

Violence and memory: slavery in the museum

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Introduction

Pain, violence and subjection were at the heart of colonial slavery. During the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade, museums across the UK had the opportunity – and the funds – to focus their attention on one of the most troubled episodes in the nation's history. This was modern Britain's opportunity to come to terms with its critical role in the rise and development of plantation slavery and its transatlantic trade in the two and a half centuries before colonial emancipation in 1833. It was also the moment to acknowledge the broader legacies of slavery and the enduring injustices that remain today, and to give voice to the eight and a half million slaves who crossed the Middle Passage, and their descendants.¹ Emotions ran high as communities across the country grappled with the question of how best to represent slavery through images, objects, text, performance and multi-media. Issues of 'race' and class, and the potential or otherwise of material culture adequately to express historical narratives of such magnitude, were just some of the issues at stake.²

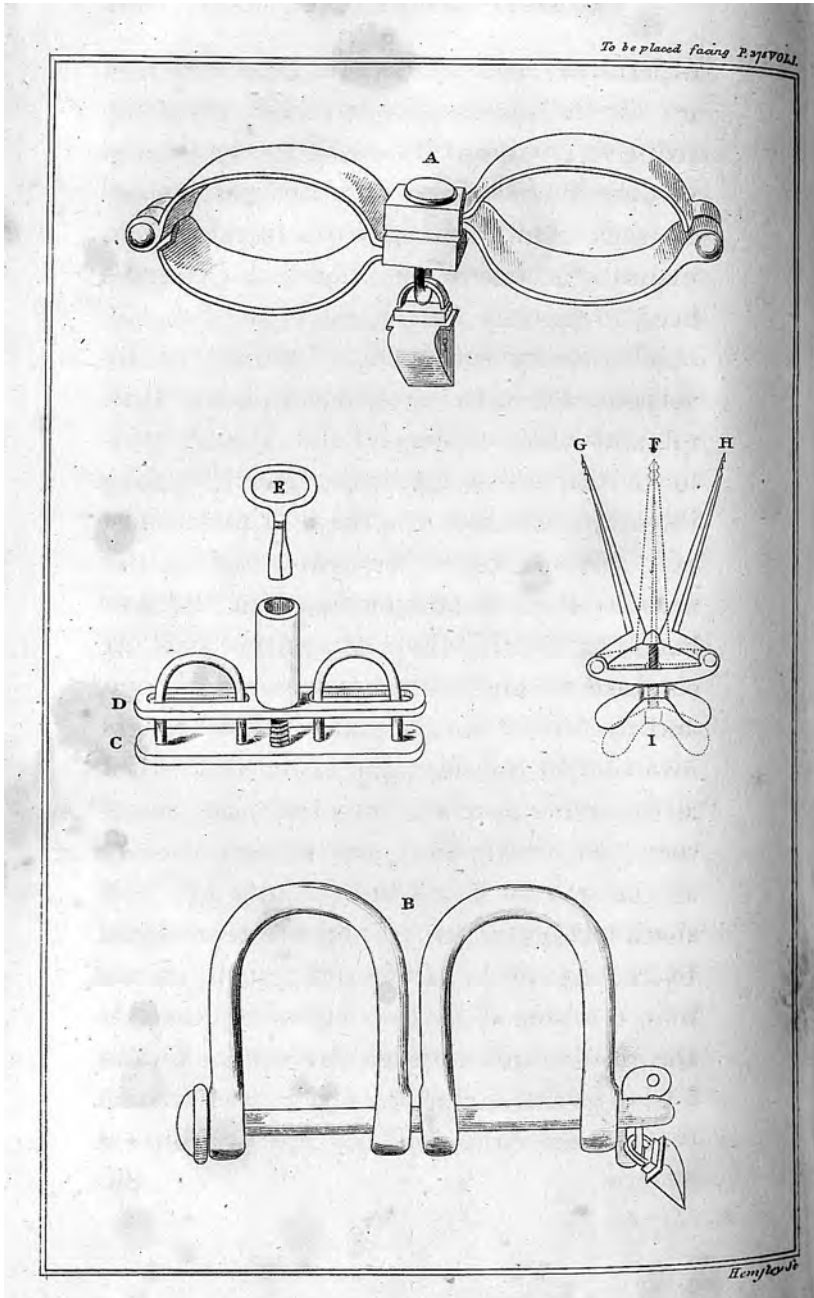
While the flurry of activity has abated, it is nonetheless important that histories of slavery, and not simply abolition, continue to have an ongoing museum presence. Yet with trauma and suffering at its experiential heart, slavery raises serious questions for the museum, such as the nexus between history and memory, and the politics and ethics of representation, particularly as these pertain to 'race' and racialised experiences. In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman has written: 'Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering [of slavery] be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible.'³ Her solution is to look elsewhere for manifestations of slave subjection, to evidence of the enslaved dancing and singing which 'hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian

rather than exploit the shocking spectacle'.⁴ This chapter will argue that Hartman is right to caution against the exploitation of the suffering black body, an approach which continues to dominate some of the most significant museum exhibits devoted to the subject. Yet as we shall see, her preferred models present enormous challenges to museums which derive their historical narratives, at least in part, from the accretion of slavery-related objects in their collections.

