populist heritage initiatives, exemplified by ‘living museums’ such as Beamish Museum, in post-industrial County Durham were

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166 Ibid.

167 Catherine Hall, ‘Afterword: Britain2007, Problematism Histories’, *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, 2010, 192

168 Littler, 2005, 5.

evidence of a nation in 'decline'.<sup>169</sup> This approach towards heritage failed to accommodate slavery, even though its legacy was all around the country and from the late 1970s through to the late 1990s the subject of slavery would be a recurring theme in the work of important contemporary artists in Britain (discussed in Chapter 3).

The late 1990s marked a shift in the nature of critical discourses on heritage which, although bound up in Britain's imperial past had, up to this point, largely ignored the subject of 'race' (Littler 2005: 5). Whilst white abolitionist narratives would prevail in 2007, they were also subjected to greater scrutiny in the mainstream.

As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, New Labour's embrace of neoliberalism represented a continuation of Thatcherism (and subsequent John Major-led Conservative government). However, the promotion of a racially inclusive agenda was taken to another level.

The contradictory nature of New Labour ideology was also reflected in how its inclusion politics would often be illustrated by racially exclusive rather than inclusive initiatives. The exhibitions, practices and institutional mindsets that were part of the bicentenary were not entirely the work of New Labour. Their 'traditions' and racial pathologies date back to the 1980s and 1990s. Once occupying a relatively marginal position within the cultural and institutional terrain, under New Labour's 'modernising' tendencies, diversity underwent a seismic shift and moved from the margins onto central ground.

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169 Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1987

Tony Blair’s embrace and celebration of African and African Caribbean ‘contributions’ to Britain’s business, sport, and media sectors, evoked the conditions of a legitimate form of Black Britishness. Such an embrace of Black people, history and heritage would continue to be championed by subsequent Conservative governments. If a Conservative government had been in power around the time of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, it is not inconceivable that they too would have commemorated it.

In 2012, under David Cameron’s Conservative government, Nigerian-born British artist Sokari-Douglas Camp exhibited her large-scale sculpture *All the World is Richer* which she produced to “commemorate the abolition of slavery”.<sup>170</sup> Douglas–Camp’s work comprises six life-size metal figures which chart the successive stages of the slavery saga”.<sup>171</sup> In 2012, it was exhibited at the Houses of Parliament to coincide with President Barak Obama’s state visit. It then went on tour to a number of Cathedral’s in England.<sup>172</sup>

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170 <http://sokari.co.uk/project/all-the-world-is-now-richer-great-hall/> [accessed 15 April 2018]

171 Ibid

172 The sculpture toured to Bristol Cathedral, Norfolk Cathedral, Norwich and St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. The work was also toured to Venice Biennale in 2017 and included in a video commissioned for the *Diaspora Pavilion*. Titled *All The World Is Now Richer Meets The Woman Who Refused To Dance*, this video “combines the sculptural work of Camp and the opera by Shirley J Thompson *The Woman Who Refused to Dance* travelling on a boat on the canals in Venice with a dance performance by Tania Dimbelolo, choreography by Monique Jonas.”  
[ <https://www.seditionart.com/sokari-douglas-camp/all-the-world-is-now-richer-meets-the-woman-who-refused-to-dance>][Accessed 7 July 2018]

Despite government acceptance of Britain's African and African Caribbean, in the years to follow, antipathy towards multiculturalism would continue unabated. Politicians and commentators lined up to highlight the problems faced by 'tolerant' Britain. In direct reference to Britain's Muslim population, Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech on 'radicalisation' and 'Islamic extremism' claiming that "state multiculturalism had failed: "Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream."<sup>173</sup>

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173 'State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron' 5 February 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994> [Accessed April 21, 2018]

## **Chapter 3**

### **State of Remembrance: Commemorations by the Royal Mail Royal Mint and the BBC**



traditions. Whilst each contained elements aligned to the legacy of abolition, they also appeared to offer a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of the past. On the surface, each were magnanimous statements, mindful of the politics of slavery and its representation today. Where the Royal Mint's £2 coin relied on a broken chain but eschewed the use of the slave ship and subservient slave, Royal Mail celebrated Black and white abolitionists. For its part, the BBC's strategy exceeded a mere recounting of the slave trade and its abolition to explain slavery's wider and enduring legacies relating to rebellion and racism.

In the title of this chapter, the word 'state' functions as both an adjective and a noun and therefore has a double meaning. First, it relates to the bicentenary's status as an event of national importance, recognising how it was proposed as a 'coming together' of the nation. Secondly, it also alludes to how these national commemorations, despite their inclusive and celebratory nature, harbored a more troubled approach to remembrance.

These bicentenary contributions were more than merely inclusive acts of commemoration. For example, the £2 coin was a vehicle for commemoration, but was also steeped in legacies of slave trading voyages and abolition campaigns. Why was this mode of commodification deemed appropriate for remembering an event which was itself a campaign against the commodification of human beings? The popular and commercially driven appeal of philatelic commemoration in Britain provided the context for Royal Mail's celebration of noted abolitionists, marketing Britain as a country of humanity. The BBC's *Abolition Season*, its first serious attempt at exploring Britain's role in the slave



suggest, the promiscuous use of such imagery during the bicentenary often over-simplified their contemporary and historical significance, foregoing a more nuanced understanding of slavery imagery.<sup>7</sup> The contributions made to the bicentenary by the Royal Mint, Royal Mail and BBC relied on retelling and re-inscribing various aspects of the abolition narrative which had endured since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ironically marginalising the very subject claimed by the State as its first humanitarian cause.

As argued in subsequent chapters of this study, contemporary art functioned to mask wider issues pertaining to institutional agendas and exhibition programming. In examining how the state marked the bicentenary through cultural initiatives, this chapter aims to provide a historical context for how the subject of slavery has been commemorated. This is important to the thesis as it offers a wider social and cultural context for how Atlantic slavery commemoration and remembrance have operated within the public domain. Where Chapter 1 brought reggae music into direct relation with contemporary art, this chapter seeks to provide an analysis of more conventional modes of commemoration. The spectacle of commemoration and remembrance staged by the Royal Mint, Royal Mail and BBC illustrate a disjuncture between representation and history.

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<sup>7</sup> Wood, 'Significant Silence: Where was Slave Agency in the Popular Imagery of 2007', 2010.





1807. However, it was not the first time that the subject of slavery had either been a feature of, or in some way linked to, the production of legal tender coins or commemorative tokens. Before coins were used to campaign against the slave trade they had also been used to celebrate what were euphemistically described as early ‘voyages’ to West Africa.

### **Guinea Coin**

Before other European nations produced their own commemorative medals to mark voyages to Africa, a coin struck by the Mint in England celebrated the founding, in 1664, of the Royal African Adventurers. At the behest of King Charles II, these English traders became known as the Royal African Company, whose motto was ‘Regio floret patricionio, commercium, commercioque regum’ meaning “Commerce flourishes due to royal protection, and the kingdom due to commerce.”<sup>13</sup> From 1672, this company held a forty year monopoly on slave trading in West Africa and on the trading of all commodities imported to England from Africa.<sup>14</sup> Gold taken from Guinea, West Africa, was one of the commodities imported to England and delivered to the Mint. It was from this gold that the guinea coin received its name. The gold was mined in West Africa, shipped back to England and then used by the Royal Mint to produce legal tender. K.G. Davies noted that despite providing a significant level of income for the Royal African Company, at the height of its importation to England, guinea gold represented only 7% of total gold coined by the Mint. Davies also notes that: “The use of the company’s emblem upon the guineas which were thus put into

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13 William A. Pettigrew, ‘Parliament and the Escalation of the Slave Trade, 1690-1714’, 2007, 13

14 K.G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* 1970, 179



Coins and medals offer important insights into the history of slavery, the slave trade and the abolition movements. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century medals celebrating voyages and wishing success to slave ships and trading companies were joined by a mass of abolitionist material from the late 1780s onwards.<sup>20</sup>

The ways in which coins and medals were used by people promoting diametrically opposing ideologies is not too dissimilar to how political and military regimes have deployed public monuments to reflect their ideological supremacy. In this regard, the bicentenary £2 coin represented a continuation of the commemorative legacy. However, what is particularly notable about commemorative coinage is the similarity of imagery. In *Representing Slavery*, a medal commemorating a voyage to Guinea in 1681 is described in the following way:

Obverse: An African woman kneels on a beach, holding a basket containing ivory. To the left, a fort partly obscures a ship flying the Brandenburg flag; to the right, ships sail away. Above, out of the clouds, cherub heads blow wind. Legend: ‘COEPTA NAVIGATIO AD ORAS GVIN AE AN. MDCLXXXI. FELICITER’ (Navigation to the coast of Guinea happily begun 1681).

Reverse: A three-masted ship with flags under sail, cherubs above blow a favourable wind. Legend: ‘DEO DVCE AVSPICYS SERENISSIMI ELECTORIS BRANDENBVRGICI AD (Under the guidance of God and the auspices of the most Serene Elector of Brandenburg).<sup>21</sup>

Such ‘voyages’ represented the first ‘scramble for Africa’, predating late

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voyage undertaken by West India Company Groningen Netherlands, and a Counter commemorating the safe return of the French West Indian Fleet, 1708, *Representing Slavery*, 165-166

20 *Representing Slavery*, 165

21 *Ibid.*



enamel. Legend: 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?' Reverse with the inscription: 'WHATSOEVER YE WOULD THAT MEN SHOULD DO UNTO YOU, DO YE EVEN SO TO THEM.'<sup>24</sup>

Typically, coins and medals produced in Britain for anti-slave trade and anti-slavery propaganda portrayed the campaign for abolition as a task of religious and moral purpose and fortitude. Simultaneously, the enslaved African was portrayed as a hapless victim. The most ubiquitous depiction of a kneeling slave accompanied by the phrase 'Am I not a man and a brother?' was designed as a seal by renowned English potter Josiah Wedgwood in 1789. Described as "probably the first widespread use of a logo designed for a political cause",<sup>25</sup> its problematic portrayal of the enslaved explains why the image was not used on the £2 coin in 2007. Within and beyond the abolitionist campaign, this image and text would encapsulate the problematic nature of the depiction of the enslaved and emancipated:

...even though this black has been given his freedom, and has had his chains physically removed, he is still imprisoned within the posture and gestures which the Abolitionists invented and which white society considered the most acceptable official icon of the Atlantic slave.<sup>26</sup>

Even when coins did not portray slaves as kneeling victims, they still carried forms of loaded symbolism, in which imagery and words could barely mask the prevalence of racial condescension. The dichotomy of the simultaneously emancipated and subaltern subject continued in anti-slavery propaganda campaigns and commemorative coins and medals produced from 1787 to 1840.

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24 Ibid., 166

25 Adam Hochschild, 128

26 Wood, 'Emancipation Art, Fanon and 'the butchery of Freedom'', 2007, 1



owners? Whilst it is possible to identify the emancipated slaves, it is only possible to speculate who they are. As the freed Black male has his hand placed on the European's shoulder, who in turn has his hand on the child's shoulder, we might reasonably surmise that this is not the planter and the slave.

Held in The National Maritime's collection, this token is described in the following way:

Obverse: An African man shakes hands with a European man attended by an African woman and child and a European woman wearing a bonnet. ... On the reverse side of the medal, there is a list of names associated with emancipation. All of these men – Penn, Granville Sharp, Wilberforce, Benezet, Buxton, Brougham, Sturge and Sligo – represent the European contribution to the anti-slavery campaigns.<sup>29</sup>

This is an intriguing coin for its barely coded language and expression of white Christian abolitionist values. Listing the names of abolitionist campaigners, the coin commemorates their contribution to emancipation. More significantly, the depiction of an emancipated family projects a Christian image of a stable family unit. This benign depiction of a 'family' belies the harsher reality and impact of slavery and spoke more of a white Christian, possibly abolitionist's view of family life. In *Jamaica: Land of Wood and Water*, Fernando Henriques considers Britain's influence on Jamaica's cultural identity, noting that in "language, dress, institutions" similarities were evident.<sup>30</sup> However, such similarities were not so evident in family structure. "The primary interest of the

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29 Royal Museums Greenwich:  
<http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/255120.html> [Accessed 16 March 2015]  
30 Fernando Henriques *Jamaica: Land of Wood and Water*, 1957, 142

planter...was to work his slaves for profit. He was not interested in helping them to establish a sound family structure.”<sup>31</sup> This produced a different attitude towards how families were constructed.

Conditions of slavery made it impossible for African conceptions of marriage to be put into practice in Jamaica. The result was the formation of liaisons which in many instances were fugitive in character, as either party might be separated through being sold or shifted to another estate. The institution of concubinage, as between master and female slave, was another ingredient which emphasized the temporary character of sexual and family relationships. Of course there were unions which did persist, with or without the sanction of the slave owner. But it is important to remember that any obligations which individuals might incur to each other in terms of a family could at any time be destroyed at the whim of a master. This was essentially the background of domestic life in the days of slavery – that it was subject to the desire, whim, or pecuniary gain of the master. Hence its inevitable impermanence.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than a conventional Christian family headed by the man, Henriques lists several different configurations in which the family was constructed in Jamaica during slavery and placing a different individual in the dominant domestic role. “Faithful Concubinage”, “Grandmother Family”, “Keeper Family”, “Twin Household”. While the impact of slavery was profound, its remembrance, in the form of this commemorative coin, reduces history to a celebratory depiction of emancipation.

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31 Ibid., 142

32 Ibid., 143

## To Coin a Phrase

What happens to the meaning and significance of the Abolition seal when it is represented without the image and just with the words: Am I not a man and a brother? The production in 2007 of the bicentenary £2 coin brought together symbols of monarchy, parliament and abolitionism. The deeper significance of this coupled with the Royal Mint's involvement was not made apparent. That a coin was used as a key element for the bicentenary's national commemoration was significant not simply because it was the first time that the abolition of the slave trade had been commemorated in British legal tender. The institution of slavery had meant that there was very little need for local currency; sugar along with tobacco had been acceptable forms of currency. In *The British in the Caribbean*, Cyril Hamshere noted that "As long as slave labour continued there were no wages, but with the start of apprenticeship cash became urgently required; after complete emancipation, it became a vital necessity."<sup>33</sup>

The use of an abolitionist aphorism (Am I not a man and a brother?) to decorate the bicentenary coin drew on an abolitionist discourse, which emerged in late eighteenth century Britain. This phrase and the attendant image of the supplicant slave would endure, becoming an integral part of anti-slavery propaganda during the 1820s, initially used for the purposes of campaigning against the practice of slave trading between 1787 and 1807.

On the Royal Mint's commemorative coin in 2007 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?' was reproduced without the question mark and, more significantly,

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<sup>33</sup> Cyril Hamshere, 'Emancipation', 1972, 157

without the visual depiction of the slave kneeling, as in original versions. The National Maritime Museum's website lists 13 different coins and medals relating to both anti-slavery campaigns and commemoration dating from 1787 to 1841.<sup>34</sup> While this collection represents only a small fraction of the many such medals and coins produced in relation to slave trade abolition and the abolition of slavery, it does provide an insight into the enduring legacy of the words 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER' and the image of the supplicating slave.

The phrase dates to at least 1787, and has been attributed to the English potter Josiah Wedgwood who, along with other members of the Quaker-led Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST), commissioned a seal to be used as part of anti-slave trade campaign. The words: 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?' were originally employed in the design of a ceramic seal which, as writer Adam Hochschild noted, represented "probably the first widespread use of a logo designed for a political cause."<sup>35</sup> Contemporary depictions of the hapless African, associated with charity and poverty, might also be considered as direct descendants of British abolitionist representations of the Black subject. Spoken in the first person, as if uttered by a slave, the words 'Am I not a man and a brother?', more closely represent the mindset of campaigners against the slave trade than its victims. As Hochschild asserts "The African may have been 'a man and a brother' but he was definitely a younger and grateful brother, a kneeling one, not a rebellious one."<sup>36</sup> This language indicated the passive role into which the enslaved African was cast.

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<sup>34</sup> Royal Museums Greenwich: <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/>

<sup>35</sup> Hochschild, 128

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 133

Marcus Wood described this as “the slave notoriously asking the white viewer if he deserves to be granted an equal share in the human condition.”<sup>37</sup> In effect, these words were put into the mouth of the enslaved subject, cast in the unenviable role of a hapless subservient individual. It was used on various anti-slave trade propaganda, including coins, medallions, hairpins and posters. Such was the enduring appeal of the image of the supplicant African and motto that both would also be used during the 1820s and 1830s in anti-slavery campaigns. Its longevity can also be seen in its use in the 1840s anti-slavery campaigns in the United States.<sup>38</sup>

The religious connotations of this kneeling figure looking upwards, as if appealing to a higher authority, evoked the extent to which in Britain the slave trade was presented by prominent abolitionists as unchristian, while abolitionism was itself closely associated with the rise of Christian evangelicalism which would play a crucial role in campaigns against British involvement in the slave trade. Historian Edith F. Hurwitz considers the ways in which religion came to dominate both the arguments and the language used in anti-slavery campaigns. Imbued with the sort of religious overtones prevalent in late eighteenth century Britain, which Hurwitz described as being reflective of the “new spirit of religion active in the political protest”,<sup>39</sup> she goes further in attributing religiosity to the language of abolitionism:

The attack on slavery was most often put in theological terms, both written and spoken. Oratorical phrases were couched in biblical cadence, giving

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37 Wood, ‘Popular Graphic Images of Slavery and Emancipation in Nineteenth Century England’, 2007, 144

38 National Maritime Museum, Object ID ZBA2812 or Representing Slavery 170

39 Edith Hurwitz, 1973, 18

them the weight and the authority, not only in meaning but in impact also, of hearing the word of God revealed.<sup>40</sup>

In his book published in the same year, 1973, writer Jack Gratus offers a contrasting assessment of the deeply influential but, in his view, problematic role religion played in abolitionism:

The abolitionists were first and foremost religious zealots who held equally strong views on the corruption of society in general as on the slave trade and slavery.<sup>41</sup>

Following passage of the Abolition of Slavery Act 1833, the phrase and image would function in a series of configurations on different commemorative tokens and coins. A medal commemorating the abolition of British slavery produced in 1834 used the words 'AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER?'. This gender shift – from 'man' and 'brother', to 'woman' and 'sister' – was significant for several reasons. It draws attention to how much men had dominated abolitionism. By contrast, during the 1820s, anti-slavery campaigning had become a movement involving a broader cross section of British society. However, despite gender and class-based shifts, the underlying tone and level of racial condescension expressed in these coins was still apparent.

It is also worth noting how the production of coins and tokens such as these had become so orthodox that it was possible for a half penny to be struck in 1790 featuring on its obverse the bust of the pro slavery Prince of Wales, and on the reverse an image of two clasped hands surrounded by the legend: 'MAY

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40 Ibid., 21

41 Jack Gratus, 1973, 15

## SLAVERY & OPPRESSION CEASE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD’.

### **The £2 Coin**

The £2 coin is bi-metallic in form and therefore distinct from all other coinage produced as legal tender in Britain.<sup>42</sup> Since the Royal Mint first issued the £2 coin as legal tender in 1998, it has on regular occasions been used commemoratively. In less than ten years, the Royal Mint issued nine commemorative versions of the coin for mass circulation, reflecting the extent to which the £2 coin had become one of its primary modes of commemoration.

These primarily celebrated various anniversaries in scientific and technological advancement, with a number produced to mark particular national sporting events held in the United Kingdom.<sup>43</sup> In 2005, the Royal Mint issued a commemorative £2 coin to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

The Royal Mint’s issuing of numerous commemorative £2 coins within a relatively short space of time (nearly one per year since 1998), illustrates the extent to which coinage is a vehicle for commemoration, and not exclusively the £2 coin.

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42 Where the narrow outer edge of the surface area comprises nickel brass, the circular inner part is made from cupro-nickel, which appears silver in colour. The inner part of the coin appears so distinct to the outer area that it could be seen as a coin set within a coin. It is perhaps this distinctive visual quality which sets the £2 coin apart from all other coinage produced as legal tender in the UK.

43 These included celebrations of technological development from the Iron Age, electronic development to the internet in 1998, the Rugby World Cup 1999, the centenary of Marconi’s transatlantic wireless transmission in 2001, XIV Commonwealth Games held in Manchester in 2002, the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of the double helix (DNA) in 2003, the bicentenary of the first railway locomotive in 2004, and the bicentenary of the birth of the engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel in 2006.







and it is this same passion that still inspires the anti-slavery movement to continue to fight contemporary forms of slavery.<sup>51</sup>

In the brochure were reproductions of white British abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce. Alongside these were three quite different Black historical figures: Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and Toussaint L'Ouverture, each of whom had for various parts of their lives been enslaved. On two sides of the brochure are reproduction details of William Turner's painting, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On (The Slave Ship)*, 1840. At the top of one of these panels is a quote from American writer Maya Angelou.<sup>52</sup>

Included in this brochure was an 'Abolition Time Line' which briefly but selectively charted Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Highlighting sixteen key years between 1562 and 1838, all but four of these 'key dates', portrays Britain's progression towards abolition. From the rise of the abolitionist movement in Britain to Parliament's passing of the Abolition act in 1807 and the eventual abolition of slavery in 1838, the time line portrays history in a linear and selective way, belying its more complex roots. An example of this was the entry for 1808, which noted: "British West Africa Squadron (Royal Navy) established to suppress slave trading. By 1865, nearly 150,000 people freed by anti-slavery operations."<sup>53</sup> Despite such a celebratory tone, the year 1865 is significant for another event in British history. A lasting legacy of slavery

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51 Text on commemorative folder 'Abolition of the Slave Trade: Commemorating the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade 1807-2007 United Kingdom Brilliant Uncirculated £2 Coin.' Royal Mint, 2007

52 The quote from Maya Angelou reads: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again."

53 Ibid.

was the crippling poverty and inequality suffered by the emancipated slaves. In Jamaica, this situation culminated with a major uprising by Black men and women, known as the Morant Bay Rebellion, on 11 October 1865. The brutal suppression of the rebellion and capital punishment meted out under the authority of Governor Eyre,<sup>54</sup> including the hanging of (justice of the peace) George William Gordon and (Baptist deacon) Paul Bogle, would have lasting repercussions for Jamaica.<sup>55</sup> However, the events of Morant Bay had wider reverberations, dividing public opinion in Britain, as Peter Fryer has observed. Bearing in mind how the bicentenary cast Britain in the role as abolitionist champion, reaction to the actions of Governor Eyre was significant because of the establishment figures involved:

The Jamaica Committee, called by Thomas Carlyle 'a small loud group... of Nigger-Philanthropists, barking furiously in the gutter, was led by John Stuart Mill, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, and its supporters included Charles Darwin and Leslie Stephen. At first it sought merely a thorough investigation and Eyre's recall, but after the whitewashing Royal Commission report it demanded the governor's prosecution for murder; at one working-class meeting, he was burnt in effigy. On the other side, an Eyre Defence Committee was set up, supported by Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Charles Kingsley, who thought the governor ought to be given a seat in the House of Lords.<sup>56</sup>

The *Abolition Time Line* presented a partial view of history. Details of brutality

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54 "Governor Eyre of Jamaica...declared martial law and his troops went on a murderous 30 day rampage, killing 439 black people, flogging at least 600 others (some were flogged before being put to death, and some were flogged with a cat among whose lashes were interwoven lengths of piano-wire), dashing out children's brains, ripping open the bellies of pregnant women, and burning over 1,000 homes of suspected rebels." Fryer, 1984, 177

55 Hamshere, 1972, 165

56 Fryer, 1984, 178

are omitted in favour of projecting humanitarian Britain's role in slavery and its eventual abolition.

### **Commemoration as Common Currency**

Why should a coin be considered an appropriate means of commemoration?

On the one hand, coins were once used to celebrate early mercantile slave trading voyages and on the other hand, they were a locus for many condescending depictions of the enslaved African. While the smallest denominations of English currency – farthings, half pennies and pennies – had historically been used for promoting anti slave trade and anti-slavery campaigns, as has already been illustrated, the relationship between numismatic history and transatlantic slavery history was never offered as justification for producing the bicentenary coin. The propinquity between slavery and coinage was not considered too toxic to prevent it being a site of commemoration.

The proliferation of commemorative coins produced by the Royal Mint, and specifically the £2 denomination, provides some rationale for it being used for the bicentenary. However, in the build-up to the bicentenary, initial discussions held within government indicated that some undisclosed denomination of bank note was to be used for the commemoration. In the Bicentenary Advisory Group meetings chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, the production of a commemorative coin was only ever considered in positive terms. The significance of using a coin was not given any wider historical consideration, what mattered more was the potential for marketing and promoting the bicentenary.



introduction of decimalisation in Britain during the early 1970s, each denomination of bank note has remained legal tender for between ten to twenty years. A newly designed bank note featuring a different historical character usually enters circulation between one to three years before its predecessor is withdrawn. For example, the £10 bank note featuring Florence Nightingale entered circulation in 1975 and was withdrawn in 1994. Its replacement, featuring Charles Dickens, came into circulation in 1992 and was itself succeeded by a note depicting Charles Darwin, which entered circulation in 2000.<sup>60</sup>

By comparison, a wide range of commemorative coins are produced annually by the Royal Mint, to mark various anniversaries or significant historical moments. The Royal Mint Advisory Committee on the Design of Coins, Medals, Seals and Decorations is responsible for commissioning all new coin designs and commemorative issues. These coins continue to exist as ‘legal tender’ despite often being produced as ‘limited editions’ or ‘special editions’. They also coexist in circulation alongside other versions of the same denomination. The production of the £2 coin as part of the bicentenary could therefore be seen as part of a more flexible, if not malleable terrain of commemorative culture, spanning sport, royal jubilees, and celebrations of technological invention. However, it is this ‘fitting in’ which neutralises the act of commemoration, by turning it into a benign spectacle.

Within this context, banknotes not only carry greater literal value as legal tender but also, given their less flexible production schedule, they accrue greater

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60 See <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/banknotes/Pages/withdrawn/default.aspx> [Accessed 20 January 2013]

cultural and political significance.

Therefore, compared to a £2 coin, the production of a banknote would have been a far more radical and visible contribution to the bicentenary. Not only would it have broken the cycle of drawing from particular and problematic abolitionist iconography, it would have also introduced a new and more expansive dimension to how the legacy of the slave trade and slavery could be publicly remembered.

An image of a historical character such as Olaudah Equiano, could, on a number of levels, have been a more challenging means by which to intervene in what Roshni Naidoo describes as 'normative' notions of Britishness. To (re)introduce to the public domain, a historical figure important to the legacy of slavery and the early years of campaigning against the trade, as well as known for writing one of the earliest slave narratives could have led to more nuanced understanding of this history.

Had Equiano's image been used on a British bank note, it would have been the first time that a Black person had occupied such a position on British currency. This alone could have been a radical gesture, in terms of simultaneously challenging, very publicly, normative notions of Britishness and the hegemony of a white abolitionist narrative. The film 'Amazing Grace', released in 2007, in which Equiano was played by singer, musician and politician Youssou N'Dour, and the exhibition *Equiano: An Exhibition of an Extraordinary Life from Enslavement to Best Selling Author*<sup>61</sup> in Birmingham illustrate moves towards

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61 The exhibition was jointly organized by The Equiano Society and Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, and presented at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery 29

diversifying Britain's abolitionist and slavery narratives. Published in 1787, Equiano's book is part memoir, part testament, and insight into life in eighteenth century West Africa. While the authenticity of his narrative and even his birthplace has become the subject of much debate amongst historians, there is no doubt that he was not born in England, but became integral to the British campaign to abolish the slave trade. One other reason why Equiano is important is precisely the contentious nature of his autobiography, which represents one of the first slave narratives to be published in Europe or America. This makes him a compelling figure around which to base an account of this history. Like the contestation surrounding aspects of transatlantic history itself, Equiano's own history is open to speculation, nuance and interpretation.

## **Part 2**

### **Stamp of Approval: The Royal Mail, History and Multiculturalism**

The Royal Mail has previously issued stamps which in different ways exemplify the legacies of Britain's colonial past and governmental gestures towards multiculturalism. In 1984, the Royal Mail issued a set of four stamps marking the British Council's<sup>62</sup> fiftieth anniversary [Fig 5.] Each stamp from this commemorative series depicted aspects of the British Council's role in promoting education, technical training, languages and the arts abroad. In one stamp [Fig.6], a Black woman doctor adorned with a head wrap holds and

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September 2007 – 13 January 2008. A smaller version of the exhibition was toured to St Nicolas Church in Earley, Reading, Thursday 22 November to Thursday 6 December 2007.

<sup>62</sup> The British Council is a British organisation established in the early 1930s with the aim of “promoting a wider knowledge of [the UK] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries.” <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/history> [ accessed 24 April 2018}

examines a baby with a stethoscope. Below this image are the words ‘The British Council education for development’.



Fig.5 The British Council 1934-1984, Royal Mail Mint Stamps, 1984



Fig.6 The British Council education for development, Royal Mail Mint Stamps, 1984

Beyond commemorative stamps produced in relation to slavery, this was the first British stamp to depict a Black person. Secondly, produced by the Royal Mail, it was issued during Margaret Thatcher’s second term in office as Conservative Prime Minister. Therefore, this stamp also represents further evidence of how ideas of diversity were manifested in Britain prior to New Labour.

In 1998 and then 2005, two sets of commemorative stamps issued by the Post Office and Royal Mail made more explicit reference to multiculturalism in contemporary Britain under New Labour. In 1998, a set of four stamps titled









most influential female abolitionist in Britain.”<sup>73</sup> Ignatius Sancho was described as having being “born into slavery aboard a slave ship off the African coast but brought to England and taken into domestic service... *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho an African*, published two years after his death [1782] were influential in bringing the issue of slavery to public attention.”<sup>74</sup>

Where the Royal Mint had ignored the relationship between numismatic history and the transatlantic slave trade, the Royal Mail had never previously issued a commemorative set of stamps, in relation to the transatlantic slave trade or slavery.<sup>75</sup> Former British colonies, such as St Helena, Antigua, and Trinidad and Tobago had previously issued commemorative stamps marking the anniversary of the abolition of slavery. These provide wider context for the Royal Mail’s approach.

### **Slavery Remembered**

Amongst the plethora of stamps relating to slave commemoration issued during the course of the twentieth century, the commemorative focus had tended to be on the abolition of slavery rather than of the slave trade. Within this international and historical context, Royal Mail’s stamps could therefore be considered as unique in being a rare example of philatelic commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade. Furthermore, in scouring the international philatelic field, it is apparent that commemorative stamps issued to mark various anniversaries of slavery’s abolition, have not always adhered to an abolitionist narrative. Royal

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73 Ibid. Words by Tony Tibbles.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

Mail's bicentenary contributions functioned to celebrate abolitionism, rather than to remember slavery. This philatelic legacy provides context for understanding where the bicentenary stamps exist within a notion of national history and public memory.

Typically, the nations which have produced commemorative stamps, have primarily been former colonies of European nations. The imagery used in these stamps reflects the times in which they were produced. For example, the centennial stamp issued in Sierra Leone in 1933, portrayed a woman dressed in torn clothes in a pose in which she is caught at the point of breaking out of her chains. St Helena issued two stamps in 1968 to commemorate its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery [Fig. 9]. These stamps incorporated a portrait of Elizabeth II and of Sir George Bingham and Sir Hudson Lowe, two men cited as bringing slavery to an end in St Helena. The former British colony of St Vincent issued three commemorative stamps in 1973 to mark the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Wilberforce's death and the passing of the Abolition of Slavery Act.

Two present portraits of Wilberforce in early and later life [Fig. 10]. These stamps bear similar characteristics to the stamps produced in 2007.<sup>76</sup> However, it is evident from the stamps produced in Sierra Leone, St. Helena and St Vincent alone that the depiction of abolitionism, rather than slavery, has taken precedence.

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76 Since the 1960s, several former British colonies such as Trinidad & Tobago, St Helena, Bermuda, and Antigua have issued official stamps commemorating the abolition of slavery.





significance of these stamps, they need to be viewed in terms of two contrasting legacies. The first relates to philatelic commemoration, which in Britain began in earnest in the early 1920s. The second concerns the ways stamps have historically been a vehicle for slave commemoration. Notably, prior to 2007, such stamps had been issued from countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Americas and the Caribbean. None were issued for circulation in Britain. For this reason alone Royal Mail's commemorative stamps issued in 2007 carry their own inherent significance.

In much the same way that the Royal Mint's bicentenary £2 coin bypassed references to the particular relationship between numismatic and slavery history, the Royal Mail's commemorative set of stamps did not acknowledge the link between slavery and philatelic legacy. To more fully assess the nature and significance of the Royal Mail's set of commemorative abolition stamps, it is also necessary to consider the wider context within which they exist. An explication of philatelic slave commemoration provides a basis for understanding the nature of the Royal Mail's contribution. However, the particular nature of commemorative stamp production is such that it is also necessary to consider where this particular commemoration exists within the wider field and politics of British commemorative philatelic design.

### **The Rise of the Commemorative Stamp**

Commemorative philatelic designs, as we know them today, first came into production in Britain in 1924, with stamps issued to mark the British Empire



commemorative sets would gradually increase to more than one set for each month of the year. For example, in 2005 there would be sixteen commemorative stamp sets, and this would rise further to eighteen in 2006. While standard commemorative stamps such as birds and nature have been regularly issued, it is also the case that others have been issued as part of wider national commemorations; the epitome of this being royal anniversaries such as the Queen's 60<sup>th</sup> Wedding anniversary in 2007. However, the rise in numbers of commemorative stamps more generally, particularly those which coincide with wider commemorative events, is symptomatic of a form of perpetual commemorative culture in Britain, which intensified during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Politics of Design**

It was in the early 1960s that Labour MP Anthony Wedgwood Benn was appointed Postmaster General and despite being in the role for only two years, he was credited with improving the quality and professionalism of British stamp design.<sup>85</sup> For Benn, commemorative stamps functioned “to celebrate events of national and international importance, to commemorate important anniversaries, to reflect the British contribution to world affairs including the arts and sciences and to extend public patronage to the arts by encouraging the development of

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<sup>85</sup> These commemorative stamp sets were: Robert Burns Commemoration, 900th Anniversary of Westminster Abbey, Landscapes, World Cup Football Championship, British Birds, England's World Cup Victory, British Technology, 900th Anniversary of the Battle of Hastings and Christmas.

minuscule art.”<sup>86</sup> Despite such a clearly articulated vision, commemorative stamps issued from the mid-1960s onwards still had little in the way of coherent thematic order.

Anniversary stamp issues could be characterised as encompassing a hotchpotch of themes: Robert Burns, Landscapes, and Battle of Britain in 1965, the Trades Union Congress 1668-1968, Votes for Women 1918-1968, and First Voyage of Discovery 1768-1968 in 1968. In 1970, the mixed anniversary issue comprised five different stamps: Declaration of Arbroath 1320, Florence Nightingale 1820-1910, International Co-operative Alliance 1895, Mayflower 1620, and the Royal Astronomical Society 1820. Such arbitrary groupings were characteristic of the approach taken in selecting anniversaries. Moving on to the 1970s, commemorative issues were, when compared to the 2000s, still commonly kept to a small number of stamps, usually barely a handful, for any given anniversary. Furthermore, while nature and science and royalty have remained staples of commemorative stamp design, by the 1990s and 2000s aspects of popular culture appeared in the philatelic field. In 2007, a set of ten *Beatles* stamps epitomised the shift towards capitalising on certain types of British popular history. In the same year, four days prior to the publication of J.K. Rowling’s last *Harry Potter* novel, Royal Mail issued a set of twelve stamps based on characters from the books.<sup>87</sup>

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86 Tony Benn speaking of his time as Postmaster General between 1964-1966. Op cit. Stuart Rose, *Royal Mail Stamps: a survey of British stamp design*, ‘PMG extraordinary’, Phaidon, 1980, 67. Stuart Rose noted “Much of what Tony Benn achieved during the two years was to have a profound effect on postage stamp design thinking.” Rose 1980, 56

87 On the website *Collect GB Stamps* it is noted: “Issued four days before the release of the last Harry Potter novel – Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows — ca-ching!” <http://www.collectgbstamps.co.uk/explore/years/?year=2007> [Accessed 1 July 2015]

These sets maintained Royal Mail's customary thematic arbitrariness. However, on the one hand, the inclusion of the abolition of the slave trade as a theme broadened the philatelic commemoration. On the other hand, the propulsion of slavery abolition into this philatelic tradition highlighted the extent to which Black history had not figured before in this vehicle for narrating British history.

The subjects of British commemorative stamps have primarily comprised populist subjects and individuals. The processes and protocols of design, rather than the subject matter *per se*, have historically been the root cause of any controversy. Equally, despite the increasingly populist leanings of philatelic designs, decision-making has overwhelmingly been the preserve of the establishment.<sup>88</sup>

## **War**

The expanding field of commemorative stamp production in the late 1990s was marked not only by increasing numbers of populist subjects and themes, but also by growth in philatelic war commemoration. Wars commemorated in the 2000s dated from 1856 through to the Second World War. Prior to the 2000s, stamps commemorating war involving Britain and British armed forces had been issued on rare occasions. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Britain in 1965, and 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Hastings in 1966 reflected the sheer expanse of history considered legitimate commemorative material.

These designs utilised the graphic visual language of commemorative stamps.

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<sup>88</sup> The numbers of different designs within each set varied from their being one (Lest We Forget) to as many as twelve (Harry Potter). Between these extremes, more typically five, six or ten different designs were issued per set.

Barely a generation had passed since the Battle of Britain, yet this historical moment was presented in quite generalised terms. The iconography of aircraft, flags, and the words 'Battle of Britain 1940' coupled with an image of an onward looking Queen evoke a sense purpose and patriotism. The photographic portrait of her head on this stamp was in use until 1967, when it was replaced by a silhouetted image.<sup>89</sup> While this might appear to be an incidental detail, the indexical portrait of the Queen on the Battle of Britain stamps contrasts with the bold graphic illustrations of planes. Thus, the Battle of Britain was not just about saving Britain from enemy invasion, it was specifically about protecting the Queen, who looks out as if she is observing war planes in action.

In the early to mid-2000s, the Royal Mail issued a series of commemorative stamps to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Crimean War, in 2004, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, in 2005 and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victoria Cross, in 2006. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War series more or less conformed to the generalised depiction of war seen in the Battle of Britain series. However, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victoria Cross brought to the fore stories of individual soldiers who had demonstrated acts of courage. Since its creation in 1854, the Victoria Cross has been the highest decoration for service a soldier in the British and Commonwealth forces can receive. The commemorative stamps focus on the stories of six individuals who fought in the Crimean War, the First, or the Second World War. Each stamp follows the same design layout, with a black and white photograph of each soldier on one side of the stamp. On the opposite

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89 See Rose, *Royal Mail Stamps: a survey of British stamp design*.

side, the Queen's head is reproduced in brown silhouette, underneath which is the stamp value followed by an image of the Victoria Cross.

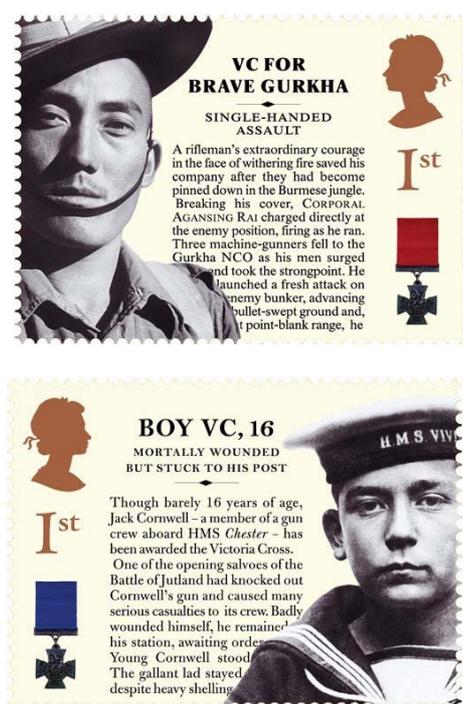


Fig 13. Royal Mail commemorates 150th Anniversary of the Victoria Cross, 21 September 2006

Located centrally within the pictorial space is a short account of the soldier's actions printed in a black font set against a cream background [Fig 13.]. The layout and tone of the texts give the impression that they are clippings lifted from the pages of a newspaper, like those published in the London Gazette during the Second World War:

This position was now under intense fire from the .37 millimeter gun in the jungle and from 'Water Piquet', Naik Agansing Rai at once advanced towards the gun, his section without hesitation following their gallant leader. Intense fire reduced the section to three men before half the distance had been covered but they pressed on to their objective.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Designed by David Gentleman in 1967. Gentleman would also design the bicentenary £2 coin.

An account of the same soldier's actions was written by contemporary author Bernard Cornwell under the heading: 'VC FOR BRAVE GURKHA', below which was the sub-heading: 'SINGLE-HANDED ASSAULT', followed by a description of the soldier's selflessness:

A rifleman's extraordinary courage in the face of withering fire saved his company after they had become pinned down in the Burmese Jungle. Breaking his cover, CORPORAL AGANSING RAI charged directly at the enemy position, firing as he ran...<sup>91</sup>

War had only occasionally featured in British philatelic design since the 1920s. But then, within a relatively short period of time, between 2004-2006, Royal Mail issued three different sets of commemorative war stamps. Coinciding with this newfound policy of commemorating Britain's military wars and personnel was Britain's involvement in military action in Iraq, which had begun in 2003. In the book, *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'* the editors argue that despite their importance to public memory, the commemoration of "distant conflicts may represent the use of heritage by governments wishing to shape social values along jingoistic lines, readying the population for new wars."<sup>92</sup> The pronounced increase in Royal Mail's issuing of commemorative war stamps in the early to mid-2000s could be seen as indicative of a shift in commemorative orientated culture in Britain. As a public body, answerable to government, it is also possible to see how, commemorations of Crimea, World

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91 Dating back to the 1660s, The Gazette (which includes issues in London, Belfast and Edinburgh) was considered the first reliable source of information relating to government and public affairs. <http://www.norvic-philatelics.co.uk/2006/09-vicx.htm> [Accessed 1 July 2015]. <http://www.thekhukurihouse.com/Content/VCHolders.php>, 5th October London Gazette.

92 <http://www.norvic-philatelics.co.uk/2006/09-vicx.htm> [Accessed January 2016]

World War I and World War II could appear attractive when the British government became tainted by its involvement in what the United Nations described as an illegal war in Iraq. Given that Royal Mail's commemorative stamps for Crimea, World War I and World War II were produced after the invasion of Iraq, they were not so much 'readying' the population for war, as providing a welcome counterpoint to any prevailing national antipathy towards Britain's involvement in such military aggression.

Royal Mail celebrated soldiers' bravery in wars dating as far back as one hundred and fifty years. Unofficial ceremonies marking the repatriation of war dead through the Wiltshire town of Wotton Bassett and the establishment of the charity *Help for Heroes* would offer more explicit expressions of public support for British armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. While not necessarily presented as vindication for the British government's military action, these different initiatives generated for a time a sustained level of media interest and coverage.

The Royal Mail became the focus of a campaign to issue commemorative stamps for individual members of British armed forces killed in Iraq. The idea came from contemporary artist Steve McQueen's work *Queen and Country*, which was jointly commissioned by the Imperial War Museum's Art Commissions Committee and Manchester International Festival. Given Royal Mail's increasing tendency towards producing commemorative editions of stamps, there was a certain level of irony in its decision not to support McQueen's project. McQueen explained his project as an explicit attempt to honour and remember the servicemen and women who died in Iraq. First, its

conservative nature meant that any patriotic subject had to also appear uncontentious. Secondly, the role of such stamps in 'marketing' or exporting an image of Britain was an important and key selection criterion. Despite the merits of McQueen's *Queen and Country*, producing stamps of recently killed British service men and women would not be an 'image' that a government-owned company could readily countenance.

### **Queen and Country**

Steve McQueen's, *Queen and Country* dates to 2003, when he was appointed as official war artist by the Imperial War Museum, London. In this role, McQueen made a six day visit to Basra, Iraq in 2005, with the intention of making a new film-based work. However, during that brief visit, his movements were so limited that he felt unable to make a film. Speaking about his experience in Basra, McQueen expressed a sense of frustration and exasperation: "I knew I'd be embedded with the troops, but I didn't imagine that meant I'd virtually have to stay in bed. It was ridiculous. We went to see some schools the army was rebuilding. I could talk to the guys but that was it."<sup>93</sup> The restrictions imposed on McQueen during his visit coupled with the failed attempt at embarking on a second visit meant that he felt unable to carry out his original intention of making a film about the British armed forces in Iraq. He subsequently formulated the profoundly eloquent idea to produce a set of facsimile commemorative stamps as a tribute, to "form an intimate reflection of

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93 Last post: Steve McQueen's tribute to Britain's war dead features stamps bearing the soldiers' faces. Why wouldn't the MoD help him?", *The Guardian*, Adrian Searle, Monday 12 March 2007 [retrieved:<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/mar/12/ira.art>]





















have been a very different event.

The significance of *Abolition Season* went beyond providing the bicentenary a national dimension. Save for radio broadcasts aired in 1933 to mark the centenary of the passing of the Abolition of the Slavery Act,<sup>118</sup> the BBC had never previously presented a schedule of programmes which attempted to explore the legacies of the slave trade and slavery. One other notable exception was their broadcast *Roots* in the late 1970s.<sup>119</sup> A dramatisation of writer and journalist Alex Haley's book,<sup>120</sup> based primarily on Haley's own familial history, *Roots* told the story of African-American slavery from colonial times through to the period of the American civil war. *Roots* represented a unique and seminal moment in America as it made available to mass audiences, the longevity, brutality and impact of slavery. Book sales surpassed any original expectations, whilst its adaptation for television resulted in over 100 million viewers.

Such considerations may have influenced the BBC's swift decision to broadcast *Roots* only months after it had been aired on American television. Nevertheless, to broadcast a story about slavery, albeit one based on an African-American perspective, on prime-time British television was highly significant:

...among the large numbers of Britons watching on the other side of the Atlantic were the families of Caribbean migrants. *Roots* proved to be a watershed

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118 Oldfield notes that the BBC "broadcast a series of talks on slavery and the slave trade that aimed to highlight the nation's 'tradition of humanity'". 'Chords of Freedom Commemoration', *ritual and British transatlantic slavery*, Oldfield, 2007, 95

119 *Roots* originally aired on ABC for eight consecutive nights from January 23 to January 30, 1977. In the United Kingdom, BBC One aired the series in six parts, starting with parts 1 to 3 over the weekend of April 8 to April 11th, 1977. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roots\\_\(1977\\_miniseries\)#Broadcast\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roots_(1977_miniseries)#Broadcast_history) [accessed 7 July]

120 Alex Haley *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Dell, New York 1976





The actual range and quantity of programmes presented as part of *Abolition Season* was a serious and substantial offering from the BBC. Rather than going through the motions, its differentiated programme was an attempt to grapple with many different topics: abolitionism, guilt, economics, and contemporary legacies. On the other hand, their promotion of *Abolition Season* appeared quite mannered and clichéd. Headlines such as “Slavery in the spotlight” and “Discovery, drama, documentary and debate: the BBC goes to town on the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade on British ships”<sup>126</sup> seemed incongruous to the often-harrowing documentary subject matter and offered little insight into the range of programmes.

One of the most pressing issues to arise during the bicentenary was the extent to which it could accommodate traditional and more progressive views of slavery history, with the latter no longer crediting benevolent white men with achieving abolition. On Radio Four, the discussion series *In Our Time* presented *Wilberforce*, whilst BBC One broadcast a documentary, *In Search of Wilberforce* [Fig 16]. The former unapologetically reprised the sort of hagiographic portrait customarily associated with Wilberforce’s legacy. The latter sought to deconstruct and dislodge Wilberforce’s centrality to the abolitionist narrative. Whilst evidently diametrically opposed, both programmes were somewhat mannered in how they formed their arguments.

