Cheryl Finley

‘It’s Part of My DNA’: The Embedded Life of the Slave Ship Icon

In 1789 a group of British abolitionists designed the now famous black and white schematic of the packed human cargo hold of a slave ship. That image was printed as a 25x19-inch broadside with a detailed explanatory text and distributed by the thousands to statesmen and concerned citizens in England and the United States. With unparalleled naval architectural precision, showing seven numbered sections, each filled with tiny darkened figures representing the bodies of enslaved Africans, it became the leading piece of visual culture responsible for garnering broad attention to the first concerted movement to end the slave trade. I have called that image the slave ship icon, for its extraordinary political power during the period of abolitionism as well as for its continuing omnipresence in the minds, memories and creative work of visual and performing artists, museum professionals, writers, poets and cultural innovators.

As an image that not only illustrated a commercial practice that was deemed immoral and inhuman, but also articulated the painful birth of the African diaspora in the transatlantic slave trade, the slave ship icon has come to stand for a particular type of African diasporic memory. As the artist Betye Saar recalled in an interview last year, ‘I even feel like it’s part of my DNA’. In fact, she and a host of other contemporary artists have incorporated the slave ship icon in their work. But this practice and type of memory work is not confined to visual artists, nor is it only a phenomenon of the past 25 years. Indeed, in the height of abolitionism in the late eighteenth century, women and men began embedding the image and political message of the slave ship icon into ordinary objects that have become artifacts of material culture.

This paper considers an array of these objects that have been created over the past 200 years - from models of slave ships to embroidery to jewelry to stained glass church windows to museum exhibitions - in order to understand how the slave ship icon has functioned in the realm of material culture. In particular, I analyse the theories, issues and ideas it has come to articulate through the objects in which it has been represented. Not merely an image of political resistance, I demonstrate how the slave ship icon in material culture

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1 Betye Saar to Cheryl Finley, telephone interview, March 13, 2002.
also has been used to speak about race, religion, sex, memory and belonging.

**Helen Mears**  
*Silver Service Slavery: The Black presence in the British home*

Direct representations of the transatlantic slave trade are rare in museum collections. Less so are representations of black domestic servants, a subject which proliferates in the art and design of the mid- to late eighteenth century. Found on prints, textiles and ceramics of the period, such images provide rare visual evidence of the black British presence. However they also highlight the marginalisation and de-individualisation of the black subject who is frequently reduced to signifying the wealth and fashionable taste of their ‘owner’. With reference to images of black servants held within the collections of the V&A, this paper will propose strategies for excavating narratives of difference and dissent from this imperially informed genre.

**Anne-Marie Eze**  
*Re-interpreting the Collection: The Medieval and Renaissance Galleries at the V&A*

The Middle Ages and Renaissance can often seem ‘pre-historic’ to those engaged in the study of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and race. In late 2009 the V&A will open the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries, showcasing the V&A’s outstanding collection of art from 300-1600, which includes textiles, paintings, sculpture, glass, metalwork, prints, manuscripts, furniture, ceramics and jewellery, in a new suite of ten galleries on three levels. The paper will discuss the opportunities this major re-display of the collection affords curators to engage in racial discourses and provide fresh perspectives on the relationship between Africans and Europeans during the period that contribute to our understanding of the impact of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade on art and design.

**Gillian Forrester**  
*Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario’s “Cries of Kingston”*

Belisario’s most significant work is the series of lithographs, *Sketches of Character, In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica*. Published in Kingston in 1837-8, when Jamaica was making its troubled transition from apprenticeship to full emancipation, Belisario’s work provides the first detailed visual representation of scenes from masquerades performed by Jamaican slaves during the Christmas and New Year holidays, notably the celebrated Afro-Jamaican form of performance, Jonkonnu, or John Canoe. Whilst sanctioned and encouraged by the slave-owning ruling elites of Jamaica, and frequently described by European residents and visitors in picturesque terms, John Canoe, as Richard D.E. Burton has argued, clearly was a transgressive phenomenon, functioning as an assertion of slave autonomy and resistance. Belisario’s series of images, more than any other, raises significant questions
about the nature of Jamaican culture, ethnicity, and politics at the moment of emancipation; while the *Sketches of Character* prints have been acknowledged as founding documents of Jamaican cultural heritage, their role as key images in the history of the visual culture of the North Atlantic, and in the history of the British Empire, has not yet been fully investigated.

