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## A Travelogue of Sorts: Transatlantic Trafficking in Silence and Erasure

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## A JOURNAL OF SORTS: 2007

*August 29*

Flew to London, England. An uneventful flight—may all flights be thus.

2007

An event filled year: the year of my father's death and my completion of the ms *Zong!*, a book length poem about the tragic events in 1781 aboard a slave-ship by the same name.

2007 CE

Been 200 years since the British abolished their dastardly trade—have heard tell that there are exhibits galore in the former “Mother Country” marking the event. Am eager to see what is made, curatorially speaking, that is, of slavery, the slave trade, and its abolition by a nation once at the heart of a crime against humanity.<sup>1</sup> Particularly since I've been immersed for the last seven years in working on a ms exploring as much, or as little, as one can, the events surrounding the drowning of 150 enslaved Africans on board the *Zong*.

*August 31*

Coffee at Café Nero (he who fiddled while Rome burned) in Woodgreen. Rome still burns, and there's a whole lot of fiddling going on.

All the dregs of the world seem to have washed up here. The grimness is overwhelming—palpable almost.

Went to see cousins L and J: they live with their son who has recently bought a house for 680,000£! Sterling! They are African Caribbean people. Like me, descended from Africans forcibly brought to the Caribbean. Like those on board the *Zong*.

London is expensive—one of the most expensive cities to live in. Eat in. Sleep in. No doubt to dream in.

*“Property is an obsession in the capital.” Time Out<sup>2</sup>*

The issue lists dream homes that range in price from 229,000£ for a high rise apartment to 620,000£—an idyllic cottage with garden.

I think of another type of property—the property in slaves—that was once an obsession, certainly in the mercantile class, in this country, and the link between that earlier property and the one I am reading about.

### ***September 1***

Speaking of property, friends and I decide to picnic on Hampstead Heath, once the property of 1st Earl of Mansfield, known also as Lord Mansfield, who was at the time also “England’s most powerful judge.”<sup>3</sup> The Heath is a well-known, gay meeting place, one of my friends, a young, gay man, tells me: whenever he tells his friends he’s been to Hampstead Heath, they tease him. All rolling fields and meadows complete with a large, reed-fringed pond, the Heath is beautiful in the bright summer sunshine. As we lounge on the grass eating good cheese and water crackers, drinking wine and sampling pâtés, I could almost pretend that what happened didn’t, so easy is it to forget. That, indeed, I just happen to be there on the Heath on that glorious summer’s day. That there weren’t a number of carefully calculated decisions—particularly legal ones made a long, long time ago—that have brought me to that particular Heath on that particular summer’s day.

Kenwood House, now the property of English Heritage, located in Hampstead Heath, was once the home of Lord Mansfield. I am there to visit an exhibit *Slavery and Justice: The Legacies of Dido Belle and Lord Mansfield*, one of the many exhibits marking the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade. The centerpiece of the exhibit is a painting of two young women—cousins—Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray painted in the late 1770s.<sup>4</sup>

“Kenwood House is closely connected to the history of the slave trade,” the catalogue reads, although “(i)ts links are not through the building itself, but are traced through the lives of two very different people who lived here in the later 18th century.”<sup>5</sup> Those two people are the 1st Earl of Mansfield, mentioned above, and Dido Elizabeth Belle, his illegitimate great-niece. According to the exhibit booklet, it was not entirely unusual for wealthy and powerful members of the upper class to become legal guardians of family members. Indeed, Lady Elizabeth Murray, the other young girl in the painting, was another great niece (legitimate) of Lord Mansfield. What was unusual, however, was that Dido was of mixed race and “probably born to an enslaved mother.” We know very little about her maternal antecedents save that her mother’s name was

Maria Bell. What we do know is that her father, Sir John Lindsay, captain of a British warship, brought Dido to England when she was about five. Where from is unknown, but it is believed that during a battle for Havana, Lindsay captured a Spanish slave ship and fathered a child with one of the enslaved African women on board. That child we have come to know as Dido Belle. All we know of her mother is that her name was Maria Bell. Why Lindsay took custody of the child, Dido, and what happened to her mother remains a mystery, as does so much relating to African peoples who were caught up in the maelstrom that was the transatlantic slave trade—the Maafa.<sup>6</sup> These silences, erasures, and lacunae have been heightened and redoubled by the curatorial decisions made in many of these exhibits.

Lord Mansfield, England’s Chief Justice, was involved in many of the most significant cases related to slavery in that country. One of his most famous judgments, the Somerset case, decided in 1772, was immediately interpreted, though incorrectly so, to mean that slavery was outlawed in England. Regarding Mansfield’s approach to issues of slavery, the booklet proffers a supposition which is unusual for this type of document: “The affection with which Mansfield watched Dido grow up at Kenwood probably influenced his personal thoughts on slavery.”<sup>7</sup> It then back tracks: “As Lord Chief Justice, however, Mansfield had to balance any such feelings against his careful reading of the law.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, although many had hoped Mansfield would use the opportunity of the Somerset case to rule that slavery was unlawful in England, he did not. First, he delayed the case for some five months. The booklet explains the delay thus: “Perhaps this indicated a personal struggle between his caution as a law lord and his closeness to Dido.”<sup>9</sup> He did consider the practice of slavery “odious,” but it was his opinion that all his judgment did was restrict the rights of slave-owners to “remove slaves from England by force.”<sup>10</sup> Despite his caution, however, the decision sent “shockwaves beyond the courtroom”<sup>11</sup> on both sides of the issue, and many believed that the ruling outlawed slavery in England.

The painting is intriguing. The two girls appear to be teenagers: Lady Elizabeth, dressed in pink, reaches out to her cousin, Dido, who wears white. The fabric of their dresses is clearly expensive. Both wear pearl necklaces, although Dido’s has one strand, while her cousin’s has two. There are other differences between Dido and her white cousin: the former wears a pearl encrusted turban, while her cousin is crowned with a single ringlet of flowers. Dido carries an armful of exotic fruit; her cousin holds a book. Finally, Dido’s right index finger is raised to her face. The booklet interprets her gesture as either playful, or one that attempts to draw attention to her different skin color. Given that Dido’s color would have



[www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.17901](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.17901)

been extremely noticeable in London at that time, more so in her class, one doubts that Dido would be drawing attention to her skin color. Far more likely is the gesture being the result of the artist's own discomfort.

While the picture remains the centerpiece, the exhibit extends through two large rooms of the elegantly spacious and imposing Kenwood House, and attempts to place Dido's existence within a larger context of Africans in London at that time. For instance, a reference to one Billy Waters, known as King of Beggars, who had fought for the British in the American War of Independence, directs our attention to the larger presence of Africans in England and their involvement in enterprises such as the War of Independence. There is far too little of this, however.

### *Sunday 2*

Visited Ally Pally (Alexander Palace) for the farmer's market.