Described as an ‘unusual edition’<sup>127</sup> of *In Our Time*, the programme deviated

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<sup>126</sup> *History Magazine*, March 2007, Vol 8, no 3, BBC, 68-69. In the same magazine, the editor, Dr David Musgrave, described the bicentenary as “... one anniversary that’s sure to catch public attention”, 4

<sup>127</sup> This was described by the BBC as an “unusual edition” in as much as it broke with the tradition of a show which ordinarily involved a studio-based roundtable table







*The Lamplighter*, about four enslaved women, and the adaptation of Ann Rinaldi's *Hang a Thousand Trees with Ribbon* based on African-American poet Phyllis Wheatly. The drama-documentary, *The Road to Abolition*,<sup>138</sup> featured a dramatised account of the abolitionist campaign interspersed with contributions from various historians seeking to provide a contemporary re-evaluation of the abolitionist movement. One review noted how:

The programme prevents any complacency or self-congratulatory histories of the abolitionists as they are represented not as the voice of the silent majority, but a minority composed largely of those on the edges of society, dissenters and non-conformists. Wilberforce is mentioned once, but focus is placed upon Sharp and Equiano.<sup>139</sup>

Unlike the more focused radio coverage, *Abolition Season* on the television was more of an arbitrary assortment of programmes. A number of these were commissioned for the bicentenary, such as the documentaries *Racism: A History*, *The Black 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, and *The Legend of Nanny Maroon* presented by singer Ms Dynamite. Where writers and historians assumed a more prominent position on radio, television programmes appeared to have a more celebrity driven dimension. This is itself a reminder of how television is primarily a mode of entertainment. Therefore, that *Abolition Season* generally lacked an authoritative account of the slave trade and slavery history was of less importance than its ability to draw viewers and ratings through utilising celebrities as presenters. On radio, documentary programmes attempted to offer such narratives but were restricted to 15 or 30-minute slots. On television,

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138 Radio 3 Sunday 25 March, 7.30pm

139 *1807 Commemorated: The Abolition of the Slave Trade*

<https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/media/reviews/roadtoabol.html>

the documentary format was also prevalent and covered a vast range of topics. The inclusion of *Congo: White King, Red Rubber and Black Death*, a documentary exploring Belgian King Leopold II's brutal colonial rule in the Congo, highlighted the tendency towards arbitrary programming and the absence of a critical narrative of British history. One commentator was moved to observe:

In an intriguing, well-researched documentary, the crimes of the Belgian King Leopold II and the Belgian Government in the Congo are laid bare, with a history of exploitation, mutilation and death. A Belgian minister is questioned sternly in the documentary regarding the apparent denial of Belgium's Government and peoples for their country's role in the genocide of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Congo. Yet the same mode of investigation is not applied to Britain's own scarred history of slavery and colonialism.<sup>140</sup>

'*Congo: White King, Red Rubber and Black Death*' was primarily concerned with the period 1885-1908, a time closer to British colonial rule than to its slave trade.<sup>141</sup> The inclusion of such a programme highlighted the absence of any comparable study exploring Britain's role in transatlantic slavery and the slave trade. More fragmented and meandering, *Abolition Season* dabbled in different aspects of slavery history, without investing in the sort of authoritative historical serialisations that could have generated a '*Roots* moment'. More significantly, such an approach would have been more in keeping with the history

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140 <https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/media/reviews/remembering.html> [Accessed 12 July 2017]

141 Originally broadcast in February 2004, this BBC4 commissioned documentary was re-aired in April 2007.



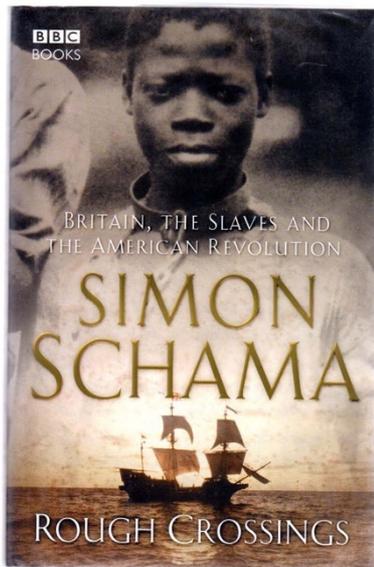


Fig 17. *Rough Crossings: Britain, The Slaves and the American Revolution*, book cover, 2005

What was described by the BBC as one “of the great narratives from the history of slavery”<sup>146</sup> was recounted in the television adaptation of Simon Schama’s, *Rough Crossings: Britain, The Slaves and American Independence* [Fig. 17].<sup>147</sup> Schama narrated the story of how slaves had fought with the British during the American War of Independence in return for their freedom. Following the end of the war and their relocation in Nova Scotia and England, the promise of freedom quickly soured, resulting in race riots and life in “another form of servitude” in Nova Scotia. To escape this turmoil, ex-slaves were offered the chance of setting sail for a new life in what would later become Sierra Leone. The story of *Rough Crossings* is primarily told via John Clarkson, brother of leading British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, who led a convoy of ships and brings to light a little-known episode in the history of Atlantic slavery from the

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146 BBC *History Magazine*, Vol 8 no 3 March 2007

147 Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, The Slaves and American Independence*, BBC Books, 2005





Although Badjie did not expand on the nature of “project directing”, her commentary was significant on a number of levels. Strikingly, she had been asked to assume responsibility for project directing the bicentenary barely six months prior to its launch. This would have meant that programmes commissioned for it would already have been in production, if not actually completed. Furthermore, Badjie’s admission of ignorance about slavery, not only raises questions as to how she felt able to undertake the role, but more importantly, why the BBC considered her suitably qualified to steer such a season of programmes. The uneven and somewhat misleading nature of the BBC’s coverage spoke volumes about how slavery remained not only contentious but an uncomfortable topic for discussion and commemoration.

During the course of 2007, the bicentenary was given some media attention. Beyond reviews of historical exhibitions, coverage in the national press was primarily concerned with either the merits and legitimacy of commemorating 1807-2007 and the issue of ‘apologising’ for British involvement, or with the problems of ‘modern forms of slavery’. In her column for *The Guardian*, journalist Madeline Bunting offered only a terse passing comment about the BBC being “in commemoration mode”.<sup>151</sup> Rod Liddle’s article for the *Sunday Times* ‘I’m Sorry but my feet are killing me’ alighted on the evangelical Christian group Lifeline’s march from Hull to London, in yokes and chains.<sup>152</sup> Pious acts of commemoration offered chauvinistic journalists such as Liddle an alternative mechanism for belittling the legacy of slavery. Alternatively, other commentators viewed such acts as merely reaffirming its rightful scepticism of the state’s

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151 Madeline Bunting, *the Guardian* Monday March 26 2007, 31

152 Rod Liddle, *the Sunday Times*, March 25 2007, 6

bicentenary motives. Reluctance to offer an ‘official apology’ but instead “carefully choreographed gestures to express government remorse without actually using the s-word.”<sup>153</sup> Yasmin Alibhai-Brown’s ‘It’s understanding we need, not apologies’ considered the how the politics of ‘race’ framed attitudes towards slavery history and the bicentenary. Although “worth all the time and money poured into it” Alibhai-Brown contended that “slavery lives on in the devaluation of black and non-white lives here and abroad.”<sup>154</sup>

## Summary

Despite being a national commemoration influenced and driven by the government, the bicentenary did not, curatorially speaking, have one central organising committee, institution or individual to take responsibility for the overall vision, scope and approach of the exhibition programme. This meant that museums and galleries were given license to initiate their own exhibitions. The bicentenary was not merely an opportunity to commemorate the passing of the abolition of the slave trade, it afforded museums the opportunity to stage exhibitions which reflected their own particular agendas. Many opted to explore the legacy of slavery or the slave trade in relation to their particular location or the particular nature of their historical collections. From slavery and the slave trade, abolition and naval history, to the contemporary politics of bonded labour and migration, the re-interpreting of historical narrative and artefact, place and institution was central to many initiatives organised as part of the bicentenary.

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153 Esther Addley and Hugh Muir *the Guardian*, Saturday March 24 2007, 12

154 Alibhai-Brown *the Independent*, Monday 26 March 2007

## **Chapter 4**

### **Intervention and Critique at the V&A and Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery**





were considered to operate physically, materially and conceptually within the museum. Various forms of contemporary art (painting, photography, installation, sculpture, drawing, print and video) were utilised to consider slavery's hitherto untold relevance to certain art and design collections. Contemporary art, as a means of intervention, was literally applied in terms of a physical object, performance and/or presence.

In different ways, contemporary art was attributed with a transformative role in both exhibitions, in terms of disrupting and challenging conventions of display, the nature of interpretation and the visitor experience. In *Uncomfortable Truths*, rarefied displays of art and antiquities were left undisturbed. In most instances, contemporary art was not deployed as a direct critique of specific decorative objects. Instead, the incongruous presence of contemporary art situated amongst these displays was intended to be a form of visual dialogue with permanent and historical displays. By contrast, *Human Cargo* was an entirely curated affair, insofar as it presented contemporary art alongside historical works that were primarily re-presented for the exhibition, suggesting a more egalitarian approach aimed at unsettling conventional uses of contemporary art, historical collections and museum spaces.

As public museums with substantial historical collections of art and design and programmes spanning historical and contemporary art and design, the V&A and PCMAG possess quite different public profiles. Where the former is located in central London, and calls itself, “[t]he world’s greatest museum of art and design”, the latter is in the city of Plymouth on the south west coast of England, and its programme is steeped in municipal history. Such differences reflect the

power of the bicentenary to involve a differentiated range of museums catering for different types of audiences.

There was a distinct difference in how the V&A and PCMAG approached their exhibitions. However, despite these differences and declared intentions, both exhibitions were structured in ways which predetermined and essentially limited the scope of intervention and (institutional) critique by predetermining the nature and form of access permitted to artists.

This chapter explores the ways in which artistic intervention and its corollary, institutional critique, were performed in *Uncomfortable Truths* and *Human Cargo*. The juxtaposition of historical and contemporary art is neither unique to these exhibitions, nor is it uncommon in the wider field of museum practice as means of intervening, subverting and challenging conventions of the institution, its programming, display and interpretation of art. Whilst it can be argued that all exhibitions held in public galleries are inherently subject to various political and cultural exigencies, the idea of artistic intervention, as presented in *Uncomfortable Truths* and *Human Cargo*, embodied a more specific set of aspirations and intentions, whereby the particular *context* (bicentenary) overpowered the *content* of the exhibition.

Notably, reviewers of *Uncomfortable Truths* and *Human Cargo* focused primarily on critiquing content, giving little consideration to specific and wider institutional agendas, which were central to these exhibitions. Rather than being anathema to art criticism, the analysis of context, and more specifically those institutional practices relating to curatorial pathologies informed by racial and cultural politics are of fundamental importance in thinking about *Uncomfortable*

*Truths and Human Cargo.*

## **Part I**

### **Intervention and Critique**

In *The Museum as Arena: Artists on Institutional Critique*, Christian Kravagna notes that, since the early twentieth century, “the museum has been both a theme of artists’ reflections and a target of their criticism since it represents a central locus of power in the cultural economy of modernism.”<sup>6</sup> As a particular mode of ‘critical’ art practice, whereby the museum willingly enables artists to subject it to a particular level of cultural and political scrutiny, the museum functions as both custodian and interpreter of history. Kravagna identifies how complicity between artist and institution is an inherent component of institutional critique but this does not necessarily diminish the ability for artists to present potent exhibitions.

...art has given up its self-deceptive picture as a revolutionary force outside the social contract. Instead it has taken a critical position, fully conscious that it has always been part of the structures it criticizes.<sup>7</sup>

Artists such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Andrea Fraser and Adrian Piper have “critiqued the power structures, the value systems and practices governing galleries and museums and illustrated how context is inseparable from the meaning of art and the meaning of the museum experience itself.”<sup>8</sup> From Duchamp to Warhol, Louise Lawler to Mike Kelley, artists have challenged the

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6 Christian Kravagna, ‘Introduction’, 2001, 7

7 Ibid.

8 Lisa Corrin, ‘Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums’, 1994, 3 - 4

'authority' of the museum to select, order and categorise. Equally incisive and interventionist have been artists such as David Hammons and William Pope.L.

Scrutiny of how art and artefacts are displayed have all been the artist's legitimate subjects. This has included the arrangement of 'neutral' spaces, such as cloakrooms and objects such as water fountains, and the roles played by senior management and security guards, visitors and donors. These components were also integral to understanding how museums construct order and include and exclude different histories. Another key aspect of opening up the museum was the questioning of "the assumption that taste and expertise justified the right of trustees, curators, and museum scholars to present what they believed their audience should know."<sup>9</sup> The terms upon which artists and their work can therefore be deployed in the name of intervention and critique can never be divorced from the wider politics and powers at play in the running of a museum.

In *Uncomfortable Truths* and *Human Cargo*, the aspiration to offer a critical and informed re-reading of the museum in relation to the bicentenary and slavery history was not linked to the underlying politics and curatorial agendas of the individual institutions.

### ***Mining the Museum***

During the late 1980s, American artist Fred Wilson developed a practice and reputation for producing exhibitions which challenged the ways in which

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9 Steven Lavine, 'Audience, Ownership, and Authority', 1992, 138

museums often suppressed or, worse still, erased certain aspects of history, culture and notions of value in presenting their collections.<sup>10</sup> Wilson's exhibition *Mining the Museum* (1992-93), is particularly noteworthy here, as it exemplifies the ways in which artistic intervention could offer an artist the opportunity to disturb and disrupt Maryland Historical Society's almost sacred equilibrium and public image. *Mining the Museum* brought into public view parts of their collection that had for a long time remained under lock and key. In doing so, Wilson uncovered aspects of American history pertaining to the legacies of slavery. Although *Mining the Museum* was not initiated by Wilson, his involvement reflected the practice and reputation he had nurtured around museum collections. Neither was it initiated by the Maryland Historical Society. Instead *Mining the Museum* was orchestrated by a third party, *The Contemporary*, a non-building-based contemporary arts organisation in Baltimore which, according to its then curator Lisa Corrin, "intended for *Mining the Museum* to be designed to address the 'crisis of identity' facing museums in the most direct way possible and to offer a particular, localized model for change."<sup>11</sup> This "localised model" referred to particular aspects of the society's collection as well as wider debates around museum histories and collections. Corrin considered *Mining the Museum* to be different to other critiques of 'the museum' because it did not evade issues of race which were commonly frowned upon by the white museum power structure.<sup>12</sup>

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10 *The Other Museum*, White Columns, New York, 1990/91 and *Primitivism: High and Low*, Metro Pictures, New York, 1991

11 *Ibid.*, *Mining the Museum*, 11

12 *Ibid.*, 8. Also, Corrin cites Maurice Berger, who stated: "most art museums offer little more than lip service to the issue of racial inclusion. Art that demonstrates its 'difference' from the mainstream or that challenges dominant values is rarely



*Carriage*; in close proximity to this is a photograph, *Mount Vernon Place*, which portrays two Black nannies with three white children and a near-identical pram. In *Whipping Post*, the eponymous punishment device was, we are told, last used in a Baltimore jail in 1938.<sup>15</sup> Here it was presented as an *object* and also as *evidence* of a violent forgotten past.

In *Mining the Museum*, Wilson's interventionist strategy resided not in the actual *making* and display of new physical objects, but in the excavation and presentation of otherwise hidden collections. Upending curatorial conventions, which had enabled inglorious aspects of American history to remain locked away, Wilson's shocking discoveries were described using the orthodox and 'objective' language of the Western art museum.



Fig 1. Fred Wilson Metalwork 1793-1880, 1993

Wilson's exhibition and the accompanying publication were enthralling and captivating because they opened up the collections of the *Maryland Historical Society* to public scrutiny in ways never previously seen. *Mining the Museum*

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15 Ibid., 16

was as mentioned a seminal exhibition and one which earned Wilson critical plaudits such as “allegorist par excellence”, a “Foucauldian archaeologist” and a “conceptual materialist”.<sup>16</sup> As Faith Davis Ruffins observed: “*Mining the Museum* tore down the wall of silence about slavery and its brutality within one of the most precious and renowned antebellum collections.”<sup>17</sup> Wilson’s original approach to exposing previously hidden histories of slavery, within a museum context, was innovative and playful in its juxtaposition of collections. Equally, orthodox and seemingly objective mechanisms of display and interpretative language were subverted.

Institutional critique as performed by artists like Fred Wilson and others such as Andrea Fraser<sup>18</sup> have been questioned in terms of the complicity between artist and institution. Cultural theorist Hal Foster described how “new site-specific work threatens to become a museum category, one in which the institution *imports* critique, whether as a show of tolerance or for the purpose of inoculation (against an immanent critique, one undertaken by the institution, within the institution).”<sup>19</sup> Quite literally, Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* did briefly inspire, if not copycat versions, what Huey Copeland described as exhibitions “aimed to reach out to black communities”.<sup>20</sup> However, what is significant about a project such as *Mining the Museum* is the lengths to which the institution went to enable “racial inclusiveness”, that was neither free from the spectre of racial

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16 Op cit., Copeland, 2013, 26

17 Faith Davis Ruffins, ‘Revisiting the Old Plantation: Reparations, Reconciliation, and Museumizing American Slavery’, 2006, 405-406

18 Andrea Fraser’s performance *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989, Video (color, sound) Duration, 29 min

19 Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’, 1994, 16

20 Op cit., Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 55

tokenism nor wholly the product of unconditional institutional altruism.<sup>21</sup>

*Mining the Museum* highlights the extent to which, even when the bar is set high, artistic intervention is still subject to the politics of institutional agendas and the vagaries of social relations and events. In *Uncomfortable Truths* and *Human Cargo*, artistic license and institutional critique were, despite their altruistic appearance, an altogether different proposition. The catalytic force of the bicentenary and wider terrain of inclusionary politics which dictated their production were not external potencies, but, in different ways, integral to these exhibitions.

It should be noted here that despite discourses and practices generated by Black artists in Europe and America, both challenging exclusions of practice and history, and offering institutional critiques, relatively few have been considered worthy of inclusion in wider published debates. Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* has been regularly cited in various anthologies on institutional critique. However, in terms of the politics of race and institutions, Wilson's project often stands out in such publications, highlighting the prevailing exclusion of a wider body of practices by Black practitioners which could be understood in relation to institutional critique.<sup>22</sup> *Mining the Museum* continues to have a presence within contemporary art discourses, but it has been erased

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21 Ibid. Copeland highlights how the exhibition was utilised by Baltimore high schools to discuss the beating of black motorist Rodney King and in this context could be understood as "a momentary tool for the management of black discontent and a viable alternative to its riotous articulation".

22 These two examples produced ten years apart illustrate this as a persistent issue. Christian Kravagna, 'Introduction' *The Museum as Arena: Artists in Institutional Critique*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2001, and *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Eds Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, The MIT Press, 2011

from the public profile of the Maryland Historical Society.<sup>23</sup>

Juxtaposing 'old' with 'new' was a novel form of intervention and a coming together of different histories and audiences employed in a number of exhibitions in Britain during the 2000s, such as *Retrace your Steps: Remember Tomorrow* (2000), at the Sir John Soane's Museum, London and *After Life: Artists Examine Life and Death*, at the Bowes Museum (2004), County Durham.<sup>24</sup> These playful and inventive exhibitions were concerned neither with excavating hidden histories nor offering particular commentaries on institutional critique. Rather, they aspired to illustrate artistic (and often curatorial) dexterity and know-how. The fusion of historical and contemporary art has also been utilised in more problematic ways, such as Whitechapel Art Gallery's exhibition *Krishna, the Divine Lover* in 1997.<sup>25</sup> [Fig. 2]

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23 <http://www.mdhs.org/search/node/Fred%20Wilson>

24 *Retrace your Steps: Remember Tomorrow*, Sir John Soane's Museum, 10 December 1999 - 25 March 2000. *After Life: Artists Examine Life and Death, The Bowes Museum*, 17 January-21 March 2004

25 The contemporary artists were: Sutapa Biswas, Maqbool Fida Husain, Perminder Kaur, Dhruva Mistry and Amrit K.D. Singh & Rabindra K.D. Kaur Singh. The contemporary artists' work did not feature in the exhibition's accompanying catalogue. This further exacerbated the problematic and tokenistic nature of their inclusion in this exhibition. At this time, the gallery had never presented a solo exhibition by a contemporary South Asian artist. *Krishna, the Divine Lover*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 30 May - 27 July 1997, Organised by National Touring Exhibitions.



Fig 2. Krishna The Divine Lover, 1997  
Whitechapel Art Gallery, London,  
Exhibition brochure  
Image: Krishna's combat with the god Indra (detail).  
Illustration from a Harivamsa manuscript, Mughal c.1590 gouache on paper.

Staged as part of celebrations marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian Independence and the creation of Pakistan. The exhibition was curated by Indian born British artist Balraj Khanna. It presented over one hundred miniatures paintings dating from the sixteenth to the early part of the twentieth century. Such historical art exhibitions were characteristic of Whitechapel Art Gallery's attempts at 'engaging' with local Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities.<sup>26</sup> Six contemporary South Asian artists were appended to *Krishna, the Divine Lover* with the aim of drawing connections between historical and contemporary art. However, the pronounced absence of Black artists from the Whitechapel Art Gallery's wider programme of contemporary art exhibitions made such exhibitions even more problematic than they already were.<sup>27</sup> Whilst *Uncomfortable Truths* incorporated elements of the novel and

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26 For example: *Woven Air: The Muslin and Kantha Tradition of Bangladesh* (1988) and *Living Wood: Sculptural Traditions of Southern India* (1992).

27 Writing on the politics of Black survey exhibitions I observed: "Up until 2001, Sonia Boyce held the distinction of being the only Black British artist to have a solo show at



approached this through an assortment of commissions and selected works, which figuratively and formally were concerned with the impact and representation of slavery and the slave trade. *Human Cargo* focused less on figurative representations of slavery and more on a related set of concepts and signifiers. In *Uncomfortable Truths*, it was depictions of an enslaved body or emancipated slave that functioned as an intervention. In *Human Cargo*, the work contrasted a number of different personas: artist and visitor, participant and performer, consumer and community, abolitionist and campaigner, who in different configurations were utilised to intervene in the conventions which ordinarily govern museum displays and the relationships and distinctions they create.

## Part II

### *Uncomfortable Truths*

It is my hope that the beautiful, stark and provocative work in this exhibition will incite ongoing scholarship, debate and creativity.<sup>30</sup> — Zoe Whitley, Curator

*Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design* comprised three main interconnected parts: an international exhibition<sup>31</sup> involving eleven artists; *Traces of the Trade* which was a “discovery trail

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30 Zoe Whitley, Exhibition Curator, ‘Uncomfortable Truths’, installation by various artists’ <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/u/uncomfortable-truths-installation/> [Retrieved 4 August 2017]

31 *Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave trading on Contemporary Art and Design*, 20 February-17 June 2007. The exhibition then toured to Salford Museum and Art Gallery, 30 June -2 September, and then Ferens Art Gallery, in Hull, as part of the city’s *Wilberforce 2007*, 15 September 2007 - 6 January 2008.



areas of the museum's collection without any reference to Africa: "Nowhere else can the history of Renaissance bronzes, of Edwardian ladies' underwear, of great tapestries, and of porcelain, furniture, silks, silver and jewelry (to list only a few of the objects it contains) be studied better under one roof."<sup>37</sup> This description of the museum's holdings reflected the extent to which Africa was seen as beyond the pale. This was the V&A's institutional mindset until the latter part of the twentieth century and did not hinder its international reputation as a citadel of expertise.<sup>38</sup>

Although *Uncomfortable Truths* was presented as the V&A's first exhibition of African art, the museum did already own a relatively significant collection of art and artefacts connected to Africa and the Caribbean. A number of these items would be included in *Traces of the Trade*.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, within its substantial print collection were a significant number of works by Black practitioners from Britain, USA, Africa and the Caribbean. The V&A had collected this work since the early 1960s. Cock's publication was little concerned with contemporary collections, let alone contemporary art, and thus their relatively small collection was overlooked.<sup>40</sup>

In 2004, the V&A's exhibition *Black British Style* reflected a change in the museum's mind-set:

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37 Roy Strong, 'Chapter 1 'A Short History'', 1980, 3

38 V&A website homepage; [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

39 Listed in *Uncomfortable Truths: Traces of the Trade, Discovery Trails Exploring Links Between Art, Design and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 20 February-31 December 2007

40 Wilfredo Lam's lithograph *Composition 1961* was purchased in 1962. See *In Black and White: Prints from Africa and the Diaspora*, Gill Saunders and Zoe Whitley, V&A Publishing, London, 2013



art group show to be organised as part of the bicentenary. It also marked a change in how contemporary art was presented at the V&A. Unlike other V&A temporary exhibitions around this period, it did not appear within a dedicated gallery space. In contrast to, for example, *Black British Style*, sculpture, painting, video and mixed media works in *Uncomfortable Truths* were sited in amongst the museum's permanent collections. Given that the contemporary art works alone were subsequently toured to Salford Museum and Art Gallery in Greater Manchester, and then Ferens Art Gallery in Hull,<sup>45</sup> the decision to present contemporary art amongst permanent collections, rather than in a dedicated space, seemed more novel than essential, particularly in the absence of an explicit rationale and given that this was precisely the approach of *Traces of the Trade*. In effect, contemporary art was subsumed within and made subservient to the museum's collections.

As a peripatetic show, *Uncomfortable Truths* was displayed across three floors of the V&A, in the Grand Entrance, and in the newly refurbished and renamed John Madejski Garden. Most of the contemporary art was situated in close proximity to the V&A's 'British Galleries'. Spread over two floors, the 'British Galleries' comprise 3000 objects in fifteen rooms. Considered by the V&A to be the most important collection of British art and design on public display in the world, it includes reconstructed interiors, ceramics, glass, and furniture produced in the United Kingdom from 1500 to 1900. It is also significant in revealing the influence of styles such as French rococo, Chinese chinoiserie and Italian Palladianism on British art and design.

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45 Quoted in V&A brochure for Discovery Trails Exploring Links Between Art, Design, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 2007, 8

In 2007, the 'British Galleries' still formed a relatively new display area in the V&A, having reopened in November 2001, following what the museum called the most substantial redesign it had undertaken in fifty years.<sup>46</sup> While the purpose of this redevelopment was to create greater and more accessible display areas, it was also an opportunity to make them more informative and interactive, and better able to meet the needs of what the museum had begun to recognise as its more differentiated audience.<sup>47</sup> More specifically, all-encompassing exhibitions such as *Black British Style* and *Uncomfortable Truths* were the museum's attempts at embracing cultural diversity:

We currently have an unrivalled track record in developing strategies to encourage participation of BAME organisations and individuals, fulfilling the Museum's strategic aim to build audiences in both size and diversity. Significant drives for change have been the development of a museum wide Access, Inclusion and Diversity Strategy and Implementation Plan; the commitment and expertise of individual staff and managers; the development of mutually beneficial and creative partnerships based on trust; the ability to attract external funding and the willingness to take risks and learn from mistakes. Our diversity objectives are clearly enshrined in our Museum Strategic Plan, and our Funding Agreement with DCMS. They are in support of, but not limited to, the DCMS's diversity targets through the PSA3 agreement and our own obligations under equality legislation.<sup>48</sup>

Although *Uncomfortable Truths* was part of the V&A's cultural diversity strategy, this was not mentioned within the exhibition publicity.

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46 'The New British Galleries at the V&A', Nicholas Humphrey, *V&A Conservation Journal*, April 1998

47 *Ibid.*, 4

48 V&A Report on Cultural Diversity, 2007

[http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy\\_documents/file\\_upload/42695\\_file.pdf](http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy_documents/file_upload/42695_file.pdf) [Accessed 15 October 2017]

One characteristic of *Uncomfortable Truths* was how interpretative material about the artists' work was kept to a minimum. Whilst the exhibition was an unprecedented moment in terms of both the subject and prominence given to Black practitioners, no deeper analysis in the form of a contextualising essay was offered. There was no attempt to explain or explore, other than in the most general of ways, why these particular artists or the wide range of art works had been brought together, nor what significance the exhibition had for the V&A.

In the exhibition's accompanying brochure, though brief, Whitley's introduction did ask questions pertinent to ideas about where slavery fitted within debates about British history. Perhaps as a consequence of how Atlantic Slavery (and its contemporary legacies) existed as extrinsic to mainstream British history few white artists felt able or willing to explore this history. Such pathologies about Atlantic slavery rendered its history as belonging to Black people alone. Within this context, printed in large uppercase letters and underlined at the top of the page, as if it were a title to Whitley's introduction, is the following declaration:

BRITAIN'S 2007 COMMEMORATION OF THE  
PARLIAMENTARY ABOLITION OF THE TRANS-  
ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE IS IMPORTANT. BUT  
NOT UNPROBLEMATIC.<sup>49</sup>

Whitley then continues:

This exhibition raises many questions, to which there may be no definitive answers: why is slavery so often discussed as something disconnected from the present? Why is Trans-Atlantic slavery seen as a black issue rather than a human one, by blacks as well as whites? Why does it take arbitrary anniversaries to bring these issues to the fore? How

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49 *Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*, 20 February-17 June 2007, brochure

do we understand the roles of the perpetrators and the victims from our standpoint in the present? What can we learn from the history of resistance to slavery? How has slavery contributed to the benefit – and detriment – of the world we live in now? And, how has this institution, like many others, profited from the wealth generated through slave trading?<sup>50</sup>

White authors such as Barry Unsworth and Philippa Gregory and academics such as James Walvin, Madge Dresser and Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace had, during the 1990s and 2000s, published a range of novels and academic studies on the subject of slavery. Notwithstanding these significant contributions, Whitley's palpable frustration was quite rightly aimed towards a wider and more prominent lack of awareness in dominant British culture about the history and continued relevance of slavery to contemporary British society.

### **New Commissions**



Fig 3. Romuald Hazoumè  
Dan Ayido-Houedo/Arc-en-ciel, Symbole de Perpetuité  
2006/07, V&A

Four artists were commissioned to each produce a new work for *Uncomfortable Truths*. These were Beninese artists Romuald Hazoumè and Julien Sinzogan

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

and British artists Keith Piper and Yinka Shonibare. Each offered a literal manifestation of intervention, in terms of where they were sited. These contributions spanned drawing, sculpture and installation, and as interventions operated in quite different formal and conceptual ways. Hazoumè and Sinzogan's works were each presented on their own and were situated in locations which, given their function as entrances or meeting places, were guaranteed to receive significant levels of suspecting and unsuspecting visitors. Hazoumè's large scale sculpture *Dan Ayido-Houedo/Arc-en-ciel, Symbole de Perpetuité 2006/07* was presented in the V&A's John Madejski Garden, continuing the V&A's self-proclaimed interest in bringing the ideas of contemporary art and design to the fore within the museum.<sup>51</sup> Painted on multiple panels, Sinzogan's work was sited in one of the museum's main entrances, known as the 'Grand Entrance' and also the starting point for walking tours.

Romuald Hazoumè and Julien Sinzogan both explored ideas of mythology, spiritualism and legacies of slavery. Hazoumè's *Dan Ayido-Houedo/Arc-en-ciel, Symbole de Perpetuité 2006/07* [Fig 3.] is made from disused plastic petrol cans, a recurring material in his practice.<sup>52</sup>

Commonly used by people in Benin to transport petrol for sale on mopeds, for Hazoumè these petrol cans also carry a deeper significance (explored in

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<sup>51</sup> Trench, V&A Interpretation Editor notes in her book, *The Victoria and Albert Museum*, that: "The V&A encourages debate between contemporary design and that of the past. *Diamond (Pink)* by Jeff Koons was temporarily placed in the garden in 2006. Two metres high and made of stainless steel, it both celebrates and critiques our consumer-driven culture." V&A Publishing, London, 2010, 20

<sup>52</sup> Although frequently described as petrol cans, Hazoumè uses containers made from plastic.

Chapter 6), symbolizing the potent challenges and perils of human survival in contemporary Benin. *Dan Ayido-Houedo* carries a duality of meaning, where the past and the present are intertwined. As with much of Hazoumè's art, spiritual and mythological references,<sup>53</sup> African deities, ritual and folklore are employed as metaphors for contemporary issues of exploitation, avarice and poverty. As a snake, *Dan Ayido-Houedo* carries with it loaded symbolism of good and evil, fertility, and potential danger. Speaking about *Dan Ayido-Houedo* several years after it was made, Hazoumè explained: "Dan is powerful. We have no love for him. He gives and he takes away. He is a thief. One is never done with being anxious about placating him, for he does not forgive readily, as Legba does."<sup>54</sup> *Dan Ayido-Houedo* is a snake depicted in the act of cannibalistic destruction. This symbolic act embodies Hazoumè's assessment of modern-day Benin. *Dan Ayido-Houedo*:

...is a symbol of an eternal disaster, a sinister vicious circle and is intended to draw attention to the danger of ignoring recurring patterns in history. Because slavery still exists, as well as *de facto* slavery in the form of exploitation. Three hundred liters [sic] of gasoline, as many as thirty jerrycans, are sometimes transported on one moped in Benin. This creates a moving time bomb.<sup>55</sup>

For Hazoumè, the brutal impact and legacy of the slave trade is all too evident

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53 "A divine python of the Fon. Husband of Ayida. He was made by Mawu and carried him on his journeys when Mawu created the earth. The python's excreta was used to make the mountains. When the work was complete he coiled himself in the sea beneath the earth to support it. If he moves there is an earthquake. When he has eaten all the iron bars in the sea, he will start to eat himself, starting at the tail, and then the earth will fall into the sea from lack of support. In some accounts, he has 3,500 coils above the earth and 3,500 below, holding it safe. One of his arched coils is seen as the rainbow." <http://www.mythologydictionary.com/dan-ayido-hwedo-mythology.html> [Accessed 2 August 2016]

54 Daniela Roth, 'People expect Africans to make masks. So I make masks.' 2010, 71  
55 Ibid.

in everyday life in Benin. While he invokes spirits and divinity to make commentary on contemporary social and political issues, in Julien Sinzogan's painting, the use of the 'spirit world' is applied in a different way and as a means to break the "sinister vicious circle" as explored by Hazoumè.

In *Gates of Return* 2007, Sinzogan depicts a world that is both real and imaginary. The bottom half of the painting portrays a melancholic scene rendered in black ink of partially clad shackled men and women being marched to a shoreline to begin their miserable journey aboard a slave ship. The left-hand panel depicts ships festooned with a carnivalesque pageant of ship sails and figures camouflaged in elaborate attire:

The brightly coloured patterns of the sails in 'Gates of Return' indicate that we are witnessing the disembarkation of vessels that have returned to the African coastline, from Cuba, Haiti and other American destinations, freighted with the ancestor spirits of those taken away so many years before. They are remembered, in the lower left of the painting, by the line of slaves resignedly awaiting their fate on the far side of some Gate of No Return. Above them, moving towards the Gate of Return of the title, can be seen a long line of Egungun masqueraders, wearing the richly patterned costumes whose colours have been reflected in the sails of the returning armada.<sup>56</sup>

Africans who began their enforced journey as enslaved captives into a life of bondage are now being welcomed back 'home'. Rather than focusing on the brutality of slave trading and its legacy, *Gates of Return* represented the start of a particularly distinctive body of work<sup>57</sup> which circumvents the schematic

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56 <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gates-of-return-julien-sinzogan/> Written by the October Gallery [Accessed 3 August 2016]

57 This work would form the basis of a solo exhibition: *Spirit Worlds*, presented at October Gallery, London, 30 September-6 November 2010



History and the hapless slave are turned on their head. By introducing a spiritual dimension to the slave trade narrative, Sinzogan offers an alternative mode of commemoration, related to a recovery of identity and a form of metaphorical 'homecoming'.

Keith Piper's *Lost Vitrines* [Fig 5.] presented a series of fictitious artefacts, which had been 'lost' but were 'rediscovered' in the museum's collection and now displayed within two glass vitrines belonging to the V&A. Slavery, rather than slave trading, was one of the central themes around which Piper's *Lost Vitrines* was constructed. *Case I* focused on methods for maintaining slavery as an institution. *Case II* considered slave rebellion and resistance. The objects presented in these cases share the aesthetics of Georgian England. Ornately produced books and quasi-scientific research detail in a matter of fact way the various forms of violence that were an integral part of maintaining slavery as an economically profitable institution. 'A Gentleman's guide to the Restraint of Negroes' and 'Illustrated Guide to Ideal Plantation Dwellings' depict different methods of control. A double-page spread in another book shows a series of delicate drawings detailing, from various angles, the 'craft' of a whip handle. 'The Coloureds Codex: An Overseer's Guide to Comparative Complexion' is a kit determining the status and characteristics of certain skin tone. Three main groups, "Field Negroes", "House Negroes" and "Whites" are each subdivided into five gradations of colour together totalling fifteen pots of pigment. Characterised by pejorative sounding descriptions, for example, the category "Field Negroes" begins with a pot of reddish pigment and is described as "Negroes (modified)", then "Standard Field", "Seasoned Field", "Guinea (Part

Seasoned)” and ending with the darkest pigment, “Congo (unseasoned)”. In the lid is a small-framed picture within which are a series of studies depicting the physiognomy of a Black person. These act as a reference point to the mirror image engravings on both sides which show a white male, the ‘overseer’, keenly carrying out an examination of the eyes of a Black man, who stands passively with his arms by his side.

*The Coloureds’ Codex* is contained within a compact ornate wooden box, reminiscent of a container for storing jewellery or for housing a painter’s paint and brushes. Piper’s diminutive vitrines present a different function and point towards a more brutal use of a classificatory system in which humans, rather than objects, were the subjects.

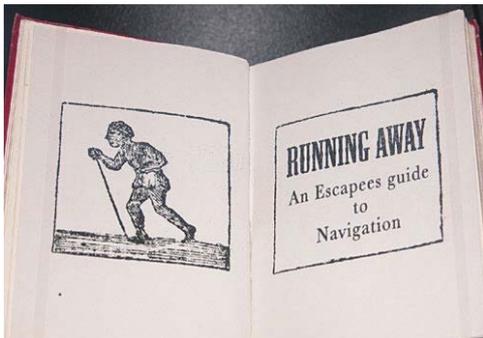


Fig 5. Keith Piper Lost Vitrines, 2007, V&A

Two books titled ‘Working Methodologies for Smashing and Burning’ and ‘Running Away: An Escapees guide to Navigation’ are contained within Case II. While these artefacts have the visual and textural appearance of authenticity, they are fabrications. Inflected with modern-day and slightly comical sounding solutions to past problems such as “Miss May’s Micro-Resistance Toolkit”, they intentionally evoke a world of slave resistance.



was noted that:

The enormous wealth on which Beckford's lifestyle depended came from the exploitation of enslaved Africans. His father was England's first sugar plantation millionaire and his mother was the widow Francis Marsh, another Jamaican planter.<sup>62</sup>

William Beckford was the son of Alderman William Beckford, a politician who accrued his vast wealth from his slavery plantations in Jamaica. Beckford's legacy in history and in art is intriguing because, while he was not himself a plantation owner, even the most avid of hagiographers do not deny the provenance of "a crude accumulation of hard-won wealth built up against a garish background of sun-bleached plantations, sweating slaves and cargoes of sugar".<sup>63</sup> It is within this context that the V&A opened up their displays to critique. Piper attempts to disrupt and subvert what he describes as "the genteel displays"<sup>64</sup> embedded within the aesthetics and linguistic styles of Georgian England. Attempts made by the V&A at revising its interpretation material were isolated and transient. Their default interpretation of collections held within its British Galleries typically bypassed wider social and political readings connecting the accumulation of wealth and the arts during the eighteenth century to British slavery. Such readings and interpretation are incorporated in the online collection records. Although Piper's *Lost Vitrines* attempted to challenge modes of interpretation and history, in its subtlety, it was visually and physically undisruptive within the gallery.

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62 Uncomfortable Truths: Traces of the Trade, Discovery Trails Exploring Links Between Art, Design and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, "Trail 3: Britain & The West Indies", 20 February-31 December 2007

63 Brian Fothergill, 1979, 14

64 Keith Piper, *Lost Vitrines*, [www.keithpiper.info/lostvitrines.html](http://www.keithpiper.info/lostvitrines.html)

Yinka Shonibare's sculpture, *Sir Foster Cunliffe, Playing* [Fig 6.], shows a headless figure dressed in eighteenth century costume styled in African textiles.<sup>65</sup> The figure is posed holding a bow and arrow at anchor point. The sculpture makes direct reference to the affluent and upwardly mobile Sir Foster Cunliffe (1755-1834) who, like William Beckford, was heir to a fortune amassed through his father's and grandfather's slave trading. Rather than focusing directly on their role in profiteering from slave trading, Shonibare's interpretation draws from its hidden aftermath. The Cunliffe family ceased 'trading' in 1759, but had accumulated enough wealth to enable Cunliffe to buy Acton Park in Wrexham in 1786-87. Pursuing a life of leisure and art collecting, Cunliffe founded the Royal Society of British Bowmen, active between 1787 and 1793.



Fig 6. Yinka Shonibare *Sir Foster Cunliffe, Playing*, 2007, V&A

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<sup>65</sup> Although described as 'African fabrics', their origins are more complicated and relate to Dutch colonial rule in what was called the Dutch East Indies (and is today Indonesia). The designs originate from Indonesian batik imitated without great commercial success by the Dutch for the Indonesian market. The material itself was originally mass-produced in the Netherlands using an Indonesian printing process copied by the Dutch and renamed "dutch-wax" printing. The fabrics became a popular mode of dress in West Africa, in large part because the Dutch would stop imports in West Africa on their way to Indonesia to sell their wares during the late nineteenth century.



and gilt woodwork”.<sup>69</sup> In the V&A’s *Discovery Trails for Uncomfortable Truths*, no link was made between Norfolk House and the slave trade. Cunliffe would have been one year old when the Music Room of Norfolk House was completed in 1756. Unlike William Beckford, the Cunliffes were not acknowledged in the V&A’s collection.

The Music Room was used for entertaining the nobility, and displayed the ostentatious wealth of eighteenth century England. Cunliffe was himself disposed to an extravagant and privileged lifestyle, expressed in his purchase of Acton Park. Shonibare uses the Music Room as a synecdoche of the wealth generated and enjoyed by the English gentry from slavery. Similarly to Piper, rather than presenting a literal historical narrative, Shonibare transposes Cunliffe into the Music Room environment.

Piper’s and Shonibare’s contributions were both forms of juxtaposition responding directly to particular aspects of the museum’s collection. Piper’s *Lost Vitrines* combined elements of fact with fiction, and appeared to be a *bona fide* and integral part of the gallery display, and because of this was a more subversive intervention. Shonibare’s work, *Sir Foster Cunliffe, Playing* sought to playfully highlight the links between wealth and tastes accumulated through slavery.

The commissioned works by Sinzogan and Hazoumè were concerned with ideas about the history and legacy of slavery but, unlike the works made by Piper and Shonibare, were not really related to any specific aspect of the V&A’s

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69 Cocks, *The Victoria and Albert Museum, The Making of the Collection*, Windward, London, 1980, 86

collection. They could have been presented in any museum. In this regard, they functioned more as physical interventions, where Piper's and Shonibare's respective works operated in relation to the museum and its collections. Other existing works selected for the exhibition functioned in much the same way, fluctuating between being physical or conceptual interventions.

### **Selected Works**

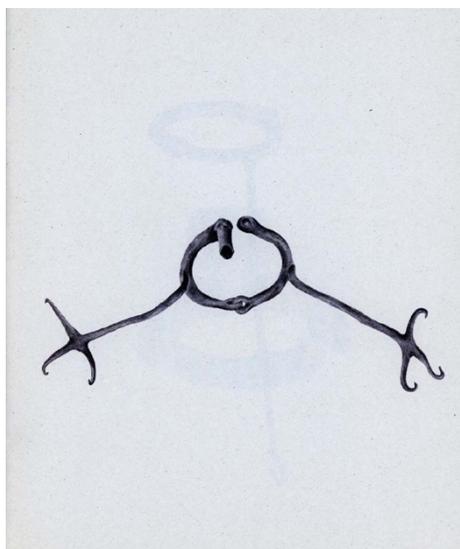


Fig 7. Christine Meisner Instrument 3, graphite drawing, 2006

The remaining seven participating artists contributed existing works, all but one of which was produced between 2002-2006. None were made with the intention of being shown within a decorative arts environment, least of all that belonging to the V&A. This itself highlights the extent to which the exhibition presented a juxtaposition of artistic styles and histories, rather than knowing interventions. The artists selected were El Anatsui from Ghana (although much of his professional career has been spent living and working in Nigeria), Christine Meisner from Germany, Michael Paul Britto and Fred Wilson from the USA,

Zimbabwean artist Tapfuma Gutsa, and British artists Anissa-Jane<sup>70</sup> and Lubaina Himid. Whilst many of their works varied formally and conceptually, one recurring presence was the Black body.

Christine Meisner's drawing series *Quilombolisation* [Fig 7.] depict torture and restraint devices, and provide a different dimension to slave trade legacies contained within the museum's ornate and seemingly benign collections such as the *Sugar Box*, *Coffee Pot* or *Snuff Grater* highlighted in *Traces of the Trade*. *Quilombolisation* are visually intriguing drawings, in part because their delicate rendering is devoid of the repulsion and horror these 'tools of the trade' might ordinarily evoke. In this respect Meisner's drawings introduce the other side of the slave trade in order "to dissolve the inaccessibility of closed events and declared histories."<sup>71</sup> Meisner speaks of slavery legacies not through the objects, wealth and consumption it produced but through the wretched objects of violence and control.



Fig 8. El Anatsui Akua's *Surviving Children*, 1996, V&A

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70 Anissa-Jane also exhibited in another bicentenary-related exhibition: *Abolition: The Thomas Clarkson Story*, Colchester and Ipswich Museum, 26 September 2007-30 June 2008.

71 'Interview with Christine Meisner, artist', <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interview-with-christine-meisner-artist/> [Retrieved 7 August 2017]



Fig 9. Lubaina Himid Naming the Money  
 [My Name is Maliepetsane They Call me Polly] 2004, V&A

El Anatsui's sculpture, *Akua's Surviving Children* 1996, [Fig 8.] provided one of most striking and aesthetically jarring interventions. Originally commissioned for the *Danish Slavery Project* in 1996,<sup>72</sup> this large floor-based sculpture comprises a group of figures made from a random assortment of driftwood and metal found on the Danish coastline. This material wreckage (wood and metal) is a metaphor for death and survival, the body and the slave ship. The work's materiality alludes to both the ship wreck and the traumatised African body. The title suggests both loss and survival. Equally, the name *Akua* (meaning a girl born on a Wednesday), bestows a sense of poignancy and identity, rather than anonymity, to those unknown and lost in the 'Middle Passage'. El Anatsui's sculpture was displayed at the top of an ornate marbled staircase, and intended as a stark contrast to a series of life-size, mosaic oil paintings of famous artists such as *Hans Holbein: design for a mosaic in the Museum (the 'Kensington*

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<sup>72</sup> The inclusion of El Anatsui's *Akua's Surviving Children* was notable not only for being much older than the other works but also because, at this time, Anatsui had achieved international acclaim for his large elaborate wall hangings made from discarded metal bottle tops, rather than *Akua's Surviving Children* which was more characteristic of his work from the 1990s.









Britto's *I'm A Slave 4 U* [Fig 10.] features five female and two male Black actors dressed in period costumes as slaves, performing choreographed dance routines to Britney Spears pop song *I'm A Slave 4 U*. Britto's video begins with a black and white still of three derelict houses set in a field. Following the roll of the credits, which include the words "Dirrrty Harriet Tubman", the scene moves to a studio set. On stage, the actors mime carrying out domestic duties, mopping and sweeping to the sounds of Spears' track, but are then compelled to down tools and join a slave revolt dance led by a female protagonist who, garlanded with a head-wrap, brandishes a handgun while menacingly stalking the stage. This insurgent leads the other dancers through a dance routine which, synchronized to the rhythm of Spears' song, transposes sexual innuendo with images of slaves fluctuating between being victims and insurgents.

On one level, Britto's video is a critique of semantics, using Spears' sexually loaded song, with its hook line *I'm a Slave 4 U*, as an audio accompaniment to a video which mimics Black defiance and the Underground Railroad. On another level, Britto's video carries deeper meaning and greater irony. Though Spears presents as a quintessential white American, this song was written for her by the Black producers and musicians, Chad Hugo and Pharrell Williams, known for their own rock, funk and hip hop inspired music. This provides another level of irony.

The intended farce and comedic aspect of Britto's video seeks to question the extent to which public consciousness is reliant on and mediated through popular culture. Britto says "I like to challenge the viewer and ask them to remember the past, and pay close attention to what we accept in our everyday



Sculpture Gallery. This arrangement enabled the work to have a distinct physical presence within exhibition spaces populated by the museum's permanent collection. Groupings were also designed to encourage the viewer to draw relationships between certain exhibition themes. For example, one cluster of works sited in Room 57<sup>87</sup> by Britto, Gutsa, Himid and Meisner considered the image and representation of the Black slave, both real and imagined. Situated nearby Yinka Shonibare's *Sir Foster Cunliffe, Playing*, was American artist Fred Wilson's *Regina Atra* ('Queen Black'), 2006 [Fig 11.]. Described in the exhibition's press release as "a sumptuous copy of the British Royal crown encrusted with black diamonds,"<sup>88</sup> Wilson's work mimics *The King George IV State Diadem*, created in 1820 for the coronation of George IV [Fig 12.]. Made from 1333 diamonds and 169 pearls, the crown was also used for the coronations of Victoria and Elizabeth II. Rendered in black and white, Wilson's crown of jewels evacuates the colour and splendour commonly associated with the royal crown and wealth accrued through the monarchy's sanctioning of slavery.

Wilson's practice, if not entire career was, more than any other of the participating artists, inextricably linked to intervention and institutional critique, and so it was inevitable he would bring that approach to *Uncomfortable Truths*. His contribution came in the form of an existing work, *Regina Atra 2006 [Dark Queen]*. Given the exhibition's aspiration of presenting artistic interventions, it was a surprising missed opportunity not to commission Wilson to bring his own

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87 Incorrectly numbered in the brochure as Room 51. This room does not exist. *Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*, V&A, 2007

88 V&A Press Release, *Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*, 20 February-17 June 2007

distinctive, insightful and humorous brand of artistic intervention to bear more substantially on the V&A.

If Whitley's brief introduction provided little in-depth contextualisation for the works in the exhibition, nor did the brief biographies on participating artists offer much more in the way of insightful interpretative material. The exhibition's subtitle, 'The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design', gave some explanation but no indication of the relationships between contemporary art and the permanent collection. Contemporary art functioned independently of the historical collections. Reviewing *Regina Atra*, Alice Correia appeared to read the work without reference to the context within which it was exhibited. She noted in general terms, however, that it "critiqued sociopolitical hierarchies founded upon exploitation, explicitly proposing that the wealth of the British Empire was achieved at the expense of millions of black people who were forced into slavery."<sup>89</sup>

The absence of a more expansive critical narrative about the selection of contemporary art works was reinforced by the inclusion of text pieces by artist Pélagie Gbaguidi, poet Benjamin Zephaniah and journalist, Gary Younge. While these contributors each sought to provide a context for understanding the legacy of slavery, their texts made no direct reference to the exhibition's theme, or the relationships between the historical collections and contemporary art works, or the relationships between the various works of contemporary art.