The problem partially derives from the fact that museums in the UK are far better equipped to tell a nationalistic and triumphalist story of abolitionism through their objects. Evoking a complex experience of slavery is difficult, particularly from black perspectives, although this is increasingly what many curators are now attempting to do. While the paucity of material culture from enslaved societies may be no surprise to archaeologists, museologists, curators or historians, offering a history or histories of slavery in the UK requires the museum to ensure that such silences are, at the very least, acknowledged. Why do so many museums continue to focus heavily on the suffering black body in their explication of slavery? Does the answer lie in the corporeal nature of objects in their collections, the material manifestations of confinement and torture, the collars and stocks that choked and constrained, objects that reflect the power and cruelty of the slave system? If we were to follow Hartman, such items would be returned to the basements in which they languished for so long before the approaching centenary prompted their appearance in the public realm. This is not, in my view, a satisfactory solution. If we accept, as we must, that physical and psychological violence was at the heart of colonial slavery, the museum must respond to the challenges of portraying this harsh reality in a non-exploitative manner.

Abolition and its archive

So what constitutes the British archive of abolition? Today we are left with objects that speak chillingly of slavery's atrocities: whips, stocks, metal shackles and wooden coffles that bound slaves together, iron masks and collars that inhibited movement and basic bodily functions. Abolitionists inherently understood the power of such objects and deployed them as physical evidence of the violence of slavery, designed to evince a visceral response from onlookers, converting them to the abolitionist cause. Recently Celeste-Marie Bernier has pointed to the common and strategic use of iron shackles in lectures by such noted figures as Granville Sharp, and she speaks of his decision in 1772 to enclose with a polemical letter an actual 'Iron Gag-Muzzle' in order to reinforce its rhetorical power.⁵ Such an action illustrates the abolitionists' well-developed sense of the evocative potential of their objects, and the ability of such objects to invoke an empathic, embodied response in their audience. © Copyrighted Material



4.1 Untitled (items used in the slave trade), artist unknown, c. 1808, engraving from Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the African Slave-Trade* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), with permission of the Senate House Library, London, Special Collections

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Similar instruments of confinement and torture were not only physically deployed in abolitionist campaigns, but were also reproduced as images and circulated in abolitionist literature. These objects were created by travelling artists whose mission was to create authoritative eyewitness accounts of the New World. One of the most widely circulated of these was an engraving, issued immediately after abolition in Thomas Clarkson's key abolitionist text, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the African Slave-Trade* (c. 1808) (Fig. 4.1).⁶ The plate conformed to the eighteenth-century visual conventions of science, with its floating line diagrams linked to descriptive text by a lettered key, reminiscent of images from trade manuals and natural history tracts of the period. Clarkson describes in his accompanying text how he had purchased a couple of such instruments from a shop window display in Liverpool, 'not because it was difficult to conceive how the unhappy victims of this execrable trade were confined, but to show the fact that they were so'.⁷ This savvy abolitionist understood the epistemological value of the 'real thing' in arguing his case against slavery; the graphic re-presentation of such items, drawing on the visual conventions of enlightenment science, was a further means of providing authoritative 'evidence' of the inhuman treatment of slaves.

The power of such metal objects and re-presentations of them to provoke a somatic response in the viewer should not be underestimated. In her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry explores the capacity of objects to evoke feeling: 'As an actual physical fact, a weapon is an object that goes into the body and produces pain; as a perceptual fact, it can lift pain and its attributes out of the body and make them visible ... The point here is not just that pain can be apprehended in the image of the weapon (or wound) but that it almost cannot be apprehended without it.'⁸ Even today such grotesque items are displayed in some museums as disembodied reminders of the almost unimaginable physical realities of slave life. In recent years, however, attempts have been made (with varying degrees of success) to return the body to the instruments of its torture or confinement in order to breathe life into such objects. At the recently inaugurated International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, for example, the institution which has done most to re-present a more nuanced history of slavery, an iron muzzle is suspended over a ghostly Perspex silhouette of a head (Fig. 4.2; the object is shown to the left of the text panel located in the cabinet on the left of the photograph). Here the body is evoked in order to bring meaning to the metal object, yet the sentient individual is absent; the horror of the object resides purely in the viewer's imagination.

One of the only other images that appeared in the first edition of Clarkson's book was a rudimentary copy of *Am I not a man and a brother?* (c. 1808), depicting a chained supplicant figure which had famously been reproduced from 1787 onwards as a ceramic seal by Josiah Wedgwood for the Society of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The subject of much recent scholarly attention, this seal had rapidly become a leitmotif for the abolitionist movement, and has since become



4.2 Display case at the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, 2010, courtesy of the National Museums, Liverpool (International Slavery Museum)

an enduring and problematic symbol of slavery.⁹ The motif was mass-produced and promoted by Wedgwood in the form of fashionable cameos ‘fit for rings, buttons, lockets and bracelets; and especially for inlaying in fine Cabinets, Writing Tables, Bookcases, etc.’.¹⁰ It is hardly surprising then to find that such desirable collectibles – bearing the prestigious Wedgwood name and the symbol of British abolitionism’s triumph – have made their way into museums across the world.¹¹ Like that other vital piece of abolitionist visual propaganda, *Description of a slave ship*, 1789, with its line of black bodies crammed into the Brooks slaver, Wedgwood’s naturalistically rendered figure operated as a symbol of the slave’s essential passivity, confirmation of his utter dependence on benign imperial intervention.¹² Here was, in Marcus Wood’s words, ‘the black as a blank page for white guilt to inscribe’.¹³ While the kneeling figure here pleads for his liberation, a symbol of hope, in other printed variations from abolitionist literature he is helplessly trying to protect himself from the lashings of the whip. The abolitionist movement itself thus gave rise to violent imagery, although it was most often in the form of small and crudely executed prints commissioned from jobbing artists whose names were usually not recorded.

