

Memory, Myth and Forgetting: the British Transatlantic Slave Trade

Lucy Ball

The thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of
Portsmouth

September 2013

Abstract

Based on Halbwachs' theory of collective memory and Connerton's notion of collective forgetting, this thesis contends that the history of the British transatlantic slave trade has been deliberately omitted from British collective remembrance, replaced by a stylised image of the campaign for its abolition, in the interests of maintaining a consistent national identity built around notions of humanitarian and philanthropic concern. This thesis examines the way that this collective amnesia was addressed during the bicentenary of the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 2007 in museological display and the media, alongside its interrogation in novels published during the last seventeen years. The exploration of the bicentennial commemoration provided a unique opportunity to examine the way in which the nation presented its own history to the British public and the international community, and the divergent perspectives at play.

Analysis of the artefacts and panel text featured at the International Slavery Museum, the *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum and the *Chasing Freedom* exhibition at the Royal Naval Museum reveals an emerging desire amongst curators to reduce attention garnered on the previously-lionised British abolitionists in favour of an increased representation of the experiences of the enslaved, including instances of their resistance and rebellion. Examination of neo-slave narratives scrutinises the way that postcolonial novelists draw attention to the process by which eighteenth-century slave narratives came to be published, demonstrating their unsuitability to be considered historical texts. S. I. Martin's *Incomparable World* (1996), David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (2000), Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2009), Bernadine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2009) and Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010) re-write the slave experience and the process of writing, reframing abolitionist motivations around self-interest and political necessity rather than humanitarian concern. Media engagement was analysed through newspaper articles reporting on the bicentenary, the output of the BBC's Abolition Season, and the representation of slavery in film, revealing a surface-level engagement with the subject, furthering the original abolitionist imagery, with any revisionist output needing to be specifically sought-out by the consumer.

The thesis concludes that a revisionist approach to the history of the slave trade is becoming more apparent in challenges to collective memory occasioned by the bicentenary of its abolition; novelists make this challenge unavoidably clear to their readers, whilst those visiting museums are presented with an opportunity to reassess their understanding of this history by engaging with exhibits; the media, however, provides this revisionism but only in small ways, and has to be sought out by audiences keen to engage with it.

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Declaration

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

Word count: 62,776

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Petra Rau for her support and guidance in helping to refine my original research idea into the project that this thesis became; for her insight, interest and endless patience and encouragement. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr Maggie Bowers for her supervision over the past year, and for her ability to offer reassurance in moments of deepest anxiety.

The University of Portsmouth's English department provided me with an inspiring and intellectually stimulating research environment, for which I am grateful. Thanks also to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, whose Studentship Award made this thesis possible.

Special thanks go to Andrew and Lucy Smith, without whom this thesis would never have begun, for their endless hospitality and encouragement. I am grateful to Dr Chmel, Dr Jackson and Dr Ford, for proving it possible to finish a PhD and for offering their advice and empathy when the going got tough. My friends and family I am indebted to for their support and reassurance throughout the composition of this thesis, and for tolerating my increasingly bad temper during the final months.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my sister Claire, who has offered her unfailing encouragement as well as emotional, financial and referencing support during the entirety of this process without complaint, and without whom I fear this thesis would never have reached completion.

Introduction

In September 2013, an unnamed Russian official dismissed Britain as 'just a small island', to which Prime Minister David Cameron responded with an impassioned invective on the aspects of British history which are widely considered a source of national pride:

'Britain is an island that has helped to clear the European continent of fascism and was resolute in doing that throughout World War II. Britain is an island that helped to abolish slavery, that has invented most of the things worth inventing, including every sport currently played around the world, that still today is responsible for art, literature and music that delights the entire world. We are proud of everything we do as a small island – a small island that has the sixth-largest economy, the fourth-best funded military, some of the most effective diplomats, the proudest history, one of the best records for art and literature and contribution to philosophy and world civilisation' (BBC News, 2013)

Though the speech received much criticism and derision from the media, and indeed could be contradicted on many fronts, it is significant that the abolition of slavery is presented by Cameron as one of the key moments of Britain's history of which Britons can be proud. Whilst a decade ago the history of slavery arguably barely featured in the collective remembrance of Britain's past, its inclusion today not only in public discourse but as a beacon of national pride presented to the world by the Prime Minister, alongside war-time victories, The Beatles and Shakespeare, marks a significant change in the way this history is being managed.

In many ways Cameron's response summarises the complications inherent with a consideration of the way Britain has remembered, or perhaps more accurately forgotten, its slave trading history. The declaration 'helped to abolish slavery' is ambiguous in that it is not clear whether it refers to the slave trade or the entire system of enslavement; whether it implies Britain spear-headed a global campaign or was instrumental in leading other nations towards abolition; and lastly because Cameron neglected to qualify with the caveat that it refers only to the transatlantic slave trade, with many forms of slavery still in operation throughout the world today. Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the inclusion of 'helped to abolish slavery' is that it necessarily obfuscates nearly two hundred years' worth of history concerning British transatlantic slavery which preceded its abolition, and therefore inevitably conceals the nature of British involvement (economic, legal and political). With the overwhelmingly vast majority of the history of the British transatlantic slave trade being one of brutality, exploitation and dehumanisation, it is the curious notion

of feeling not merely a sense of pride regarding its abolition, but a seeming belief that this one piece of legislation effectively wipes clean the slate of such a history, with which this thesis is concerned. As Dark Tourism historian John Beech wryly puts it: 'Isn't the UK celebrating the abolition of slavery rather like celebrating that you've stopped beating your wife?' (Beech, *A Step Forwards or a Step Sideways?: Some Personal Reflections of how the Presentation of Slavery has (and hasn't) changed in the last few years*, 2008)

The decision to view the British slave trade through the moral lens of abolition is not a new phenomenon, however. 'Repression and narrative disguise surrounded the memory of slavery', Marcus Wood argues, 'from the moment Britain decided it had attained the moral high ground, with the stroke of a pen in 1807' (2007, p. 205). 1807 saw the culmination of a twenty year political campaign by abolitionists to end the trade in slaves between Africa and British plantations in the Americas, with the passage of The Slave Trade Act (1807). Following the foundation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, an organised public campaign in Britain sought to convert wider public opinion of the trade, and was supplemented by parliamentary representation by figures such as Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp, who quickly became the public figureheads of the campaign. Along with the published testimonies of former slaves like Oloudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana, parliamentary Select Committee hearings took evidence from former slaves, those still enslaved (transcriptions of testimonies recorded and submitted by abolitionists), slave trade captains, surgeons, sailors and plantation owners. The abolition movement gained a vast and active following, and its number of supporters grew exponentially; indeed, 'so rapidly did abolitionism gain a respectable political foothold throughout the cities of England that all forms of religious, private, municipal, and civic meeting places were made available to the cause' (Walvin, 1981, p. 65). Campaign supporters were active in adding their voice to the demand for abolition: 'in spring 1792 an unprecedented 508 abolitionist petitions were delivered to Parliament; in Manchester alone 20,000 names from a population of 60,000 were attached to the petition' (Walvin, 1981, p. 66). The passage of the Slave Trade Act was considered a moral victory by the virtuous and pious over the greed and inhumanity of Britain's slave traders, despite the fact that the law did not abolish slavery itself, which legally continued on British plantations for another three decades. This comfort in moral triumph enabled Britons to focus their remembrance of this period on the success of the high profile, two-decade campaign, rather than on the previously accepted two-century trade that preceded it. Thus the collective memory of the transatlantic slave trade was shaped, from the moment of abolition, around self-congratulation and international moral superiority, with British

abolitionists going on to exert pressure on other nations to follow Britain's lead, and not on remembering the previous misdeeds of Britain's subjects in profiting from the sale of human beings.

The history of the British transatlantic slave trade and its resultant legacy, and that of the struggle for abolition and its subsequent commemoration are not, of course, straightforward or simple events. Consisting of a myriad of complex and interdependent motivations and a multiplicity of voices, it is perhaps of little surprise that the history of the slave trade has been reduced to a footnote of the history of abolition. This thesis examines the process by which this occurred, and the attempts being made to salvage and re-present this history to a modern audience. Using theories of memory and commemoration to structure the analysis, chapters will focus on how the British transatlantic slave trade (hereafter 'the slave trade') is represented in museums, literature and the media.

'Collective memory differs from history', Halbwachs argues, because 'it is a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memories alive' (2007, p. 140). Despite Halbwachs' insistence that collective memory is not artificial, he concedes that it is necessarily constructed rather than organic, which serves to complicate the notion of the process by which events pass from lived experiences into collective memory. Whitehead argues that Halbwachs' concept insists that collective remembrance is not made up of detailed, faithful historical accounts of past events, but 'rather, what we have preserved and can retrieve is a schema, which comprises incomplete, wavering, and imprecise impressions that can then be fitted together under suitable stimuli', meaning this remembrance represents 'an activity of reconstruction in the present rather than the resurrection of the past' (Whitehead, 2009, p. 126). Christian Krampe describes collective memory as therefore constituting a 'volatile entity: processes of selection, interpretation and (re)-construction render and re-render information into modifications of the 'original' information' (2010, p. 307). The remembrance of the group can therefore be considered to depend on the preoccupations and motivations of current society. In terms of how previous events have been remembered, then, it is easier to examine a society's collective remembrance when that society is forced into a position of recall: when that event is reconstructed according to the schema which has been in place for generations. In this case it was the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007 which opened the way that this history had passed into collective memory for public analysis.

Stressing the malleable nature of collective memory, Halbwachs notes that as individual group members die the overarching group memory can be eroded at the edges, based on the recollections which the individuals/generation were specifically carrying. However, a potentially redemptive feature of this type of remembrance is that it is difficult to say when any memory has totally disappeared or left group consciousness, because 'its recovery only requires its preservation in some limited portion of the social body' (Halbwach, *The Collective Memory*, 2007, p. 142). Thus memories which are apparently absent from collective remembrance can easily be re-inserted into this canon through their resurrection by even a small number of the group. This line of thought implies that forgetting is an innocent act, by which events disappear from group consciousness when those for whom they seem significant disappear from the group. Paul Connerton considers that not only is forgetting a wilful activity, but also disputes the assumption that 'remembering and commemoration is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily a failing' (2008, p. 59). Indeed Connerton identifies seven types of forgetting which are utilised by societies in order to formulate their national identity, two of which are worth considering when attempting to understand Britain's collective amnesia regarding its slave trading history.

Connerton's description of 'forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity' suggests that communities sometimes need to forget previous events and social ties in order to form new identities, particularly in the case of those migrating to new countries. Whilst Connerton's description does not claim this type of forgetting is contrived, or undertaken to erase a painful past (instead, it functions as a way of making space for a new identity predicated on new surroundings) it has a potential relevance here:

'The emphasis here is not so much on the loss entailed in being unable to retain certain things as rather on the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one's current identity and ongoing purposes. Forgetting then becomes part of the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences' (2008, p. 63)

The notion of new memories being formed and stored alongside a set of shared silences seems very reminiscent of the way the memory of the abolition campaign became a source of public pride for Britain, whilst it has retained a silence around the gains the nation accrued from the slave trade. As historian Catherine Hall argues, before the bicentennial events of 2007, 'in so far as there was a collective memory in the United Kingdom on issues of the slave trade and slavery, it was one of Britain's pride in having led the world, or so it

was thought, in abolition and emancipation' (2010, p. 191). Concurrently, 'no attempt was made to explain how evil arose on such a scale in the first place, scant effort was expended in order to explore the economic impacts of slavery on Britain' (Beech, 2008, p. 88).

An alternative type of forgetting outlined by Connerton which seems most appropriate to the memory of the slave trade is 'forgetting as humiliated silence'. Connerton relates this forgetting more specifically to post-war Germany, but its significance in this setting is clear: it is 'not solely, and may in large part be not at all, a matter of overt activity on the part of a state apparatus. It is manifest in a widespread pattern of behaviour in civil society, and it is covert, unmarked and unacknowledged' (Connerton, 2008, p. 67). In explaining the motive behind this type of forgetting, Connerton expounds that 'some acts of silence may be an attempt to bury things beyond expression and the reach of memory; yet such silencings, while they are a type of repression, can at the same time be a form of survival, and the desire to forget may be an essential ingredient in that process of survival' (2008, p. 68). Connerton relates this to the need for Germany to forget the events of the Nazi regime in order to survive in the post-war landscape. The British compulsion to forget the slave trade would be considered less of a necessity for survival than in the case of post-war Germany, but in terms of maintaining a national identity founded on a sense of morality, forgetting such a barbaric part of its heritage would have been essential.

I would argue that Britain's amnesia about its slave trading history stems from a combination of the two types of forgetting outlined above; whilst the memory of engaging in the trade at all could bring about a 'humiliated silence' regarding its preservation, the necessity of forgetting became more paramount in order to construct a new identity, shaped around the benevolence of abolition, as a precursor to colonisation and the rise of the British Empire.

Geoffrey Cubitt also discusses the issue of memory failure and its relevance to the British slave trade, calling it a 'crucially mislaid or concealed stratum' of national history, and argues that it can be viewed in one of two ways: either 'one is allowed to suppose that the mislaying of this history has been somewhat accidental' or that it is a 'cynical suppression', an 'instance of collective amnesia, repressing a past too shameful or embarrassing or traumatic to be acknowledged' (2009, p. 267). While Cubitt's reasoning behind this forgetting is broadly in line with Connerton's framework, where it differs is that Connerton outlines the types of forgetting as essential in various ways for maintaining a national identity; conversely, Cubitt argues that consciousness of the previously forgotten 'must be

re-established in the local community if that community is to possess an honest and properly grounded understanding of its own historical being' (2009, p. 267).

A further aspect of memory, which sits alongside rather than competing with the assertions of Connerton and Cubitt, is that of Freud's concept of 'screen memory'. Freud writes in terms of an individual's memory of their childhood, but the concept is easily expanded to encompass a more collective remembrance. He claims that screen memories, which constitute falsified or modified recollections, serve to 'repress and replace objectionable or disagreeable impressions' (Freud, 2003, p. 21). In a loose appropriation of Freud's theory, the memory of British complicity in, and profit from, the slave trade can be considered to represent the 'disagreeable' event which the screen memory – in this case the abolition campaign – seeks to obscure. Rothberg uses Freud's concept to bolster his own notion of 'multidirectional memory': 'while screen memory might be understood as involving a conflict of memories, it ultimately more closely resembles a remapping of memory in which links between the memories are formed and then redistributed between the conscious and unconscious' (2009, p. 14).

One of the key motifs of Rothberg's multidirectional memory is that historical events should not be considered sacrosanct in terms of their depiction and memorialisation: when considering the history of the Holocaust alongside that of colonialism and slavery, a 'competition of victims' should not ensue (2009, p. 2). Instead, memory should be considered multidirectional: 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). In a step away from Halbwachs' notion of collective memories being tied to members of the group (and thus memories fading into obscurity when those members of the group retaining them disappear or die), Rothberg argues that memories are, in fact, 'not owned by groups – nor are groups 'owned' by memories. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are jagged; what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant' (2009, p. 5). This concept aligns well with Alison Landsberg's 'prosthetic memory', which she relates specifically to the legacy of the slave trade. Because of (Patterson's theory of) natal alienation, the enslaved lacked the familial and communal ties to be able to amass a cultural heritage. With the regular separation of families, and constant and unpredictable risk of being sold to other plantations, the stability of a group to pass down collective memories and cultures was almost entirely absent from the slaves' world. This has led to postcolonial authors' preoccupation with writing novels which attempt to retrieve the genealogical and cultural

histories which slaves were precluded from bearing during the course of transatlantic slavery. In particular, Landsberg gives the examples of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Songs of Solomon*, along with Alex Haley's *Roots* and John Singleton's *Rosewood* as books which have sought to 'initiate the difficult process of remembering' (2004, p. 88).

The aim of prosthetic memory is to provide a cultural heritage to those who have been denied access to such a history by slavery. Thus by its nature this prosthesis has to be portable; with the capacity to be accessed and absorbed by many people, which necessitates the use of mass cultural modes such as the novel, film and television. The difficulty with using mass culture is twofold. Firstly, its accessibility means that it is impossible to exert much influence over the way that people interact with it, and thus its key message can be overlooked in favour of an alternative interpretation. With the example of the screening of *Roots* in the USA, Landsberg explains that the result was not that Americans found themselves facing up to the history of slavery or race in their nation, but rather than it 'stimulated instead a fascination with the project of genealogy': it was 'too much about the pleasure of healing and not enough about the pain of remembering' (2004, p. 106). The second issue with the prosthetic nature of these memories lies in their very prosthesis: they 'engage spectators across racial lines, to create prosthetic memories even in those to whom the memories do not "properly" belong' (Landsberg, 2004, p. 109). The danger here is that these memories are devalued when taken on by those for whom they were not constructed; those with their own existing cultural heritage: in this instance does not the accessibility of these memories encourage what Wood might disparagingly describe as a 'sentimental self-identification' (2007, p. 203) rather than an authentic connection with a history filling a genuine memory void? Landsberg suggests that in order for the work of prosthetic memory to foster political debate and to catalyse action, these memories need to be 'visceral, painful, and scarring', and that the 'potential of prosthetic memories lies in their power to unsettle, to produce ruptures, to disfigure, and to defamiliarise the very conditions of existence in the present' (2004, p. 106).

Alongside the debate around excavating or recreating hidden memories, there has also been an increasing imperative to interrogate existing cultural remembrances. However, this interrogation is somewhat fraught, and the defamiliarisation which Landsberg desires can cause uproar when the memory being unsettled is that which has attained the status of myth, perhaps best exemplified by the reaction to Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg's research indicating that the number of Jews murdered during the Nazi regime was closer to five than six million: 'anger erupted...the figure six million mattered', with people arguing

that 'by altering an important symbol of commemoration, Hilberg was an accomplice to Holocaust denial' (Paris, 2000, p. 315). Though Hilberg's calculation was based on extensive historical research, and the findings indicated fewer people had been murdered than previously believed – which objectively represents a positive moment in Holocaust research and history – the image of the six million has entered the realm of mythical status so completely that any challenge to its legitimacy seems unthinkable to those whose cultural heritage this represents. In a similar vein, it will be important to analyse the extent to which there is a resistance to modifying aspects of the collective memory of the slave trade and abolition when examining the commemorative activities of 2007.

Slavery and the slave trade have never constituted comfortable subjects for the British public to engage with. Before abolition, slavery was 'something of a paradox: an enormously profitable business whose moral status was deeply problematic' argues Carey (2004, p. 1). According to religion, the law and morality, it was 'not easily comfortable to notions of British liberty or Christianity, yet such was the importance of slavery to the British economy that these questions were overlooked and ignored' (Carey, 2004, p. 1). In order to change public opinion, then, abolitionists first had to bring the subject within the public sphere of interest. One of the difficulties in achieving this was the need to persuade 'people whose lives were in many cases lived far from the ostensible epicentres of slaving activity that the sufferings of enslaved people and the struggle for their emancipation ought to be a matter of personal concern' (Cubitt, 2009, p. 260). This distance from slave plantations affected not only how eighteenth-century Britons viewed slavery, but has also contributed to the ease with which the slave trade has been omitted from collective memory. Consequently, efforts to reconstruct this remembrance have focused on making the history of slavery seem relevant to a public largely apathetic about the subject. This necessity is somewhat complicated, however, not only by the distance at which the slave trade was carried out, but by the very practice of day-to-day slavery on West Indian plantations; Seaton describes slavery as 'a phantom industry that leaves scant traces; its capital lies in people, long since dead, not machinery' (Sources of Slavery-Destinations of Slavery, 2008, p. 117). This absence is symptomatic of one of the reasons why slave trade memorialisation in the UK differs so vastly from that of the heritage industry in the US, which is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

Goulbourne claims, like many historians, that 'for the most part, there have been almost two centuries of relative silence in Britain about the place of slavery in the nation's history and national consciousness' (2001, p. 128). The critical discourse regarding

memorialisation of the slave trade widely concurs on this notion of silence. The absence of the slave trade from collective memory can be related directly to Connerton's types of forgetting, with the potential sense of national shame meaning this troubling part of British history has had to be suppressed in order that the nation is able to continue presenting an image to the rest of the world of humanitarian concern. However, as Halbwachs has claimed, collective memory's 'recovery only requires its preservation in some limited portion of the social body' (*The Collective Memory*, 2007, p. 142), and so any attempt to actively raise collective awareness of this history in the public consciousness provides the opportunity for it to regain a place in collective remembrance. In an attempt to harness this opportunity, '2007, the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, saw an unprecedented explosion of activities in Britain focused on the slave trade and slavery, abolition and emancipation' (Hall, 2010, p. 191). This explosion saw an entire calendar of events organised and funded by government, as well as the rise of exhibitions and heritage trails by local cultural and heritage groups, along with art installations, performance pieces, literature, television and film. The attempt to mark this event in a way accessible to the entire British public rather than solely through academic debate illustrated an intention to genuinely resurrect an awareness of this previously 'hidden' history in public consciousness.

The choice of 2007 as an anniversary worthy of commemoration has been the subject of much debate. As Oldfield points out, the centenary of abolition in 1907 went largely unnoticed in the UK; the bicentenary was thus not following a tradition of marking the event (2007, p. 3). Perhaps more significantly, of course, the passage of the Slave Trade Act did not emancipate slaves working on the plantations of British owners, which continued to bring vast economic dividends to nineteenth-century Britain. This distinction between the ending of the slave trade in 1807 and of slavery in 1833 remained somewhat blurred during the commemorations of 2007, with many people (whether knowingly or otherwise) conflating the two. Writing in *The Guardian* as early into the bicentennial commemorations as March 2007, Baroness Lola Young noted that 'ministers and other public figures, along with newspapers (including the Guardian, sadly) have referred to 2007 as the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery. That is not so' (Young, 2007). It is easy to see why the commemoration of the ending of slavery itself would prove an attractive subject for politicians attempting to present Britain's history as one of humanity and benevolence, especially in the aftermath of decolonisation and the increased debate which it has inspired, particularly in the last four decades. The abolition campaign in particular, with its bringing together of British, African and West Indian campaigners to further a

humanitarian cause, constitutes an ideal history to champion for politicians with an emphasis on "social cohesion" [which] has emerged in the context of concerns that multiculturalism has led to social fracturing and increasing separation' (Hall, 2010, p. 195). However, this modern preoccupation with shaping the past around current agendas obfuscates the anniversary which 2007 represents. As Baroness Young points out, it does not commemorate the end of slavery in any sense, which continued legally on British plantations for another three decades, nor even the end of the transatlantic slave trade, which other nations did not abolish for some time, and which also continued illegally, albeit with a British naval squadron enlisted to suppress it.

Wood foresaw some of the issues which could arise with the commemorative activities of 2007, writing early that year that it was:

'crucial to ensure that the extended and colossal amorality of Britain's centuries-long involvement in, and final domination of, the Atlantic slave trade does not become buried beneath a mountain of self-congratulation and biographical self aggrandizement, albeit cleverly dressed up with the sack cloth of sentiment and the ashes of nostalgia. That Britain finally abolished the slave trade was a good thing, that it constituted a moral triumph for the nation is far less certain' (2007, p. 203).

Writing three years later, Wood expressed his disappointment in the commemorations, insisting that 'all in all, Britain's societal response to 2007 hid behind a date, and used 1807 as a monolith (or is it a shibboleth?), to avoid thinking of the wider implications of the outfall of the slave trade now' (2010, p. 163). Wood's disappointment seems rather a negative assessment of the publications, exhibitions, events and performances put on in 2007; while many of these of course conformed to Wood's evaluation, there were exhibitions in particular (discussed in the following chapters) which sought to redress the collective amnesia of the slave trade, and to diminish the importance of the story of abolition to a part of the history of slavery, rather than constituting the most central part of this history.

Collective memory is mediated, Rothberg argues, through 'networks of communication, institutions of the state, and the social groupings of civil society' (2009, p. 15). This thesis focuses on museum exhibitions as state-endorsed representations of national collective remembrance. As Oldfield asserts, 'in the past twenty years museums have emerged as key sites of memory in relation to transatlantic slavery' (2007, p. 5). However, although

museums can perhaps be considered one of the best cultural forms for observing state-endorsed remembrance, Rothberg contends that 'mediascapes of all kinds play a predominant role in the construction of the memory frameworks described by Halbwachs' (2009, p. 15). Indeed Landsberg likens the ambitions of museum exhibitions and other mass cultural forms to the intentions of postcolonial novelists in providing a kind of 'visceral pedagogy' (2004, p. 100). It is Landsberg's contention that mass media makes it easier for people to take on prosthetic memories, but also that the particular modes of address which it utilises put the spectator in 'the position of being quite naked and vulnerable', with museums acting as 'sites[s] of bodily experience' with 'the capacity to mark, or even scar, the subjectivities of its spectators' (2004, p. 101). Though they are contested as a means of presenting the history of the middle passage, it is the experiential exhibitions which provide mock-ups of slave ship holds designed to offer visitors a glimpse of the dark and disorienting nature of middle passage voyages which tend to garner the most attention and comments from visitors.

Furthering Landsberg's association of postcolonial novels with mass media, Vivian Nun Halloran argues that 'in recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to demarcate the boundaries between the fields of literary, cultural and museum studies' (2009, p. 6). In refining her argument, she explains that 'both contemporary museology and postmodernist narrative theory reject all-encompassing grand narratives in favour of inclusive (re)presentations of multiple voices from different subject positions and experiences' (Nun Halloran, 2009, p. 8). This excavation of a multiplicity of voices and competing stories in describing the realities of the slave trade constitutes one of the major strengths of postcolonial historical novels in providing a revisionist understanding of this period. Whilst museums vary in their interaction with the different facets of the slave trade, ultimately they have to perform within a committee-approved framework, and acknowledge their funding by local councils or the HLF. Where novels differ is in their total independence and freedom of expression. Through the analysis of novels in chapters three and four, it becomes increasingly clear that the majority of authors writing neo-historical novels about the slave trade broadly conform to the discourse of revisionist theorists such as Marcus Wood. Thus the modern British consumer of popular culture finds themselves in a position where they can begin to identify two different types of narrative emerging and often in conflict with one another: the museum and the novel.

In discussing the history of the slave trade from a post-modern, post-colonial perspective, there are problems which arise when interacting with a historical discourse which

functioned to champion abolitionist figures whilst reducing slaves to characters who for the most part were silenced, background figures. The issue of terminology arises in many instances when discussing the operation of the slave trade from a twenty-first century perspective. As will be discussed in chapter two, the very term 'slave' can become the subject of debate around the language used on museum panels. As well as the obvious uses of racist terms by pro-slavers, and the ultimately delimiting representations of abolitionists when describing the enslaved, issue can be taken with the less obviously problematic descriptions of the mechanics of the trade, indeed with the very term 'triangular trade'. Beech highlights how 'Africans are reduced to the level of a commodity and thus totally dehumanized' (Beech, 2008, p. 91). Using one side of a mathematical figure to embody the enslavement and forced transportation of millions of Africans is indeed a reductive metaphor, and when this form of representation is interrogated it does seem to demand redefinition. However the discontinuation of the term 'triangular trade' would require the construction of an entirely new terminology for describing the slave trade. Given the term dates back to an era when issues of memory, commemoration and reconciliation were far from paramount, perhaps it is time for a change, especially if a new awareness of Britain's slave trading heritage is to emerge from the increase in public engagement with this history. Such debate falls beyond the scope of this study, but there is a growing desire for the way that we engage with the history of the slave trade to be addressed.