This paper will outline the lineage of Jonkonnu to its West African roots, mapping its indigenisation and evolution in Jamaica from the early eighteenth century through to the post-emancipation period, and placing *Sketches of Character* in the context both of Jamaican social history and the visual culture of the British Empire. The paper will position Belisario’s lithographs in relation to European print culture, and specifically the *Cries* tradition, examining its relationship to publications produced in the early decades of the nineteenth century, including J.T. Smith’s extraordinary *Etchings of Remarkable Beggars* (1815), which depicts the marginal and dispossessed figures which populated the streets of the metropolis during and in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, a period of agricultural depression and social unrest. By creating a ‘Cries of Kingston’, Belisario demonstrated the interpenetration of visual production in the colony and metropole, situating print culture as an ambivalent space both of oppression and resistance.

**Thomas Loftfield**  
*The Other Way: European Influences in the Ceramics of the Diaspora*

Much work has been done on the set of ceramics that has become known as ‘colono-ware’. Originally supposed to have been the work of Native Americans in Virginia and South Carolina, this disparate collection of ceramics has more recently become understood as also the work of Africans transported to North America in the slave trade. Often defined by the appearance of ceramic traits from West Africa, colono-ware has been used to study the survival of African cultural traits across time and space. However, colono-ware does eventually disappear, replaced by ceramics of European standard, either imported or locally made. This paper seeks to address the process by which European ceramic standards appear in the body of colono-wares to ultimately replace the African motives. Examples are drawn from archaeological collections in the museum at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana and in the Barbados Museum to illustrate the hypothesised process.

**Tim Barringer**  
*The Visual Culture of the Plantation: Picturesque Prospects and Slave Labour*

This paper will interrogate the tradition of plantation landscapes, reading against the grain of the colonial picturesque by focusing on the labouring bodies of slaves rather than the visually dominant topographical features of the images.

The landscapes, topography and work practices of Jamaica differed radically from the European models and the negotiation of a new aesthetic for the depiction of an island colony whose economy depended upon slavery.
presented challenges for the artists. This paper opens with an analysis of a set of grandly celebratory essays in the colonial georgic, the series of six oil paintings of Jamaican estates and scenery commissioned by the absentee plantation over William Beckford from the aspiring landscape painter George Robertson. They were exhibited in London in 1777 and published as engravings the following year. Little attention has been paid to the tiny figures of slaves in these works, which seems to suggest that life as a slave in Jamaica was little different from that in a classical arcadia.

The Governor general of Jamaica from 1834-1836 was Howe Peter Browne, second Marquess of Sligo (1788-1845), himself an absentee landlord of Jamaican property and a slave-owner. Sligo’s estates in Jamaica, which included Cocoa Walks and Kelly’s Estate, were depicted in a series of landscapes made in the 1830s by Isaac Mendes Belisario, the Jamaican-born and British-trained watercolourist, lithographer and oil painter. In these little-known paintings labour appears to be in short supply, indicating perhaps the economic dislocation which followed the Emancipation legislation of 1834.

The slave rebellion, which began on December 27, 1831, marking the culmination of a long history of unrest, is the subject of a series of lithographs made and published by Adolphe Duperly in Kingston, rare examples in which the brutality and violence which marked the lives of enslaved people are made visible. These revelatory images, crudely produced, may seem to be both corrective and epitaph for the tradition of the colonial picturesque. Yet when the topographical artist Joseph Bartholomew Kidd published *West Indian Scenery: Illustrations of Jamaica, 1838-40*, he constructed an image of Jamaica after emancipation and during apprenticeship as a productive, orderly colony untroubled by recent events, whose natural beauty and fecundity - tended now by free labourers visually indistinguishable from slaves - was matched by the development of a cultivated urban society. Other forms of historical record indicate the partiality of these views. Jamaica during this period was riven by urban and rural unrest, and many planters claimed that their prophecies of economic chaos, violence and revolution after emancipation had come true.

Geoff Quilley
‘A true report’: Gabriel Bray’s drawings of the Guinea coast

This paper will focus on a set of drawings (in the National Maritime Museum collection) made by Gabriel Bray, a naval lieutenant who made at least two voyages to the coast of West Africa in the mid-1770s. The purpose of the voyages was to report on the state of the British forts along the Guinea coast, which enabled the British trade in transatlantic slavery. Bray’s drawings (totalling around 90 in all) form a kind of visual log of the voyage. They are remarkable for their representation of lower-deck life at sea, but also for their profiles of the forts and the Guinea coast and depictions of native Africans. When considered within the context of the contemporary discourse on the slave trade, they are problematic but rich pieces, providing remarkable insights into perceptions of Africa and also the role of the naval officer as both adjunct to the slave trade and as artist.
Marcus Wood
The article will consider the cultural marketing of the 'Emancipation Moment' within the slave cultures operated by Britain, North America and Brazil. The analysis will start out by examining the premise that freedom is not something which any culture or individual can give to another culture or individual. Frantz Fanon's neglected analysis of Hegel will provide the theoretical underpinning of this opening section. A series of art objects, and cultural productions including paintings, sculptures, prints and finally Thomas Clarkson's display chest will then be analysed in order to reveal how they created powerful but false fictions of empowerment around the white liberation of African slaves.