Besides abolitionist works, and despite their purported intention to entertain and amuse, another significant body of imagery to include scenes of slave torture and humiliation circulated in the form of prints by Britain's notorious satirical artists. The pointed barbs of men such as Isaac Cruikshank (1764–1811) and James Gillray (1756–1815) openly and often ambiguously represented the violent horrors of colonial slave life. Yet in order to find the most prolific and sustained graphic images of the violated slave body we need to look beyond production in the metropolis towards images produced for publication by European travellers. It is in this substantial body of work, which includes media ranging from oil paintings, watercolours, and a huge body of prints in travel literature, that some of the most problematic visual culture of slavery may be identified.

The traveller's view

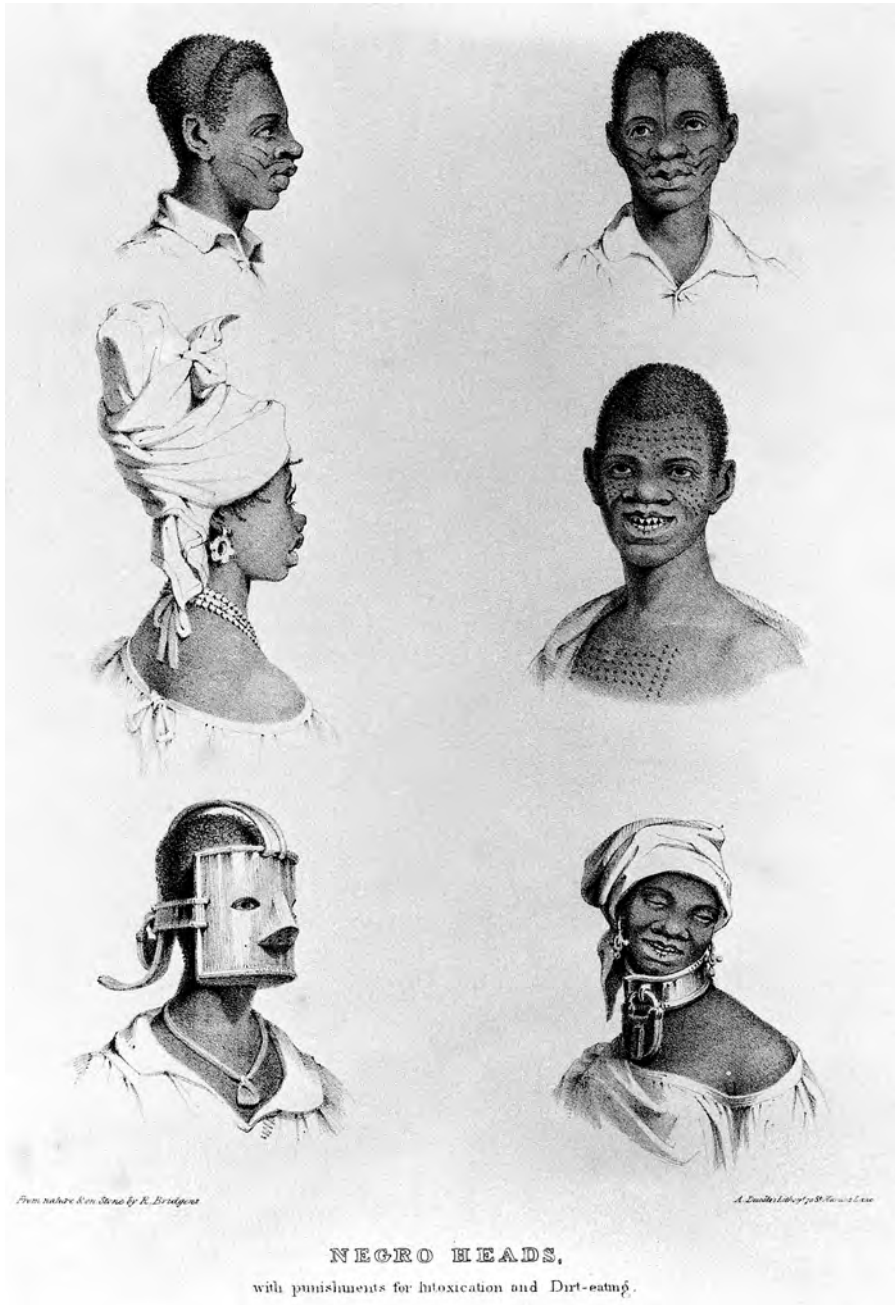
Perhaps the best known images which fall into this category are those after the Scottish mercenary John Gabriel Stedman (1744–97). His drawings of slaves hanging on gallows and being flayed, made famous in the subsequent engravings by William Blake (1757–1857), were rapidly co-opted by the abolitionist movement and have subsequently come to be considered synonymous with it. As Richard and Sally Price have suggested, Stedman himself was no abolitionist, yet it is precisely for this reason that his text and images were considered to have even greater authority.¹⁴ It would not be long before his images (or at least those by Blake after his sketches) came to epitomise all that was morally repugnant about plantation slavery.