My next stop along the curatorial trail is the National Museum which is hosting an installation—*Scratch the Surface*—by Yinka Shonibare, a British artist of Nigerian heritage. The exhibit begins in a small room in which there are large oil paintings of two individuals: *Colonel Tarleton* and *Mrs Oswald*, the former by Zoffany, the latter by Joshua Reynolds. Tarleton wears a plumed helmet and Mrs. Oswald holds a large broad-brimmed hat, commonly worn by aristocratic women, the crown of which is decorated with light, gauzy fabric typical of the time. Tarleton made his fortune from the slave trade and was an avid anti-abolitionist, while Mrs. Oswald and her husband owned plantations in the Americas. The accompanying text and displays of archival documents trace the part the trade played in the Museum's ownership of these paintings. Other text(s), with pictorial assistance, documents some of the more horrendous practices of slavery such as an individual being thrown into a boiling vat of sugar. A military helmet, much like the one Tarleton wears, sits in a glass case, and where one would have expected a plume of feathers, Shonibare has replaced it with strips of what we have come to know as African fabric. Another glass case contains a broad-brimmed hat similar to the one Mrs. Oswald holds in the painting, except in this instance the fabric decorating the hat is also of African textiles.

On an audio-visual recording, Shonibare recounts the history of what we now commonly refer to as African textiles. These batik prints were first designed in Holland by the Dutch for the inhabitants of Indonesia where, for a variety of reasons, they did not do well. West Africa then became the dominant destination market. Indeed, the name that describes these fabrics, Veritable Wax Hollandais or Real Dutch Wax, speaks to the economic history of these textiles. Today Asia, and in particular China, has become a competitor in production, not only of these fabrics,

but also of the clothing made from them, which, in turn, wreaks havoc on the fragile domestic industries of African countries.<sup>12</sup>

From this room we are directed to a large, airy, central area filled with natural light from above, and high up overhead, in the domed, light-filled ceiling a pheasant appears to explode, having been shot I assume, into startling, red plumed feathers strung along strands of wire. And elevated on pedestals, clad in Georgian-styled clothing fashioned from African textiles, life-sized figures of Colonel Tarleton and Mrs. Oswald stand, pointing muskets upwards. They are both missing their heads. It is a clever and powerful exhibit.

### *An aside on Woodgreen*

All the dregs of the world—it seems a harsh comment, but on a bright summer’s day there is a “downpressed,” unwashed, grim mood to the throngs that pass by—Eastern Europeans, poor cousins to the Western European, now elevated to membership in the white club of Europe; dark clad, sombre-eyed Somalians with clothing advertising their faith; young Muslim girls in giggling groups, heads covered, cell phones glued to their ears; and the bone-weary working classes, Black and white. They are all here and many, many others. Drawn or pushed to the industrial heartlands, albeit on the downswing.

I sense a palpable difference between immigrants here and those I observe in and around Toronto. There appears to be a greater sense of possibility—hope even—in the latter group. Perhaps, it’s in the way people carry their bodies in Toronto. Unlike the New World where money *can* propel you out of your class, here in the erstwhile heart of empire in-born class and pedigree, neither of which you can buy, still determine your destiny. Add race to that and the odds for Africans become almost insuperable.

Several months later, I come upon a statement that sums up what I observe on the streets of Woodgreen: the writer, Iain Marlow, himself of English heritage, concedes that London can be friendly, but describes it as a place where “the leaves seem to tumble from the trees out of depression for seasons to come, and the damp, grey landscape pushes people to pull coat collars up around their necks and ignore the chill wind that causes this country such discomfort.” His parents, “shackled” by their class and fleeing the “bleak prospects” and failure of opportunity that Britain offered, immigrated to the greener pastures of Canada. Not much appears to have changed in England, for in the same article Marlow draws attention to recent headlines in the Guardian describing England as “(r)iven by class” and having “no social mobility.”

What does this have to do with the 200th anniversary of the passing of legislation abolishing the slave trade? The connections are dense, run deep and spread wide.

### *DNA connection*

Lord Justice Sedley is calling for DNA files to be kept on the entire population of the United Kingdom. The present system, he says, which only takes DNA profiles from criminal suspects and crime scenes, discriminates against those who tend to be profiled too frequently by the police, namely peoples of color and poorer people while “a great many people whose DNA would show them guilty of crimes go free” (Stallwood). I cannot imagine any justice of the Supreme Court of Canada ever making such a statement. I agree with Justice Sedley’s reasoning, although am leery of the outcome. But why the hell not? Think on it—think of all those, including kings, queens and popes who, in their involvement in slavery and the slave trade, have committed heinous crimes which constitute crimes against humanity, and have escaped any responsibility. Who has ever been brought to justice for those acts?

### *Monday 3*

Slept late. Breakfast—braved Woodgreen again. Changed money at the post office. Bought dishcloths.

### *Tuesday 4*

Tube strike across the City—stayed at home—washed—vacuumed—did accounts—tracked money. I get a perverse pleasure from using my Oyster card—slapping it on the electronic turnstile and sailing through. Too bad for me if this strike continues.

### *Wednesday 5*

Tube strike called off. Hurrah!!

Me and my Oyster card sail off to the British Museum which is next on my list. The exhibit, *Inhuman Traffic: The Business of the Slave Trade*, is intended to provide “an overview of the Slave Trade through an examination of the commodities which encouraged such a barbaric use of labor... The display examines the commodities involved in the Slave Trade and the way Africa, Europe and the Americas were linked in a global trade network.” What was I expecting? Certainly not the hole in the wall, British museum style. Room 69a, some 15 feet square,

containing a “small exhibition” which “covers more than 500 years and examines both the Parliamentary Abolition of the trade in 1807, and important resistance leaders including Toussaint l’Ouverture, Olaudah Equiano and Nanny of the Maroons, and their struggles to end enslavement.” Blake may have believed it possible for a grain of sand to contain a universe, but presenting 500 years of history related to the business of the slave trade within a room which by any, let alone British Museum, standards can only be described as tiny, is tantamount to the Biblical impossibility of trying to pass a camel through the eye of a needle. It is egregiously disrespectful and offensive; indeed, it is denial writ large and succeeds in trivializing an enormous historical tragedy that continues to have current repercussions in contemporary British society.

*“The grand object of English navigators—indeed of all Christian navigators is money, money, money...the poor wretched natives...are rendered so much more miserable (by)...the Christians’ abominable traffic for slave and the horrid cruelty and treachery of the petty kings.” Ignatius Sancho, 1770.<sup>13</sup>*

The British Museum is an imposingly regal building. The relatively recent renovations have brought an abundance of light into it—spacious and light-filled, it vibrates with a sense of history—not theft. And in all that space one tiny room is devoted to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic trade in slaves.<sup>14</sup> There is a sense of the miserly in the lack of space devoted to the exhibit. What should I make of it? That, perhaps, there weren’t sufficient artifacts in their collections to mount a major exhibit? Like hell, no! This country that in the heyday of empire pillaged the cultures of the world and brought back the booty to be deposited in this very British Museum. If it’s one thing the British do well it’s history. Theirs and others’. So why this churlish concession to a major event and development in their own history, the effects of which continue to reverberate to this day? The silence speaks for itself.

I remind myself that slavery and colonialism were consolidated well after the principles of the Enlightenment had made substantial inroads into English society, and that this culture had no difficulty adhering to the precepts of reason and rationality while believing that it was acceptable to hold humans as slaves.

I leave the small room to wander the large, bright, spacious outer room that splendiferously displays Etruscan and Roman history. I wander and wonder at the marvel of it all. So much space! Like the child in the poem of my colonial childhood who stood in his shoes and wondered. So much space and time devoted to this history. So little space and time devoted to the depredations wrought by the British crown and all those in its employ. The wonder of it all! And as I wander the Museum I become a collector of sorts—of words, using them as surrogate fragments to fill the silences.