This thesis is structured into five chapters. The first discusses notions of commemoration, and examines the way that museums function to disseminate state-endorsed collective remembrance. Analysis focuses on the climate of debate around multiculturalism in which the exhibitions of 2007 were constructed, and considers the way the bicentenary of abolition was approached by former British colonies which once housed slave plantations. Discussion engages with the complications and sensitivities surrounding issues such as which types of artefacts should be considered inappropriate for presenting such a sensitive history, and the necessity of museums to find new ways of representing this history, which move away from the traditional imagery of abolition commemoration.

The second chapter takes three museum exhibitions and analyses the representation of the slave trade and abolition in each. The exhibitions discussed are the International Slavery Museum (Liverpool), the *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition at the V&A (London), and the Royal Naval Museum's *Chasing Freedom* exhibition (Portsmouth). Selected as each approached the subject from a different starting point, this chapter thus covers a broad

range of museological display, with exhibitions presented by museums of slavery, design and Naval history.

Chapter three introduces the novel as a cultural form used by postcolonial authors to rewrite the history of Britain's involvement in the slave trade. Examining a range of novels published between 1996 – 2010, these novels reveal and criticise the methods by which abolitionists gathered and edited the narratives of former slaves for production as part of a well-defined canon that went on to define the abolition myth. Chapter four focuses on the way that key figures of the slave trade have been recreated in these novels in order to counteract the reductive 'stock' characters presented in abolition-era narratives.

Chapter five discusses the engagement of the media with the commemoration of abolition in 2007, including analysis of television, film and newspapers. Whilst the chapters on museology provide an analysis of the way that the state would like the nation to view the history of the slave trade, and the chapters regarding literature exemplify the manner in which postcolonial writers seek to adapt this, it is the examination of the most popular cultural forms of mass media which perhaps best illustrate how this history is currently understood by the public.

Discussing diverse methods of engaging with the representation of the slave trade and its abolition, taken together these chapters provide an overarching framework through which to view the collective memory of the slave trade and its interrogation by various cultural groups.

Chapter One: Remembering Slavery

'In Britain,' argues Cubitt, 'as in other European countries whose histories are marked by an extensive participation in transatlantic slavery, the significance of this participation has been, to a large extent, ignored or obscured in the prevailing narratives of national history that have shaped public awareness since the time of abolition' (2012, p. 161). These prevailing narratives have sought to emphasise the importance of British abolitionism in bringing transatlantic slavery to an end, whilst simultaneously using this commemoration to obscure the history of enslavement and marginalise the experiences of the enslaved. As Cubitt continues, 'in a country that memorialised abolitionists, memorials to enslavement, or to the long-standing black presence in British society, have until recently had no discernible place in the landscape' (2012, p. 161). Similarly, the legacy of the slave trade, and its effects on issues of inequality in both the contemporary UK and internationally, has gone broadly unexplored in the public domain, with discussion confined to academia.

This chapter explores how the slave trade has been engaged with and represented in British national consciousness, and how this has come to be addressed around the notion of multiculturalism. Analysis centres on the unsatisfactory nature of this representation, and how the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade constituted an opportunity for cultural institutions to readdress and redefine this history through museological display as part of a government-sponsored and –promoted year of engagement. Discussion outlines the necessity, for encouraging a more balanced understanding of this part of the nation's history, of using the engagement with abolition not as an opportunity to continue praising figures such as Wilberforce and Clarkson but a chance to bring the slave figure back to the most central position in this history, by providing the wider British public with a deeper understanding of the slave experience.

Analysis questions the method and motivation behind the mythologizing of the abolition campaign at the expense of an understanding of the slave industry, and asks whether this history is commemorated in the same way in Britain's former slave-holding colonies.

The Parekh report's painting of Britain in 2000 as a fragmented and disharmonious society, home to many ethnic groups, yet not truly multiethnic, prompted a critical and continuing academic and political discussion of what multiculturalism really meant, and what it would take for Britain to achieve it. The report aimed to cover all aspects of society: 'policing, the criminal justice system, education, arts, media, sports, health and welfare, employment, immigration and asylum, religion, government leadership, legislation and organisational

change', and included a list of recommendations for each of these, stretching to eighteen pages (Kowaleski-Wallace, 2006, p. 1). Cultural theorist and co-commissioner of the report, Stuart Hall reacted to the report's huge response by arguing that 'belonging is a tricky concept, requiring both identification and recognition. If people from ethnic minorities are to become not only citizens with equal rights but also an integral part of the national culture, then the meanings of the term 'British' will have to become more inclusive of their experiences, values and aspirations' (Hall, 2000). This demand for inclusion and integration is difficult to satisfy, even theoretically; for the native subjects of Britain's colonies during imperial expansion, the idea of 'Britishness' had always been fixed and rigid, with any opposing cultures deemed inferior rather than simply different. Said's notion that 'all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, 'equal', and 'fit'' (1994, p. 96) seems one that can be traced through the history of British imperial progress, and one which necessarily and automatically posits 'the other' as exactly that: other; in opposition to a culture 'well-grounded in moral, economic, and even metaphysical norms designed to approve a satisfying local, that is European, order and to permit the abrogation of the right to a similar order abroad' (Said, 1994, p. 96). However, the Parekh report sought to counter this notion of Britain's fixed identity, dismissing the notion that 'postwar immigrants of color arrived to find a stable, homogenous group of citizens who had previously not known conflict or ethnic strife' (Kowaleski-Wallace, 2006, p. 4), instead highlighting the many different regional identities and religious groups existing within the nation.

In this climate of debate about ethnicity, multiethnicity, Britishness and multiculturalism, it is little surprise that discussion concerning resurrecting the history of the slave trade came to the fore. Indeed the introduction to the Parekh report's section on Arts, Media and Sport begins with a quotation from Austen's *Mansfield Park*, on the 'dead silence' surrounding the economic prosperity gained through slave trading; the report then goes on to state that this silence was countered most obviously and with most impact by museological display: it was 'confronted by a new permanent exhibit at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. It showed a Jane Austen-like figure sipping tea with a sugar bowl on the table beside her. From beneath the floor at her feet a manacled black arm reached out as if from the hold of a slave ship, and as if to show the source of her comfort and wealth' (Parekh, 2000, p. 159). The exhibit was not favourably received, though it did elicit response and debate in the form of 'bitter criticism from sections of the media' (Parekh, 2000, p. 159). The power of museological display to shock, stimulate and encourage debate has made it an ideal medium through which to explore the previously

neglected history of the British slave trade. Almost a third of the events listed on the official government Calendar of Events for marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade were exhibitions, illustrating the importance with which official institutions view the work of museums.

The Parekh report recommends that

‘the whole mainstream canon needs to be reinterpreted. Just as individuals, families and groups turn the random incidents of their lives into coherent narratives, so a nation creates – and continually re-creates – its national story. The arts are a critical element in this process. Like personal memory, social memory is inherently selective, and by its nature seeks and imposes patterns... Events are highlighted or denied, placed centre-stage or left in the background’ (2000, p. 162).

Maurice Halbwachs’ *The Collective Memory* argues against the selective preservation or omission of events from collective memory; he claims that ‘the memory of a society extends as far as the memory of the groups composing it. Neither ill will nor indifference causes it to forget so many past events and personages. Instead, the groups keeping these remembrances fade away’ (1980, p. 142). This assertion is entirely questionable; the forgetting of major aspects of a nation’s history which elicit only feelings of guilt or shame, whilst remembering those which are invested with a sense of national pride, is more than merely coincidental. The Parekh report also describes this forgetting as ‘Britain’s selective amnesia about its former empire’ (2000, p. 163). This ‘amnesia’ about the history of slavery does not constitute a gap in the collective memory of the British, however; instead it has been supplanted with what Rothberg describes as a ‘screen memory’. Rothberg argues that a screen memory ‘stands in or substitutes for a more disturbing or painful memory that it displaces from consciousness’ (2009, p. 13). Though Rothberg speaks about screen memory as a personal rather than collective remembrance, it seems entirely appropriate as a description of the way that the memory of the abolition campaign has supplanted the memory of slavery itself, and the way that this history of abolition has become stylised and idealised, neglecting many crucial aspects. Indeed Marcus Wood argues that the British memory of slavery is ‘not an innocent thing, and the 1807 abolition moment must in part be remembered as a device cleverly constructed to police a particularly ghastly part of our national memory’ (2007, p. 205).

Wood's *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* provides us with relatively recent examples of the way that the memory of slavery is not only remembered but considered culturally significant today by some members of British society, while an attempt to condemn it is resolutely challenged in legal terms by others. After the publication of the McPherson report into Stephen Lawrence's murder, there was a rise in debate around race and racism; with the Metropolitan police force denounced as 'institutionally racist', protracted discussions of race relations sought to find solutions to the lack of social cohesion in modern Britain, leading eventually to the publication of the Parekh report. However, Wood takes interest in a statement made by Stephen Lawrence's mother in 1999: 'Doreen Lawrence stated: 'my son was stabbed and left to bleed to death on the night of 22 April 1993 while Police officers looked on. They treated the affair as a gang war and from that moment on acted in a manner that can only be described as white masters during slavery'' (2002, p. 19). This connection between the late-eighteenth/early nineteenth-century slave trade and a murder in late twentieth-century London is bold and significant in displaying how some British subjects experience the legacy of the otherwise 'silent' history. Wood argues that the divide identified by Lawrence between the way that black and white victims of crime are treated 'evolves directly out of the social and economic dynamics that operated within, and in her view have remained the legacy of, the Atlantic slave systems. Black people, black bodies, had no legal status within the codes that authorised slavery... [they] were not protected by the law' (2002, p. 19). Wood seeks to buttress Lawrence's claim, arguing that 'one major aspect of the traumatic inheritance of slavery lies in the long-term damage which the systematic repression of the memory of slavery has effected in white institutions, and exerted on white creativity, in Europe and the Americas' (2002, p. 20). It is the 'misremembering' of slavery which Wood sees as the root cause of many of modern Britain's problems with racism and race relations. That this history has not been remembered, but rather 'disguised in the most extraordinarily elaborate, and effective ways' (Wood, 2002, p. 20) is an issue which cultural institutions have sought in recent years to counter. Whilst museums and other institutions have been seeking to effect these changes, however, Wood cites an example of an official British response to resurrecting slave trade memory; a statement drawn up by a group of African nations in advance of a UN conference on racism, seeking assent from the international community, was rejected and challenged on legal grounds by the British officials in attendance. The statement read that "The slave trade is a unique tragedy in the history of humanity, particularly against Africans – a crime against humanity which is unparalleled, not only in its abhorrent barbaric feature but also in terms of its enormous magnitude, its institutionalised nature, its trans-

national dimensions and especially its negation of the essence of the human nature of the victims' (2002, p. 20). Wood explains that the British officials sought to argue against this statement because of the terminology used, specifically the word 'crime': 'In the language of English officialdom: 'We are not trying to devalue what happened. No one is doubting the barbarism of the slave trade. But the legal analysis is that you can't apply it retrospectively and it must be tested against the legal standards of the time. Customary international law at the time did not oppose slavery.' (2002, p. 20). The refusal to identify the slave trade as a 'crime' is indicative of both modern Britain's desire to obfuscate the realities of the trade in place of prolonged celebration of being the first European nation to abolish it, as well as of a very real fear of making any gesture towards apology, acceptance or blame which could result in the issue of reparations being raised.

Reparations, of course, constitute an argument which is ever at the margins of slave trade history; though this is a more prominent concern in the US, there remains anxiety around the potential for this to become a point of discussion between Britain and her former slave-trading colonies. Whilst this chapter focuses on the significance of the bicentenary of abolition for British national identity, it is important to remember that 2007 also represented a major anniversary for those living on the Caribbean islands on which the British slave trade had been built. Preparation for the commemorations of 1807 required a different set of questions to be asked about how to frame the event. In terms of attitudes in Jamaica, Annie Paul posits that the pertinent issues revolved around how the descendants of the enslaved would want to remember the abolition of the trade which had kidnapped and transported their ancestors into a life of slavery:

'would they wish to remember the degradations and exploitation of their fore-parents or would they prefer to bury such inconvenient, painful history as deeply as possible? Wouldn't digging up such traumatic memories be detrimental to the pursuit of peace and prosperity today? On the other hand, didn't such wilful amnesia hint at unhealed and fragile psyches on the part of the latter-day population of this ex-slave society?' (2009, p. 170).

A complex and many-faceted situation, the debate around Jamaican commemoration of 1807 was also, like Britain's, tethered to notions of national identity, with concerns about remembering troubling aspects of history. Whilst the Jamaican president PJ Patterson had hoped that the commemoration would 'force us to correct this regretful gap in our knowledge, that it will highlight both the consequences created by the slave trade and slavery as well as its effect on the interactions, past and present, between the peoples of

Europe, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean' (Paul, 2009, p. 170), opinion at the local level seems to have been more sceptical. Debate began to arise after the St Elizabeth Parish Council rejected proposals to arrange commemorative activities. Some council members were quoted in the local newspaper as arguing that 'talking about the slave trade and slavery is just reminding ourselves that whites had domination over us. We need to leave slavery behind and forget it. All I want to know is how to develop this country' (Paul, 2009, p. 171). This sentiment could be considered a powerful attempt at a revisionist attitude towards history, almost a re-appropriation of Jamaica's own history, choosing to forget or obscure enslavement as a way of breaking the connection to historic issues of racial hierarchy in terms of Jamaican economy and society. However, this historic amnesia obviously means that issues of national trauma are thereby left unaddressed and therefore the 'fragile psyches' which Paul notes are unlikely to be healed and will be passed on to subsequent generations. Andrew Holness, a member of the Bicentenary Planning Committee in Jamaica, described in a newspaper article how abolition was not historically recognised on the island as an event with major significance for the formation of modern Jamaica; instead, he said, 'we commemorate the end of the colonial period with Independence celebrations, and the end of slavery with Emancipation celebrations' (Paul, 2009, p. 172).

The issue of whether the passage of the Abolition Act is worthy itself of commemoration in comparison with that of Emancipation is a regularly recurring one. Indeed this would seem especially pertinent in the Caribbean; whereas African nations should theoretically have experienced fewer people being kidnapped and enslaved after 1807 (though, of course, other nations still legally continued their own slave trades, and even the trade to the British continued illegally, albeit on a smaller scale), the passage of the Abolition Act had very little impact on the lives of those already enslaved on British plantations, other than seeing the numbers of enslaved gradually decrease over the years as people died and were not replaced.

However, Holness argued that the bicentenary gave Jamaica 'the opportunity to rebalance the portrayal of our history and accord our ancestors the respect and attention they deserve for securing their own freedom' (Paul, 2009, p. 172). This desire to recognise slave resistance has been notable in the commemorations and monuments erected by former colonies in the Caribbean, several examples of which are discussed below. Holness further claims that 'we have mostly tried to forget about slavery and the slave trade while we secretly retain the inferiorities which are a part of the slave mentality' (Paul, 2009, p. 172).

In seeking out stories and characters of slave resistance to champion, then, national remembrance is reconstructed along the lines of rebellion against exploitation and injustice. In opposition to Jamaica's divorcing of the histories of enslavement and independence, in Antigua a monument was erected on the 12th anniversary of national independence in 1993 to commemorate Prince Klaas, a slave who led a revolt on the island in 1736 (Brown, 2002, p. 104). Whilst the selection of Klaas as a figure of resistance does not seem incongruous (he mobilised a large number of people in an organised attempt to regain their liberty), his figure and the descriptive panels accompanying the monument are less clear. Klaas is sculpted blowing on a conch shell, a call to the other slaves making up his resistance party. Yet his dress is of a distinctly European style, which it seems unlikely he would have adopted given his slave status. Perhaps the intention here is to reimagine Klaas along physically European lines in an attempt to assert his power; presenting him in slave attire could be considered to undermine his power by reaffirming his status as chattel. However, the adoption of European dress complicates notions of empowerment; the attempt to celebrate a noted Antiguan figure who rebelled against European overseers is confused by the need to dress him in European clothes in order to assert this power.

The panel text describes how Klaas came to Antigua from the Gold Coast as a 10 year old slave in 1701, but 'simply could not accept the role of a slave' or the physical punishments he was forced to endure 'because his proud and unbending spirit would not submit to the white man' (Brown, 2002, p. 104). The panels also describe how after 35 years in Antigua he could 'pass for a creole but he preferred to be known as an African' (Brown, 2002, p. 104). As a monument to those who endured enslavement in Antigua, the selection of a resistance figure is entirely appropriate; however in terms of contributing to national identity and notions of national pride in resistance, this is complicated by Klaas' insistence on maintaining a distinctly 'African' nationality. The need for a recognisable figure to demonstrate Antigua's history of resistance clearly took precedence here over notions of nationality.

The personification of resistance has also been a significant component in the remembrance of slavery and the slave trade for other Caribbean nations. A monument was erected in Barbados in 1985 to mark the 150th anniversary of emancipation, consisting of a statue of a 'male slave, his broken chains held aloft in a stance that portrays dynamism and strength' (Brown, 2002, p. 106). Whilst the stance itself is assertive and dominant, the featuring of shackles (admittedly broken) could serve to dampen the suggestion of power, by attesting to the very physical nature of the constraints under which slavery operated;

drawing attention to the fact that the figure has been constrained by them, the viewer is indirectly invited to consider the person who secured the chains in place. The very presence of the chains is itself somewhat incongruous, given that they were employed more on middle passage journeys or other cross-country journeys than for day-to-day life on plantations, where their restraint would have rendered the wearer too restricted to reach optimal levels of productivity. Wood's notion of torture and bondage implements constituting 'compromised' artefacts is also worth remembering here; if these artefacts are avoided by British commemorators so as to prevent the opportunity for 'sodomasochistic fantasy, and sentimental self-identification' (2007, p. 203), then do they really have any place in the monument of a nation previously enslaved, a monument whose stance seems to overtly be attempting to demonstrate power? Perhaps the chains are intended merely as a visual marker of enslavement itself, simply to immediately make the viewer aware of the context of the monument; however it is difficult to avoid feeling that the chains undermine the power of the figure.

The main debate surrounding Barbados' statue, however, was regarding the identity of the rebellious figure: its 'generic identity failed to offer a vision of the past in which the slaves themselves were decisive actors in their own emancipation' (Brown, 2002, p. 107). Popular opinion preferred to name the figure as Bussa, the leader of a slave revolt in 1816, despite the fact that the panel of the monument includes an extract from the 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act (Brown, 2002, p. 107), and therefore refers explicitly to an event some seventeen years later. Yet the identification of Bussa continues, partly, argues Brown, because of the lack of monuments to black figures to be found in Barbados; it was therefore important that the statue be identified 'as an African General to counter the statue of a European Admiral (Nelson) in the capital's centre' (2002, p. 107). Karl Watson also notes the lack of monumental heritage in Barbados, and believes this 'may be in part responsible for the psychological distance most Barbadians seem to place between themselves and the issue of the abolition of the slave trade' (2009, p. 186). The lack of monumental heritage, and lack of concern regarding this, is somewhat exemplified by the decision in 1985 to demolish the building where the Emancipation Act was read aloud to the Barbadian population, in order to make way for a car park (Watson, 2009, p. 187).

Whilst the criticism here of the monuments to both Prince Klaas and Bussa highlights the ways in which they do not fulfil in totality the remit of memorialising slavery and the slave trade in post-emancipation societies, it is worth noting that they have made significant progress towards recognising this history. They also provide a powerful counter-narrative

to the (limited) monuments to the history of the slave trade which exist in Britain, where very few 'commemorate the victims of the transatlantic slave trade, or, for that matter, the thousands of white seamen who died as a result of their involvement in the trade', instead focusing on memorialising figures of the abolition campaign in statue form (Oldfield, 2007, p. 56). As Brown argues, 'representing blacks to themselves, their sculptures are a striking contrast to those of the nineteenth century where blacks were either caricatured or Europeanized' (2002, p. 110), and it is this self-representation which is important for Caribbean societies shaping their own memorialisation of slavery.

Angus Calder's appropriation of Barthes' notion of 'myth' in terms of the representational strategies of remembrance of the Blitz as an event that 'has assumed a 'traditional' character, involves heroes, suggests the victory of a good God over satanic evil, and has been used to explain a fact: the defeat of Nazism' (2004, p. 2), is directly applicable to the story of abolition, and the defeat of the slave trade in British parliament. Wood has also adopted the term into his dialogue on the remembrance and representation of slavery, arguing that the 'myth of the abolition moment is motivated by the desire to erase and re-inscribe.... a constant pressure for sin, guilt and evil to vanish, in order that they might be instantly overwritten by British pathos, avuncular concern and moral enlightenment' (2007, p. 205).

The cultural significance of museums and the privileging of the stories they tell make exhibitions an ideal subject for an analysis of the way that our heritage has passed into our collective memory. In her article describing exhibitions commemorating the Blitz in the 1990s, Lucy Noakes writes that 'museums provide one of the principal means by which people can gain access to the past and a special historic legitimacy is conferred upon events and objects when they are included in museums' (1997, p. 93). Museum exhibitions become an important way of examining the way that we are encouraged to view our collective history and heritage. Noakes' work on the Blitz exhibitions is very useful in applying to exhibitions around slavery and abolition; both constituting thematic types of exhibition, rather than those based around historical era. This affects the way that the exhibitions are experienced; because 'these themed museum 'experiences' or heritage displays begin with the choice of a period, event or lifestyle as particularly significant and worthy of commemoration rather than beginning with the discovery or acquisition of artefacts, they have the ability to tell us more about current preoccupations with the past than do the older, object-reliant, forms of museum display. Rather than *preserving* the past, they *create* it' (Noakes, 1997, p. 94). It is more difficult for an audience to question

the interpretation of the museum curator if that interpretation is not immediately visible; artefact displays constructed when a series of physical objects have been discovered are presented and described because their recent discovery is considered important for public consumption, while exhibitions based on themes or time periods are less easy to understand in these terms.

In these exhibitions it is important to view the way that the modern curator has presented the society in existence around the time of the thematic display. As Noakes points out, the Blitz is an interesting case as it has been seized on to 'present a unified picture of Britain at war; a time when 'we' were all soldiers in the front line', when Britain 'overcame its internal divisions and aligned itself behind the values of 'freedom', 'democracy' and the 'rights of the individual'' (1997, p. 90). Diana Paton has explored whether the same issues are at play with the representation of a British public brought together behind the abolition cause. She describes how there was 'discontent with taxes, high prices and the impressment of young men to fight... desperate poverty in the countryside', which are aspects of eighteenth-century society rarely explored in museum displays describing the abolition period. However, Paton argues that even at the time of the campaign, it was seized on by the government as an attempt to 'unify the nation (and particularly the middle-class nation) against the French', leading to such an association of 'opposition to the slave trade with British patriotism and national pride that even those who had previously opposed abolition had to accept it' (2009, p. 282). The image of unity behind the cause, so championed by commemorators, is, then, exposed as not necessarily organic and philanthropic; instead serving the political agenda of a government seeking to unify the nation. However it is worth questioning whether a similar attempt at presenting an image of public unity was at play in constructing the commemorations in 2007 of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, this time constructed around a multicultural agenda, in order to suggest that Britons' concerns with unifying against a social injustice saw previously divisive factors such as class and race overcome or at least suspended in the interests of overcoming the inhumanity of the slave trade. Diana Paton argues in this respect that a 2006 DCMS publication claimed 'that abolitionists 'came from all walks of life' and compared the movement to the anti-apartheid and Make Poverty History campaigns, while Gordon Brown, who became prime minister in June 2007, made several speeches that referred to the grass-roots nature of the abolition campaign as part of a wider discussion of contemporary campaigns against debt' (2009, p. 279).

Historians Diana Paton and Jane Webster have written how 'substantial funding' was set aside by the government in order to commemorate the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. They explain that the Heritage Lottery Fund, DCMS and DES provided money for 'local authorities, museums, arts organisations and community groups to organise events, community programmes and exhibitions', and that the presence of 'Queen Elizabeth II and the Prime Minister at a commemorative service at Westminster Abbey was perhaps the pinnacle of state endorsement of the commemoration' (2009, p. 162). This state endorsement was also evident within the media's engagement, with the publicly funded BBC scheduling its own 'Abolition Season'. The 1807 Commemorated report, produced by the University of York, has argued that the BBC's programming constituted 'a significant tool in creating and maintaining the memory of abolition and enslavement in Britain. The very existence of a specific Abolition Season already defines the anniversary as of national importance' (Wilson, 2008). With such a large-scale engagement with the subject of slavery and its abolition by British media and cultural institutions, one could expect to see a well-researched and well-defined discussion of this history and its legacies in modern Britain, presented with sensitivity and shaped to encourage discussion. However, Katherine Prior argues that although, ideally, 'slavery would not register as a difficult subject for our museums or indeed any other cultural or educational institution... that presupposed a considerable advance in how we view our past' (2007, p. 201). Prior claims that although the commemorative events and activities of 2007 are a step in the right direction, in reality they illustrate just how far there is to go until 'the transatlantic slave trade becomes a standard chapter in the public's reading of British history' (2007, p. 201). After all, prior to 2007 the nation's highest profile museum, London's British Museum, did not feature any exhibits detailing or referring to this history.

In the BBC's Radio 3 programme *Road to Abolition*, enslavement is likened to the 'conditions suffered by the industrial working-class in Britain. Naval press-gangs are also used as a comparison, further diminishing the historical specificity of the Atlantic slave trade' (1807 Commemorated, 2008). Whilst Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* draws our attention to the need to refrain from being dismissive of comparisons of these sort as necessarily unhelpful/insensitive, it is nonetheless difficult for a modern reader not to balk at these suggestions; after all, claims such as these formed the basis for a vast amount of pro-slavery dialogue arguing that transatlantic slavery was an almost humanitarian exercise. However, this argument itself highlights a significant question for the construction of the memory of slavery: should everything written and produced by the pro-slavery lobby regarding the slave trade be discounted as false or compromised because the

pro-slavery lobby was ultimately defeated by the passage of the Slave Trade Act? Many early pro-slavery texts (or at least those claiming neutrality) are still accepted in the canon of slavery production, because there was little to no output from any organised anti-slavery writers or artists until well into the mid-eighteenth century. These texts and images are essential in understanding the slave experience, albeit presented from the view of the enslavers. Nonetheless, with any texts produced after the rise of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, we find that pro-slavery texts were publicly criticised in speeches, poems and texts and their ideology so discredited that their claims were automatically discounted as biased and falsified. Therefore these have tended to fall into obscurity when it comes to constructing the memory of slavery, whilst those of abolitionists tend to be unquestioningly accepted.