The bulk of work in *Uncomfortable Truths* was displayed across three of the

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89 Alice Correia Third Text, 25:5,2011639-644, DOI: 10.1080/09528822.2011.608956 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2011.608956> [Accessed 15 October 2017]



In *Uncomfortable Truths*, intervention primarily functioned physically, as the exhibition was not presented in a demarcated gallery space, but with art works interspersed amongst permanent displays. If this was less typical of the V&A's approach towards staging contemporary art exhibitions, the decision to focus almost exclusively on the work of contemporary Black practitioners raised a more fundamental problem. *Uncomfortable Truths* was a rare occasion for seeing contemporary art produced by Black practitioners from Britain, Africa and America in such numbers at the V&A. Superficially this may have itself been seen as a form of tacit intervention. However, one of the arguments in this chapter (and the thesis more generally) is that such interventions, if this is indeed what they were, valorised practice which, save for flagship 'diversity' initiatives, sees work by Black artists routinely excluded from museums and galleries in Britain. Consequently, rather than intervention, the unexamined prominence of Black artists functioned to normalise certain institutional practices and pathologies. Not providing a reasoned and thoughtful argument for the exhibition's adoption of a historically problematic framing of Black artists appeared at odds with its aspirations towards intervention and institutional critique. This implicit, untheorised selection policy was evident in both the curation and some critical reviews of the exhibition. One critic erroneously described the show as featuring only Black artists.<sup>95</sup> Another commentator considered the selection unfairly biased towards African and African American artists:

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95 Coomer, 'Artistic Freedom' 2007, 30-31. Coomer erroneously described the exhibition as involving "11 black artists from around the world."

Ironically, most of the work is by African or American artists – once again avoiding the specific issue of what the slave trade signified in terms of the formation of British and European society.<sup>96</sup>

In fact, the artists included two African Americans, four Africans, four British and one German. Although misleading and fixated on quantities and quotas, this criticism inadvertently points towards an underlying paradox of representation which permeated *Uncomfortable Truths*. By recalling the license afforded to Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* project, and the reductive Black British survey exhibition, we see how *Uncomfortable Truths* functioned not as an intervention but as a spectacle and an illusion of inclusion.

### **Part III**

#### **Human Cargo: Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery**

*Human Cargo* was the antithesis of *Uncomfortable Truths*, involving fewer artists but a more multi-racial line up of practitioners. Rami Gbadamosi was the only Black artist to be involved. Furthermore, presented primarily within dedicated gallery spaces and beyond, these approaches offered both a literal and conceptual form of intervention in terms of 'interactive' works, the remapping of gallery spaces, and the involvement of the public, be they unsuspecting shoppers or visitors to the museum.

*Human Cargo: The Transatlantic Slave Trade, its Abolition and Contemporary Legacies in Plymouth and Devon* had two interconnected components. The first was a selection of historical artworks and artefacts drawn from regional and

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96 Mike Phillips, quoted in 'Slavery: Into the art of darkness', Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *the Independent Online*, Friday 9th February 2007

national museums and displayed in the museum. The second was a series of newly commissioned works produced by six contemporary artists based in England. The exhibition guide described these works as “art interventions”, which took “place throughout the Museum and beyond, including an artist’s trail...and participatory projects.”<sup>97</sup> In *Uncomfortable Truths*, contemporary art was presented in various spaces amongst museum collections which remained undisturbed. *Human Cargo* presented a more fluid relationship between historical collections and contemporary art, between display and intervention. Decisions on layout were applicable to both contemporary art works and historical collections. Artist intervention, as a curatorial rationale, appeared less crude in *Human Cargo* than it did in *Uncomfortable Truths*. There were two contributory factors for this. First, the participating artists were each commissioned to make new work, rather than exhibit existing work, unlike the majority of works in *Uncomfortable Truths*. Secondly, in *Uncomfortable Truths*, collections remained intact within their permanent displays, highlighted primarily through a separate ‘museum trail’. Most works utilised in *Human Cargo* became an integral part of the exhibition. Its use of historical collections was more thematically honed and attuned to the possibility of an interventionist approach. In the exhibition guide, the historical aspect of the exhibition took precedence, with a series of images and accompanying texts taking up the first half.<sup>98</sup> The inclusion of historical collections in *Human Cargo* was, nevertheless, key to the overall project. Their inclusion was critical in attracting various levels of

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97 Human Cargo, ‘Introduction’. Exhibition Guide, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, 2007

98 In the related follow-up publication *Cargo*, produced four years later, the historical aspect of the exhibition would play a more subordinate role to the contemporary art, although documentation of its installation provided an insight into how it was displayed.

institutional support, derived from various strata of central government and arts funding. Typically, local authority run spaces were more inclined to present solo exhibitions, such as Keith Piper's *Abolitionists' Parlour*, Romuald Hazoumè's *La Bouche Du Roi* and Anissa-Jane's *Abolition: The Thomas Clarkson Story* at Colchester + Ipswich Museums.<sup>99</sup> However, these shows were supplemented by separate historical exhibitions. One exception was artist Graham Fagen's exhibition, *Downpresserer* at Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow.<sup>100</sup> *Human Cargo* was made possible by a series of political and cultural forces, which would prove critical in enabling the relatively quick realisation of exhibitions for the bicentenary.<sup>101</sup> These factors are not incidental. They are in many respects exhibition-shaping and evoke the spectre of what Hal Foster referred to as the artist as ethnographer, whereby the institutionalisation of 'critique' is generated and managed by institutional authority. This provides the context as well as the parameters for artistic intervention.

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99 Anissa-Jane was commissioned to make a work for *Abolition: The Thomas Clarkson Story*, 26 September 2007 – 30 June 2008, Colchester + Ipswich Museums. These two municipal museums are described as 'Colchester + Ipswich Museum'. Located in two different towns, thirty miles apart with similar size populations. The former is in the county of Essex, the latter is in the county of Suffolk.

100 'Downpresserer', Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow 14 March 2007-28 May 2007. The research theme developed further with a British Council funded trip to Jamaica in December 2006, to develop new work to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. The exhibition comprised a new performance of the Burns song, *The Slaves Lament*, by a group of Jamaican singers.

101 In the *Exhibition Guide*, it was noted that the exhibition was made possible from Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) Designation Challenge Fund and the Renaissance in the Regions Programme. The historical part of the exhibition was also supported by the National Portrait Gallery via the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).



what the curators described as the legacies of the British slave trade in Plymouth and Devon. The groups *Trade in Humans Across the Atlantic and Slave Trading Links with Plymouth and Devon* included sixteenth century portraits of Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins, who were cousins born in Tavistock, Devon and Plymouth respectively.<sup>107</sup> As Elizabethan naval commanders, both were also slave traders. Most notably, Drake was heralded for being the first Englishman to sail around the globe. Hawkins was the first English slave trader to profiteer on the misfortunes of those he forcibly took and sold into slavery.

Another characteristic of the historical selection was the inclusion of particular artefacts, which were used to reveal the impact slavery had on certain aspects of British society. Under the heading, 'Slavery and the British Way of Life', teaspoons, teacups and saucers, coffee pots, rummers, and chocolate cups were evidence of how the production of sugar on slave plantations in the West Indies impacted on British society and daily life. 'Striving Towards Abolition' centred on portraits painted between the 1760s and 1830s, of individuals who played important roles in various aspects of the anti-slave trade campaign, abolition and resistance.<sup>108</sup> Other thematic groups were '1807 and after, in Britain and the Americas', 'Patrolling the Seas', 'Legacies of the Trade in Africa' and 'Legacies of the Trade Today'. Given this range of subject matter and the nature of historical artefacts selected, this part of the exhibition was more

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107 For example, *Portrait of Admiral Sir John Hawkins, (1532-1595)* by Hieronymous Custodis, Oil on panel, 1591

108 These works were oil paintings, prints and watercolours and included portraits of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, Lord Mansfield (William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield), and Hannah More.





















nineteenth century Abolitionists, and between fair trade goods and the plantation crops traded through the Transatlantic Slave Trade.”<sup>131</sup> Central to *Free or Fair?* was a level public of interaction which took the form of a competition offering real prizes. However, Meadley’s competition demanded more of individuals than simply ticking a box, or answering a series of multiple-choice questions. Entrants had to study a “treasure map” and link abolitionist campaigners to interviews, write short interpretations of the treasure map and to nominate a product which they considered merited being sold as a ‘fair trade’ commodity.

Taking her project to local shopping centres in Plymouth, Meadley had thousands of leaflets distributed and invited members of the public to enter the competition. Importantly, the project sought to provide the public with information, which would make it possible to draw connections between slave trade and goods, commerce and consumerism. Whilst mimicking aspects of a consumer orientated competition, it was also its antithesis. Although the competition delivered first, second and third place winners, we were never told how many people actually entered the competition. In a subsequent interview between artist and curator, the level of public interaction was expressed in terms of how the project demanded more from an unsuspecting public than merely box ticking. This would, according to Meadley be an integral, if not defining part the project:

Zoë Shearman: The competition leaflet re-presented complex information about global trade. Do you think

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131 *CARGO*, 59-60



Where Meadley's project sought to physically and literally address the 'wider social realm' by way of a competition reliant on appealing to unsuspecting shoppers, Raimi Gbadamosi's two commissioned works *Theactre* [Fig 18.] and *Drake Circus*, [Fig 19.] were more explicitly interventionist in re-imagining and re-presenting the museum whilst simultaneously addressing the legacy of the slave trade and its abolition. *Theactre* comprised two separate videos in which the artist is filmed reading the 1807 Parliamentary Act of Abolition of the Slave Trade: "to animate the Act, contextualise the exhibition, and pull the mind back and forth between 1807 and 2007."<sup>133</sup> The two videos were presented in PCMAG's foyer and North Gallery. In reference to *Theactre*, the exhibition guide also noted: "As far as we are aware, no other Abolition 200 exhibition focuses on the wording of the Act of Abolition itself."<sup>134</sup>

*Drake Circus* was a limited edition printed brochure in which Gbadamosi re-designed the museum's floor plan. Presented on one level, each room was assigned both numbers and new names. Each was assigned a colloquial sounding name; the museum shop became the "booty store", the *Explore Nature Gallery* became "Keeping it Real" and so on. The museum rooms to which Gbadamosi's map refers were left untouched but the imposition of a different form of interpretative language provides the visitor with a transformative (rather than merely informative) experience. Gbadamosi's presence brought a certain, if unspoken, level of credibility to the project, not

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133 *Exhibition Guide*, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, 2007, unpaginated  
134 Ibid.





the enslaved to slave traders. Bradley's use of the daffodil was also intended to resonate contemporaneously because of the flower's cultivation in the South west, where it is "often grown on an industrialised scale involving Eastern European migrant works. Many of these workers endure very poor working conditions and pay."<sup>141</sup>

Bradley reflected on how she intended her wallpaper to be hung in a room displaying collections which "had some connection to the slave trade" and many of which had up until 2007 been kept in "deep storage".<sup>142</sup> The design of the wallpaper was inspired by several different cultural sources including English 'damask patterns'.<sup>143</sup> The daffodil image was itself appropriated from a botanical drawing by Dutch naturalist Anna Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), who, during her travels in Suriname, was said to have voiced concerns about treatment of Amerindian and Black slaves, and from the design of an umbrella from Northern Nigeria.<sup>144</sup> Bradley's contribution to the exhibition, such was the considered nature of her approach in making a thoughtful and thought-provoking work:

It was my intention that the wallpaper would hang in the room where the collections would be shown, contrasting the assumed neutrality of the usually white walls and suggesting the self-reflection many cultural institutions seemed to be going through that year.<sup>145</sup>

Bradley aligns the intentions of her work with those of the institution. However,

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141 Ibid. Op cit

142 Jyll Bradley, 'Lent Lily (for Rev. Dr. Rosemarie Mallet)', *CARGO: Excavating the Contemporary Legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Plymouth and Devon*, eds by Len Pole & Zoë Sherman, University of Plymouth Press, 2011, 26 X.

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid., 27

145 Ibid.

her passing reference to how 2007 had induced “the self-reflection” of “many cultural institutions”, portrays the institution in benign terms. On one level, it seems overly simplistic. On another level, it appears at odds with the scrutiny she applied to her work. By no means the only artist to eschew criticism of the motives of institutions involved, Bradley’s passing comments are indicative of the ways in which the bicentenary context often produced blinkered critical commentary.

In his review of *Human Cargo*, Colin Glenn offered a decidedly favourable assessment of the exhibition. The issues of institutional opportunism and expedience were not acknowledged as significant or critical to appreciating the exhibition. Instead, Glenn considered *Human Cargo* to be the kind of exhibition which “resuscitates the idea that art can make a difference”.<sup>146</sup> For Glenn, the exhibition’s success lay with how the commissioned works considered both historic and contemporary forms of slavery. In a relatively brief and largely descriptive review, Glen provides succinct descriptions of each artist’s contribution to the exhibition. He considers the merits and relevance of these artistic contributions to wider political discourses, noting how the exhibition “addresses the inescapable issue that perhaps before a system of fair exchange can be established, the West needs first to relinquish its domination of cultural capital.”<sup>147</sup>

In terms of the work presented, *Human Cargo* did attempt to use intervention as a means by which to explore the relationships between history, slavery and contemporary society. Critical analysis of the bicentenary context was

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146 Colin Glen, 2007, 36

147 Ibid., 37



essays, documentation of the exhibition, and artists' testimonies and reflections, the dropping of the word 'Human' at the very least warranted some greater level of explanation. Such an 'edit' otherwise appears, if unintentionally, as a brutal act of excision, re-affirming the slavers belief that that enslaved were merely 'cargo'.

## Summary

This chapter has examined two major group exhibitions organised as part of the bicentenary. It used Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* as a historical context for artist intervention and institutional critique. Both the V&A and Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery framed contemporary art as a form of intervention.

This implied that these exhibitions offered a level of institutional critique. Despite the imaginary excavations of discovery presented in Keith Piper's *Lost Vitrines*, or the evocations of exploitation in Jyll Bradley's *Lent Lily*, the problems of these exhibitions go beyond merely the merits or failings of individual artworks.

However, these exhibitions were not initiated by the participating artists. Nor was their emergence entirely the brainchild of the V&A and Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery. Both artists and institutions were called upon to produce and perform *interventions*. In this respect, notions of intervention and (institutional) critique were not only *accommodated* but staged-managed. It seems ironic that in the politically charged context of the bicentenary, institutional critique, be it of museum histories or museum practice should bypass wider politics and government agendas, which were, after all, the catalyst for these exhibitions. This brings another meaning to the respective exhibition concepts of "shadows" and "legacies". These terms also denote the

spectres of certain institutional and curatorial pathologies. Far from being remotely disruptive, these exhibitions were, in eschewing these difficult and vexing issues, rather tranquil affairs. Although *Mining the Museum* has continued to be cited by art historians and curators as a seminal and important exhibition, its lasting impact on the Maryland Historical Society, as previously noted is far less apparent.

This provides a sobering context for reading what were by comparison less ambitious exhibitions mounted by the V&A and Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery. It is only possible to imagine the impact of more ambitious projects. What if the V&A's exhibition had instead focused on film-based interventions alone, spanning different genres such as, documentary, biographical, the interview and historical? Such a focused use of the contemporary artist and spectacle would have been more amenable to various and more enduring forms of dissemination and reproduction. Furthermore, it could have applied its own logic to the project:

Supporting contemporary artists, designers and makers has always been at the heart of the V&A's mission. Our Residency Programme enables creative practitioners to gain unique access to the Museum's collections, archives and curatorial expertise, providing them with a studio on-site, a bursary and a production budget to experiment, create a new body of work and engage with the public.<sup>151</sup>

The absence of such opportunity, of a more genuinely 'integrated' approach to programming, stands in sharp contrast to what was essentially a Black artist survey exhibition. This illustrates a clear disparity between the institution's

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<sup>151</sup> <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/museum-residency-programme> [Accessed 11 October 2017]

routine programming practices and those applied to the bicentenary exhibition. *Human Cargo* was the antithesis, in opting for a multi-racial group of artists. Although not articulated in exhibition publicity material, it suggested a tacit acknowledgment of how legacies of the slave trade could be interpreted by a wide range of practitioners and not delineated along racial lines. Historical collections, the museum, and the wider public arena were brought into dialogue with contemporary artworks to excavate and reflect on hitherto unseen narratives about contemporary legacies of the slave trade. As argued within this chapter and the wider study, the unprecedented government-led bicentenary, inclusion, and opportunism were as pertinent to the notion of critique but were essentially ignored.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Terms and Conditions: Black Artists, Contemporary Art and the Use of Museum Collections in the Bicentenary**

## Introduction

This chapter considers how Black artists' work drawn from publicly held collections of contemporary art was used in the exhibitions, *Crossing the Waters*, organized by Cartwright Hall, Bradford and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, presented by Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.<sup>1</sup>

Where the former focused solely on contemporary art, the latter incorporated contemporary art as part of a wider collection-based exhibition about history, museums slavery and the slave trade. Focusing on the work of Black practitioners was not inherently problematic. Equally, publicly-funded galleries in Britain had had a checkered history in presenting the work of Black artists *en masse* and without regard for their formal and conceptual differences.

During the 1980s, myopic institutional attitudes increasingly governed the ways in which a wider body of Black artists was routinely presented in group exhibitions. Whilst themes were formulated and enthusiastically presented as a means of legitimating particular exhibitions, the underlying principles governing these shows was that an occasional exhibition involving Black practitioners functioned as a form of placation. In a study on cultural diversity and the visual arts sector, I previously noted that:

Although the 1980s signaled an unprecedented level of visibility for Black artists within the mainstream, it also pointed towards the tendency for such visibility

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<sup>1</sup> *Crossing the Waters*, Cartwright Hall, Bradford, 1 September - 2 December 2007, [toured to City Gallery, Leicester 19 January - 1 March 2008], Sonia Boyce, Ugo Egonu, Tam Joseph, Isaac Julien, Glenn Ligon, Hew Locke, Chris Ofili, Ingrid Pollard, Keith Piper, Yinka Shonibare, Carrie Mae Weems, Aubrey Williams; *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, The Whitworth Art Gallery, 16 June 2007 - 27 April 2008. Artists: Godfried Donkor, Althea McNish, Tony Philips Selectors: SuAndi, Kevin Dalton-Johnson, Emma Poulter, Alan Rice.

to be constructed around a largely segregated agenda. The Black survey show became the common route by which many of the major publicly funded galleries would interact with the majority of Black artists.<sup>2</sup>

As argued previously, the exhibition *Krishna, The Divine Lover* was typical of the raced exhibition, in which skin colour was above all else the primary rationale for grouping often incongruous artistic concerns. However, for the majority of Black artists, the die had been cast over a decade earlier by the Whitechapel Art Gallery's exhibition *From Two Worlds*.<sup>3</sup> This exhibition was not the only survey exhibition to take place during the 1980s. However, staged at one of Britain's most prestigious public art galleries, *From Two Worlds* offered what would become a de facto curatorial template for exhibiting Black artists on *en masse*. The exhibition included sixteen artists/groups which was a modest number compared to other Black survey shows.<sup>4</sup> Director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Nicholas Serota and artist Gavin Jantjes, two of the exhibitions main organisers<sup>5</sup> explained their rationale for the show:

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2 Richard Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector. A study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976-2006*, University of Bath, 91

3 *From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Art Gallery 30 July – 7 September 1986 Rasheed Araeen, Saleem Arif, Franklyn Beckford, Zadok Ben-David, Zarina Bhimji, The Black Audio Film Collective, Sonia Boyce, Sokari Douglas Camp, Denzil Forrester, Lubaina Himid, Gavin Jantjes, Tam Joseph, Houria Niati, Keith Piper, Veronica Ryan, Shafique Uddin.

4 *Into the Open: New Paintings Prints and Sculpture by Contemporary Black Artists*. Clement Bedeau, Sylbert Bolton, Sonia Boyce, Pogus Caesar, Eddie A. Chambers, Shakka Dedi, Uzo Egonu, Lubaina Himid, Gavin Jantjes, Claudette Johnson, Tom (now Tam) Joseph, Juginder Lamba, Bill Ming, Tony Moo-Young, Ossie Murray, Houria Niati, Benjamin Nhlanhla Nsusha, Pitika P. Ntuli, Keith Piper, Richie Riley, Veronica Ryan, Jorge Santos. Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, 4 August – 9 September 1984. Toured to Castle Museum, Nottingham, 16 September – 21 October 1984 and Newcastle Media Workshops, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2 – 30 November 1984.

5 The exhibition involved the following selectors: artists Sonia Boyce, Veronica Ryan and Gavin Jantjes (all included in the show) and gallery staff, Jenni Lomax, Rachel Kirby and Nicholas Serota.

...so many of the younger artists emerging from Britain’s art schools come from backgrounds which contain strands from across the Commonwealth, South America and the Far East. *From Two Worlds* is an exhibition which seeks to show a wide diversity of work by artists who draw on their background to produce art which is a fusion of European and non-European visions.”<sup>6</sup>

Eddie Chambers observed that the show was an attempt at a “positive departure from previous Black artists exhibitions” such as *Into the Open*, by privileging “synthesis” rather than “difference”, and expressing the view that these artists “embodied a sort of cultural hybridity”.<sup>7</sup> Despite participating in *From Two Worlds*, Keith Piper offered a critical assessment on the exhibition including that it was “an insensitive lumping together of a hotch-potch of art objects apparently linked only by the ‘non-European-ness’ of their makers”.<sup>8</sup> However, as Chambers observed:

*From Two Worlds* was in its own way no less problematical than exhibitions such as *Into the Open*...subsequent curatorial strategies of the Whitechapel Art Gallery itself point ultimately to a replication of long-standing difficulties in mainstream attitudes to the framing of Black artists’ work.<sup>9</sup>

This modus operandi would be embodied by the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s programme of exhibitions involving Black artists over a period of two decades which overwhelmingly focused on the survey exhibition model.<sup>10</sup> The majority of

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6 *ibid.*

7 Eddie Chambers, Chapter 9 ‘The Making of *From Two Worlds*’, Phd, Goldsmiths College, 1998, 248

8 Keith Piper, “Forward”, *the image employed, the use of narrative in Black art*, Cornerhouse, Manchester, 1987, unpaginated

9 Eddie Chambers, ‘The only thing to look forward to ... is the past’, *Things Done Change*, 2012, 26

10 These exhibitions included: *Seven Stories: About Modern Art in Africa* 1995 *Krishna, the Divine Lover* 1997, *000zerozerozero*, 1999, and *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary* 2005.

Black practitioners would, in lieu of more substantial and empowering opportunities, be stifled by this form of engagement. Adopted by a panoply of publicly funded galleries, the 'Black exhibition' would become something of a fixture in the visual arts sector. This historical perspective provides a broader context for the exhibitions *Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*.

The bicentenary exhibitions staged by Cartwright Hall and the Whitworth were largely based on collections, therefore they bypassed the need for any interaction between artist and institution. Nevertheless, both entered a minefield of problems. Despite being seemingly committed to the bicentenary theme, closer analysis reveals some problems raised by the approaches adopted in these two exhibitions. This chapter argues that their different use of contemporary art was rooted in problematic curatorial and institutional mindsets of both the past and the present.

Despite taking place in 2007, the approach adopted in *Crossing the Waters* was illustrative of certain institutional practices and mindsets dating back to the 1980s. *Crossing the Waters* replicated racialized curatorial pathologies of the past, namely the 'Black survey' exhibition model, in which an artist's ethnicity, rather than practice, was the abiding rationale for their inclusion. In contrast, presenting the work of contemporary Black artists alongside the hitherto unseen legacy of slavery in the collections of Greater Manchester's museums, *Trade and Empire* embodied the sort of inclusive institutional initiatives which, beyond the bicentenary, had become more common place amongst museums and galleries under the influence of New Labour.

Even within the problematic and overly politicized bicentenary context, a public exhibition on the relationship between Black artistic practice and slavery could have been an illuminating and credible, and an original approach.<sup>11</sup>

In primarily relying on their own sporadically assembled collections of contemporary art, the curators of *Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire* were limited in scope.

The institutional acquisition of works by contemporary Black practitioners had been sporadic for the majority of the post-war period. Amongst the many examples of British art collected by museums in Britain, the work of Black practitioners was relatively conspicuous by its absence. During the early 2000s, practices of diversity and inclusivity were more widely adopted by major arts institutions, leading to an acceleration in acquisitions of a wider range of work by Black artists, including by the V&A and Tate Britain.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst Cartwright Hall and the Whitworth responded to the opportunity to stage

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11 The multi-site project *Trophies of Empire* (1992) was the closest any institution in the UK came to presenting a group exhibition which specifically sought to explore the legacies of slavery and empire in contemporary art. Led by the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool and artist Keith Piper, *Trophies of Empire* was devised in part as a critical response to Columbus' quincentenary and the creation of the European Union, both of which took place in 1992. While Black practitioners were predominant in this project, *Trophies of Empire* was also notable for presenting works by Black and white practitioners side by side. *Trophies of Empire* was not without its detractors in terms of its curatorial approach and fixation with '1992'. Its purpose and politics were articulated in terms which were critical of empire and imperialism, but also contemporary government. *Crossing the Waters* was in many ways the antithesis of *Trophies of Empire*. Relying primarily on collections and focusing on the work of Black practitioners, it did not attempt critical opposition to the political climate in which it was produced.

12 During the early 2000s, the Victoria and Albert Museum increased its acquisitions of prints by Black practitioners. See *In Black and White: Prints from Africa and the Diaspora*, Gill Saunders and Zoe Whitley, V&A Publishing, 2013. In 2004, Tate purchased works by the late Donald Rodney for the first time, in the form of artist's archival material including 48 sketch books. In 2007, the Donald Rodney Estate presented Tate with Rodney's painting, *How the West was Won*, 1982.

bicentenary-related exhibitions, neither were equipped to explore the particular historical relationship and significance of contemporary art and slavery in real depth. Instead, both exhibitions were largely decontextualized glimpses and fragments of history and art history.

*Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, presented contemporary art in different ways to the other contemporary art exhibitions organised as part of the bicentenary. Rather than selecting practicing artists by invitation or embarking on a commissioning process, an approach favoured by several other galleries, Cartwright Hall and the Whitworth formulated group exhibitions based principally on their own collections. Therefore, unlike other bicentenary exhibitions involving contemporary art, artists were mostly not invited to participate. However, despite this principle, both institutions deemed it necessary to supplement their selection of contemporary art with works purchased either at the time or following the bicentenary. Two thirds of the work included in *Crossing the Waters*, was acquired for the actual exhibition. One of the three contemporary artists included in *Trade and Empire*, Godfried Donkor, was not represented in the Whitworth's collection. Instead Donkor was invited to participate in the exhibition. The focus on collections also brought insight into Cartwright Hall and the Whitworth's contemporary art holdings as well as their capacity to deliver thematic exhibitions built up from existing collections of contemporary art.

*Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire* adopted contrasting approaches to the same effect in terms of how they were organised. The former was curated by a one-time employee of Cartwright Hall. The latter was led by the

Whitworth's curatorial and educational team, and involved four external but regionally based selectors, comprising an artist, poet, research student and an academic. However, what these exhibitions had in common was the decision to show contemporary art produced by Black practitioners. Thirteen artists were selected for Cartwright Hall's exhibition and three for the Whitworth's exhibition. The exclusive role assigned to Black artists was in keeping with how galleries involved in the bicentenary had assigned a prominent role to Black practitioners as part of the spectacle of commemoration and remembrance. However, in terms of group exhibitions organised as part of the bicentenary, not even the V&A *Uncomfortable Truths* presented an all-Black line up of artists. Although *Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery* had notable differences in their thematic approaches, their exclusive use of contemporary art by Black artists, resonates politically and culturally, both within and beyond the bicentenary context.

The bicentenary was unequivocally the catalyst for *Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*. *Crossing the Waters* focused exclusively on the work of contemporary artists who shared a "cataclysmic commonality".<sup>13</sup> *Trade and Empire* combined contemporary art and historical collections to "tell a wider range of meaningful stories of the Atlantic slave trade."<sup>14</sup>

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13 Nima Poovaya-Smith, 'Introduction', 2007, 5

14 David Morris and Andrew Vaughan, 2011, 4

## Part I

### Crossing the Waters

*Crossing the Waters* was curated for Cartwright Hall by Alchemy, an independent arts organization established by its founding director Nima Poovaya-Smith in 2004.<sup>15</sup> In her catalogue introduction, Poovaya-Smith set out the rationale for the exhibition. In doing so, she made clear that the bicentenary was a legitimate and appropriate vehicle for considering the legacy of the slave trade. Whilst some high-profile participants in the bicentenary had expressed ambiguity, if not scepticism, towards the initiative,<sup>16</sup> Poovaya-Smith provided an unequivocally ringing endorsement of the event:

*Crossing the Waters* takes its central metaphor from the transatlantic slave trade, appropriately in the bicentenary year of the parliamentary abolition of the trade in the British Empire.<sup>17</sup>

The sentiment was hardly surprising, and in keeping with what appeared to be the largely supportive approach of public institutions and individuals actively involved in the initiative. Perhaps more surprising were the reasons why Poovaya-Smith chose the range of work selected for *Crossing the Waters*, as

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<sup>15</sup> On its website, Alchemy was described as “exist[ing] to connect people – across cultures, nations and generations – through the arts. We aim to challenge perception, opening doors to new ideas and ways of thinking through shared cultural experiences.” The exhibition was part of Freedom and Culture, a bicentenary-related initiative led by curator, Nima Poovaya-Smith and cross-bench peer Professor Lola Young. Touted as “a dynamic year-long, nationwide programme that marks the bicentenary of the Parliamentary Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire”, *Freedom and Culture* was responsible for only a handful of events. Aside from the exhibition *Crossing the Waters* and its accompanying catalogue, the most noteworthy and visible document to be produced by *Freedom and Culture* was the bicentenary issue of the biannual journal *Moving Worlds*.

<sup>16</sup> Zoe Whitley, curator of *Uncomfortable Truths*, and artist Raimi Gbadamosi, contributor to *Human Cargo*, both expressed doubts about the bicentenary initiative.

<sup>17</sup> Poovaya-Smith, 5

she continued her introduction by singling out Yinka Shonibare's, *The Wanderer*, "newly acquired" for both the collection and this specific exhibition, as providing "one of the unsettling centre-points of this exhibition."<sup>18</sup>

Whilst it was not the only contemporary art group exhibition to be organised to coincide with the bicentenary, *Crossing the Waters* was a significant contribution to the bicentenary for a number of reasons.<sup>19</sup> It was the only group show featuring contemporary art to be based exclusively on an art collection. This majority of works exhibited were acquired as a result of the bicentenary. In this regard, *Crossing the Waters* was not dissimilar to the British Museum's approach which centred on purchasing and then exhibiting Romuald Hazoumè's installation *La Bouche Du Roi* as part of its contribution to the bicentenary. Poovaya-Smith explained that none of this work had "been made specifically for 2007 although the bicentenary has acted as an impetus for a number of purchases."<sup>20</sup> They had also all been purchased within a year of their production.

Poovaya-Smith explained that none of this work had "been made specifically for 2007 although the bicentenary has acted as an impetus for a number of purchases."<sup>21</sup> They had also all been purchased within a year of their production.

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18 Ibid.

19 *Bound*, Open Eye Gallery, National Museums Liverpool, FACT, Tate Liverpool, 10 August-20 October 2007 and *Port City: On mobility and Exchange*, Arnolfini, Bristol, 15 September-11 November 2007 (and touring).

20 Poovaya-Smith, 'Introduction', 2007, 5

21 Poovaya-Smith, 'Introduction', 2007, 5



Fig 1. Ingrid Pollard  
Landscape Trauma, 2006

Ingrid Pollard's [Fig 1.] and Yinka Shonibare's works were produced in 2006 and 2006-07 respectively. All the other works included in *Crossing the Waters* were made by six artists and all came from one source, the *Rivington Place Portfolio*, an initiative devised by the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva)<sup>22</sup> and Autograph (Association of Black Photographers) as part of their fundraising towards their new purpose-built arts venue for so-called culturally diverse artists. Whilst such acquisitions appeared to be a positive move by the institution, their inclusion in this bicentenary exhibition was altogether more problematic.

The underlying politics and problems of this approach were epitomised by drawing solely on the *Rivington Place Portfolio* for *Crossing the Waters*. In effect, *Crossing the Waters* was not simply an endorsement of the bicentenary it also became, by proxy, a promoter of wider and not altogether unproblematic

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<sup>22</sup> The Institute of International Visual Arts acronym INIVA has changed several times during the course of the organisation's existence. It has changed from INIVA to inIVA, following the then Director's decision to drop the word 'new' from the organisation's original name.

activities surrounding cultural diversity.

To more fully understand its impact and significance, it is necessary to analyse a number of the exhibition's key components. These can be separated into four categories: the exhibition's theme, the art works, the artists' background and the institutional context. This analysis of separate but interconnected issues will highlight the problematic ways in which the work of Black artists was framed in these exhibitions.

### **“Cataclysmic commonality” and “Normal custom”**

As has been illustrated elsewhere in this study, the legacies and impact of slavery had, prior to the bicentenary, been explored in a wide range of works and public exhibitions involving a number of Black visual artists in Britain dating back to the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> The ongoing role slavery played in the work of a number of Black practitioners, and the conditions under which it was generated, whilst by no means without its problems, was not determined or shaped by government or official commemoration. Rather, the catalyst for such activity typically centred on artists' own interests coupled with recognition rightfully bestowed on them by a range of galleries and arts organisations. Such art also set a precedent, in art historical terms, for how slavery figured in recent British art and provides compelling evidence of why an exhibition bringing the legacy of slavery to greater public attention could have been, even within the problematic

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23 Donald Rodney, site specific work *Visceral Canker*, Keith Piper's solo exhibition, *A Ship Called Jesus*, and Godfried Donkor's exhibition *Slave to Champ* are examples of work exhibition during 1990s.

bicentenary context, possible, credible and unique.<sup>24</sup>

In *Crossing the Waters*, the grouping of Black practitioners' work was not predicated on formal and conceptual commonalities or differences. Despite the definitive exhibition context, the actual works in *Crossing the Waters* had relatively little to do with exploring the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade. Yinka Shonibare's *The Wanderer* was the exception to the rule. A number of other individual works in the exhibition were more closely aligned to legacies of colonialism and European imperial power. Keith Piper's *Four Frontiers*, Tam Joseph's *Native Woman with Fetish* and Carrie Mae Weems' *Untitled* photograph are all examples of this. Furthermore, artists such as Glenn Ligon, Ingrid Pollard and Sonia Boyce, each to varying degrees had built artistic reputations on work which considered the cultural legacies of slavery. However, in terms of work included in this exhibition, such specific narratives were less apparent. Poovaya-Smith herself acknowledged that her selection represented a differentiated artistic grouping:

It is not surprising that these works so variously  
acquired should lend themselves to the recurrent

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24 The sheer scale, scope and longevity of Piper's interest in the legacy and impact of slavery was reflected in individual works such as *Go West Young Man* from 1987, and in major exhibitions such as *A Ship Called Jesus* (1991), *Trade Winds* (1992) and *Relocating the Remains* (1997).

Donald Rodney was one of the first Black British artists to introduce the subject of slavery into his practice, in the early 1980s, in sculptural works such as *Middle Passage* (1984), *The Lords of Humankind* (1985) and *Voyage of My Father* (1985). In 1990, Rodney presented the site-specific installation *Visceral Canker*, as part of TSWA Four Cities Project, at Mount Edgcumbe Park Plymouth. Mary Evans installation, *Wheel of Fortune* 1996, and Godfried Donkor's series, *Slave to Champ* 1999-2007, utilise in different ways the image of the slave ship to contemplate the history, legacy and contemporary impact of slavery. The scale and scope of work produced on the subject of slavery by Black British practitioners is such that these visual documents represent a kind of history of their own.

This brief overview illustrates the ways in which Black artists had over the past thirty years explored the legacy and impact of slavery.

themes of departure and return, loss and transcendence, abrasive satire, humour and a quiet artistic confidence. If nothing else, this landmark anniversary highlights the cataclysmic commonality that links all of the artists in *Crossing the Waters* – the shared history of being connected directly or indirectly, with what has been variously been called the “Abominable Traffic”, the “Maafa” or the “African Holocaust”.<sup>25</sup>

Rather than sharing formal or conceptual concerns, the bonding agent between these artists was the legacy of slavery itself, what Poovaya-Smith termed the “cataclysmic commonality”.

References to ‘return’, ‘loss’, the ‘creative imagination’, and ‘Africa and the Caribbean’ presented an expansive and all-embracing range of ideas and possibilities for framing the exhibition. However, such was the expansive nature of these descriptions, they could have been applied to almost any grouping of Black practitioners, as this too became an all-encompassing metaphor:

*Crossing the Waters* is also a metaphor that operates in an historical and contemporary context, literally and symbolically, within real geographic locations as well as virtual spaces and, most importantly, within the constructs of the artist’s creative imagination. It moves from Africa and the Caribbean to the West and the Americas and back again.<sup>26</sup>

The metaphorical significance of the exhibition’s title coupled with the idea of ‘crossing’ being a catalyst for the ‘creative imagination’ is not without precedent. The exhibition’s title was itself reminiscent of several other works produced since the 1990s, in literature, history and the visual arts, which have considered

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25 Ibid. Povoya-Smith

26 Ibid., 6

the history and traumas of the 'middle passage' or colonialism more generally.<sup>27</sup> More significantly, the linkage between the 'creative imagination' and 'cataclysmic commonality' could also be considered as an oblique reference to the idea of the 'Black Atlantic' as explored in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy argues that Black modernity exists beyond the bounds of "quiet cultural nationalism" as a "cross catalytic or transverse dynamics of racial politics."<sup>28</sup> For Gilroy, the legacy of the 'middle passage' necessitates that Black cultural production is to be understood as not being rooted to any one location. It is the product of diaspora, symbolized by the Atlantic. This is noteworthy here because of the parallels between *Crossing the Waters* and Gilroy's hypothesis. Focusing on the visual arts produced in Britain, but born of the African diaspora, linking Caribbean, Africa and Britain, *Crossing the Waters* had the potential to open up a fascinating and rarely explored subject. Gilroy's study "to comprehend the doubleness and cultural intermixture that distinguish the experience of black Britons in contemporary Europe" had necessitated making "an intellectual journey across the Atlantic" that primarily focused on literature and music produced in America rather than the Caribbean, Africa or Britain.

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27 These include *Crossing the Rivers*, a novel about slavery by novelist and writer Caryl Phillips, 1991 and *Rough Crossings* by historian Simon Schama, 2005. Most notable of all was the similarity of Poovaya-Smith's exhibition title with *Crossing Black Waters*, an exhibition of work by thirteen South Asian artists, curated by Panchayat in 1992 and finally *Cross/ing: Time.Space.Movement*, curated by Olu Oguibe, 1997. In the *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition catalogue foreword, Shaheen Merali noted: "The title itself refers to a transgression of boundaries, a stepping into the unknown. Kala Pani – black waters – were the oceans surrounding the Indian Subcontinent. To cross them was to break tradition and to sever one's links with the 'motherland'. *Crossing Black Waters*, eds. Allan deSouza and Shaheen Merali, Working Press, 1992, 5"

28 Paul Gilroy, 1993, 4

Three years after *Crossing the Waters*, Gilroy's concept of the 'Black Atlantic' would be utilised by Tate Liverpool, for their survey exhibition *Afro-Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* which was claimed as the "first to trace in depth the impact of Black Atlantic culture on Modernism."<sup>29</sup> This exhibition vehemently argued the case for bringing together a historically and formally disparate group of art works, as "an alternative transatlantic reading of modernism and contemporary culture."<sup>30</sup> Sheer numbers Black artists were predominant. However, rather than being a Black survey exhibition, *Afro-Modern* sought to explore the relationship between art of the Black diaspora and white Euro-American traditions. In this regard, *Afro-Modern* offered a more considered form of Black exhibition. By comparison, Poovaya-Smith presented an altogether less favourable summation of her all-Black exhibition. In the catalogue's introduction she explained that:

It would not have been Cartwright Hall's normal custom to combine these artists in one exhibition, their current practice being so very distinct from one another. As importantly, Cartwright Hall has for a while, in its quest for more sophisticated explorations of cultural discourse steered away from group shows where ethnicity is a common thread – sometimes the only common thread.<sup>31</sup>

Cartwright Hall's exhibition *Double Vision: An exhibition of contemporary Afro-Caribbean art* in 1986/87<sup>32</sup> contradicts Poovaya-Smith's assessment. Staged

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29 <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/afro-modern-journeys-through-black-atlantic>

30 *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, Tate Liverpool, 29 January-25 April 2010, exhibition catalogue, 'Foreword', 6

31 *Crossing the Waters*, exhibition catalogue, 2007, 5

32 *Doublevision: 8 November 1986 - 4 January 1987*. The exhibition featured work by Tam Joseph, Franklyn Beckford, Amanda Hawthorne, Keith Piper, Debbie Hursefield, Johny Ohene, Gregory Whyte, Margaret Cooper, Uzo Egonu, Lee Hudson Simba, and Madge Spencer

two months after *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, it illustrates that the gallery had itself used the Black survey exhibition model. By promptly distinguishing her exhibition from “normal custom”, Poovaya-Smith remarkably undermines the very premise of *Crossing the Waters*, implying that by its nature, an all-Black artist exhibition such as this one was inherently reductive and inferior, and negated the possibility “for more sophisticated explorations of cultural discourse”. Poovaya-Smith did elucidate what form such explorations might take but her unsubstantiated assertion certainly implied that merely grouping Black artists together would itself, in most circumstances, guarantee a substandard exhibition. Poovaya-Smith’s explanation about the exhibition was also inaccurate in that it overlooked the fact that two of the artists, Aubrey Williams and Uzo Egonu, had died in 1990 and 1996 respectively and therefore the idea of “current practice” was irrelevant.

The Black survey-type exhibition, which had emerged in public galleries in the United Kingdom during the 1980s, was still, despite some of the notable successes of a small number of Black British artists in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the prevailing approach to programming work of Black practitioners. Such exhibitions often functioned as a means by which institutions could begrudgingly counter their self-assigned practice of marginalising Black artists. The racial overtones that often burdened these exhibitions did much to reinforce the idea that they were essentially substandard tokenistic exhibitions with little in the way of artistic merit. Evidence of this was made clear in how critics, in

particular, responded to them.<sup>33</sup> *Crossing the Waters*' artist was, in this regard, particularly problematic given Poovaya-Smith's seemingly apologetic framing to the exhibition.

### **"Complex and fascinating narratives"**

Galleries in the United Kingdom would come to rely on the survey exhibition as a mechanism for showing work by Black practitioners, characterised by homogenising what were often disparate numbers of practices. As previously mentioned, these shows began in earnest in the early 1980s with *Into the Open: New Paintings Prints and Sculpture by Contemporary Black Artists*.<sup>34</sup> Although not initially problematic, they would become the primary form of engagement offered by public galleries to the wider body of Black practitioners.<sup>35</sup> *Crossing the Waters*' rationale of 'cataclysmic commonality' and its defying of 'normal custom' continued this legacy. However, whilst this wider context certainly provides a basis for considering the exhibition's shortcomings, an analysis of the actual works in *Crossing the Waters* and how they related to each other provides another means by which to assess the exhibition's flaws.

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33 *Guardian* art critic, Waldemar Januszczak described *The Thin Black Line* curated by artist Lubaina Himid and staged at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1985 as a "loud and angry" exhibition which came "very close to choking on its own anger". 'Angry at hand', *Arts Guardian*, *The Guardian* 27 November 1985

34 *Into the Open: New Paintings Prints and Sculpture by Contemporary Black Artists* at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, 1984.

35 Subsequent exhibitions included: *The Thin Black Line* (1985) curated by Lubaina Himid, Institute of Contemporary Arts. *From Two Worlds* (1986) and *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary* (2005), both staged at Whitechapel Art Gallery, illustrate the enduring institutional appeal of survey exhibitions.

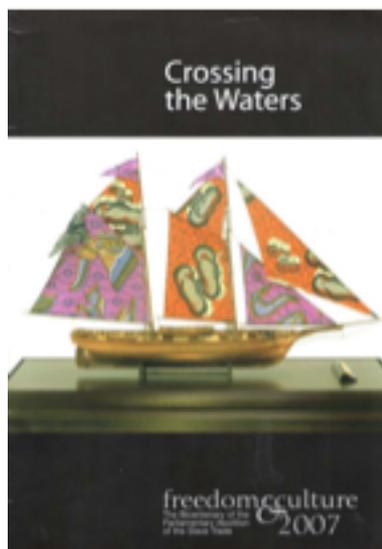


Fig 2. *Crossing the Waters*, exhibition catalogue. Cover image: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The Wanderer* 2006/7

Yinka Shonibare’s *The Wanderer* (2006-07) [Fig. 2] offered one of the closer links to *Crossing the Waters*’ theme and the commemorative context of the bicentenary.

In the exhibition catalogue’s foreword, Mark Suggitt, Head of Museums, Galleries & Heritage, like Poovaya-Smith, singled out Shonibare’s work for primary attention, noting how this work had already been used at “the launch of Freedom and Culture at the House of Lords.”<sup>36</sup> Reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue, no other work included in *Crossing the Waters* was afforded the same level of attention. It was not difficult to fathom the appeal of this work within the exhibition context given that its central motif was that of a scaled down model of a sailing ship. Therefore, on a literal level, Shonibare’s

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<sup>36</sup> The event launched what was described as “a dynamic year-long, nationwide programme that marks the bicentenary of the Parliamentary Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire. Freedom and Culture has been conceived and directed by Professor Lola Young of Cultural Brokers and Dr Nima Poovaya-Smith of Alchemy. *Crossing the Waters*, exhibition catalogue, 2007, 3.

*The Wanderer* appeared to be a near perfect fit, providing as it did a neat visual harmony with the exhibition title.<sup>37</sup>

Taking its title from the eponymous slaving vessel, Shonibare's scaled down model is a replica of an American-made sailing yacht turned slaver. In 1858, *Wanderer* made at least one round-trip voyage across the Atlantic – from America to the West coast of Africa – returning to Georgia with four hundred slaves, who were to be sold and forced into servitude in America's south. One hundred slaves died *en route*. *Wanderer* was one of the last American slaving vessels to have illegally transported Africans from the west coast of Africa to the United States. The story of *The Wanderer* is less well known than many other slave ship narratives. Tales of *Zong*, *Amistad*, and even *Brookes* have been recounted in history books, film and art,<sup>38</sup> making them an integral and familiar part of slavery history. By comparison, the story of *The Wanderer* has been the subject of comparatively few historical studies.<sup>39</sup> Whilst images of the *Brookes* and JMW Turner's *The Slave Ship* tended to dominate the visual representation of British slavery history in Britain's bicentenary literature in Britain, Shonibare's focus on this lesser-known story was a departure from a well-trodden path.

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37 Poovaya-Smith would also interview Shonibare about this work. He explained that: “This work was not actually made for the bicentenary. It is part of a growing body of work of mine, and this work, I think, in fact resonates with the key concerns of the bicentenary because they are what I explore anyway. In other words, my destiny was actually there for somebody to celebrate.” Nima Poovaya-Smith, ‘An Interview with Yinka Shonibare’, *Moving Worlds, A Journal of Transcultural Writings* Volume 7 Number 2, 2007

38 This includes Marcus Rediker *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, 2007. The painting *The Slave Ship* (1840) by J.M.W. Turner was inspired by the *Zong* massacre

39 Notable books written on this slaver are: Tom Henderson Wells, *The Slave Ship Wanderer*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1967 and Erik Colonius, *The Wanderer: The Last American Slave Ship and the Conspiracy That Set Its Sails*, St Martin's Press, 2006

Originally built in 1856 by John D. Johnson, a southern plantation owner, sportsman and member the New York Yacht Club, *Wanderer* began its life as a lavish racing yacht, measuring 106 feet in length and whose sleek design won it many admirers within the New York Yacht Club.<sup>40</sup> The ingenuity of its design made it capable of travelling at speeds in excess of twenty knots, which at the time was a considerable sailing speed comparable to clippers. *Wanderer* was sold to William Corrie, a white southerner who, along with vehemently pro-slavery American southerner Charles Lamar, hatched a plan to import slaves into the US. At various stages prior to its Atlantic voyage to the west coast of Africa, the internal layout of the ship was refitted for this purpose.