I hunt traces of Africa, jotting phrases that leap out at me, or catch my fancy:

- *Trapiche de sangre*—blood mills
- manillas
- sardonyx gem
- granite and porphyry (quarried in Egypt)
- grains of paradise
- West Africa, source of salt, cheap textiles, copper wine, palm oil, gold ivory pepper, cotton cloth
- Arabs 700 AD
- bracelets used as currency
- Mediterranean coins from gold mined in north Africa
- Mungo Park
- Septimus Severus the first “African” Emperor of Rome—193–211
- Carthage destroyed in 146 BC
- Rome controlled as far west as Morocco to the Sahara
- Tripolitania
- bronze hanging lamp modelled on head of an African identified as 1st or 2nd century A.D. (His mouth is lit!!!)
- African acrobat on a crocodile. (He has locks!!!)
- terra cotta plaque with “pygmies in a boat” against straw huts
- Egypt produced most of the corn that fed the poor
- soldiers and sailors guard the Empire’s boundaries
- woman sitting on enormous phallus
- harlot of Canopus
- river to Alexandria in Middle Egypt
- Manfalout
- nome of Lycopolite
- Roman soldiers were particularly attracted to the crocodile cult centred on the sacred grottos of the region

I am overwhelmed. The British Museum overwhelms me. A feeling of lassitude comes over me. What sort of mind gathers this stuff? This is often my response on visiting British exhibits. I am always struck by how much there is of *their* culture; how little there is of ours; how much of ours *they* destroyed and how tenderly and carefully they guard theirs. My way of counteracting these feelings, I have discovered over many visits to England, is to visit a Roman ruin. To stand on what was once a part of the largest empire in the world and tell myself that in time everything passes. Indeed, the British Empire is no longer.

As I leave the Museum I pass a huge container for donations. I am impressed that most of their museums and galleries are free, courtesy of Tony Blair's Labour government. I refuse to make a donation, however—my entrance has been paid for many times over.

I go out into the bright sunlight which lifts my spirits to wander some more in the downtown area. I recognize the people—essentially the idle, like myself. Tourists. Less of the grim quality I observe in Woodgreen. Perhaps, because the people in this area are better off.

I try to identify some of the buildings that are featured in the leaflet: *On the Road to Abolition: Ending the British Slave Trade*. It promotes “a walk around Westminster” advertising 15 places of interest related to slavery and the abolition of the trade, including sites such as Nelson's Column and the National Gallery.

### ***Thursday 6***

I wend my way to Westminster Hall (Westminster Palace) and the exhibit, *Parliament and the British Slave Trade*.

In this very hall Mansfield would have sat! This is my first thought as I stand in the middle of the empty hall. I try and imagine him sitting here as Lord Chief Justice deciding on the Zong case (Gregson vs. Gilbert).<sup>15</sup> Above me are flying buttresses, below, worn flagstones inscribed with names I have only ever read about—Thomas More & Charles I—both of whom were tried and sentenced to death in this very hall. Impressive, spacious and bleak are the adjectives that come to mind as I gaze around—a hall representing 900 years of history. Banquets, coronations, parliaments, state trials and funerals have all taken place here; within these walls were law courts and shops. Kings and queens have lain in state here, as have Prime Ministers like Gladstone (owner of sugar plantations in the Caribbean) and Churchill. Here, in 1907, the British government hosted a banquet for colonial premiers attending the Imperial Conference. And here I stand, 200 years after the abolition of the slave trade that forcibly brought my ancestors to this part of the world, and all the while staring down at me from way above are kings, queens and angels frozen in stone. I turn my attention to the exhibit, *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament & People*, devoted to the parliamentary struggle to pass legislation abolishing the trade. Once again the contrast between space and confinement is striking for the exhibit, modest by any standards, appears somewhat lost in this vast hall; it feels awkward, constricted and somewhat claustrophobic. The exhibit begins in a modest purpose-built anteroom within the confines of the great hall and with the aid of text and audio-visual material it takes us through the historical events leading up to the recreation of the Parliamentary debate in a simulated House of Commons. Physically the design has the feel of a corridor—a sort of historical birth canal, if you will—leading us to “modern day slavery.”

### *Uneasy thoughts*

Equating the transatlantic slave trade with what is called modern day slavery leaves me uneasy—even queasy. Among the display materials is a “Primary Booklet” published by The Parliamentary Education Service which defines a slave trade as “the buying and selling of people who have been captured and made to work against their will.” Without intending to diminish the horrors of the contemporary sex trade that transports women and vulnerable youths around the world, or the forced labor of children in many parts of the world today, there are unique aspects to the transatlantic slave that are disappeared by collapsing these two practices. The transatlantic trade and slavery entailed the deliberate destruction of untold numbers of people, of cultures, languages and religious practices. Not to mention countries.

... Our gospel truth  
is harder than we know it.  
Written in the ink of blood,  
molasses and spent sweat,  
it reads:  
Centuries of slavery  
left the nigger naked,  
stripped bare of human attributes  
cropped back to the ape stock.  
At one cold cutlass stroke religion went;  
down fell another and the language went  
and pride and names and cultures  
all drained out like blood from mortal wounds—  
Africa dismembered, disembowelled. (Roach)

Transatlantic slavery became the lynchpin of the ideology of white supremacy which continues to this day. More disturbing is that collapsing transatlantic slavery with “modern day slavery” fits neatly into the often expressed canard that slavery in Africa predated the transatlantic slave trade, survived the trade, and that Africans were themselves responsible for slavery:

If our DWMs were wicked exploiters...then not enough is made of the brute fact that black-on-black slavery was endemic in Africa. But what happened when Europeans intervened in domestic African trade was that an *ideological* element suddenly appeared in an ancient tradition. (Bayley, my emphasis)

This in a review in the *Observer* on the refurbished permanent exhibit on slavery in Liverpool! The “ideological element” is nowhere defined in the article, nor does the writer explain why or how this “ideological element” (what ever it was) “suddenly appeared.” And why are World Wars I and II never referred to as white-on-white violence?

Or, as appeared in the venerable *New York Review of Books*:

...it is easy to forget that virtually all African slaves were first enslaved by fellow Africans. The men, women and children sold to Europeans in exchange for textiles, metal goods, guns, liquor, cowry shells and other commodities were, for the most part, slaves under African laws. (Davis)

How much of “all” is “virtually”? Estimates range anywhere from 16 million up to, and often in excess of, 30 million Africans who were caught up in this trade. Are we to believe that “virtually all” of these people were slaves in Africa?

I consider Hugh Thomas’s views on the transatlantic slave trade extremely problematic. A disturbing example of these views is to be found in his work, *The Slave Trade*, where he writes, “Slave women sometimes *benefited* from the fact that the crew were unable to maintain themselves without women” (Thomas 406, my emphasis). In the same paragraph he quotes further from a source that describes a sailor “seducing” a woman and lying with her “brutelike.” He does not explain what “benefit” enslaved African women could possibly derive from being in the power of men who wanted to have sex with them and were prepared to rape them. It is also astonishing that an opinion like this would be printed as recently as 1997.