The debate around whether abolition artefacts should be automatically considered 'compromised' continues, with Wood questioning whether the 'torture implements, and restraints, used on slave bodies, or paintings and prints showing slave abuse, [should] be put on display at all – do not these things simply invite sadomasochistic fantasy, and sentimental self-identification?' (2007, p. 203). This constitutes a vital question for museological display; there exists a clear conflict between the necessity of representing the horrors of the slave trade to an uninformed audience, and the desire to avoid falling into the representational hazard which Wood describes. The violence inflicted on slaves was a very public thing. Slave testimonies and abolitionist tracts recounted such incidents in great detail, whilst images of violence were reproduced regularly. Wood's concern is not with hiding or seeking to obscure this violence, but with whether it is appropriate to give such objects prominence in display. Whilst instruments of torture and restraint certainly make an impact on viewers, their reaction is likely to be one of sympathy for the victim, rather than a critical consideration of the rise and regulation of the industry which made such practice legal. He further asks whether these exhibits, produced by white artists or gathered by white propagandists, 'can ever truly speak for the experience of the slave, rather than for a free-white fantasy of that experience?' (2007, p. 203). The pertinent issue which Wood seeks to dissect is that the representation of the British slave trade which existed (here Wood was writing before the commemorative programme of 2007) was 'not about black slave lives and black slave suffering, but about white fantasies of black lives and suffering' (2002, p. 21). However, if curators were to remove all items from their displays which showed slave suffering, or abuse, or which were created by white artists/campaigners to depict slavery, what would remain for the exhibition? The accounts of slaves and former slaves would qualify for inclusion, along with perhaps portrait

photographs, items exhibiting slave culture on plantations, and factual information relating to slave ships (tonnage, berth, etc). Aside from these items, however, the only other artefacts which currently feature in slavery exhibitions which would not have been ruled out with Wood's criteria would be those items associated with slave-plantation exports back in Britain: sugar bowls and tongs, coffee pots and paraphernalia. These artefacts would be singularly unacceptable in constructing the social memory of slavery, failing as they would to display all of the facts and experiences of those suffering under the system. This issue of the complexity regarding which artefacts are used to represent suffering has been raised by James E Young in his work on Holocaust museums. Rather than torture implements, Young is concerned with the masses of personal belongings left behind by those who were killed in concentration camps, and how these have come to represent the dead; he argues that 'by themselves, these remnants rise in a macabre dance of memorial ghosts. Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction' (1993, p. 132). Young argues that we should recognise the tragedy of this circumstance; that these 'remnants' have come to be immediately recognisable as representing the lives of those killed; 'that a murdered people remains known in Holocaust museums anywhere by their scattered belongings, and not by their spiritual works, that their lives should be recalled primarily through the images of their death, may be the ultimate travesty' (1993, p. 133). Similarly, remembering the enslaved by the instruments of their bondage and torture rather than their personal experiences should be considered the same 'travesty'. Considering, as this chapter does, the displays of museums as an integral part of the accepted collective memory of this part of British history, the individual artefacts which are exhibited are lent a weighty significance, and their inclusion in or exclusion from exhibitions becomes more meaningful.

John Beech's article on how the presentation of slavery has altered in recent years provides an insight into how museums approached the subject before the impending 2007 commemoration. Beech argues that before 2007, British museums seemed most concerned with presenting slavery solely as the Middle Passage; this presentation 'effectively defines slavery as essentially the slave trade, and thus locates it firmly in the past, something temporally distant which has only limited implications for present-day Britain' (Beech, p. 2). He also argues that this presentation posits slavery as a peculiarly maritime activity, and that this is inappropriate in that 'it is hard to imagine that any German recognition of the Holocaust would be placed in a railway museum simply on the basis that trains were used to transport victims to the concentration camps' (Beech, p. 2).

The 'maritimization' of the history of the slave trade and slavery began at the moment of abolitionist representation. The middle passage constituted an opportunity to present a two-pronged attack on the slave trade; both on the inhumane conditions suffered by the captive Africans, and the brutal treatment of British sailors. The Middle Passage was an extremely traumatic and defining experience for the enslaved - Emma Christopher has argued that this journey 'made' people into slaves; they had to be 'rendered 'socially dead'. For this to occur they needed not only to be separated from all that they knew, but also to be stripped of their power and personal honour' (2006, p. 167).

The horrendous effect of the middle passage on those who endured it, and those who lost their lives to it, make it an essential part of the slave trade for representation. However, the standing-in of the middle passage to represent the entirety of the slave trade itself is inappropriate, especially given the fact that only first-generation enslaved Africans experienced it, while the experience of those born into slavery on plantations was vastly different. The middle passage was extensively described in literature of the abolition period, most famously in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, but also in the accounts of surgeons like Alexander Falconbridge, sailors and captains, and the ghost-written slave narratives published by abolitionists. However, modern postcolonial literature has tended to avoid describing this aspect of slave experience, with the most successful novels (Morrison's *Beloved*, Levy's *Long Song*, among others) instead focusing on the lives of those born into plantation slavery. In constructing characters born into enslavement, these authors are able to draw more critical attention to the lived, day-to-day experience of slavery for those who had never known any other way of life. The trauma of enslavement is emphasised in the way that protagonists lack a sense of cultural heritage, and endure unrelenting hardship and violence without the ability to remember a time when life was different, and therefore lack the ability to imagine a return to such a life. This inclination to move away from representations of slave ship journeys could also be considered a response to the argument that the experience is simply not representable, though this has not been followed by museum curators, with many exhibitions featuring attempts to recreate the middle passage. Oldfield argues that slave ship reconstructions, 'however tastefully they are presented, run the risk of trivialising the transatlantic slave trade, not least by suggesting that by walking through and around them we can find out 'what it was really like'. The presumption here is that we can 'know' the past by experiencing or re-experiencing it' (Oldfield, 2007, p. 125). The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool features a darkened room which attempts to recreate the disorienting nature of the middle passage. The sounds of water lapping against the side of a ship are overlapped with the

sound of people moaning and wood creaking, along with large TV screens showing close-up images of a black actor's face and shackled body, moving in and out of frame, in and out of darkness. The disorienting nature of the exhibit is effective in demonstrating the confusing nature of being trapped in a dark, noisy area, with no visual reference points. However, the fact that the audience is standing (or sitting) comfortably in a large area, totally unrestricted in terms of space and movement, means their 'connection' to the experience can only ever be a parody of it, quickly ended in favour of moving on to other exhibits.

The 'maritimization' which Beech describes has been very wide-scale in museum production and indeed in commemoration, possibly partly due to the prominence of the *Description of a Slave Ship* both during the abolition campaign and in the commemorative activities of 2007. Jane Webster has written that there 'can be no such thing as an uncompromised abolitionist artefact' (2009, p. 314), a point perhaps illustrated by the amount of critical attention garnered on the *Description*. The 1807 Commemorated report notes that there was even a physical element to the resurrection of the *Description*, with several museums 'asking large numbers of individuals, usually children, to recreate the image by laying down alongside each other' (University of York, p. 2). This re-enactment demonstrates to viewers the lack of space in slave ships and the cramped quarters to which people were confined in a very visible way. What it cannot do, and indeed shows no inclination of attempting, is any engagement with the physical and emotional effects of such conditions. Indeed, as a visual depiction it can only be considered partially representative of the dimensions of a slave ship, lacking as it does any indication of the claustrophobic lack of space above those lying side-by-side, or the lack of light and air occasioned by the closure of the hatches. Moreover, the *Description* itself has long been criticised as a piece of abolition production. Wood effectively summarises the effect of the image, as supporting a 'cultural agenda which dictated that slaves were to be visualised in a manner which emphasised their total passivity and prioritised their status as helpless victims' (2000, p. 19). Further than just presenting the enslaved as victims, the 1807 Commemorated report goes on to claim that the 'renderings of the enslaved in the print, side by side, serves to dehumanise individuals at the very moment when the need to proclaim their humanity is paramount. They are reduced to ciphers, images of pain and cruelty, to be easily understood by the viewer' (University of York, p. 3). Because the image was produced to represent any slaving voyage taken by the ship *Brookes* (which the dimensions of the *Description* were based on), or, by extension (the implication of SEAST's constant reuse of the *Description*), any British slave-trading ship, the images of the enslaved themselves are necessarily anonymous; nameless, faceless, to stand for any

number of different slaves on different journeys, illustrating merely the physical space occupied by a body. In fact the *Description* can in some ways be considered a representation which has been misused from its inception: Webster notes that it constitutes the 'ultimate testimony, drawing on data sought and recorded not by SEAST, but by Parliament, and therefore unimpeachable... a matter of true record, set down in the Sessional Papers of the House' (2009, p. 321). The representation of a slave trading journey on board the *Brookes*, then, which the *Description* represents, can be considered entirely objective, constructed from data recorded by an impartial source. Despite the impartiality of its construction, as Wood glibly notes, 'at one narrative level the image functions as a slave dealer's utopia, and so forces the viewer, albeit ironically, to share their fantasy of slavery with that of an idealized slave captain trying to fill his ship as efficiently as possible' (2007, p. 207). It is this use as signifying a generic slave trading journey, with no historical specificity, which has led to its criticism. This very anonymity, the standing of this image to represent so many other journeys, makes the *Description* a compromised object; conceived to elicit sympathy from audiences to be shocked by conditions on board slave ships, the image itself offers no sense of what those conditions were like for those who endured them. Indeed the conditions themselves are not illustrated at all; instead there is a textual description to the side of the image. The anonymity of the slaves in the image, the failure to represent any differences between people, serves to illustrate very clearly the abolitionists' lack of concern for individual slaves.

Francis Meynell's *Slaves Below Decks* (1845), by comparison, shows both the individuality of different enslaved people, and also the physical constraints inherent from lack of space. The painting shows how slaves were crammed below decks on top of the platforms built especially for slaving voyages to maximise space; some are sitting speaking to each other, some are stretching to the ceiling of the hold, while some sit or lie alone, facing nobody. Meynell was a Naval artist, working with the Royal Africa Squadron to suppress the illegal slave trade after abolition, and the image was painted in 1845, aboard a Portugese/Brazilian vessel, and therefore does not constitute a faithful representation of a ship legally engaged in the British slave trade, but nonetheless shows how an illustrated representation of a slave ship could be capable of conveying many of the same points as the *Description*, whilst also offering a more realistic image of the enslaved themselves. One of the key differences, as noted by Wood, is that 'no white liberating presence is depicted' (2000, p. 25). Instead, the figures 'appear left to fend for themselves in the misery and the gloom, fitting in around bales of cloth and barrels, their status as cargo self-evident, their

powerlessness emphasised by the fact that there is not a chain in sight' (Wood, 2000, p. 25).

Jane Webster has written that museums are 'fully aware that time has not finished with these eighteenth-century artefacts, whose biographies are still being written by contemporary theorists and artists' (2009, p. 314), and yet she notes that their engagement with the *Description* was rather piecemeal. The *Description* itself also contains a body of written text, taking up as much space on the page as the diagrammatical representation of the Brookes. This text offers a written description of conditions on board a slave ship from Alexander Falconbridge's *Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (1788), as well as measurements of the dimensions of the ship. While illiteracy levels in the eighteenth-century meant that the image itself became the key tool in convincing the wider public about the need for abolition, a modern audience would find the textual information gives the image itself more of a story. Webster is dismayed that so few museums engaged with the text at all; 'in some cases, only fragments of the 'Brookes image' were used, rendering even the visual element of the *Description* partial and incomplete. At the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, for example, a fragmentary, much magnified section of the *Brookes* slave deck was employed on a panel introducing the voyage of the Liverpool slaver *Essex*' (Webster, 2009, p. 319).

This use of the *Description* by the ISM to stand for an entirely separate voyage, rather than as an example of the type of propaganda produced by the SEAST, is very much at odds with both the museum's overarching narrative, and Webster's own assertion that 'museums were careful to highlight the fact that abolitionist memorabilia have been revealed to be confused and compromised objects' (2009, p. 314). The artefacts relating to the *Essex* which are exhibited (receipts, inventories, etc) serve to further reinforce the notion of the insignificance of the enslaved people transported on the voyage, by again failing to describe their experience, but viewing the voyage/s through the documents which illustrate how slave traders engaged with them. Wood reminds us that while the *Description* was being passed around politicians by abolitionists, 'the actual ship, the *Brookes*, continued to float across the waters of the Atlantic filled with slave cargoes' (2007, p. 207). A further troubling exhibit in relation to the ISM's engagement (or lack thereof) with the politics surrounding the *Description* is the three-dimensional slave ship it featured: like a scale model of the *Description* brought to life; complete with miniature figures. However, the issue of representation still stands, highlighting the fact that the ISM's engagement with the imagery of the Middle Passage is quite systematic; as with the

Description, the figures of the enslaved are anonymous – although some sit and some lie, their gender is often indeterminate, the size of their loincloth seems quite uniform and they have no distinguishing characteristics. In comparison, the sailors are presented wearing different coloured shirts and trousers from each other, some with beards and some without, some at their work and some engaged in conversation. Given the ISM's emphasis on rebellion, it is interesting to note that none of the slaves in the unsupervised sections below decks appear to be speaking to one another or grouping together.

Angela Landsberg contends that the absolute rupturing of family and social units during slavery led to a sense of 'natal alienation', which meant people formed 'kinships based on shared experiences and memories rather than on biological or familial connection' (2004, p. 87). The postcolonial response to this disjuncture, she argues, is to reconstruct and regain these lost memories through an investigation of genealogy; she posits the fiction of Toni Morrison as particularly concerned with a return to the history of slavery in order to unearth a sense of cultural memory. However, these memories, in their creation rather than inheritance, are necessarily 'prosthetic'; that is, 'they always are alienated' (Landsberg, 2004, p. 90). Whilst this creation of a cultural memory for communities whose ancestors were ultimately unable to bequeath one should be considered important in terms of filling a void, it is also problematic. The very nature of prosthesis makes the memories accessible to all; able to be picked up and taken on whether or not they form part of one's own cultural heritage. The consequence of this is that museums and other cultural modes of production (such as films etc) have brought prosthetic memories into the wider cultural sphere, and opened them up to all audiences; 'with the technologies of mass culture', Landsberg argues, 'it becomes even more possible to take on prosthetic memories across colour lines, in effect, to take on memories that are not part of a person's ancestral inheritance or 'heritage'' (2004, p. 100). However, is this ability to 'create prosthetic memories even in those to whom the memories do not 'properly' belong' (Landsberg, 2004, p. 109) really appropriate? With the rise of 'experiential' museum exhibits, a sense of empathy is more and more accessible; if this then encourages audiences to take on prosthetic memories, does this not serve to belittle the whole process of creating those prosthetic remembrances? Ultimately the descendants of those who were enslaved are denied access, by the descendants of the enslavers, to a cultural memory which is theirs alone due to the very accessibility of prosthesis; thus the white British museum visitor gains a second, prosthetic, heritage, while the Caribbean-descended visitor fails to discover a heritage uniquely theirs, from which those with their own existing heritage are excluded.

The representation by museums in 2007 of the British transatlantic slave trade can be viewed as rather palimpsestic. The various museums and cultural institutions which engaged with the subject all sought to re-inscribe this aspect of British history with a different emphasis. The way that these different emphases and links could be made by differing institutions goes some way to highlight the rather unstable, unfixed and relatively undefined memory of the slave trade which had existed previously. The status of the memory of the slave trade and abolition as a palimpsest, then, can be traced back to its creation by eighteenth-century abolitionists. However, it could be argued that the focus on the subject in 2007 should have led to a more defined image of this history emerging. The failure of the museum sector to produce one overarching story to function as the collective memory of the slave trade is difficult to categorise as just that: a failure. Whilst the memory of other key events in the nation's history (the Blitz, the battle of Waterloo) are relatively fixed, and constituted by key images, the unfixed nature of the memory of slavery allows for broader interpretations of its history. The differing stories and images presented by museums during 2007 are not all successful; some contain images or stories which are at the very least problematic, and at worst incorrect. However, the opportunity for different cultural institutions to approach the story in different ways meant that many new connections to this history, through local areas or prominent figures were revealed, new stories were uncovered, and new voices were heard.

The engagement with the history of slavery by museums in port cities (Liverpool, Portsmouth, Bristol, London Docklands), or in places with a particular connection to prominent figures of the period (Hull's Wilberforce House, Wisbech and Fendland's exhibition on Clarkson) seems likely to be a continuing one; many exhibitions have become permanent and make the connection to the local area very clear, considering the slave trade as a vital (whether positive or negative) aspect of what made these places what they are today. The variation in the permanent exhibitions is reflective of the multiple voices and stories which make up the history of the slave trade, and their variety rather than conforming to a fixed version of this history, is part of their success. Because of the multiplicity of characters and experiences of this history, attempting to construct one secure, master version would be unsuccessful and inadequate. Indeed such an undertaking would merely have served to repeat the reductive representation achieved by the abolition myth. However, there is still a very real lack of engagement with the history of the slave trade by national heritage sites. Until the British Museum finds space for a permanent

gallery on the slave trade and slavery, its place in the national narrative of British history cannot truly be considered sustainable.

Chapter Two: Bicentennial Exhibitions

John Oldfield has written on the changing nature of exhibitions on the slave trade, from the eighteenth century to the present, rightly pointing out that figures such as Wilberforce and especially Clarkson could be considered early proponents of physically exhibiting slavery for a wider audience who had no first-hand knowledge of or access to this part of their nation's heritage (2007, pp. 117-139). However, this chapter is not concerned with the evolution of slavery museums, but with those museums or exhibitions which were constructed specifically (whether temporarily or permanently) for unveiling in 2007, to coincide with the bicentenary of abolition. The awareness of the curating teams that these exhibits would receive high numbers of visitors and garner critical attention ensured their construction was very carefully managed – the end results can therefore be considered an accurate representation of the way cultural institutions currently believe the history of the slave trade is best understood by modern Britons.

Despite the early work of Wilberforce and Clarkson in exhibiting the slave trade, there is little material evidence left of Britain's slaving history, aside from some original manacles and torture implements: a mark of the lack of importance placed on remembering this past. This lack of heritage conservation is perhaps best highlighted through consideration of maritime preservation: 'England has saved its fastest clipper, the *Cutty Sark*, as a tribute to its East India trade, and it has preserved HMS *Victory* as a tribute to Nelson and British naval defeat of Napoleonic France. No slave boats were preserved: they were adapted to other trade and sailed on, and when they wore out they were scrapped. Not one survives to bear silent testimony to the suffering they contained' (Wood, 2000, p. 17). Considering the huge importance the abolition campaign placed on the *Description of a Slave Ship*, and the attention this gained throughout Europe, it is perhaps even more surprising that no slave ships, the physical embodiment of this visual representation, were preserved. Marcus Wood claims that it is important to view all British bicentennial commemoration with 'open, curious and even suspicious eyes' (2007, p. 205), and the analysis of this chapter will seek to explore the representations of slavery and the slave trade constructed for display in 2007 as part of the HLF-funded bicentennial programme, and the ways that these museums engaged with the history of slavery in totality, or restricted its representation to one focused on the myth of abolition. The main focus of this analysis will be the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, the *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum (London) and the *Chasing Freedom* exhibition at the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth, but this will be situated within a dialogue of the

wider museological engagement with the history of slavery. The way that artefacts from the period of slavery and abolition were re-used for bicentennial display will be explored, alongside analysis of the implications of this re-use for the subtext of the exhibitions' narratives. Themes which will be engaged with to further this analysis include rebellion, the use of language, Middle Passage representations, and the way that modern preoccupations with multiculturalism have influenced the stories which museums tell about Britain's slave trade heritage.

Noakes has argued that museums are 'powerful sites of cultural transmission and public education; they are an embodiment of knowledge and power, important hegemonic instruments. The state museum is an important site not only for the exhibition of objects, but also for the exhibition of national beliefs; it is a place where the 'imagined community' of the nation becomes visible' (1997, pp. 90-91). The significance of museums for shaping public memory makes an analysis of exhibitions essential for understanding the way that these have constructed the stories of the slave trade and abolition. An exploration of the panel text used at museums is crucial for furthering this understanding; as Coxall argues, 'language itself is a source of power that contributes to ideological domination. Implicit in this premise is the understanding that language is a site for the negotiation and renegotiation of meanings by readers/visitors' (1997, p. 100). This chapter will therefore engage with the objects displayed, the text used to describe these, and also the overarching narratives of the exhibitions discussed.

Wood has engaged with the issue of 2007's commemoration programme, arguing that it forced 'prolonged confrontation with the difficult and probably un-resolvable question of whether it is possible to represent the memory of the trauma of Atlantic slavery through museological display', and that 'given the lure of a pot of National Lottery funding, just about every institution that put in a bid tried to re-invent itself or refurbish itself for the bicentennial' (2007, p. 151). One of the main reinventions took place in Liverpool. The International Slavery Museum opened in Liverpool at the Albert Dock on 23rd August 2007, marking both Unesco's Slavery Remembrance Day and the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. Occupying a floor of the National Maritime Museum, the International Slavery Museum was divided into three roughly equally-sized galleries: Life in West Africa, Enslavement and the Middle Passage, and Legacy, thus immediately setting out for the visitor the museum's stance on the importance of the first and last galleries in understanding the second. Though the museum opened in 2007, it was not conceived as a

bicentennial exhibition; it is a permanent museum which then moved to a larger building next door in the summer of 2011, with more space over multiple floors.

The museum has grown from the Transatlantic Slavery gallery, which used to occupy the basement level of the National Maritime Museum. The gallery was open for over 10 years before being closed and amalgamated into the new International Slavery Museum, a fact which attests to Liverpool's attempt to come to terms with and explore its slaving history. Indeed Paton and Webster remind us that 'before 1994, when the ground-breaking *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* gallery opened at the Merseyside Maritime Museum, few British museums engaged with slavery at all' (2009, p. 163). The British Museum in London, by comparison, only opened slavery galleries in 2007, which did not become permanent and which were all removed by January 2008. Yet even Liverpool's early attempt to come to terms with its slave trading heritage could be questioned: how symbolic is it that the gallery opened in a basement; easily avoided and placed physically lower than the galleries on maritime history, perhaps this could be seen as an attempt to address this aspect of history without actively promoting it.

The panel text of the museum illustrates its position towards its remembrance from the very beginning; the first panel reads 'The story of transatlantic slavery is a fundamental and tragic human story that must be told and retold, and never be forgotten' (p. 3), sentiments which are no doubt echoed by those commemorating the abolition movement. However, the same panel then reads: 'Africa and its people are central to this story' (p. 3), forging a different path to those cultural institutions which sought to present a few white British political campaigners as the centre points of the history of slavery. An analysis of the panel texts used at the three exhibitions outlined above, and how these engage with and respond to dialogue on 2007 presents an opportunity to examine the ways in which these museums have succeeded or failed in navigating the complexities inherent in such an undertaking.

Expectations were very high for museum exhibitions in 2007; Katherine Prior has suggested that there was a comprehensive list of subjects which museums were expected to include in their exhibitions:

'slavery before the transatlantic slave trade, especially Classical slavery and the Barbary slave-trade; the indentured-servant trade to the Caribbean; religious and political upheaval in Britain in the seventeenth century; the history of Africa before European contact, with an emphasis on the great African empires and the sophistication and multiplicity of the continent's cultures; Continental Europe's

slaving activities in Africa and the Americas; the Red Sea slave-trade; Britain's anti-slaving naval squadron; the history of the African-Caribbean presence in Britain up to and including the present day; contemporary legacies of slavery and European imperialism in Africa; and more modern forms of slavery and human trafficking throughout the world' (2007, p. 202).

This is clearly a very extensive list, one which it would be almost impossible for any museum to achieve in its entirety. Prior herself concedes that there is a 'high probability' that with these expectations, more museums will disappoint than satisfy audiences (2007, p. 202). However, of this list of ten subject matters, I would argue that the ISM engages with at least six; surely a surprising feat for a new museum. The fact that the museum is dedicated in its entirety to slavery admittedly means that it is at a distinct advantage over other non-specific museums which sought to include only a temporary slavery exhibition; however I would argue that the ISM has shown distinct successes in its mandate as a museum dedicated to the history of slavery itself.

In terms of approaching the history of slavery and abolition, Prior argues that 'media coverage of 2007 in the UK has preferred to go down the older path of celebrating Wilberforce and pitying the shackled slave' (2007, p. 203). Whilst this was arguably the case with other museums (the British Museum and Wilberforce House in Hull being obvious examples), I argue that the ISM took great care to avoid this. Wilberforce's name features on only one of the 32 panels of text in the museum, and even then in quite a supporting role: 'Individuals such as William Wilberforce and Liverpool's William Roscoe were active members of anti-slavery societies' (p. 26). By relegating the role of Wilberforce and the story of abolition to an aside, the panel foregrounds the importance of the history of slavery itself, how it came into being and when it ended, rather than focusing on the key British parliamentarians who sought to abolish it.

The 1807 Commemorated report on the BBC's programming comments on how a discussion of slave rebellion in Radio 3 programme *The Road to Abolition* is placed at the end of the programme, the positioning of which 'appears to imply the rebellions of the enslaved stemmed from the actions of abolitionists, a perception the programme does nothing to prevent' (1807 Commemorated, 2008). This represents a key difference to the engagement of the ISM, which builds a picture of slavery around the notion of rebellion. Indeed, rebellion is a key and reoccurring theme of the museum. Rebellion is first mentioned in the text of panel 9, describing life on board a slave ship: 'some preferred death and took their own lives. There were revolts on one in ten slave voyages. Most were

unsuccessful and put down with brutal ferocity' (p. 11). In terms of resistance, the next panel describes an even earlier instance, with the experience of being forcibly marched hundreds of miles across Africa to slave-trading ports: 'Enslaved people took every opportunity to escape. One group of women tracked their husbands for several days before breaking them free' (p. 12). Resistance is presented as a constant theme, with Cubitt describing how 'inside the museum, a key structural feature of the display was a 'timeline wall,' which visually affirmed the essential unity and continuity of black liberation struggles from the days of slavery to the present' (2012, p. 169). Eighteenth-century British abolitionists and pro-slavers were keen to bring the issue of rebellion into their discussions regarding abolition, following the reports of destruction and death wreaked by Saint Domingue's rebelling slaves. The West India lobby, writes Walvin, 'feared the spread of black revolt to the British islands, saw in Haiti an awful illustration of the results of tampering with slavery, while abolitionists tended to view it as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of the evils of slavery itself' (1982, p. 9), tropes easily identified within the writings regarding rebellion by either side following 1790. Whilst abolitionist writers, especially poets, described rebellions as the result of slaves desiring to exact vengeance on their erstwhile captors, pro-slavers managed to again deny slaves any agency even in the descriptions of their most forceful resistance to the institution. In his 1790 polemic *Doubts on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, James Ranby's first allusion to slave resistance is in his argument that abolition would so drastically change the nature of slavery on British plantations (he claimed masters would be compelled to be very careful with the treatment of their slaves as stocks would no longer be replenished by the trade, that this 'indulgence' would be experienced by slaves as a reluctance to use force, which would in turn lead to slaves refusing to work, before finally being compelled by violence to do so) that the situation would be 'so pregnant with discontent and insurrection, that we shall be justly accountable for whatever mischief happens, unless an additional force is sent to prevent it' (1790, p. 118). Ranby's insistence that the responsibility for any rebellions will lie with the British who abolish the trade rather than the slaves who rebel demonstrates his failure to accept that they could have any impact on their own lives. The booklet accompanying the *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition at the V&A made explicit reference to rebellion in a way which belies the seriousness of the subject and thus attempts to normalise the practice: following the description of an eighteenth-century sugar box, the text states 'sugar was produced in such terrible conditions that the slaves rebelled' (V&A Museum, 2007, p. 9). Rebellion here is presented as a natural and causal consequence of the brutality of slavery, in a way which has no place for the shock or

outrage of eighteenth-century English society. Indeed, Michael White has argued that very little of the exhibition 'conformed to the traditional iconography of the slave trade, such as images of shackles, brutality or even the Middle Passage. It carefully avoided the pitfalls of aestheticizing white violence against black people' (White). Certainly, in an exhibition dedicated to art and visual culture of slavery, the absence of Blake's 1796 *A Negro hung alive by the ribs to a gallows, from Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (reproduced with regularity during 2007) is notable.