It was in the years between abolition and emancipation in the British empire that much of the most violent colonial imagery of slavery appeared. By then the market for empirical knowledge of the New World was expanding well beyond the exclusive preserve of the scientific community; a growing middle class with increased time for leisure was eager for words and pictures recorded by 'on the spot' witnesses.¹⁵ The rise of books of voyages and travels mirrored the expansion of European commercial and colonial interests.¹⁶ At the same time an increasing number of European artists were inspired by a Humboldtian imperative that propelled them beyond the traditional Continental itinerary of the Grand Tour.¹⁷ Independent travel was becoming easier, and some cities such as Rio de Janeiro were opening up their ports to foreign visitors for the first time. By the 1820s independent travelling artists were engaging in what Mary Louise Pratt has coined 'planetary consciousness', a global process of ordering nature according to the principles of natural history.¹⁸ Many of the watercolours and prints by such artists were destined for publication in lavish travel books, and while most would not have considered themselves natural history artists *per se*, nonetheless they felt the weight of obligation to represent

what they saw with at least some degree of faithfulness, and to depict what they considered to be the most distinctive characteristics of the New World.

The art of travel would reach its apotheosis in the following decade when the relatively young printing technique of lithography was being used to illustrate some of the most lavish volumes of travel writing ever to appear in print. For many travelling artists it was important that their images held the weight of authority, as testimonials to the act of eye-witnessing. The German artist Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802–58), for example, who spent much of his life travelling in South America, wrote towards the end of his life: 'I spent most of my life ... engaged in studying the nature and the different races of [South America's] inhabitants. My main undertaking was to faithfully reproduce nature and therefore *I never sacrificed the truth in favour of appearances*. My intention was to make it possible for my work to be used with confidence by geographers, naturalists and artists' [emphasis added].¹⁹ Inspired by Humboldt, his vision was guided by the aspirations of enlightenment science. By then scientific visual conventions for recording peoples new to European science were beginning to respond to the burgeoning discipline of anthropology. After the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, the paradigm of natural history art would thus start to incorporate ethnographic images laid out as 'specimens' on the page, not unlike the treatment of flora and fauna. Rugendas produced many full-page plates of Brazil's native inhabitants, as well as its slaves, which he classified for the purposes of science according to their country of origin.

Similar conventions were also utilised by artists of a less ambitious nature. Englishman Richard Bridgens's (1785–1846) lithograph 'Negro heads, with punishments for intoxication and dirt eating' (Fig. 4.3), which appears in his book *West India Scenery*, 1836, acknowledges anthropological conventions in its incorporation of both profile and frontal views. Yet ironically, and tragically, the main clues to suggest that these individuals are no longer in western Africa are the tin collar and iron mask that torment the two figures at the bottom of the plate. Bridgens was also no abolitionist; in fact, he was implicated in the very fabric of British slavery. The art historical problem, therefore, of engaging both the historical texture of his work and its curatorial after-effects needs to be addressed. In 1825 Bridgens had abandoned his struggling career in England as a designer of furniture and furnishings, and moved to Trinidad, where his wife had inherited a sugar plantation.²⁰ Like other West Indian landholders, Bridgens was keen to correct what he saw as the damaging misinformation being spread by abolitionists. His views are made clear in the description of his initial arrival in Trinidad: 'We have to make our way through crowds of that race whose miseries we have heard so much of but whose smiling faces present no appearance of mental or bodily suffering.'²¹ While Bridgens's words would seem to contradict his images, there is nonetheless a deliberate lightness of touch about the latter, which



4.3 'Negro heads, with punishments for intoxication and dirt eating', Richard Bridgens, c. 1836, lithograph on paper, from *West India Scenery* (London, Robert Jennings and Co., 1838), with permission of the Senate House Library, London, Special Collections

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shows an awareness of the satirical tradition referred to earlier. This artist's slightly offhand manner is confirmed by text accompanying the plates in his book, which reassures the readers that the new model of stocks seemed to present the slave with an experience of nothing more than mild inconvenience.

The plates by Bridgens from *West India Scenery* are held in specialist library collections, but they appear as reproductions in slavery exhibits in a number of museums. They are rare examples from the British West Indian archive in which the systemic barbarities of the slave economy are even alluded to. Like Bridgens, most other English artists working in the British Caribbean both before and after abolition, including Agostino Brunias (1730–96) and William Clark (working 1820s), tended to be directly involved in the business of slavery. Brunias, for example, had a government official as his patron, whose role encouraged settlement to, and investment in, the Ceded Islands in the years after they were ceded by France at the end of the Seven Years War in 1763. Brunias's role was to promote these islands as civilised, prosperous and self-sufficient colonial enterprises. Bridgens and Clark were directly involved with the management of plantations in Trinidad and Antigua respectively, and their images too were directed at potential investors. However, rather than simply being designed to encourage British investment, they also played a pedagogical role by instructing their British readers in the methods of sugar production and slave management.

Thus while those European artists, or at least their patrons, who were drawn to the West Indies tended to be active participants in the sugar economy, those who visited Brazil were more often independent and attracted by the cosmopolitanism of Rio de Janeiro. On the arrival of the exiled Portuguese royal court from Lisbon in 1808, Rio had begun its dramatic transformation from a colonial town to a grand imperial city, the centre of the Portuguese empire. With its cultural aspirations directed firmly towards Europe, particularly France, a lavish building programme was initiated, and after several years the city could boast a royal library and museum, a public archive and an institute for the preservation of Brazilian and natural history. There were theatres, a botanical garden and a royal press. European artists were drawn to the city not only to take up posts in its cultural institutions, but also to partake of its royal and aristocratic patronage.