Emma Poulter
Collective meanings: slave-grown cotton, economic growth and cultural investment in Industrial Manchester.

During the eighteenth century and increasingly into the nineteenth, Manchester expanded to become the world’s first industrial city. This growth centred around one commodity in particular - imported cotton grown on slave plantations. This paper examines how the wealth generated via the cotton industry and associated businesses was utilised by individuals and by later generations to whom this wealth and social prestige passed. In particular I will examine the implications of cultural investments made by these individuals and their families, not only through amassing collections which were subsequently donated to museums and galleries, but also via their patronage of these institutions and the influence this had on their architecture and governance.

In museums and galleries objects are often displayed as representative of a particular time and culture. The Revealing Histories Project, a collaboration between eleven museums and galleries in Greater Manchester, is showing how the collections these institutions house are integrally connected to Manchester’s industrial past and to the complex histories of slavery. As such they tell the stories, not of a single culture, but of an intersecting cultural past and have a resonance for people of all backgrounds. As this paper will demonstrate, it is vital for research to be undertaken into collections to bring hidden meanings to the surface and for institutions to confront these issues within their displays and audience development programmes.

Christina Shannon
Victims of Fashion, the strange iconography of a series of printed textiles produced exclusively for the slave trade.

Known as ‘Les Indiennes de Traite’, or printed textiles produced under the legislation known as the Code Noir, these textiles proved to be a proliferate and lucrative trade. The Code noir, instituted in France in 1685 was the first administrative document outlining racism, legalising the sale of human lives as livestock and formulating theories using racial factors to justify slavery. Les ‘Indiennes de Traite’ describe a particular style of decorative textiles
printed in Europe, principally in the Nantes and Bordeaux areas. These cotton prints, along with firearms, glassware, pewter and alcohol served as currency for the exchange of slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Unlike any other decorative textile produced at this time, these prints show naïve and stylised motifs with invented wild animals, Africans dancing and other representations of ‘Les Bons Sauvages’. One of the most unsettling thing about these designs is their beauty. The graphic elegance and joyful, purposely naïve rendition of the images belie an iconography full of strange, revealing references. Who produced them, where did their visual references come from?

The French began trading for slaves from 1673, and the activity reached its height during the latter part of the 18th century. These cotton prints represented more than two-thirds of the cargo destined for the African coast. Traces of this most sombre part of textile history, lasting from 1760 to 1820, are hard to find. The industrialists whose fortunes were made on the triangular commerce were not especially keen to document them. No examples of printed fabric have been found to date either in Europe or in Africa.

Cybele Gontar
Pierre Dutreuil Barjon vs. His Creditors:
The Story of a St. Domingue Émigré Cabinetmaker in New Orleans

Between 1719 and 1812, nearly fifteen thousand Haitian refugees passed through New Orleans nearly doubling the population of the city. Among them was Dutreuil Barjon, Sr. born ca. 1799 in Jeremie, Ste. Domingo. An indenture contract of 1813 documents Barjon as having been apprenticed to Jean Rousseau, a gens de couleur libre or "free man of color" cabinetmaker, active ca. 1810-1837. By 1822, Barjon is listed in Paxton's New Orleans Directory and Register as an independent menuisier. Signed furniture from his workshop survives, as well as various newspaper advertisements and court records, which allow us to examine Barjon's career within an overall framework of a history of les gens de couleur libre and slave cabinetmakers in Louisiana. Further, his story may be compared to that of other slave cabinetmakers in America including anonymous laborers in the larger workshops (i.e. Thomas Elfe of Charleston, South Carolina) and to President Jefferson's well-known and highly-skilled servant, John Hemings at Monticello in Virginia.

Debra Jackson

This illustrated presentation will discuss the various ways European artists working in the Americas depicted the social dancing of enslaved Africans and free people of colour during the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries. Visual documentation to support this theme will include drawings,

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prints and paintings of the period.

Artists in Europe who portrayed social dancing during this period responded to a variety of influences, among them, the painterly style know as the fêtes galantes, and the popularity of the commedia dell’arte, whose characters were regularly depicted by artists.

In the Americas, representations of the social dancing of white society displayed a reliance on the artistic conventions of Europe in terms of visual style. But artists depicting the social dancing of enslaved Africans and free people of colour in the Americas presented viewers with a subject entirely novel, influenced by the presence of slavery in the colonies. Europeans in the New World were facinated by the dancing of black people and repeatedly turned to this theme for inspiration.