Resistance and rebellion are raised again during the description of 'seasoning' taking place on plantations, with the ISM's panel text reading 'some took their own lives. Some ran away and joined communities of 'maroons' or runaways' (p. 18). Similarly, the text on the panel describing plantation life explains that 'slaves fought against their oppressors in numerous ways. There were uprisings and rebellions as well as less obvious methods of resistance. Slaves stole from their owners, damaged machinery, worked slowly and pretended to be sick' (p. 22). Whilst this text clearly attempts to posit the rebellions as constant and forceful, the use of the term 'owners' is problematic in terms of producing a revisionist narrative of the story of transatlantic slavery. Using this term seems to acknowledge and almost legitimise the claims of slave traders who considered themselves as 'owners'. Prior has acknowledged the many dangers of language in slavery exhibitions, noting that 'when an adviser rightly sounds a warning about the all-subsuming nature of the label 'slave' or the political perspective inherent in the term 'runaway', this can, in a nervous museum environment, turn into a dictat that the words 'slave' and 'runaway' must never be used' (2007, p. 206). Helen Coxall provides a brief analysis of the problem with using the term 'slave' too freely; though it is 'clearly used as a shorthand, it unfortunately robs the Africans of their identity. This word gives no clue as to the sex, age, nationality, status or even humanity of the people being named' (1997, p. 112). The term 'slave' as a naming device is insufficient, Coxall argues, because 'the first Africans who were enslaved were not born in captivity, and when they became slaves this state was imposed on them. Calling them *slaves* from before they were captured and repeatedly thereafter unconsciously perpetuates the common Eurocentric terminology that is taken for granted... others would make a resistant reading and see it as a label which denies the people's humanity' (1997, p. 112). Whilst this is a complicated issue in a museum whose panels are describing the very practice of slavery, ISM does show some sensitivity to the issue. In the earlier panels, the text uses the terms 'Africans' or 'enslaved Africans' to describe those sold into slavery, in a deliberate attempt, it would seem, to define these people by their nationality rather than the condition of slavery forced upon them. However, once the

panels start describing life on plantations, there is a switch from these terms to the use of 'slave'. This does fit with a wider discourse on slavery, with Emma Christopher arguing that it was the experience of the Middle Passage which 'turned people into' slaves; mentally as well as physically.

The issue of language is pertinent when it comes to the panel text accompanying museum exhibits, and potentially sensitive and politicised. Helen Coxall emphasises that 'the choice and combination of words is crucial to the preferred meaning of the text', leading writers to question whether they are 'unconsciously perpetuating any stereotypes or myths through their choice of language' (1991, p. 93). She goes on to claim that museums are 'generally regarded by the public as centres of excellence and objective learning, their collections being accepted as assemblages of authentic objects', meaning that museums themselves have 'acquired a status of 'myth''; their exhibits therefore 'imbued with a received aura of unquestioned truth' (1991, p. 93).

Some curators were uncomfortable using the term 'slave' on their panel texts, believing that it too heavily indicated the position forced onto people rather than saying anything about who they were, instead preferring simply 'African'. This is in itself slightly problematic in terms of the diasporic nature of Caribbean slavery; the children born to Africans on the plantations had never visited their ancestral homeland, and never would (a fact which is vital in terms of the construction of identity and social memory) – once they had children, this link to Africa was further loosened, further still by any children born of rape by overseers/plantation owners. Thus the formation of a more distinctly 'Caribbean' rather than 'African' nationality means that the term 'African' describing those enslaved on plantations is not really appropriate. Whilst the intention is admirable, the reality seems that 'enslaved' is the most useful uniform descriptor for the people discussed. Additionally, if descriptive terms such as 'slave' or 'enslaved' are avoided specifically because of the fact that they are terms which show the situation enforced onto people rather than anything about their own identity, then we lose part of the point of discussing and remembering these people. It is the very fact of their enslavement; that they were subject to a brutal and eventually criminalised regime and system, which makes the discussion and understanding of this system and state of being so essential to understand. To replace the title 'slave' with one denoting nationality almost serves to trivialise the experience of enslavement.

The issue of compromised objects discussed in the previous chapter was approached in a novel way by the Victoria & Albert museum in London. Its temporary exhibition for the bicentennial, *Uncomfortable Truths: the Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design* saw items from the museum's permanent collection highlighted, with new panel texts placed alongside the old to describe the significance of the artefact in terms of the slave trade and its legacy, in a way which had been missing from the previous panel text. The exhibition constituted 5 'trails', each picking its way through a different part of the museum's existing collection: 'Consuming the Black Atlantic', 'Black Servants in British Homes', 'Britain & the West Indies', 'Representing Slavery & Abolitionism', and 'Gold & Slaves: Transnational Trade Links'. The exhibits from the permanent collection numbered only 25, but if 'the museum is poor in terms of objects that obviously represent slavery, this modest display demonstrated how easily one might connect thousands of its objects to the economics of the slave trade' (White). Although one of these objects was a medallion featuring the Wedgewood seal, the rest of the artefacts featured slaves/ex-slaves only in portraits, or as background figures in other images. In fact, slaves were visually quite absent from the exhibition; an attempt to mirror the absence of the physical slave presence from Britain during the slave trade. One of the first items in the exhibition was a sugar box, whose original panel text focused on its design features, and method of construction. The *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition saw the sugar box feature new text, describing the source of the sugar the box was designed to hold. The text also read that 'two thirds of all slaves captured in the 18th century were set to work on sugar plantations. Conditions were especially harsh, with dangerous machinery and several harvests a year, but slave labour, plus improved production and processing methods, enabled traders to reduce their costs' (V&A Museum, 2007, p. 3). This is one of the few panels which makes reference to both the physical danger of sugar production for the enslaved, and also the economic benefits of it for slave traders and plantation owners. Whilst most panels are quick to outline the inhumanity of slave traders, and some examine the justifications they used for the trade, few go as far as to specify the reasoning behind their participation in it, and therefore some of the sense of financial greed as motivating factor can be lost. A further exhibit, a silver coffee pot, appended to its original panel text describing its origins at a large London silversmiths, a description of the rise of 'coffee houses' in seventeenth and eighteenth century London, explaining that they 'assumed a central position in the social, political and economic life of Britain. Apart from being places to meet friends, exchange news and read newspapers, they were important in the transatlantic trade. Merchants, bankers, insurers and ship owners would gather in the coffee house and sometimes use them as a venue for

slave auctions. The 'hue-and-cry' advertisements that publicised runaway slaves circulated in the coffee houses' (V&A Museum, 2007, p. 4) This strategy is highly effective in drawing attention to the way that the slave trade influenced British culture and consumerism. It also highlights the way that this history has been ignored and neglected, although everyday items are infused with it.

The V&A's inclusion of Plate II from Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* illustrates a desire to access the wider, and older debate about the black figure in eighteenth and nineteenth century art. David Dabydeen's *Hogarth's Blacks* (1987) sought to open up discussion of the previously overlooked black characters featuring in paintings and engravings, and his work on Hogarth was instrumental, along with Peter Fryer's (1985) *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, in excavating the history of black communities in eighteenth century Britain. The decision by the V&A's curators to include a Hogarth print shows an awareness of the existing debate around resurrecting previously ignored black figures, in the same way in which the exhibition sought to re-inscribe its existing artefacts with their previously ignored connection to the slave trade. The presence of the Wedgwood medallion in the collection somewhat problematizes the message of the exhibition itself, however. Marcus Wood's work on the visual culture of slavery and abolition has much to say on the representation of slaves in abolitionist art, and he sees the Wedgwood seal as a classic example of this type of artefact, which displays 'the black as cultural absentee, the black as a blank page for white guilt to inscribe' (2000, p. 23), and gave (and still gives) white audiences 'exactly what they wanted to see: passive and abused slave bodies hanging in a cultural space that invited white empathic projection' (2007, p. 209). In many ways the Wedgwood seal could be considered more compromised than the *Description of a Slave Ship*, which has also garnered considerable critical attention; while the *Description* has its own representational problems, the Wedgwood seal shows the enslaved not only as passive and subjugated, but as specifically turning to an abolitionist audience (and, by extension, Britons and Britain's law-makers), pleading for his freedom and an acknowledgement of his humanity. The lack of any sense of him being able to seek his own freedom, and the begging stance, set him out as entirely helpless. The new panel text added for the *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition sought to address these issues, arguing that 'it relied on creating an emotional impact. By doing so, it presented the black African as a passive and depersonalised victim requiring the mercy and intervention of the white Briton. While such imagery helped bring about the end of slavery in Britain and her colonies, it also created a legacy of unequal power relations that would endure long after 1807'. The last sentence is very powerful in almost attributing to the representational strategies employed

by abolitionists, the continuing problem of racism in Britain. Few exhibitions made particularly bold statements linking the slave trade and its legacy to multicultural relations in modern Britain; while the ISM included its third gallery (Legacies) as an attempt to situate twentieth century race relations, apartheid and the American civil rights movement as leading directly from the end of the slave trade ('The idea of white supremacy grew out of transatlantic slavery'), this was not a strategy widely adopted in museum production.

While the final note is useful for acknowledging how the artefact is compromised, is its inclusion in the exhibition necessary at all? After all the aim is to highlight the unacknowledged impact which slavery and the slave trade had on art and design; the Wedgwood medallion was not only commissioned by the SEAST, but it featured the image of a slave begging for pity – the connection to and impact of slavery here is palpable. However, Webster points out that, historically at least, this connection to the slave trade has not always been made. She argues that while the *Uncomfortable Truths* panel text made note of the compromised nature of the Wedgwood seal, 'the (much older) labelling inside the display case made no mention of slavery or abolition at all. That disjuncture – and the failure to reconcile it – speaks both of missed opportunities, and of the problems inherent in displaying these cameos' (Webster, 2009, p. 315). The fact that a cameo produced as a propaganda tool for the campaign to abolish the slave trade could sit for many years in a display case with other examples of cameos, and make no reference to the slave trade whatsoever, is symptomatic of just how much ground some museums had to cover in 2007 in order to bring their collections, and the labelling of these, up to date.

The artefact following the Wedgwood seal in the exhibition is equally compromised, if not more so: a beer jug 'shows the ending of the slave trade. It depicts the patriotic image of Britannia 'offering comfort' to a kneeling African slave' (V&A Museum, 2007, p. 10). This image doesn't merely present the enslaved as a passive victim in need of British assistance, but liberty itself arriving only via the hands of the British, like the Wedgwood seal, offering no acknowledgement of slave resistance. However, the panel text accompanying the jug does not, in the same way as the Wedgwood seal, offer any criticism of the imagery.

John Beech's description of the 'maritimization' of the British representation of the slave trade, discussed in the previous chapter, is contentious when considered alongside the *Chasing Freedom: the Royal Navy and the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade* exhibition at the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth. The exhibition was opened in 2007 to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. It is understandable that the museum chose to focus the exhibition on the 'preventive

squadron' of the West Coast of Africa Station, as the history of naval liberation of illegally enslaved Africans fits comfortably within the wider narrative of abolitionist heroes which prevailed in 2007. More practically, the National Museum of the Royal Navy has most ready access to historic naval artefacts and could build a detailed exhibition from these. However, the timing of the exhibition as a commemorative event is not entirely in keeping with the theme of abolition. Though the Navy was involved in policing the African coast following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the squadron was not officially formalised until the West Coast of Africa station was established in 1819, some 12 years after the event which 2007 commemorations were designed to mark. Perhaps a more immediate connection to the history of the slave trade and its abolition would have been for the museum to mark the role or significance of Portsmouth as a place within this history. Equiano and Gronniosaw both mention their visits to Portsmouth within their *Narratives*, and though for Gronniosaw his experiences of the city are less than positive, Equiano is pleased when Portsmouth looms on the horizon because of his love of England. Instead the vast majority of the focus on the exhibition is not on the slave trade itself, or its abolition, but the work of the Navy in policing the African coast. Indeed, more attention is paid to the lives of the sailors of the squadron, than to the experiences of those found on slaving vessels, either before or after their liberation by the Navy. Only one panel makes mention of the fact that all those liberated from slave ships were disembarked at Sierra Leone, a place they did not know or originate from, and the problems of integration and settlement inherent in this situation: an obvious absence in the story of the Navy's role in suppressing the slave trade.

The panel text of the exhibition is also, at times, questionable. The first panel describing the slave trade itself explains that 'by the end of the 19th century British ships had carried more than three million Africans across the Atlantic' (Chasing Freedom panel text, p. A1). The use of the verb 'carried' is very passive and does not emphasise the brutality of the passage or indeed even the lack of consent involved in the transportation. The panel then states that after its foundation, the Royal Africa Company established trade and 'guaranteed to supply 3000 Africans a year' (Chasing Freedom panel text, p. A1). The same panel then describes the triangular trade: 'ships carried goods from Europe to Africa and exchanged them for Africans. They then took the Africans across the Atlantic to sell in the New World, before returning to Europe with agricultural products cultivated by the enslaved' (Chasing Freedom panel text, p. A1). The description of the slave trade purely in terms of economic transactions, with people described as commodities (part of a 'supply') is very problematic here, as its similarity to the discourse of eighteenth-century slave

traders is noticeable. Space for text is at a premium in exhibitions, but the casual nature of the description of how traders brought goods and 'exchanged them for Africans' is particularly insensitive. In her description of being part of the team who put together the panel texts for the original *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* exhibition in Liverpool (which was later amalgamated into the International Slavery Museum), Coxall notes the power and implication of the text used. She says of the phrase 'Many Africans died during this period' ('seasoning') that 'the intransitive verb *died* was probably used originally, out of convenience, in the interests of brevity, because it requires no object... However, its use permits the avoidance of why they died. Therefore, the use of intransitive verbs can contribute to the impression that responsibility is being avoided' (1997, p. 108).

Chasing Freedom's description of the experience of the middle passage features the same use of the intransitive verb 'died' which Coxall describes: 'Shackled and packed so tightly they could hardly move or breathe, often suffering from dysentery and blindness, many Africans died' (*Chasing Freedom* panel text, p. A4). Whilst this statement is factually accurate, the difference between it and the panel describing the same conditions at the ISM is vast. The ISM states that 'Africans were held in atrocious conditions for six weeks or more. Violence, terror and degradation were everyday occurrences on board ship', and describes how people suffered and were 'humiliated', 'violently abused', 'rape[d]', and 'traumatised'. (International Slavery Museum Main panel text, p. 11) The same panel describes suicide as a form of rebellion and also slave revolts, and ends with a statistic estimating the number of people who died during each middle passage journey (12.5% was the figure estimated by government in 1789) (International Slavery Museum Main panel text, p. 11). The language used by both museums to describe the same event differs enormously; the National Museum of the Royal Navy uses emotionless terms whilst the ISM uses highly emotive language, in a deliberate attempt to attribute blame. The naval museum lists some of the suffering of those on board slave ships, but the ISM goes further both in its descriptions of this suffering, and also in its insistence on including references to how people rebelled against the circumstances they found themselves in, and attempted to free themselves at every opportunity. As previously discussed, rebellion is a significant and recurring theme in the ISM; its absence at the Naval Museum is, in comparison, highly noticeable. The main reference to slave revolts is in a panel describing how the Abolition Act was passed, and that a contributing factor was 'alarm at slave revolts' (*Chasing Freedom* panel text, p. A5). Thus rebellion is only viewed through the lens of those living in eighteenth-century England, in fear of their plantations; there is no description of the

numbers of rebellions, how many people were involved, or instances of success or failure of these.

One of the strengths of the ISM's panel text is the way that it describes the motivations for the slave trade itself; not without a heavily implied sense of blame, but without overtly emotive language and in basic analytical terms. The ISM answers the question 'why slavery' on one of its earlier panels with the succinct answer 'The transatlantic slave trade happened because Europeans needed workers for their colonies in the Americas' (International Slavery Museum Main panel text, p. 7). However, the link to economic exploitation is not made entirely clear, as Europeans did not simply require workers, but free workers.

Coxall has argued that 'different visitors will read meanings differently depending on where they, too, are coming from' (1997, p. 100). It is worth briefly investigating here the data that exists on visitors to museums in 2007. Specifically, the 1807 Commemorated website has audience reports on both the ISM and the British Museum. Of the visitors surveyed at the British Museum, the majority were white (though with those identifying themselves as black or belonging to an ethnic minority numbering 16%, higher than the national average of 5%), and 77.6% of visitors were educated to at least undergraduate level, while 75.3% held managerial and professional occupations, with only 8.3% of visitors long-term unemployed. These statistics reveal quite a specific, typically middle-class audience for the British Museum. Over half of the visitors had travelled from overseas rather than being UK residents, which again affects the reach of the Museum in terms of being accessed by a diverse audience. Not surprisingly given its small size and lack of publicity surrounding its opening, the vast majority of visitors (91.3%) did not come to the museum specifically to see the *Inhuman Traffic* exhibition. By comparison, the ISM statistics present a slightly more positive picture of social inclusion and the importance of the history of slavery for museum visitors. Though the majority of visitors were again white, the number identifying as BME rose to 23.4%. Like the British Museum, the majority of visitors to the ISM held managerial or professional occupations (51.2%), but the remaining visitors' occupations were spread more evenly over other sectors, and also included 11.7% long-term unemployed. Only 46.4% of visitors held undergraduate degrees, with 11.7% holding no formal qualifications (compared to 1.5% at the British Museum). Finally, only 10.3% of visitors to the ISM had travelled from overseas, and the majority (61.09%) had attended specifically for the 1807 exhibition. It is problematic that the British Museum, the ultimate state museum and therefore official endorser of cultural memory, produced a slavery

exhibition which was so small and deemed so unimportant by the British public. One of the main successes of the bicentennial commemorations was in making local meaning and drawing attention to the vestiges of the slave trade still in existence – obviously so at the V&A, but more specifically locally in the way regional museums drew attention to street names derived from characters of the slave trade, or buildings financed by sugar plantations. However, the failure of the British museum to insert the slave trade into its discourse of British imperial history is symbolic of Britons’ desire to reframe this history around moment of philanthropic triumph like abolition, or around local connections.

Despite the large advances that have been made in slave trade representation in slavery museums and galleries in recent years, John Beech still considers there to be a noticeable absence: ‘The inconvenient truth that not only did slavery create massive pain, suffering and misfortune for black people but also enormous gains, financially, socially and politically for the white traders without any apparent moral qualms – these people, it should be remembered, resisted strongly the pressure that abolitionists brought to bear – is still not recognised fully in the presentations of today’ (2008). Whilst some museums make reference to the money gained through the slave trade in terms of buildings erected and art collections amassed using these profits, there is a clear absence of discussion of the force with which politicians and pro-slavers vehemently refused to sanction the passage of the Abolition Act for some twenty years after the formation of SEAST. In order to provide a truly balanced presentation of the history of the slave trade, more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which these groups justified the slave trade, and how they resisted accepting the humanity of the enslaved for so long. One of the panels in the *Chasing Freedom* exhibition featured a quote by then Prime Minister Lord Grenville, to the House of Lords in 1806: ‘Can we flatter ourselves that the mischief which the slave trade has created will not be remembered for many ages, to our reproach?’ (Chasing Freedom panel text, pp. AS-Q). However, I would argue that careful renegotiation of this aspect of Britain’s history, cultural framing around the story of abolition, and a more general sense of amnesia within the wider historical discourse (yes the slave trade is now taught under the national Curriculum, but it is still absent from the British Museum) has lessened the ‘reproach’ which Grenville predicted. As Oldfield explains, slavery is still ‘frequently defined as a colonial activity, and therefore as something remote and distant’, because ‘it is still hard for many Britons to conceive of a history of British slavery, even though they might be willing to acknowledge, however grudgingly, British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade’ (2007, p. 135).

Katherine Prior's article on slavery in museums in 2007 provides a method by which to benchmark the exhibitions which emerged. She argues that museums

'accepted that enslaved Africans and their descendants should not be accepted as passive victims or as the generic slave; that their resilience and opposition to slavery and their contribution to its demise should be flagged up; and that images of them being humiliated and punished should be used with caution and sensitivity. They have attempted to source as many African and African-Caribbean voices and representations as possible, rather than relying entirely on European depictions of enslavement. And they have been careful to specify that it is the abolition of the slave trade rather than slavery as such that they are noticing' (2007, p. 203).

All of the museums and exhibitions discussed throughout this chapter fail to live up to at least one of the assertions that Prior makes about them. However, when taken in their entirety, they all conform to the general tone and attitude which Prior describes. In this sense museum exhibitions have actively sought to address Britain's cultural amnesia around the slave trade, and create new versions of this history to fill the void. Whilst not all of the artefacts and displays included in exhibits are effective at rejecting the abolition myth, the intention is certainly to challenge it. The ISM in particular should be considered a powerfully revisionist museum, where visitors can gain a wealth of learning about the many influences and motivations which brought about the slave trade, and its many effects and lasting legacies.

Chapter Three: Remembering slavery: re-writing the slave narrative

In considering the process of deconstructing and reconfiguring collective memory, literary output is as important as, and in many ways a parallel of, museological display. Both have the prospect of reaching large and diverse audiences, and, as Vivian Nun Halloran argues, 'both contemporary museology and postmodernist narrative theory reject all-encompassing grand narratives in favour of inclusive (re)presentations of multiple voices from different subject positions and experiences' (2009, p. 8). Lars Eckstein asserts that literature should be considered as a special form of cultural memory in itself; 'a complex lieu de mémoire with its very own forms and strategies of observation and writing from older memories and their diverse representations (2006, p. ix). Postcolonial novels conform to both Eckstein's notion of literature as sites of memory, and Nun Halloran's description of the rejection of grand narratives for the creation of multiple voices. However it is in the neo-slave narrative that memory is most consciously addressed; as well as re-writing the experiences and characters featured in historical slave narratives, these novels seek to address the construction of memory itself, and comment on the way that the historical narratives were written.

In order to appreciate the subtleties of a post-colonial re-writing of the slave narrative, it is necessary to explore and understand the complexities of the original form of the slave narrative. Using Olaudah Equiano as an example, this chapter will initially explore the process of penning a narrative, how this was presented to and received by a contemporary audience, and how the narrative itself went on to become a template for future narratives, including discussion of how his template eclipsed previously published narratives, such as that of Gronniosaw. This discussion will construct an understanding of the grand narrative of the British slave trade and slavery which was propagated by eighteenth-century slave narratives.

Analysis will focus on the factors at play in producing a narrative, and the differences which could occur between the slave's experience, the initial 'telling' of this story, and the final publication, with emphasis on the reasons authors (whether ex-slave or abolitionist) felt pressured to make these changes. The discussion will then go on to explore the way that these issues are addressed in postcolonial neo-slave narratives. The following analysis will be split broadly into two chapters; the first concerning the re-writing of the slave narrative, the second regarding the re-writing of the characters of slave narratives.

These chapters are specifically concerned with the way that post-colonial authors represent the slaves'/ex-slaves' recollection of their experiences of enslavement, and how this memory has been affected by the trauma of the experience. Allied to this is the exploration of how these authors present the circumstances which bring the protagonist to recount their story, how this then becomes a published narrative (i.e. self-penned or dictated, etc), whether the finished publication is an accurate reflection of the lived experience, and how the authors expect their audience to respond to reading their story – and whether these expectations affect the story which is told. These considerations are all designed to counteract the collective memory of slavery which exists as a result of slave narratives, and to re-write the mythical nature of the British slave trade.

'Anyone who sets about reading a single slave narrative,' according to James Olney, 'or even two or three slave narratives, might be forgiven the natural assumption that every such narrative will be, or even ought to be, a unique production' (1984, p. 46). Instead, he argues, reading a large number of these narratives will impart 'a sense not of uniqueness but of overwhelming sameness' (1984, p. 46). The notion of slave narratives conforming to a very prescribed formula is one which can definitely be identified within the context of eighteenth century English publications. Lincoln Shlensky's article on Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* provides a different way of viewing this 'sameness', though. At the time of Equiano's publishing, there were few other published slave narratives, and none which had found such a wide readership as his own was to. This made Equiano's task of representing slavery and the slave trade, from an ex-slave's point of view (there had been accounts of slavery published by explorers, planters and slave captains for years, of course) both difficult in terms of having to write from an entirely new standpoint, and full of opportunity to fill what was certainly a gap in the public consciousness. However, the difficulty in beginning to articulate the experiences of the enslaved in a cultural format (literature) outside the sphere of most slaves, should not be underestimated. Shlensky's article argues that the 'life of a slave entails an unrelenting isolation of the self... the product of frequently disrupted social relationships' (2007, p. 111). This assertion is reinforced by Landsberg's notion of natal alienation: Landsberg describes this as the result of the regular forced separations of families during slavery (2004, p. 86). She writes that the slaves' status as chattel and thus the constant possibility of their being sold off to other plantations without their parents or children, meant that 'they lost access to their cultural ancestors as well as to their nuclear families' (2004, p. 86). Whilst this led to the construction of 'new, non-traditional forms of cultural production along with alternative

community and kinship ties', it also led to the loss of any real sense of cultural or collective memory spanning more than one generation.

Shlensky has highlighted this very solitary nature of a slave's life, and limited experiences, to explain that the 'social cohesion necessary to framing and maintaining memory within a collective context is thus radically absent for the ex-slave narrator' (2007, p. 111). This makes Equiano's literary undertaking the more important for essentially beginning the slave narrative genre. Shlensky elaborates on the problems of this lack of collective memory for Equiano's writing, describing how he held the burden 'not only of describing his experiences in the absence of a mutually sustained social construct with agreed points of reference, but also of narrating an account of group history where the collective subject itself – that is, the slave community of which he had been, and theoretically continued to be, a member – was missing or radically reduced' (2007, p. 111). Aside from the issue of agreed points of reference of such a traumatic experience, Equiano also faced the difficulty of relating his story to an 'audience for whose members, with very few exceptions, the experience of slavery remains fundamentally alien' (Shlensky, 2007, p. 111).