It is, however, because of his generally anti-African positions that his statement about the activity of Africans prior to being captured carries some weight:

Still, most of the millions of slaves shipped from Africa were not members of an established slave population but ordinary farmers or members of their families, suddenly deprived of their liberty by fellow Africans in response to...“growing external demand.” (Thomas 95)

In this very hall, Mansfield would have heard the Somerset case in 1772 that was the reason for great celebration among Africans living in England at the time, as well as their white supporters:

On Monday nearly 200 Blacks with their ladies had an entertainment at a Public House in Westminster to celebrate the triumph which their brother Somerset had obtained over Mr. Stuart his master. Lord Mansfield’s health was echoed around the Room. (Thomas)<sup>16</sup>

In 1783, he would have heard the Zong case: I try to imagine the hurly burly, the to-ing and fro-ing of lawyers, their clients, the bewigged and gowned justices—deciding a case related to an insurance claim seeking indemnification for murdering 150 people. A “most uncommon case,” Mansfield is reported to have described it as. That is the extent of his reported discomfort. Uncommon!? Why uncommon? What was uncommon in this case? In a culture that was comfortable with the buying and selling of humans. Was it because the company was trying to claim money for the Africans they killed? Or was it, as the catalogue from the earlier exhibit mentions, his fatherly relationship with Dido Belle, his great niece, that fed his discomfort.

16 years—that’s how long it took to get the legislation abolishing the slave trade passed. The excerpts of the debate that one can listen to through headphones while seated on pseudo House of Commons seats, is stirring—impressive even. William Wilberforce, the abolitionist member of Parliament, spoke for four hours, arguing for the abolition of the trade, although he did not entertain the abolition of slavery, believing as he did that “Negroes” were not ready to enjoy freedom.

### *Left Out*

The “African Slave Trade is contrary to the Principle of Justice, Humanity and Sound Policy.”<sup>17</sup> The sepia-toned postcard on which these words appear is a scaled down replica of the original bill—An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade—complete with the House of Lords stamp. It informs “(w)ords printed in ‘Italics’ were added by the Commons, and the Words printed in Black Letter(sic) at the Bottom of the Page, were left out by the Commons.” The “African Slave Trade is contrary to the Principle of Justice, Humanity and Sound Policy...” is printed in “Black Letter” and was therefore omitted from the final text. This particular erasure speaks volumes and has direct bearing on the erasures and silences I notice in these exhibits.

From Westminster, I go the Tate Britain, walking past the imposing statue of Boadicea queen of the Iceni, riding in her open chariot pulled by two horses. Enraged at the rape of her daughters by Roman soldiers, Boadicea led her people to a war against the Romans which included destroying Londinium, as London was then known, Colchester and St. Albans and coming dangerously close to defeating them.

The Tate Britain exhibit, *1807: Blake, Slavery and the Radical Mind*, focuses on William Blake and a circle of radical writers and artists whose “poetry and art protested against mental, physical and economic enslavement.”<sup>18</sup> These artists were involved in the Abolition movement and all worked with the publisher Joseph Johnson. The exhibit features several of Blake’s drawings and his poetry.

Interestingly, the booklet describing the exhibit, simply titled *1807*, devotes as much, if not more, time to Sir Henry Tate, the Tate’s first benefactor, than to Blake, going to some length to distance the former from slavery. Henry Tate’s fortune, the booklet instructs, “did not come from the production of sugar – he was a refiner.” I recall the Tate and Lyle factory of my colonial childhood in Trinidad, located along the Eastern Main Road, as I read that Sir Henry “was something of a benefactor to the Caribbean economy.” It exculpates him of any involvement in slavery or the trade: “Sir Henry was a bulk purchaser of cane sugar and there is no evidence that his business came any closer than that to the post-slavery Caribbean plantations.” The defensiveness of tone does more to raise questions in my mind about Sir Henry Tate than otherwise. Further, we know that although slavery was ended, the ill effects of the

institution, not to mention the working conditions for the descendants of the formerly enslaved and the indentured were onerous and debilitating.

During the now compulsory audio-visual component in the lobby area of the one room display, the journalist, Yasmin Ali Brown, describes the response of white Britons to the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade as “stingy.” She is shocked at the churlishness of their response. I am not.

### *Friday 7*

“I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits” Olaudah Equiano 1789.

I copy these words from the *International Museum on Slavery* in Liverpool. It is fitting that this exhibit is located in Liverpool since the city was central to the triangular trade in African slaves and commodities. There have been extensive renovations to the building and the original exhibit itself has been expanded and become far more high-tech. Like the former exhibit, this one is permanent. But unlike it, this one has been elevated from the basement to the third floor. The exhibit begins in Africa with the *de rigueur* simulated African village, takes us through the mechanics of the triangular transatlantic slave trade, explores slavery in the New World and the Caribbean, engages with the civil rights movement and era (this is inspired!) and reaches back across the Atlantic into South Africa to confront apartheid.

I play my game of collecting words, letting them spin out in my imagination:

- grape shot and leg irons
- salt house
- Penny Lane of Beatles fame (named after James Penny, anti-abolitionist and owner of a Liverpool slave ship)
- slave pennies
- Gorée Piazzas
- 1/10 -1/4 of each cargo dead

This is my second visit to this exhibit—I notice that there is now a shrine to the ancestors: “To commemorate the ancestors of those descended from enslaved Africans,” the text reads. It continues: “People need to remember about slavery. It pains the ancestors when we forget.” The shrine is “protected” by the glass case within which there are, among other objects, a Rosa Parks bus, a Mother Teresa photograph!., a Che beret, a Harriet Tubman figure, photographs of Claudia Jones, Marcus Mosiah Garvey and a Love Supreme record. Fruits, rum,

books about Nanny and Walter Rodney, palm oil, white chalk, a cocoyea-broom, and drinking glasses are among the other components of the shrine.

The exhibit now contains an extensive section on African music in all its complexity from both sides of the Atlantic: as I pass through the area showcasing this music the triumphant sound of Hugh Masakela's trumpet envelops me.

It didn't happen here! It didn't happen here! It didn't happen here! The phrase is like a mantra, reverberating—shouting even in my mind as I wander the exhibit. But here in Liverpool, many of whose streets bear names of those who were intimately involved in the trade; where carved in stone along the perimeter of the roof of the Town Hall, built between 1749-54, are the heads and faces of Africans, along with figures of elephants, crocodiles and other such animals, as well as the continent of Africa. It is hard to find evidence that it did happen. It didn't happen. Here. In Liverpool. In England. In Great Britain. Ignored by the Romans for nearby Chester, Liverpool's growth and financial success were directly related to the trade in humans which took it from a simple fishing village to a bustling, international port. "Virtually all" of the city's economy would have been linked to slaving, from ship building to the sexual servicing of sailors in brothels. But, it didn't happen! Here! Does this, perhaps, explain the impulse to erase the miserliness of the response?

I think of contemporary trades that are considered immoral—the drug trade, for instance, which forces us to live with the evidence of that trade on a daily basis, from pan handling to crimes being committed for money to buy drugs, to addictions of family members or friends. Debates about safe injection sites and other ways of dealing with the problems of addiction are public and ongoing. Although the abolitionist did bring the issue "home" to England in their debates and activism against the trade, British society would not have had to bear any of the negative effects of the slave trade, making it so much easier for them to pretend it didn't happen. There. Here. Or anywhere, for that matter.

The "spring and parent whence the others flow"; "the first principle and foundation of all the rest"; "the mainspring of the machine which sets every wheel in motion" (Williams 148). These were some of the sentiments and opinions of mercantilists involved in the trade. The late Dr. Eric Williams describes the trade in this way:

The slave trade kept the wheels of metropolitan industry turning; it stimulated navigation and ship building and employed seamen; it raised fishing villages into flourishing cities; it gave sustenance to new industries based on the processing of colonial raw materials; it yielded large profits which were ploughed back into metropolitan industry; and, finally, it gave rise to an unprecedented commerce in the West Indies and made the Caribbean territories among the most valuable colonies the world has ever known. (148)

But, it didn't happen here.