By 1821 Rio was also home to some 36,000 slaves, a figure which had more than doubled in just over a decade.²² The slave system here relied on brutality, and corporeal punishments were often carried out publicly in the city's streets and squares. Artists such as Rugendas, Augustus Earle (1793–1838), and Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768–1848), as well as writers like Maria Graham (1785–1842), were quick to record what they saw, and a prolific visual and written archive of public barbarity are testament to the suffering and trauma of the enslaved. Yet slave life in Brazil was no more brutal or regimented than in the West Indies, despite common misconceptions in the past which have suggested

otherwise: in both places the enslaved were publically brutalised. Stocks, treadmills, chain gangs, cages, iron masks and collars, workhouses and gaols were all visible reminders of the violence that underpinned both societies. Yet for French, German, and particularly British artists who themselves had no direct involvement with Portuguese slavery in Brazil, being critical of their Iberian contemporaries was a far less complicated proposition than overtly criticising their own governments and those of their intended audience.

Re-presenting slavery

How then should this extensive European visual archive be deployed today in the museum or gallery? Indeed, does it have a place at all? As Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone observe in their book *Contested Pasts*: 'The attempt to resolve meaning in the present is ... often a matter of conflicts over representation ... In these debates the contest is often over how truth can best be conveyed, rather than what actually happened.'²³ For Hodgkin and Radstone memory has a key role in the contestation of the past: memorialisation challenges, subverts, obscures or reinvents our understanding of history. Museums, like all memorial sites, are where 'the past is not only preserved as fetish but also transmitted as signification'. It is here that we are made aware of a 'struggle over meaning', and as these sites are 'often publicly established, or at least sanctioned, they are inescapably implicated in the construction of narratives – or perhaps maps – of national identity'.²⁴ This seems particularly pertinent to the memorialisation of slavery in the UK in recent years.

As I mentioned earlier, the bicentenary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade, in 2007, presented the opportunity for museums to 'remember' Britain's significant role in the development and perpetuation of slavery, not just the role of the abolitionist movement in securing its demise. How, then, are museums continuing to shape the memory of colonial slavery today? Is it commemorated as a heroic narrative of national identity, with the victory of the abolitionists at its heart, or are museums able to create a bigger picture that can broaden the focus on this history both temporally and spatially? That is to say, can museums in Britain present the story of colonial slavery as one of global significance whose profound legacies continue to scar the modern era?

The institution that has made the most ambitious attempts to do so is the International Slavery Museum (ISM) in Liverpool. The Director of National Museums Liverpool, David Fleming, describes the mission of the ISM as being: 'To promote the understanding of transatlantic slavery and its enduring impact. Our aim is to address ignorance and misunderstanding by looking at the deep and permanent impact of slavery and the slave trade

on Africa, South America, the USA, the Caribbean and Western Europe. Thus we will increase our understanding of the world around us.²⁵ The parameters of the institution clearly stretch far beyond the realm of the British empire, both geographically and historically. This is no memorial to abolition, as is the case at the William Wilberforce House in Hull, although it too is making attempts to emphasise a bigger picture of slavery. Rather, this is an institution that embraces contention, promising to tackle 'ignorance and misunderstanding' as the residual legacy of colonial slavery. The museum's proactive stance has recently been affirmed, too, by its key involvement in the establishment of a new initiative, the Federation of International Human Rights Museums, which has been formed to enable museums who 'deal with sensitive and controversial subjects such as transatlantic slavery, the Holocaust and human rights to work together and share new thinking and initiatives in a supportive environment'.²⁶ In forging such links the ISM is surely acknowledging that memory and suffering, or perhaps the memory of suffering, lie at the heart of any memorialisation of a troubled and troubling past.

The museum is arranged into three thematic sections: 'Life in West Africa', 'Enslavement and the Middle Passage' and 'Legacies of Freedom'. It is the second gallery which will be my main focus. Here the ISM not only constructs a history of colonial slavery but, more significantly, attempts to link slave experience inexorably with bodily subjection. At the heart of the display is a hull-shaped immersive video display which attempts to evoke the horrors of the Middle Passage. Configured on a short loop, the video shows a prostrate figure writhing and vomiting, while the ship creaks and invisible bodies groan. Perhaps it is the institution's origins as a collection display in Liverpool's Maritime Museum, and indeed its current location within that institution, that gives the Middle Passage its thematic prominence. Ignoring objects, for perhaps not even the iconic Brooks diagram could compete with this visceral overload, the ISM, in commissioning this video, has literally placed the violated body at the heart of its display. Yet surely this approach epitomises the exploitative spectacle of atrocity, the 'pageantry of the trade' of which Hartman and others are so critical.²⁷ In *Blind Memory*, Marcus Wood has persuasively criticised such attempts at re-imagining the Middle Passage, asking: 'Could a privatised company be invited to provide a Disney style, or Spielbergian, "reliving" of the Middle Passage for any punter with the money to pay for the ride?'²⁸ His book raises some significant questions about the very possibility of representing slavery for a modern audience, suggesting that we resist the 'easy option of an unthinking moral outrage, itself a form of self-blinding'.²⁹ Rather, we need to understand that we are still implicated in the terrible history of colonial slavery.