The success of Equiano's narrative depended on many factors at play at the time of its publication, but the public persona that he created for himself is doubtless of importance, especially in the way that this persona set him apart from the majority of the black citizens of England with whom his readership were likely to have already come into contact.

Adams and Sanders write that in 1764, there were 'nearly 20,000 black men and women in London, and about 30,000 in all of England. Twenty years later, it was said that these figures had 'greatly increased...beyond a doubt'' (1971, p. 1). This change in the visibility of England's black population affected the attitudes of the English towards slavery and notions of emancipation. It also affected the way black people, and especially slaves, were represented, arguably leading to a blending of the identities of 'black' and 'slave' into one persona in the eyes of English audiences. Before the rise of abolitionism, Sukhdev Sandhu argues, the black presence was palpable even in the visual arts, featuring as they did in 'the prints of Hogarth, Cruikshank, Gillray and Rowlandson, as well as on countless tradesmen's cards – particularly those of tobbaconists' (2004, p. 14). Dabydeen's *Hogarth's Blacks* discusses the presence of black figures in eighteenth century art, and describes 'the black as a mute background figure going about his duties unnoticed and unacknowledged...barely more than a blob of black paint, a shadowy figure with no personality or expression' (1985, p. 21).

However, this neutral image did not last. With the rise of abolitionism, new representational strategies were employed by those depicting slaves/ex-slaves: 'black men and women were cast as heroic leviathans, their teeth of finest ivory, their brows set most nobly, their souls full of pride and vigour' (Sandhu, 2004, pp. 15-16). Obviously the pro-slavery lobby also sought to depict the slave population in a way which would reinforce their arguments about the suitability of Africans to slavery:

'they were portrayed as stupid, indolent and libidinous. Violent and untrustworthy, they were said to lack ratiocination. They were wild and emotional. Often compared to orang-utans, their simian propensities encouraged audiences to believe that enslaving them in no way contradicted the laws of humanity. Such tropes peppered cartoons, stage plays, private journals, plantocratic tracts, coffeehouse pontification, parliamentary invective' (Sandhu, 2004, p. 16).

With the rise in the visibility of slaves and ex-slaves in England, both in terms of those living in the country and those portrayed and discussed by both sides of the abolition debate, their presence in English law increased too; the Somerset case of 1772, while ambiguous as to the exact state of a slave's liberty on English soil, made it illegal for a slave to be removed (back to a plantation) against their will, while the 1781 case of the slave ship *Zong* allowed the owners of a slave ship to claim compensation for the loss of ailing slaves (as stock) who were thrown overboard to their deaths during bad weather, as the insurance company would not make payments for those who died after reaching Jamaica. The nature of the English legal system's attitude towards slavery was thus complex; both cases (featuring prominently in newspapers) were presided over by Lord Mansfield, and while one implied that slavery in England was unlawful, the other failed to even bring charges against those who had murdered 133 slaves at sea.

The attitudes of former slaves to England were often equally complex. Ukawsaw Gronniosaw came to England in the mid-eighteenth century, where he recounted his narrative to an abolitionist, who published *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As related by himself* in 1772. In his *Narrative*, Gronniosaw claims to have had a long-standing love of the English, and after gaining his freedom, explains 'I entertained a notion that if I could get to England I should never more experience either cruelty or ingratitude, so that I was very desirous to get among Christians' (1772, p. 23). Towards the end of his journey, Gronniosaw again emphasises the hopes he had in coming to England: 'I cannot describe my joy when we were within sight of Portsmouth... I expected to find nothing but goodness, gentleness and

meekness in this Christian land' (1772, p. 24). However Gronniosaw's experiences in England did not live up to his expectations. He found himself poor and alone; he was soon robbed by his landlady at a boarding house in Portsmouth, and after moving to London found that 'though the Grandson of a king, I have wanted bread, and should have been glad of the hardest crust I ever saw' (1772, p. 28); even after marrying and having a child he tells of the family being forced to subsist on one raw carrot shared between them per day, while the end of the narrative sees the family in a situation which has not improved, with Gronniosaw by then too old to support them and relying entirely on his wife's work to feed and clothe them. As Sandhu succinctly puts it, Gronniosaw's tale is 'a depressing start to the history of black English literature' (2004, p. 19). Gronniosaw wasn't the only young ex-slave to find life in England difficult to survive; after 1731 black people in London were not allowed to learn a trade (Fryer, 1989, p. 74), so their opportunities to make a comfortable life for themselves were limited. Though there were of course success stories, and people such as Sancho who became well-known and well-respected in many circles (though the nature of running a shop meant that sometimes he, too, worried whether he could afford to feed his family), on the whole life was tough for black people living in England's capital. The black population also rose after 1784, when former American slaves who had fought for the British in return for their freedom began arriving in England. The number of former slaves without work or means of financial support grew to such an extent that the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor was established, which donated money to each person at a rate of 6d a day (Fryer, 1989, p. 195). At its height, the Committee was providing the handout to nearly 1000 people a day.

It was in this climate that Equiano published his *Narrative*. Whilst it could have been expected that the reading public would have run out of sympathy for ex-slaves' life stories, especially with the public purse paying out such a lot for poor relief at the time, Equiano's autobiography was a resounding success. This success paved the way for other slave testimonies to be published, either by the former slaves themselves or by abolitionists.

The success of Equiano's testimony can be attributed to many factors, not least the exponential rise of the abolitionist movement. However, it is also clear that the character he created for himself was quite different to those of narrators like Gronniosaw who had gone before him, and of those members of the ever-swelling black poor. Equiano's *Narrative* takes great pains to express his admiration for and desire to see England, and especially London; 'a place of liberty, a shelter from the storms that slavery had rained down upon him since he was a young boy. Throughout the time he was chained below

deck of toiling in plantation fields, London lingered stubbornly in his imagination as a city that, far off and possibly unreachable, might be an asylum from the immiseration in which he and his fellow blacks found themselves' (Sandhu, 2004, p. 22). Equiano also sought to educate himself (and thus was able to write his autobiography himself), and to convert to Christianity. However, perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of his character for a reading audience was his financial independence in England. Unlike Gronniosaw, who found himself destitute and reliant on charity, and unlike those receiving alms from the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, Equiano always found himself work. Indeed on one stay in London when learning the skills of hairdressing, he wrote that his wages were 'by two-thirds less than ever I had in my life... I soon found would not be sufficient to defray this extraordinary expense of masters, and my own necessary expenses... I thought it best, therefore, to try the sea again in quest of more money' (2003, p. 166). His insistence on finding another line of work which would glean him enough wages to support himself demonstrates Equiano's unfailing desire to be independent, and his strong sense of initiative; after seeing so many former slaves supported by the state, the reading English public could experience Equiano's *Narrative* as an account of the lives which ex-slaves could lead which would even benefit the state. So wholly was Equiano a member of English society rather than dependent on it, that in 1786 (before his *Narrative* was published), he became the first black person to be employed by the British government, working as the Commisary of Provisions and Stores for the Sierra Leone project (Sandhu, 2004, p. 20). Equiano's success in creating this character for himself aided the abolitionist cause immensely, in lending the audience a predisposition for sympathy towards those who were in many ways like any other working Englishman, yet being held in a system of bondage abroad which was not legal in England.

From writing without a 'mutually sustained social construct with agreed points of reference' (Shlensky, 2007, p. 111), Equiano's *Narrative* went on to effectively form a narrative grid for future slave testimony. The events, locations and timelines of Equiano's testimony; essentially childhood in Africa, kidnap and sale into slavery, Middle Passage, plantation labour in the Caribbean and then America, before eventual freedom and religious conversion, seem to have gone on to form the skeleton structure for many other narratives.

One of the key problems with relying on slave narratives for an understanding of the experience of slavery is that of the unreliability of testimony. As well as the psychological effects of trauma which affect any testimony, recent controversy around the factual basis

of Equiano's *Narrative* has highlighted the fact that not all accounts can be verified in their entirety, and that autobiographical ex-slave writers could well have fictionalised part of their testimony. In the case of Equiano, it is principally his heritage and early life which have been called in to question. Having claimed he was the son of a village chief, descended from royalty, he then described his experience of being kidnapped and gave one of the most detailed and vivid accounts of the Middle Passage. Recent archival research, however, calls in to question not only his experience, but also his nationality. Baptismal records indicate Equiano was, in fact, born in Carolina. There has been much scholarship on the possible inaccuracies of Equiano's account, and the reasons for these, but a significant event is the Middle Passage. This became 'a memory that was transferred over the generations' (Lovejoy, 2011, p. 92), and was a transformative experience which rendered people 'socially dead' (Christopher, 2006, p. 167), and thus would seem preferable to have managed to avoid enduring it. However, as Lovejoy asserts, 'those who actually experienced the crossing of the Atlantic had a unique story to tell of a passage from freedom in Africa to slavery in the Americas, including regaining freedom through emancipation' (Lovejoy, 2011, p. 92). Although Equiano's account was one of the first published and successful narratives, it is possible he felt the need to join the existing canon of testimonies (passed around orally, or recounted as evidence by abolitionists).

While Equiano penned and published his own testimony, many ex-slave narrators were exactly that – narrators, not authors. The accounts, for example, of Gronniosaw and of Mary Prince were related to abolitionist scribes. The issues of memory in terms of recording an account of one's life as autobiography is complex; the more so when deeply traumatic experiences are inserted into this story. Lars Eckstein's work *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* argues that the passage of time between the occurrence of any event and its being described in writing means there is 'a period of reflection in which memorised events are undergoing structuring and restructuring,' where some 'occurrences will be remembered, others forgotten' (2006, p. 19). Olney argues that the knowledge that time alters perceptions and memories are never entirely accurate creates a high level of anxiety for ex-slave narrators, the assumption being that memory functioned as an 'unfailing record of events sharp and distinct that need only be transformed into descriptive language to become the sequential narrative of a life in slavery' (1984, p. 49). Because ex-slave narrators were aware of this assumption, Olney argues, they knew they had to be careful about how they described and related to their life story; they 'cannot afford to put the present in conjunction with the past...for fear that in so doing he will appear, from the present, to be reshaping and so distorting and

falsifying the past' (1984, p. 49). Therefore, he claims, narrators chose not to tell their story as they actually remembered it, but rather to fit their account to a 'pre-formed mold...virtually obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances, and authentications – that carry over from narrative to narrative and give to them as a group the special character that we designate by the phrase 'slave narrative'' (Olney, 1984, p. 49).

Equiano was one of the 'very few, and certainly the first, to manage to publish his tale without major editorial influence; in most cases, the narratives were dictated to (white) members of the abolitionist societies' (Eckstein, 2006, p. 31). These abolitionists became, then, not only scribes but editors too; they could assume full control of the version of events which was released to the reading public, and the way this could be transformed from the original telling. As Kowaleski-Wallace points out, 'what gets told depends very much not only on who asks for the story but also on what motivates the telling' (2006, p. 107), and this is particularly significant in terms of stories of slavery related to abolitionists, where the ex-slaves' motives for telling (making sense of/exorcising their past, recording their place in history, mourning the loss of others, etc) and the abolitionists' for recording (furthering the abolitionist agenda) could lead to a vastly different story being published to that which was originally dictated. John Blassingame's analysis of the uses of ex-slave testimony notes that the editor's 'education, religious beliefs, literary skill, attitudes toward slavery, and occupation all affected how he recorded the account of the slave's life' (1975, p. 474). On reading these narratives, it can seem obvious that these editors 'fleshed out the sparse details supplied by the fugitives to heighten the dramatic effect of the dialogues' (Blassingame, 1975, p. 478). Because these accounts also lend themselves to inaccuracies, due to the nature of their construction, it is clear to see why postcolonial writers have been so attracted to writing novels which 'write back' to these accounts, and re-write the story of slave experiences.

The re-writing of any historical period depends upon the reader's appreciation of the text as historiographical. Samantha Young's article on neo-historical novels argues that they 'create a 'doubleness' that allows the reader a unique interaction with the text; one may know the outcome of the story from the past, but be nonetheless drawn into a new rendering of it. The reader may have an awareness that the text's characters do not', especially in terms of a character's demise (2011, p. 8). Where the postcolonial slave narrative differs from other types of neo-historical novel, however, is in its attempt to re-configure the reader's understanding of the historical period or experience. For example, Sarah Waters' novels seek to sit comfortably within the genre of Victorian fiction (although

delving into and presenting to the reader the experiences of Victorian lesbians in London, previously unexplored in mainstream Victorian novels); she does not challenge the depictions of city life presented by Victorian novelists; instead wishing to insert her own work into that canon. The neo-slave narrative, however, seeks to drastically alter the perception of slavery and the slave trade which readers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts presented, and which have arguably gone on to form the basis of the cultural understanding of the experience of enslavement. Nun Halloran's comparison of the work of postmodern historical novels and museum exhibitions argues that 'both the postmodern historical novel and the new slavery-themed museum ask their respective audiences to participate actively in the narrative process by filling in the gaps they perceive to exist between their pre-existing knowledge about the historical objects on display in an exhibition and the ideology of the official documents that accompany and even define the same' (2009, p. 8). Reading these novels, Nun Halloran suggests, forces the reader to 'question just how much they know about the specific history of the trade in human beings', and leaves the burden of discovering a full understanding with the reader, who 'must consult reference volumes outside of the text to fill in the gaps in their historical knowledge' (2009, pp. 15-16). These novels, therefore, appeal to, as Kowaleski Wallace claims, 'an audience ready to listen to a story they believe they have been denied; (2006, p. 105).

Nun Halloran argues that readers (though referring specifically to *A Harlot's Progress*, the notion could apply to all neo-slave narratives) are required to have an understanding of the slave narrative tradition, and 'to be aware of how those written in England by white abolitionists taking dictation from, and editing the words of, freed 'Africans' differ fundamentally from the American accounts of torture and escape written in the North by runaway bondsmen from the South' (2009, p. 66). The issue of dictation and narration, and the way that slave narratives were recorded, is one which will frequently be returned to in this chapter. Although published later than the majority of original slave narratives which will be referred to here, *The History of Mary Prince* offers a good description of the process of producing a slave narrative, according to the abolitionist who published it, Thomas Pringle. Originally published in 1831, Pringle claims in the Preface to Mary's story that the 'idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself' (Prince, 2004, p. 3) rather than at his insistence. He then explains that it was 'taken down from Mary's own lips', 'written out fully' and then 'pruned into its present shape' (Prince, 2004, p. 3). The pruning, he claims, was carefully exacted so that 'no fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own,

without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible' (Prince, 2004, p. 3). Lars Eckstein notes the importance of Pringle's interaction with the narrative in preparing it for publication in terms of the supplement he offers at the end of the narrative, which it is roughly equal to in length, and in which he 'goes out of his way to verify every detail of Mary Prince's account through various references by white persons who came into contact with her, and to testify to her moral character' (2006, p. 129). He also explains Moira Fergusson's interpretation of Prince's relationship with Pringle, highlighting Prince's 'immediate economic dependency on Pringle, who gathered her from the street and gave her employment', suggesting that it could have led to Prince using a 'number of conscious strategies to please her benefactor' (2006, p. 129), thus, for all Pringle's attempt to verify her account, calling into question the veracity of Prince's narration. The key issues at play in the publication of Prince's narrative; namely the motivation for the recording of the narrative, the way in which the narrative was transcribed (and by whom), and the way in which it was dictated, are all called into question by the neo-slave narratives analysed in this chapter.

The real focus of this chapter is on the way in which postcolonial writers have explored and re-written the process of turning slaves' lived experiences into published texts, which have gone on to form the basis of a collective understanding of the experience of enslavement. The novels which will be explored are S. I. Martin's *Incomparable World* (1996), David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2009), Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2009), and Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010). Narration and transcription is approached differently within the group of novels. *Incomparable World* and *Blonde Roots* do not refer to the act of narration for publication at all; however, while *Incomparable World* is narrated in the third person, *Blonde Roots* features a first-person narrator whose story is highly self-reflexive in its description of her experience, and who directly addresses the reader at times. *The Long Song* and *The Book of Negroes* both feature first person narrators who have physically transcribed their stories, and both refer to the act of writing them, and thoughts of publication, as well as how and why they came to commit their life story to paper. *A Harlot's Progress* is narrated in the first and third person, and engages with the complexities inherent in the act of telling, as well as those behind the act of transcribing by an abolitionist. Although perhaps in places the most poetic and literary of the novels, and the least historical, it is also the one which most decisively sets out to draw attention to the problems with accepting slaves narratives as historical sources.

One of the major problems inherent in accepting a slave narrative as a historical source that is highlighted by neo-slave narratives is that the narratives are necessarily constructed; they are not narrated and recorded 'in the moment', as the slave/ex-slave is living their life. *The Long Song*, *The Book of Negroes* and *A Harlot's Progress* all address the fact that the narrator has to reflect back on the life they have led; none of them with any aide memoirs such as diaries or paintings to assist them in their recollections. However, only *A Harlot's Progress* highlights the inevitable unreliability of the narrator as a consequence of writing the entire history of one's life.

'My life. My words. My pen': the struggle for authorship.

One of the most significant ways that neo-slave narratives approach the re-writing of the slave narrative is in their focus on *how* the telling of the former slave's story came about, who recounted it, and the process of recording and transcribing it. This is specifically evident in the three narratives this chapter discusses, which address the process of producing the published narrative: *The Long Song*, *A Harlot's Progress* and *The Book of Negroes*. Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* is narrated by Aminata Diallo, who is kidnapped from her African village and sold into slavery aged 11. Spending the majority of her time in enslavement in America, she eventually becomes one of the first settlers in both Nova Scotia, and afterwards Sierra Leone, before finally ending her days in London, as a guest of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (a mirror of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade). Through her time in enslavement, Aminata becomes literate to a high degree, a skill which is utilised by her masters many times, and is thus able to write her own account. This is emphasised at the very beginning of the novel, when Aminata introduces her narrative, stating that 'I am writing this account. All of it. Should I perish before the task is done, I have instructed John Clarkson – one of the quieter abolitionists, but the only one I trust – to change nothing' (Hill, 2009, p. 4). Aminata's insistence that she write her own story, and that it not be altered before its publication (with the accompanying implication that abolitionists would indeed seek to edit it), serves to comment on the process of producing historical slave narratives. Her description of John Clarkson as the 'only' abolitionist she trusts also highlights her attitude towards abolitionists in general as one of mistrust, despite the benevolent and philanthropic image of abolitionists depicted by the collective memory of slavery. In this way Hill, like Dabydeen, seeks to show his readers that the image of abolitionists constructed by themselves as faithful scribes producing facsimiles of slaves' stories may have been questioned by slave narrators of the time, but should certainly not go unquestioned now.

Aminata's story is long and highly eventful; her life covers a great many years and a vast geographical area. Though each of the chapters of her life is described in detail and could pass as an authentic experience, it would be incredibly unlikely for one single slave to endure every one of the challenges which Aminata faces. Rather, it seems that Hill is at pains to re-write the entire slave experience, covering as many historical occurrences as possible, perhaps because he feels none of these historical episodes has ever really been presented from the point of view of the slaves/ex-slaves who lived through them.

The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade persuade Aminata to leave Sierra Leone, where she has settled, to come to London and share her story of enslavement to further the abolitionist agenda, her main task being to tell her story in person, in Parliament and at other meetings and rallies. As an additional tool for the abolitionist cause, however, she is told that 'with delicacy and meticulous care... we will interview you and write a short account of your life, including the abuses you suffered in the slave trade' (Hill, 2009, p. 451). When it is then explained that the abolitionists need to pen the narrative because they 'need to arrange the account just so. The slightest inaccuracy or inattention to detail could be fatal to our cause' (Hill, 2009, p. 451), Aminata falls into a fever. After recovering, Aminata meets with the Committee again, to inform them that she will write the story of her life, but 'without guidance... My life. My words. My pen. I am capable of writing' (Hill, 2009, p. 455). Aminata's resistance to having her story penned by an abolitionist scribe is complex. Although economically dependent on the Committee, living at their request in a country she does not know, she refuses to assent to what would seem a reasonable request. Hill's attempt to situate a stubborn, but literate, woman into the history of ex-slave narratives emphasises his desire to re-write all aspects of the genre. Whilst Mary Prince had suggested that her story should be published, it is the Committee which seeks out Aminata for hers. In then dictating the terms of the publication, Aminata retains the power of the storyteller over her audience, in a way that Mary Prince and other ex-slaves dictating their stories could never hope to. When challenged by the Committee that they should be in charge of the writing, for the purpose of 'ensuring its authenticity', Aminata is again able to articulate her position, asserting 'that is precisely why nobody will tell my story but me' (Hill, 2009, p. 455), going on to explain that 'If I give my account, you will have it all. But it will be on my terms and my terms only, coloured neither by you nor the blacks of London' (Hill, 2009, p. 456). Stretching to some 500 pages, Hill's *Book of Negroes* dwarves eighteenth century narratives, with Mary Prince's filling only 31 pages. It is in this length, also, that the attempt to re-write and re-remember is evident; instead of allowing her life story to become a footnote in the abolition committee's references, Aminata's insistence on telling 'all of it' (Hill, 2009, p. 456) ensures she, and those who feature in her narrative, will not be forgotten - despite the abolitionists' initial intention to pen 'a short account' (Hill, 2009, p. 451) of her life.

The Long Song begins with a foreword by the narrator July's son, Thomas, which explains the reason for the narrative's publication. Unprompted by any outsiders, July felt a desire to share her story; this story, Thomas says, 'lay so fat within her breast that she felt impelled, by some force which was mightier than her own will, to relay this tale to me'

(Levy, 2010, p. 1). She hoped that it would be passed down the generations and that 'the fable would never be lost and, in its several recitals, might gain a majesty to rival the legends told whilst pointing at the portraits or busts in any fancy great house upon this island of Jamaica' (Levy, 2010, p. 1). Set long after emancipation, the writing of July's narrative is presented as a particularly personal act; it is not the result (as with *A Harlot's Progress* or *The Book of Negroes*) of abolitionists seeking more material for their campaigns to end the slave trade and then slavery itself. Instead July has a desire simply to share the story of her life. Thomas Pringle sets out in *The History of Mary Prince* Mary's motivations for wishing to have her story published, claiming the idea of writing the narrative was Mary's, and that 'she wished it to be done, she said, that good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered' (Prince, 2004, p. 3). July's narrative, however, is not borne of the desire to share a catalogue of suffering; though it features descriptions of cruelty and brutality throughout her life, the narrative features humour, and instances of kindness by planters, as well as going some way towards offering an explanation for their behaviour. Indeed at the end of her story July tells the reader how her son has chastised her for failing to share all of the details of the hardships she endured after the end of slavery, to which she responds 'But why must I dwell upon sorrow? July's story will have only the happiest of endings and you must take my word upon it. Perhaps, I told my son, upon some other day there may come a person who would wish to tell the chronicle of those times anew. But I am an old woman. And, reader, I have not the ink' (Levy, 2010, p. 305).

Levy situates her novel from its beginning within the tradition of the eighteenth-/nineteenth-century literary tradition of describing slave plantations; in particular, her narrator July sets herself up as writing counter to the publications of white plantation mistresses. These, July explains, consist of monotonous descriptions of the minutiae of their dissatisfied existence upon sugar plantations:

'two pages upon the scarcity of beef. Five more upon the want of a new hat to wear with her splendid pink taffeta dress...Three chapters is not an excess to lament upon a white woman of discerning mind who finds herself adrift in a society too dull for her. And as for the indolence and stupidity of her slaves (be sure you have a handkerchief to dab away your tears), only need of sleep would stop her taking several more volumes to pronounce upon that most troublesome of subjects' (Levy, 2010, p. 8).

In this way Levy highlights the ability of the neo-slave narrative to re-write not only the original slave narrative genre, but also the history of plantation life detailed by white plantation mistresses.

July also makes a claim for the authenticity of her story from the outset. After telling an apocryphal story of her birth (which her mother, toiling in the cane field, barely noticed, and which kept her from her work merely long enough to swaddle the baby and tie her to her back), July confesses 'reader, I cannot allow my narrative to be muddled by such an ornate invention, for upon some later page you may feel to accuse me of deception when, in point, I am speaking fact, even though the contents may seem equally preposterous' (Levy, 2010, p. 11). As well as vouching for the authenticity of her story, July is keen to ensure that no outside influence is exerted on her narrative; in his foreword, her son Thomas explains that he had offered to 'be her most conscientious editor' (Levy, 2010, p. 3), an offer which July had initially been keen to accept. However, after settling in to the task of writing her life story, July changed her mind, and became 'emboldened to the point where my advice often fell on to ears that remained deaf to it. Some scenes I earnestly charged her not to write in the manner she had chosen. But, like the brightest pupil with an outworn master, she became quite insistent upon having her way' (Levy, 2010, p. 3). This insistence upon having no outside influence over the content of the slave's life story is made in *The Book of Negroes* and *A Harlot's Progress* as well as *The Long Song*. It is indicative of postcolonial authors' concern to bring to the reader's attention the fact that the original slave narratives could so easily (without a forthright refusal of such assistance) be subject to external influence. As well as avoiding any editing, July and Aminata both manage to escape having their stories reduced from a full narrative down to a synopsis; while the abolitionist society intended to publish Aminata's story as a 'short account', July's son had suggested that her narrative be published as a 'chapbook – a small pamphlet' (Levy, 2010, p. 2).

The ability of *The Long Song's* July and *The Book of Negroes's* Aminata to tell their own story; both the intellectual and physical ability to write their own words down onto paper without mediation, whilst ensuring that their stories are un-edited, also marks them out as separate from the majority of slaves: though both learned to read and write on slave plantations, it was a skill which most slaves were deliberately denied access to. In fact, the ability to read and write gave Aminata many opportunities and different experiences during her time in enslavement than would have been available to most slaves in America. This again highlights her difference from the majority, and begs the question whether we can

accept her narrative as a re-writing of the slave experience, or whether she tells a story of a person with a very specific experience – worthy of learning about, certainly, but as a re-writing of the previously under-explored life of a slave, perhaps it is not adequate. As Abigail Ward writes of Equiano – though he and Sancho have ‘come to be seen as representative of the 18th-century black presence in London, it is important to remember that their very literacy which brought them fame also differentiated them from other black people in Britain at this time’ (2007, p. 36). This differentiation is especially highlighted in fiction by S. I. Martin’s *Incomparable World*, which features the characters of Equiano and Cugoano enjoying a dinner with Thomas Hardy, to which the illiterate protagonist, Buckram, gains invitation. Rather than embracing one of the previously enslaved black poor in England whom their works seek to illicit sympathy for, Equiano and Cugoano deliberately mock and belittle Buckram; goading him with ‘drunken, malicious vigour’ (Martin, 1996, p. 99). By presenting a scene where the two characters interact with a more average example of an ex-slave, Martin highlights not only the differences between Equiano, of middle-class, literate and lettered, sentiments, and Buckram, but also the way that these differences manifest themselves in the actions and interactions which each ex-slave group is able to have.