*Wanderer* was by no means the only slaver to come out of New York at this time. Tom Wells Henderson noted in his book, *The Slave Ship Wanderer*:

In the 1850's New York City was the center of the slave-trade activity in the United States. A modern study has identified twelve ships sold into the slave trade there in 1859 and ten in 1858.<sup>41</sup>

Slave trading in New York was abolished in 1827. Henderson was referring to illegal slave trading.<sup>42</sup> *Wanderer* sailed in the middle of the nineteenth century, after the British had abolished the slave trade and slavery in its colonies. It was one of many ships which, whilst illegally transporting Africans across the Atlantic, successfully outmaneuvered African Squadron patrols off the coast of Africa. Henderson notes:

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40 Wells, op. cit., 1967, 8 and Erik Calonius op. cit., 2006, 55

41 Wells, op. cit., 9

42 Hugh Thomas assessment concurs with this view. He notes that "In 1859, more slave-trading expeditions set out from Cuba or the United States for Africa than at any time since 1820. Perhaps as many as 170 voyages for the benefit of Cuba were arranged in New York in 1859-61" 'Cuba, The Forward Sentinel', 1997, 773

It would not be making too many excuses for the American and British squadrons' failure to capture the *Wanderer* to bear in mind that during 1862, when most Southern ports were in Confederate hands and the Federal blockading fleet consisted of over 250 relatively modern vessels patrolling [sic] a coastline approximately the same length as the African slave coast, two out of every three blockade runners succeeded in getting through. There were but five United States sailing warships and about eighteen British sailing and steamships guarding the African coast.<sup>43</sup>

The subsequent impounding of and court case involving the *Wanderer*, its crew and owners also gave it notoriety. Although relatively little has been written about this ship, a model replica of it has been on display for several decades at *Sea Maritime Museum* in Scarborough House in Savannah, Georgia. Encased within a glass vitrine perched on a four-legged wooden plinth in one of “nine galleries of ship models, maritime paintings and artefacts” which narrate “the rich story of Savannah’s maritime history,”<sup>44</sup> the *Wanderer’s* story is sanitized here. Shonibare’s *The Wanderer* is presented as almost a facsimile of the model at Scarborough House. Interestingly, where Shonibare’s appropriation of other art works has been clearly signposted, he makes no direct reference to this other museum model. Nevertheless, he does opine that the vitrine within which his scaled down model is encased “makes a number of museological references”.<sup>45</sup> It appeared that Shonibare was unaware of the existence of this model.

Shonibare’s interest in the *Wanderer* went beyond merely recounting this

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43 *Ibid.*, Henderson, 17

44 <http://www.shipsofthesea.org/#!collection/c15v1> [Accessed 16 May 2016]

45 Yinka Shonibare quoted in ‘An Interview with Yinka Shonibare’, Nima Poovaya-Smith, 32

particular story. Appropriating the ship's name, he explained:

...what I like about it – is that it can be read in two ways. On the one hand, wandering implies a kind of freedom, if you like, a kind of self-determination. It could be read as an emblem of the diaspora or Africa... I was placing control of the ship in the hands of the Africans within it. The wax cotton sails are symbolic of Africa and the people sailing under African colours, so to speak. On the other hand, the horror and pathos of the actual story still remain.<sup>46</sup>

Describing his model replica as a “simultaneous representation of very different kinds of power”<sup>47</sup> namely, as a site of brutality, resistance and “cross-cultural hybridity that link Africa and Europe,”<sup>48</sup> the symbolism of the slave ship coupled with the particular story surrounding the *Wanderer* drove Shonibare’s work.

Notably, in an interview about this work, neither Shonibare nor Poovaya-Smith alighted on the wider legacies and depictions of the slave ship in art and history.

Shonibare chose instead to focus on his singular efforts:

It is part of a growing body of work of mine, and this work, I think, in fact resonates with the key concerns of the bicentenary because they are what I explore anyway. In other words, my destiny was actually there for somebody else to celebrate. The issues of how my ancestors came to be in the West, and the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world, these have always been major artistic concerns. I am glad that so many people are now as engaged as I am with these issues because of 2007.<sup>49</sup>

In many respects, Shonibare’s involvement in *Crossing the Waters* was unlike that of other participating artists, in that he was given a public platform to

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46 Ibid., 29

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

express his ideas and opinions about this and other works. His pronouncements about his “growing body of work” and “destiny” implied that they represented a form of year zero with regards to slavery.

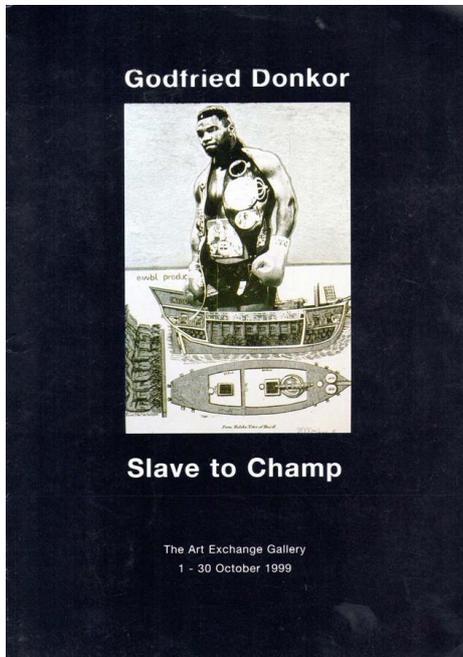


Fig 3. Godfried Donkor, *Slave to Champ*, exhibition catalogue, 1 - 30 October 1999

More problematic, however, given the theme and historical context of this exhibition was Poovaya-Smith's reluctance or ability to consider Shonibare's *The Wanderer* within a wider (art) historical context. Shonibare was by no means the first contemporary practitioner to either explore slavery or to utilise the slave ship in his work. Keith Piper's seminal exhibition, *A Ship Called Jesus* in 1991, Mary Evans' wall-based *Wheel of Fortune* from 1996 and Godfried Donkor's exhibition *Slave to Champ* in 1999 while by no means an exhaustive list of examples, reflect a wider art historical legacy. [Fig 3.]

The seeming resistance and indifference to attempting a more expansive view of contemporary art was ironic given that six of the twelve artists in the

exhibition were represented by work bought from an initiative which sought to challenge the excision of Black artists from various art discourses. *Rivington Place Portfolio* was a fundraising initiative devised by Iniva and Autograph who, in 2007, opened Rivington Place, “the UK’s first permanent home for culturally diverse visual arts and photography.”

Included in *Rivington Place Portfolio* were British artists Sonia Boyce, Isaac Julien, Hew Locke and Chris Ofili, and American artists Glenn Ligon and Carrie Mae Weems. Although limited to Black British and Black American artists, this was still a formidable grouping, comprising a *Turner Prize* winner and nominees as well as recipients of an array of prestigious prizes, commissions and critical acclaim. Each artist contributed a print edition, which took the form of an etching, relief print, or a digital photograph.

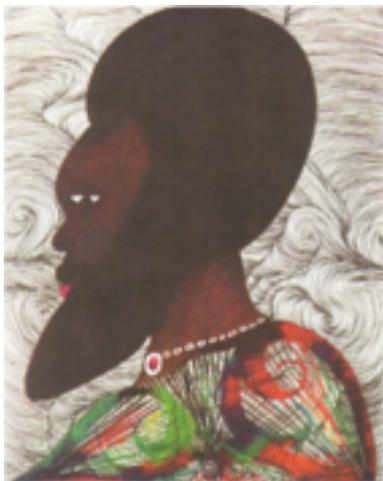


Fig 4. Chris Ofili *Regal* 2000  
*Rivington Place Portfolio* 2007

Besides being a fundraiser, *Rivington Place Portfolio* was also a profile raiser which signaled a new wave of cultural diversity, officially sanctioned and endorsed by a number of highly regarded practitioners. In this regard, curatorial

coherence was not a central concern of *Rivington Place Portfolio*. The portfolio was a miscellany of work by artists who were, Poovaya-Smith noted, “better known for their association with other media.”<sup>50</sup> This was particularly the case for contributions by Isaac Julien, Glen Ligon, Hew Locke and Chris Ofili which, whilst beneficial to the portfolio, offered very little thematically to the ‘*crossing the waters*’ theme. [Fig 4.]



Fig 5. Sonia Boyce *Devotional*, *Rivington Place Portfolio* 2007



Fig 6. Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled*, *Rivington Place Portfolio*, 2007

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50 Poovaya-Smith, ‘Introduction’, *Crossing the Waters*, 5

Poovaya-Smith's decision to include the portfolio in its entirety characterized the opportunism and expedience, which permeated the bicentenary. Sonia Boyce's work in the *Rivington Place Portfolio, Untitled 2006* derived from her ongoing project 'Devotional' and was given another showing at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) as part of the bicentenary.<sup>51</sup> In addition to the NPG commission and *Rivington Place Portfolio*, it was also purchased for the Government Art Collection.<sup>52</sup> [Fig 5.]

Carrie Mae Weems' *Untitled* [Fig 6.] was one of few works in the *Irvington Place Portfolio*, which appeared to grapple directly with the legacies and impact of slavery and colonialism. Where Shonibare had presented a British perspective on an American story, American artist, Carrie Mae Weems focused on a quintessential British cultural institution to explore ideas of history and identity. Although not made for the bicentenary, its narrative brought an engaging approach to exploring the wider legacies of slavery.

*Untitled* is a black and white photograph set outside the British Museum. Tourists, dressed in casual summer attire and carrying bags and rucksacks, amble to and from the museum, while other visitors sit and relax on the museum steps. To the right of the museum entrance between two huge colonnades, which tower over the tourists, is a narrow advertising hoarding depicting a reproduction of a Michelangelo study. It shows a woman's face positioned in such a way to appear to stare towards the very visitors who have themselves come to stare. Facing towards the entrance, this advertising

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51 Sonia Boyce *Devotional*, National Portrait Gallery, London 16 June - 25 November 2007

52 Art Collection <http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/work.aspx?obj=32868> [Accessed 16 October 2017]

hoarding also functions as a form of 'way finding'. A short distance from these tourists is a Black female figure dressed in a black gown-like costume. Her deportment and dress, and standing as she does, with her arms by her side suggests her presence is intended to be ghostly. Is this an authentically staged scene or an image fabricated via digital means?



Fig 7. Aubrey Williams Birth of Maridowa oil on canvas, 1959

The ambiguity that surrounds Weems' dreamlike image itself functions as a means by which to reconsider the museum, as a site for historical fact and cultural significance, but also as a place of ambivalence. The Black ghostly figure, present but unseen, watches those who appear oblivious to her presence. Weems' image therefore becomes an allegory about those invisible and visible histories and legacies.

Aubrey Williams' painting, *Birth of Maridowa* [Fig 7.] was made in 1959 and purchased by Cartwright Hall from a 'vendor' in Ilkley in 1974.<sup>53</sup> Named for the artist's daughter, Williams' *Birth of Maridowa* carries particular meaning given that it was made in England early on in the artist's blossoming career. Poovaya-

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<sup>53</sup> Poovaya-Smith, 'Introduction', *Crossing the Waters*, 5

Smith described the painting in more vague terms, noting what she considered to be the “sadness that underlies the exuberance” of the work. Whilst by no means one of his most exhibited works, it does possess characteristics found in his other ones, in its use of form and colour inspired by his interest in pre-Columbian culture, which would, over the next three decades, be a recurring feature of William’s painting.<sup>54</sup> The painting appears, given its title, as a form of celebration of birth and of cultural legacy.

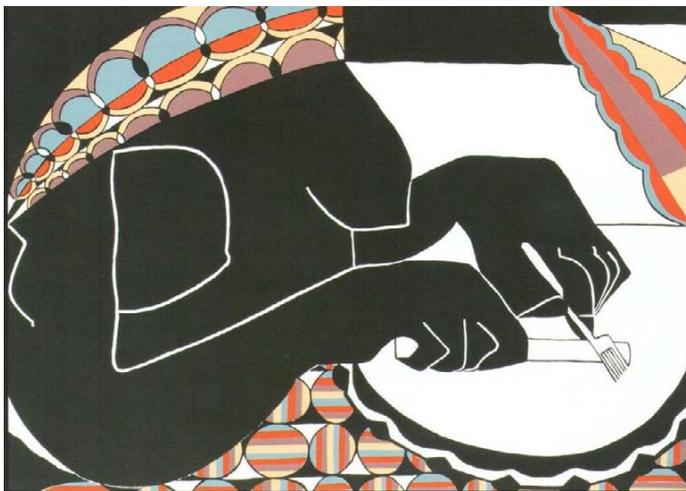


Fig 8. Ugo Egonu Lone Eater screen print 1979

The acquisition of works by Ugo Egonu and Tam Joseph was contemporaneous with their production and also followed their inclusion in earlier exhibitions staged at Cartwright Hall. Egonu’s screen print *Lone Eater* [Fig 8.] was produced and purchased in 1979 and had been in Cartwright Hall’s *Print Biennale*.<sup>55</sup>

Along with several other works made between 1979-1982, *Lone Eater* has been

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54 See Rasheed Araeen, 'Conversation with Aubrey Williams', *Third Text*, 2, Winter 1987/88, 30

55 Sixth British International Print, Cartwright Hall, Bradford, May 20-July 22 1979

considered by historian and writer Olu Oguibe as belonging to a group of Egonu’s most important works.<sup>56</sup> Other works from this period include *Mending* (1980), *A Cup of Coffee in Solitude* (1981) and *Tasting* (1980). For Oguibe, these works possess multiple meanings central to which is an exploration of solitude, as they all share a depiction of a sole female but also “a feeling of authority and territorial control”<sup>57</sup>:

In each work, the artist depicts a specific chore or activity which corresponds with the title. The location in which these activities are played out is discernibly domestic, represented by patterns suggesting wallpaper and carpets. These are then replicated in the figure’s apparel, providing a delicate formal cohesion, which, together with the masterful manipulation of positive and negative spaces, belongs to the classical tradition of Igbo mural design.<sup>58</sup>

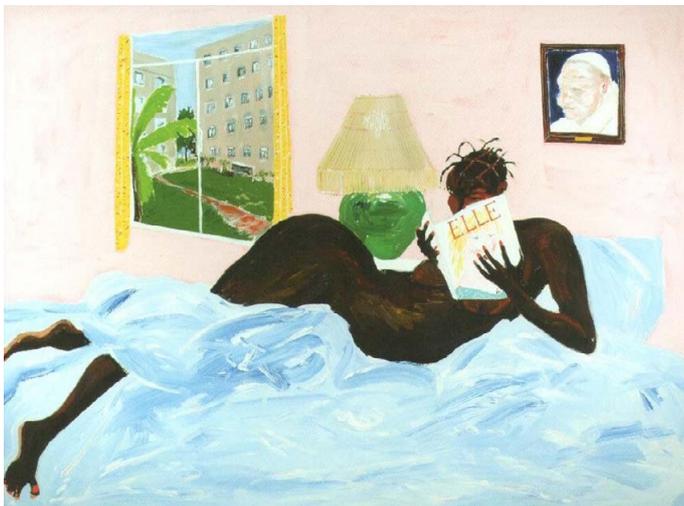


Fig 9. Tam Joseph *Native Woman With Fetish*, acrylic, 1985

Joseph’s *Native Woman with Fetish* [Fig 9.] was acquired two years after its production, following its inclusion in *Double Vision: An Exhibition of*

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56 Oguibe, 1995, 131

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 134-135

*Contemporary Afro-Caribbean Art* in 1987.<sup>59</sup> This painting displays Joseph's ability to express, in visual terms, complex ideas and critical thinking about contemporary culture. In its mocking reference to Manet's *Olympia* 1863, *Native Woman with Fetish* (1985) inverts the idea of a body that is both fetishized and marginalized. The Black near naked woman occupies the position of fetish and voyeur, as she reads the fashion consumer magazine *Elle* which personifies images of idealised (white) beauty. The work's irreverent painting style belies its pointed critique of what Hiroko Hagiwara describes as our understanding of "Modern Africa", while its references to religious and popular culture icons destabilize "our biased presumption" about what constitutes a 'fetish'.<sup>60</sup>

Rather than draw out the interplays between these works, Poovaya-Smith described them in terms of their acquisition:

serendipitous, slightly accidental and then increasingly purposeful from the 80s onwards – reflects Bradford's mode of operating, driven as it was by the pleasure principle, a sense of adventure allied with a growing awareness that it was increasingly important that such works were in a public collection.<sup>61</sup>

Save for these art works already in Cartwright Hall's collection, and the loan of Keith Piper's photographic work *Four Frontiers*, 1998, all the other works included in *Crossing the Waters* were purchased in 2007. Where other venues that had mounted bicentenary exhibitions involving contemporary art either

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<sup>59</sup> *Double Vision: An Exhibition of Contemporary Afro-Caribbean Art*, Franklyn Beckford, Margaret Cooper, Uzo Egonu, Amanda Hawthorne, Lee Hudson Simba, Debbie Hursefield, Tam Joseph, Johnney Ohene, Keith Piper, Madge Spencer and Gregory Whyte, 8 November 1986-4 January 1987

<sup>60</sup> Hiroko Hagiwara, 'Here History Unfolds', in the exhibition catalogue *This is History*, produced by Eddie Chambers, 1998 (unpaginated).

<sup>61</sup> Poovaya-Smith, 'Introduction', 2007, 5

commissioned or selected works, Cartwright Hall used the commemorative event as a means by which to acquire the majority of the work for its exhibition. Despite the particular nature of the selection and attendant process of acquisitions, Poovaya-Smith would claim that:

Almost all of the works in the exhibition belong to the collections of Bradford Museums, Galleries and Heritage and although modest in size, reflect not only forty years of collecting but also the very different tastes of the various curators involved as well as the very different motivations that led to their purchase.<sup>62</sup>

The unfocused process employed in the selection of work was highlighted by the inclusion of Keith Piper's *Four Frontiers*. In the bicentenary, Piper had been commissioned to produce two new works by Ferens Art Gallery and the V&A. *The Abolitionist's Parlour* and *Lost Vitrines* respectively were very much focused on legacies of slavery. By comparison, *Four Frontiers* presented an altogether different set of concerns. *Four Frontiers* is a light box installation, originally commissioned by Photo 98,<sup>63</sup> which explored the idea of 'fortress Europe' and what Piper described as "the idea of borders – not so much physical borders, but real or imagined points of incursion, points of contact with non-European influences, in opposition to which Europe attempts to establish its identity."<sup>64</sup> The selection of this work seemed particular odd, given Piper's particular track record and interest in exploring slavery.

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62 Ibid.

63 *Photo 98*: The UK Year of Photography and Electronic Image, an Arts Council initiative celebrating a different art form each year up to the millennium.

64 Keith Piper, *Continental Drift, Europe Approaching the Millennium*, 10 Photographic Commissions, Prestel: Munich and New York, 115

## “From the Eurocentric to the international”

The practices brought together in *Crossing the Waters* were divergent to the extent that what formal and conceptual connections could be extrapolated tended to be bypassed in the framing of the exhibition. For example, Carrie Mae Weems’ and Sonia Boyce’s works placed female subjects at the centre of their narratives; also notably prevalent in works by Aubrey Williams, Uzo Egonu and Tam Joseph, and yet at no point were such connections made. Instead, Poovaya-Smith noted that while sharing a “cataclysmic commonality”, the artists in this exhibition were:

also bound by another commonality. The contribution they have made and continue to make to British art in its inexorable shift from the Eurocentric to the international. It is not dissimilar to the role played by some of Britain’s most talented artists over an extended period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Epstein, Bomberg, and Auerbach, for instance, played a decisive part in the shift from the parochial to the European.<sup>65</sup>

This is not entirely inaccurate, insofar as, excluding the American contingent, the artists in *Crossing Waters* were or had been practicing, working and exhibiting in Britain and beyond. However, such platitudes are also misleading insofar as they make little attempt to acknowledge that these ‘contributions’ to British art were more contentious and relatively rare. In their lifetime, artists such as Aubrey Williams and Uzo Egonu were at every turn excluded from being considered as legitimate contributors to British art. Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare, on the other hand, were bestowed with substantial exhibition

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65 Poovaya-Smith, ‘Introduction’, 2007, 7

opportunities and establishment recognition, which assured their place within the British art establishment. Poovaya-Smith's overly generalized interpretation failed to position them in relation to a series of other discourses relating to the Caribbean Arts Movement, African art, the first generation of British art school educated Black artists, and the *young British artist* (yBa).

In her essay, Poovaya-Smith compares and contrasts the relationship between artists Chris Ofili and Uzo Egonu. "Juxtaposing the internationally acclaimed Chris Ofili with Egonu, an artist of a much earlier generation, will be a fascinating process."<sup>66</sup> Born nearly forty years apart, in every way imaginable, these artists appear to be polar opposites. Egonu's untimely death in 1996 coincided with the start of Ofili's meteoric rise in the art world.<sup>67</sup> The works by Ofili included in *Rivington Place Portfolio* and already purchased by Cartwright Hall had a much more sombre tone compared to the paintings using elephant dung and profanity with which he made his name. Egonu's art combined figurative, abstract and representational painting,<sup>68</sup> having, in Olu Oguibe's words, a "general disregard for movements and prevailing aesthetics strategies."<sup>69</sup>

Ofili's paintings were primarily figurative and drew heavily on particular aspects of Black American popular culture. It seemed curious but also significant that Poovaya-Smith would choose to pair the two, given the disparities in age,

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66 Ibid. 6

67 In 1996, Chris Ofili had his first solo exhibition at Victoria Miro Gallery, titled *Afrodizzia*. In 1997, he was included in the group exhibition *Sensation* at the Royal Academy, followed by a major solo exhibition organised by Southampton City Art Gallery and Serpentine Gallery, London, which would lead to him winning the Turner Prize in 1998.

68 Eddie Chambers, 2014, 59.

69 Ibid., Oguibe 60.

background and their approach to painting. Her decision to do so seems primarily based on both artists being of Nigerian extraction. Poovaya-Smith justified her pairing thus: “Egonu’s own experiences are a perfect metaphor for *crossing the waters*” and Ofili, “felt the need to suffuse the very texture of his works with Africa, through the medium of elephant dung – a medium used in important African rituals.”<sup>70</sup> Ofili’s playful gimmick seemed incongruous to Egonu’s interests.

Oguibe’s evaluation of Egonu reaffirms the importance of African roots in his practice. “The Egonu aesthetic is as private and subjective as it is ‘visionary’ or social, and in both cases it is rooted in his Africanity.”<sup>71</sup> In pairing Egonu and Ofili in such a way, Poovaya-Smith air brushes art history. Egonu had, unlike Ofili, been “denied a place in the centre” of the art world.<sup>72</sup> More significantly perhaps, where Egonu had never shied away from exploring and contemplating his African identity and Nigerian history, Ofili’s relationship to ‘Africa’ was characterised very differently. Although Ofili was himself the son of Nigerian parents, this connection appeared of little consequence to critics and curators who embraced his work. Ofili’s connection to Africa was couched in decidedly more flippant and self-serving terms:

The general mythological construction of Chris Ofili’s identity has been brought about by a colluding media and is based in large part on the widely reported anecdote which tells of his first trip to Africa and his discovery there of elephant dung. The artist joked once that the whole story had been made up...<sup>73</sup>

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70 *Crossing the Waters*, 6

71 Oguibe, 1995, 78

72 *Crossing the Waters*, 8

73 Godfrey Worsdale, 1998, 1

Such a mocking tone was indicative of the sort of readings Ofili's paintings could elicit from certain sectors of the artworld. Although such sentiments were imposed they were not readings which Ofili appeared uneasy with. Ofili's claim that his was not a "PC project"<sup>74</sup> provided further encouragement for curators such as Lisa G. Corrin (responsible for Fred Wilson's exhibition Mining the Museum) who wrote of Ofili's art:

The era of multiculturalism and its manifestation in museum and gallery exhibitions, has, by and large, given the impression that all black artists make black art about black issues. The paintings of Chris Ofili do not – will not – conform to stereotypes of what art by a black artist is supposed to look like.<sup>75</sup>

Unsubstantiated and reductive as such assertions were they reflected a familiar trend in reading and positioning Ofili's breakthrough work in opposition to an undefined notion of "black art". While Poovaya-Smith asserted that Ofili "need[ed] to suffuse the very texture of his works with Africa,"<sup>76</sup> the use of elephant dung, as made clear by critics, in no uncertain terms, was not as means of 'identification', reflection or even empathy with modern Africa. Certain critics were quick to frame his work in particular ways, notably as playing with stereotypes and challenging 'political correctness':

Ofili plays with stereotypes, not only of big-breasted, porn-mag floozies, but of blackness, black culture, black victimization, black pride and black paranoia. He is not, evidently, an artist who polices himself with political correctness.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See, Corrin, 'Confounding the Stereotype', 1998, 13

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>76</sup> Poovaya-Smith, 6

<sup>77</sup> Adrian Searle 'Top Plop: Chris Ofili's work steams with ideas. He uses magazine clippings, glitter and, of course, the famous elephant dropping. He's the token black in

Given Poovaya-Smith's interest in diaspora, it is curious that the relationship between artists Aubrey Williams and Uzo Egonu was not highlighted, the more direct and profound ways in which *crossing the waters* to Britain, from Guyana and Nigeria respectively, would have a great impact on their lives and development as artists. A more appropriate comparison for Ofili would have been his contemporary Yinka Shonibare, who, though six years older was, like Ofili, born in England, to Nigerian parents, during the 1960s. Like Ofili, Shonibare's work explored certain ideas about Black identity, history and cultural authenticity using particular gimmickry. Where Ofili deployed elephant dung within his paintings and as physical props for their display, faux African textiles would become Shonibare's leitmotif, which were playful and colourful in their visual and conceptual fusion.

### **Connect: People, Place and Imagination**

Around the time of the bicentenary, Cartwright Hall was in the throes of developing its project *Connect: People, Place and Imagination*, which received over £1 million from Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England.<sup>78</sup>

*Connect: People, Place & Imagination*, would be launched in 2008, but Mark Suggitt, the Head of Museums, Galleries and Heritage noted that *Crossing the Waters* was "also an integral part of Cartwright Hall's ongoing programme

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the Brit brat pack, but patronise him at your peril, says Adrian Searle *Guardian* Tuesday April 21 1998, 10-11

78 The main aim of Connect was to re-present "the previous categorization of displays at Cartwright Hall from culture, chronology and medium, to the three key themes of People, Place and Imagination. This was to allow a mixture of objects from Europe and Asia, which reflect the common heritage of the people of Bradford, to be displayed." [https:// www.hlf.org.uk/our-projects/connect-people-place-imagination-bradford-museums-galleries-heritage-collections](https://www.hlf.org.uk/our-projects/connect-people-place-imagination-bradford-museums-galleries-heritage-collections) [Accessed 9 May 2016]

involving the revisioning of the permanent gallery displays.”<sup>79</sup> *Connect: People, Place & Imagination* was also initiated and devised by Nima Poovaya-Smith, and was about “implementing pioneering, long-term audience and learning development programmes, as well as gallery design, installation and interpretation.”<sup>80</sup> Poovaya-Smith’s role in both *Connect* and *Crossing the Waters* was significant, as she had previously worked at Cartwright Hall from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s.<sup>81</sup> Under Poovaya-Smith’s direction, the museum would also begin to collect what it described as “transcultural art, particularly material relating to the Indo- Pakistan Sub-Continent.”<sup>82</sup> The focus on these acquisitions was “on the present art produced by artists of South Asian descent, living and working in Britain.”<sup>83</sup> This collection policy would culminate with the opening in June 1997 of the *Transcultural Gallery*, which focused on works by a number of contemporary South Asian artists.<sup>84</sup> Presented as a separate initiative to *Crossing the Waters* (which was credited in the exhibition catalogue as being curated by Alchemy, Poovaya-Smith’s independent arts organisation), this same company ran described its activities in almost identical terms to *Connect: People, Place and Imagination*:

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79 Mark Suggitt, ‘Foreword’, *Crossing the Waters*, exhibition catalogue, 3

80 <https://www.hlf.org.uk/our-projects/connect-people-place-imagination-bradford-museums-galleries-heritage-collections> [Accessed 9 May 2016]

81 From Assistant Keeper in *Ethnic Arts*, Poovaya-Smith would become Senior Keeper, International Arts at Bradford Art Galleries and Museums. During her tenure at Cartwright Hall, Poovaya-Smith would play a significant role in organising exhibitions which acknowledged the practice of contemporary Black and Asian artists. However, it was under the banner of ‘South Asian’ arts spanning fine art and decorative arts that Poovaya-Smith would make her mark. Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast*, 88

82 *Ibid.*, 89

83 *Ibid.*

84 These artists included: Said Adrus, Saleem Arif, Sutapa Biswas, Chila Burman, Amal Gosh, Anish Kapoor, Dhruva Mistry and Sarbjit Natt.

Alchemy exists to connect people – across cultures, nations and generations – through the arts. We aim to challenge perceptions, opening doors to new ideas and ways of thinking through share cultural experiences.<sup>85</sup>

A decade later, the *Transcultural Gallery* would make way for *Connect: People, Place and Imagination*. However, although *Connect* superseded the *Transcultural Gallery*, the “transcultural concept”,<sup>86</sup> would be harnessed to the *Connect* initiative. There are a number of parallels between the *Transcultural Gallery* and *Connect: People, Place & Imagination*, not least that both were initiated by Poovaya-Smith and received significant financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. These initiatives were also eager to pander to those notions of cultural diversity championed by public funding bodies. While appearing to be progressive, in providing an alternative approach towards the presentation of museum collections, the underlying politics governing initiatives such as the *Transcultural Gallery* and latterly *Connect: People, Place & Imagination* was not to reimagine ‘the museum’ per se, but more to ‘showcase’ and ‘celebrate’ certain notions of local demographics within the visual arts and which led to *Crossing the Waters*.

## **Part II**

### **Whitworth Art Gallery**

#### ***Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery***

Compared to other bicentenary exhibitions that combined contemporary art and

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85 Alchemy website <http://www.alchemyanew.co.uk/about%20us.htm> [Accessed 24 April 2018]

86 <http://www.bradfordmuseums.org/venues/cartwright-hall-art-gallery> [Accessed 9 May 2016]

historical collections, *Trade and Empire* involved a comparatively small number of artists and artworks. Nevertheless, it represented an important part of the role contemporary art played in the bicentenary. First, it took place in one of the most prestigious and highly regarded galleries outside of London. Secondly, a conspicuous role was assigned to Black practitioners in the exhibition. Thirdly, it also was part of a region wide initiative devised as part of the bicentenary.

One of the main aims of *Trade and Empire* was to re-evaluate the discourses and histories surrounding the art and artefacts held in various art museum collections in Manchester. Maria Balshaw, Director of the Whitworth, noted that the exhibition and its accompanying events “brought new insight into the objects from our collections and from other collections around the North West and beyond.”<sup>87</sup> The underlying motives of the exhibition could be seen as positive, in bringing alternative interpretations of the close relationships between museum collections and the slave trade. Writing about the exhibition Lola Young opined: “Once you begin to look in the right places, with the appropriate lenses, you will see Britain’s colonial history inscribed on our landscapes, our cityscapes and in our institutions.”<sup>88</sup> *Trade and Empire* was part of a wider initiative, *Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery*, the umbrella name given to an initiative involving eight museums in Greater Manchester, devised to commemorate the bicentenary and to challenge a general lack of public awareness and institutional acknowledgement of the impact and role of slavery in the region.

The initiative started from the observation that ‘port cities’ connections to

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87 Balshaw, ‘Foreword’, 2010, 1

88 Lola Young, Baroness Young of Hornsey, ‘Introduction’, *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, University of Central Lancashire, 2010

transatlantic slavery were widely known, but little research had been carried out until now on the impact of slavery in Greater Manchester.”<sup>89</sup> *Revealing Histories* identified links between Greater Manchester and the need “to explore the legacy of slavery in our collections, in our communities and in our region.”<sup>90</sup>

Underlying the bicentenary was a perceived need to be seen to involve Black people at all levels of the initiative. High profile individuals at one end of the spectrum, including David Lammy MP, Baroness Amos, Lola Young, Ms. Dynamite and Moira Stuart, brought visibility and endorsement to the bicentenary.

Coupled with this were the various opportunities offered to Black artists.

Although there was no official call made for a bicentenary commemoration by any specific Black group or organisation, the involvement of Black people in certain aspects of the bicentenary was considered politically and culturally important. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that such sensibilities would percolate into the organization of *Trade and Empire*.

### **Audience and Engagement**

A notable trait of *Revealing Histories* was the significance attached to particular notions of audience engagement and the emphasis placed on ‘educating’ these audiences. In much the same way that Black artists were given prominence in the bicentenary, so too, were significant efforts made to cajole and entice Black people to initiate their own commemorative events. Organisations involved in

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89 <http://revealinghistories.org.uk/about-us.html>

90 <http://revealinghistories.org.uk/about-us.html> [Accessed 25 August 2016]

the bicentenary were eager to be seen to be championing the need for engaging 'regular' gallery-going audiences as well as those audiences who were seen as absentee. From government departments and funding bodies, to museums and other art organizations, the bicentenary was not simply an event for onlookers to experience and participate in, however they wished, but, more importantly, it was meant to be for the benefit of *everyone*.<sup>91</sup> This view would filter its way through into the mindset of various organizations involved in the bicentenary. A credible bicentenary could only be achieved if Black people themselves had some significant and visible level of involvement in the events. The Black-led activist organisation Rendezvous for Victory would play an active consultation role across government and the cultural sector.<sup>92</sup> The British Museum would enlist the support of Rendezvous for Victory for "cross-community dialogue and engagement to address some of the Atlantic Slave Trade's contemporary legacies and effects."<sup>93</sup> Racial delineation in such consultation (those in the 'Black community' and the white institution) was often unspoken and assumed:

Ultimately, community consultation over 1807 exhibitions was about the negotiation of political resources, not only whose version of history would be privileged but also to what extent African

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91 Tony Blair announced "This is everyone's bicentenary. This anniversary is a chance for all of us to deepen understanding of our past, celebrate the richness of our diversity and increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share."

'Foreword: A message from the Prime Minister', *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007*, HM Government, 2007, 1

92 The Home Office awarded Rendezvous of Victory (ROV) £5,000 towards a commemorative programme of events between 23-29 August 2004, including a launching conference, seminars, workshops, youth and community arts events and heritage trail." <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3590152.stm> [Accessed 7 July 2011].

93 Christopher Spring, 'Art Resistance and Remembrance', *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, eds Smith, Cubitt, Wilson, Fouseki, Routledge London New York, 2011, 195

Caribbean communities could influence the way that they would or would not be given recognition.<sup>94</sup>

*Revealing Histories* was itself the product of an earlier incarnation of another educational initiative, *Connecting Histories* which involved 'heritage professionals' interested "in improving and developing community engagement practice in their institutions."<sup>95</sup>

One way to engage people of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage was with the relevant interpretations of collections, and that research into the collections was critical to uncover these relevant narratives and objects, some of which were previously unknown or unused by the museums.<sup>96</sup>

Aside from Black artists, across the social, political and cultural spectrum other key individuals<sup>97</sup> lent their very public support and in effect endorsed the government initiative. Less emphatic were the contributions made by Black people not affiliated to government, museum or arts institution. While a number of high profile Black individuals and a small number of organisations such as *the Equiano Project* were actively involved in the bicentenary, there was still a belief that government needed to do more to attract a wider audience and to initiate events. Even if there was little evidence to support the belief that 'audiences' or 'communities' had themselves expressed a desire to be involved in any commemorations, central government bodies such as the Department for Culture Media and Sport and Department for Communities and Local

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94 Laurajane Smith and Kalliopi Fouseki, 'The Role of Museums as 'Places of Social Justice'', *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, 2011, 112

95 Nadine Andrews, *Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery Evaluation Report*, October, 2008, 4

96 Ibid.

97 These included David Lammy MP, Baroness Amos, Baroness Lola Young, Lee Jasper

Government, emphasised enabling and coaxing certain ‘audiences’ or ‘communities’ to participate in the bicentenary. One of the strategies used to ‘engage’ Black audiences was led by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) which presided over millions of pounds of funding for the bicentenary. The emphasis placed on ‘engaging’ audiences or encouraging organisations to participate was such a priority that HLF produced various forms of publicity for this purpose.<sup>98</sup>

HLF’s appeals to community organisations and groups would help in the funding of over one hundred and thirty projects from across England. In keeping with funding practices, these awards formed a pyramid, whereby a direct correlation existed between organisational size and the amount awarded. At the bottom of the pyramid were the greatest number of recipients who would receive the smallest grants (usually £3000 to £8000). Above this group were recipients of awards in excess of £20,000, followed by recipients of awards ranging from £50,000 to £80,000. Top of the pyramid were the smallest number of recipients, who would receive grants ranging from several hundred thousand pounds to over a million. Despite HLF’s much publicized appeal to community groups, only one ‘Black’ organisation (the Equiano Project) received a joint award at the higher end of the funding scale.<sup>99</sup> Larger sums for bicentenary related exhibitions and initiatives primarily went to institutions already integrated into the funding system.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, the longevity and empowerment that

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98 This included *Remembering Slavery in 2007: A guide to resources for heritage projects*. On the cover of one of HLF’s newsletters were the words: “We can provide funds to help you mark this anniversary.” These appeals would continue into 2007.

99 The Equiano Project and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery jointly received an HLF grant of £653,000 to stage the touring exhibition *Equiano-An Exhibition of an Extraordinary Life*.

100 These awards included Wilberforce House Museum in Hull, which received £800,500 towards its restoration, the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, which

might result from a substantial award went not to those Black groups targeted by HLF, but to those like Wilberforce House Museum and National Museums of Liverpool for developing the International Slavery Museum. *Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery* was a beneficiary of HLF funding, with Manchester City Galleries receiving a grant of £265,000 towards the project.<sup>101</sup>

### ***Revealing Histories***

The eight institutions involved in *Revealing Histories* represented a broad range of museums, from those housing substantial collections of art and design, to those focused on archival material charting various aspects of Britain's social and industrial history. These institutions were Bolton Museum, Manchester Art Gallery, People's History Museum, the Whitworth Art Gallery, Gallery Oldham, Museum of Science and Industry, the Manchester Museum, and Touchstones Rochdale.

The majority of the institutions involved in *Revealing Histories* were founded during the mid to late 1800s, after Britain had abolished both slave trading (1807) and slavery (1838) in its Empire. However, each institution had objects and artefacts that in some way could be related to the legacies of slavery. For example, Bolton Museum's spinning mule, invented by Samuel Compton in 1802, was described as "one of the most important objects in Bolton's collection

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received a capital award of £1.5 million for a new purpose built museum. The now defunct British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol was the recipient of £700,000 for the exhibition *Breaking the Chains – The Fight to End Slavery*.

101 Other funders included Renaissance North West and Museums Libraries and Archives North West.

but it had not been interpreted in the context of slavery until 2007.”<sup>102</sup>

Manchester Art Gallery’s “impressive collection of fine and decorative art had been accumulated, added to by gifts and bequests from wealthy Manchester industrialists, many of whom made money from cotton and its associations with slavery.”<sup>103</sup>

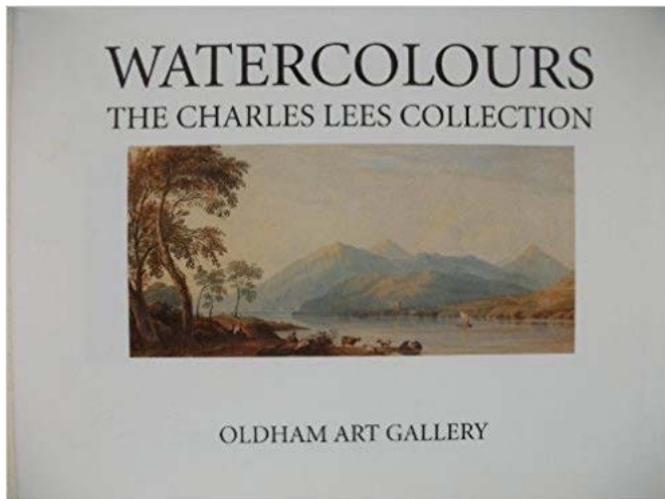


Fig 10. Watercolours The Charles Lees Collection exhibition catalogue, Oldham Art Gallery, 1993

The accrual of wealth made possible by slavery enabled certain individuals to purchase a substantial number of artworks which would eventually make their way into public collections. Gallery Oldham (originally Oldham Art Gallery) owes much to the generous donations of Charles Lees, the son of a rich industrialist

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102 This machine would revolutionize the speed and quantity of cotton yarn production and as a result would increase demand for slave-grown cotton from American plantations. “It was capable of producing high quantities of fine, strong cotton yarn, and during the early 1800s revolutionised the British cotton industry, heralding the start of the cotton boom. The application of the mule to industry massively increased the amount of cotton yarn manufacturers could produce, which in turn increased demand for raw cotton to supply the mills. This led to an increase in cotton production by the slave system, and a parallel boom developed in the plantations of the southern states of America.” [http:// revealinghistories.org.uk/why-was-cotton-so-important-in-north-west-england/objects/crompton-s-mule.html](http://revealinghistories.org.uk/why-was-cotton-so-important-in-north-west-england/objects/crompton-s-mule.html)

103 Revealing Histories <http://revealinghistories.org.uk/partners/manchester-art-gallery.html> [Accessed 23 September 2017]

and mill owner, who began working in his father's business in the 1850s and, by the 1880s, became a founder of and major donor to Oldham Art Gallery. During his lifetime and subsequently, many works from his private collection were donated to the gallery. These include watercolours, paintings and decorative arts, encompassing artists J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, pre-Raphaelite painters William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and English potter Josiah Wedgwood. Following the restoration of the *Charles Lees Watercolour Collection* in 1993, it was subsequently displayed in a specially renovated exhibition space within Oldham Art Gallery. The publication produced to mark the new display stated that Charles Lees' father had: "In 1846 launched into cotton spinning and weaving, making the bulk of his wealth from the cotton boom."<sup>104</sup> The publication stressed Charles Lees' liberal credentials, describing him as being "very much a product of liberal reformism, committed to the improvement of living conditions for the working classes and to enlightenment for everyone through exposure to culture and the arts."<sup>105</sup> But this fortune came from spinning slave-grown cotton, cheaply bought and imported from the American south.<sup>106</sup> [Fig 10.]

The *Revealing Histories* initiative was divided into four main parts: 'In Conversation With'; 'In My View'; 'In My film'; and an eponymous website, which would also be the most enduring facet of *Revealing Histories*. Audience engagement would percolate through to each of these categories. For example, 'In Conversation' was focused on "community consultation, talks, seminars,

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104 Blair French, *Watercolours: The Charles Lees Collection*, Oldham Art Gallery, 5

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.

object handling (outreach and inreach). 'In My View' encouraged developing personal narratives, creative writing, poetry, and other artistic responses, new interpretations of museum objects and displays, and educational resources.<sup>107</sup>

The publicity for *Revealing Histories*, explained the project's approach in worthy terms:

We came together in 2007 to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 and to explore the legacy of slavery in our collections, in our communities and in our region. Slavery is part of our shared history that still impacts on our lives today. We explored transatlantic slavery through the history of our institutions, through the objects in our collections and the people who collected those objects. We also researched the significance of the slave trade in the history of the Greater Manchester region and wrote a substantial research report.

Then we went public. We developed exhibitions and displays, events and activities. We encouraged dialogue and discussion through talks, object handling sessions and feedback cards and hosted public debates.

We also developed innovative drama performances and produced two exciting films which were written and acted by young people.

This website is a record of the objects, stories, voices and events that were the Revealing Histories project.<sup>108</sup>

This appears, on face value, to offer a clear and concise description of what was, in terms of its scope and aims, an ambitious project. As an initiative whose legacy exists online, it was not possible to easily fathom the exact nature of the

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107 Nadine Andrews, *Revealing Histories Remembering Slavery*, Evaluation Report, October, 2008, 5

108 *Revealing Histories Remembering Slavery*, <http://revealinghistories.org.uk/about-us.html> [Accessed 23 June 2016]

programme of exhibitions and displays. This confused presentation characterised the wider initiative. An already complicated and rarely publicly discussed history was framed in overly complicated and seemingly fragmented ways. What was most striking about *Revealing Histories* was that, despite the many convincing arguments presented and the involvement of eight major museums, only a single publication was produced. This was published in 2010, three years after the launch of the event by Whitworth Art Gallery and University of Central Lancashire as part of the exhibition *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*.

The lack of published material highlighted the extent to which *Revealing Histories* stopped short of bringing a hitherto unseen history to wider public and critical attention. Also, despite eight museums being involved, the initiative produced comparatively few actual exhibitions of note. Only one exhibition was cited in the subsequent evaluation report for the *Revealing Histories* initiative. This was *The Fight to End Slavery*, staged at Touchstones Rochdale, which appeared to tick all the boxes for *Revealing Histories*, in terms of using “collections to engage new and existing audiences particularly young people in the history of slavery, its impact and legacy in Greater Manchester”.<sup>109</sup> The evaluation report highlights it for having won ‘the Black History Foundation’s Outstanding Contribution to Black Heritage’, but no other form of critical appraisal about the exhibition was forthcoming.<sup>110</sup> Although the Whitworth’s

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109 Andrews, Evaluation Report, 6

110 In the report, the exhibition was referred to in the following way: “The Touchstone Rochdale exhibition ‘*The Fight to End Slavery*’ was the 2007 North West winner of The Black History Foundation’s Outstanding Contribution to Black Heritage award. This is a tremendous achievement, especially given the opening of the new International Slavery Museum in Liverpool in the same year. However, this achievement has not

exhibition, *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery* was also part of the *Revealing Histories* initiative, no mention of it was made in the evaluation report. In the exhibition catalogue for *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, the Whitworth's director, Maria Balshaw, makes an unequivocal connection between the gallery and the wider *Revealing Histories* initiative, noting how it "invited visitors to think again about the legacy of this history in Manchester and the North West, and to contribute their own thoughts."<sup>111</sup> There were other exhibitions including: *The Myths About Race* at Manchester Museum, *Remembering Slavery Trail* at Manchester Art Galleries and *Remembering Slavery* at the Museum of Science and Industry. However, these and other related exhibitions have a largely peripheral presence on the *Revealing Histories* website.<sup>112</sup>

The exhibition catalogue is an interesting document, not least for appearing some three years after the exhibition had taken place. This time lapse was left unexplained, and the catalogue was one of relatively few produced as part of the bicentenary which involved contemporary art. As such it represents a valuable document of the exhibition. However, the catalogue is also a confusing document, presenting as it does a muddled exhibition narrative. First, no 'list of works' from the exhibition was reproduced in the catalogue. Secondly, reproductions of art and artefacts in the catalogue included works that were not in the actual exhibition.

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been acknowledged, celebrated or promoted by the partners as much as it could have been." *Revealing Histories Remembering Slavery*, Evaluation Report, Andrews, 35  
111 Maria Balshaw, 'Foreword', *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, exhibition catalogue, The Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Central Lancashire, 2010, 1  
112 The website is structured around a combination of museums and specific objects

***Trade and Empire* – “where notions of difference and sometimes dissent can be voiced and debated”**

*Trade and Empire* sought to “re-interrogate the stories” of the Atlantic slave trade, “not to celebrate the triumph of British liberal values as embodied solely in the persons of William Wilberforce and his fellow white abolitionists, but to tell a wider range of meaningful stories of the Atlantic slave trade”.<sup>113</sup> Whitworth curatorial and educational staff decided that, “[i]n keeping with the *In My View* strand of the *Revealing Histories* programme,”<sup>114</sup> invitations should be extended to a number of external individuals. Focused on utilising the collections from the Whitworth and other partner museums, four guest curators who were “community engaged artists/and or academic researchers working on the history of slavery, trade, empire and its legacy in Manchester and the North West”, would select work, which “focused on the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Manchester and the North West”.<sup>115</sup> David Morris, Head of Collections and Andrew Vaughan, Learning Manager represented the gallery. The external curators were Manchester-based poet SuAndi, Lancaster-based artist Kevin Dalton-Johnson, University of Manchester PhD candidate Emma Poulter, and Dr. Alan Rice, Reader at University of Central Lancashire. It was noted by Vaughan and Morris that the invited guest curators’ “cultural identities and own

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113 Morris and Vaughan, ‘The Making of *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*’, *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester and University of Central Lancashire, Preston, 2011, 4

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

ethnic backgrounds are variously from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and Britain.”<sup>116</sup> Such explicit profiling of guest curators was an uncommon practice for a gallery such as the Whitworth. However, in the spirit of *inclusivity* and *diversity*, central tenets of the bicentenary, “a range of different voices both Black and white”<sup>117</sup> were required. At no point did Vaughan or Morris disclose their own “cultural identities”, choosing instead to rely on the backgrounds of the guest curators for bringing “a stimulating array of new voices into the Whitworth”.<sup>118</sup> SuAndi summed up this approach more cynically, as the bicentenary bringing “employment to many on both sides of the race line.”<sup>119</sup> Whether meant generally or in specific relation to her involvement with the Whitworth project, SuAndi added ironically “Curators have rushed eagerly to recruit from the black-arts marketplace.”<sup>120</sup>

Within the exhibition’s revisionist context, the inclusion of contemporary art works by Godfried Donkor, Althea McNish and Tony Phillips also signaled the particular interests of the curatorial and educational staff, who made clear from the outset that the work of Black artists was of fundamental importance to the exhibition. Including a number of contemporary art works by Black practitioners alongside historical collections carried a particular significance. For a project concerned with reviewing how historical collections had been presented, why were works by only three *Black* artists considered relevant and necessary? Works by two of these artists were already in the collection; why was a third

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116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.

120 SuAndi ‘What a Celebration: When One is Too Many’, *Trade and Empire, Remembering Slavery* The University of Manchester and University of Central Lancashire, Preston 2010, 37

invited to participate? How could contemporary art contribute to exploring these ideas of interpretation, when its history was not also subject to scrutiny?



