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The Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation: Jamaica in the Atlantic World

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Remembering the Crack of the Whip: Some Images of Slavery in the Work of Some Black British Artists

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This year, 2007, has been the year of 'Abolition 200', a yearlong commemoration of the British parliamentary act of 1807, which abolished the British trade in slaves. We've seen commemorative coins being minted, commemorative stamps being produced, all manner of special exhibitions, in museums and galleries. A number of Black British artists have been commissioned to make work for Abolition 200, though in my view, much of this work is little better than a sort of themed 'painting by numbers'. I would argue that this is work that exists, or has been commissioned, for the benefit of assorted institutional shenanigans, rather than out of any sort of artistic integrity. Consequently, my brief discussion of work by Black British artists, which utilises imagery of slavery, is limited to work produced over the course of the past two decades or so. Work produced, in my view, out of a genuine desire to explore the experience of slavery and the ways in which this experience interfaces with memory and identity.

I think that for many Black people, particularly those within the Diaspora, slavery exists as much more than, or something other than, a distant historical occurrence. Rather, slavery (or more specifically, its memory) functions in a range of ways very much anchored to the present-day, the here and now. I think to a large extent the type of work we'll be looking at today reflects this. As far as these artists are concerned, slavery and identity cannot be separated. Slavery (or more specifically, its memory) is a means of making sense of, or trying to understand, present-day conditions and circumstances. It's a means of understanding diaspora, understanding how it is that we came to be in these situations, in these times.

Many of the works we're about to look at utilise what has long since been a very familiar image of the slave ship, namely the Brookes of Liverpool (late 18th century). Before we go on to look at some specific work, I'd like to say a few words about what I regard as a somewhat problematic use of this image in recent and present-day references to the slave trade and the campaign to abolish it. We have seen, and continue to see the slave ship used as almost a decorative motif, an attractive design, an intriguing pattern, on book jackets, stamps, newspaper articles etc. I'd like us to consider for a moment if uses such as this represent a trivialising of the slave ship image, or if a sort of commercial plundering, or over-use of the image has inevitably taken its toll.

I'd like contrast this sort of use of the slave ship motif with what I'd consider to be an altogether more sensitive, imaginative and deeper use of this icon of slavery by Black British artists.

'Past Imperfect/Future Tense' 1984 exhibition poster, Keith Piper

Here we see Piper bringing together the twin makers of slavery and apartheid. Slavery and apartheid in the same mix, both existing as signifiers of Black diasporic identity in the late 20th century. Slavery here being inextricably linked to our understanding of present-day difficulties. Not only that, but Piper's memory of slavery being the foundation of which he bases present-day and future struggles.

We know of course that the slave ship represents, in the most graphic and violent of terms, forced travel, movement, and migration. It is this interplay - between forced relation and perhaps more voluntary (or at least, less forced) forms of migration, and how these things lead to, and explain, present-day circumstances – that concerns Eugene Palmer, within this work from the mid 1990s.

Eugene Palmer painting

The artist's use of a paper boat is in some ways very subtle and understated. If we're not careful, we might even miss it. Within this painting, Palmer is suggesting that the factors of slavery, as much as more recent migration, underscore present day difficulties and have contributed, in no small part, to the decidedly uncomfortable space, and a profound sense of exclusion, that characterise the Black British experience.

'Seven Rages of Man', Keith Piper, circa 1985

Within this grand, panoramic work, Piper 'remembers' being a slave, 'remembers' being transported on the slave ship, 'remembers' working on the plantation. This is much more than empathy; this is almost direct memory of an earlier existence. Piper here illustrates memories

of his earlier states of being, from pre-colonial Africa right through to more recent times. I'd like to focus for a minute on this panel, which depicts Piper (these are by the way, self-portraits) as a shackled slave. Tate & Lyle is one of the largest producers of sugar in the UK, with a history that stretches, inevitably, back into the days of slavery. So in a simple but profound way, Piper links present-day consumerism with the most brutal legacies and experiences of slavery. Something as supposedly innocuous as buying a bag of sugar in a supermarket, or using a sachet of sugar with one's cup of coffee – these things are forcefully linked with slavery and the slave trade. And the work contains other, perhaps less obvious narratives. Those of you who have been to London will no doubt know and have visited the Tate Gallery. The Gallery came into existence through the endeavours of Sir Henry Tate, a sugar merchant, and one half of Tate and Lyle. So one of the great cornerstones of British art owes its existence to slavery. The Tate is an institution that has traditionally excluded Black artists. So within this work, we see layer upon layer being added to Piper's remembrance of the days of slavery.

This idea that slavery marks a sort of 'beginning' of our identities as Black people that lies at the centre of this work

'From Slave Ship to Champ' by Godfried Donkor, circa 1998

It's almost as if, in Donkor's view, the slave ship gave birth to us, the slave ship brought us from there to here, subsequently and consequently, giving birth to us as New World Africans. These are complex works, reflective of both overlapping as well as divergent narratives. Slavery giving birth to particular types of racism, including the idea that Black people are more 'physical' than they are 'intellectual'. That they should be noted for what their bodies

can do, much more than their intellectual capacities and achievements. In some regards, the image of the Black boxer is the epitome or the single most enduring icon of this racism. And yet, Donkor's boxers are triumphant, sensitive survivors. They are human beings who evoke a humanity that racism has tried (and continues to try) to strip from them. Within these works, the slave ship exists as a metaphor for how far we have come, for how far these different boxers have come. From slave ship to heavyweight champion of the world. Donkor invites us to ponder the troubling question of just how far is that distance from slave ship to champ? Is it very far, or not far enough?

'The Nation's Finest' by Keith Piper 1990

I'd like to very briefly bring in this work by Piper that explores some of the terrain of Donkor's paintings. What is the nature of the Black sportsperson in a society in which racism is as rife as it is enduring? What is the sporting arena? Is it a stadium or is it an enclosure?

I'd like to take a brief look at a few other pieces that in my view reference or discuss issues of slavery in a range of highly engaging ways.

'Wheel of Fortune' by Mary Evans, 1996

Within this work Evans explores the idea of chance and slavery. The wheel of fortune is spun and x amount of Africans are enslaved, their lives and the lives of their descendants, forever more transformed. I'd like us to consider the ways in which this use of the slave ship differs from (or indeed, might possibly be similar) to the sorts of uses I showed towards the beginning of my talk.

'Under the Sea' by Tam Joseph

I'd like to end by taking a look at one of my favourite pieces that references slavery. Perhaps the great success of this painting is that, on first encounter, it makes no direct or explicit reference to slavery. It is instead, at first glances at least, a well-executed seascape. But water is of course as powerful a metaphor of slavery as the slave ship. Water was the means by which we were transported. The means by which slaves chose to end their suffering by committing suicide – jumping overboard. But water (and for that matter, the slave ship) is also a metaphor for redemption, salvation, survival, rebirth. For us as Black people, the spiritual, the healing qualities of water are deeply cherished. Tam Joseph's work pays homage to those who have died in great violence – those thrown overboard as well as those who chose to jump overboard. And yet, alongside this description of great violence is a profound sense of baptism by total immersion – redemption, salvation, and above all, survival. But not just survive, but the flourishing of creativity.