In contrast to *The Long Song* and *The Book of Negroes*, David Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* features a narrator, Mungo, who does not engage in the act of writing; his narrative is dictated to Thomas Pringle, an abolitionist. This narrative strategy employed by Dabydeen serves to highlight the differences between what happened to Mungo, what Mungo described to Pringle, and what Pringle intended to finally publish, in a way which successfully draws attention to the fact that slave narratives were carefully constructed by their publishers, and therefore should not be considered unbiased historical sources. As well as Pringle being a politically-motivated scribe and publisher, Dabydeen also presents Mungo as an entirely unreliable narrator. Mungo is unable to tell his history, or to tell it accurately. He boasts that he can ‘change memory’, or lie, to Pringle, and revels in this power. However, his own recollections seem permanently confused and contradictory, and it seems increasingly likely that he does not, in fact, retain any real remembrance of these events himself.

From the outset of the novel, Mungo demonstrates his awareness of the constraints of the slave narrative genre, and how the publication of such narratives are politically motivated, the output controlled by those who have the finances to print and distribute them, whilst it is the money raised through sales which in turn the slave narrators depend upon for

survival. Mungo's desire to mislead Pringle in his attempt to transcribe his testimony belies his frustration at Pringle's perception of his intellectual capabilities. After accidentally telling Pringle 'Sir, I am unworthy of your subscription' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 5), Mungo immediately hums and froths at the mouth to make himself appear simple-minded; he considers that Pringle would not 'believe me capable of speech as polished as my teeth once were. No, nigger does munch and crunch the English, nigger does jape and jackass with the language, for he is of low brow and ape resemblances' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 5), an assertion borne out by Pringle's later thought that he will record Mungo's story despite it being 'blemished by frailty of mind and heathen grammar' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 6). After setting out Pringle's expectations of his intellectual capabilities, Mungo then tells his audience how wrong his abolitionist benefactor is in his assertions, claiming 'I can write the story myself': 'I have imbibed many of your mannerisms of language, and the King James Bible is at hand to furnish me with such expressions as could set your soul aglow with compassion for the plight of the Negro' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 5). However, unlike *The Long Song's* July or *The Book of Negroes'* Aminata, Mungo does not wish to tell his story in this manner, instead wishing to 'say I come from the tribe of Bongo-Bongo; that I am germane and first-cousin to jungle beasts like anthropophagi, hermaphrodites, salipenters and all the other creatures dreamt by your writers or discovered by your travellers' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 5). In Mungo's desire to present his own state of mind and origins in this way, Dabydeen presents the reader with an original take on the slave narrator's attitude towards the recording of their story. Mungo wishes his testimony to be recorded in this way precisely because it is the way in which many of the reading public viewed Africans, and especially African slaves, and thus his desire to conform to this perception rather than rewrite it is a subversive act, replete with power over this information and intended as perhaps a punishment for the British thinking of Africans in this way. Mungo does realise, however, that this is not the story which Pringle wishes to record, and will not be acceptable to the abolitionist society: Pringle 'wants a sober testimony that will appeal to the Christian charity of an enlightened citizenry who will, on perusing my tale of undeserved woe, campaign in the Houses of Parliament for my emancipation and that of millions of my brethren' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 5).

Dabydeen's novel seeks to rewrite the motivations for publication from both sides – the abolitionist Thomas Pringle is shown to have entirely selfish reasons for recording Mungo's story, and has a desire to depict his history following a strict formula. Mungo, on the other hand, exhibits no desire to tell his story to the abolitionist audience. He resists telling Pringle for as long as he can, and eventually divulges anecdotes which are not truthful.

Pringle begins to set out the framework for Mungo's narrative, based on 9 points:

'1. Africa. 2. Voyage to the Americas in Slave Ship. 3. Plantation Labour. 4. Voyage to England with Captain Thistlewood. 5. Service in the Household of Lord Montague. 6. Purchase of Mungo by Mr Gideon, a Jew. 7. Debauched by Service to Moll Hackabout, a Common Prostitute. 8. Descent into the Mire of Poverty and Disease. 9. Redemption of Mungo by the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery.'
(Dabydeen, 2000, p. 6).

This framework immediately differs from the standard slave narrative in that the majority of the description covers the time after Mungo's arrival in England. However, once Mungo starts to narrate his story, it becomes apparent that Pringle's summary is not accurate; Mungo's story does include a childhood in Africa and endurance of the Middle Passage, however he never has to experience plantation labour, instead facing a life of domestic service in England. Pringle's attempt to record Mungo's story in this proscribed format is intended to maximise its circulation and therefore the effect it could have on helping forward the abolitionist agenda. The success of Equiano's and Mary Prince's testimonies set up the format as a tried and tested structure likely to appeal to an English readership.

Mungo's concern in pleasing Pringle with his story is not really with furthering the abolitionist cause, but more selfish in hoping to ease his physical needs: 'they can refuse to buy my book, and I'll starve' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 256). Whilst this demonstrates how uneasy Mungo is with his British readership, and how he is 'all too aware of the constrictive form of the slave narrative and fearful of alienating his readers' (Ward, 2007, p. 34), it also raises the issue of economics tied to slave narratives, and Mungo's awareness of these. As Ward outlines, slaves were 'like books, read and consumed by an audience', with slave narratives instrumental in bringing about abolition, but nonetheless 'part of a process of representing black people which was not devoid of exploitation', (2007, p. 33) including economic exploitation, especially if we consider Pringle's initial excitement that Mungo's narrative would 'bring great dividends for the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery' (2000, p. 3). Mungo considers his value in economic terms to have decreased through the reproduction of his story (though this precedes the publication of his narrative and relates to pirated copies of Hogarth's engravings), and is displeased by the notion that this depreciation will continue with his further reproduction in Pringle's book. However, this economic value was only in terms of his valuation by the English in their sale of him or of stories featuring him; the perceived decrease in his value has left Mungo in no worse a situation (as a former slave in nineteenth-century London) than at the height of his

economic worth, yet he bemoans that 'once I was affordable only to the very rich, a slave worth countless guineas, but because of Mr Hogarth I was possessed, in penny image, by several thousands' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 274).

Perhaps Mungo's constant desire to thwart Pringle in his recording of the slave's life could in part be considered a protest about the fact that Mungo does not have the means to publish his own narrative. Knowing that whatever information he imparts about his life will be subject to Pringle's own interpretation and intervention, he is aware that the essence of his story could get lost. With Aminata and July both so adamant that they will brook no interference with the detail of their experiences, perhaps Dabydeen sets Mungo out as an obstructive narrator to show that he would rather no part of his story is recorded or distributed, if it is not the whole thing, in his own words. Though Mungo establishes to readers that he is more articulate than he will let Pringle realise, the novel does not ever describe him as literate; his potential illiteracy, combined with his poverty and solitude, mean it would have been impossible for him to write and especially publish his narrative independently; or even, as with Aminata, through abolitionists after penning the work himself. The attempts of Dabydeen, Hill and Levy to present slave narrator characters who are determined that their story will either be told in its entirety, from their own perspective, or not at all, signify a concerted attempt by diverse postcolonial authors to engage with the history and practice of slave narrative publication, and to bring to readers' attention the issues involved with any publication, and therefore to question the motivations behind publications of narratives of the eighteenth century, and who would have exerted editorial control over these. Whilst these original narratives are still vastly important for an understanding of the slave trade and slaves' experiences, the work of postcolonial authors to expose the politics involved in their publication offers a new way to view these narratives, and advises against accepting them as entirely authentic representations.

The *'ruined archive'*: Unreliable narration

As well as being subject to external editorial control or moderation at the hands of abolitionist publishers, slave narratives were also subject to a more potentially damaging problem: that of the unreliable narrator. Most clearly presented in Dabydeen's *Mungo*, postcolonial authors acknowledge the possibility that some slaves who narrated their stories were simply unable to give accurate descriptions of their lived experiences, which offers the reader a new problem with the acceptance of slave narratives as historical sources.

The narration of *A Harlot's Progress* does not follow a straightforward, linear progression. The story jumps forwards and backwards in time, and is sometimes told in the first person, by Mungo, and sometimes also by a third person narrator. The beginning of the novel sees the abolitionist Mr Pringle attempting to extract from Mungo his life story. As the narrator observes,

'A book purporting to be a record of the Negro's own words (understandably corrected in terms of grammar, the erasure of indelicate or infelicitous expressions, and so forth) would bring great dividends for the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery. As its young Secretary, Mr Pringle would of course be universally applauded for his dedication and achievement in recording the progress of the oldest African inhabitant of London' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 3).

Pringle's motivations for recording Mungo's history are thus identified as self-serving from the outset, not a benevolent wish to help a traumatised former slave who wishes to share his story with the world in the hope that its repetition can be avoided, as discussed in the previous section. However, Pringle believes that 'there must be a story', and pleads with Mungo for 'a beginning...a beg-inn-ing' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 1). Mungo's reluctance to tell his story, or to tell it to Pringle in a standard form, appears in direct opposition to Pringle's insistence on a succinct, chronological account. This opposition is also reflected in Mungo's attitude towards memory, which he sees the English as at the mercy of – in a physical example he describes 'whites who curl against the blasting ice to keep warm [in winter] and remain in that posture even when sun come, as if crippled and fixed by memory' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 2). In contrast, Mungo claims 'memory don't bother me... I can change memory' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 2). Indeed, the whole novel demonstrates Mungo's perception of memory's palimpsest nature, with stories of his family, youth and experiences told and retold, differently each time.

Dabydeen never quite presents Mungo as realising the potential of his power to withhold his testimony, or to present it in a calculated way. Instead, he creates in Mungo a character deeply confused and traumatised by his own experiences. Though there are instances when Mungo deliberately seeks to mislead Pringle, or when his narrative is concerned that the truth in its entirety is not what he wishes to hear, the troubling aspect of his narration is his retelling of parts of his life in different ways. His description of his upbringing changes throughout the course of his narrative. Initially he describes being brought up by his mother after the death of his father (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 12), then being brought up by the banished widow Rima (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 28), who is later described as being a slave to both of Mungo's living parents (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 35), before describing being brought up by his father after his mother's death (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 65). Each version is detailed without any reference to the previous description, leaving the reader with no indication of which should be accepted as the empirically 'true' account. Similarly, Ward notes that the 'TT' shaped scar on Mungo's forehead is described variously as 'a sign of evil made by the Headman of his tribe (p.19), a sign traditionally used to brand women's heads for failure to produce children (p.30), representative of the bush (p.31), a sign present at birth (p.33), a coming of age sign (p.65), and Captain Thistlewood's brand (p.66)' (2007, p. 38). Again, these multiple descriptions are not offered any kind of graduation in terms of levels of truthfulness, and the reader is at a loss to decide which, if any, to believe.

Mungo's multiple descriptions of his experiences in Africa are difficult to interpret. A possible explanation is that his mental health has been affected very deeply by enslavement. At one point he is confronted by the ghost of Ellar, a lame, husband-less woman from his village, who implores him 'tell the strangers that I was fabled throughout the land for my comeliness' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 60). Mungo's visions of ghosts indicate a loosened grip on reality itself. The fact that these ghosts are then dictating the way he should tell his story further distances the experiences of his life from the way that he they will ultimately be described, if he complies with the ghosts' requests. As well as furthering the narrative he recounts from the 'truth' of his experience, this also shows Dabydeen's attempts to display the psychological effects of slavery. The narrators of *The Long Song* and *The Book of Negroes* have triumphed over their enslavement, and become respected figures, and functioning members of society by the end of their testimonies, whilst Dabydeen presents Mungo as at the mercy of hallucinations, and conflicting memories, living alone and forgotten in poverty. The ghosts which Mungo sees do not even function as reliable memory aids: Rima initially tells Mungo that 'the men were masters. Only the Elder and his clan allowed themselves marriage. The rest of us were slaves to the whim of

any man, though we were appointed individual masters' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 28), but later claims 'our tribe was content, each with each. There were ceremonies of love by which we lived, each with each and in communion with the gods of earth and sky' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 65). The contrary stories of the ghosts which Mungo sees further confirm the lack of any stability on his memories. Indeed it is only to the ghosts that Mungo admits 'I remember nothing' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 67).

The Long Song, *The Book of Negroes* and *A Harlot's Progress* all depict narrators reflecting back on their lives and recounting the events of their own history. All three narrators do this without the aid of diaries/journals, newspaper clippings or other documentary evidence. When considering the length of time each narrative covers, it must be accepted that each narrator is able to remember in detail the whole of their life, without any physical objects to remind them. Eckstein, however, asks: 'to what extent is it at all possible to imitate experienced events verbally and thus to memorialize them adequately in written form?' (2006, p. 12). Testimonies, he reminds us, are always 'representations in place of actual events' rather than exact mimetic reproductions, and therefore 'acts of memory are always subject to the psychological disposition of the person who remembers and are thus...also subject to manipulation in retrospective mechanisms of restructuring' (2006, p. 16).

With the unreliability of slave testimony to tell the story of the experience of slavery, it is worth exploring Kowaleski Wallace's assertion that 'the story of Britain's slave trade is best understood not as a story to be told but a series of messy, overlapping narratives of competing voices. Moreover, it may be the case that dangers lie in designating an untold story a told story' (2006, p. 104). Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* tells the story of slavery in just this messy, partly incoherent, manner. Consciously rejecting many of the tropes of the conventional slave narrative, Dabydeen's novel immediately distances itself from these in his depiction of his narrator, Mungo. Neither the son of a chief nor the favourite of a king, nor even an innocent child, he has already transgressed, entering the forbidden katran bush, and been abandoned in a hole in the ground to die as punishment, before the enslavers even arrive in the village. This choice of narrator is significant. Equiano and Gronniosaw, along with many other slave narrators, presented themselves as the descendants of royalty or village chiefs, which further emphasised, to a class conscious English society, the injustice of their enslavement. Whilst postcolonial authors have tended to move away from making these claims for their protagonists (with the experience of enslavement itself being enough to convince readers of its injustice for any person), there

is still a tendency for the pre-capture protagonists to be 'good' citizens. *The Book of Negroes'* Aminata is from a religiously-observant and law-abiding family, while *Blonde Roots'* Doris originates from a cabbage-growing family on a feudal estate. However, Mungo's status as a having committed a serious crime complicates the reader's ability to sympathise with him.

In highlighting the unreliability of Mungo's testimony, Dabydeen draws attention to the problematic nature of the way that slave narratives have previously been received as akin to historical fact. James E Young has similarly noted that Holocaust literature is afforded the same lofty status:

'unlike other historically based literature...the writing from and about the Holocaust has not been called upon merely to represent or stand for the epoch whence it has derived, which would be to sustain the figurative (i.e. metonymical) character of its 'literary documentation'. But rather, writers and readers of Holocaust narrative have long insisted that it literally deliver documentary evidence of specific events, that it come not to stand for the destruction, or merely point toward it, but that it be received as testimonial proof of the events it embodies' (1990, p. 10).

Slave narratives have always been perceived in just this way; the abolition campaign did not present the narratives they sponsored as representations through literature of the way that former slaves were able to articulate their experiences – these publications were presented as, and intended to be received as, non-fiction and factual descriptive pieces. However, Eckstein argues that any disjuncture between the events described in a slave narrative and those recorded in historical sources should not be considered as a failing of the slave narrative genre, but as an inevitable consequence of the recording of testimonies, which are 'not mimetic representations of experienced events, even if they perform as such' (2006, p. 16). Instead, they are 'always representations in place of actual events, and as such are based on a figure of doubling', with acts of memory 'always subject to the psychological disposition of the person who remembers' and to 'manipulation in retrospective mechanisms of (re)structuring' (Eckstein, 2006, p. 16).

Dabydeen's exposition of how unreliable a slave narrator could be, along with Vincent Caretta's investigation into the history of Equiano's life as featured in historical records (in comparison with the description in his *Interesting Narrative*) both highlight the need to re-examine slave narratives, and their place in the history of the slave trade. Eckstein argues

that we should 'see the slave narrative not necessarily in terms of either credible or unreliable factual records, but possibly more as a dramatization of the authorial self, with all the potential that this must bear for seeming incoherence or self-contradiction' (2006, p. 29). However, this is complicated by Mungo's inability to remember his experiences; as Pagnouille argues, 'Mungo's inability to remember leads to complete freedom to invent' (2007, p. 198). Going further than simply failing to provide a factual record, the fictitious and contradictory nature of Mungo's story makes it difficult to use it as Eckstein suggests, to understand the authorial self. Mungo's unreliability and deceitful character will be discussed further in the following chapter, in terms of how he functions as a rewriting of the central slave character of historical slave narratives.

It is difficult to place the intention of Dabydeen's novel in its rewriting of the slave narrative. As a postcolonial theorist he is concerned with and motivated by recovering the lost stories and voices of slavery and colonisation, exhibited in his critical work, notably *Hogarth's Blacks*, which seeks to literally recover the previously overlooked black figures featured in Hogarth's prints. *A Harlot's Progress* seeks to further this recovery through fiction, by giving one of these characters an entire back story. However, his depiction of Mungo seems to simply highlight the impossibility of ever actually achieving this recovery. Pagnouille asks 'Why is the record we receive as thickly veiled in uncertainty as the katan bush in a viscous white mist? No single answer is enough' (2007, p. 198). It seems almost that Dabydeen believes in and espouses the importance of postcolonialism attempting to give voice to these silenced histories, whilst acknowledging that this is essentially an impossibility.

Subverting the story

While 'the classic slave narrative characteristically employs the Biblical triad of Slavery, Exodus, Promised Land in an allegorical way' (Krampe, 2010, p. 302), both *A Harlot's Progress* and *Incomparable World* seek to refute the notion of England as the promised land which ex-slaves expected it to be. Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* details his experiences of London as a place of opportunity, where he was able to learn new trades and increasingly find a place for himself in society, while *Incomparable World* and *A Harlot's Progress* present the ex-slave experience in the capital as having much more in common with the experiences of Gronniosaw. *Incomparable World* tells the stories of men who have escaped slavery in America (the experience of which is never described in any great detail), and who now live as free men in England, the home of abolitionism. Yet, they find that they have no place in this country which is trying so hard to secure their freedom. They are rejected and thwarted at every turn, and find that they cannot make real or productive lives for themselves. The abolitionists featured in the novels discussed here, as well as the abolitionists of the eighteenth-century, continually lecture about the necessity of saving people from enslavement, but there is little, if any, discussion of what is meant to come next for these former slaves. There was no real sense of either where these people were meant to go (or if, indeed, they were expected to continue living on or near the plantations on which they were enslaved) or what they were meant to do in order to survive. *Incomparable World* describes the continuing problems that were faced by people who had been emancipated, in order to make readers aware that escaping physical enslavement was not necessarily the beginning of a new, free life; in some cases, as the novel describes, former slaves would indenture themselves to new 'employers' in despair at simply not being able to provide for themselves.

The image conjured up most readily by the term 'transatlantic slavery' is of forced labour on sugar plantations; by subverting the narrative path of the slave testimony in altering Mungo's experience, Dabydeen is able to draw attention to the psychological and emotional effects of slavery, rather than focusing on the torturous physical conditions which are impossible to avoid describing with plantation labour. Mungo does, however, experience cold, hunger, fear and violence during his time in service in England, and his story highlights the less discussed experiences of those brought directly to England by slave traders and captains. For those returning to England with a captive slave to be put to service, there existed an attraction to the elevated status such a slave provided; the association with the wealth generated by the West Indian colonies meant domestic English

slaves were 'at once charming, exotic ornaments, objects of curiosity, talking-points, and, above all, symbols of prestige' (Fryer, 1989, p. 72). Though the conditions imposed on such slaves were humiliating at best, they were often aware that their lot was greatly favourable to those of other slaves; they were left with little doubt that it was 'better to serve a slightly dotty duchess [looking after tea-table, fan, smelling salts, feeding parrots and combing lapdogs] until she grew tired of you than a sadistic captain of a slave-ship or a rum-sodden absentee planter' (Fryer, 1989, p. 74).

The humiliating treatment of Mungo in the household of the Montagues was not uncommon for domestic slaves in England, who were 'often treated as pets, not only in the sense of favourites, but as sub-human creatures too. They were given preposterous names...and even made to wear silver or copper collars, much in the way that dogs are today' (Adams and Sanders, 1971, p. 14). The narrator describes Lord Montague's decision to purchase Mungo for his wife's amusement as a continuation of a tradition of purchasing exotic animals to bring home on his return from travels abroad. Although Montague had 'long resisted the idea of a pet Negro, such as kept by many of his friends, out of a vague moral qualm' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 188), he nonetheless purchases Mungo, as the latest exotic amusement of Lady Montague, following the death of the 'monkey from North Africa, its teeth filed, its claws softened in honey and a silver collar embellishing its neck' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 188). Mungo is considered as a direct replacement for the dead monkey, highlighting the way his humanity was regarded by the Montagues. The fact that Lord Montague is unable to identify or pinpoint the 'vague moral qualm' about suppressing Mungo's humanity and treating him as a pet is reinforced by his description of the journey home from the auction house. His attitude towards Mungo seems confused and not fully realised. Initially on reading the advertisement for his sale, Montague likens Mungo's plight to that of Christ on the road to Golgotha, considers him to have been betrayed, and makes up his mind to 'rescue' him (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 199). His idea is that Mungo will be presented to his wife 'for instruction, for his mind was as yet unformed' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 199), illustrating a belief that a slave could be educated, somewhat at odds with his notion of Mungo's functioning as a pet for Lady Montague, though he does add the caveat that the education would consist of only 'as much as his heathen constitution could bear' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 199). Within the same period of musing on Mungo's future, Montague also notes that he seems unmoved by his situation or the journey from the auction house, that his features are unreadable, and considers whether he 'should have left the boy to the baseness of a merchant's house, a habitation more suited to his nature' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 200). Finally he reassures himself that 'Lady Montague would soften his stiffness and

angularity, as she had softened the monkey's claw in honey' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 200). Montague's confused notion of the humanity and status of an African slave sees him draw comparisons to Christ, to working class commerce and finally to a pet animal. It is difficult to place Dabydeen's intentions here – in many ways the reversal of these comparisons (i.e. pet, working-class British, divine) constitutes a brief outline of the ways that the public image of Africans changed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the first cartoon figures to the campaigns for abolition and emancipation. Lady Montague encounters no such confusion in terms of her attitude towards Mungo – on his arrival, she informs her staff that he is to be renamed, and gives instruction to 'Take him away and prepare him in suitable clothes. And give him Medusa's silver collar. My poor monkey...' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 204).

Mungo exhibits an attitude towards enslavement whilst he is still in Africa which problematizes the notion espoused by abolitionists that Africans did not enslave their own people in the same way in which Europeans did. He 'enslaves' Saba, a local bully, deliberately, and with no real justification. He then offers some instruction on enslavement:

'a sudden blow can make you into a slave forever. If you creep up on someone, as I do to Saba, and with a quick blow knock all the stuff from his head, words and all, then you make a fresh space where only you can dwell. 'Come here' and 'go yonder' and 'do this', you can say, and he will obey, for he is now you and not himself nor no one else'... to make a slave you have to move quick and lash in one clean stroke, or else he will stay stale, his old self stubborn, and one day will rebel and curse you' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 14).

Mungo's description of enslaving another is one that can span centuries and is equally applicable to the transatlantic slave trade and to modern people trafficking.

While most slave narratives offer a description of African slavery, it is usually described as a consequence of debt, or becoming a prisoner of war. The conditions of these slaves are also described, as being much lower status than those in the village, but performing largely the same domestic or agricultural tasks, while being provided with food and lodgings, with no mention of beatings or brutality. The existence of Mungo's 'slave' Saba, however, serves no real purpose; while he is sometimes tasked with performing chores for Mungo's mother which Mungo should be undertaking, Mungo also describes how 'sometimes I

make him do nothing useful all day but dig a hole in the ground. Then fill up the hole, I say, and make another' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 14).

Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* constitutes an entirely different way of revising the slave narrative from any of the other novels explored in this chapter. Evaristo completely reverses the direction of the slave trade, as well as race roles and geographical locations. The first-person narrative tells the story of Doris, a 'whyte' slave, kidnapped from her homeland in Europa, and sold into slavery in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa (Aphrika) to toil for black Ambossan slave owners. Having been raised in a cabbage-farming family on a feudal estate in her homeland, Doris is forced into slavery aged ten. The reversal and confusion of the story of the slave trade in *Blonde Roots* 'ridicules the apparent security of the white master/black slave paradigm and refuses to allow the real history of the Atlantic slave trade to remain a stable moment in the past' (Burkitt, 2012, p. 1). The novel's role reversal serves to interrogate the history of the slave trade, and demonstrates the fragility of the positions of black and white in a way which instead seems to hint that it is, in fact, human nature which led to the slave trade. As Evaristo has commented, *Blonde Roots* is 'a 'What if?' book but it's also a 'This is what was' book' (Evaristo, 2009, p. 1210).

The notion of the novel representing both what was and what could have been also see it mixing timeframes and disrupting the image of eighteenth century life which framed the slave trade. Thus the proliferation of branded coffee shops, such as 'Coasta Coffee, Hut Tropicana, Café Shaka, and Starbright mimic contemporary London, though they also stage slave auctions, just like eighteenth-century coffeehouses in London and Liverpool did' (Newman, 2012, p. 288). The mention of various events and figures ranging from the fifteenth to twentieth century in a vaguely eighteenth-century setting help to disrupt the accurate placing of *Blonde Roots* in any century. This temporal instability 'challenges the legitimacy of all official histories' (Newman, 2012, p. 289) whilst also targeting the 'British love affair with costume drama...exemplified in 'bonnet and bustle' movies and the television, utopian shards in contemporary culture that evoke a past which never was, with its horrors airbrushed out' (Newman, 2012, p. 289). Indeed the only part of the novel which allows for a grounding in a specific era is when the slave trader Bwana recounts his travels in Europa, and is 'horrified by the practice of criminals being hung, drawn, and quartered, witch burnings, beheadings and the display of heads on poles' (Newman, 2012, p. 293). In allowing her readers to identify historic European practices, Evaristo draws

attention to how the classification by Europeans of African tribes' 'barbarism' could equally have applied to their own heritage.

The subversion of ethnicity/nationality in *Blonde Roots* also functions as a way of drawing the reader's attention away from issues of race and potentially legacies of the slave trade in modern race relations – this act of defamiliarization forces the reader to focus instead on the experience of enslavement itself. By using country names similar enough to be identified (Aphrika/United Kingdom of Great Ambossa), Evaristo ensures her readers understand the locations she is writing about, but the unfamiliar names mean the reader is prevented from a sense of total identification. Writing the novel for publication in the UK, Evaristo's revisioning also offers her readership a protagonist whose experiences they will be more likely to identify with; British readers will immediately recognise the cold and dark days of English winters, the immediate family living in a small house, foods such as cabbages and potatoes – while the hot days, polygamous marriages, and exotic foods of most eighteenth century slave narrators' early lives will always seem somewhat unfamiliar.