Fig 11. Godfried Donkor *The Birth of Venus I*, 2006



Fig 12. Thomas Stothard  
*The Voyage of the Sable from Angola to the West Indies*, 1800

Althea McNish's textile work, *Golden Harvest* (1957) was purchased by the Whitworth in 1961. Tony Phillips' *History of the Benin Bronzes* (1984), a series of eleven etchings, were acquired by the gallery in 1991. Godfried Donkor's collage series *The Birth of Venus I, II, and III: Triptych* [Fig 11.], related to Stothard's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2006) [Fig 12.], were included in the exhibition and subsequently purchased by the Whitworth in 2008.<sup>121</sup> What might

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

this pattern of acquisition say about the relationship between these artists and the Whitworth, and previous interpretations of their work?

By comparison, the works of contemporary art functioned in a more illustrative role. Each artist's work had made its own particular journey into the museum's collection. It was not explained how representative such selections of contemporary art related to the wider collections of contemporary art. Were the Whitworth Art Gallery's collection of Althea McNish and Tony Phillips and subsequent purchase of several works by Godfried Donkor indicative of a more profound or consistent level of engagement with the work of Black artists?

How did such an approach compare with the gallery's usual programming tendencies towards Black practitioners? Was the privileging of Black practitioners' work in *Trade and Empire* an exception to the rule? This chapter now explores the significance of the ways in which the work of Black artists was utilised within the exhibition. The bit part role assigned to Black artists appeared opportunistic and expedient, based on the overly simplistic notion that, given the theme and bicentenary context, the inclusion of contemporary art by Black practitioners could only enhance the exhibition. It could also be asked if an exhibition without contemporary art would have in any way been less successful or meaningful.

Rather than seeing the inclusion of contemporary art works in isolation, it is necessary to consider them within the wider aspirations of the exhibition. Taking this wider context into account, the issue becomes about whether, given the historical context of *Trade and Empire*, the inclusion of contemporary art, with its own particular (historical) discourses, could usefully bring greater

understanding and clarity to objects and artefacts already laden by a tradition of myopic scholarship.

The main focus of my analysis here is concerned with what I consider to be the politics and problematics surrounding how contemporary art was used in the exhibition. However, these issues need to be assessed in relationship to the wider aspirations of the exhibition.

In their introductory catalogue essay, David Morris and Andrew Vaughan indicated that material selected from the gallery's collections would be "integrated with other contemporary works by Black artists and objects borrowed from The Manchester Museum, The John Rylands University Library Manchester, Bolton Museums and Archives Service and private collections around the North West."<sup>122</sup>

The Whitworth staff were eager to express the lengths to which the institution had gone to lead an initiative that was inclusive and transparent, even though contemporary art was delineated along purely racial lines without explanation. This was also seen by them as reflecting the gallery's ethos, as well as its position within an academic environment. The invitation which had been extended to external curators was "predicated upon the notion that the Whitworth functions best when it works as a laboratory for researching, producing and developing ideas...where notions of difference and sometimes

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<sup>122</sup> Whitworth Art Gallery's website: [<http://gallerysearch.ds.man.ac.uk/Detail/54850>] These works were dated 2006 and acquired in 2008. However, in the publication, *Trade and Empire, Remembering Slavery*, produced in 2010, these works are dated 2005. These conflicting dates cast some doubt as to whether Donkor's works were in the Whitworth Art Gallery's collection prior to the 2007 exhibition.

dissent can be voiced and debated.”<sup>123</sup> Morris and Vaughan also pointed to:

The Whitworth’s role as a university gallery, a public arena where the worlds of the city and academy intersect and new ideas can be generated and debated.<sup>124</sup>

The stated aims of this exhibition and indeed, the wider *Revealing Histories* project were to reinterpret *historical* collections in relation to slavery and the slave trade. Each of the guest curators would bring their own knowledge, interests and responses to the collections they were given access to.

SuAndi’s contribution was notably different to the other guest curators because, rather than re-presenting museum collections, she expressed the view “that it was important to humanize a gallery show about slavery and its legacies... otherwise [it would be] too academic or curatorial in its tone.”<sup>125</sup> This SuAndi sought to do by presenting an installation. The Door of No Return<sup>126</sup> comprised the words *Remember... we were People before we were slaves* printed in large script in the entrance to her exhibition space. Once in the space visitors were invited to “tie a knot of remembrance for someone who was lost to them, and by so doing feel a human kinship with those left behind in Africa when the slave ships sailed west with their loved ones.”<sup>127</sup> At the end of the exhibition, 750 knots tied by visitors over its duration were cremated and blessed. Despite bypassing the opportunity to re-present material from the collection, during

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123 Ibid.

124 Ibid., 4-5.

125 Ibid.

126 The title is the name of a memorial and museum on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal. An infamous island used to hold enslaved Africans prior to being “[s]hackled and trapped in the bowels of a slaver, unable to go home again”. Marcus Rediker *The Slave Ship*, 106

127 Trade and Empire 8

discussions with staff and her fellow guest curators SuAndi did articulate her reservations about what she considered to be the contentious and offensive nature some of the museum's holdings. In one instance, she responded to the Whitworth's *Four Models of Freed Africans, formerly enslaved* (1834-36) [Fig 13.] selected by guest curator Alan Rice:

If it had simply been a matter of choice, without hesitation, I would have chosen to place these horrendous things back into the darkest corner of the collection cupboard.

They do not resemble me or any other Black person. Yet still I recognize that they are meant to be all of my people... My fellow curator was right in his decision to include them.

To trap them under glass like the very specimens they are. To have them stare out at the visitor with their beady dead eyes. They represent the silence of the slave.<sup>128</sup>

These model dolls belonged to members of the Ralph Henry Samuel family, who ran a cotton plantation in Rio de Janeiro, and brought them back to England from Brazil. In contrast to SuAndi's interpretation, Alan Rice noted that "they are brightly and ornately dressed in clothing that reflects their newly enfranchised status".<sup>129</sup> It is not clear from the catalogue if such conflicting interpretations were included in the exhibition. However, these contrasting views deviated from a necessity for consensus. Both uncorroborated and corroborated interpretations were allowed to exist within the same exhibition.

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128 Trade and Empire 11

129 Alan Rice, 'Manchester and the Shadow of the Black Atlantic: Trade, Empire and Slavery in the Whitworth Art Gallery Collections', *Trade and Empire, Remembering Slavery*, 22



Fig 13. Four Models of Freed Africans, formerly enslaved, 1834-36, Whitworth Art Gallery Collection

Emma Poulter's contribution to *Trade and Empire* attempted to highlight the links between Manchester's cotton industry and slavery. Poulter's installation *Collecting and Commerce*<sup>130</sup> brought together a number of works from the gallery collection, including a series of watercolours by J.M.W. Turner. Poulter examined the genesis of collections such as the Turner watercolours, which could be traced back to the ownership of the McConnel family, whose immense wealth was generated from cotton grown by slaves in the American south. Poulter sought to disrupt traditional exhibition narratives underpinning the presentation of historical collections. Two of Turner's landscape watercolours were installed over the top of a photograph "of Black men, women and children working as cotton pickers in the state of Georgia in the southern USA."<sup>131</sup> As noted previously, *Trade and Empire* was a relatively modest exhibition. Given the claims made about the relationship between North West of England and Slavery, *Revealing Histories* was also underwhelming. Although Poulter was able to bring together a substantial range of research in her subsequent

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130 Emma Poulter's section is titled 'Commerce and Collecting', rather than 'Collecting and Commerce' See pages 5 and 28 *Trade and Empire*

131 Morris and Vaughan, *Trade and Empire*, 5

catalogue essay<sup>132</sup> her contribution to the exhibition was limited to a handful of objects. In this context, the works by Althea McNish, Tony Phillips and Godfried Donkor assume even greater significance.

Alan Rice's rationale for including works by Godfried Donkor and Althea McNish was "to make sure that the exhibition contained examples of Black agency in the struggle against slavery and that contemporary Black artists were well represented."<sup>133</sup> In his catalogue essay *Manchester and The Shadow of the Black Atlantic: Trade, Empire and Slavery in the Whitworth Art Gallery Collections*, Rice explains his interest in bringing the "pro-slavery print"<sup>134</sup> *Voyage of the Sable from Angola to the West Indies* by Thomas Stothard RA to critical view. Rice provided this reading of Donkor's critical appropriation of the Stothard print:

His response to Stothard's image answers excess with collage depictions of bodies indulging in sexual pleasures, reflecting the pornography of slavery with his own borrowings from pornographic imagery. The three images are designed to overwhelm the viewer with an excess of repeated images, in much the same way that Stothard created his *Sable Venus* as an excessive cornucopia of sexual possibility that the exploitation of slavery made possible. Flesh in Donkor's images is the primary narrative too; however, he shows us the reality of the exploitation and forced relationships that slavery gave rise to. His naming of his piece *The Birth of Venus* inscribes this as a seminal image in the making of relationships between races and sexes in the Atlantic world. Close examination of the sun's rays in his collage shows Donkor using pages from the *Financial Times*. The pink colouring of the paper makes its own comment

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132 Emma Poulter, 'Slave Grown Cotton, Economic Growth and Cultural Investment in Industrial Manchester', *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, exhibition catalogue, 2010, 28-36

133 Ibid., 8

134 Rice, 2010, 23

on flesh, however, and his use of the newspaper here also highlights the commodification of this flesh through the workings of commerce.<sup>135</sup>

Donkor's triptych *The Birth of Venus* was, at the time of the exhibition, unlike those works by Althea McNish and Tony Phillips, not part of the museum's collection.<sup>136</sup>

Although Donkor's work would be subsequently purchased by the Whitworth, for the purposes of exhibition it was effectively loaned by the artist. Rice also invited Donkor to jointly select a number of his other works to displayed in tandem with a selection of prints by William Hogarth, chosen from several hundred held in their collection. The inclusion of Donkor's collages *Dessert* (2001) and *London Mob* (2001) was due to them sharing "a similar satirical import"<sup>137</sup> and to show how "Donkor also strategically inserts black figures which pose questions regarding national identity and multicultural lifestyles of relevance to both Hogarth's time and his own."<sup>138</sup> The guiding principle of *Trade and Empire* was to produce an exhibition utilising both historical works held in museum collections and "other contemporary works by Black artists".<sup>139</sup>

However, as Donkor's work was not already part of the museum's collections its inclusion was somewhat contrived, despite the works dialogical relevance to the exhibition's theme.

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135 Ibid., 23-25

136 Godfried Donkor's, *The Birth of Venus* I, II, III were subsequently purchased by the Whitworth Art Gallery in 2008.

137 Rice, 25

138 Ibid. 26

139 Morris and Vaughan *Trade and Empire*, 2010, 4



Fig 14. Althea McNish Golden Harvest, textile, 1957, Whitworth Art Gallery Collection

Rice also wrote about his selection of Althea McNish's textile work *Golden Harvest* (1959) [Fig.14], which had been inspired by the artist's visit to the English countryside in 1957:

Excited by the colour of the Essex cornfields glowing in the British sunlight, Althea McNish developed drawings and watercolour sketches she brought home from that weekend into a repeating design using both black monoprint and textured colour. As she says herself, "My early exposure to the Caribbean environment led me to transform the tiny flowers of the British hedgerow into tropical exuberance" [Weiss 2007]. It, along with McNish's other wonderful designs, should warn us against a reductive critique of Black Atlantic arts that wants to make it either merely a critique of imperial legacy or a consequence of it. McNish's exuberant textiles transmit their own powerful message about the limitations of such narrow views, showing that the legacies of *trade and empire* are both complicated and at times breathtaking in their simplicity.<sup>140</sup>

Despite including McNish's textile work in an exhibition underwritten with a theme of "imperial legacy", Rice argues this work should not be solely viewed through a prism of "imperial legacy". However, it is precisely this rationale which appeared to determine the inclusion of McNish's *Golden Harvest*, predicated as

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 27. Althea McNish quote taken "Notes on Althea McNish" John Weiss, private email correspondence, May, 2007

it was, not so much on its formal qualities but more on the artist's own background:

She uses imperial resources for new purposes. McNish's ancestry and life reflect the triangulation of the African diaspora. Her paternal ancestor came from Senegambia in the eighteenth century, before being enslaved in Georgia, fighting for the British in the war of 1812 and then settling in Trinidad in 1816. In recognition of this her textiles were displayed in a triangular form speaking to Africa, the Americas and Europe.<sup>141</sup>

If McNish's inclusion revolved around the legacies of cotton, it could be argued that, as a museum with a substantial textile collection, many other (undisclosed) works had equal if not more relevance to the exhibition's theme. As one of the exhibition's guest curators Emma Poulter observed: "Alongside the founding of cultural institutions, Manchester's cotton wealth was also directly associated with collecting."<sup>142</sup>

Artist Kevin Dalton-Johnson selected Tony Phillips' series *History of the Benin Bronzes*, 1984, [Fig 15-16.] as the main part of his contribution to *Trade and Empire*. In the exhibition's publication, Dalton-Johnson would describe at length and in often deeply personal terms, the relevance and appeal of Phillips' work. Synergies between being an "African Diasporic man living in the United Kingdom" and a practicing artist, enabled Dalton-Johnson to both produce and experience art as a form of "visual catharsis".<sup>143</sup>

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141 Rice, 2010, 26-27

142 Emma Poulter, 'Slave Grown Cotton, 2010, 33

143 Kevin Dalton-Johnson, 'Tony Phillips: History of the Benin Bronzes [1984]: A Metaphor for Diasporic Displacement', 2010, 43

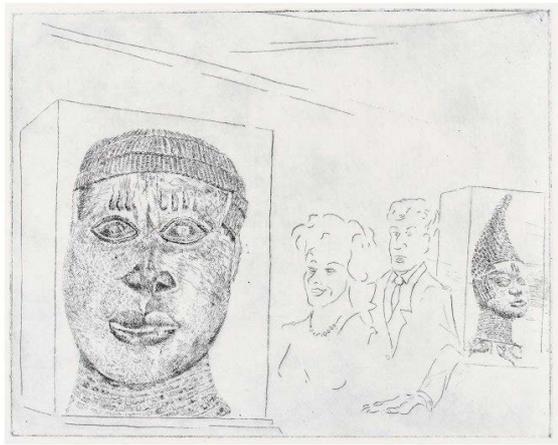


Fig 15. Tony Phillips The Gallery,  
from series History of Benin Bronzes, etching 1984,  
Whitworth Art Gallery Collection



Fig 16. Tony Phillips Face to Face,  
from series History of Benin Bronzes, etching 1984,  
Whitworth Art Gallery Collection

Identifying strongly with different aspects of his African heritage, Dalton-  
Johnson would also candidly describe the relevance and appeal of Phillips'  
work:

Amongst the images and objects that were presented to the guest curators, *The History of the Benin Bronzes* a series of etchings by Tony Phillips, was the only set of images that I felt allowed me, in the role of curator, to use my pedagogic skills, artistic skills and expertise. Further, and more importantly, I felt these images would allow me to draw on my experiences as an African diasporic male who, like many others, is constantly confronted by the resonant after effects of the African Holocaust and

the legacies of colonialism that are still so influential in today's globalized and media-driven society.<sup>144</sup>

Where Godfried Donkor's series of collages were brought into the exhibition and juxtaposed with works by Stothard and Hogarth, Tony Phillips' etchings already in the collection were presented in relation to a fascinating private collection of photographs taken in West Africa between 1890 and 1917. Covering the period leading up to and following the aftermath of Britain's destruction of the Kingdom of Benin (also known as Benin Expedition 1897), many of these images were also significant for being credited to J.A. Green, a West African photographer working for the British in the period leading to Britain's colonization of Nigeria [Fig 17.].



Fig 17. Ovanramwen, Oba of Benin with guards on board the Niger Coast Protectorate Yacht S. Y. Ivy on his way to exile in Calabar in 1897. Photograph by J. A. Green.

Although it was not made clear how many of these photographs were included in the exhibition, their selection was credited to Emma Poulter.

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144 *Ibid.*,45

Phillips' 12 etchings, *History of the Benin Bronzes* explore the physical and cultural character of the sculptures known as the *Benin Bronzes*, which originate from Benin City (in modern-day Nigeria). With immense visual economy and laconic humour, Phillips charts how these artistically accomplished and sacred works of art came to be scattered amongst many hundreds of public and private art collections around the western world.

While legalised British slave trading in West Africa had ceased at the beginning of the nineteenth century, by its end, British (and European) colonization had become the new mode of exploitation across vast swathes of the African continent. The 'scramble for Africa' was formalized in the Berlin Conference 1884-85 when as Walter Rodney put it "European robber statesmen sat down in Berlin...to decide who should steal which parts of Africa".<sup>145</sup> The British mindset justifying it was succinctly and somewhat euphemistically described as 'The Spirit of Victorian Expansion':

The Victorians regarded themselves as the leaders of civilization, as pioneers of industry and progress. Industry in Britain was stimulating an ever-extending and intensifying development overseas, as her investors and manufacturers, merchants, and colonists, railway-builders and officials opened up new continents.<sup>146</sup>

Phillips' prints focus on a period in history in which Britain and other European nations joined in the 'scramble for Africa'. It was Britain's imperial expansionist ambitions in Africa which ultimately led to the attack on Kingdom of Benin and

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145 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 1972, 149

146 Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, 'The Spirit of Victorian Expansion' *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, Macmillan St Martin's Press, 1961, 1

the plundering of the Benin Bronzes, as part of its retaliatory punitive expedition of 1897. Frustrated in their failed attempts for unfettered trading rights in the region, British forces once again encroached on the Oba's (King's) territory with the intention of overthrowing him. On route this small army of two hundred were attacked by the Benin forces and all but two were killed. Britain responded by sending hundreds of troops to retaliate, and ultimately the west African Kingdom was razed to the ground. British troops returned with hundreds of art works taken from the King's palace and what erroneously became known as the 'Benin Bronzes'.<sup>147</sup>

Phillips' etchings each depict significant 'moments' in the Benin Bronzes' many journeys. Using the same plate to create twelve different impressions "calls for considerable control, both physical and intellectual,"<sup>148</sup> with each plate often showing elements of imagery of the preceding one. *History of the Benin Bronzes* exude a remarkable level of intensity and even wit in their attempt to grapple with and express the legacies of an almost unfathomable history. The intensity of detail in early plates provides the original context of the Benin Bronzes [Plate 1 *Ancestral Heads*, Plate 2 *Divine Kingship*, Plate 3, *The Oba's Palace*, Plate 4 *Shrine of Sacrifice*, Plate 5, *The Ododua Dance*]. Later in the series, the Benin Bronzes are depicted out of context, and the rich detail and tone of earlier plates has been replaced by increasing amounts of white space. Here, Phillips juxtaposes contrasting levels of detail from the intricacy of the bronzes to sketch- like impressions of auctioneers, experts and collectors.

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147 These artefacts are made from a variety of materials including zinc, bronze, ceramic and copper.

148 John Lyons, *Tony Phillips: Jazz and the Twentieth Century*, exhibition catalogue, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1991, unpaginated

[Plate 8 *The Auction*, Plate 9 *The Gallery*, Plate 10 *The Lecture*, Plate 11 *The Lounge*, Plate 12 *Face to Face*.] The faint line impressions denote the spectres of physical and cultural acts of violence haunting the legacy of the Bronzes' removal from their sacred origin; decontextualized in the western museum, their presence is riven with paradox, as they are now imbued with an exalted status.

When British forces entered Benin City in 1897 they were surprised to find large quantities of cast brass objects. The technological sophistication and overwhelming naturalism of these pieces contradicted many 19<sup>th</sup> century Western assumptions about Africa in general and Benin – regarded as home of 'fetish' and human sacrifice – in particular. Explanations were swiftly generated to cover the epistemological embarrassment.<sup>149</sup>

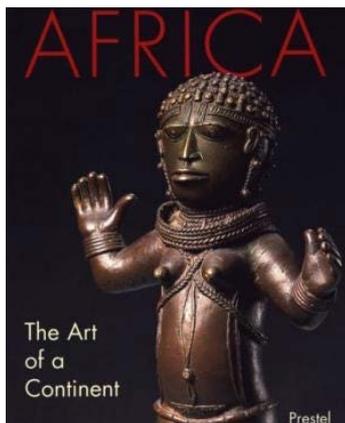


Fig 18. Africa: The Art of a Continent, Royal Academy of Arts, London exhibition catalogue, image: Figure of a woman Benin, Nigeria 17th-18th century 1995

For example, the Royal Academy of Arts 1995 exhibition *Africa: Art of a Continent* was accompanied by a 600-page catalogue, on the cover of which was a reproduction of a single Benin Bronze, *Figure of a woman Benin*, Nigeria

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<sup>149</sup> John Picton, 'West Africa and the Guinea Coast', *Africa: Art of a Continent*, ed. Tom Phillips, Prestel: Munich, Berlin London New York, 1995 (reprint 2004), 396

17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century [Fig 18.].<sup>150</sup>

In this regard, *History of the Benin Bronzes* series is not merely charting a linear and specific narrative of history pertaining to the Benin Bronzes. Dalton-Johnson had asserted that his selection of Phillips' work was intended to "balance the exhibition by creating a contemporary context that would complement the historical contexts presented"<sup>151</sup> by the other guest curators. An alternative assessment of Phillips' chronicle identifies its profound critique of how the concept of 'African art', in its many forms, has been and continues to be obsessively framed and 'owned' in western culture:

These narratives lead Phillips to conclude his series with the unanswerable assertion that the celebration, or even the fetishisation of the Benin Bronzes in particular, and African art in general speaks of a simultaneous brutalising and subduing of African people themselves, even as their artefacts are crammed in to the leading museums and auction houses of the world.<sup>152</sup>

The inclusion of works by Black contemporary artists in *Trade and Empire* was presented as both an essential and an inevitable component of the exhibition. The problems of including works by contemporary Black visual artists centred not on their inclusion per se. Both Alan Rice and Kevin Dalton-Johnson illustrated quite literally how the individual works by Althea McNish, Tony Phillips, and Godfried Donkor could each be legitimately considered as relevant

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150 Held in the collection of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Museum für Völkerkunde. The website explains: "The collections of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) comprise outstanding examples of material and immaterial goods that were created outside of Europe and brought to Berlin in the 19th and early 20th centuries".

151 Dalton-Johnson, 'Tony Phillips: History of the Benin Bronzes [1984]: A Metaphor for Diasporic Displacement', 2010,45

152 Biographical entry for the artist Tony Phillips [http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display\\_item.php?id=145&table=artists](http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display_item.php?id=145&table=artists) [Accessed 30 August 2016]

to the exhibition's theme. Donkor and Phillips works were deployed in terms of their *mise en scene*. Emma Poulter's presentation of framed Turner watercolours mounted over an image of cotton pickers went beyond the illustrative to consider the politics of the 'object'. The systemic processes of historical erasure practiced by museums were claimed to lie at the heart of *Revealing Histories* and *Trade and Empire*. However, the process for 'revealing histories' was implicitly demarcated. Contemporary art and artists were not considered to be in need of contextualization.

Opening up the gallery's collection and its curatorial processes were presented as intrinsic elements of the project. Equally, Whitworth staff confidently noted that the work of Black artists *would* also be included in the final exhibition. Presented as a *fait accompli*, it was as if, given the exhibition's theme, it should follow that the work of Black artists would form a natural part of the curatorial process. However, there is nothing 'natural' or normal about how Black practitioners' work has been programmed by galleries in England. The sense of normality, routine and inevitability about their inclusion merited greater critical consideration and assessment in order to explain the terms upon which their work should be included in a historical exhibition, where this work 'fits' with the museum's collections, and why and how it came to be in the collection.

## **Summary**

On face value, *Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire* may have appeared to have been positive and progressive exhibitions, not least because they gave contemporary art produced by Black practitioners a prominence within the bicentenary. Compared to other exhibitions involving contemporary art

organised as part of the bicentenary, these were, however, relatively peripheral affairs. Neither managed to generate much critical attention.<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless, this does not diminish their significance. In different ways, each illustrated what might be called a lack of *duty of care* in their approach towards the work of Black practitioners. Institutions' role as custodians of art and responsibility for certain standards of scholarship appeared less important here than political expedience.

*Crossing the Waters* justified its selection in terms of a "cataclysmic commonality". In *Trade and Empire*, the relatively small selection of artworks was presented in such a decontextualized way that they negated the very thesis of the exhibition, which was to 'reveal histories' through collections. This opportunistic and haphazard framing of artistic practice was emblematic of deeper problems relating to institutional engagement with the work of Black practitioners. In this regard, these exhibitions were part of a continuum of the Black survey type exhibition model.

In today's art world, it might seem anathema to dispute the idea that *any* exhibition is a worthwhile exhibition, regardless of the extent to which it is corralled and compromised by various forms of curatorial and institutional opportunism. Tate played a largely peripheral role during the bicentenary in 2007.<sup>154</sup> In the years since, however, it has organised three major exhibitions that would easily eclipse the efforts of Cartwright Hall and the Whitworth Art Gallery. These exhibitions were: *Afro Modern: Journeys, Through the Black*

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153 Two international group exhibitions, *Port City: On Mobility and Exchange* organised by Arnolfini, Bristol and *Bound* organised by Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool were staged to coincide with the bicentenary.

154 Tate Liverpool hosted part of the exhibition *Bound* organised by Open Eye Gallery

*Atlantic* at Tate Liverpool in 2010; at Tate Britain, *Migrations: Journeys into British Art* in 2012; and *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past* in 2015-16.<sup>155</sup> Whilst this triumvirate of exhibitions made no reference to *Crossing the Waters* or *Trade and Empire*, their respective themes of the 'Black Atlantic', 'migration' and 'Empire' portrayed an uncanny thematic resemblance. However, they were far more substantial in every way possible, in terms of numbers of artists and artworks, as well as the coterie of academics, historians, curators and artists who each contributed to the extensive exhibition catalogues.

*Migrations: Journeys into British Art* is particularly relevant here, as it comprises mainly works held in the Tate collection. Reproduced prominently on the catalogue frontispiece was an image from the series *Go West Young Man*, a 14-piece text-based work by Keith Piper. Tate's choice of this image, described in the catalogue as 'seminal', was significant; they purchased the work in 2008.<sup>156</sup> The words *Go West Young Man* are intersected by the now familiar depiction of a slave ship. The image is a visual pun on the idea of migration, reminding us that some forms of 'migration' have been more involuntary than others. The use of *Go West Young Man* functions not only as a visual witticism but also as a means by which to seamlessly slot Piper's oeuvre into the 'narratives' of both the exhibition and Tate's collection. These exhibitions were however, not focused on arbitrary or reductive contexts.<sup>157</sup> Instead they sought

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155 *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, Tate Liverpool, 29 January-25 April 2010; *Migrations: Journeys into British Art*, Tate Britain 31 January-12 August 2012; *Artist and Empire Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, Tate Britain, 25 November 2015-10 April 2016

156 Paul Goodwin, 'New Diasporic Voices', *Migrations: Journeys into British Art*, 2012, 92

157 For example, *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* included works by Pablo Picasso and Constantin Brancusi; *Migrations: Journey into British Art* included

to locate the work of a number of Black practitioners within a wider conception of art history. In this regard, they represent a significant departure from the Black survey model reprised in *Crossing the Waters* and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*.

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work by Hans Holbein the Younger, Anthony Van Dyck, Kurt Schwitters, Piet Mondrian, Gustav Metzger, and Francis Alys.

## **Chapter 6**

**Flagship: *La Bouche du Roi* An Artwork by Romuald Hazoumè,**

**Contemporary Art, Ethnography and the Western Museum**

There has been a profusion of books on traditional African art in recent years. Though many of these are excellent they tend to create the impression that artistic expression is a thing of the past in Africa and that nothing of value is being produced today.<sup>1</sup> — Ulli Beier

*La Bouche du Roi* by Benin artist Romuald Hazoumè forces us to confront the horrors of a slave ship whilst reminding us of modern forms of economic bondage.<sup>2</sup> — British Museum

...other possible ways of marking the bicentenary through a more conventional large exhibition drawn from collections had proved problematic.<sup>3</sup> — Christopher Spring

## Introduction

This chapter considers the staging of Romuald Hazoumè's multi-media installation, *La Bouche du Roi*, as part of 'Resistance and Remembrance', the British Museum's main contribution to the bicentenary. The acquisition, exhibition and subsequent national tour<sup>4</sup> of *La Bouche du Roi* made it the most prominent work of contemporary art in the bicentenary. Exploring the history, trauma and legacy of transatlantic slavery, the installation's floor-based component was also modelled on the iconic abolitionists' engraving *Description*

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1 Ulli Beier, 'Preface', *Contemporary Art in Africa*, Pall Mall Press, London, 1968

2 Bicentenary of the Parliamentary Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A programme of activity at the British Museum, 22 March 2007 – 13 January 2008, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/news\\_and\\_press/press\\_releases/2007/abolition\\_of\\_the\\_slave\\_trade.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2007/abolition_of_the_slave_trade.aspx) [Accessed 2 October 2017]

3 Christopher Spring, 'Art, Resistance and Remembrance', 209

4 Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, 2 June - 15 July 2007; Merseyside Maritime Museum, 4 August - 2 September, Liverpool, 2007; Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery, 15 September - 28 October 2007; Laing Art Gallery Newcastle, 10 November - 3 February 2007-8; Horniman Museum, London, 5 December-1 March 2009; The Herbert Gallery, Coventry, 3 April - 31 May 2009

*of a Slave Ship* 1789. Hazoumè's installation appeared tailor-made for the bicentenary. However, rather than being newly commissioned by the British Museum, *La Bouche du Roi* was started in 1997 and completed in 2005. In this regard, and bearing in mind the various other bicentenary art commissions and selected works, the selection and purchase of *La Bouche Du Roi* was both a decisive and emphatic statement, and the prominence given to it a substantial gesture.

The significance of Hazoumè's exhibition at the British Museum extends beyond being solely about the politics of the bicentenary or Hazoumè. It incorporates the emergence of contemporary African art in the west during the 1990s, which challenged reductionist views of Africa and African art manifested in discourses on Modernism and ethnography. Three separate but interconnected sections of this chapter consider the cultural politics surrounding the exhibition *La Bouche du Roi*.

*Part I The Rise of Contemporary African Art* revisits a series of exhibitions and debates which challenged and disrupted the Western Modernist paradigm which had framed African art in historical and ethnographic terms. Exploring seminal exhibitions such as "*Primitivism*" in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, *Magiciens de la Terre*, and *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art* this section considers the range of debates and arguments that would emerge during the 1990s. Despite differentiated agendas, the staging of contemporary African art exhibitions would also, in Britain, be sporadic, intermittent and often characterised by overarching survey exhibitions. Whilst widely celebrated, contemporary African artists also had to navigate a terrain

marshalled by curators, collectors and institutions. Reception of contemporary African art was imbued with a kind of fetishization. Artists were often shown in the west in exclusively African group exhibitions. Rarely did individual artists get selected outside this format. Consequently, modern day African artists became a desirable, but self-referencing and often homogenised entity, almost in similar ways to ethnographic discourse. The section concludes with an examination of Romuald Hazoumè's emergence as a 'self-taught' artist and his rise to prominence with his 'mask' works, a leitmotif which would be a key component of *La Bouche du Roi*.

Prior to exploring Hazoumè's exhibition it is important to contextualise the role of contemporary African art in the British Museum. *Part II The British Museum and Contemporary African Art* considers the ways in which contemporary African art was featured in the British Museum programme during the early 2000s. Hazoumè was not the first contemporary African artist to receive such attention at the British Museum. *Play and Display: Steel Masquerades from Top to Toe* by sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp in 1995 was one of its first major exhibitions. However, it was during the early 2000s that the museum would embark on a concerted effort to exhibit, commission and acquire contemporary art works by contemporary African artists. This was part of a wider international trend in ethnographic museums. The British Museum's presentation and support of contemporary Black African artists was notable for propelling artists' careers. Typically framed in celebratory terms, they also denied the more sinister and problematic side of a museum shrouded in histories of colonialism, violence and pillaging.

The art and antiquities it holds span thousands of years, but came into the possession of the museum during the violent and unrelenting period of colonial expansion. Critically, as ethnographic collections and museums atomised and decontextualized artefacts and objects, the chapter also argues that this is precisely the approach adopted towards contemporary African art. However, critical response to the exhibition was largely devoid of any critique of the ethnographic context.

*Part III La Bouche du Roi and the Bicentenary* explores various components of Hazoumè's installation, its presentation, relationship to the bicentenary and the ethnographic context. Part III also explores critical responses to the work in terms of abolition iconography and the bicentenary.

Across the disciplines of curation, art history, and cultural theory, as well as in the art market, contemporary African art has received an unprecedented level of coverage and analysis over the past two to three decades. Much of this activity has, not unproblematically, taken place in the West. Debates have ebbed and flowed around innumerable themes, including migration, the city, poverty, history, ethnography, the 'self-taught' artist versus the schooled, authenticity, post colonialism and post modernity. Critically, such discourses challenged "the containment of Africa as a monolithic entity".<sup>5</sup> Nothing typified and was more implicated in "containment" than the ethnographic museum. For these reasons, reductive and Eurocentric concepts about Africa and African art were subject to a hitherto unseen level of scrutiny. In *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* we are told:

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5 Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, *Reading the Contemporary*, 10

...in recent years the discursive authority of the ethnography museum, and the interpretive power it wielded, have been eroded by the emergence of contemporary curatorial projects functioning in the arena of the museum of art.<sup>6</sup>

In reality, powerful institutions such as the British Museum were hardly perturbed by such cultural currents and continued to generate exhibitions like *Kingdom of Ife*<sup>7</sup> which were part of the museum's usual ethnographic fare.



Fig 1. (left to right) Reading the Contemporary 1999, Yinka Shonibare, MBE, Jardin d'amour, 2007, Contemporary African Art Since 1980, 2009

As the illustration [Fig 1.] shows, the work of the internationally acclaimed artist Yinka Shonibare was, in one decade, used on the cover of two important theoretical publications: *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* from 1999 and *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, published in 2009. In between these two publications is a catalogue for Shonibare's exhibition *Jardin d'amour*. Shonibare was only the second solo

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6 Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, 'Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction', *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, 12

7 *Kingdom of Ife, Sculptures from West Africa*, British Museum, 4 March – 4 July 2010. The British Museum described it as a "major exhibition present[ing] exquisite examples of brass, copper, stone and terracotta sculpture from West Africa. The Kingdom of Ife (pronounced ee-feh) was a powerful, cosmopolitan and wealthy city-state in West Africa (in what is now modern south-west Nigeria)". [http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats\\_on/all\\_current\\_exhibitions/kingdom\\_of\\_ife.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/all_current_exhibitions/kingdom_of_ife.aspx)

artist to exhibit at the newly relocated ethnographic museum, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac<sup>8</sup>, in Paris Hazoumè's *La Bouche du Roi* was the first.

Whilst disciplines of ethnography and anthropology have been subject to critical scrutiny, the same does not apply to contemporary African art in the ethnographic museum. Save for the odd exception,<sup>9</sup> the work of contemporary African artists has been co-opted into ethnographic museum in particular ways. Ruth B Phillips observation, that ceramicist Magdalene Odundo and sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp “have become part of the new, revised museum canon of African art and artefact”,<sup>10</sup> reflects the shifts in notions of inclusivity and diversity. Another view is that “the ethnographic museum and the curator of anthropology have had to share epistemological space with the curator of contemporary art and the institutional frame of the museum of art.”<sup>11</sup> Such forthright assertions, coupled with ever more ambitious opportunities and initiatives involving contemporary African art, have continued to emerge during the 2000s. Yet such activity failed to anticipate or critically respond to the ethnographic museum's appropriation of contemporary African art.

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8 In 2016, ‘Jacques Chirac’ was added to the museum's name, as recognition of the former President of France (1995-2007) who initiated the museum's development.

9 Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt illustrated a different approach with the exhibition El Hadji Sy: *Painting, Performance, Politics* in 2015. It noted: “In the mid-1970s, a pioneering move, the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt began collecting contemporary artworks from Africa. Today it has over 3000 paintings, prints and sculptures in its collection.

In 1985, the museum commissioned the artist and curator El Hadji Sy (born 1954 in Dakar) with the task of assembling a new group of works of contemporary art from Senegal, thereby initiating a long-term relationship between Frankfurt and Dakar.”

<http://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/en/ausstellungen/vorschau/5065>

[Accessed 17 October 2017]

10 Ruth Phillips, 951, 2002

11 Ibid.

## Part I

### The Rise of Contemporary African Art

The dominant political discourses of East and West were undone with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent demise of the Soviet Union, signalling the end of the Cold War and rapid change world-wide. As one of the de facto battlegrounds for the Cold War, Africa was immeasurably impacted by these political events. Such seismic political and cultural shifts, the “impact of globalisation on contemporary art and culture” and the “globalising phenomenon” of biennales,<sup>12</sup> resulted in the West’s growing interest in non-western art contemporary art.

The exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 signalled the start of greater interest in art from outside of the West’s traditional exhibition networks.

Although Europe and the United States had staged contemporary African art exhibitions, these had been sporadic affairs.<sup>13</sup> Dakar 66 and Festac 77<sup>14</sup> which took place in Dakar, Senegal in 1966 and Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977 were, until the 1990s, the most significant initiatives to engage and celebrate the work of contemporary African artists and their counterparts across the African diaspora.

During the 1990s, contemporary African art received an unprecedented level of exposure in the West. Prestigious museums and biennales would be the

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12 Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, ‘Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction’ *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, 10 13

13 *Contemporary African Art* staged at Camden Arts Centre, London in 1969 and *Contemporary African Art*, staged at the Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., in 1974.

14 *The First World Festival of Black Arts* held in Dakar, Senegal, 1 - 24 April 1966; *Festac’77*, 15 January - 12 February 1977

fulcrum of much of this early activity, with the work chosen and presented by primarily white Western curators, collectors, and historians.<sup>15</sup> During the course of the 1990s, a growing visible presence of Black curators, writers, historians would begin to populate and thus influence the staging of contemporary African Art in the west. Because of this embrace, ethnographic and anthropological dogma, which viewed African culture as an entity fixed in the past became, if not untenable, certainly contested by greater scrutiny and re-evaluation.

Exhibitions such as “*Primitivism*” were no longer the predominant model. The exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 shifted the focus of Western museums and collectors on to contemporary art practice. It was criticised for failing to “subvert omniscient curatorial authority”,<sup>16</sup> evident in the Modernist/Primitive paradigm. Dominated by white authorial knowledge, that dualism was partially replicated by this new wave of curatorial activity. Nevertheless, this period also witnessed the launch of new journals which introduced Black diasporic perspectives. In art criticism alone, journals such *Third Text* (in Britain) and *African Arts* (in the United States) were joined in the early 1990s by *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* and *Revue Noire* based in the United States and France respectively.<sup>17</sup> The 1999 anthology *Reading the Contemporary* pooled a wide range of articles from these and other journals

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15 For example: *Out of Africa: Contemporary African Art from the Pigozzi Collection*, Saatchi Gallery, London, 1992; *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale*, 1993 was curated by Thomas McEvelley and Susan Vogel.

16 Sidney Kasfir, ‘African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow’ in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* eds Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, Institute of International Visual Arts, London 1999, 88

17 *Nka* was launched in Brooklyn, United States in 1993 as a triannual journal. The France-based quarterly journal *Revue Noire* was published between 1991-2001

and exhibition catalogues of the time<sup>18</sup> by writers, art historians and cultural theorists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Kobena Mercer, V.Y. Mudimbe, Laura Mulvey, Everlyn Nicodemus, Chika Okeke and John Picton.

### **“Primitivism”**

*“Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* [Fig 2.] was staged at Museum of Modern Art New York in 1984.<sup>19</sup> Taking as its starting point the ‘influences’ of ‘tribal’ arts on modern art, *“Primitivism”* presented a white western view of modern art history. The press release described the show’s concept:

Few if any external influences on the work of modern painters and sculptors have been more critical than that of the tribal arts of Africa, Oceania and North America. Since the turn of the century when Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, and others first acquainted themselves with masks and sculptures from these areas, modern artists have continued to display strong interest in the art and culture of tribal societies. The term “Primitivism” is used to describe the Western response to tribal cultures as revealed in the work and thought of modern artists.<sup>20</sup>

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18 *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, eds Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 1999.

19 *“Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* September 27 1984 - January 15 1985, Museum of Modern Art, New York (and touring)

20 Press Release, ‘New Exhibition Opening, September 27 at Museum of Modern Art Examines “Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art’. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, August 1984 [[https://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/6081/releases/MOMA\\_1984\\_0017\\_17.pdf](https://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6081/releases/MOMA_1984_0017_17.pdf)2010]

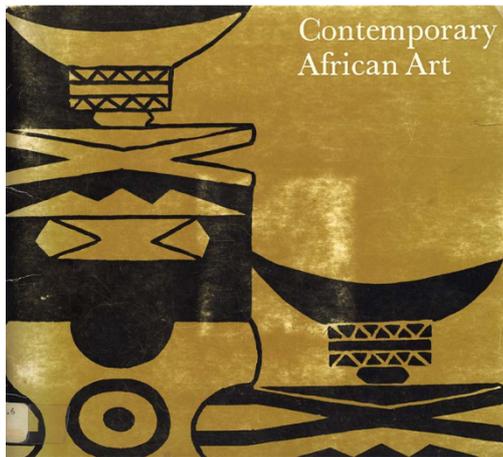


Fig 2. *Contemporary African Art*, exhibition catalogue published by Studio International and Africana Publishing Corporation, Camden Arts Centre, London, 1969

The exhibition included 'modern' art works by Gauguin, Picasso, Brancusi, Modigliani, Klee, the Expressionists and Surrealists. These were presented alongside over 200 "tribal objects from Africa, Oceania and North America".<sup>21</sup>

Alongside the exhibition was a substantial two-volume catalogue spread over 690 pages with over 1000 illustrations. Fifteen essays by historians and scholars including William Rubin, Kirk Varnedoe and Rosalind Krauss explored "the major artistic figures and movements in terms of the complex aesthetic, art historical and sociological problems posed by this dramatic development in the history of modern art."<sup>22</sup> The exhibition was not without its problems. Petrine Archer-Straw eloquently articulated the genesis of such problems noting "The Parisian avant-garde first encountered Africa and black culture in their admiration for African sculptures that ended up in the hands of dealers and museums as a result of colonial trade and pillaging."<sup>23</sup>

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Petrine Archer-Straw, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, 137

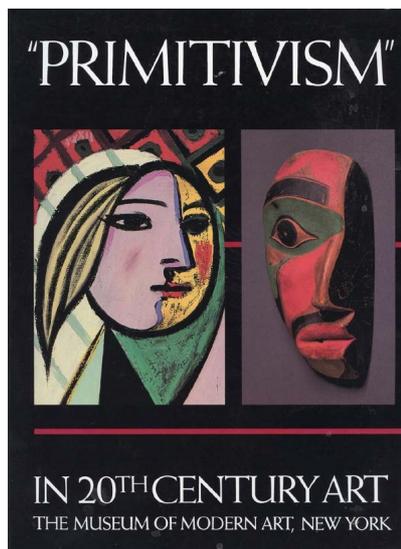


Fig 3. “*Primitivism*” exhibition catalogue cover, 1984

Through the exhibition and catalogue, “*Primitivism*” attempted a historical account of the influence non-Western art had on Western art. For William Rubin, the exhibition’s curator, “*Primitivism*” sought to “understand the Primitive sculptures in terms of the Western context in which modern artists ‘discovered’ them.” However, while bringing new understanding to “Primitivism’s” “intersection in modern Western culture”,<sup>24</sup> it also reaffirmed the narrative of twentieth century art history, which largely excluded contemporary Black artists from the USA, Africa and Europe.<sup>25</sup> Within an institutional context in which Black and other non-Western artists rarely featured in exhibition programmes, “*Primitivism*” constructed the history of modern art through an exclusively white European and American prism. The period of modern art presented in the exhibition and referenced in the catalogues spanned the late nineteenth century

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24 William Rubin, ‘Modernist “Primitivism”’, “*Primitivism*” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, Volume 1, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984, 1

25 “*Primitivism*” took place in New York during a period in which artist Jean- Michel Basquiat had become a key figure in the American and international art world. Basquiat would be both fêted and criticised for what was considered by some commentators as his ‘primitivist’ style of painting.

through to the mid twentieth century.

This period also coincided with significant artistic activity by African American artists, writers, historians and poets. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League was founded in 1914. The idea and interpretation of Africa was therefore an intrinsic and compelling part of artistic practice and political philosophy in America. In *Modern Negro Art* published in 1943, historian James A. Porter cited an excerpt from Countee Cullen's poem *Heritage* with the opening line "What is Africa to Me?". Porter also considers the influence of "African Negro art that intrigued" Sargent Johnson, Richmond Barthé, and James L. Wells.<sup>26</sup> However, aside from the inclusion of thumbnail images of work by Romare Bearden and then emerging sculptor Martin Puryear, no other reference was made to African American culture. African American artists were still during the 1980s routinely excised from mainstream exhibitions in the USA. Their peripheral role in "*Primitivism*" compounded this practice. It also bypassed an opportunity to enhance and even complicate ideas about the relationship between western modernism and notions of primitivism and the influence African art had on a number of African American artists in the early part of the twentieth century such as Augusta Savage, Palmer Hayden, Lois Mailou Jones and Richmond Barthé.<sup>27</sup>

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26 James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, 103-105

27 See the exhibition catalogue *Challenge of the Modern African-American Artists 1925-1945*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, January 23–March 30 2003.

## ***Magiciens de la Terre***

*Magiciens de la Terre* was presented at the Georges Pompidou Centre and La Grande Villette, Paris in 1989.<sup>28</sup> Devised by the Pompidou's then Director Jean-Hubert Martin, this international exhibition brought together the work of over one hundred artists from Europe, North America, Africa, Asia and Australia.<sup>29</sup>

Interest in non-Western art, shifted from a position of modernity, which viewed 'other' cultures through an ethnographic prism, to a post-modern perspective, in which old certainties about identity and 'cultural purity' had become displaced.<sup>30</sup>

The European and North American artists selected for *Magiciens de la Terre* were, to varying degrees, already established or in the process of establishing themselves in the international art world. In this regard, the exhibition followed the path of many other international exhibitions, aspiring to showcase what organisers considered to be the most interesting and important practice of the time. Artists included: Marina Abramović, Rasheed Araeen, Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren, James Lee Byars, Francesco Clemente, Barbara Kruger, Richard Long, Juan Munoz, Nam June Paik, Nancy Spero and Jeff Wall. By also including contemporary artists from beyond Western countries, *Magiciens de la Terre* offered a more pluralistic approach, not previously seen as a legitimate

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28 *Magiciens de la Terre*, Georges Pompidou Centre and La Grande Villette, Paris 18 May - 14 August 1989

29 Artists included Rasheed Araeen, Richard Long, Daniel Buren, Francesco Clemente, Chéri Samba, Tony Cragg, Hans Haacke, Ilya Kabakov, On Kawara, Rebecca Horn, Shirazeh Houshiary, Alfredo Jaar, Nam June Paik and Jeff Wall

30 *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, eds Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 1999. This anthology brought together 22 essays by curators, writers and scholars based in Africa, Europe and America. The essays were originally published between 1991-1996 and reflected the notable critical shift which began to take place during the 1990s in debates, attitudes and perspectives on historical and contemporary African art.

curatorial practice by prestigious museums. Artists included Sunday Jack Akpan, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, Seni Camara, Bodys Isek Kingelez, Agbagli Kossi, Esther Mahlangu, Henry Munyaradzi, Chéri Samba, Jangarh Singh Sharma, Yousuf Thannoon and Ruedi Wem. Artists were drawn from across the globe, including the United States and United Kingdom, Italy and Spain, Nigeria and Iraq, Mozambique and Papua New Guinea. One commentator called *Magiciens de la Terre* “the first truly international exhibition of contemporary art”.<sup>31</sup> Although the exhibition became symbolic of the west’s embrace of contemporary African art, out of the 100 plus artists, contemporary African artists made up about ten percent of the entire selection. Like the exhibition “*Primitivism*”, in *Magiciens de la Terre*, African American artists were conspicuous by their absence.

It was at the time (and continues to be) seen as an important but equally problematic exhibition. Its significance was reflected by the British-based art journal *Third Text*’s decision to translate the exhibition catalogue (from French into English) as part of a ‘Special Issue’.<sup>32</sup> *Third Text*’s editor, Rasheed Araeen, explained that *Magiciens de la Terre* merited such attention because of its “physical scale” and “global ambition” and aspiration to both “represent many different cultures” and to question “those cultural distinctions which have divided the world”.<sup>33</sup> Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe<sup>34</sup> made substantial reference to

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31 Yves Michaud, Editorial, *Cahiers du Musée National d’art Moderne*, op cit, *Third Text* Special Issue 6, Spring 1989, 17

32 The exhibition catalogue was titled *Magiciens de la Terre*, *Les Cahiers Du Musée National D’art Moderne*

33 *Third Text* Special Issue 6, Spring 1989, 8

34 Okwui Enwezor is an internationally recognised curator, writer and founding editor of *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*. Olu Oguibe is an artist, writer and Professor of Art and African-American Studies at the University of Connecticut, Storrs

*Magiciens de la Terre*, in their anthology, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*,<sup>35</sup> describing it as “being both notorious and seminal”.<sup>36</sup> In 2005, historian Thomas McEvelley described *Magiciens de la Terre*, as a “more neutral and less imperialistically colored way to exhibit Western and non-Western works side by side”.<sup>37</sup> Writer Debra J. Meijers referred to the exhibition as a “form of ‘global village’”.<sup>38</sup> Rasheed Araeen considered the exhibition to be progressive in terms of representing a “departure” from exhibitions such as “*Primitivism*”, for not only including objects from other cultures but also living artists.<sup>39</sup> Commonly viewed against “*Primitivism*”,<sup>40</sup> the exhibition took a step towards a more culturally expansive and inclusive view of international contemporary art.