Shortly after my arrival in England, I am astonished to learn that the subject of slavery has only recently been made a part of the British educational curriculum. It did not happen here. Can we be surprised, then, by the ambivalence that appears to be so much a part of these exhibits that attempt to mark the abolition of the British slave trade?

Busy, loud and noisy is how I would describe the new and refurbished *International Museum of Slavery*. The exhibit appears to be trying to do too much (although there is still far too little information on how modern Britain was built with profits from the slave trade and the continuing ill effects of slavery in Britain today), as if trying to compensate for the somewhat half-hearted, stingy installations I have been visiting. It can be excused for this. The busyness and noise are also welcome, for there is a sense in which the busyness echoes the busyness of a trade that lasted 500 years, and the noise fills the echoing silences that continue to surround it even 200 years after its abolition.

A few days earlier, August 29 to be exact, the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone unveiled a statue of Nelson Mandela in Parliament Square, the latter joining the likes of Ian Christian Smuts, Viscount Palmerston, Sir Robert Peel, Sir Winston Churchill and other “heroes of the empire.” They collect “heroes of the empire” the way a child collects baseball cards. And virtually every one of these “heroes” meant untold suffering for the brown and black inhabitants of an empire on which the sun never set. Mandela, a “hero of the empire”!? The incongruities are overwhelming. Perhaps in this historically amnesiac age the ironies of a Mandela being placed alongside an Ian Smuts are irrelevant.<sup>19</sup> How odd that a man who spent most of his life imprisoned for his opposition to pernicious genocidal practices that grew out of empire would allow a statue of himself to be placed among “heroes” like Smuts. Did he have a say in where his statue was placed? Did he care? Does it even matter where the statue was placed?

“Why not Ghandi?” my companion asks, when we visit the statue a few days later. Why not, indeed? Interesting, too, given that Ghandi’s work began in South Africa and completed its arc in India where his practice of non-violence helped to hasten the departure of the British. So, why Mandela? Because, I believe, the cult of personality that developed around Mandela shortly after his release, was designed to distract us from the fact that the ANC, with Mandela supposedly at the helm, had completely capitulated to corporate interests in South Africa:

In 1993 the corporate sector and core ANC leaders reached a hugely important elite compromise... (t)his elite compromise should be regarded as one of the most decisive ideological turning points in the ANC’s approach to economic issues. By agreeing to it, the ANC put in place the first cornerstone of the economic edifice of a post-apartheid South Africa. In effect, it agreed to an economic policy and system that would exclude the poorest half of the population from a “solution” that was really aimed at resolving the corporate sector’s long-standing accumulation crisis. (Terreblanche 96, 98)



The fetishisation of Mandela functioned like distractions magicians employ and deploy in order to accomplish their magic tricks. Today, Mandela is feted like a rock star, yet South Africa remains saddled with poverty, HIV/Aids and its white settler communities remain intact with very little land returned to indigenous Africans. Why Mandela? In a country that has done nothing regarding reparations for the descendants of those forcibly removed from Africa. Where, if the curatorial examples I have observed are anything to go by, slavery was but a footnote, not central to the expansion of its economy. Mandela remains the lone African in Parliament Square, that class-ridden rump of a former empire, the formerly Great Britain, where Africans are over-represented in jails and under-represented in higher education and continue to play out their contemporary stereotypical roles.

Many people, African and non-African alike, want to be photographed with the statue of Mandela. As if believing that something would rub off on them. Bronze and reflecting the stiffness of the man, it captures nothing of the myth that now surrounds him. I understand the excitement of Black people but am intrigued by the response of non-Black people. I ask a Polish woman why she is visiting the statue—she is surly, her father even more so. I pretend to be a journalist, but they are still not very forthcoming. I wonder if they have any some-of-my-best-friends-are-Black friends. Perhaps I am being unfair, but this is still a harsh world for Black people to inhabit—a world often hostile to their very physical well-being. So, when people fawn over a statue of a Black man, I become curious, even suspicious.

Back in London, from Liverpool, just in time to attend a party at my cousin's. Her son and his wife are hosting a house-warming party. This is the new multicultural London with guests from all racial and ethnic backgrounds—Asians (South and East), Africans and Europeans. This scene is a lot more than the 45 minutes away by tube from grimness of Woodgreen—this new, young, hot, multicultural Britain. Indeed, this appears another universe, the garden all aglow with tea lights, not to mention a tent under which guests lie on cushions.

Suddenly, I see myself: I have now become one of the older women who sit in the kitchen while the young people party!

### ***Sunday 9***

There is a concessionary quality to these exhibits that, for the most part, manifests itself in how and where they have been positioned within permanent exhibits, not to mention the paucity of space allowed them. Collectively, these gestures, for that is what they are, lack generosity, feel churlish—their *\*\*import one that says: “We do this, but reluctantly.”* There was the cubby hole at the British Museum; one room plus at the National, one room, albeit somewhat

spacious, at Tate Britain. Of the exhibits I have seen in London only Kenwood House appeared to allow sufficient space to the subject.

The Victoria and Albert Museum (The V&A) exhibit, *Uncomfortable Truths: Traces of the Trade—Discovery Trails Exploring Links Between Art, Design and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, in its overstated understatedness, is by far and away the most disconnected from the subject matter. One can almost hear the somber, sonorous voice of the curator—I see an old, white-haired gentleman—“Well, I suppose...if we must.” How else to explain this exercise in the ephemeral that works better on paper than in reality. Through five trails the visitor is encouraged to trace, through objects, certain aspects of the trade. Trail 1: “Consuming the Black Atlantic” features five objects—a sugar box, a chocolate pot and stand, a coffee pot, a snuff box and a tobacco snuff grater. The objects are modest, albeit finely wrought, and remain within larger exhibits, so one really has to hunt for them—as one does for a realistic presence of Africans in British society, historically or otherwise, or the role that slavery played in the development of this society. Trail 2: “Black Servants in British Homes” comprises a tea bowl and saucer, Plate II from Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress*, an embroidered hanging from Stoke Edith, a portrait of a Trinidadian woman (the artist’s servant), and three, tiny, enamelled cups. And so it goes with Trail 3: “Britain and the West Indies”; Trail 4: “Representing slavery and Abolitionism,” and Trail 5: “Gold and Slaves: Transnational Trade Links.” Generally, the objects are interesting, many beautiful, but one is underwhelmed by it all. The objects are entirely absorbed by the larger collections of which they remain a part of. As if the curators could not be bothered to remove them from their original places, or that they did not wish to disturb the permanent exhibit.

The so-called trails take us nowhere and the collective impact of the exhibit, if one can call it such, serves to aestheticize thoroughly one of the most horrific periods of world history, reducing its impact to trinkets.

The back of the accompanying booklet acknowledges that there “is no dedicated gallery space for African art at the V&A”<sup>20</sup> which confirms my uneasy response to this exhibit. At the time of the gallery’s founding, the explanation continues, the aim was “collecting examples of good design.” At that time, however, according to the booklet, “African art was categorised as ‘ethnography’ rather than ‘art’,” and the “Museum focused on the products of Europe and Asia.” But fear not, dear visitor, “(o)utstanding collections relating to black and African heritage can be seen elsewhere in London in the British Museum and the Horniman Museum especially.”