Wood goes on to link the representation of slavery with that of the Holocaust, and cites the work of other scholars and artists who have, in his words:

gone a long way to making sure that we continue to understand that the Holocaust is something that the West must work very hard never to 'come to terms with'. It is absurd to assume a role of absolute empathy, to think that we have the option to find out 'what really happened' ... In inviting us to think that we are getting a 'total experience', these [slavery] exhibits simply recast the empathetic yet complacent emotional substitutions with which the West has been mis-remembering and dis-remembering slavery for more than three centuries.³⁰

Wood's use of the word 'mis-remembering' is problematic here in that it implies the possibility of a correct memory of slavery, one that has so far eluded the West but that should be sought out. Yet the author seems to doubt the modern museum's capacity to deal adequately with slavery at all, with, in his view, its redundant collections of horrific objects and its over-reliance on contemporary museum theory. To Wood, the museological rhetoric of 'consumer involvement', 'client participation' and the 'decentering' of both curator and imprisoned object within the 'totalising institution' all miss the mark.³¹

Wood is right to suggest that nothing could possibly allow us to re-live or even fully comprehend the experience of colonial slavery today. Yet as our culture's primary sites of historical memorialisation, repositories of valued objects despite their inherent biases and silences, museums have a serious responsibility to engage with society's most pressing issues. In the end Wood turns to 'Art' for help, asserting that 'the primacy of Art [is] the most effective tributary cultural response [to the memory of slavery]. Art can perform what is otherwise impossible: it can represent horror through beauty, it can see beauty in pain, it can force vision beyond the veil of salt tears, it can make the blind see.'³² Yet as Wood well knows, art can obscure as much as it reveals, despite artists' protestations of testimonial authority. Where the art of travellers is utilised to full effect at the ISM is in a display about plantation life adjacent to the Middle Passage installation. Behind a model of a West Indian plantation an entire wall is covered in large-scale reproductions of slave life, most of them from the first-hand accounts of travellers, including many of those mentioned here. Images of the enslaved singing and dancing, for Hartman the 'mundane and quotidian', sit alongside images of the 'shocking spectacle'. However, rather than illuminating the 'terror of the mundane', without any kind of contextual information they project an evocative and varied picture of slave life (Fig. 4.4) in which hardship appears ameliorated, if only temporarily, by the possibility of joyous abandon. Beside this spectacular montage are original prints, including some by Stedman (discussed earlier), which are housed in secure drawers because of their light sensitivity, rather than any potential sensitivities over their graphic subject matter. Like Scarry's images of weapons that simulate pain, here too pain is replicated in the objects of torture; but unlike the muzzle cast over a cold piece of Perspex, here metal appears to touch flesh.

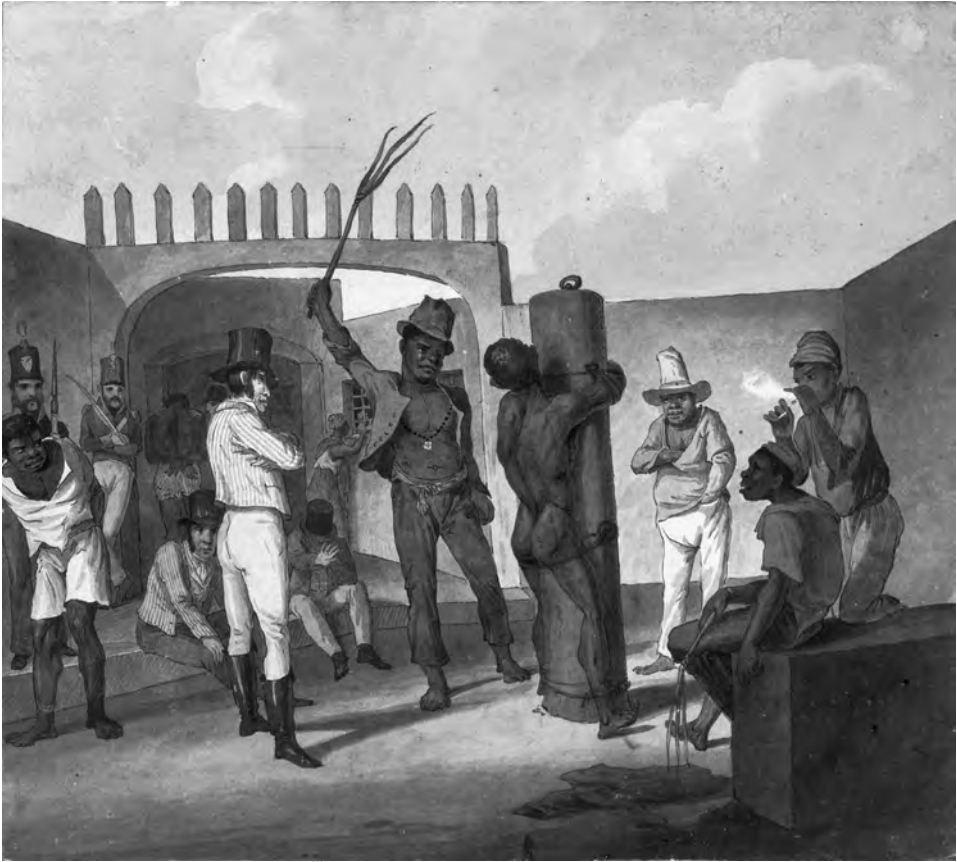


4.4 Photographic montage, the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, 2010, courtesy of the National Museums, Liverpool (International Slavery Museum)