Although one of the artists selected for the exhibition, Araeen found its curatorial approach to be so problematic that it effectively negated its more progressive qualities. Central to Araeen’s criticism was the disparity between the process of selecting Western-based and some non-Western artists. The latter frequently bypassed art school educated practitioners in favour of more traditional and community orientated groups of artists. This approach was,

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35 Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, ‘Introduction’, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, Institute of International Visual arts, 1999, 9

36 Ibid.

37 Thomas McEvelley, ‘How Contemporary African Art Comes to the West’, *African Art Now*, 35

38 Debra J. Meijers, ‘The Museum and the ‘Ahistorical’ Exhibition: The latest gimmick by the arbiters of taste, or an important cultural phenomenon?’ *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, Routledge, 1996, 16

39 *Third Text*, Special Issue 6, Spring 1989, 9

40 McEvelley considered “*Primitivism*” to have “prepared the ground” for *Magiciens de la Terre*. Quoted from his biography in the catalogue *Africa Explores 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, The Center for African Art, Prestel, 1991.

critically, not applied to the selection of Western-based artists. It also reinscribed problematic notions that 'authentic' non-Western art was primarily rooted in completely different constructions of 'tradition' and the past. Araeen lamented the exhibition's underlying assumption that modernity and even post-modernity existed within the metropolitan cities of the West, while 'tradition' and its preservation were characteristic of non-Western 'cultures'.<sup>41</sup> Araeen viewed the show as having perpetuated rather than challenged "preconceived distinctions between the West and non-West".<sup>42</sup>

Entering the Grand Hall of La Villette [sic] and looking towards the end wall, one immediately noticed a large work by Richard Long which covered the whole wall and overshadowed everything else. However, on approaching it, one then saw traditional works by Esther Mahlangu (South Africa) and by the Yuendumu Aboriginal community (Australia). All these works were placed in such a way that their 'similarities' eradicated their differences.<sup>43</sup>

Stuart Hall considered *Magiciens de la Terre* to have exposed the inherent flaws in "re-present[ing] the culture of others".<sup>44</sup> The exhibition juxtaposed 'traditional' and contemporary practice. [Fig 4.]

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41 The selection of Chief Mark Unya, Nathan Emedem, Patrick Vilaire, '6 artistes de la communauté aborigène Yuendumu', *Magiciens de la Terre*, exhibition catalogue. 1989

42 See *Global Visions Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, Published by Kala Press (Iniva Franchise) in association with Iniva, 1994

43 Rasheed Araeen, 'Our Bauhaus Others' Mudhouse' *Third Text*, Special Issue 6 Spring, 1989, 11

44 Stuart Hall, *Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-Imagining the Post-Nation*, *Third Text*, Winter, No. 49, 2000



Fig 4. Traditional paintings by the Yuendumu (aboriginal community in Australia) and in the background 'Red Earth Circle', a work by Richard Long at the Grande Halle, Parc de la Villette, Paris 1989 © Centre Pompidou, Bibliothèque Kandinsky

For example, South African artist Esther Mahlangu was shown not primarily as an artist in her own right but as representative of the Ndebele people of South Africa. Nevertheless, in presenting art by named and living practitioners, the exhibition was still more progressive and inclusive in its approach than much of what had gone before.

While Australian, Latin American, Japanese and Indian artists were included in *Magiciens de la Terre*, the involvement of contemporary African artists has often been the focal point for critiques of the exhibition. Curator Clémentine Deliss' essay, *Free Fall – Freeze Frame: Africa, exhibitions, artists*, originally published in *Third Text* in 1992,<sup>45</sup> is a withering critique of *Magiciens de la Terre*, illustrating the exhibition's continued ability to elicit critical attention from curators and writers. Deliss considered the show to be significant in influencing the curation of contemporary art by artists living outside of Europe and the USA, although she did not elucidate on this assertion. She was more forthcoming in questioning what she deemed to be the show's underlying problematic premise,

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45 Clémentine Deliss, 'Free Fall Freeze Frame' op cit. *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, Routledge, 1996. Original version published in *Third Text*, 18 Spring 1992, 27-51.

noting that its reliance on a “retinal mode of appreciation”<sup>46</sup> had “shied away from uncomfortable questions of cultural identity and differing critical systems, opting instead for a classic modernist thematic: the magician and spirituality.”<sup>47</sup>

For Deliss, the sheer scale and spectacle of the exhibition acted as a decoy and prevented discussion about what she considered to be more pertinent issues raised by the exhibition. She argued that it failed to offer in-depth critical appreciation of art works produced outside of a European and North American context. Equally, the politics at play within the Western art world were not addressed in the selection and presentation of Western-based artists. The exhibition essentially fixated on the binary relationship between Western and non- Western artists.

While the exhibition presented an explicitly, if superficially, more inclusive view of what constituted international contemporary art, for Enwezor and Oguibe its framing of work was still driven by a modernist outlook, in which problematic notions of tradition, authenticity and cultural purity were unequally implied by the differing modes of selection of western and non-western art. Where Deliss deemed *Magiciens de la Terre* to have stifled debate, Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe appraised its presentation of contemporary art in more positive terms. Despite the exhibition’s shortcomings, in their view, it produced a “dialogue between artists of various cultures”.<sup>48</sup>

During the 1990s, contemporary African art and individual artists would continue

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46 Ibid., 284

47 Ibid., 282

48 Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, ‘Introduction’, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, Institute of International Visual arts, 1999, 17

to receive both a greater and a different kind of attention from major gallery institutions internationally than they had previously. Curatorial agendas and attitudes that had underpinned the Museum of Modern Art's "*Primitivism*" exhibition were, if not entirely superseded, now accompanied by exhibitions with a seemingly antithetical, more expansive and engaged approach towards contemporary African art.

The exhibition *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art* was one such show. Staged at the Center for African Art, New York in 1991 (subsequently renamed the Museum for African Art), rather than using the study of African art as merely pretext and spectacle for re-inscribing the hegemony of Western art, *Africa Explores* attempted to introduce a more expansive and nuanced reading of African art as both a historical and contemporary entity. Susan Vogel, the curator of the exhibition noted that:

Africa Explores seeks to focus on Africa, its concerns, and its art and artists in their own contexts and in their own voices. Western perceptions of Africa, and Western uses of African art, are entirely secondary here, as are isolated African uses of Western ideologies and artefacts.<sup>49</sup>

The exhibition was divided into several sections,<sup>50</sup> and accompanied by a substantial catalogue, which included contributions on historical and contemporary aspects of African art by writers and historians based in the US and Europe. Although *Africa Explores* presented work by contemporary African artists, its examination of 'African' art was characteristic of a Western

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49 Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores 20th Century African Art*, The Center for African Art, New York and Prestel, Munich, 9

50 These categories were 'Traditional art', 'New Functional art', 'Urban art', 'International art' and "Extinct" Art'

institutional mind-set, in which Western curators and writers would demarcate the parameters by which contemporary African art should be framed. Vogel conceded as much in declaring that there was “nothing specifically African about this kind of study: we are aware that the whole exercise is typical of late twentieth-century Western scholarship.”<sup>51</sup> Despite her candid view of these shortcomings, this approach towards curating African art would be the dominant model used by many other institutions through the 1990s and into the 2000s.<sup>52</sup>

It was witnessed in exhibitions such as *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Traditions*, Studio Museum Harlem (1990), *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, the Center for African Art, New York (1991), *Out of Africa: Contemporary African Art from the Pigozzi Collection*, Saatchi Gallery, London (1992), *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale*, produced by Museum for African Art, New York, (1993) and *Seen/Unseen*, Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool (1994). The 1990s also saw the rise to prominence of several African artists. These included painter, Cheri Samba from the Democratic Republic of Congo<sup>53</sup>, Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso, and Malian photographer Seydou Keita. William Kentridge was one of most successful and prominent artists to profit from art world interest in contemporary art from Africa. As a white

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51 Vogel, 10

52 Between Europe and the United States these exhibitions have included: *Out of Africa: Contemporary African Artists from the Pigozzi Collection*, 1992, Saatchi Gallery, London; *Africa: Art of a Continent*, 1995, Royal Academy of Arts; *African Art Now*, Menil Collection, 2004; *Africa Re-Mix: Art of a Continent*, Hayward Gallery, 2005.

53 At the time of Cheri Samba’s solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1991, the Democratic Republic of Congo was known as Zaire between 1971 and 1997 until the death of military dictator and President Mobutu Sese Seko. The country’s name would change several times over the coming decade. However, Samba’s work exhibited in the early 1990s referred to the country as Zaire.

South African, Kentridge would be included in survey exhibitions on contemporary African art, such as *Africa Remix*. However, unlike most Black African artists, for whom such exhibitions were a significant source of exposure, Kentridge also received substantial and sustained attention. In the late 1990s, he exhibited in many of the Western art world's most prestigious galleries and festivals.<sup>54</sup> Cheri Samba was one Black African artist who briefly attracted attention from the international art world. Following his inclusion in the exhibition *Magiciens de La Terre*, he became a much sought after contemporary African artist and received a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London in 1991. This was no small feat. At the time the ICA was one of Britain's most prestigious publicly funded venues for contemporary art. After *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings 1981-1984*, Samba would become only the second Black artist to have a solo show at the ICA since its founding in 1946.<sup>55</sup>

Samba was one of a few 'self-taught' African artists to be 'discovered' by French collector and curator André Magnin. Magnin would go on to work for the Italian collector, Jean Pigozzi, establishing him as one of the leading collectors of contemporary African Art. Magnin played an instrumental role in the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, selecting work by several contemporary African artists.

### **The 'Self-Taught' Artist**

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<sup>54</sup> William Kentridge was included in exhibitions such as *Documenta X*, Kassel, 1997; *São Paulo Biennial* and The Drawing Center; New York, 1998; Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art and Venice Biennial in 1999; Bienal de la Habana, Havana and Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany, 2002; Metropolitan Museum New York, 2004; Musée d'art Contemporain, Montreal, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings 1981-1984*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1984; travelled to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1984-1985.

Romuald Hazoumè was one of several 'self-taught' artists 'discovered' during the late 1980s and early 1990s by Pigozzi and Magnin. Prior to his critical success at *documenta 12* in 2007, Hazoumè's career, like several of his peers, had ebbed and flowed. His rise to international acclaim was by no means immediate. Therefore, although much celebrated for his contribution to *Out of Africa: Contemporary African Art from the Pigozzi Collection* staged at the Saatchi Gallery, London in 1992, Hazoumè was not involved in *africa95* but he was subsequently included in *Africa Remix* in 2005. His journey towards international success bears an uncanny resemblance to the international rise of contemporary African art, in which Pigozzi and Magnin were deeply involved. Central to his emergence were his "witty, tongue-in-cheek 'masks'".<sup>56</sup> These masks would continue to play a central role in his art.

Pigozzi and Magnin would become two of the most influential collectors and curators respectively of contemporary African art, together establishing the Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC) in Geneva, Switzerland in 1990. Magnin's approach toward contemporary African art was a continuation of his role in *Magiciens de la Terre*. Historian and art critic, Thomas McEvelley described this approach as one which "ignored the experts and followed an idiosyncratic trail from one self-taught, unschooled artist to another."<sup>57</sup> The CAAC's exclusive commitment to 'discovering' and promoting 'self-taught' African artists, such as Chéri Samba from Democratic Republic of the Congo and Frederic Bruly Bouabré from Ivory Coast, were considered by historian of

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<sup>56</sup> October Gallery <http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/artists/hazoume/index.shtml> [19 August 2017]

<sup>57</sup> Thomas McEvelley, *African Art Now*, 36

African art John Picton as “neo-primitivist exoticism, the new way to wear ‘black’, reinvented by André Magnin for ‘Johnny’ Pigozzi”.<sup>58</sup> Such arguments were attempts to impose a discourse on notions of authentic Africa and African art.<sup>59</sup> Hazoumè’s exhibition at the British Museum would introduce another problematic framing of contemporary African art (explored in Part III).

During the 1990s and 2000s, prolonged and sometimes combative exchanges between various curators and historians were as much a part of the ‘new’ cultural landscape as was the proliferation of ‘African’ exhibitions themselves.<sup>60</sup> For some Western based curators and historians, notably those involved with or affiliated to *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Pigozzi and Magnin reflected a continuance of the problematic discourses and attitudes embodied by “Primitivism” and *Magiciens de la Terre. Forum for African Arts*<sup>61</sup> represented a counter model to CAAC. With a mission to promote contemporary African art globally, the *Forum* aspired to be “an intervention in the patterns of narration of contemporary culture, a re-insertion of passages otherwise likely to be left out,

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58 John Picton, ‘In Vogue, or Flavour of the Month’, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, Institute of International Visual Arts (INIVA), 1999, 125

59 In the introduction to the catalogue published to accompany Camden Arts Centre’s 1969 exhibition *Contemporary African Art*, the question was asked by “intellectuals, relatively comfortable when it comes to questions of history, economics and ‘development’, refuse to consider contemporary African art, especially painting, in a dispassionate, objective way.” Jacqueline Delange and Philip Fry, ‘Introduction’, *Contemporary African Art*, Studio International and African Publishing Corporation, Camden Arts Centre, London August 10 – September 8, 1969, 1970, 6

60 See Olu Oguibe in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* and Thomas McEvilly in *African Art Now Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*.

61 The Forum’s mission was described as follows: “The purpose of the Forum is to promote contemporary African visual arts and culture, to help create a renaissance of artistic creativity by Africans, and to give them exposure on a global scale.” *Authentic/Ex-Centric Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe, A Publication of the Forum for African Arts 1998, 264

as well as an effort to assume responsibility in telling one's own story."<sup>62</sup> The *Forum's* advisory board comprised artists, curators, scholars and art critics based in universities and arts institutions internationally,<sup>63</sup> reflecting the tendency towards increasingly globalised and pluralistic 'networks' operating in the art world, precipitated by the radically expanded numbers of biennales.<sup>64</sup> This was antithetical to CAAC, which was Eurocentric in its approach and interested in art produced largely outside of an educational environment. The *Forum's* major international exhibition, *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* presented at the *Venice Biennale* in 2001, not only represented the pinnacle of the *Forum's* short lived existence but also primarily focused on artists who lived outside of the African continent.<sup>65</sup>

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62 Hassan and Oguibe, *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, 2001, 8

63 The Board comprised: Florence Alexis, Paris; El Anatsui, Nigeria; Ibrahim El Salah, Sudan; Okwui Enwezor, Olu Oguibe, Salah Hassan, Tumelo Mosaka, USA; Gilane Tawadros, UK; Marilyn Martin, South Africa; Obiora Udechukwu, Canton; Koyo Kouoh, Senegal.

64 Prior to the 1990s, biennale exhibitions had in the main been the preserve of a relatively small number of cities. Notable amongst these were the long established international biennales in Venice and Sao Paulo, which started in 1907 and 1951 respectively. Istanbul and Havana would emerge during the 1980s. During the 1990s, the biennale model began to proliferate. These included the *Bamako Encounters (Rencontres de Bamako)*, 1994; *Manifesta, European Biennale of Contemporary Art*, 1994; *Johannesburg Biennale*, 1995; *Dak'Art*, Senegal, 1996; *Liverpool Biennale*, 1999, *Berlin Biennale*, 1998

65 See: *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe, Forum for African Arts, 2001. Exhibition:

“People expect Africans to make masks. So I make masks.”

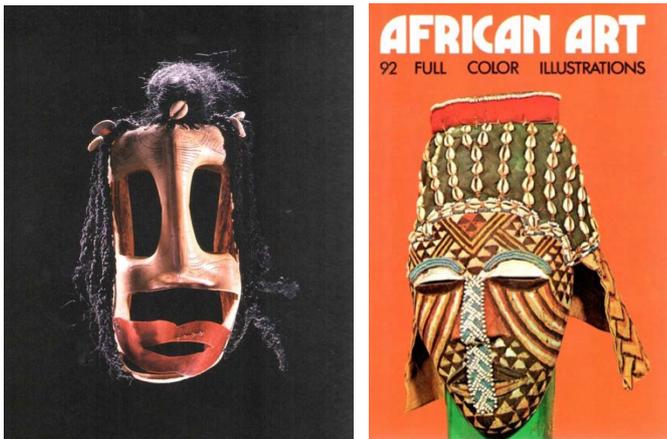


Fig 5. left to right: Romuald Hazoumè *Kirikanta*, mixed media found objects 28 13 x 22cm 1995; *African Art* Publication, Octopus Books, 1972

2007 was a notable year for Romuald Hazoumè. The British Museum purchased and presented his installation, *La Bouche Du Roi*, and the V&A commissioned *Dan Ayido-Houedo, Rainbow Serpent*, a new sculptural work, for *Uncomfortable Truths*. 2007 would culminate with winning the *Arnold Bode Prize* for his installation, *The Dream*, which Hazoumè presented at *Documenta XII*, Kassel, Germany. While 2007 was a particularly auspicious year for Hazoumè, his career had since the early 2000s been on an upward trajectory. He was included in numerous exhibitions around the world during the 2000s, particularly in Europe and the United States. His rise to international prominence and acclaim within the art world can be attributed to his appropriation of the petrol can. His practice also incorporates painting, sculpture, photography and video, but the petrol can has been a constant feature for the best part of two decades. Hazoumè’s playful appropriation of petrol cans, transforming them into ‘masks’, brought him to the attention of

curators and collectors in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>66</sup>

Incorporating a range of other materials such as false hair, cowrie beads (*Kirikanta*, 1995 [Fig. 5]) electrical cable (*Internet*, 1998), a trilby hat (*Beuys II*, 2004), paint brushes (*Armand*, 2007), these masks immediately lent themselves to being interpreted as a postmodern take on Eurocentric attitude towards African art. ‘Tongue in cheek’ was how one writer described them.<sup>67</sup> Art historian Daniela Roth used Hazoumè’s explanation of his work (also reminiscent of Yinka Shonibare<sup>68</sup>) as the title of her essay on the artist, “People expect Africans to make masks. So I make masks.”<sup>69</sup> Roth described Hazoumè’s masks as “monetary-value art”<sup>70</sup> and explained that:

In Europe, where they are appealingly foreign and exotic, masks are the very epitome of African art. On the wall of a living room they take the place of journeys their owner may not even have undertaken... The fact that African masks are collected in Europe and the way in which they are collected say more about the European understanding of “fine art” than about the masks themselves.”<sup>71</sup>

Petrol cans are a ubiquitous object in Benin and are commonly used for ferrying and trading illegally bought petrol. Often manipulated to increase their size to maximise the quantities of petrol they can carry, these containers become

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66 Out of Africa: Contemporary African Artists from the Pigozzi Collection, Saatchi Gallery, London, 1992; First Africus Biennale, Johannesburg, 1995; Liverpool Biennale (title) in 1999.

67 John Picton, *Moving Worlds*, 89

68 For example Shonibare described his use of faux-African fabrics in the following way “The fabrics are signifiers, if you like, of ‘Africaness’ insofar as when people first view the fabric they think of Africa.” ‘Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey’, *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, Prestel: Munich, Berlin, London New York, 2009, 39

69 Daniela Roth, “People expect Africans to make masks. So I make masks”, 55

70 Roth, 50-51

71 Interview with John Picton, *Moving Worlds*, 93

structurally unsafe, making the highly flammable contents more prone to spontaneous explosion. Prior to being appropriated and anthropomorphised by Hazoumè, the petrol can not only has a practical function, but it also carries, almost literally, an important contemporary social meaning, reflecting the desperate lengths people must go to struggle for day-to-day survival. Reading interviews and essays on Hazoumè, it is possible to detect the extent to which a certain amount of role-playing is an integral part of his explanation for work. Hazoumè has offered various other explanations for his use of petrol cans:

Many people think that all my art is made with recycled things, but that's not the case... I have just started to send back to Europe what is sent every day to Africa. Africa has now become a giant rubbish tip, and we Africans were complicit in this because we thought that it would make us money. But what nobody understood is that, one day, this exchange would turn into an unstoppable flood of rubbish. Here in the West you consume and consume, and, when you've finished, you send the rest to Africa because you think it's good for them; they can use the scraps – they can repair these broken things.<sup>72</sup>

Hazoumè positions his masks within a prevailing political and economic context, relating to human consumption, poverty and ecology. His use of waste products, or 'rubbish', as he puts it, intentionally conflates the cultural and the political, the past and the present. The historical 'value' of the African mask, as a desirable, mythical and highly collectable object in Europe is juxtaposed with the contemporary social and economic impact of capitalism. However, Hazoumè's version of the African mask has accrued its own cultural and monetary value within the contemporary art world. Responses to a Hazoumè mask have found a duality of cultural and social 'meaning'. Writer Martin

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72 Martin Henatsch, Romuald Hazoumè: *My Paradise – Made in Porto –Novo*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Germany 2010, 11

Henatsch characterized Hazoumè's approach as "a world-spanning synthesis between the regional roots and international art discourse, between self-critical stock taking and the reflection of tourists' desires; a contemporary reflection on paradise, made in Porto-Novo and using the language of international art."<sup>73</sup>

Hazoumè's masks function as a form of critical intervention in discourses about the 'traditional' and the 'authentic', the 'primitive' and the contemporary.

The critical acclaim these works received from curators and writers alike, as well as their popularity amongst collectors reflect the scope of their appeal.

The appropriation of petrol cans for *La Bouche du Roi*, coupled with Hazoumè's mask motif were combined as part of a large ambitious installation. *La Bouche du Roi* would primarily be exhibited within a number of ethnographic contexts.<sup>74</sup>

Purchased and exhibited by the British Museum, *La Bouche du Roi* was framed by a confluence of narratives pertaining to commemoration, slavery and ethnography.

### ***africa95, Africa 05***

Ethnographic-type exhibitions about African art, such as *Africa: Art of a Continent* at the Royal Academy in 1995, would continue to populate the programmes of museums in America and in Britain during the 1990s.

However, exhibitions like *Africa Explores* and *Magiciens de la Terre*, indicated a shift, if a problematic one, towards greater institutional interest in contemporary

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73 Menil Foundation, Houston and Musée du quai Branly, Paris

74 Chris Spring, 'Art, Resistance and Remembrance', *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums* eds Smith, Cubitt, Wilson, Fouseki, Routledge: New York London, 211, 195

African art practice.

Two years prior to the bicentenary, the UK witnessed in *Africa 05* 'the biggest celebration of African culture ever organised in Britain'.<sup>75</sup> Presented as part of the *Africa 05* initiative, *Africa Remix: Contemporary art of a Continent* [Fig 6.] was organised by four international galleries including the Hayward Gallery, London.<sup>76</sup> Described in the exhibition catalogue as the largest exhibition of contemporary African art ever seen in Europe, such was the scale of the exhibition that, when it came to the Hayward, space limitations<sup>77</sup> meant it was reduced to 60 artists from the original 88 shown in Düsseldorf.

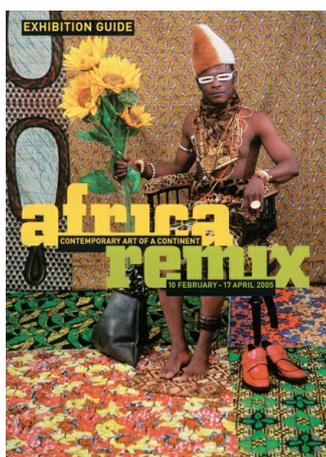


Fig 6. *Africa Remix Contemporary Art of a Continent*, exhibition catalogue 2005, Samuel Fosso, *Le chef: celui qui a vendu l'Afrique aux colons*, from series *Série Tati, autoportraits I-V* 1997

In his review, 'Africa calling',<sup>78</sup> *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones wasted little time in criticising the ethos of the exhibition. Grappling with its curatorial

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75 [www.developments.org.uk/articles/major-africa-exhibitions-hit-london/](http://www.developments.org.uk/articles/major-africa-exhibitions-hit-london/) Programme Director Augustus Casely-Hayford, 2005

76 The exhibition was organised by Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf; Hayward Gallery, London; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.

77 Roger Malbert, 'Preface', *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Hayward Gallery Publishing, abridged format, 2005, 9

78 Jonathan Jones, 'Africa calling', *the Guardian*, Wednesday 9 February, 2005

premise, he raised concerns regarding what he saw as the exhibition's problematic curatorial agenda. Jones asserted: "Africa Remix flails around to find an Africa that can claim its place in the world of biennales, glossy art magazines and proliferating theory."<sup>79</sup> Further evidence of the exhibition's bias and pandering towards a globalised art world was, according to Jones, to be found in the selection of art works. "The exhibition's preference for that which asserts its right to be called truly contemporary and sophisticated means that it includes lots of photographs and lots of video."<sup>80</sup> For Jones, the apparent scale of the exhibition, namely the decision to include over sixty artists, was also central to its problematic nature and shortcomings. Pondering what he perceived to be a "lack of quality control", he argued: "I don't just mean it has bad work, but it aspires to the condition of an art fair or festival, in which a large number of artists of wildly varying merit display one or two works."<sup>81</sup> Artist Cheri Samba was one of a handful of artists singled out for praise by Jones because he "seems to tell us about African contemporary life, rather than setting out to fit into a global art system."<sup>82</sup>

Jones' review highlights various curatorial pathologies. Described in the exhibition catalogue, "as an anthology or compilation, serving to introduce a selection of significant artists to a wider public largely unfamiliar with them,"<sup>83</sup> Jones questions whether the white South African artists included in the exhibition "really need the leg-up?" Furthermore, he criticizes the marketing of

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79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Roger Malbert, 'Introduction; *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Hayward Gallery Publishing, abridged format, 2005, 11

the exhibition for a desire to “connect” with a Western audience. “The image chosen for the publicity is Jane Alexander’s tableau of human and animal hybrid figures on a bed of red sand. It has obviously, irritatingly, been selected because, in a photo, it looks like an African answer to the Chapman brothers.”<sup>84</sup> In actuality, the more prominent exhibition publicity (including the catalogue cover) featured an image by Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso.<sup>85</sup> Jones does attempt to critically examine the exhibition, in touching on numerous issues which could be said to be central to reading *Africa Remix vis-à-vis* the machinations of a globalised art system, and its attendant curatorial and artistic agendas. However, Jones’ critical reading of *Africa Remix* stops short of identifying the exhibition’s shortcomings as symptomatic of institutional agendas.

The Hayward Gallery’s exhibition programme comprises a variety of exhibition formats: solo shows, historical and occasionally thematic exhibitions. They are usually initiated by the Hayward or, as in the case of *Africa Remix*, as part of an international collaboration. In *Africa Remix*, a conscious decision was made to present an exhibition in which artists could only show what Jones laments as “one or two works”. However, Jones does not attribute this curatorial approach or restriction to the commissioning institution.

Sally O’Reilly’s review, in *Art Monthly*, took its cue from Jones, opening with the

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84 ‘Africa calling’, Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 9 February 2005

85 Although an image of Jane Alexander’s *African Adventure* may have appeared on some publicity material for the exhibition, Samuel Fosso’s, *Le chef: celui qui a vendu l’Afrique aux colons*, from the series *Serie Tati, auto-portraits I–V*, 1997 was reproduced on the cover of the Hayward Gallery’s exhibition catalogue, poster and brochure.

following lines: “Even the unphasable [sic] Jonathan Jones confessed to feelings of inadequacy when writing about ‘Africa Remix’ ...It was not my idea of fun to review ‘Africa Remix’ either, and the idea would be horrifying, I imagine, to most European art critics, especially those from colonising nations.”<sup>86</sup> Where Jones was more forthcoming in expressing his concerns about the exhibition, O’Reilly opted for a more reserved critique, which she justified by her assertion that she was not best placed to ‘judge’ the exhibition. The show warranted a reviewer, someone with “first-hand knowledge and understanding”<sup>87</sup> of the African continent. O’Reilly effectively tip-toed about the exhibition. Her tentativeness and “wishing to do the right thing”<sup>88</sup> explains her more descriptive account of the exhibition.

Neither Jones or O’Reilly noticed the significance of *Africa Remix* taking place as part of the umbrella initiative *Africa 05*. Yet it was this initiative, described as “a watershed moment in the development and promotion of African arts and culture in the UK”<sup>89</sup> which in so many ways determined the *en masse* rationale of *Africa Remix*. Hyperbolic publicity statements for *Africa 05* set the tone. Programme Director Gus Casely-Hayford stated: “We are confident that the year will challenge many people’s perceptions about Africa and will place many African artists firmly within the UK and international arts scene.”<sup>90</sup> Despite this impression of doing something new, *Africa 05* was closely modelled on *africa95*,

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86 Sally O’Reilly, ‘Africa Remix’, *Art Monthly*, May 2005, issue 286, 27-28

87 Ibid.

88 Sally O’Reilly, ‘Africa Remix’, *Art Monthly*, May 2005, issue 286, 27-28

89 [www.developments.org.uk/articles/major-africa-exhibitions-hit-london/](http://www.developments.org.uk/articles/major-africa-exhibitions-hit-london/), Programme Director Augustus Casely-Hayford, 2005

90 Ibid.

which took place across Britain between August-December 1995. As with *Africa 05*, *africa95*'s programme (sub-titled "A Season Celebrating the Arts of Africa"), comprised exhibitions, cinema, music, performing arts, and literature, as well as conferences, workshops, residencies, and programmes for television and radio. This provides an important, if not fundamental context within which to read *Africa 05*, not least because contemporary African art exhibitions were based on a similar model to *Africa Remix*.

*africa95* was, perhaps, more justified in its proclamation that it was "the largest ever nationwide season of the arts of Africa and the African Diaspora to be held in the UK."<sup>91</sup> As the first high profile and nationwide attempt to present contemporary African art, it was supported by several prestigious publicly funded art galleries who had, in the main, never previously embarked on presenting contemporary African art as part of their exhibition programmes. The concept of *africa95* captured the interest of numerous galleries across the UK, including London's major institutions such as the Royal Academy of the Arts, Whitechapel Art Gallery and Serpentine, as well as Tate Liverpool. Each contributed to a programme of historical and contemporary African art previously unseen in the UK.<sup>92</sup> Ironically, although *africa95*'s director, Clémentine Deliss, brought new levels of interest and engagement in African arts, it was not without problems. The very shortcomings she had identified in *Magiciens de la Terre*, in terms of its unwieldy scale and spectacle, would surface in *africa95*. Despite creating opportunities for historical and

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91 Sir Michael Caine, *africa95*, brochure, *Introduction*, 1995, 2

92 Contemporary art exhibitions staged as part of *africa95* included: *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*, Whitechapel Art Gallery; *Big City*, Serpentine Gallery; and *Vital: Three Contemporary African Artists*, Tate Liverpool.

contemporary African art to be seen, *africa95* existed in a cultural, temporal and political vacuum.

Jones and O'Reilly critically lacked historical perspective; neither one cited *africa95* as the obvious precursor to *Africa 05*. In his article on *Africa 05*, curator and writer Eddie Chambers argued that:

If London's biggest galleries are only prepared to take art from Africa seriously once every ten years, and if the 'africa95'/'Africa 05' model is to be the one with which we are saddled, then there can presumably be little genuine hope of African art gaining lasting acceptance and prominence.<sup>93</sup>

*Africa Remix* reprised the model of a one-in-a-decade mega exhibition. Ten years earlier, the Whitechapel Art Gallery presented *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*<sup>94</sup> as part of *africa95*, which included no fewer than sixty artists. A similar number were selected for the Hayward Gallery's iteration of *Africa Remix*.<sup>95</sup> Despite gestures of adulation and celebration in both *africa95* and *Africa 05*, none of the major galleries involved followed up their mega exhibitions, with exhibitions focused on solo or smaller groupings of artists.

Attention given to contemporary African artists during the 1990s and 2000s was also characterised by periods of intense institutional interest followed by fallow periods of relative indifference. This sporadic engagement was exemplified by *africa95* and *Africa 05*. These festivals would include exhibitions at Britain's

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93 Eddie Chambers, 'Polemic', *Africa 05*, *Art Monthly*, Issue 284, March 2005, 44

94 *Seven Stories: About Modern Art in Africa* Whitechapel Art Gallery, 27 September – 26 November 1995 (touring)

95 The exhibition included significantly more artists when shown at Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf. Roger Malbert, Senior Curator at Hayward Gallery explained that: "Because of space limitations, the London show has been reduced, and we apologise to the artists who have been omitted for this inescapable reason." 'Preface', *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Hayward Gallery, London, 2005, 9

most prestigious galleries, including the Hayward Gallery, Serpentine Gallery, Tate, Liverpool, Royal Academy of Arts and Whitechapel Art Gallery. Between *africa95* and *Africa 05*, these galleries would not stage any exhibitions on contemporary African art.

Exhibitions and publications on contemporary African art and history continued unabated into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Each one seeming to offering a historical or contemporary overview of the entire continent.<sup>96</sup> Although many projects before and subsequently explore the post-colonial condition, few could articulate the profound imbalance between the contemporary art initiatives staged within and without the African continent. African contemporary art and art history were effectively resources plundered and removed, like enslaved people, artefacts, minerals, for the benefit of the west. Symptomatic of this was the short-lived *Johannesburg Biennale* which ended after two exhibitions in 1995 and 1997, “falling victim to ongoing debate about the relevance of an international biennial in post-apartheid South Africa.”<sup>97</sup>

*Africa 05* reprised its predecessor’s modus operandi, proclaiming the ‘arts’ of the African continent, but in a changed environment. Whilst *africa95* came into being during the moribund years of John Major’s Conservative government, *Africa 05* was launched in February 2005, three months short of New Labour

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96 For example *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, and *Africas: The Artist and the City: A Journey and an Exhibition* curated by Okwui Enwezor. organised by Museum Villa Stuck, Munich February 15 – April 22 2001, touring to House of World Cultures, Berlin in the Martin Gropius Bau; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

*Africas: The Artist and the City: A Journey and an Exhibition*, curated by Pep Subirós, Centre du Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona 29 May - 11 September 2001

97 Enwezor and Agulu, *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, 345

being re-elected for a third term in government. It coincided with the UK's G8 Presidency, which included the G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland where, under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair, "Africa and climate change" were "top of the agenda".<sup>98</sup> The British Museum was a major protagonist in both *Africa 05* and the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. This represented the extent to which culture and politics shared a new symbiotic relationship. Further still, underscored by colonial traits of paternalism and benevolence, the particular use of contemporary African art introduced another problematic dimension to this relationship.

## **Part II**

### **The British Museum and Contemporary African Art**

Contemporary African art has increasingly become an integral feature of the British museum over the past two decades. As an institution with a global reach, the British Museum also has the power to attract extensive public funding and corporate investment. The museum can access resources enabling it to offer curators and artists lucrative and, on occasion, career changing opportunities to commission and create new work. These opportunities often involve artists of colour and appear to be celebrated as evidence of on-going strides towards cultural pluralism, equality and inclusion.

The acquisition and presentation of contemporary African art over the past two decades reflect a shift in the museum's policy. However, the shift has not transformed power relations within the realm of the ethnographic museum for the better. On the contrary, such strategies have realigned rather than

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<sup>98</sup> Number10.gov.uk <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page7442>

overhauled the British Museum's ethnographic project.

The "official rubber stamping"<sup>99</sup> and subsequent national tour of *La Bouche du Roi* made it the most prominent contemporary art work to be used in the bicentenary. It was also part of the British Museum's wider policy of acquiring work by contemporary African artists, which accelerated during the early 2000s. However, the British Museum's interest in contemporary African art dates to *africa95* and sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp's exhibition *Play and Display: Steel Masquerades from Top to Toe* at the now defunct Museum of Mankind<sup>100</sup> in London. Presented in relation to the museum's wider exhibitions and displays on African art and culture, these contemporary art programmes were situated within the museum's newly refurbished African galleries (later renamed Sainsbury's African galleries).<sup>101</sup>

The British Museum's leading role in staging *Africa 05* included the commission of contemporary art by African artists. As part of its contribution, the museum commissioned four Mozambican artists to produce a new sculptural work. The artists were: Cristovao Canhavato (Kester), Hilario Nhatugueja, Fiel dos Santos

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99 "The British Museum is not renowned for the importation of sub-Saharan African installations artists, or for buying their work, but under Neil MacGregor, the politically canny and economically wired museum politico who took over directorship of the museum in 2002, all that was going to change." Marcus Wood, *Imagining Slavery*, 171

100 Between 1970-2004, the Museum of Mankind incorporated the British Museum's Department of Ethnography.

101 *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art*, InIVA and British Museum, London, 1995. Iniva described this exhibition in the following way: "Curated by James Putnam, curator of the Egyptian Antiquities Department at the British Museum, *Time Machine* was an exhibition which contested the idea that the British Museum and its ancient Egyptian artefacts are stagnant remnants of the past, disconnected from the present. Installed in the vast Egyptian sculpture gallery the works by twelve artists presented a rare juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary art." [http://www.iniva.org/shop/voices\\_on\\_art\\_amp\\_culture/time\\_machine](http://www.iniva.org/shop/voices_on_art_amp_culture/time_machine) [Accessed 13 March 2017]

and Adelino Serafim Maté.



Fig 7. *Tree of Life*  
The workshops of the TAE collective,  
Maputo, Mozambique, 2005

*The Tree of Life* [Fig 7.], was initially temporarily installed in the museum's Great Court, and then then became part of the museum's permanent collection of contemporary African art in the African galleries. Opened in 2001, these galleries were the locus for the museum's substantial holdings of African artefacts, but also for art commissions and acquisitions by contemporary African artists. Notably, these commissions would not be presented as works of art. Nor were they a straightforward part of the museum's contemporary art programme. Given the warfare subject matter, *Tree of Life* and *Throne of Weapons* would have been more contextualised if presented at the Imperial War Museum. Instead as single works, such bit-part presentations were incongruous with the ethnographic context and wider contemporary art practice and discourse. Contemporary African art functioned as part of the museum's self-serving strategy for marketing and re-branding itself, not as a repository of stolen African artefacts but one actively engaged in certain forms of contemporary art, history and politics.

*Tree of Life* is a sculpture standing some 11 feet in height, made from

decommissioned weapons, such as AK47 assault rifles, pistols and parts of rocket launchers, which have been dismantled into their component parts and then welded together to form a tree-like structure. Between 1977 and 1992, Mozambique endured a violent and nation crippling civil war, beginning only two years after achieving its independence from, Portugal. Mozambique suffered a similar fate to other African countries transitioning from colonial to post-colonial rule, in becoming a proxy battleground for Cold War hostilities between the Soviet Union and the USA. In being supported by one of the two super powers, combatants in Mozambique's civil war gained access to the sort and quantities of weaponry only super powers could supply.

The weapons used in *Tree of Life* represent one of the bitter legacies of the civil war. The proliferation of weaponry throughout Mozambique meant that, following the end of the war, many guns remained unaccounted for and were buried or hidden away. In 1995, a Church-led initiative established a non-governmental amnesty on weapons. *Transforming Arms into Tools*<sup>102</sup> encouraged people and former combatants to exchange their weapons for construction and agricultural tools as well as domestic appliances. As part of the decommissioning process, the weapons were given to artists based in the capital city of Maputo, to produce sculptural works. The sculpture *Throne of Weapons* (2002) by the artist Cristóvão Canhavato, also known as Kester, was one of the first produced under *Transforming Arms into Tools* to gain international recognition. Originally included in the exhibition *Swords into Ploughshares. Transforming Arms into Art*, at London's OXO Tower in 2002, the

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102 A charity established in 1995 by Bishop Dinis Sengulane of the Christian Council of Mozambique with the support of Christian Aid.  
[<http://www.almalink.org/transtool.htm>]

British Museum bought this work and subsequently toured it around Britain. Two years later, the British Museum would work with *Transforming Arms into Tools* to commission *Tree of Life*. Sculptures such as *Tree of Life* and *Throne of Weapons* introduced a commemorative dimension to the museum's engagement with contemporary African art. In contrast, Sokari Douglas Camp's *Asoebi*, commissioned as part of *Africa 05*, celebrated African womanhood and Yoruba culture.<sup>103</sup> Such commissions have been spectacular and colourful, figurative and formal. Although they explore ideas of ritual and spirituality, themes relating to masquerade and civil war, as contemporary art works, their insertion into an ethnographic context is left unexplained.

In another exhibition by Sokari Douglas Camp presented at the Museum of Mankind, *Play and Display*, the essayists recognised Douglas Camp's calibre as a contemporary sculptor. However, beyond such plaudits neither writer expressed an opinion on the relationship between Douglas Camp's work and the Museum of Mankind.<sup>104</sup> The brochure accompanying *La Bouche du Roi* similarly offered no contextualising commentary. Within such historical and institutional contexts (the bicentenary and the British Museum) in which ideas of history, preservation and interpretation are central tenets, the absence of a critically informed text appears both inexplicable and political. It functions as a means of negating certain forms of critical engagement. The bicentenary's

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[https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/loan\\_in/s/sokari\\_douglas\\_camp,\\_asoebi,\\_o.aspx](https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/loan_in/s/sokari_douglas_camp,_asoebi,_o.aspx) [Accessed 5 May 2014]

104 Although the exhibition was staged to coincide with *africa95*, neither Horton or Hubbard ventured an opinion. *Play and Display Steel Masquerades From Top to ~Toe: Sculpture* by Sokari Douglas Camp, 'Sokari Douglas Camp Ekine Woman in London?' by Robin Horton and 'The Sculpture of Sokari Douglas Camp' by Sue Hubbard, Museum of Mankind, 1995.

ethical and moral imperative diminished and thus obscured from view the need for *La Bouche du Roi* to be read beyond this immediate context. This wider view of the museum's collecting policy also contextualises its twenty-year acquisition policy of contemporary African art.

The British Museum's strategy for presenting a supposedly more pluralistic and inclusive concept to history and culture was embodied by *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, a collaborative initiative with BBC Radio 4.<sup>105</sup>

*A History of the World in 100 Objects* inscribed itself as a global educator, a "museum of, and for, the world".<sup>106</sup> Neil MacGregor, then director of the museum, explained the concept of the programme which, despite its pronounced diversity of interest, still bore the hallmarks of a colonial adventurer:

In these programmes, I'm travelling back in time, and across the globe, to see how we humans over two million years have shaped our world and been shaped by it, and I'm going to tell this story exclusively through the things that humans have made: all sorts of things, carefully designed, and then either admired and preserved, or used, broken and thrown away. I've chosen just a hundred objects from different points on our journey, from a cooking pot to a golden galleon, from a Stone Age tool to a credit card.<sup>107</sup>

Whilst the 100 objects explored a wide range of histories and objects, it also included a work of contemporary art. *Throne of Weapons* was 98<sup>th</sup> on the list. It was commissioned by the British Museum and, as the BBC explained: "It

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105 [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_world.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx) [Accessed 16 September 2017]

106 Neil MacGregor 'The best of Britishness', *Museums Journal* March 2006, 15

107 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_World\\_in\\_100\\_Objects](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_History_of_the_World_in_100_Objects) Neil MacGregor, Programme 1, broadcast 18 January 2010 [Accessed 27 February 2017]

represents both the tragedy of that war and the human triumph of those who achieved lasting peace".<sup>108</sup>

### **Part III**

#### ***La Bouche Du Roi* and the Bicentenary**

The British Museum will never be the same again.<sup>109</sup>— Frances Carey

This part begins with a descriptive account of the two separate but connected components which form *La Bouche du Roi*. The floor-based installation was made in 1997. A video work was produced as part of the work in 2005. The floor-based component explores abolition iconography, and the politics of the ethnographic museum. The emerging interest by Western museums in contemporary African art was, during the 1990s, a catalyst for ethnographic museums. This section then explores how *La Bouche du Roi* was critically received and the way it was framed, and how debates around contemporary African art and the ethnographic context were largely ignored by the institution and reviewers alike.

*La Bouche du Roi* comprises two distinct components; a floor-based multi-sensory installation including objects, sounds, and odours, and a video work presented in a separate space. Its main part is physically and visually imposing, measuring more than ten metres in length with over three hundred plastic petrol cans. Each has its base cut away, with handles and spouts personifying human

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108 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/97OnxVXaQkehIbliKKDB6A>  
[Accessed 27 February 2017]

109 Christopher Spring 'Art, Resistance and Remembrance', *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagement*, eds Smith, Cubitt, Wilson Fouseki, Routledge, New York London, 2011, 209

facial features, reminiscent of Hazoumè's anthropomorphised 'mask' works. Where Hazoumè's one-off mask works vary in shape, size and colour, in *La Bouche Du Roi* there is a sense of uniformity. This denotes the brutal and dehumanising experience on board the slave ship. However, rather than being merely a mass of bodies, each mask has distinct markings to represent an individual. Large masks signify adults, while the smaller masks represent children. At the head of Hazoumè's floor-based ship, standing side by side apart from the other masks, are a yellow and a black mask. The yellow mask represents *La Chacha*, a white Portuguese ruler of Dahomey during the 1700s. The black mask is the King of Dahomey. Placed side-by-side like this, these two masks signify the complicity between Europeans traders and Africans rulers.

Arranged in rows, the rest of the masks are not laid side-by-side, but instead each one sits partially raised on the next, with only the last in each row sitting completely on the floor. This partial stacking alludes to the miserable cramped conditions in which the enslaved were transported. Euphemistically known as 'tight packing',<sup>110</sup> all available space on board the ship was utilised to maximise 'human cargo'. Often, 'tight packing' resulted in a greater loss of life than the practice of 'loose packing', but still brought higher profits to these ship's investors.<sup>111</sup>

The arrangement of *La Bouche du Roi* takes its cue from part of the iconic image in the engraving *Description of a Slave Ship*, from 1789. Hazoumè's installation most closely resembles one of the seven images originally produced as part of this schematic print; an aerial view of the slave carrying vessel which

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110 Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes*, 106

111 *Ibid.*, 106-107

shows literally hundreds of identical Black figures crammed into the ship, from bow to stern, vertically, horizontally and diagonally. Unlike the original diagram, in which the depiction of human cargo is portrayed as a unified mass of bodies, Hazoumè's three-dimensional reworking of the engraving also uses other devices to propel Black agency to the fore, through culturally and religiously loaded objects, sounds and smell.



Fig 8. Romuald Hazoumè  
*La Bouche Du Roi* (detail) 1997/2005

First, although the masks appear as an almost uniform mass of bodies, each has its own distinct adornment, such as painted markings, small carved figures or set of beads tied to it [Fig 8.]. Curator Matthew Drutt describes how “each of these masks bears a symbol, name, or object that refers to an African god whom the slaves might have invoked as they made their way into bondage”.<sup>112</sup>

Presented in a space where all available diffused lighting is directed towards the work, creates an eerie and mournful spectacle. The surrounding darkness alludes to the sea at night. The sombre lighting sprayed across the arrangement also reveals other objects such as cowrie shells, cloth, and bottles of alcohol arranged in neat groups at the ship's stern. A large rifle, also laid at

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112 *La Bouche Du Roi*, exhibition catalogue, The Menil Collection, 2005, 5

the ship's stern, reminds us that, despite the seeming order, violence and force were an intrinsic part of slave trading. Such goods and weapons were the choice 'currency' and 'tools of the trade' used as part of a ruthless bartering process. The aromas which pollute the atmosphere in and around the installation are a cocktail of sweet smelling spices and an acrid smell of urine and sweat. Where the former symbolises the use of spices as part of the bartering process of slave trading, the latter recall the unforgiving environment of a slave ship.

Laid out and arranged in an orderly and almost matter of fact way, the work mimics a 'reconstruction' or the display of material evidence, as if its component parts are laid out as 'evidence' of the slave trade.

Two soundtracks played simultaneously emanate from underneath the masks. One a recital of slave names and the other a form of lamentation, together they produce a low drone-like sound of overlapping voices, speaking in the different West African tongues of Yoruba, Idaacha, Mahi, Mina and Holli.<sup>113</sup> These human utterances offer another means by which the unimaginable physical and psychological trauma endured during the 'middle passage' are remembered:

Sometimes in the night, as the sailors lay on deck and tried to sleep, they heard from below "an howling [sic] melancholy noise, expressive of extreme anguish." When Dr. Trotter told his interpreter, a slave woman, to inquire about the cause of the noise, "she discovered it to be owing to their having dreamt they were in their own country, and finding themselves when awake, in the hold of a slave ship."<sup>114</sup>

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113 Romuald Hazoumè, *La Bouche du Roi*, exhibition catalogue, The Menil Collection, 2005, 22-25

114 Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes*, 115-116

Hazoumè's use of sound, voice and language function as devices for humanising and acknowledging the cultural heterogeneity of a forcibly aggregated and hapless 'human cargo'.

*La Bouche du Roi* takes its name from a coastal area in Benin where, during the height of the slave trade, Africans were sold into slavery. According to Hazoumè, *La Bouche Du Roi* is a "mistranslation of Boca do Rio, which, in Portuguese, refers to the mouth of the river Mono, the place where Portuguese slave ships would anchor off the river mouth while waiting to take their human cargo aboard."<sup>115</sup> The title literally translates from French as 'the mouth of the king'. Written in French (Benin's dominant national tongue) rather than Fon, it is another reminder of a colonial legacy.