The V&A has had a century and a half to correct the “design” lacunae in its collections, and the explanation for the oversight is all the more ironic given that the Modernist art movement owes its genesis to African design principles that artists like Picasso and Brancusi were only too eager to exploit in the early 19th century, no more than half a century after the V&A was established.

### *Reflections on shock and awe*

Several newspapers review Naomi Klein's most recent book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, its title riffing off Bush's tagline for the Iraq war. The book argues that Friedman style economic practices have taken hold in certain countries such as Iraq, not because they were popular, but because the citizens of these countries were in shock from natural disasters or catastrophic events such as the Iraq war, which could be said to have softened them up. I reflect on the dissemination of this idea—the shock doctrine—as if it were something new and novel. Even the subtitle, “The Rise of Disaster Capitalism,” is misleading, given that disaster has always been a concomitant of capitalism, and has remained a disaster for places like Africa. It behooves us to remember that David Livingstone, missionary and explorer, in offering advice about how to bring religion to the continent, advocated that the culture had first to be destroyed, only then could commerce be brought and after that religion. Further, to imply that there has been a waning of “disaster capitalism” leading to a “rise” is egregiously inaccurate. Despite the somewhat softened face we have become used to in the West, capitalism has always been about shock, one the most egregious and extended example of which has been the four-hundred-year exercise of capitalism that the transatlantic slave trade represented. There are, in fact, deep rooted connections between the examples Klein has chosen and what happened to and in Africa from the 15th century to the present day. It is shocking—pun not intended—that 20th and 21st century capitalism can be portrayed in such an ahistorical way, particularly in light of the fact that slavery and all its attendant issues, including freedom and racial equality, were an integral aspect of the shaping of modernity. This type of amnesia is, indeed, all of a piece with the attenuated approach of the V&A exhibit; like the latter it traffics in silence.

This type of pop analysis confirms the existence of the social amnesia Russell Jacoby identifies in his seminal work by the same name that is such an integral aspect of the culture of capitalism. The “Eurocentric provincialism—philosophical and otherwise—that considers modernity something that took place in London, Paris and Berlin, as if the colonies and the slaves somehow belonged to another era and played no role in the shaping of modernity,” has been replaced by a North American provincialism that continues the tradition of erasure as it relates to all things African. Indeed, silence is its shape (Fischer).

### *Remembering*

Some forty years after the opening of the V&A, on February 9, 1897, British forces invaded Benin City, ostensibly in retaliation for an earlier attack on British forces. Thus began the scorched earth policy of looting and sacking the City. Indeed, as an early example of shock and awe, Benin City's fate ranks alongside that of Iraq. Palaces, chief's quarters, homes—everything was burnt to the ground. Estimates are that more than 2,000 objects related to religion and spirituality were taken to England, not to mention artworks and other cultural works. Much

of this booty was sold off to pay for the expenses linked to the expedition to invade the City. Among these stolen artifacts and objects would have been the now famed Benin bronzes which, by any definition of art, meet the highest standards of design. As a result of the dispersion of Benin art around the world, there occurred an aesthetic reevaluation of West African art in the West. Yet, in 2007, the V&A can excuse its failure to mount an appropriately respectful and accurate exhibit around the slave trade by trotting out the old argument that West African art as such didn't exist at the time the Museum was founded.

### *Notes on money and class*

Here in this sceptred isle where class and pedigree trump money there is little interest in examining the more sordid practices, like slavery and the slave trade that have helped to shore up that very class and pedigree.

### *Notes to myself*

In 1800, there were some 5,000 black people in England.

The ship's manifest lists the names of vessels. No names of Africans—simply females and males.

Fact: After the Haitian revolution, Haiti was made to pay 150 million francs in compensation to France for loss of property. Read—Africans, after having fought successfully for their freedom, were forced to pay for that very freedom. A debt that continued right up to the 20th century.

*The Socialist Worker* of September 1, 2007, states that the “British worker works the longest hours in Europe. Millions live in substandard or overcrowded housing and face cuts in basic services.” This explains Woodgreen.

After the V&A, we go to see the movie *Atonement*. It is a well done, somewhat dull, period piece that markets what the British have become so good at marketing—nostalgia for all things British. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, which I had seen earlier and which chronicles Irish resistance to British rule, is far better and far more interesting.

### *Connections*

Queen Victoria, one of the two founders of the V&A, was niece to King Leopold of Belgium, notorious for the unsurpassed cruelty of his rule in the Congo. He had his soldiers

collect the severed hands of those Africans whom they believed had stolen rubber. She had her employees collect design art from Europe and Asia. Not Africa. And today in Belgium one can buy little chocolate hands at chocolatiers.

### ***Monday 10***

Mandela's statue is described as a beacon of hope to the future and I wonder if it is possible to be a beacon of hope to the past? If we accept (as I think we should) David Scott's statement that "the great narratives of emancipation have become enfeebled," then we will need ways to invigorate the past. This, of course, is based on seeing the past as being in flux and amenable to being shaped, which must be what the Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, meant when he urged that we "imagine the past" and "remember the future."

Today my Oyster card has brought me once again to Westminster Hall and the Houses of Parliament. And the past. I don't like official tours but I want to see the House of Commons and the House of Lords and the only way to do so is to join a tour. The tour guide is competent: he does what tour guides do—shepherding us around explaining about kings, queens and threats to blow up the Houses of Parliament. He talks of events such as fires and wars that have affected the building through which he guides us. It is the gold that dazzles me, however—in the House of Lords. There it is, entirely covered in gold, the chair on which the Queen sits at the opening of Parliament. England has no gold, I think, so where did all this gold come from? Silly question. There is a sense in which this place is a womb—the Parliamentary womb. This is where I and so many like me were created. By fiat, rule and law. Nameless. Stateless. Absent a country. I feel myself becoming emotional. Here laws and regulations were passed that created companies such as the Royal African Company and the East India Company who were granted the prerogative to go out and legally loot vast areas of the world. Uprooting peoples, communities and cultures. I belong here. I was made here. Monstrous offspring of the Crown.

We move on to the House of Commons but aren't allowed to sit on the green upholstered benches in the House of Commons, and I think of how they—the British—penetrated so many of the hidden, sacred spaces of the world, and without so much as a by-your-leave sat, squatted, stole—so-called settlers whose sole aim and purpose was to unsettle. In the name of settling.

The day is bright and warm, so I walk from Parliament to Leicester and the British Museum. My goal this time is the African gallery funded by Saatchi and Saatchi, the global advertising agency. The gallery is stylish—all glass and muted light and the now compulsory video screens. But it's still in the basement. I make a quick go round since it's close to closing time. In the anteroom there is a display of modern art by African artists. The permanent exhibit is the usual mix of artifacts including masks and woven fabrics.

In the bookstore upstairs, I meet a couple—he is African American and she Kenyan: they own an art gallery in the US. We begin talking about the exhibit and things African and agree to have a drink at one of the nearby pubs. They talk about being in Kenya recently and witnessing Kenyans selling off beautifully hand-carved stools so as to buy plastic tubs and basins made in China, while simultaneously wondering why these strange, white people were paying good money for these stools.

Later, fish and chips with Jean and Lindsay—very, very expensive fish and chips—all 25£ sterling worth of fish and chips—this is London, after all.

### ***Tuesday 11***

On one of my last days, I decide to “go down to Kew” although it is not “lilac time” (Noyes).