The middle passage constituted a pivotal part of the abolitionists' argument for ending the trade in slaves. Descriptions of such an abhorrent, violent, frequently lethal and ultimately transformative experience were invaluable in assisting abolitionists with their mission to convert others to their cause. Descriptions of the middle passage were included in the testimonies of slaves (whether their narratives, as with Equiano, or in transcripts read aloud at campaign meetings), and were also published from the perspective of those who shared (though did not endure) the experience; namely slave ship surgeons, sailors and captains. The 1789 Select Committee hearing on the slave trade also features many descriptions of the middle passage from a range of those who experienced or witnessed it, while SEAST's *Description of a Slave Ship* also sought to offer a visual representation of the experience. It would be easy to argue that it is the central image of the transatlantic slave trade. However, this experience is not included in all of the neo-slave narratives discussed in this chapter. *The Long Song* tells the story of a woman born into slavery on a Jamaican plantation, while *Incomparable World* details the lives of those who have escaped the enslavement they were born into in America. Indeed the novel which includes the longest description of the journey from Africa is *A Harlot's Progress*, yet even this does not follow the familiar portrayal of the voyage. Instead, Mungo is saved from enduring the atrocious conditions of the hold because of Captain Thistelwood's pederastic desire for him. The absence of an Equiano-like description of these voyages from neo-slave narratives is striking, and perhaps this absence is simply because Equiano's account gave such a

detailed, visceral and unforgettable description of enduring the experience that postcolonial writers feel they would be incapable of bettering it. However, it seems that this lack can be viewed as a more deliberate omission.

Ward has proposed that *A Harlot's Progress* suggests Dabydeen's concern that 'interest in these texts may be in part due to a morbid fascination or voyeuristic titillation at reading stories of bondage and cruelty exercised against black people' (2007, p. 34). Indeed this awareness of readers' motivations for reading stories of enslavement can be recognised in Marcus Wood's concern with the inclusion in museum exhibitions of implements of torture used on slaves when he asks whether these artefacts should be 'put on display at all – do not these things simply invite sadomasochistic fantasy, and sentimental self-identification?' (2007, p. 203). Wood also asks whether these artefacts, put on display behind glass cases over two hundred years since they were used to inflict violence on human bodies, 'can ever truly speak for the experience of the slave?' (2007, p. 203). The unrepresentability of the trauma of the middle passage means its detailed description is rightly absent from many neo-slave narratives. As well as being respectful of the inability of gaining any real understanding of or identification with such a distinct, unrepeatable experience, this absence also leaves the reader free to focus more on the experiences (both physical and emotional) detailed by the narrators of enslavement itself. These postcolonial writers are thus not attempting to in any way downplay the severity or importance of the middle passage experience, but to be mindful of the inadequacy of any fictional recreation of it, and in so doing to shift the readers' attention away from the initial brutality of being enslaved, to the enduring physical and emotional trauma of continued enslavement.

Rebellion was a recurring theme in the discourse of slavery in the eighteenth century, although, as Heuman and Walvin write, they were far less common than was the constant pervading fear of them: 'rumours of plots, fears of rebellion, imaginary slave threats, all and more flit in and out of the history of slavery. Such evidence speaks to the planters' mentality: of deep-seated fear and distrust of their slaves, especially of Africans, whom they scarcely knew and yet whom they needed for their well-being and daily care' (2003, p. 548). It seems obvious that acts of rebellion were generally absent from slave narratives – though large-scale rebellions took place regularly, and the potential for small-scale, individual acts of rebellion could be quite vast, publicising these acts would certainly not further the abolitionist cause. These narratives were intended to elicit the reading public's sympathy, rather than incite their fear for Englishmen working on Caribbean plantations, surrounded by potentially mutinous and dangerous slaves. As well as this fear of the

potential for physical harm to befall planters, rebellion was also associated with revolution in the late eighteenth century, and following the French revolution any vehement opposition to power was viewed as suspicious and dangerous. Indeed, the public support of abolitionism was to prove detrimental to the cause for a brief period in 1792, which saw a surge in the numbers of English radicals, forming themselves into regional groups, and using the same means as abolitionists to appeal for mass public support. Walvin argues that, 'spurred on by Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*... they believed that such rights are 'not confined solely to this small island but are extended to the whole human race, black and white, high or low, rich or poor'' (2003, p. 66). Espousing similar sentiments of equality to those of the abolitionists, the English radicals also followed their example in adopting 'popular associations, petitions, cheap publications, public lectures, large public meetings, pressure on Parliament: these, the lifeblood of abolitionism', and so not surprisingly, both causes 'came to be resisted as a potentially disastrous repeat of events in France. In the political confusion and fear of 1792-1793 abolitionists and radicals were transformed, in the eyes of their opponents, into one and the same specie' (Heuman and Walvin, 2003, p. 66). Brycchan Carey and Peter Kitson claim that this association meant that in the mid-1790s abolitionism came to be regarded as 'at best, a sentimental and quixotic endeavour and, at worst, a politically radical and seditious business in sympathy with the most dangerous tendencies of the French Revolution' (2007, p. 3).

Instances of rebellion in slave narratives of the period are, unsurprisingly, incredibly rare: the planters' fear of such uprisings, along with the abolitionists' need to present slaves as childlike and in need of rescuing, meant such instances of slaves attempting to escape enslavement by their own means, had no place in the discourse of the period. Postcolonial authors, however, have been keen to reinsert the history and reality of rebellion back into the history of the transatlantic slave trade. *The Long Song*, in particular, focuses on multiple and sustained minor rebellious activities, as well as a more brazen uprising. The slaves on the Amity plantation exhibit very different attitudes towards their masters when serving them and when amongst fellow slaves. In the first instance of July's interaction with her mistress, she is in the kitchen with several other slaves when she is summoned, first by the ringing of a bell and then having her name called repeatedly. July, however, exhibits no hurry to rush to her frustrated mistress' assistance. Instead, she continues with the task she was undertaking, attempting to repair a damaged dress, ignoring the several people who remind her that she is being summoned. When July does finally reach her mistress (who is, by now, enraged by the delay), however, she enters the room at speed, and throws herself on the ground, yelling 'Missus, the dress spoil! Them mash up your

dress. It mess up, it mess up. Oh, beat me, missus, come beat me! The dress spoil, spoil, spoil. Come tek a whip and beat me. I beggin' you missus!' (Levy, 2010, p. 47). This attitude of supplication and insistence on being beaten proves a successful strategy for July to avoid receiving any punishment – for both damaging the dress and for the delay in responding to her mistress' calls. All of the house slaves on the Amity plantation carry out similar minor rebellions through the course of each day, with minor acts of sabotage regularly making their way into daily routine. Whilst pretending total obedience in front of their masters, when alone or in the company of their fellow slaves, July and her counterparts all exhibit their true feelings towards their orders. Though they make their disdain for their masters clear, they rarely go as far as actually commenting on the institution of slavery itself. This seems something of a striking absence in a postcolonial novel commenting on the way the slave trade has been remembered. Whilst Levy goes a long way to rewrite many aspects of enslavement on a Jamaican plantation, the slaves themselves are still presented as only able to exert very limited influence over their own destinies, in a way which if not reinforcing abolitionist depictions of submissiveness, does not go far enough by way of challenge. What seems to be lacking from many postcolonial novelists' portrayals of enslaved people is the sense that they were able to effect any change in the system of enslavement; individual rebellions and escapes are of course important for an understanding of the fact that slaves were not simply passive and accepting of enslavement, and indeed inserting these episodes into slave narratives constitutes a vast rewriting. However, the system of enslavement itself is still only challenged in a large-scale and organised way within these novels by the same abolitionist characters. What could be an effective method of removing the hagiographic attitude towards abolitionists is to redistribute the power of effecting abolition itself, depicting perhaps the episodes in the history of the slave trade where groups of slaves worked together in a large-scale, organised and systematic way to overthrow the system, whether in a violent rebellion or in peaceful protest and petitioning. These are the characters that are missing from the collective memory of British abolition. French history has the figure of Toussaint Louverture, while American culture has the infamous Nat Turner – both with different levels of success, but both figures of power and influence over their communities, exhibiting foresight and planning in their attempts to overthrow the systems (Turner at a local level, Louverture nationally). The ex-slave figure most associated with the English abolition movement, however, is Equiano, who did seek to alter the system, but only after acknowledging its legitimacy by buying his freedom, and who worked alongside abolitionists rather than other slaves/former slaves.

The occasion of Christmas dinner in *The Long Song* illustrates Levy presenting Amity plantation's house slaves as an organised group intent on quietly disrupting the mistress Caroline's carefully planned social event. Despite issuing Godfrey with strict instructions on the fine decoration, service and entertainment to be organised in time for the dinner, which 'nothing would be allowed to mar' (Levy, 2010, p. 65), the dinner ends with Caroline exclaiming 'My God, Elizabeth Wyndham will soon testify to everyone that a soiled bed sheet was on my table through this whole beastly dinner' (Levy, 2010, p. 76). Godfrey had arranged a band to play at the dinner, who he assured Caroline were competent players, and even requested an 'extra shilling... to bribe them from a Joncanoe masquerade in town. Yet the clatter they made as her guests changed their shoes, was unrecognisable as a tune' (Levy, 2010, p. 66), leading one of the guests to claim 'Niggers cannot render civilised music' (Levy, 2010, p. 66). Upon emerging in the slaves' quarters after dismissal from the dinner table, however, the same fiddlers played 'no more clatter or unrecognisable tune – the sound of a sweet melody came whispering through the open window. For, like most slave fiddlers, it only amused them to play bad for white ears' (Levy, 2010, p. 72). Whilst the failure of the dinner to live up to its promise could be considered an act of rebellion by each of the slaves involved in its ruination, it also constitutes a deliberate act of revenge by Godfrey, whom Caroline had punched in the head when issuing instructions for the event. Though the impact did not cause him any physical pain, the response of his companion who witnessed the event elicited a more emotional response: 'it was what he glimpsed in the expression of Hannah's eyes that caused him to feel its agony. That old woman...was looking upon him with pity' (Levy, 2010, p. 61). Neo slave narratives frequently feature descriptions of minor rebellious acts, but targeted acts of specific revenge are much less common.

Yet when the dinner is prematurely terminated by the arrival of the news of the rebellions beginning on other plantations, Levy does not direct her narrator's attention to these events. Similarly, just before this news arrives, July engages in an argument with a house slave from another plantation, exchanging insults about their respective mistresses, whilst remaining fiercely defensive of Caroline and of Robert's finances. July's defence of the woman who is usually the recipient of her scorn and derision when faced with criticism from an outsider represents an interesting type of loyalty. However it is the defence of the master's finances and the profit July insinuates he makes from the plantation which is questionable to a modern audience. Those profits were derived from the free labour on which slavery was built; therefore from the work July was forced to undertake.

Similarly to the Amity slaves' passive but destructive rebellion in ruining the planters' dinner, *Blonde Roots* also makes these small-scale but highly deliberate acts of quiet insurgence seem every day. Yomisi, Bwana's chef, was forced to wear an iron muzzle all day to prevent her stealing food whilst working; the contraption enclosed her whole face in metal bands, locking 'a perforated plate over her mouth', the result of which was that 'her lips cracked. Her mouth dehydrated. Her tongue swelled. Her gums bled. Even when the muzzle was removed at night she spoke through gritted teeth' (Evaristo, 2009, p. 15). However, rather than then launch into a tirade on how inhumane Yomisi's treatment was, or attempt to extract more sympathy from the reader, the narrator Doris instead immediately describes Yomisi's revenge, as though the obvious reaction to such treatment:

'Sometimes Bwana vomited the night away or one of his children ran a fever. The runs were commonplace. Bwana's regular hallucinations bordered on insanity, and the entire family frequently broke out in rashes so unbearable they could be seen clawing off layers of skin in a communal frenzy.

All fingers pointed to the juju of Bwana's business enemies, none at the passive, stick-like cook.

Crushed glass.

Rotten meat disguised by strong herbs and spices.

Fungi.

Plants she would not name.

It was the only thing that gave her pleasure' (Evaristo, 2009, p. 15).

Yomisi not only gains the power of wreaking a very physical and visceral revenge on the man enslaving her, but more crucially is capable of desiring, plotting, exacting and enjoying that vengeance. Whilst eighteenth-century slave narrators could not concede such sentiments regarding their enslavers because they had to comprise the morally righteous party in the slave trade, postcolonial writers such as Evaristo are keen to exhibit in their characters more of the emotions and motivations that form part of basic human nature. In endowing the very minor character of Yomisi with such a powerful and relentless desire for causing her oppressor pain, Evaristo seeks to make this an accepted and perhaps commonplace emotion: the narrator offers no reaction to the description of Yomisi's actions; no shock, disbelief or regret: it is entirely matter-of-fact. Whilst this group of slaves may be unable to take back their freedom, they can certainly punish those responsible.

Even those slaves not actively engaged in rebellion or revenge are described by Doris as desiring it nonetheless. After describing how one of Bwana's wives had ordered every slave to immediately assist in scrubbing her floors with nailbrushes, Doris mentions as a brief aside that 'as the eyes are the window of the soul, if she had bothered to look into ours, she would have seen an axe murderer in each and every one of them' (Evaristo, 2009, p. 17). The implication here is not that each slave has the capacity to become an axe murderer, but that they certainly have the ability to desire such a deed. This is a very clear way of giving back a sense of agency to the enslaved in *Blonde Roots*; the desire for retribution itself is a powerful motivator, and one conspicuous by its absence from eighteenth century slave narratives where even the most mistreated slaves sought only escape from brutish masters, rather than violent retribution. In this way Evaristo goes further than Dabydeen or Levy in articulating the reactions of the enslaved to their treatment at the hands of their oppressors; endowing each with the deep-seated desire for exacting vengeance which usually tends to feature only in the motivations of the protagonist, making them stand out from their peers.

One of the benefits of Evaristo's use of temporal shifts is its ability to enable readers to identify with events or experienced related in modern terms. Instead of merely repeating the same descriptions of emotional turmoil and physical torture which original slave narratives describe, Evaristo's storytelling method engages readers and makes these incomprehensible circumstances more accessible. Doris describes her enslavement in the style of a modern contract of employment:

'The terms of my engagement stipulated that it was a job for life, that my hours should run from Monday to Sunday, 12am to 11:55pm daily, although I needed to be available to do overtime when required. I would receive an annual wage of nothing with an added bonus of nothing for good behaviour but to expect forfeits in the form of beatings for any insolence, tardiness or absences' (Evaristo, 2009, p. 24).

As the true horrors of the slave trade can never truly be described or represented, they can never be understood or appreciated in their entirety by readers of such accounts; events so outside of a reader's own life experiences are simply inaccessible in a meaningful way, as Wood has argued with his insistence that the events are simply 'untranslatable' from the actual experience into any method of representation to an audience (2000, p. 15). However, in describing her work as a slave in the terms of an employment contract, Evaristo brings the appreciation of exactly what enslavement entailed within the language,

culture and understanding of modern readers, few of whom could imagine the feeling of a cat o' nine tails tearing through their flesh, but all of whom would at some point have had the experience of negotiating their remuneration. Setting out in detail the hours worked and absolute absence of reward emphasizes to the reader the injustice of the practice of enslavement.

The neo slave narratives discussed in this chapter all emphasise how the story of the slave trade is made up of multiple, competing voices. As Kowaleski Wallace argues, this is a story 'best understood not as a story to be told but a series of messy, overlapping narratives of competing voices' (2006, p. 104). The ways in which these novels identify and seek to offer a correction to the failings of eighteenth-century narratives to adequately represent the history of enslavement serve to reaffirm the notion that there is no single narrative of slavery, that the neo slave narrative form 'simultaneously illuminates and blurs the borders of truth and the imaginary', providing 'a space within which they are inseparable' (Burkitt, 2011, p. 4) and thus that the form will always fail when considered a faithful historical account. Some critics see this as an intentional, and indeed beneficial outcome of the genre, for 'it may be the case that dangers lie in designating an untold story a told story when so much awaits discussion' (Kowaleski-Wallace, 2006, p. 104). Indeed Kowaleski Wallace goes further to argue that the failure of neo slave narratives to designate the previously untold story a 'told' story means that focus shifts from this issue of obtaining an absolute representation of the past, on to the process of the telling, which 'becomes a meaningful way to initiate conversation, to put conflicting ideas into play, and potentially to make meaningful transracial connections' (2006, p. 123). This imperative can be easily identified within the construction of *A Harlot's Progress*, where Mungo's unstable grip on the past is perhaps less important to a reader than understanding the multiplicity of experiences through which he supposedly lived. Like *A Harlot's Progress*, *Blonde Roots* is similarly disruptive of the traditional slave narrative structure, using this defamiliarisation to force the reader to look more closely at a story they perhaps thought they knew, in broadly sentimental terms, encouraging a closer examination of and allowing for the possibility of a deeper understanding of the experience itself. *Incomparable World* clearly sets out to excavate the early black British presence from relative historical obscurity, with readers introduced to the trials, tribulations and traumas of attempting to start a post-enslavement life in a London still being financed by the slave trade.

Chapter Four: Re-writing slave narrative characters

Olney has described the slave narrative as 'most often a non-memorial description fitted to a pre-formed mold, a mold with regular depressions here and equally regular prominences there – virtually obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances, and authentications – that carry over from narrative to narrative' (1984, p. 49). Whilst the previous chapter focused on how neo-slave narratives have sought to raise readers' awareness of the act of construction of the narratives themselves, and the problems inherent in accepting testimonial representations as objective historical sources, this chapter will focus on the characters created by neo-slave narratives. The 'virtually obligatory figures' which Olney mentions do indeed feature in the post-colonial re-writings of slavery: these include the 'stock' characters of 'slave', 'slave ship captain', 'plantation owner', 'overseer', 'abolitionist', but also specific historical characters. However, it is the way that these characters have been reconfigured by postcolonial writers which this chapter will focus on. While the 'stock' figures are given more rounded characters and character depth in order to make them more believable to a modern audience, their motivations and characteristics are also investigated by these authors, furthering the exploration into understanding the history of the British slave trade.

The issue of the resurrection of figures from imperial history in contemporary fiction is one which Jeremy Paxman considers in his book *Empire: What Ruling the World did to the British*, where he suggests that 'it has been a long time since the age and beliefs of empire seemed an attractive subject for creativity' (2011, p. 13). 'By the turn of the millennium', he argues, 'there was hardly an imperial hero who had not had a few buckets of mud thrown at him', while the 'new heroes were the men and women who fought against the British brutes – the Mahatma in *Ghandi* (1982), the medieval Scottish rebel William Wallace in *Braveheart* (1995) or the modern Irish revolutionary in *Michael Collins* (1996)' (2011, p. 13). With this modern, postcolonial view of imperial history replacing the more traditional imperial grand narrative, it is easy to understand why tales of empire do not grasp the public imagination. However, as Paxman asserts, stories and figures of imperial resistance have gained prominence and popularity, leaving a perfect space for tales of slave resistance to be championed, with characters like Toussaint Louverture sitting alongside Ghandi and Wallace. Yet this has not come to pass; slavery is still not a feature of popular literature or culture. Even following the hype of 2007's bicentenary, the novels discussed in this chapter have been able to fall into relative obscurity. Comparative novels in the US, though, have

not suffered the same fate. Kunta Kinte is a name immediately recognised, as is Beloved. Paxman offers an explanation of the reasons for this international difference:

‘the British have *never* really had to confront the consequences of this trade because for them slavery happened thousands of miles away. The contrast is with the United States – where slaves lived, sweated and died within the national borders, where a civil war was fought over their freedom, and where discrimination against the descendants of slaves was a mainstream issue within living memory. Roughly 40 per cent of African Americans alive today have their ancestral roots in West Africa and remind contemporary Americans of the country’s slaving past every day. But Britons with an Afro-Caribbean family background, who are also descendants of slaves, pass as a mere ‘ethnic minority’, while their white fellow citizens troop off to gawp at the splendour of Harewood House, and turn it into ‘England’s Large Visitor Attraction of the Year, 2009’. (2011, p. 27).

As discussed, the recent rise in the interest of the public in figures of imperial resistance makes the rewriting and recreation of key figures from the history of slavery all the more timely.

A reading of eighteenth-century pro-slavers’ accounts exposes depictions of hard-working planters with the needs of their (childlike or even animal-like) slaves ever in the forefront of their minds, with descriptions of violent and terrifying rebellions (with slaves wild-eyed, without a strategy and bent on revenge rather than escape), jeopardising the plantation’s ability to deliver goods back to England. Many attempted to detail how the condition of their own slaves was far favourable to that of the working class in England. Slave narratives of the same period featured earnest and hard-working Africans (frequently of high social status in their native tribes – sons of chiefs or kings) kidnapped and enslaved, with masters who cared nothing for their physical wellbeing past their ability to perform the back-breaking tasks demanded of them, and no regard for emotional wellbeing, callously separating families and selling slave babies/children to other plantations. These slaves lived in fear and dreamed of escaping and travelling to England; their escapes were violence-free, often after broken promises from masters about granting their freedom at some forever future date. The two differing styles of representation of British enslavement bear little resemblance to each other, and it is the accounts of former slaves which have passed into received history as being accurate depictions of the slave trade, with those of pro-slavers being disregarded as mere propaganda. However, as discussed in the previous chapter’s analysis of *A Harlot’s Progress*, slave narratives were very much propaganda tools

themselves, and an unquestioning acceptance of their contents has led to a very stylised image of enslavement (with, of course, the proceeding abolition) being ingrained in the public psyche. Where neo-slave narratives have differed is in their refusal to accept the original slave narratives as accurate historical record, whilst simultaneously refusing to discount the depictions of pro-slavers as entirely distorted: instead, what emerges is a style of representation which takes on tropes of both previous styles. Thus, neo-slave narratives feature masters who *are* capable of benevolence towards their slaves, and show instances of kindness, alongside masters who do indeed care nothing about them aside from their capacity to labour. The cruelty and violence of many planters and overseers is still vivid and disturbing in these stories, but it comes up against stories of slaves who form genuine bonds with their masters, and masters who treat their slaves as skilled staff (though never, of course, as free people). Many of the instances of sadistic planters/overseers are presented with some basic psychological insight into their history (abuse, alcoholism, personal loss) as an explanation for their actions. This does not, however, serve as any justification – these narratives are still clear that the slave trade constituted a brutal crime against humanity, but their interest in presenting plantation owners and overseers as individual people subverts the previous dichotomy of abolitionist/pro-slaver by indicating that slave traders could be ‘good’, as well as ‘evil’. Similarly, abolitionists are presented as both philanthropic, and self-interested and controlling in their attempts to abolish the slave trade, often caring less for the individual slaves than the larger political cause and how they can help further it. The figure of the slave, unsurprisingly, receives the most comprehensive re-writing. No longer docile and obedient, the slaves of neo-slave narratives are intelligent, wily, cunning and manipulative. They are also all rebellious – whether actively participating in a structured rebellion or by daily disobeying orders.

This chapter will explore the ways that these characters are re-written by different novelists, and whether they all focus on re-creating them in the same way, or bringing to light the same traits or characteristics. Analysis will be broadly divided down character lines, and will centre on Martin’s *Incomparable World* (1996), Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* (2009), Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots* (2009) and Levy’s *The Long Song* (2010). All of these novels reconstruct familiar figures from the abolition era, as well as ‘stock’ characters. *Incomparable World* re-writes the characters of Equiano and Cugoano, while *The Book of Negroes* features Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, as well as slave-ship surgeon turned writer Alexander Falconbridge, and *A Harlot’s Progress* Thomas Pringle and Thomas Thistlewood.

Re-imagining the slave

Martin's *Incomparable World* (1996) tells the story of Buckram, one of a number of former slaves from America, granted freedom and safe passage to England in return for fleeing their plantations and joining the English forces in fighting against the Americans. Dreaming of freedom and a better life, Buckram and his friends are soon disabused of this fantasy when they find themselves living in St Giles, one of the most deprived parts of the capital, and relying on charity or crime to survive. *Incomparable World* differs from the other novels analysed in this chapter, in that it does not properly conform to the template of a slave narrative: the story begins after Buckram and his friends have gained their freedom, and also after they have left behind the land where they were enslaved men, in order to settle in England. However, its subject matter allows the reader to understand another postcolonial engagement with the way that slaves and former slaves were viewed by English society. The story is significant for this chapter as it serves to highlight what happened to slaves *after* their emancipation; something abolitionists spoke little of, and made little provision for, during their campaigning. Set in 1786, the novel is also timely in that its events occur 14 years after Mansfield's ruling on the Somersett case, three years before the publication of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, one year before the founding of SEAST, and a full 21 years before the abolition of the slave trade. Whilst the characters of *Incomparable World* all have papers confirming their freedom, and Mansfield's ruling had clarified the law regarding enslavement in England anyway, nonetheless eighteenth-century London was not a place which offered the dreamed-of welcome and sanctuary for former slaves. As Georgie comments at the very beginning of the novel: 'Free? We're all in prison here Buckie. You're just out of gaol... But don't forget you're still in the exercise yard' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 6).

Buckram, the protagonist, eventually briefly meets both Equiano and Cugoano at a dinner party hosted by his (rather more educated, cultured and well-connected) girlfriend. In featuring known abolitionists in his novel, Martin not only serves to re-write these characters, but also to essentially situate his text within a very specific period; the familiar names within the text itself lead the reader to believe that they are being introduced to a previously concealed part of this historical era, as Martin bases his story so firmly around names, dates and places detailed in history books. Young argues that this is a strength of historical fiction – that it 'is distinct from, although inherently similar to, scholarly or 'proper' history in as much as its writers share the same evidence. Yet the writer of fiction can employ the criteria of narrative – the traditional historian will not' (2011, p. 8). Indeed

Christopher Campbell has seen Martin's novel as continuing the work of historian Peter Fryer, in 'rescuing an image of black experience from the footnotes of eighteenth-century discourse. He does not merely breathe life into historical notes and sources but adds an energy, dynamism, humour and depth of pathos to his characters' lives; this can be the achievement of only fiction' (2005, p. 170). In bridging the gap between historical account and literary narrative, *Incomparable World* provides the reader with the opportunity to access eighteenth-century London in a very visceral sense, allowing a focus on the motivations of each of the characters portrayed. Martin's novel is clearly well researched and the evocation of the realities of living in the world which the characters inhabit is palpable; this is again an important skill specific to historical fiction, according to Young, in its ability to articulate the motivations for the actions of figures from history: the ability to question 'why events occur and how they play out the way they do', to force us 'beyond the realm of historical investigation and to consider human experience, feelings and motivations that offer perspectives rarely achieved within an empirical discipline' (2011, p. 8). Indeed Sandhu goes so far as to suggest that 'the plot of *Incomparable World* is not unimportant, but the novel's real achievement lies in the fidelity with which it portrays subterranean London' (2004, p. 304). While 'life, gross and stinking, is burped and vomited from each paragraph' (Sandhu, 2004, p. 305), the specific renderings of the characters of Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano are particularly insightful in considering the construction of these figures in collective memory, and the work of postcolonial writers to provide an alternative viewpoint.