A continuous video loop forms the second component of *La Bouche du Roi*, played on a small monitor in an adjacent gallery space. The video (also titled *La Bouche du Roi*) depicts the journeys undertaken by men on motorbikes through the city streets of Porto Novo, Benin, carrying contraband petrol brought from across the border in Nigeria. Illegally tapped from pipelines and transported on land or by boat, this unrefined petrol, known as *kpayo*, (meaning bootleg petrol) is sold by children and women on the streets of the towns and cities of Benin. More affordable to the Beninese than the city's 'official' fuel sources, petrol is a valuable and an essential commodity, which provides a vital means of income.<sup>116</sup>

Hazoumè's video appears to be the very antithesis of the installation. Shown on

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115 John, Picton, *Moving Worlds*, 92

116 Andy Rice, 'Dirty Petrol: The story of Benin's benevolent fuel bandits', Daily Maverick [23 December 2013]

a small monitor, it does not have the same physical presence. However, it is a compelling account. Filmed using a hand-held camera, its construction and production is akin to a low budget documentary-*cum*-tourist video. Devoid of memorialisation, the video is concerned with contemporary life, portraying fleeting moments of 'everyday' life on the streets of Porto Novo. It is an important part of *La Bouche du Roi*, demonstrating the significance of the petrol-can in Hazoumè's practice. Though typically described as petrol-cans or jerry-cans they are made from plastic, derived from petrochemicals. This adds a further potency to Hazoumè's central leitmotif. The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta district of Nigeria during the 1950s enabled the country to become Africa's leading producer and exporter of petroleum. Democratic governments and military dictatorships alike have colluded with multinationals in generating huge revenues, but at an almost incalculable cost to both local populations and the environment.

As a multi-media installation, *La Bouche du Roi* has a profoundly commemorative dimension pertaining to the legacy of the slave trade. Equally, the video component about the relationship between the West and contemporary Africa, makes it a work of social commentary. In several interviews conducted before and after the bicentenary, Hazoumè expressed his intentions in forthright and often quite polemical terms. Talking with John Picton, Professor Emeritus in African Art, School of Oriental and African Studies, in 2005, Hazoumè described *La Bouche du Roi* as one of the most important works he had ever made, and elaborated:

I made this installation to show how very difficult it is to survive in present-day Africa, and I made this

symbol – of plastic jerry cans – to represent those slaves of long ago as well as the slaves today. It says that nothing has changed; it shows how people work in the black markets of today, and these people make the same gestures, have the same attitudes even the same faces as those people of long ago who were sold into slavery.<sup>117</sup>

This interview followed shortly after Hazoumè had exhibited *La Bouche du Roi* at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas as part of a citywide exhibition, *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*.<sup>118</sup> In this exhibition, Hazoumè presented both the floor-based installation and the new video work. The following words were an integral part of the installation which re-inscribed the thematic importance of the slave ship:

They didn't know where they were going, but they knew where they had come from. Today they still don't know where they are going and they have forgotten where they come from.<sup>119</sup>

In *La Bouche du Roi*, the image of the slave ship functioned literally and metaphorically, but in this exhibition only fleeting reference was made to the eighteenth-century engraving. Hazoumè also gave no indication that *La Bouche du Roi* was concerned with the history associated with the abolitionist commissioned engraving. He was more concerned with offering an African perspective on what he saw as the ongoing impact of slavery, rather than honouring British abolitionism. It is important to remember that the two components of this work were made in 1997 and 2005 and not with Britain's bicentenary commemorations in mind. However, during the bicentenary, the

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117 Romuald Hazoumè: An Itinerant Artist, An interview with John Picton Arranged by Gerard Houghton', *Moving Worlds*, 92-93

118 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the CAAC: Contemporary African Art Collection, presented January 29 – May 8, 2005, at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

119 Exhibition brochure, *La Bouche du Roi: an artwork* by Romuald Hazoumè, British Museum, 2007

*Description of a Slave Ship*, an image steeped in abolitionist history, became one of the dominant reference points for reading *La Bouche du Roi*. Prior to examining responses to *La Bouche du Roi*, it is useful to provide a reading of the historical importance of the *Description*.

### **A description of the *Description***

*Description of a Slave Ship* was commissioned by the London Committee of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and published in 1789. Using significant advances in naval technical drawing,<sup>120</sup> the engraving presented detailed and proportioned diagrams of the inside of a slave-carrying vessel. Unlike another abolitionist commissioned engraving, based on a fictional slave-carrying vessel,<sup>121</sup> the *Description* was based on an actual slave carrier, named the *Brookes* after the family of builders in Liverpool who built it.<sup>122</sup> Unlike many other slave ships, it was purpose-built to carry slaves. However, the decision to base an anti-slave trade drawing on this slave ship was made more arbitrarily. The *Brookes* was the first ship named in an alphabetical list held by Captain Parrey of the Royal Navy, who is believed to have produced the original drawing upon which the engraving was based.<sup>123</sup> Parrey had originally been sent to Liverpool to compile a report for the House of Commons on the measurements of 'typical' slave vessels. The *Brookes* was a 320 ton vessel and was considered by Parrey to be a typical slave ship. Its tonnage meant that, in

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120 Wood, *Blind Memory*, 19

121 *Plan of an African Ship's Lower Deck with Negroes in Proportion of only One to a Ton* was commissioned by the Plymouth Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. See Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory*, 25

122 Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870*, 413

123 Wood, op. cit., *Black Cargoes*, 26

law, the vessel could carry 454 slaves. Parrey's final drawing used in the engraving showed 451 slaves crammed into the ship because he "failed to see how the [slave] captain could find room for three more".<sup>124</sup> Despite this, prior to the law being passed in 1788 restricting numbers of slaves carried per ton, the *Brookes* had been known to have carried upwards of 600 slaves across the Atlantic.<sup>125</sup>

The engraving *Description of a Slave Ship* comprises seven drawings made of different views of the slave ship, showing "the manner in which slaves could legally be packed onto the Liverpool slaver the *Brookes*".<sup>126</sup> Four of the smaller images in the engraving show cross-sections and details of the confined spaces into which slaves were packed. *FIG. II* The three largest drawings within the engraving depict the entire length of the ship. *FIG. I* gives a sideways view of how slaves were packed across four decks. *FIG. V* is an aerial view of the upper deck in which slaves are tightly packed around the ship's perimeter.

*FIG. IV*, another aerial view, this time of the lower deck, depicts how, from bow to stern, slaves were compressed vertically and horizontally into this space, save for two small rectangles located in the ship's bow and described as 'Store Room'.

Originally printed in England as broadsides, first in copper and then wood engravings, the *Description* would subsequently be reproduced and disseminated in various adapted forms in France and the 'free states' of the

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124 Mannix and Cowley, *Black Cargoes*, 107

125 Ibid., "Parliament was told by reliable witnesses, including Dr Thomas Trotter, formerly surgeon of the *Brookes*, that before the law was passed she had carried 600 slaves on one voyage and 609 on another". 107

126 Wood, *Blind Memory*, p.17

United States of America. Credited with being the first form of effective printed propaganda of its kind, the *Description* has consistently and almost without reservation been attributed an importance and status unrivalled in the annals of Atlantic slavery history. The *Description's* importance to the abolitionist narrative in part stems from its own production during the campaign's fledgling years. In his recent account of Britain's role in abolishing slavery, historian Adam Hochschild reflects on the enduring power of the *Description*:

You have seen this diagram. Rare is the illustrated school book of world history, or book or television documentary about the slave trade that does not show the famous top-down schematic view of the *Brookes*, with the slaves' bodies as close together as anchovies in a can. Part of its brilliance was that it was unanswerable. What could the slave interests do, make a poster of happy slaves celebrating on shipboard? Precise, understated, and eloquent in its starkness, it remains one of the most widely reproduced political graphics of all time.<sup>127</sup>

Hochschild's appreciation of the engraving's brilliance reflects the extent to which the *Description* has continued to be viewed as intrinsic to the abolitionist movement. Slavery historian James Walvin noted: "Of all the imaginative publicity coups organised by the abolitionists, few were as successful – or better remembered to this day."<sup>128</sup>

In *Blind Memory*, Marcus Wood names the *Description* as "the most famous, widely reproduced and widely adapted image representing slave conditions on the middle passage ever made."<sup>129</sup> Its original propaganda function during the late eighteenth century eventually became visual shorthand signifying the

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127 Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 156

128 Walvin, *Black Ivory*, 46

129 Wood, *Blind Memory*, 17

brutality and horror of the middle passage. Beyond historical accounts, the engraving has regularly been used on book covers, record sleeves, t-shirts and other memorabilia.<sup>130</sup> Its multiple manifestations, the majority of which came into being long after it served its original function, make it a *de facto* if unconventional form of remembrance. Tom Lubbock described the engraving as resembling “a mass grave” which “would have tapped into strong contemporary fears – aroused by *The Monk* and other 18<sup>th</sup>- Century gothic fiction – about confinement and being buried alive. No representational picture could have conveyed that terror with the visual power of this cross section diagram.”<sup>131</sup>

Since the late 1990s, Marcus Wood has written extensively on the status and understanding of slavery imagery. One of his main concerns centres on how scholarship on slavery has paid comparatively little attention to the role and importance of visual imagery in explicating this history. Consequently, slavery imagery occupies a subordinate role to the written word:

Rarely, even in serious scholarly studies of the slave trade, abolition, slave narrative or plantation life, does the writer subject quoted imagery (that is to say, reproduced imagery) to the sorts of close reading or technical and theoretical analysis, which are applied to quotations from written sources.<sup>132</sup>

Although images of the slave ship have been extensively reproduced in

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130 Ibid., 34 For example: on the inside cover of James Pope Hennessy, *Sins of the Father: A Study of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1441-1807*; on the cover of Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade*; and as part of the design for the LP cover ‘Survival’ by Bob Marley and the Wailers.

131 Tom Lubbock, ‘Great Works The British Slave Ship ‘Brookes’, the *Independent*, 2007, 30

132 Wood, *Blind Memory*, 6

scholarly work, they have primarily functioned illustratively. Wood considers that this derives from the belief that “pictures speak for themselves in a way that words do not”<sup>133</sup> and are therefore not generally considered to warrant closer examination. He suggests that the dearth of critical engagement with slavery imagery is related to its cultural status. According to Wood, because little of it can be designated as ‘high art’, it has not attracted the attention of “formal fine art historians, nor cultural historians or semioticians.”<sup>134</sup> He acknowledges that, while analysing and looking at artefacts, documents and paintings, will not enable “our cultures” to know what “really happened” to the people who endured slavery, the significance of visual representation of slavery has been poorly served by scholarship.<sup>135</sup> Through reading images, socially and culturally, and through their ‘semiotic codes’, Wood has attempted to illustrate why these images are important and warrant closer examination.

In Britain, Wood is as part of a wider community of mainly university based academics who have, since the late 1990s or so, researched various aspects of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, from historical chronologies to narratives on abolitionism, commemoration and public memory.<sup>136</sup> Some of this material was published during the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, 2005 to 2010 saw a significant increase in the amount of material published in Britain on transatlantic slavery. Wood contributed to a number of these bicentenary-

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133 Ibid.,8

134 Ibid., 6

135 Ibid.,8

136 For example: John Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom: Commemoration, ritual and British transatlantic slavery*, 2007; Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*, 2006; Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in Bristol*, 2001

related publications.<sup>137</sup> What distinguishes him from many other writers participating in these debates on slavery within bicentenary-related publications was his willingness to be more openly critical of the bicentenary initiative itself. Wood occupied two contradictory positions. On the one hand, a willingness to contribute to a number of bicentenary-related initiatives represented a tacit endorsement of the initiative. On the other hand, he bemoaned the political and cultural shortcomings of the bicentenary.<sup>138</sup>

Wood analyses the *Description* from its development and emergence as British abolitionist propaganda, inspiring a plethora of copycat versions, to becoming an image appropriated by contemporary culture. The *Description* has often been reproduced in part, collaged, abstracted, and has been employed as graphic device. The transformation of the *Description* from visual icon of British abolition to a visual 'icon' in popular culture signifies an "accreted history" which makes its meaning "unstable".<sup>139</sup> Wood's reading of the *Description* also argued that despite being the most widely reproduced image from the abolition's visual lexicon, it also embodied the extent to which Black agency was reduced to a homogenised mass of bodies.

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137 *Representing Slavery* 2007, and *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* 2010, *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People*, 2007

138 Wood was by no means alone in adopting these feet in two camps stance. Cross-Bench Peer Lola Young was the highest profile public official to endorse numerous bicentenary events, including those she was directly involved with, while also providing harsh critique of the government's involvement in the bicentenary. Wood applauded Lola Young's article, *The Truth in Chains* published in *The Guardian* on 15 March, on the eve of official bicentenary commemoration events. Young's article was an attack on New Labour's involvement in the bicentenary. 'Significant Silence: Where was Slave Agency in the Popular Imagery of 2007', *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, Eds. Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 162

139 Wood, *Blind Memory*, 32

Through his re-reading, Wood challenges the “peculiar nature of the English relationship to the slave trade and Atlantic slavery,”<sup>140</sup> which has privileged “a triumphalist narrative” based on abolitionism, and has failed to acknowledge “white representation of slavery”.<sup>141</sup> For Wood, the *Description* is not a record of the middle passage, or of the abolitionist movement, but might be “best understood as a memorial to a disaster, not as a representation of what ever happened”.<sup>142</sup> Coming full circle in his explication of the *Description*, and, having made the case for why the *Description* is a complex and problematic icon of slavery history,<sup>143</sup> Wood opines: “Perhaps all one can say at this stage is that, for better or worse, this image is as close as the abolition movement in Britain got to the creation of a final monument to the middle passage.”<sup>144</sup> This is a paradoxical summation given that the *Description* was never intended to be a memorial. Nearly thirty years elapsed from when the engraving was originally published to when Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807. A further thirty-one years would elapse before slavery in the British Empire was abolished in 1838. From the *Description*’s original publication in 1789, to slavery’s eventual abolition was fully half a century. This history puts into context the *Description*’s role in the abolitionist movement and its lasting importance as an “image in which slave ships were to be memorialised through centuries and across continents”.<sup>145</sup>

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140 Ibid., 7

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid., 32

143 Wood notes, “If no slave ship had survived to become a site for memory, Liverpool did generate one image in which its slave ships were to be memorialised through centuries and across continents.” *Blind Memory*, 17

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid., 17

“a famous nineteenth-century engraving of a slave ship”

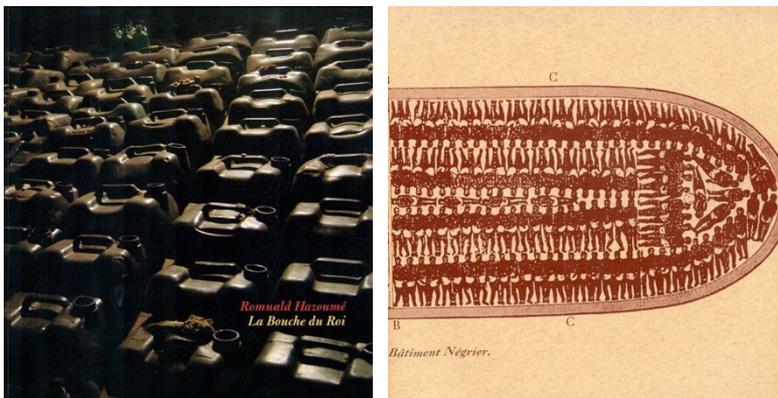


Fig 9. Romuald Hazoumè, *La Bouche du Roi*, exhibition catalogue front cover show and inside cover (right), shows detail of French version of the *Description*, The Menil Collection, 2005

Earlier presentations of *La Bouche du Roi* saw less significance placed on the work's relationship to the *Brookes*. Hazoumè's appropriation-*cum*-reinterpretation of the *Brookes* was noted in the catalogue accompanying the work's first showing outside his native Benin at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas in 2005.<sup>146</sup> In the introduction, Matthew Drutt refers to how Hazoumè used “a famous nineteenth-century engraving of a slave ship as the basis for the design of his installation”.<sup>147</sup> Drutt's erroneous description of a nineteenth-century, rather than eighteenth century engraving, inadvertently illustrates the extent to which the specific image and attendant abolitionist narrative were peripheral to *La Bouche du Roi*. Almost in passing, he directs the reader to the catalogue's flyleaves, across which was a partial reproduction of a French version of the *Brookes* print [Fig 9.].

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146 Romuald Hazoumè, *La Bouche du Roi*, The Menil Collection, Houston, January 29 - May 8, 2005. The work was first shown in Cotonou, Benin in 1999.

147 Matthew Drutt, 'Introduction', Romuald Hazoumè, *La Bouche du Roi*, The Menil Collection, 5

The ethnographic museum Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac <sup>148</sup> also reproduced a French version of the *Brookes* erroneously described as a “19<sup>th</sup> century engraving – cross-section of a slave trader. Unlike the Menil Collection catalogue, this press pack presented a complete reproduction of the *Brookes* above an overhead view of *La Bouche du Roi*. Notwithstanding the photographically distorted image of *La Bouche du Roi*, such juxtaposition encouraged comparison. Without reference to abolition or the engraving’s provenance, *La Bouche du Roi* was described as exploring “the history of slavery and colonialism in West Africa”.<sup>149</sup> At the top of the same introductory page titled “PRESENTATION OF THE INSTALLATION”, Hazoumè was able to explain his intentions behind the work:

Contrary to what might appear, *La Bouche du Roi* (‘The King’s Mouth’), does not speak of past slavery, but rather of that which exists today, for it is the mouths of our present-day ‘kings’ that kill us. In times gone by, the slaves who set sail to Ouidah or Porto-Novo knew from whence they came, but knew nothing of where they were heading. Today, they still do not know where they are heading, but they have forgotten, and no longer know where they came from. I denounce an Africa and a world ruled over by corrupt kinglets who steal, pillage, hijack, appropriate, and enrich themselves at their peoples’ expense. I am not afraid of denouncing them. Today, many families are still forced to sell their children in order to survive. This is unacceptable.<sup>150</sup>

Hazoumè’s work creates fusion of historical and contemporary narratives in the floor-based installation and video work respectively. Although diminutive, as the main publicity material produced for the exhibition and subsequent tour, the

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149 Romuald Hazoumè, *La Bouche du Roi*, 12 September - 12 November 2006, Musée du quai Branly- Jacques Chirac Paris

150 Romuald Hazoumè, *La Bouche du Roi*, ‘Press File’, Musée du quai Branly- Jacques Chirac, Paris, 3

brochure occupied an important role. Folded down from three sides, the cover revealed a partial view of *La Bouche du Roi* centrally positioned between the exhibition title at the top and an artist quotation and corporate logos towards the bottom. When extended, the concertinaed pamphlet revealed an overhead view of the floor-based work across one side. Numbers one to ten pinpointed key components of the work. For example: “1. The smaller masks represent women and children,” and “8. The black mask symbolises the king of Benin.”<sup>151</sup> Whilst this labelling was perhaps in keeping with museum ‘educational’ etiquette, when applied to a work of contemporary art it appeared overly reductive if not crude. Such rudimentary explanations corresponded with the prosaic photographic image of the floor-based work. The darkness which surrounded the actual work in situ (also partially reproduced on the Menil Collection catalogue cover) was a striking and essential component of the work. In the British Museum brochure such qualities were visually and textually eradicated.

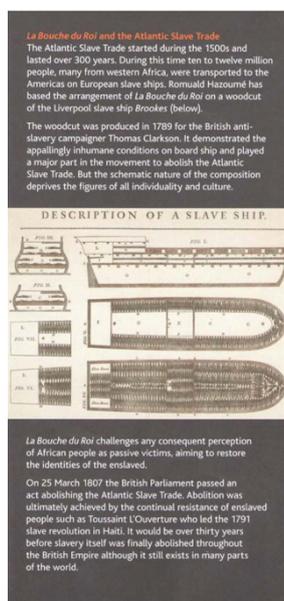


Fig 10. *La Bouche du Roi*, 2007, exhibition brochure, British Museum, Description of a Slave Ship (inside cover)

151 Ibid.

Neither Hazoumè, Musée du quai Branly- Jacques Chirac or the Menil Collection made a direct connection between Brookes and the British abolitionist movement. In the British Museum's foldout brochure, abolition assumed a more prominent role. [Fig 10.]

On the inside central panel, the entire *Brookes* engraving *Description of a Slave Ship* was reproduced. Under the heading '*La Bouche du Roi* and the Atlantic Slave Trade', a short explanatory text weaves a narrative of history, abolition, and resistance:

The Atlantic Slave Trade started during the 1500s and lasted over 300 years. During this time ten to twelve million people, many from western Africa, were transported to the Americas on European slave ships. Romuald Hazoumè has based his arrangement of *La Bouche du Roi* on a woodcut of the Liverpool slave ship *Brookes* (below).

The woodcut was produced in 1789 for the British anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson. It demonstrated the appallingly inhumane conditions on board ship and played a major part in the movement to abolish the Atlantic Slave Trade. But the schematic nature of the composition deprives the figures of all individuality and culture.

*La Bouche du Roi* challenges any consequent perception of African people as passive victims, aiming to restore the identities of the enslaved.

On 25 March 1807 the British Parliament passed an act abolishing the Atlantic Slave Trade. Abolition was ultimately achieved by the continual resistance of enslaved people such as Toussaint L'Ouverture who led the 1791 slave revolution in Haiti. It would be over thirty years before slavery itself was finally abolished throughout the British Empire although it still exists in many parts of the world.<sup>152</sup>

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152 British Museum exhibition brochure, '*La Bouche du Roi: an artwork by Romuald Hazoumè*', 2007

Although this text referred to several historically important narratives, these were not in any real sense connected to Hazoumè's rationale. Furthermore, the *Brookes* reproduction elevated the abolition narrative above all others.

**“...another predictable variation...”**

During the bicentenary, in Britain and further afield, the *Description* would be reproduced in numerous ways, across a multiplicity of historical and contemporary exhibitions, marketing and promotional material, as well as in media coverage.<sup>153</sup> For Wood, such appropriations fluctuated from being “intensely creative” to being “dangerously close to irresponsible”.<sup>154</sup> He wrote: “In thinking about what happened to this image and why it happened, a great deal can be uncovered in relation to the dominant cultural agendas, which conditioned the visual archive that 2007 generated.”<sup>155</sup> Wood's knowledge about the *Description* (*Brookes* from now on) would have a bearing on his critique of *La Bouche du Roi* as it was presented at the British Museum.

In ‘Significant Silence: Where was Slave Agency in the Popular Imagery of 2007’, Wood offered a highly critical reading of the ways in which the *Brookes* image would suffer “its ubiquitous dismemberment and endless recycling”.<sup>156</sup>

This suggestion that *Brookes* should occupy a more sacrosanct position in

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153 For example, the Royal Mail's commemorative bicentenary stamps incorporated the *Brookes* engraving in both the official set of stamps and First Day Cover designs. Also, the General Post Office in Bridgetown Barbados issued a set of five commemorative stamps and two first day covers (FDCs), the latter of which used the cross section of the *Brookes* engraving. See Marcus Wood, ‘Significant Silence: Where was Slave Agency in the Popular Imagery of 2007?’, *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, Eds. Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

154 ‘Significant Silence: Where was Slave Agency in the Popular Imagery of 2007’, *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, Eds. Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield, Palgrave Macmillan 2010, 166

155 Ibid

156 Ibid., 164

society is problematic. Whilst innumerable theoretical musings about its importance are founded on legitimate grounds, unchecked numbers of visual appropriations have devalued its legacy. However, Wood's claim denies the extent to which the legacies of the slave trade and slavery have occupied a peripheral role in British history. Wood's assertion also implies a certain academic ownership over the image. Although not an art historian, his criticisms of *La Bouche du Roi* centred on what he considered to be an over reliance on this iconic, historically and culturally loaded image:

Coming at the *Brookes* as an image that has been manipulated and reinvented without cessation from the moment of its production over two centuries ago, it is hard to see in *La Bouche du Roi* anything but yet another predictable variation in a long line of relatively straightforward adaptive moves by installation artists and performers.<sup>157</sup>

But *La Bouche du Roi* was more than merely a 'reproduction' of the *Brookes*. Its dual function as a work of remembrance and contemporary social commentary challenged the engraving's abstracted and dehumanised portrayal of the slave subject. Although Hazoumè elected to loosely appropriate one of the more commonly reproduced images of *Brookes*, he also employed different material elements, thereby introducing contemporary concerns. *La Bouche du Roi* explored identity, history and culture in ways unseen and ordinarily unaccounted for in discourses on the *Brookes*. Wood's assessment of *La Bouche du Roi* dismissed these as possible and important considerations. Equally, his criticisms did not consider the period during which the two components of the work were produced. Namely, the first component of *La Bouche du Roi* was produced in 1997 and the second in 2005, long before it

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157 Ibid., 171

entered the British Museum's radar on the eve of the bicentenary. Instead, Wood reduces the work's meaning to being almost entirely about the engraving. This contradicts an earlier and perhaps more perceptive observation that the:

historic trauma of transatlantic and plantation slavery must not be encapsulated within a history believed to be stable, digested and understood; history is also *not over*, and is *evolving*.<sup>158</sup>

In judging the work in relation to “endless recycling” of *Brookes*, Wood readily accepts the problematic ways in which *La Bouche du Roi* was framed by the British Museum, as a modern-day equivalent of the eighteenth-century engraving. Ironically, he questioned the bicentenary's absence of “slave agency”, but summarily dismissed the possibility that *La Bouche du Roi* could itself be a part of an ever-evolving dialogue about slavery and representation.

British-based historian Dr. Michael White and American-based academic Wayne Edge provided more favourable accounts of *La Bouche du Roi*. Unlike Wood, both appeared less troubled by Hazoumè's appropriation of *Brookes* and were generally more empathetic towards the installation, seeing it as part of a wider discourse about African diasporic history and identity. However, they too assessed *La Bouche du Roi* without reference to a wider contemporary art context. As such, they too were not functioning as art critics.

White's assessment identified the “complex associations” of *Brookes* and the wider signification of the slave ship in the Black diaspora.<sup>159</sup> For White, the engraving's power resides in its graphic simplicity, in depicting and

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158 Wood, *Blind Memory*, 11

159 Dr. Michael White, University of York ‘Carrying the past into the present: Romuald Hazoumè, 'La Bouche du Roi', 1807 Commemorated: The Abolition of the Slave Trade [<http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/art/labouche.html>]

communicating the brutal justificatory rationale for the slave trade. However, its projection of anonymous and homogenous Black bodies failed to convey the “disarray of the hold where the living and the dead were compressed into one, fetid space” and how in “focusing on the image of the hold, filled entirely with supine black figures, it reinforced notions of black passivity and subordination”.<sup>160</sup> White acknowledges Hazoumè’s insistence that the installation was “not talking about old slave ships; it’s about what happens today”.<sup>161</sup> He also points out how:

The memory of the slave ship and the middle passage has formed an important part of black identity politics in America, the Caribbean and Europe. In these contexts it has become less about the slave trade itself and more about survival, dislocation, the preservation of culture and the development of new identities.<sup>162</sup>

For Wayne Edge, “it is difficult to view the exhibition without deep reservations, because it calls for thoughtful review of what happened to human reason during the 300 and more years of transatlantic slave trade.”<sup>163</sup> Similarly to White, Edge’s review explores the relationships between schematic print, history and culture. What Edge describes as a “kind of template” functions as a catalyst for reading the work more as a museum artefact than as a work of contemporary art. The work’s contemporary significance for White is how it “confronts its

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160 Ibid.

161 Ibid.

162 Ibid.

163 Wayne Edge, ‘A Review of ‘La Bouche du Roi’, an artwork by Romuald Hazoumè. A mediation on human greed and exploitation, the Atlantic Slave Trade of the past, and the different forms of oppression that continue today’, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings, Freedom and Culture The Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* Volume 7, Number 2 2007, 95. Edge’s review of *La Bouche du Roi* was based on the presentation at The International Slavery Museum, Liverpool. The acquisition and tour of the installation were organised by the British Museum.

audiences with a disturbing image of the Atlantic slave trade which has been reworked to convey present-day humanitarian crises.”<sup>164</sup> Edge considered the potentially wider resonance of the work in terms of how the linkage between past and present could benefit “black youth” in Britain and the USA “who seem so unrooted, so culturally lost in the growth of contemporary society”.<sup>165</sup> He suggests that *La Bouche du Roi* offers a “sense of perspective and identity to keep them moving forward, proud of their past, and confidently able to greet the future”.<sup>166</sup>

Reproducing an image of *Brookes* in the brochure encouraged a symbiotic reading between an iconic historical document and a contemporary artwork.

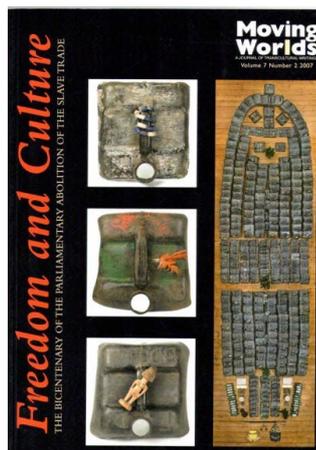


Fig 11. *La Bouche du Roi* on the cover of Moving Worlds a Journal of Transcultural Writings, Volume 7 Number 2 2007

White also noted that “In the British Museum a small upper deck was even created to enhance this perspective.”<sup>167</sup> This made explicit why the work was

164 Dr. Michael White, University of York ‘Carrying the past into the present: Romuald Hazoumè, 'La Bouche du Roi', 1807 Commemorated: The Abolition of the Slave Trade, [<http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/art/labouche.html>]

165 Edge, 98

166 Ibid

167 Dr. Michael White, ‘Carrying the past into the present: Romuald Hazoumè, 'La

deemed suitable to mark the museum's commemorative contribution. [Fig 11.]

The reworking by a renowned African artist of an image, used prominently within the British campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, provides a stage on which to reconsider the legacy of both enslavement and the abolitionists. The image has been wrested away from its original context and re-employed to great effect upon contemporary audiences.<sup>168</sup>

The highly visible and central role played by a contemporary African artist was intended to signify a form of cultural inclusion. However, the presentation and assessments of *La Bouche du Roi*, whilst varying in the significance attributed to *Brookes*, failed to address a wider and profoundly important set of interconnecting issues relating to contemporary art and ethnography.

White and Edge's reviews considered various themes and contexts, examining the iconography of *Brookes*, the cultural politics of diaspora and displacement, and contemporary social commentary. The violence and horror of the middle passage were also addressed as key components of the work. However, they pay no attention to the museum context, and what Annie E. Coombes describes as the "ethnographic and exhibitionary gaze".<sup>169</sup> All the appraisals so far discussed bypass the formidable legacies and contemporary power of the ethnographic museum. This abdication of critique tacitly overlooked how the exhibition was itself more than an act of commemoration or an inclusive and progressive approach to programming. It was part of the British Museum's

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Bouche du Roi" 1807 Commemorated *The abolition of the slave trade*, <https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/art/labouche.html> [Accessed 28 August 2017]

168 Ibid.

169 Annie E. Coombes, 'Introduction', *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994, 4

ongoing strategy for re-inscribing and legitimising its continued hegemonic control over ethnographic display and discourse. The selection, acquisition and staging of *La Bouche Du Roi* was emblematic of how authority, power and the “ethnographic and exhibitionary gaze” had been reconfigured.

To varying degrees, this blinkered framing of *La Bouche du Roi* was evident in all three museum iterations. The absence of wider critically and historically informed assessments of the *ethnographic museum* is also a significant silence in these reviews. This illustrates a systemic unwillingness to not only frame this work within an expanded field of artistic practice and art historical discourse but also the cultural politics of the ethnographic museum within which it was exhibited.

### **Ethnography, Violence and Silence**

In ‘Where is “Africa”? Re-Viewing Art and Artefact in the Age of Globalization’,<sup>170</sup> Ruth B. Phillips considers ethnographic museums’ responses, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, to what she termed “new and newly understood realities of globalisation and transnationalism”.<sup>171</sup> Notable museums embarked on a series of curatorial modifications of their displays of African art and artefacts, but Phillips argues that these changes were often little more than cosmetic. Emblematic of this practice was the British Museum’s re-presentation of the *Benin Bronzes* in its new *Sainsbury African Galleries*. Using seemingly ‘objective’ interpretative language to recount the British punitive expedition

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170 Ruth B. Phillips, ‘Where is “Africa”? Re-Viewing Art and Artifact [sic] in the Age of Globalization’ *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Sept, 2002), 946

171 *Ibid.*, 946

which led to the museum's ownership of these art works, Phillips notes how:

In this narrative, the 'victims' are white, the soldiers are guiltless, the Victorian rationale for the sale and dispersal of the kingdoms treasures is repeated uncritically.<sup>172</sup>

The British Museum's continued resistance to examining how its own legacies anesthetize and efface "the other history of imperialism and appropriation"<sup>173</sup> was all the more pronounced given how contemporary critical discourses and African artists readily engage with such legacies. *La Bouche du Roi's* emotive sub title 'A mediation on human greed and exploitation, the Atlantic Slave Trade of the past, and the different forms of oppression that continue today' could be substituted with what Phillips describes as the British Museum's "entanglement in histories of violence, colonial power, and racist discourses about art".<sup>174</sup>

### **Summary: Beyond the Bicentenary**

Since 2007, contemporary African art has continued to have a significant presence in Britain, notably London. Tate Modern's acquisition of Meschac Gaba's installation *Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997–2002* in 2013, and El Anatsui's *TSIATSIA – searching for connection* (2013), an award-winning work installed on the façade of the Royal Academy of Arts reflect this. Furthermore, the opening of the commercial gallery Tiwani Contemporary in 2012 and the launch of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair in 2013 have, along with long-established October Gallery, contributed to sustaining and diversifying opportunities. Such activity may explain why festivals such as *africa95* and

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172 Ibid.

173 Ibid.

174 Ibid.

*Africa 05* have fallen out of favour. The exhibition *We Face Forward: Art from West Africa Today*<sup>175</sup> was significant in this regard. Staged entirely in Manchester, it homed in on a region rather than the African continent.

After its two-year national tour of museums and art galleries across England, *La Bouche du Roi* returned to the British Museum and was placed in storage. Like many of the tens of thousands of objects, artefacts and works of contemporary art held by the museum, *La Bouche du Roi* does continue to have a visible presence online. In ‘Building the Collection – *La Bouche du Roi*’, the following descriptive account offers a form of historical and interpretive contextualisation:

Although *La Bouche du Roi* isn’t a historical artefact from the time of the slave trade, it helps the Museum tell the story of what happened then and what is happening now. But by putting it on display in the context of the anniversary, Museum staff could also offer visitors a different way to think about objects in other galleries, such as the Enlightenment gallery, which displays artefacts from the eighteenth century. In this way a work of contemporary art can have a different kind of value in the collection of a museum than in an art gallery.<sup>176</sup>

The Enlightenment gallery is divided into seven thematic sections. One of these sections,<sup>177</sup> euphemistically named ‘Trade and discovery’, references “voyages of trade and discovery to Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti and other Pacific

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175 Stated on the catalogue dust jacket: “Forget everything you think you know about African art; embrace all that you don’t yet know about the art, culture and creativity of West African artists today.” *We Face Forward: Art from West Africa Today*, Manchester, 2012

176 ‘Building the Collection - *La Bouche du Roi*’, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/the\\_museums\\_story/behind\\_the\\_scenes/building\\_the\\_collection\\_collecting\\_la\\_bouche\\_du\\_roi.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/behind_the_scenes/building_the_collection_collecting_la_bouche_du_roi.aspx) [Accessed 21 September 2017]

177 These are: Religion and ritual, Trade and discovery, The birth of archaeology, Art and civilisation, Classifying the world, Ancient scripts, and The natural world. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/themes/room\\_1\\_enlightenment.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/themes/room_1_enlightenment.aspx) [Accessed 21 September 2017]

islands". Within another web-based research repository, 'Collection online', the several hundred of components of *La Bouche du Roi* have been individually catalogued and are accompanied by photographic records. Under the title 'Subjects' are the hyperlinked words "slave/slavery".<sup>178</sup> This link redirects to another part of the collection in which literally hundreds of entries relate to slavery, spanning the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Letters, coins, medallions, anthropological photographs, prints, ornamental objects, historical and contemporary artworks chart various histories and legacies of slavery. These items are described objectively and include:

- Receipt for purchase of slave Robin by Moses Bishop
- Silver pepper-pot in the form of a sleeping African slave
- Bronze medal. (reverse) African slave standing amid palm trees and other plants, arms raised showing broken chains
- Letter from James Lawson to George Kirlew describing the disciplining of a runaway slave woman named Bunny Tussele

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<sup>178</sup> [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=3791061&partId=1&searchText=la+bouche+du+roi&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3791061&partId=1&searchText=la+bouche+du+roi&page=1) [Accessed 5 October 2017]



Fig 12. John Steuart Curry, *John Brown*, Lithograph 1939

A lithographic print by American artist, John Steuart Curry from 1939 [Fig 12.] carries the following description:

John Brown, the slavery abolitionist, represented as a fiery preacher of the American bible-belt, with full beard and arms outstretched; with approaching tornado behind him left and rising prairie fire behind him right.<sup>179</sup>

Missing here is any reference to a Black figure clearly depicted in the bottom left hand corner of the print. The catalogue notes that Curry “cut down the composition to focus directly upon the Moses-like John Brown”.<sup>180</sup> However, this diminutive and comparatively static figure is, despite occupying a dubious subservient role, a critical counterpoint to John Brown’s dramatic and animated oratorical portrayal. The Black figure is thus rendered superfluous to this descriptive account about American abolitionism. Such flawed analysis is

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179 [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=3044548&partId=1&subject=16275&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3044548&partId=1&subject=16275&page=1) [ Accessed 5 October 2017]

180 *Ibid.*

presented as 'objective' and authoritative interpretation. The print was acquired by the British Museum in 2007, the bicentenary year of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire.

In his post bicentenary essay *Art, Resistance and Remembrance*, Christopher Spring, curator of the African Galleries (also known as The Sainsbury Galleries), noted that "The British Museum will never be the same again".<sup>181</sup> This remark was credited to Frances Carey, Head of National Programmes, reflecting on the museum's day of 'Resistance and Remembrance'. Spring's summation of the British Museum's bicentenary contribution is startling and candid. He reflected how there had been an expectation that "people of African descent could take ownership of the museum in ways they had never done before" and that whilst some were "disappointed that not more seems to have happened" a "fundamental sea change did take place".<sup>182</sup> At no point did Spring reflect how *La Bouche du Roi* related to the legacies of slavery and colonialism contained within the museum's collection.

This chapter has sought to explore in detail various aspects of the politics surrounding the staging of *La Bouche du Roi* at the British Museum. Such analysis requires and indeed merits in depth critical reflection. As has been argued and illustrated elsewhere in this study, such analysis, be it of government initiative, exhibition, review, article or art collection must also take account of the wider context. The ethnographic pathologies signalled by *La Bouche du Roi* are still evident today. Recent solo exhibitions at the British

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181 Christopher Spring, 'Art, Resistance and Remembrance', *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, 2011, 209

182 Ibid.

Museum of artists Grayson Perry and Maggie Hambling<sup>183</sup> and another, *South Africa: The Art of a Nation* took place between 2012 and 2016. Granted *carte blanche* access to make “a journey of his own through the vast British Museum collection”,<sup>184</sup> Perry produced a new body of work to be presented alongside existing works. Hambling’s exhibition represented an “important survey of works on paper” borrowed from a variety of museum collections.<sup>185</sup> Both Perry and Hambling are practitioners with successful careers and significant public profiles. Within the British Museum programme, their presence was contextualised not compromised, their work central to the exhibition. This is not unusual institutional practice.<sup>186</sup> In *South Africa: The Art of a Nation*, such an approach is thrown into sharp relief revealing the museum’s asymmetrical ideology:

Discover the history of South Africa through an incredible 100,000 years of art. Your journey starts with examples of some of the earliest examples of human creativity – from rock art to perhaps the world’s oldest necklace. From there, be amazed by 800-year-old gold treasures from the kingdom of Mapungubwe [mar pun jarvoi], be moved by powerful anti-apartheid pieces, and be inspired by cutting-edge contemporary works.<sup>187</sup>

In *South Africa: The Art of a Nation*, [Fig 13.] contemporary art and artefacts

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183 Grayson Perry, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, 6 October 2011 - 19 February 2012 and Maggie Hambling *Touch: Works on Paper*, 8 September 2016 - 29 January 2017

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[http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/news\\_and\\_press/press\\_releases/2011/grayson\\_perry.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2011/grayson_perry.aspx) [Accessed 16 September 2017]

185 [http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/past\\_exhibitions/2016/maggi\\_hambling.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/past_exhibitions/2016/maggi_hambling.aspx) [Accessed 16 September 2017]

186 For example: Oskar Kokoschka: *word and vision 1906-1966*, 5 May - 7 June 1967 and Antony Gormley *drawing*, 24 October 2002 - 21 April 2003

187 *South Africa: The Art of a Nation*, publicity brochure, British Museum, 2016

were brought together to tell the “story of the region’s deep history, the colonial period, apartheid, the birth of the ‘rainbow nation’ and South Africa today. Objects from the British Museum’s own South African collections will be displayed alongside contemporary acquisitions.”<sup>188</sup> The multi-racial line up of contemporary artists included Willie Bester, Candice Breitz, William Kentridge, Santu Mofokeng, Karel Nel, Helen Mmakgabo Sebidi and Mary Sibande. Each was represented by one or two pieces of work. Such a selection appears even handed. However, the celebratory and inclusive appearance of *South Africa: The Art of a Nation* belies how the British art establishment’s embrace of contemporary art from post- apartheid South African has largely bypassed Black practitioners. Kentridge and Mofokeng are white and Black, they are also contemporaries, born in 1955 and 1956 respectively. Two of South Africa’s celebrated contemporary practitioners, in Britain, they have received radically different exposure. Mofokeng’s one solo exhibition in Britain organised by Autograph was presented at Rivington Place.<sup>189</sup> Kentridge has had solo exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery and Whitechapel Art Gallery.<sup>190</sup>

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188 British Museum, ‘Press Release’ for *South Africa: The Art of a Nation*, 27 October 2016 - 26 February 2017

189 *Santu Mofokeng*, Rivington Place, London 14 January - 28 February 2009

190 *William Kentridge* Serpentine Gallery 21 Apr 1999 to 30 May 1999; *William Kentridge: Thick Time*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 21 September 2016 - 15 January 2017

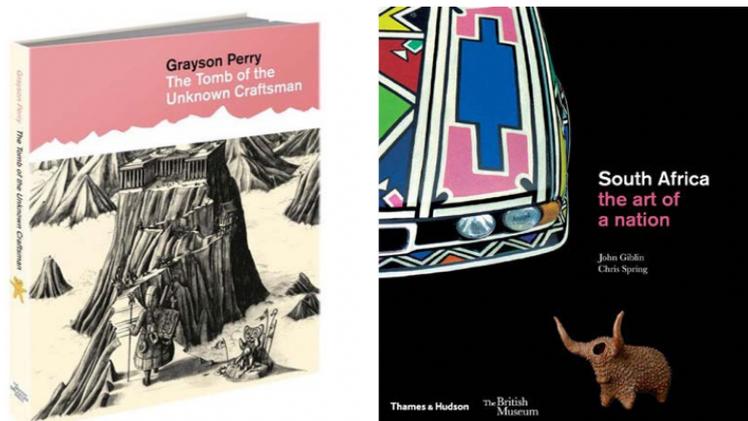


Fig 13. left to right, Grayson Perry *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, 2011; *South Africa: The Art of a Nation*, exhibition catalogue 2016

Media coverage of *South Africa: The Art of a Nation* generally failed to acknowledge the problems raised by the exhibition. Eddy Frankel’s *Time Out* review was a rare exception which asked “How can you sum up the art of a whole country in one show?”<sup>191</sup> John Picton’s review exemplified the absence of critical reading of the exhibition.<sup>192</sup> Picton’s review spoke of the exhibition blowing away “preconceived notions” about South African art and how artists of “all colours” fought against apartheid. Most tellingly Picton’s claim about the problems facing the contemporary study of African art past and present, does not identify the source of these “problems”. Thus, it tacitly denies the formative role played by institutions such as the British Museum:

The past has always been a resource for the present – not just in Africa – and the present is equally a resource for (understanding) the past. By stressing this the curators successfully smash one of the most pernicious stereotypes currently afflicting the study of African art, the separation of ‘traditional’ from ‘contemporary’ – the one signifying an authenticity

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191 Eddy Frankel, ‘South Africa: The Art of a Nation’, *Time Out*, Friday 16 August 2016 <https://www.timeout.com/london/art/south-africa-the-art-of-a-nation> [Accessed 13 October 2017]

192 John Picton is Emeritus Professor of African Art at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies.

that largely serves an art market external to Africa;  
the other an origin in European modernism.<sup>193</sup>

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193 John Picton, 'South Africa: 'A land of visionaries and artists' *Christie's*, exhibition review, 9 December 2016 <http://www.christies.com/features/South-African-Art-at-the-British-Museum-7995-1.aspx>

## **Conclusion**

We are also encouraging a debate about how we can commemorate the anniversary as a national event in the future. Should we have a national day of commemoration every year, and if so, when? The House may be aware that the European Commission supports 11 June as the European day against human trafficking. That day could be a candidate for an annual commemorative event, but I leave that for discussion.<sup>1</sup> – John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister

David Cameron has called for Jamaica to "move on" from the "painful legacy" of slavery as he defied calls to apologise for Britain's role in the slave trade.<sup>2</sup>  
–The Telegraph 2015

Let me speak the truth.<sup>3</sup> –Toyin Agbetu, 2007

This thesis has sought to describe and critique the ways in which contemporary art functioned in a number of exhibitions and to consider the political and cultural contexts within which this activity took place. Each chapter has examined specific themes relating to art history, commemorative discourses, New Labour's inclusion agenda, artistic intervention and institutional critique, the use of public collections and the relationship between contemporary art and the ethnographic museum. Although various issues are examined chapter by chapter, core themes and approaches, such as historical erasure and historical perspectives have recurred throughout.

Contemporary art exhibitions comprised specially commissioned works and

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1 <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2007-03-20b.687.0>

2 Ben Riley-Smith, 'David Cameron calls on Jamaica to "move on" from "painful legacy" of slavery. Prime Minister says slavery is "abhorrent" in address to Jamaican Parliament but defies calls for apology or reparations. *the Telegraph* 30 September 2015

3 The words of activist Toyin Agbetu spoken as part of his protest during the National Service of Commemoration for the bicentenary held at Westminster Abbey, Tuesday 27 March 2007.

works primarily produced within the past two decades. This range of art was framed by a variety of themes which also sought to explore a selective and delimited form of history, pertaining to collections, institutions, and even geographical regions. However, despite the emphasis on historical *recovery* and the diversification of British history, history itself was negated. As Kobena Mercer has observed, “the past is vulnerable to selective erasure – a symbolic threat that cultures of the Black Atlantic diaspora have had to contend with from their inception”.<sup>4</sup> In each chapter, I have illustrated the importance of applying a historical perspective to the various modes of commemoration staged in the bicentenary.

*Chapter 1 Excisions: Reggae, Slavery and Contemporary Art*, explored the inherent paradox of the bicentenary, whereby historically important modes of Black cultural expression remained excluded from dominant commemorative narratives. Such forms of remembrance were integral to earlier formations of Black British identity and Black artistic practice but largely absent from the bicentenary. Stuart Hall’s essay ‘Afterword: The Legacies of Anglo-Caribbean Culture – A Diasporic Perspective’ was included in the publication *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*. This publication and related exhibition mostly centred on nineteenth century art history and were primarily inspired by the work of one white artist. Hall’s contribution represented the most significant appraisal of contemporary Black artists’ practice and reflects the wider problems of how they were framed in the bicentenary.

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4 Kobena Mercer, ‘Diaspora Didn’t Happen in a Day: Reflections on Aesthetics and Time’, 2007, 69

New Labour was undoubtedly the catalyst for marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade with a nationwide event. In reality, the majority of contemporary art venues, particularly Britain's most prestigious galleries, did not contribute. London-based galleries such as the Whitechapel, Serpentine, and Camden Arts Centre were notable absentees, as were Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, and Cornerhouse, Manchester. This puts into wider context the extent to which government could cajole contemporary venues to participate. One explanation for this absence was the bicentenary's emphasis on history, manifested by a reliance on various historical collections. Commemorative events nationwide attempted to recount and excavate various histories, which had, until 2007, been barely visible in public museums.

*Chapter 2 A Labour of Love: The Politics of Inclusion and Commemoration in the Age of New Labour* considered the government's influence across political, social and cultural terrains. New Labour's embrace of multiculturalism compared to preceding Conservative governments, ratcheted up efforts to appear more racially inclusive particularly with regards to African and African Caribbean people. However, New Labour's chosen remedies, examined here in the visual arts sector stopped short of challenging or transforming mainstream exclusionary practices. Instead subscription to diversity, inclusion and plurality would manifest itself in racially separate arts initiatives and buildings under the rubric of 'culturally diverse arts'.