The Royal Botanical Gardens Kew—300 acres of gardens, greenhouses and conservatories whose aim is to have 10% of all seeds in the world by 2010. They have recently obtained the billionth seed. What is this mania for collecting and storing anything and everything? Here you will find the world’s oldest palm from Africa.

I wander around the grounds, admire the Henry Moore sculptures placed in and around the grounds. In the tropical greenhouse I come upon a *Ficus Benghalensis*, the Banyan Tree, which begins life on other trees and eventually envelops them completely. A disturbing image that reminds me of European and Western capitalist culture that, like the Banyan tree, envelops the cultures on which it has fed. It is also known as the wish-fulfilling tree because its expanding branches represent eternal life, a more pleasing image.

The cycads attract me. Living fossils, they can live for 2,500 years and date back to the Jurassic period 206–144 million years ago. “Cycads produce cones not flowers,” the identifying text reads. I learn that when plants are stressed they produce more cones than when they’re too well cared for. “The nastier one is to them,” the explanatory text says, “the better they do.” This time my mind turns to African communities in the Afrospora, and how, on the surface at least, it appears as if along with improvements in socio-economic standards, there is an accompanying societal and cultural degradation.<sup>21</sup> Consider, for instance, how alongside the excessive wealth hip hop artists have accumulated, there exists a devaluing of women and a glorifying of more negative behaviors. And how the apparent unity that exists during periods of intense oppression appears to dissipate on improvements being made. It is tempting to look back on times like the civil rights movement, or even the anti-apartheid movement as periods in which there appeared

to be a moral center, although African communities were under attack. Are we cycads, functioning better in times of stress?

I read that some plants are born to burn and are adapted to fires that sweep the landscape. Some need the heat of flames, or even gases in the smoke to stimulate flowering, seed release and germination, and I wonder about the fires of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism that have swept the landscape of African life time and again. The flowering has been indisputable—music, art, dance and literature, to list but a few of the areas we have excelled in. But the destruction has been enormous. All the same, it is a disturbing thought.

The seed is an archive of sorts, storing the plant's genetic memory. As Africans in the Afrospora have stored the cultural and genetic memory of their peoples.

### *Bourne Black*

The Bourne films have become for me an odd allegory of African survivals, particularly of memory. Jason Bourne, the protagonist, is highly skilled. He speaks many languages, has survival skills that save him in dangerous circumstances, yet because of his amnesia he has no recollection of how he acquired these skills, or from whom. Most times he doesn't even know he has the necessary skills until he finds himself in a difficult situation. Even his name is not his own, and those who have created him now seek to destroy him. The parallels with African life in the Afrospora are striking. One of the advertisements promoting the most recent film proclaims: "Remember everything; forgive nothing," a suitable motto for New World Africans.

At time of first writing this article, emancipation celebrations in Trinidad and Tobago provide a poignant backdrop. The archive that is unearthed each year in this twin-island state is to be found in the gesture of robing the body in African cloth, in drumming, in parading through the streets. No one appears to notice the ironies, deep-rooted in the energies of capital, of this gesture of robing the body in African fabric. In Trinidad, this fabric is most often sold by fabric stores largely owned by Syrian Trinidadians. As mentioned earlier, what we have come to know as African fabric was actually created in Europe initially for the Indonesian market which, in turn, rejected it. In Trinidad, this is the fabric that is associated with Africa and, therefore, with emancipation, and it seems that the further away we move in time from emancipation itself, the larger the headdresses made of African fabric become. It is a time of celebration that pays no heed to Scott's admonition about the enfeeblement of the "great narratives of emancipation."

### *Design, aesthetics and the marking of memory*

Is it human to want to mark an event—to establish some gesture to lend permanence in an impermanent world? For those who come after. From the physical marking of trails—I passed

here, as do you now, through the marking of life's personal passages—birth, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, to the marking of momentous public events like the ending of WWI or II, or the emancipation of enslaved Africans, there appears to be a human impulse to mark the event and in so doing mark time. Perhaps even in the repetition of the marking of the event, it may be an attempt to stop time or to insist on the cyclical nature of time.

Does it matter who does the marking? Surely neo-Nazis marking an event harking back to Hitler's regime would be frowned upon, as would Klan members celebrating the death of Martin Luther King for instance. The same event is viewed very differently depending on what side of the memory divide one stands on.

What, indeed, were the British marking in 2007? The Act that abolished the slave trade failed to identify the trade as being "contrary to Principles of Justice, Humanity and Sound Policy," the House of Commons removing those words. What were they marking then? The legal precedent of abolishing a pernicious practice? (But they did not consider slavery abhorrent.) A philosophical breakthrough or them? Since the abolition of the trade did not mean they considered Africans deserving of freedom, one has to wonder what, indeed, they were marking, particularly in light of the fact that they have made no reparations to any descendants of those Africans they forcibly transferred to the New World. What were they marking? Was it their goodness? Certainly there seemed to be an attempt to portray men like Mansfield and Henry Tate as good men. Their insight, perhaps? Their philanthropy? Simply the passing of the legislation? And if so, why does that piece of legislation warrant marking anymore than any other piece of legislation?

The exhibits I visited (with the exception of the International Museum of Slavery) marking the abolition of the slave trade succeeded in, at best, neutralizing the event and, at worst, denying the horrific nature of this trade. This was done through specific curatorial decisions. As if the curators themselves were ambivalent about what it was they were marking. As if they were reluctant to engage with the true nature of the event which lasted some 500 years. And how do you mark an event that was primarily parliamentary and arose out of events that took place a long way away and never really impinged on life in Britain?

And what do we, on the other side of the historical divide, mark? Most will say our freedom. But it is a freedom that holds us fast to a problematic history.

Further, with respect to material culture, which forms the basis of any exhibit, how do we reconcile the aesthetics of an object with its former uses? Coppers, for instance, the large, graceful iron pots—some 7 feet in diameter—that were used for boiling sugar. Today, in the Caribbean, they are used as planters. Or, the abandoned water wheel of a sugar mill, its delicate spokes covered in vines, that becomes a tourist destination. Or, the restaurant established in a former sugar mill. What of the striking, graphic representation of the layout of the slave ship that was first designed in the eighteenth century? How do we—can we—reconcile their former uses



which were integrally linked to torture and trauma with the now new aesthetic purposes? Should we? And although the plantation was the fulcrum of New World slavery, with its attendant tortures and unsavoury practices, the idea of the plantation has never fallen into disrepute and with the development of tourist destinations for northern tourists, has received a new lease on life, lending its name to villas and hotels. A place to kick back, relax and get away from it all while sipping a rum punch or two.

### *Is that all there is?*

No one smiles in this country. Everyone is grim. I recall that the English work the longest hours in Europe. I feel visually assaulted by the ads. Is this really all there is, Peggy Lee? Caught, held fast in a net of desire for (essentially) what we don't really need.

As I walk down Bounds Green Road in Woodgreen, I observe some workmen across the street trimming a tree. Boughs and branches lie on the ground. It is a warm, bright morning—the weather has been superb for a place where rain is norm—and I experience a sudden rush of recognition. Am not sure what it means. It's as if they have been doing this forever and I am overwhelmed by the awareness of having been nurtured to want this. What is the this, though? To long for completion. Trapped forever in a web of desire for the unattainable. To be in the bosom of empire. Never accepted. They never accepted their own working class, let alone Black peoples. I recall as a child hearing grown-ups describe themselves as “not feeling too British today” when they weren't feeling well! Or local Trinidadians going on “home leave” to England. What is it about this profoundly ordinary scene that ignites this memory? Of a forgotten longing? It is as if the scene itself, ordinary in the extreme, becomes a submerged marker, surfacing unexpectedly to catch me unawares and working to remind me of an earlier event, or state, long forgotten, but subject to resurrection when one least suspects.