Regrettably, regional specificities tend to be played down: the 'New World' is considered almost as a homogenous entity, with the focus more on diasporic similarities across the Americas at the exclusion of crucial regional characteristics. For example, the model of a Caribbean plantation is accompanied by a digital display in which autobiographical texts describing the harshness of slave life in rural Jamaica are accompanied by Brazilian images of brutality. This is a matter of expedience: as we saw earlier, the British Caribbean archive simply does not contain the brutal images that emerged from Brazil. Significantly, while the texts in the display are credited to their authors, the images are not; rather, they are presented in a purely illustrative capacity. This is unsurprising. It is, after all, the manner in which most historians continue to deal with the visual image, at face value, and museum curators are often drawn from the same discipline. Yet art historians are compelled to distrust images implicitly; it is this critical engagement that must be embraced, or at least acknowledged, within the museum today.

The experiential approach utilised by the ISM encourages its audience to feel as well as to think. While it is problematic in many ways, it is a means of avoiding the kind of 'absolute empathy' that Wood so distrusts. The objects are distanced from us. It is the separation of our whole, comfortable body from representations of the tortured body of the enslaved that creates a distanced empathy. The Middle Passage installation aside, this is not simulated Disneyland, but rather the recognition that slaves were 'like me, but not me', created through the strategic display and contextualisation of objects. Here is the sentient body as it is evoked by steel objects, and represented in images, which links our own humanity to that of the enslaved centuries ago: not via a 'just like me' message, but rather through an embodied recognition which says 'that could be me'. It is important that slavery is understood in its broadest sense; in its quotidian ordinariness but also in its extraordinary brutality. This is not a history that can be redeemed by a Prime Minister's apology, but rather one whose legacy remains with us in a myriad of forms.³³ This is a particular strength of the Liverpool museum. Theirs is not a remote, historically intangible approach. Rather, on entering the museum the visitor passes by a sequence of contemporary televised interviews with a range of commentators, including some who discuss their ongoing involvement in the fight against slavery across the world today.

Slavery is, and always has been, an inherently global phenomenon. The ISM's spatial and temporal parameters are far broader than the British abolitionist movement and its triumphs around the turn of the nineteenth century. In fact, it speaks directly to a modern multicultural Britain, a strategic policy directive which emerged from a climate of New Labour politics in the late 1990s and which affected museums far beyond the ISM.³⁴ Embedded within such political rhetoric was a new imperative to acknowledge and engage the culturally diverse demographic of modern Britain. Such political pressures on museums to engage audiences representative of that broad demographic have resulted in an increasing institutional willingness to confront some of the difficult truths embedded within the nation's imperial past. Britain's empire was fundamentally reliant on the mass circulation of people – slaves and later indentured labourers, British emigrants, imperial administrators, soldiers, merchants and so forth; and in the post-colonial period mass immigration has profoundly coloured the demographic constitution of Britain today. As the prominent historian Catherine Hall has noted, the 'crisis of Englishness/Britishness associated with the end of empire, the loss of status as a world power, and the realities of a multicultural society has inspired new historical work – a new interest in slavery and abolition and a return to questions of empire from a variety of perspectives'.³⁵



4.5 *Punishing negroes at Cathabouco [Calabouço], Rio de Janeiro*, Augustus Earle, c. 1822, watercolour on paper, 23.5 × 26.0 cm, National Library of Australia (2822650)

It is crucial for museums to acknowledge the powerful legacy of the nation's imperial history, for it has helped shape historical collections and continues to impact directly on the narratives that can, and perhaps as yet cannot, be told. Furthermore, it has transformed modern British audiences, a significant component of which – notably people of African Caribbean descent – identifies directly with the heritage of slavery. Ultimately, it is not the inherent violence of slavery that presents the greatest of challenges to the museum. Rather, it is the willingness of modern British society to accept and take responsibility for such colonial atrocities, and to recognise the enduring scars that continue to be felt today.



4.6 Photographic still from *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture*, Kara E. Walker, 2005, DVD video, 15 minutes 57 seconds, Artwork © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co., New York

Conclusions: in the shadow of memory

In my view it is crucial that the museum audience is reminded that at its heart the slave system relied upon the systematic application of physical violence and torture. Corporal punishment and harsh discipline were a daily reality for the majority of slaves across the Americas, and only a phenomenological approach can draw us towards that experience. For artists who witnessed the enslaved first-hand, representing their agonies was, in one sense, a means of validating a human experience that was, to most Europeans, further beyond the realms of their imagination than the most visceral of gospel stories. Artists' depictions of the pain of the enslaved served in part to embody, quite literally, an otherwise unimaginable human reality. For those with an abolitionist agenda this was strategic. For travellers it was a means of generating interest in foreign subject matter, sometimes by highlighting the sense of the spectacle in scenes of public torture, or else by creating a more intimate atmosphere, as in Earle's *Punishing negroes at Cathabouco [Calabouço], Rio De Janeiro*, c. 1822 (Fig. 4.5) in which moral revulsion is articulated by the recoiling seated figure in the centre.

There is no doubt that such images are problematic and difficult to confront on many levels. As an isolated group they confirm a range of dangerous stereotypes which remove agency from the enslaved and lock them into an irredeemable position of powerlessness. The charges of exploitation and fetishisation which have been levelled at them are pertinent. Nonetheless, when viewed in conjunction with other images of not only quotidian ordinariness but also rebellion and resistance, the narrative becomes one of remarkable resilience. The usual images of brutality in this context serve to emphasise the wonder that forms of resistance took place at all. Some museums today are recognising and incorporating narratives of resistance, and in this area the visual archive is incredibly rich.