The allocation of £20 million by Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to the bicentenary signalled a climax of New Labour's commitment to diversity. The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and Wilberforce House Museum in Hull would be

long term beneficiaries of HLF's largesse. The name of the former illustrates a displacement of 'Atlantic' while the latter re-inscribes hegemonic abolitionist narratives.<sup>5</sup>

*Chapter 3: State of Remembrance: Commemorations by the Royal Mail, Royal Mint and the BBC* argued that the brutality, scale, duration and legacy of the slave trade was inappropriately acknowledged by these government-owned companies. Capitalising on the shift towards 'populist' forms of commemorative culture, Royal Mint and Royal Mail's contributions exemplified how Britain's role in slavery and the slave trade was sanitised and co-opted as part of a lexicon of commodified commemorative practices. Whilst Equiano's stamp was described as a "fitting tribute",<sup>6</sup> the lasting impact of such an ephemeral gesture raises questions about why a bank note was not used. Such attempts at recalibrating British history and deconstructing the white abolitionist myth did not challenge what Roshi Naidoo terms 'normative notions of 'Britishness':

Through being contained it becomes a singular, shameful episode in a nation's past – we can acknowledge it, apologize and move on...For that meaning to dominate, the story of post-slavery forms of exploitative labour must be obscured, as too must the story of the carving up of Africa and the wider history of colonialism to which the slave trade was the precursor.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Richard Benjamin, Director of International Slavery Museum, explained that the name reflected "the fact that the transatlantic slave trade and its many consequences is a huge and complex international story which spans (at least) four continents. Also, the scope of the new museum would eventually extend beyond transatlantic slavery and encompass other human rights issues". Quoted in 'Exhibiting Slavery' Two-day conference, 2-3 March 2009, publicity sheet

6 'Slave honoured on postage stamp' Thursday, 22 March 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6478377.stm>

7 Roshi Naidoo, 'High Anxiety 2007 and Institutional Neuroses', *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*, 2011, 53

The *Abolition Season* was the BBC's most substantial programming on slavery history since its broadcast of the American mini-series *Roots* in the late 1970s. Whilst the BBC's radio schedule included a range of debates, fiction and non-fiction, drama and music programmes, on television, *Abolition Season* flattered to deceive. Its seemingly broad arrangement of themes (American Revolution, rebellion, Wilberforce, history of racism) collectively did not explore the legacies of John Hawkins, Elizabeth I or Olaudah Equiano. Such a television schedule appeared out of step with the corporation's usual munificent programming of history based programmes. The commercial sector's hagiographic portrayal of the white abolitionist movement in the film *Amazing Grace*<sup>8</sup> certainly merited a more substantial counterpoint than *In Search of Wilberforce*.

Subsequent chapters in this study have charted how various curatorial and institutional agendas were deployed in contemporary art exhibitions. Institutions opened themselves up to artistic intervention and critique, the aim being to reveal and to explore hitherto unseen histories about the slave trade and slavery contained within Britain's historical collections. However, such processes of historical recovery were predicated on the assumption that exhibitions could be delimited by a discourse between contemporary art and a historical subject. As illustrated in my critique of *Uncomfortable Truths and Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, what constituted history and critique exceeded a reappraisal of objects and artefacts alone. Integral to reading these exhibitions was assessing how the prominence afforded Black artists relates to an understanding of (art) history.

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8 *Amazing Grace* directed by Michael Apted, Four Boy Films, 2006

The absence of any commentary about how contemporary Black practitioners have themselves suffered historical erasure and routine exclusion by such institutions highlighted the underlying problems of intervention and critique. In the bicentenary, this revisionism had wider implications. Institutions used contemporary art to highlight historical erasure, whilst simultaneously denying the historical marginalisation of Black artistic practice.

Alternative modes of engagement were possible, despite the overwhelming influence and power of New Labour's brand of inclusion. The V&A presented *Uncomfortable Truths* as its first genuine attempt at exploring the shadow of slave trading in art and design. Despite appearing to be a magnanimous inclusive gesture, it was out of step with the museum's more routine ways of engaging with contemporary art practice and practitioners. On what basis could this eclectic selection of mainly Black artists be considered an intervention when such an approach was itself indicative of marginalisation? A more innovative form of intervention is what the bicentenary merited, rather than a reprise of old practices. The V&A's 'Museum Residency Programme'<sup>9</sup> could have generated a more emphatic and enduring exploration of history, collections and the museum, what Stuart Hall termed "a discursive practice".<sup>10</sup>

The interventionist strategies proposed by *Human Cargo* at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, in contrast, were not predicated on a survey exhibition. However, the museum had never previously shown any inclination towards exploring legacies of the slave trade, which brings into question the

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9 <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/museum-residency-programme> [Accessed 11 October 2017]

10 Hall, 2000, 5

underlying motivation and integrity of the exhibition. A tick-box selection of works coupled with expedient use of temporarily rehoused historical collections further highlights the exhibition's shortcomings.

The tremendous power wielded by institutions such as the V&A and the British Museum enabled them to attract artists who occupy radically different positions within the art world. As argued in *Chapter 6: Flagship: La Bouche du Roi, an Artwork by Romuald Hazoumè*, such institutional power proved sufficient to decontextualize a work of contemporary art. Once again, history was both staged and erased. But as Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu (previously known as Chika Okeke) assert, "while we make note of the ravages of colonialism on African cultures and institutions, we also acknowledge the importance of artistic exchanges that have marked the transition from colonial to postcolonial subjectivities".<sup>11</sup> The ways in which contemporary African art came to be reframed within the western contemporary art arena has itself been problematic. Its uncritical co-option by the ethnographic museum highlights another more troubling institutional strategy.

In her essay 'Afterword: Britain 2007, Problematizing Histories',<sup>12</sup> historian Catherine Hall considered how the bicentenary marked a particular moment. "The plethora of representations of the slave trade and slavery that were on view in 2007 was made possible by the change in the nature of British society over the last half century. Without a significant black British population, none of

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11 Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 'Archives of Tradition', *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, 2009, 13.

12 Hall, 'Afterword: Britain 2007, Problematizing Histories', *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* 2010

this would have happened.”<sup>13</sup> Her essay is a rare attempt to view the bicentenary beyond abolitionism and commemoration and as symptomatic of New Labour’s inclusion agenda. It explores:

...the struggle for independence, the eruption of civil rights and black power, and the ‘discovery’ of Africa in the Caribbean have all impacted on the construction of new black British identities, with Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’ as an iconic rendition of the return to slavery as a constitutive element of blackness. The work of black artists since the 1950s, from film makers, poets and novelists to those working with photographs or installations, has represented these experiences, making them available to wide audiences and providing a base from which to draw in 2007.<sup>14</sup>

Catherine Hall’s recognition of a historical cultural landscape dating back to the 1950s is important. It acknowledges that artistic expression has been central to various formations of Black British identity. The cogency and breadth of practice evoked by Hall was not evident in the exhibition *Crossing the Waters*.

Notwithstanding the vagaries of publicly funded acquisitions of art, Cartwright Hall’s hastily acquired collection for the purposes of a memorial exhibition in 2007 reflected the institution’s short term view of remembrance and commemoration.

During the National Service of Commemoration held at Westminster Abbey, broadcast live on BBC television, Toyin Agbetu a human rights activist and founder of the organisation Ligali<sup>15</sup> single-handedly staged a protest. In front of hundreds of dignitaries, at close proximity to the Queen and Prince Phillip, Tony

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13 Ibid., 194

14 Ibid.

15 Founded by Toyin Agbetu in the early 2000, Ligali describes its activities as having “extended beyond African misrepresentation in the media and focuses on independent cultural media production and holistic education.” <http://www.ligali.org/ethos.html> [accessed 25 April 2018]

Blair, John Prescott and Gordon Brown, Agbetu carried out a bold and audacious act against the establishment's bicentenary remembrance. In attendance, *Observer* journalist, David Smith recounted his version of Agbetu's intervention during what he erroneously described as the "slavery bicentenary service":

The slavery bicentenary service was about 45 minutes old and running as smoothly and sombrely as any usual major national commemoration at Westminster Abbey: the singing of hymns, readings from the Bible and an air of inviolable solemnity.

All this was shattered when, from behind my seat in Poets' Corner, a man strode rapidly into the space in front of the altar and began screaming at the top of his voice. The Queen, Prince Philip, Tony and Cherie Blair, John and Pauline Prescott, Gordon and Sarah Brown and the Archbishop of Canterbury watched in stunned disbelief. The bright-shirted black demonstrator, Toyin Agbetu of the African rights organisation Ligali, was only a dozen feet from all of them, with apparently no security guards to block him.<sup>16</sup>

Agbetu proceeded to lambast the congregation, specifically the Queen and Tony Blair for their unwillingness to issue a full apology for British involvement in the slave trade and slavery. Agbetu urged other members of the congregation, notably Black attendees, to walk out of the service with him. Subsequent mainstream coverage of Agbetu's protest focused on questioning how a protestor could have been allowed to get within touching distance of the Queen unchallenged. However, Agbetu's protest also carried greater

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<sup>16</sup> David Smith "You, the Queen, should be ashamed!" All was solemn at the slavery service in Westminster Abbey ... until a bright-shirted demonstrator let loose, says David Smith who watched the drama unfold' Tuesday 27 March 2018  
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/mar/27/race.world1>

significance. It was one of the few moments in which so called 'Black suspicion' about Wilberforce<sup>17</sup> was publicly manifested. The choice of Westminster Abbey as an appropriate venue for a national service of commemoration was also significant. As the Church of England's pre-eminent place of worship it is where Royal Coronations, Royal Weddings and state burials have taken place for centuries. It is also where white (and not Black) abolitionists William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Zachary Macaulay are commemorated.<sup>18</sup> As a public expression of antipathy, Agbetu's protest was a fleeting but important (Black) voice of dissent:

In 2007, the Pan-African voice and perspective was largely excluded from the nationalist retelling of African enslavement. As a result, for many African people, worldwide, 2007 represented the year Britain rewrote and institutionalized, through its museums, libraries, galleries, media and education system, a new narrow romantic [sic] abolition mythology about the nation's historic involvement in the Maafa.<sup>19</sup>

Agbetu's use of the neologism 'Maafa' (Kiswahili for 'great disaster') to describe African enslavement and slavery, embodies a political outlook which challenges dominant narratives about and ownership of slavery history that were promoted during the bicentenary via what he referred to as "state-funded educational and heritage-based institutions".<sup>20</sup>

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17 Researchers from *1807 Commemorated* noted that "Many African and African - Caribbean members of society were [...] deeply suspicious of a commemoration which they regarded as a 'Wilberfest' – a government sponsored official commemoration, focused on William Wilberforce and his associates, in which little heed would be paid to the needs and feelings of their own communities." 'Introduction', Geoffrey Cubitt, Laurajane Smith and Ross Wilson, 2011, 5

18 Two Black abolitionists, Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho are commemorated in St Margaret's Church located in the grounds of Westminster Abbey. <http://westminster-abbey.org/st-margarets-church> [accessed 12 May 2018]

19 Toyin Agbetu 'Restoring the Pan-African Perspective: Reversing the Institutionalization of Maafa Denial', 2011, 61

20 Ibid.

Since the bicentenary, a significant body of literature has emerged exploring the relationship between the legacies of slavery and the slave trade and contemporary art. This has taken two distinct forms. First, belated exhibition publications such as *CARGO* and *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*, which were published in 2011. In addition, successive issues of *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* have featured reviews and articles on bicentenary exhibitions. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman presented an expansive and detailed account of numerous bicentenary exhibitions. They engaged with the ways in which artists and institutions presented a variety of exhibitions including, for example, the Whitworth Art Gallery's *Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery*. Absent from the review, however, was any consideration of the problematic ways in which Black artists' work was deployed.

The second set of literature to emerge also explores aspects of bicentenary - related exhibitions and commemorative material.<sup>21</sup> Marcus Wood's *the Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and Representation of Emancipation* includes several chapters related to the bicentenary.<sup>22</sup> *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* and *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums* from 2011 were two of the most substantial post-bicentenary publications. The former brought

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21 *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post Slave Studies*, Special Issue, 'Public Art, Artefacts and Atlantic Slavery', Volume 29 Number 2, June 2008; Alan Rice, *Creating Memorials Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool Studies in International Slavery, 2010  
22 Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, 2010. These essays include: 'Stamping Out the Memory of Slavery: The 2007 Commemoratives and Philatelic Approaches to Bondage and Freedom' and 'Supine in Perpetuity: The Description of the *Brookes* in 2007'

together essays on a range of themes such as ‘abolitionist discourse’ and ‘women and abolitionism’.<sup>23</sup> It also included several essays which reflected on the bicentenary.<sup>24</sup> *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums* was the culmination of the bicentenary research project *1807 Commemorated The abolition of the slave trade*.<sup>25</sup>

The recent anthology, *Visualising Slavery: Art Across the African Diaspora*<sup>26</sup> represents the most substantial publication from Britain about the relationship between slavery and art. Drawing from historical and contemporary practices in Britain, America and the Caribbean, *Visualising Slavery* aims to ‘tell a new story’<sup>27</sup> about the historical, social and cultural realities of the centuries long tradition of transatlantic slavery. Notably, it includes an essay on the work of the late Donald Rodney, specifically regarding “his determination to commemorate Black lives as lived in the face of histories of unimaginable loss”.<sup>28</sup> Keith Piper’s contribution ‘Strategic Remembering and Tactical Forgetfulness’<sup>29</sup> examines the notion of the plantation as not merely a “space of unremitted defeat and abjection” but also “as a site of acts of resistance”.<sup>30</sup> In his essay, Piper describes his contribution to *Uncomfortable Truths* as taking place “during a

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23 Kaplan and Oldfield, *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*, 2010

24 Ibid.; Douglas Hamilton, ‘Representing Slavery in British Museums: The Challenges of 2007’; Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, ‘Coram Boy: Slavery, Theatricality and Sentimentality on the British Stage’; Marcus Wood, ‘Significant Silence: Where was Slave Agency in the Popular Imagery of 2007’; and Catherine Hall ‘Afterword: Britain 2007, Problematizing Histories’.

25 <https://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/>

26 Bernier and Durkin, eds., *Visualising Slavery: Art Across the African Diaspora*, 2016

27 Ibid., 3

28 Ibid., Bernier, ‘Paintings, Installations and Sketchbooks of Donald Rodney’, 2016, 220

29 Piper, ‘Strategic Remembering and Tactical Forgetfulness’ in ‘Depicting the Plantation A Personal Account’, *Visualising Slavery: Art Across the African Diaspora*, 2016

30 Ibid., 66

moment of muted celebration.”<sup>31</sup> He did not elucidate on what he meant by this. In the context of ‘speaking’ about history, Piper’s fleeting consideration and reflection of the bicentenary denies the role institutions play in shaping exhibitions. This illustrates that relationships between institution and artist, nation and commemoration, as played out in the first part of the twenty-first century, are still relatively unexplored.

Despite its commitment to marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, New Labour side-stepped the wider issue of an annual national commemoration or permanent monument to the legacy of the slave trade and slavery. A transitory commemoration appeared more appealing. Is there any other episode in recent British history as abject and as brutal as the slave trade which remains relatively peripheral to the nation’s sense of self? As artist Mary Evans attests, “the political, social, and cultural dynamics of modern Britain are in many respects the legacy of Britain’s imperial past.”<sup>32</sup>

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31 Ibid.,74 Piper erroneously refers to the exhibition as “Unrecorded Truths” rather than *Uncomfortable Truths*.

32 Mary Evans, ‘Macro/Micro: Focusing on Diasporic Identity’, *Moving Worlds*, 2007, 23

## Appendix



## Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

To [andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk](mailto:andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk)

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Dear Andrew Marcus

I am writing with regards to my research as a MPhil/PhD student at Goldsmiths College. I am currently researching the emergence of the 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in the British Empire.

I am eager to gather background material regarding the various protagonists involved in the development of this initiative. As one of the major contributor's to the Bicentenary, I am interested in gaining access to material held by the Royal Mint that chart how and why this £2 coin came to be produced. As I understand it, all proposed coin designs are presented to the Advisory Committee which then discusses the proposals. Is it possible to receive:

1. Minutes of meetings (e.g advisory committee) which relate to discussions around this particular coin.
2. Documentation, if any, of communications between Government and Royal Mint about the production of a commemorative coin.
3. The commissioning process for the design (e.g. how artists were selected).
4. How the final design was agreed upon via consultation within and without the Royal Mint.
5. Any publicity material/ notifications relating to tendering and or consultation process.
6. In order to contextualise the process by which the Abolition Coin came into being, it would also be useful to have some information on other coins produced around the same time.

I do hope this is clear and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Kind regards,

--

Richard Hylton  
48 Ivanhoe Road  
London  
SE5 8DJ

T: +44 (0)20 7657 2745

F: +44 (0)20 7657 2429

Katie Owen

12/05/2011 10:20

RE: Thanks

To Jo Reilly Copy Aretha George • HYLTON RA

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Hi Jo,

I have given Richard some links etc to HLF-generated coverage but don't have an archive of regional press coverage, I'm afraid. However, Richard could probably track quite a few articles down via the internet. There was quite a bit of coverage in the Yorkshire media and also in Liverpool-based publications.

Richard, we had a bicentenary event in Leeds and there was also a big opening at the Wilberforce House Museum in Hull (release attached). For the Leeds bicentenary event I organised a media call and both the Yorkshire Post and Yorkshire Evening Post ran the story with an accompanying picture of David Lammy MP (who was Culture Minister at the time). On the broadcast front, David Lammy did interviews with BBC TV 1 'Look North' and BBC Radio Leeds. The story also featured in ITZCaribbean.com. I also set up a profile of our Head of HLF Yorkshire and Humber, Fiona Spiers, about the bicentenary and that appeared in the Saturday magazine of the Yorkshire Post.

Do let me know if I can be of any further help on this front (NB: I'm on annual leave next week).

Katie

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**From:** Jo Reilly  
**Sent:** 12 May 2011 08:31  
**To:** 'HYLTON RA'  
**Cc:** Aretha George; Katie Owen  
**Subject:** RE: Thanks

Thanks Richard, glad it was useful for you.

Katie, we talked about whether we had an archive of regional press about individual 2007 projects. Aretha and I assumed not. Can you confirm?

Thanks,  
Jo

---

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
**Sent:** 11 May 2011 09:34  
**To:** Jo Reilly  
**Cc:** Aretha George  
**Subject:** Thanks

Dear Jo and Aretha

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me yesterday. I found our meeting very helpful indeed providing some useful information and insight into various aspects of my research.

I look forward to hearing back from you regarding the enquiries you offered to follow up on. In the

FOI Ref: 170579

To richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com

---

**Our Ref: 170579**

Dear Mr Hylton,

Thank you for your request of 22 March relating to files regarding DCMS' involvement with the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 2007.

I am dealing with your request under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

I regret that in order to respond properly to your request we would first need further clarification from you on the exact terms of your request. This is because the right of access in the Freedom of Information Act is to information not documents or files.

If you clarify your request, it should be possible to provide you with the specific information you seek if you restrict the terms of the request to concentrate on the information you are most interested in. For example, you may be able to narrow down the request by restricting the search to specific types of information. For example you may be interested in advice to ministers, or information about a particular meeting.

Information can be found in our web archives (link below) that may be of interest to you, or assist you in narrowing your request.

[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20060924210931/http://www.culture.gov.uk/about\\_us/culture/abolition\\_of\\_slavetrade\\_bicentenary.htm](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20060924210931/http://www.culture.gov.uk/about_us/culture/abolition_of_slavetrade_bicentenary.htm)

If you would like to discuss the terms of the request before responding, then please do not hesitate to contact me. We aim to deal with your response promptly once your clarification has been received, and will treat it as a new request from the date we receive your clarification. In the meantime we will close this case on our system.

Yours sincerely,

Heather Batchelor  
Freedom of Information Team  
Public Engagement and Recognition Unit  
Tel: 0207 211 2308

**Complaints Procedure**

If you are unhappy with the way DCMS has handled your request you are entitled to ask for an internal review of its handling within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you wish to make a complaint you should contact:

FOI Complaints  
Public Engagement and Recognition Unit  
Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Longrigg Claire

25/05/2011 12:59

RE: query

To HYLTON RA

---

Hi Richard,  
It's actually the **Hull Daily Mail**.  
Thanks  
Claire

Claire Longrigg  
Assistant Curator of Exhibitions  
Ferens Art Gallery  
Queen Victoria Square  
Kingston Upon Hull  
HU1 3RA  
General Office: 01482 613902  
Direct Number: 01482 613916  
E: [claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk](mailto:claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk)  
W: [www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections)

***Gladiators!***

*Meet Maximus the Roman Centurion, create crafts, taste Roman food and more at this family fun day.*

***Saturday 28 May 2011, 11.00am – 3.00pm***

*Hull & East Riding Museum, Museums Quarter*

***For more information, including how to book battle tactic training, please click [here](#)***

---

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]

**Sent:** 25 May 2011 12:58

**To:** Longrigg Claire

**Subject:** Re: query

That's great thank, Claire. One other question is the local paper 'This is East Riding' or This is Hull and East Riding?

Regards

Richard

On 25 May 2011 12:39, Longrigg Claire <[Claire.Longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.Longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk)> wrote:

Dear Richard,

Sorry my volunteer didn't include a reference.

Yes it's an arts council document:

**NEWS from arts council England, Yorkshire issue No. 16, 06.07**

Thanks

Claire

Claire Longrigg  
Assistant Curator of Exhibitions  
Ferens Art Gallery  
Queen Victoria Square

Longrigg Claire

25/05/2011 12:39

RE: query

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Richard,  
Sorry my volunteer didn't include a reference.  
Yes it's an arts council document:  
**NEWS from arts council England, Yorkshire issue No. 16, 06.07**  
Thanks  
Claire

Claire Longrigg  
Assistant Curator of Exhibitions  
Ferens Art Gallery  
Queen Victoria Square  
Kingston Upon Hull  
HU1 3RA  
General Office: 01482 613902  
Direct Number: 01482 613916  
E: [claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk](mailto:claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk)  
W: [www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections)

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*Hull & East Riding Museum, Museums Quarter*

**For more information, including how to book battle tactic training, please click [here](#)**

---

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]

**Sent:** 25 May 2011 12:24

**To:** Longrigg Claire

**Subject:** query

Dear Claire

I have a small query. The photo copy comprising two pages (06 & 07) has no reference on it. Can you provide one. Page 06 has a photograph of Romuald Hazoumé and his work, La Bouche du Roi. Is this from an Arts Council document? Can you possibly provide a title and date?

Thanks

Richard

--

Richard Hylton  
48 Ivanhoe Road  
London  
SE5 8DJ

T: +44 (0)20 7657 2745

F: +44 (0)20 7657 2429

---

Longrigg Claire

16/05/2011 15:25

RE: BICENTENARY INQUIRY FOR THE ATTENTION OF CLAIRE LONGRIGG

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Richard,  
Sorry for the delay. I have only just had time to look through the exhibition files in our library.

The Abolitionists' Parlour: Keith Piper  
Unfortunately I cannot find the exhibitions file for this.  
I have found 1 evening preview in the history file, which I can photocopy for you if you want me to?  
We have installation shots available - may I ask what is the purpose of you obtaining photos, is it for a publication?

Mind Forg'd Manacles: Slavery and Blake  
I could only find press cuttings in the file, are these of interest? You are probably best contacting the Hayward Gallery as they originated the exhibition (they may put you in contact with the British Museum the main partner I think) Alison Maun or Ann Jones might be able to help. There is a catalogue that went with the exhibition, that might be of interest to you too.

La Bouche du Roi: an artwork by Romuald Hazoume  
I have found press cuttings and an exhibitions flyer. We have a few spare so can send you a flyer if that's of interest?  
It might be worth contacting the British Museum as they originated the exhibition, we were just one of the touring venues.  
I have some installation images on file.

Best Wishes  
Claire

Claire Longrigg  
Assistant Curator of Exhibitions  
Ferens Art Gallery  
Queen Victoria Square  
Kingston Upon Hull  
HU1 3RA  
General Office: 01482 613902  
Direct Number: 01482 613916  
E: [claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk](mailto:claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk)  
W: [www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections)

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Hull & East Riding Museum, Museums Quarter

For more information, including how to book battle tactic training, please click [here](#)

-----Original Message-----

From: HYLTON RA [[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
Sent: 20 April 2011 14:27  
To: Longrigg Claire  
Subject: Re: BICENTENARY INQUIRY FOR THE ATTENTION OF CLAIRE LONGRIGG

Dear Claire

Thanks for getting back to me. I really appreciate your help on this.

Additionally, it would be really helpful if you could locate any publicity material associated with any of the bicentenary events organised by Ferens Art Gallery. If the library don't have this material would the design department still have files of this publicity? Also, are there any installation shots of these various projects? Are there any old weblinks for these

**BATCHELOR HEATHER**

26/04/2011 07:52

RE: FOI Ref: 170579

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Mr Hylton,

Request safely received on April 8, apologies for not acknowledging it at the time.

Regards,

Heather Batchelor

Heather Batchelor  
Freedom of Information Team  
Department for Culture, Media & Sport  
020 7211 2308 | [www.culture.gov.uk](http://www.culture.gov.uk)

-----Original Message-----

From: HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
Sent: 21 April 2011 14:35  
To: BATCHELOR HEATHER  
Subject: Re: FOI Ref: 170579

Dear Heather Batchelor

I am checking that you received my email below?

Regards

Richard

On 8 April 2011 10:12, HYLTON RA <[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)> wrote:

> Dear Heather Batchelor  
>  
> Thank you for your call regarding my inquiry about the emergence of  
> the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.  
>  
> I would like to receive minutes of any meetings which chart the  
> evolution of the Bicentenary into a commemorative series of  
> exhibitions, events, TV/radio programmes which was in various ways  
> Government backed and funded.  
>  
> As I explained, I'm not sure who met with who and how the idea to  
> establish a commemorative event came about. The public face of the  
> initiative indicates that David Lammy and John Prescott were  
> protagonists in this, however, I'm not sure if their interest and  
> support was sparked by others within or without Government.  
>  
>  
> Below I have listed a number of examples. I hope these aren't too  
> many. As we discussed, it's quite possible that some initial material  
> may lead to other lines of inquiry. Please do let me know if you need

Andrew Marcus

11/05/2011 12:59

RE: Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

To HYLTON RA

Dear Richard,

Thank you for your email. I have forwarded this to the Royal Mint Museum who will get in touch if they are able to assist.

Kind regards,

Andrew

**ANDREW MARCUS**  
Account Manager  
D +44 (0) 207 853 2317

**PORTER NOVELLI**  
31 St Petersburg Place, London, W2 4LA | porternovelli.co.uk  
T +44 (0) 207 853 2222  
[andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk](mailto:andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk)  
[www.linkedin.com/in/andrewjamesmarcus](http://www.linkedin.com/in/andrewjamesmarcus)

---

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
**Sent:** 11 May 2011 11:39  
**To:** Andrew Marcus  
**Subject:** Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

Dear Andrew Marcus

I am writing with regards to my research as a MPhil/PhD student at Goldsmiths College. I am currently researching the emergence of the 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in the British Empire.

I am eager to gather background material regarding the various protagonists involved in the development of this initiative. As one of the major contributors to the Bicentenary, I am interested in gaining access to material held by the Royal Mint that chart how and why this £2 coin came to be produced. As I understand it, all proposed coin designs are presented to the Advisory Committee which then discusses the proposals. Is it possible to receive:

1. Minutes of meetings (e.g advisory committee) which relate to discussions around this particular coin.
2. Documentation, if any, of communications between Government and Royal Mint about the production of a commemorative coin.
3. The commissioning process for the design (e.g. how artists were selected).
4. How the final design was agreed upon via consultation within and without the Royal Mint.
5. Any publicity material/ notifications relating to tendering and or consultation process.
6. In order to contextualise the process by which the Abolition Coin came into being, it would also be useful to have some information on other coins produced around the same time.

I do hope this is clear and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Kind regards,

--  
Richard Hylton  
48 Ivanhoe Road  
London  
SE5 8DJ

T: +44 (0)20 7657 2745  
F: +44 (0)20 7657 2429

\*\*\*\*\*  
The information in this e-mail and any files transmitted with it is confidential, copyright protected and may be legally privileged. It is inte

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\*\*\*\*\*

BATCHELOR HEATHER

16/05/2011 10:23

RE: FOI Ref: 172830

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Richard,

I can confirm that there is no further information about the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting held – unfortunately our filing on this topic seem rather sporadic, although I understand that DCLG may hold more comprehensive records.

I have logged your further queries as a new FOI request (ref 175127).

Kind regards,

Heather

Heather Batchelor  
Freedom of Information Team  
Department for Culture, Media & Sport  
020 7211 2308 | [www.culture.gov.uk](http://www.culture.gov.uk)



<http://twitter.com/dcms>



<http://www.youtube.com/user/dcms>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/thedcms>

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]

**Sent:** 16 May 2011 10:12

**To:** BATCHELOR HEATHER

**Subject:** Re: FOI Ref: 172830

Dear Heather Batchelor

Thank you for sending through this information. The 7th meeting appears to only have an agenda, are there no minutes available for this?

The minutes to the first 6 meetings are actually available online in the archive of DPM Cabinet Office. But it is useful to see information/minutes for meetings 7 & 8 as these relate to post-March 2007 anniversary.

In terms of other information, I have reason to believe that there is more information beyond the minutes to this Advisory Group, which chart DCMS' relationship with various institutions. Therefore, I'd be grateful if you could let me know if there is any information relating to the Bicentenary involving:

1. DCMS and Heritage Lottery Fund (Dr. Fiona Spiers, Judith Cligman Carole Souter CBE)
2. DCMS and Arts Council

FOI Ref: 175127

To richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com

---

**Our Ref: 175127**

Dear Mr Hylton,

Thank you for your request of April 16 asking for the following:

*"In terms of other information, I have reason to believe that there is more information beyond the minutes to this Advisory Group, which chart DCMS' relationship with various institutions. Therefore, I'd be grateful if you could let me know if there is any information relating to the Bicentenary involving:*

1. DCMS and Heritage Lottery Fund (Dr. Fiona Spiers, Judith Cligman Carole Souter CBE
2. DCMS and Arts Council
3. DCMS and British Museum (Neil Mcgregor/ Chris Spring)
4. DCMS and Wilberforce House
5. Arthur Torrington, OBE (The Secretary, the Equiano Society)
6. DCMS and Department for Communities and Local Government
7. Royal Mint/ Royal Mail"

I have dealt with your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

I am able to release information within the scope of your request. Please find attached relevant documents. The names of junior officials have been redacted under Section 40 of the Freedom of information Act (Personal Information), this is an absolute exemption and does not require a public interest test.

If you require any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

Heather Batchelor  
Freedom of Information Team  
Ministerial Support Team  
Tel: 0207 211 2308

\*\*\*\*\*

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- Briefing on the Key Issues.pdf (1 MB)
- DCLG-\_LETTER.pdf (140 KB)
- DCLG-10-08.JPG (3 MB)
- Honouring the Past and Looking to the Future.pdf (250 KB)
- Membership and Key Interests.pdf (672 KB)

Kevin Clancy

11/05/2011 13:30

FW: Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

To richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com

---

Dear Hylton

Your enquiry respecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade coin has been passed on to me by Andrew Marcus.

I think the best thing would be for you and I to have a conversation on the phone in the first instance. My contact details are as set out below. I will be in the office tomorrow if you have time to call.

Kind regards

Kevin Clancy  
Secretary to the Royal Mint Advisory Committee on the Design of Coins, Medals, Seals and Decorations  
[kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk](mailto:kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk)

.....  
The Royal Mint  
Llantrisant, Pontyclun  
CF72 8YT  
United Kingdom

.....  
Tel: +44 (0) 1443 623005(Direct)  
Tel: +44 (0) 1443 222111 (Switchboard)  
Mobile: +44 (0) 7917 882918  
Fax: +44 (0) 1443 623177  
<http://www.royalmint.com>

---

**From:** Andrew Marcus [mailto:[andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk](mailto:andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk)]  
**Sent:** 11 May 2011 12:57  
**To:** Kevin Clancy; Joseph Payne  
**Subject:** FW: Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

Dear Kevin and Joseph,

I have received this enquiry from a student at Goldsmiths College, would this be something I could pass on to you to deal with please?

Many thanks,

Andrew

**ANDREW MARCUS**  
Account Manager  
D +44 (0) 207 853 2317

**PORTER NOVELLI**  
31 St Petersburg Place, London, W2 4LA | [porternovelli.co.uk](http://porternovelli.co.uk)  
T +44 (0) 207 853 2222  
[andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk](mailto:andrew.marcus@porternovelli.co.uk)  
[www.linkedin.com/in/andrewjamesmarcus](http://www.linkedin.com/in/andrewjamesmarcus)

---

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
**Sent:** 11 May 2011 11:39  
**To:** Andrew Marcus  
**Subject:** Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

Dear Andrew Marcus

I am writing with regards to my research as a MPhil/PhD student at Goldsmiths College. I am currently researching the emergence of the 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in the British Empire.

I am eager to gather background material regarding the various protagonists involved in the development of this initiative. As one of the major contributor's to the Bicentenary, I am interested in gaining access to material held by the Royal Mint that chart how and why this £2 coin came to be produced. As I understand it, all proposed coin designs are presented to the Advisory Committee which then discusses the proposals. Is it possible to receive:

1. Minutes of meetings (e.g. advisory committee) which relate to discussions around this particular coin.
2. Documentation, if any, of communications between Government and Royal Mint about the production of a commemorative coin.
3. The commissioning process for the design (e.g. how artists were selected).
4. How the final design was agreed upon via consultation within and without the Royal Mint.
5. Any publicity material/ notifications relating to tendering and or consultation process.
6. In order to contextualise the process by which the Abolition Coin came into being, it would also be useful to have some information on other coins produced around the same time.

richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com

16/05/2011 12:06

## DEBATE ABOUT STRUGGLE AGAINST SLAVERY OCTOBER 2005

To richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com

---

Subject: DEBATE ABOUT STRUGGLE AGAINST SLAVERY OCTOBER 2005

Question: I am trying to locate a debate on slavery in Hansard which took place during October 2005. I have reason to believe this debate took place on Friday 14 October 2005 in the House of Commons. However, I have been unable to locate it. I'd be grateful for any advice on this matter.

Kind regards

Richard  
Name: RICHARD HYLTON  
Email: [richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)  
Address: 48 IVANHOE ROAD

LONDON  
Postcode: SE5 8DJ

---

This email has been scanned by the MessageLabs Email Security System.  
For more information please visit <http://www.messagelabs.com/email>

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Longrigg Claire

17/05/2011 13:05

RE: BICENTENARY INQUIRY FOR THE ATTENTION OF CLAIRE LONGRIGG

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Richard,  
Photocopies and spare print is in the post to you today.

We do not always keep spare copies of print as we just don't have the space to store it.  
You may find copies of press releases on the Hull City Council website, not sure if they just keep recent ones on there.  
Best Wishes  
Claire

Claire Longrigg  
Assistant Curator of Exhibitions  
Ferens Art Gallery  
Queen Victoria Square  
Kingston Upon Hull  
HU1 3RA  
General Office: 01482 613902  
Direct Number: 01482 613916  
E: [claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk](mailto:claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk)  
W: [www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections)

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*Hull & East Riding Museum, Museums Quarter*

**For more information, including how to book battle tactic training, please click [here](#)**

---

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]

**Sent:** 16 May 2011 16:26

**To:** Longrigg Claire

**Subject:** Re: BICENTENARY INQUIRY FOR THE ATTENTION OF CLAIRE LONGRIGG

Dear Claire

Thanks for getting back to me.

The purpose for obtaining material regarding all these exhibitions/events is for research towards my MPhil/Phd. I do not intend to publish any of this material. If possible, please do send me copies of all the material you have. You previously mentioned that the Library may have kept publicity material, is this not the case?

Just to clarify the gallery does not keep a record or copies of press releases etc neither are they stored on an archived website?

Thank you again for your assistance on this matter.

Regards

Richard



RE: BICENTENARY INQUIRY FOR THE ATTENTION OF CLAIRE LONGRIGG

To HYLTON RA

---

Hi Richard,

I have only been working here since 2008, but I have managed to find out the following:

The gallery commissioned a work *The Abolitionist's Parlour* by Keith Piper as part of its 2007 temporary exhibition programme commemorating activities locally and nationally to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in Britain. Piper proposed the creation of a site-specific work taking as its basis film made during Wilberforce House Museum's redevelopment 2006-07.

*The Abolitionists' Parlour*: Keith Piper

5 May - 24 June 2007

Unique to Hull and commissioned especially by the Ferens Art Gallery for 2007. *The Abolitionists' Parlour*, takes the form of a multi-media installation by contemporary artist, Keith Piper. His ambitious three-screen video work explores perceptions of Wilberforce through the writings of a fictional black woman, an ex-slave who was secretly building an archive about the abolitionist movement.

Funded by Arts Council England, Yorkshire

*Mind Forg'd Manacles: Slavery and Blake*

7 April - 20 May 2007

William Blake (1757-1827) was a contemporary of William Wilberforce and during his lifetime saw successful campaigns against the slave trade, leading to its abolition in 1807. Slavery was a fundamental theme in his art and writing and he was fervently opposed to it.

This new exhibition features over 40 watercolours, prints and plates from Blake's illuminated books, alongside other prints of the period showing contemporary attitudes to slavery.

The works are on loan from the British Museum which holds the most comprehensive collection of Blake's art in the world and the exhibition also marks the 250th anniversary of Blake's birth.

A Hayward Gallery Touring/British Museum Partnership UK exhibition

*La Bouche du Roi*: an artwork by Romuald Hazoume

2 June - 15 July

A powerful new multi media installation which confronts the horrors of a slave ship whilst reminding us of modern forms of economic bondage.

Combining over 300 black market petrol cans with terrible sounds and smells, *La Bouche du Roi*, recalls the famous 18th century print of the slave ship, the *Brookes*, which was used to great effect by the abolitionists. Created between 1997 and 2005 by Romuald Hazoume, an artist from the Republic of Benin, West Africa.

A British Museum Partnership UK exhibition. Generously supported by Arts Council England and the Dorset Foundation.

We don't tend to keep copies of posters/publicity etc...but I can check in the library if you would like me to?

Best Wishes

Claire

Claire Longrigg

Assistant Curator of Exhibitions

Ferens Art Gallery

Queen Victoria Square

Kingston Upon Hull

HU1 3RA

General Office: 01482 613902

Direct Number: 01482 613916

E: [claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk](mailto:claire.longrigg@hullcc.gov.uk)

W: [www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections)

Kevin Clancy

23/02/2012 16:10

RE: FW: Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Richard

I am happy to talk this through with you and to go over any details afterwards that may not be clear but I do not wish to be recorded please.

Best wishes  
Kevin

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
**Sent:** 23 February 2012 15:35  
**To:** Kevin Clancy  
**Subject:** Re: FW: Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

Dear Kevin

11.30am on 27 March is fine. However, it would greatly assist me if I could record our conversation (as I don't write shorthand) not only in terms of accurately reflecting various aspects of the design process but also as part of the requirements of my doctoral research. I am happy to send you the general outline of questions prior to our meeting if this helps.

I look forward to your response.

Regards

Richard

On 23 February 2012 14:06, Kevin Clancy <[kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk](mailto:kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk)> wrote:  
Dear Richard

How about 11.30am. I would prefer not to be recorded if that is ok with you.

Best wishes  
Kevin

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
**Sent:** 22 February 2012 10:40

**To:** Kevin Clancy  
**Subject:** Re: FW: Enquiry regarding Coin for Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007

Dear Kevin

Your suggestions are fine. What time would be best for you and how long do you think you'll have? Finally, would you mind if I recorded our conversation on DAT, as this will help me greatly?

Kind regards,

Richard

On 21 February 2012 14:34, Kevin Clancy <[kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk](mailto:kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk)> wrote:  
Dear Richard

How about Tuesday 27 March. Late morning tea/coffee at The Wolseley?

Best wishes  
Kevin

Dr Kevin Clancy  
Director  
Royal Mint Museum  
[kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk](mailto:kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk)

.....  
The Royal Mint Museum  
Llantrisant, Pontyclun  
CF72 8YT  
United Kingdom

.....  
Tel: +44 (0) 1443 623005(Direct)  
Tel: +44 (0) 1443 222111 (Switchboard)  
Mobile: +44 (0) 7917 882918  
Fax: +44 (0) 1443 623177

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]  
**Sent:** 20 February 2012 15:12

**To:** Kevin Clancy

RE: INQUIRY- ABOLITION - THE THOMAS CLARKSON STORY- An exhibition at Ipswich Museum in 2007

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Richard,

Many thanks for your enquiry.

Unfortunately, our Collections and Learning Curators are involved in an extensive, ongoing research programme and cannot facilitate research enquiries at this time.

We are now entering an exciting time of change ahead of major capital development projects that will transform Ipswich Arts and Museum into a fabulous visitor attraction focused on Ipswich's culture, heritage, science and the arts. A key part of this is unlocking the fascinating stories of the collections through an ambitious information research programme, as such we are currently focusing on research in this area.

We apologise therefore that we are temporarily unable to support your requests.

Best wishes,

**Ben Ridgeon**

Business Support Officer,

**Colchester + Ipswich Museums Service**

Ipswich Museum,  
High Street,  
Ipswich,  
IP1 3QH

Tel: 01473 433550

---

**From:** HYLTON RA [mailto:[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)]

**Sent:** 02 August 2016 11:46

**To:** museums

**Subject:** INQUIRY- ABOLITION - THE THOMAS CLARKSON STORY- An exhibition at Ipswich Museum in 2007

Dear Sir/Madam

I am currently a PhD student at Goldsmiths College and researching contemporary art and the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

Ipswich Museum staged the exhibition ABOLITION THE THOMAS CLARKSON STORY, as part of the bicentenary in 2007. The exhibition also included a new commission by artist Anissa-Jane. I was wondering if you had any information, including dates, leaflets and/or publicity about the entire exhibition?

I would be grateful if you could let me know if you have any material. I would be happy to pay to receive any copies of this material.

Kind regards,

graham fagen

27/06/2016 11:01

Re: Downpresserer, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, 2007

To HYLTON RA

---

Hi Richard,

attached some low res images of the work that was exhibited as part of Downpresserer.

The work - especially the video work which is a development of The Slave's Lament by Robert Burns - has a bit of pre and post history.

A version called 'Auld Lang Syne c/w The Slave's Lament' was first made for an exhibition at the Tramway, Glasgow 2005 for a solo exhibition called 'Clean Hands Pure Heart' and then a version called 'The Slave's Lament' was made last year for my solo exhibition Scotland + Venice for the 56th Biennale.

Publications were made for both these exhibitions.

Here's a private link to my vimeo page which gives you access to the video works, please use this for your reference and research only.

<https://vimeo.com/album/3431183> password: nothank

Michael Morris has also used my work in his PhD at Glasgow which went on to be published, here's a link that may be of interest. <http://www.ljmuenglish.com/staff/dr-michael-morris>

Hope this helps Richard, let me know if there's anything else I can help with or any questions you may have.

Very best,  
g

Nancy, 2006  
Silk screen print  
55.5 x 76cm  
Edition of 13  
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Edition of 13

West Coast Looking West (Atlantic)  
Colour photograph  
98.5 x 144cm  
Edition of 3 + 2AP  
2006

our ref DE/11/08/2016  
your ref  
please ask for Damian Etherington  
direct dial 01473 433551  
email damian.etherington@ipswich.gov.uk



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BOROUGH COUNCIL

Mr Richard Hylton  
Flat B  
48 Ivanhoe Road  
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SE5 8DJ

Grafton House  
15-17 Russell Road  
Ipswich Suffolk  
IP1 2DE

Telephone: 01473 432000

[www.ipswich.gov.uk](http://www.ipswich.gov.uk)

Dear Richard Hylton

**Response to your Complaint**

Thank you for taking the time to contact the Council regarding the response you received on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2016 in reply to your request for information on the Abolition display at Ipswich Museum and Gallery. Please accept our apologies that the standard of our service has not met your expectations. I have had an opportunity to have a look into your complaint.

Our enquiry and research services in Ipswich have been suspended due to a largescale retrospective documentation project we are undertaking called the Collections Information Programme (CIP). CIP is a major undertaking that involves us looking at every item in the Ipswich Borough Collection in preparation for the re-development of Ipswich Museum and Gallery, which as you will appreciate is a significant task. At present, we do not have a timescale for the re-introduction of the services, but we expect the suspension to continue until 2018 at the earliest.

The reply you received is the standard message we have been using and I am sorry that you found it inadequate. I have now taken the opportunity to review this and have asked that it explains why we are unable to help more clearly and also for additional information about the service suspension to be added to the website.

Ipswich Borough Council is committed to investigating and responding to complaints promptly. Complaints are a valuable tool used to continually review and improve services. Further information on our complaints policy can be accessed at the following page on our website.  
<https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/complaints>

Yours Sincerely,

pp Handwritten signature of Bill Seaman in black ink.

Bill Seaman  
Museum Arts and Culture Manager  
Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

Michael Paul Britto

18/09/2015 11:38

Re: INQUIRY

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Hylton,  
I apologize for the delay, I've been very busy preparing for an upcoming exhibition. I will get those videos online for you this weekend.

Best,  
Michael Paul Britto

Sent from my iPad

On Sep 18, 2015, at 2:32 AM, HYLTON RA <[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)> wrote:

Dear Michael

I was wondering if you'd be able to upload these videos? Kind regards Richard

On 31 August 2015 at 13:31, Michael Paul Britto <[brittofiel@gmail.com](mailto:brittofiel@gmail.com)> wrote:

Dear Richard,  
I would be happy to post those videos online with a passcode to help you with your thesis. I would need a few days to make that happen, but I could post them this week.  
Best,  
Michael Paul Britto

On Mon, Aug 31, 2015 at 4:07 AM, HYLTON RA <[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)> wrote:

Dear Michael Paul Britto

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I would be most grateful for any assistance you can provide on this matter.

Kind regards,

Richard Hylton

--  
Richard Hylton,  
[www.handeyeprojects.org](http://www.handeyeprojects.org)

Michael Paul Britto

20/09/2015 20:45

Re: INQUIRY

To HYLTON RA

---

Dear Hylton,  
Please find included in this email the links and passwords for the videos you requested to view. I apologize again for the delay.  
Best,  
Michael Paul Britto

Dirrrty Harriet Tubman  
<https://vimeo.com/139860522>  
Password: tubman

I'm A Slave 4U  
<https://vimeo.com/121741003>  
Password: slavery

On Sun, Sep 20, 2015 at 7:19 AM, HYLTON RA <[richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com](mailto:richard.hylton1@ntlworld.com)> wrote:

Dear Michael

Thanks for this and sorry to bother you at what must be a busy time. Hope the show goes well. Regards  
Richard

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<http://britto-fotowrk.tumblr.com/>  
<http://100square.tumblr.com>  
<http://globalgrind.com/hip-hop-culture/michael-paul-britto-takes-n-word-church-photos>

RE: INQUIRY- ABOLITION - THE THOMAS CLARKSON STORY- An exhibition at Ipswich Museum in 2007

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Bill Seaman  
Museum Arts and Culture Manager  
Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

## **Bibliography**

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*Two Sevens Clash* Culture, Joe Gibbs, 1977

*Handsworth Revolution* Steel Pulse LP Mango Records, 1978

*International Herb* Culture Virgin Records, 1979.

*Not Satisfied*, Aswad Columbia Records, 1982

## **Exhibition References**

**Uncomfortable Truths:  
The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design**

Victoria & Albert Museum, London  
20 February - 17 June 2007

El Anatsui  
Michael Paul Britto Tapfuma Gutsa Romuald Hazoumè Lubaina Himid Anissa-Jane  
Christine Meisner Keith Piper  
Yinka Shonibare MBE Julien Sinzogan  
Fred Wilson

[Tour: Salford Museum and Art Gallery, 30 June - 2 September 2007; Ferens Art  
Gallery, Hull 15 September 2007 - 6 January 2008.]

**Human Cargo  
The Transatlantic Slave Trade, its Abolition and Contemporary Legacies in  
Plymouth and Devon**

Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery  
22 September - 24 November 2007

Jyll Bradley  
Lisa Cheung – in collaboration with WESSIELING Raimi Gbadamosi  
Melanie Jackson  
Fiona Kam Meadley

**Crossing the Waters**

Cartwright Hall, Bradford  
1 September - 2 December 2007

Sonia Boyce Ugo Egonu Tam Joseph Isaac Julien Glenn Ligon Hew Locke Chris  
Ofili Keith Piper

Ingrid Pollard  
Yinka Shonibare MBE Carrie Mae Weems Aubrey Williams

[Toured to City Gallery, Leicester 19 January - 1 March 2008]

**Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery**

The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester  
16 June 2007 - 27 April 2008

Artists:  
Godfried Donkor Althea McNish Tony Phillips

Selectors:  
SuAndi  
Kevin Dalton-Johnson Emma Poulter  
Alan Rice

**La Bouche du Roi An Artwork by Romuald Hazoumè**

British Museum, London 22 March - 13 May 2007

[Toured: Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, 2 June - 15 July 2007; Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool 4 August - 2 September, 2007; Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery, 15 September - 28 October 2007; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, 10 November - 3 February 2007-8; Horniman Museum, London, 5 December - 1 March 2009; The Herbert Gallery, Coventry, 3 April - 31 May 2009]

**Keith Piper**

***The Abolitionists' Parlour***

Ferens Art Gallery, Hull 5 May - 24 June 2007

**Graham Fagen**

***Downpresserer***

Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow 14 March - 28 May 2007

**Sonia Boyce**

***Devotional***

National Portrait Gallery  
16 June - 25 November 2007

**Godfried Donkor**

***Lace & Slavery Lace***

The Yard Gallery, Nottingham 11 January - 10 February 2008

**Anissa-Jane**

***Abolition: The Thomas Clarkson Story***

Colchester and Ipswich Museum  
26 September 2007 - 30 June 2008.