London has ever been dirty. It still is—by the end of a week my sheets are filthy—although there has been a noticeable improvement in the air quality over the last few years.

### *Violence*

The end stopped. Present in Trinidad is a violent society where by July 2008 in excess of 300 people had been killed; where only violence is certain and compulsory; where despite a generous bestowal of natural resources of oil and natural gas, health care, education and housing fall below acceptable standards; where the drug trade, with all the accompanying ills, flourishes. In such a country the African populace continues to embrace emancipation as a marker of a new future. A future which still remains to be realized.

While acknowledging a need to mark the legal end of enslavement, I am unconvinced that the celebration of emancipation is a liberatory gesture—indeed, it is a gesture that points to the archiving of politics—a surrogate issue that replaces a failure of politics and stands in for an absence of political, cultural and social solutions for the post-colonial, post post-modern condition of the island states of the Caribbean.

### *Dido meets Vanley Burke*

And as I began, I return to Dido Belle; I return to the image. Of Africans in the Afrospora. Where silence has been the fixer. One of the last books I purchase (at the Tate) is a book of photographs by a Black British photographer, Vanley Burke. Burke, of Jamaican background, has lived and worked in Birmingham since 1965. He began photographing Black British communities around him in 1967, a practice he continues to the present day. In his work the archive of body and gesture are most visible as Burke “frames” a moment in time, but a moment resonant with all that has gone before, beginning with the Windrush, moving through the long struggle in Britain, that is by no means over, to create a place where the potentialities that lie within the individual and the community can be realized, albeit still through great struggle.

In an essay accompanying the text, Stuart Hall writes:

The framing “fixes” what is not elsewhere fixed: a certain way of seeing these people; a certain moment (in a dance, a baptism, a funeral) which “represents” a deeper knowledge or “truth”, and which, because of how it is “read” by the camera in the context of a whole way of life, largely unrecorded (*and undervalued*) of a black community, acquires a value, a surplus of meaning, a “representativeness” it did not know it had. (Sealy 14, my emphasis)

Burke’s subjects appear to resist the quality of being ground down, although they are over-determinedly working class. Whether caught in worship, facing down the police or playing soccer there is a sense of resistance and community and all that that evokes.

When Dido Belle’s picture was painted (late 1770s), slavery would last for another sixty or so years. Yet Dido Belle lived like few, if any, Black people did. Despite this, however, her guardian, Lord Mansfield, felt the need to guarantee her freedom in his will. This is ironic, given that many believed he had outlawed slavery in England in the Somerset decision. He obviously knew otherwise.

I “read” this picture of Dido Belle alongside Burke’s images of Black Britons who do not need to point to their cheeks, playfully or not. The representation of her story is the only occasion when I have observed adequate time and space given to an exhibit related to slavery

and the slave trade (with the exception of the Liverpool exhibit which was a pre-existing permanent exhibit). I suspect that Dido's class—being the niece of the Chief Justice of England—trumped her race and therefore warranted more space. More importantly, her small story was linked to one of the most powerful men in English society at that time. One of the most powerful markers of wealth or its absence is space, reflected, at its most basic level, in the size of homes, for instance. None of the other exhibits I saw involved anyone as powerful as Lord Mansfield. This no doubt explains why the Kenwood House exhibit would occupy the most space.

The most striking difference between the painting of Dido and Burke's subjects—apart from the differences in medium—is that the former is moving. While her cousin is stationary, facing the artist and viewer straight on, Dido is moving off to the left, away from her white cousin, almost as if she is moving out of the “frame” of the story. Whether consciously or not, the artist has captured a quality of kinesis which I have identified as an aspect of the African aesthetic which crosses all disciplines. But Dido's movement contains a certain historical impulse to be disappeared and erased which is reflected in the great and overwhelming absence of the African presence that I have sensed as I have visited these exhibits. In Burke's photos on the contrary, the Black presence and the presence of the Black body is felt. His subjects are rooted.

Four generations later Dido's great great grandson would identify himself as white in South Africa moving entirely out of the frame of being raced as someone of African descent. The picture conveys a deep sense of instability and latent unease which are absent from Burke's photographs. Whatever they are doing, his subjects convey a sense of being present, rather than an absent, presence. It has been two hundred years between Dido's picture and Burke's photographs. Long enough.

### ***Wednesday 12***

#### *An aside on the death of Anita Roddick*

Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop, has died and the *Independent* runs a long article on her: “Never forget,” Michael McCarthy writes on September 12, 2007, “that some of the *greatest social-justice movements of our times* (my emphasis) have grown up out of a sense of shared community: the women's movement, the gay rights movement, the ecology movement. It was women's innate sense of consciousness-raising that got these movements off the ground...” There is no mention of the civil rights movement. The best possible interpretation one can put on this is that there was no such movement in the UK as there was in the USA, but the shock waves from that movement were felt around the world and helped to spawn other

movements. This movement was, in fact, the foundation movement. There is no mention of this, however.

Once again the silence—the erasure.

### *Thursday 13*

Back in Canada. I look at what I've collected: my Oyster card, tube tickets, various receipts, booklets, postcards: the usual stuff one collects when one travels, all contained now in a clear plastic bag printed with the Kew Gardens logo. I finger them trying to remember where I was, or how I was feeling, or what had just happened. I am reminded of those who were forced to travel all those years ago, across the great water, the Atlantic ocean, bringing nothing but their longing for their motherland and their families; their memories; their bodies and the memories within those bodies.

They are not forgotten; they would be well pleased.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The World Conference Against Racism in Durban, August 31 – September 7, 2001 acknowledged that the slave trade was a crime against humanity.

<sup>2</sup>*Time Out*, September 5–11.

<sup>3</sup>Exhibit catalogue: *Slavery and Justice: The Legacies of Dido Belle and Lord Mansfield*.

<sup>4</sup>The painting had formerly been attributed to Zoffany. At the exhibit the painting was described as being by an unknown artist. The painting is a part of the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland.

<sup>5</sup>See note 3 above.

<sup>6</sup>Swahili meaning a horrific event.

<sup>7</sup>See note 3 above.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>There has also been some duplicating of these fabrics by homegrown Nigerian businesses.

<sup>13</sup>Copied from Museum text elaborating *Inhuman Traffic*.

<sup>14</sup>La Bouche du Roi was an earlier exhibit in Room 3A5. The British Museum website describes it as “based on a famous late-18th century print of the Liverpool slave ship the *Brookes*, and is both a powerful memorial to the horrors of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and a thoughtful reminder of its terrible legacy.”

<sup>15</sup>Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic* delineates the details of the this significant case.

<sup>16</sup>Quote from the exhibit, *The British Slave Trade*.

<sup>17</sup>Postcard purchased at Westminster Hall.

<sup>18</sup>Booklet describing the exhibit.

<sup>19</sup>Jan Christian Smuts, statesman, military leader and former Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, believed in the segregation of the races in South Africa.

<sup>20</sup>V&A: *Uncomfortable Truth: Traces of the Trade*, 20 February – 31 December 2007.

<sup>21</sup>Afrospora is a neologism coined by me.

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