So perhaps the last word should go to the black American contemporary artist Kara Walker (see Fig. 4.6), whose eloquent and powerful commentaries on the barbarities of slave life in antebellum America resonate far beyond geographic boundaries. While she has been fiercely criticised for perpetuating the black stereotype, in my view her work, which deploys the artisanal eighteenth-century convention of the silhouette, undercuts any sense of voyeurism or sensationalism that may linger around some of the colonial imagery I have discussed. In a still from Walker's short video of 2005, *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture*, the horrific is made child-like, brutal realities become strange dreams, memories materialise in that most intangible of phenomena, the shadow. Modern museums cannot work with shadows alone as they are far too tied to their collections of objects and pictures. Yet such artefacts cast their own shadows, and it is the role of the curator to ensure that from these shadows emerge the ambiguities and complexities that constitute the memories of slavery in the twenty-first century.

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Endnotes

- 1 This figure represents the approximate number of Africans who made the Middle Passage to the Americas between 1500 and 1820. Philip Morgan, 'Slavery', in Alan Charles Kors (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 2003), available at Sydney University, <<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t173.e667>> (accessed 19 October 2010).
- 2 Arguably the most ardent and consistent critic in this regard has been Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010). For a range of insightful critiques on the 2007 commemorations in Britain, see Catherine Hall and Matt Cook (eds), *History Workshop Journal*, 64/1, Special Issue (2007); Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield (eds), *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). See also the important work of Alan Rice, especially his *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), which was published shortly after this essay was written.
- 3 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 4.

- 4 Ibid.
- 5 'Letter to Mr. Sergeant Davy' (5 February 1772), manuscript held by York Minister Library, cited in Celeste-Marie Bernier, "'Iron Arguments": Spectacle, Rhetoric and the Slave Body in New England and British Antislavery Oratory,' *European Journal of American Culture*, 26/1 (2007): pp. 64–5.
- 6 Reproduced and discussed in Wood, *Blind Memory*, p. 228.
- 7 Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), pp. 375–6. The plate faces p. 375.
- 8 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 16.
- 9 See in particular J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Wood, *Blind Memory*.
- 10 From Wedgwood's 1779 catalogue, cited in Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807*, pp. 156–7.
- 11 Many major UK museums own examples of the medallion, including the British Museum, the National Maritime Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, and the Wilberforce House Museum, Hull.
- 12 A version of this image also appeared in Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, opp. p. 112, vol. II.
- 13 Wood, *Blind Memory*, p. 23.
- 14 John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam: Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript*, ed. Richard and Sally Price (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. xv.
- 15 For further discussion of the significance of 'on the spot' witnesses, see: Elisabeth A. Fraser, 'Books, Prints, and Travel: Reading in the Gaps of the Orientalist Archive', *Art History*, 31/3 (2008); John E. Crowley, "'Taken on the Spot": The Visual Appropriation of New France for the Global British Landscape', *The Canadian Historical Review*, 86, no. 1 (2005): pp. 1–28.
- 16 Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel-Writing, 1770–1840: 'from an Antique Land'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 15.
- 17 The great German natural historian Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) inspired many artists to contribute to his grand enlightenment vision of understanding the world in its totality.
- 18 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 19 Johann Moritz Rugendas in a letter to the Minister of the Interior, Count Duchâtel, cited by Pablo Diener and Maria de Fátima Costa, *Rugendas e o Brasil* (São Paulo: Capivara, 2002), p. 357. With thanks to Frances Goodingham for the translation.
- 20 Brian Austen, 'Bridgens, Richard', in Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T011315> (accessed 13 March 2010).
- 21 Richard Bridgens, *West India Scenery, with Illustrations of Negro Character, the Process of Making Sugar, &c., from Sketches Taken During a Voyage to, and Residence of Seven Years in, the Island of Trinidad* (London: published for the proprietor, by Robert Jennings and Co., 1836), unpaginated (text for plate 5).
- 22 Mary C. Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio De Janeiro, 1808–1850* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 61–2.
- 23 Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.
- 24 Ibid., p. 11.
- 25 International Slavery Museum website, <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/about>. (accessed 13 March 2010).
- 26 Ibid.

- 27 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, p. 32.
- 28 Wood, *Blind Memory*, p. 300. This book was written over seven years before the 2007 opening of Liverpool's Slavery Museum, and Wood's comments were in response to its previous incarnation, a display in the basement of the city's Maritime Museum called 'Transatlantic Slavery'.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 296, 300.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 300.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 305.
- 33 In March 2007 Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that the UK's role in the slave trade was a matter of 'deep sorrow and regret'. The New Labour government earmarked a sum of £16 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund for commemorating the bicentenary of abolition in 2007. See Catherine Hall, 'Remembering 1807: Histories of the Slave Trade, Slavery and Abolition', *History Workshop Journal*, 64/1 (2007): 2.
- 34 In relation to this climate and its impact on art museums in particular, see Victoria Walsh, 'Tate Britain: Curating Britishness and Cultural Diversity', *Tate Encounters* Edition 2 (February 2008).
- 35 Catherine Hall, 'Afterword: Britain 2007, Problematising Histories', in Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield (eds), *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 194.