Martin has spoken of his motivations for including Equiano and Cugoano as characters in his novel, during an interview in which he explained:

'I wanted to demystify them, demythologise them, because too often in literatures of 'peoples of colour', especially when dealing with historical or noteworthy figures, there is that attempt to mythologise, so that everyone has to be perfect, they have to be church-going, god-fearing, beyond reproach. I wanted Equiano, who is one of my heroes, to come across as someone that people could relate to, so I wanted him to be imperious and haughty, and standoffish, and maybe a bit vain, and critical and contradictory – I wanted him to be *human*, rather than the Equiano which has been built up by history departments as this person beyond reproach – which apart from being untrue, is *boring!*' (Campbell & Kamali, 2005, p. 131)

We are introduced to Equiano and Cugoano midway through the novel, when the protagonist, Buckram, attends a small dinner party hosted by the object of his affection, Charlotte Tell. Also in attendance is Thomas Hardy, co-founder of the London Corresponding Society. Martin's description of Equiano as possessing an 'extraordinarily serious face' sets out his character from the outset, with the further description that 'his large round eyes brimmed with awesome, unwieldy sanity. It was the sort of face to which only outright victories could bring a smile' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 96). This initial image of Equiano does not represent a major re-writing; in many ways it conforms to the way he has historically always been received as a character, one which Walvin argues he created for himself. The portrait which adorns the first edition of Equiano's *Narrative*, Walvin argues, was 'carefully chosen by Equiano himself', and shows him in 'European clothing, finely-dressed in contemporary Western attire' (1998, p. 175). In selecting this image, in which he is also holding a Bible, Walvin claims that Equiano was giving a clear message, that 'the author was African, he was devout and he was refined... in stark contrast to the familiar visual images of Africans, in slave ships of slave colonies, as dehumanised beasts of burden devoid of any semblance of civility. Equiano, on the other hand, strikes the reader immediately as a civilised, religious man: recognisable, congenial and, in fact, at ease and at home with his British readership' (1998, pp. 175-176). The initial characterisation of Equiano also conforms to this image, with him offering Charlotte a brief history of the English reaction to the rising black presence in the country: 'Good Queen Bess...issued, again for reasons of political expediency, a proclamation ordering us to be discharged from her dominions, seeing how we supposedly relied over-much on 'relief' at the 'great annoyance of her own liege people'...yet, in spite of it and all of its kind, here we remain. More numerous than ever, better organised, an established community, I say' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 98). This description could have been lifted directly from the pages of Peter Fryer or James Walvin, and serves to illustrate both the heavy historical research influencing Martin's work, and also to underline the seriousness of the character of Equiano, in bringing to the dinner table such thoughtful conversations.

The real re-imagining of Equiano's character begins when he interacts with Buckram. When Charlotte briefly excuses herself from the room, leaving the men alone, Buckram immediately notices that 'the tenor of the mood plunged swiftly to the depths of acknowledged yet unspoken contempt' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 99). This contempt is the result of Equiano having been told by Charlotte that Buckram is a writer himself, who is also promoting the literature of a friend of his; in fact he is selling *Aethiopian Secret Papers*, a pornographic pamphlet. Despite Buckram's protestations that he cannot share any of his

or his associate's work with his fellow diners, Equiano continues to insist, seeming aware that he has been lied to about the nature of Buckram's work, pressing him to provide an example of his work and answer 'what form does it take: essays, criticism, perambulations, personal recollections?' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 100). Equiano goes on to dismiss Buckram's argument that his work is 'personal' and eventually jumps up and snatches a manuscript from Buckram's waistcoat pocket, before sneering at the contents and proclaiming 'I thought as much. You're nothing but a Piazza pimp, preying on the weakest daughters of Afric'', and shredding the paper into scraps (Martin S. I., 1996, pp. 100-101). Equiano's utter disdain for Buckram is instant upon meeting him, and must therefore be based solely upon his physical appearance, mannerisms and speech, rather than as the result of having attempted to understand his character. As Sandhu asserts, Equiano is 'shown as a serious and rather testy man who doesn't take kindly to having an uncouth, foul-smelling imposter in his presence' (2004, p. 309). This disdain for one of the very people whom his *Narrative* sought to ease the suffering of really serves to show why Equiano's slave narrative should not be accepted as characteristic of the slave experience. While *Incomparable World* 'illuminates the disparity not only between the rich and poor of London but also between the wealth gap within the city's black population at the time' (Campbell, 2005, p. 164) it also, therefore, illuminates the different lives led by those former slaves who gained wealth and reputation, like Equiano, and those who struggled to meet their daily needs, like Buckram. Knowing that the latter were in the vast majority, especially in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, the novel speaks for the need for more narratives to be produced which can provide depictions of the lives led by ex-slaves in London. The literacy of Equiano having already set him apart from the majority of former slaves, Martin's representation of his character as aloof, condescending, and hostile, underlines the divide between social standing amongst former slaves. Indeed it has been argued by Tanya Calwell that Equiano sought in his *Interesting Narrative* to 'present himself not as an African but as a British man of black complexion' and that he 'fashions himself as the ideal *homo economicus*, whose anti-slavery activism is always framed in terms of the burgeoning mercantile values of Britain which Equiano himself shares' (Shlensky, 2007, p. 116). However, the obvious difference in the way Equiano features as a character in British collective memory and the way that the majority of former slaves actually lived in England is perhaps also explained by the fact that the *Interesting Narrative* should be considered a 'freedom narrative': 'in a real sense, these narratives are 'survivals' of slavery' (Lovejoy, 2011, p. 95). This constitutes another argument for the necessity of re-writing slave experiences: the existing narratives that were published during the eighteenth and early

nineteenth centuries were written or dictated by those who had survived the experience, gained their freedom and often found a place in society. The characters of *Incomparable World* and *A Harlot's Progress* do not experience such success; though both novels feature former slaves who have gained their freedom (either through emancipation or rebellion) neither sees its characters settling into successful post-enslavement lifestyles. All of the novels analysed in these chapters also feature characters who do *not* survive their enslavement; in contrast to 'freedom narratives' focusing on the escape from slavery, these novels describe how enslavement (and its effects) were experienced by a range of people, with some overcoming and some succumbing to its brutality.

The range of different experiences of enslavement is exemplified by *Incomparable World*, which features a group made up of former American slaves all experiencing freedom in London in separate ways, with varying degrees of success. An interesting minor character described as an aside, shortly after Georgie George's assertion that 'we're all in prison here' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 6) is that of Morris. As another depiction of the options available for this group of men, his choice seems difficult to understand, given his previous enslavement. Having grown up as a slave on an armourer's plantation before gaining this freedom through fighting for the English, Morris was a trained gunsmith, and after arriving in England found, like his compatriots, that there were no opportunities for skilled work available for black men. Eventually he gained the position he sought, after which it transpired that 'not only was he an unpaid worker but that he had willingly sold himself to the proprietor in perpetuity for fifty guineas in exchange for a roof over his head, three meals a day and the opportunity design newer, deadlier firearms' (Martin S. I., 1996, pp. 10-11). This information invoked disdain and aggression in Morris' acquaintances, with Georgie claiming 'we all hate him. He's just a slave... Look at us!... Most of us were slaves at one time of another. But him... He's a slave reborn. A slave of his own making' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 10). It is hardly surprising that this voluntary return to enslavement after physically fighting for freedom would provoke such strong feeling amongst this group. However, it is interesting to note that Morris is the only character whom Martin presents as experiencing any physical comfort and safety in London. Whilst the other characters experience ups (gambling wins, gains from stealing) and severe downs (stints at Bridewell, riots, casual beatings), despite being friendless and alone, Morris is presented as a 'well-fed drunkard' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 10) who is not only able to practice his craft but also to avoid struggling to pay rent or wondering how he will pay for his next meal. Martin seems to be attempting to show that despite the Somerset case, London in the 1780s was not a place where freed former slaves could remain free and enjoy any decent quality of life. The

lack of respect and kinship afforded Morris by his previous companions demonstrates that Martin does not suggest his voluntary enslavement was a socially acceptable or desirable option, but does draw attention to it as being the only guaranteed way of maintaining nourishment and a place to live in a society hostile to the notion of freed blacks gaining employment, especially in skilled professions.

The only member of Buckram's group to have gained a permanent position was Neville; a verger. Buckram posits that this success in gaining a post was a largely due to Neville's ability to read and write, but his religious fervour certainly confirms his suitability for the post. However, Neville's employment does not ensure his comfort: his home is described as not 'so much a house as a shed... Almost a lean-to, Pastor Neville's home was a windowless wood-slatted structure held together in places by shipwrights' nails and tar... lacquered with chevrons of green slime' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 26). Although he is described as the only member of the American group to have 'retained his dignity', Neville is also characterised as 'mad': 'a tall gloomy man in his late thirties. When not speaking the Bible, Neville muttered in tongues and focused on infinity' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 13). This constitutes another significant rewriting of the slave experience by Martin. Religion, often presented by slave narrators as the guiding force which saw them through even the most difficult times, seems to be a factor contributing to Neville's distance from the rest of the free black community. Having experienced the life of a freed slave in England during the mid-eighteenth century, Gronniosaw said of his experiences;

'Though the Grandson of a king, I have wanted bread, and should have been glad of the hardest crust I ever saw. I who, at home, was surrounded and greeted by slaves, so that no indifferent person might approach me, and clothed with gold, have been inhumanly threatened with death; and frequently wanted clothing to defend me from the inclemency of the weather; yet I never murmured, nor was I discontented – I am willing, and even desirous to be counted as nothing, a stranger in the world, and a pilgrim here; for *'I know that my REDEEMER liveth,'* and I am thankful for every trial and trouble that I have met with, as I am not without hope that they have been all sanctified to me' (1772, p. 28).

Although Neville was not born the descendant of a king, his attitude towards religion as saving him, and vindicating the suffering he has endured, and the discomfort he continues to endure, can be easily equated with Gronniosaw's sentiments. However, Martin does not posit this as a successful life for a former slave living in England's capital. Rather, the lonely and possibly unstable Pastor lives a disappointing existence as a friendless recluse, without

companionship or financial security. Considering Martin's dismissal of the virtuous and religious lifestyle, it is worth considering which character is presented as living the most outwardly successful or integrated life. Though there are negative aspects to his character, and his actions are not always fruitful, Georgie George lives the most sociable, powerful and materially successful lifestyle.

Whilst the rest of the Blackbirds, as Georgie's St Giles compatriots come to be known, all have legitimate claims to be in England, all having fought for the British against the Americans, Georgie is revealed to have made his escape from slavery by fleeing the estate with 'a sackful of his master's plate, jewels and quite a sum of money too' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 15). In order to secure passage on a ship to England, the rest of the Blackbirds were forced to seek out British army officers who could vouch for their service in the war, while Georgie was said to have murdered a shopkeeper and stolen his name and certificate (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 15). On arrival in England, Georgie George becomes not only influential amongst his peers but eventually the glue which binds them together: as Campbell asserts, he can be viewed as a 'warped Moses figure – he becomes the centre of the social group and primary provider of shelter and sustenance... he drives events with his thuggery, skull-duggery and get-rich-quick scheming' (2005, p. 160).

Georgie's continued success is predicated on his interpersonal skills and his ability to draw people to him and convince them to do his bidding, especially in matters involving any risk. However, the King of Beggars does not feel the same financial constraints as the rest of the Blackbirds. He asks William 'Have you ever seen me cap in hand? Have you ever known me to ask a stranger for money? A landlord for shelter? A woman for her quim?' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 35). However, immediately following this question, Georgie is greeted by a group of 'well-heeled folk...wished Georgie a good morning. They tipped their hats and each, individually, placed a coin in his pail. As they passed, Georgie shouted something incomprehensible at their backs and they burst into laughter' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 35). The ease with which Georgie is able to accumulate money is striking when compared with the lengths that Buckram has to go to in order to collect the sixpence from the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor. Despite Georgie's plot to carry out a robbery for the vast financial gain, money and material possessions seem of little importance to him. Whilst William and Buckram worry about saving and making money respectively, and about being able to afford lodgings, for Georgie 'problems never boiled down to money. He seemed to know everybody and money simply didn't matter when you had his kind of credit' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 109). Indeed these connections work to effectively save Georgie spending

money on lodgings: with no permanent address, he spends each night at a 'different location to stay with yet another of his ever-growing circle of friends, lovers and acquaintances' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 109). With his sole desire being to have 'the time of his life', we are told 'living in London made Georgie truly free' (Martin S. I., 1996, p. 45). However, this freedom comes at the cost of other people. As Leila Kamali asserts, Georgie's manipulation of others 'contributes to the forces which turn the social experience of London into a trap paralleling the threat of slavery in the wider Atlantic context' (2005, p. 143).

Martin fails to provide an example of a former slave who settles into post-enslavement life in England in any kind of successful and uncompromised way. Though Georgie maintains a distinct social standing, is accepted by both black and white Londoners, stays out of prison and never finds himself lacking for anything, yet he has no home or possessions to call his own and thus his position is fragile; desertion by his many friends and acquaintances would render his situation equally as desperate as the other Blackbirds'. Even were Georgie to maintain his social standing in perpetuity, he would retain this at the cost of other people; his position is therefore not only precarious but morally dubious. Whilst Neville maintains a godfearing, charitable and morally upstanding lifestyle, he lives a life of no comfort, in little more than a lean-to, in relative squalor. Martin seems keen to refuse to offer any sense of reassurance for a modern British readership that former slaves who escaped a life of bondage were able to find a welcoming place in eighteenth-century London.

Re-imagining Slave Ship Captains

Similarly to *Incomparable World*, Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* takes two named historical figures and seeks to re-write and subvert their characters. Both the abolitionist Thomas Pringle and the slaver Thomas Thistlewood are reconstructed and re-written. The reconstruction of Thomas Thistlewood, however, is slightly more complex. The actual figure was a plantation overseer, notable for his brutality and sexual abuse toward his slaves, all of which he faithfully documented in diaries (edited and published by Douglas Hall in 1999). Dabydeen's depiction of Thistlewood, however, incorporates this element of sexual abuse, but re-writes the character as a slave ship captain, and later in the novel attributes a massacre based on the slave ship *Zong* to Thistlewood's captaincy. In constructing a character whose traits span several actual personalities and occupations, the fictional Thistlewood 'becomes representative of the worst atrocities of slave owners and captains' (Ward, 2007, p. 38). Dabydeen is perhaps attempting to create a very generic character as a way of countering abolitionists' depictions of slaves as similarly generic. In selecting a slave ship captain for Thistlewood's character, though, Dabydeen writes back to a very specific persona. Because of Mungo's unreliability as a narrator, the reader is presented with two fictionalised 'versions' of Thistlewood; the first constituting Mungo's actual recollection, and the second the depiction he provides for Pringle's publication. However, both of Mungo's versions of Thistlewood do conform to many of the character traits of a typical slave ship captain, whilst his 'true' recollection also provides a new side to the slave ship captain, and offers the reader an opportunity to try to understand his motivations.

Whether in the Royal Navy or the merchant service, ships' Captains in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had to be powerful, aloof, and capable. However, captains of the transatlantic slave trade had to be more than simply intimidating; as Hugh Thomas describes, 'The Captain had to be a man of parts...the heart and soul of the whole voyage'. As such, he:

'had to be able, above all, to negotiate prices of slaves with African merchants or kings, strong enough to survive the African climate, and to stand storms, calms, and loss of equipment. He had to have the presence of mind to deal with difficult crews who might jump ship, and he had to be ready to face, coolly and with courage, slave rebellions' (2006, p. 305).

Whilst sailors claimed to have often been coerced/forced into the slave trade, and it has been claimed that many surgeons took up their posts because of a lack of availability of domestic posts in Britain, the same cannot be said of slave trade captains. Essentially the entire success or failure of a slave trading venture depended to a large degree on the character and actions of the captain, so they were carefully selected; Mackenzie-Grieve describes how 'merchants took great care in the choosing of their captains. They had to be not only iron disciplinarians and good seamen, but shrewd businessmen and tactful. Before each voyage even the most esteemed received elaborate written or verbal instructions from his owners' (1941, p. 52). In order to be this committed to their role, slave trade captains exhibited an unwavering belief in the legitimacy of the trade. In fact, Captain William Snelgrave goes as far as to claim that 'It has been the custom among the negroes, time out of mind, and is so to this day, for them to make slaves of all the captives they take in war' and that 'before they had an opportunity of selling them to the white people, they were often obliged to kill great multitudes, when they had taken more than they could well employ in their own plantations, for fear they should rebel, and endanger their masters safety' (1734, p. 158).

Thistlewood is presented by Mungo (in both his narration to his readers and in the description he gives Pringle) as the sort of 'iron disciplinarian' and 'shrewd businessman' which Mackenzie-Grieve describes. He does not shirk from the violence employed by captains for maintaining discipline amongst their sailors. Indeed, Mungo describes the act of corporal punishment as not eliciting any kind of emotional response, even when meted out by Thistlewood himself: 'Captain raise and fall the birch to his back, his eyes don't see the skin bulge and the blood, his hands just work at the whiteman's back as if to haul or slack a rope, to steer a sail or wipe the salt spray from his face, just one more task and act to make our way through the sea smooth' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 56). As well as floggings, Mungo records Thistlewood's sentencing to death of sailors exhibiting fear and hiding below decks: 'he used to kill such cowards by gunshot or strangulation and command that they be hung from the topmast like hare or pheasant, mocking their longing for land and reminding the rest of the seasoning of his wrath' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 72). However, Thistlewood's violence was not restricted merely to his sailors; whilst he ministered to the medical requirements of his captive cargo, he also permitted his crew to enact sexual violence upon them – for their own morale, but also with a calculated economic reasoning behind it: 'rape was allowed, not only for necessary manly recreation, nor because it calmed their craving for a shore, but because it promised to increase the stock of slaves. But it had to be a measured act, no lasting hurt done to the females, no excessive violence

to exhaust them to the point of extinction' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 72). Also highlighting Thistlewood's business acumen and concern for reduced profits, Mungo describes how the captain would go below decks after particularly bad storms, to count the number of slaves who had died; however, he 'only counted their bodies for human record, for the purpose of the insurance dividends which would be paid for loss of goods once we landed on commercial shores; or for the purpose of calculating the quantity of fresh water on board against diminishing demands' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 49).

British slave captains often sought to justify their role in the trade through the assertion that slavers from other nations exercised a far lower regard for the welfare of their captive cargoes, and even exhibited a level of deliberate brutality of which, it was claimed, the British captains would never approve. Writing his *Memoirs* long after the slave trade's 1807 abolition, Captain Hugh Crow goes even further, to claim that

'instead of saving any of the poor Africans from slavery, these pretended philanthropists, have, through the abolition, been the (I admit *indirect*) cause of the death of thousands: for they have caused the trade to be transferred to other nations, who...carry it on with a cruelty to the slaves, and a disregard of their comfort and even of their lives, to which Englishmen could never bring themselves to resort' (Pinfold, 2007, p. 93).

Crow was not alone in attacking the practices of other nations; in his evidence before Parliament in 1789, Captain Robert Norris claimed that 'our ships are cleaner, and our provisions better, than the French; our accommodations and manner of treating slaves infinitely better than the Portuguese' (House of Commons, 1789, p. unpaginated). Attacking the act of abolition so long after it had come into force (*Memoirs* was first published in 1830) Crow could be seen as quite a controversial figure. He also criticises the introduction of bonuses for captains and surgeons of vessels with low slave mortality rates, and argues against any regulation of the trade. However, if his narrative is to be believed, it would be difficult to paint Crow as the sort of stereotypical cat o' nine tails brandishing, violent bully which much anti-slavery literature paints all slave captains as. Crow does not argue that the trade should not be regulated, and bonuses not introduced because of a disregard for the slaves, or a desire to be able to act as he wishes without fear of reprimand. Instead he simply asserts that regulation will not better the conditions of the slaves as their wellbeing is always of paramount importance to the captain. He asks: 'could any one in his right senses suppose, that after paying perhaps £25 for a negro, their owners would not take especial care of them, and give them those comforts which would conduce

to their health? Many a laugh I and others have had at Mr Wilberforce and his party, when we received our hundred pound bounty' (Pinfold, 2007, p. 38).

Crow's argument that it was in their interest to ensure slaves were well treated so as to make the most money from them upon sale was one to which most captains and also pro-slavery lobbyists conformed. It is highly likely, considering that captains viewed their captives as merely a cargo, they were anxious to ensure they were in the best possible condition when they reached their point of sale. However, the concern regarding profit, according to some sources, suggests not that captains were anxious to ensure the welfare of the slaves, but that instead they were merely quick to cover up or dispose of any slaves who were not fit to sell. James Arnold, a surgeon in the trade, recounted to a Parliamentary committee how a fifteen year old slave sustained a gunshot wound to the thigh during an insurrection, which shattered his bone. He informed the captain that the boy's life would easily be saved by amputating his leg; 'the captain however, foreseeing that a boy so mutilated would be of little or no value on his arrival at place of sale, would not suffer him [the surgeon] to perform the operation, but...ordered him [the boy] to be thrown overboard with bricks to be tied either to his neck or heels' (House of Commons, 1789, p. unpaginated). Arnold reports of the same captain that upon arrival in the West Indies a ten year old slave was discovered to be weak and emaciated, so the captain refused to have him exposed to sale as he 'did not wish to have it reported that his cargo was sickly' (House of Commons, 1789, p. unpaginated). It was explained to Arnold that if the boy was sold in a sickly state that 'the low price he would fetch would diminish the average price of the cargo, and consequently the emolument' of the captain and mate (House of Commons, 1789, p. unpaginated). The boy was therefore imprisoned on board and subsequently died in secret a few days later. John Newton similarly records in the journal of his 1750 voyage that he 'sent a girl, ill of the flux...on shoar...not so much in hopes of recovery (for I fear she is past it), as to free the ship of a nuisance' (1962, p. 48). Another example of captains' brutalities intended to protect their finances is recorded by William James, a naval captain who encountered two slave ships who had (supposedly accidentally) failed to reach Jamaica and were running out of water and provisions. After providing the captains with provisions, James asked what they had planned to do had the naval captain not come across them: 'they replied, 'to make them walk the plank'...Mr James asked them...why they did not turn a number of slaves on shore at the Isle of Pines, and endeavour to save the rest? They replied... 'in such case they could not have recovered the insurance' (House of Commons, 1789, p. unpaginated). This incident is reminiscent of the slave ship Zong; with sickness spreading rapidly amongst the slaves, the

captain cast the most sickly overboard to save the rest, seeking to claim for the loss through insurance (Clarkson, 1822, p. 32). Accounts such as this seem to verify the captains' assertions that their own interest in the slaves dictated their treatment, but also that this interest was so extreme as to lead to cases of severe brutality. Indeed, in his *Observations on a Guinea Voyage* (1788) James Stanfield notes 'that interest must operate on the captain to treat the slaves with kindness, has been advanced by those who have cogent reasons for wishing the continuance of this trade: but, like most of the arguments they advance, it has more of speciousness than of truth' (1788, p. 31). What is indisputable is that the captains viewed the slaves purely as cargo, and their concern for them was limited to an economic consideration: there seems no indication that slaves were ever accepted as fellow human beings.

This view is clearly evidenced in Thistlewood's opinions of the slaves on board his ship in *A Harlot's Progress*. Though Mungo is quick to point out that the captain does not physically abuse his captives, he also seeks to make his audience understand exactly how he did relate to them. In order to emphasise this attitude, he is described as offering medical aid to the slaves, going below decks to minister to them himself. However, this presents the reader with an event unlikely to ever have taken place outside of fiction, and perhaps should be interpreted as an attempt by Dabydeen to sidestep issues of veracity in order to offer further character development, and highlight the multifarious nature of his depiction of Thistlewood. Slave ships would always depart with a surgeon in employment; whilst the captain would be responsible for purchasing slaves at the best price, keeping order amongst his men and suppressing any attempts at slave rebellions, the surgeon's duty was to keep slaves in the best health possible, and to ensure that as few died as possible. Indeed after the passage of the Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788, all slave ships had to carry a surgeon, who was required, alongside his medical duties, to record the number of slave deaths during each voyage, for submission to port authorities at the ship's destination. Bonuses were offered as an inducement to surgeons in addition to captains in order to ensure their ship's mortality rate was sufficiently low. However, Mungo describes Thistlewood as tending to the medical needs of the slaves himself, with no assistance from any surgeon: 'every day he went below deck with salt tablets for the diarrhoeic, and bandages, and limes for the scurvied, and bread for the toothless feeble children which he chewed in his own mouth into a paste before feeding them' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 50). This last description, of the softening of bread in his mouth before feeding to children, is a very intimate gesture for a man whose profession dictated distance and aloofness. This gentleness of character towards his slaves is, however, clarified by Mungo, who explains

that Thistlewood 'tended to them not as soulful beings but as sick animals. And when his efforts failed, and they were brought on deck to be disposed of overboard, his face was mulched with sorrow. He was deeply affected by the loss of his creatures' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 50). The helplessness of animals also permeated Thistlewood's sympathy towards any slaves who died: 'when he looked upon them, [he] did not behold a scene from hell, for there were not perished souls. He saw animals innocent of crime or sin, animals discharged into his failed care and husbandry. And he was moved as fiercely as any decent man is by the sight of undeserved suffering' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 50).

Thistlewood's view of slaves as innocent animals is again contradicted by his interaction with Mungo. Thistlewood personally saves Mungo from the massacre which kills the rest of his villagers, and instead brings him on board the slave ship. After a brief time in the hold, Thistlewood takes Mungo to his cabin, where he ultimately spends the rest of the journey. Thistlewood's rape of Mungo is not in itself remarkable; many slave narratives, and even several postcolonial slave narratives, tell of captains or surgeons keeping a slave captive in their cabin for sexual abuse. What does constitute a rewriting, however, is the way Thistlewood interacts with Mungo in terms of episodes of remorse. The first instance of this sees Thistlewood stamp on Mungo's groin repeatedly, until he is completely helpless – then, Mungo says, 'he came over to where I lay and soaked his handkerchief in his own spittle to moisten my lips. 'Forget the land, forget the land,' he said, pressing my head to his chest as if to contain some dreadful hatching' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 52). This attempt to soothe Mungo's (emotional as well as physical) suffering is repeated throughout his time with Thistlewood, who offers such comforts after each act of brutality towards him. In his moments of remorse, Thistlewood also attempts to introduce Mungo to Christianity, or a version of it. Following the description of the previous beating, the captain plies Mungo with alcohol until he becomes dazed and limp, then proceeds to rape him. When he awakes, Mungo finds that Thistlewood 'is still there, and with a kind hand and a page of white bread he dab the froth from the sides of my mouth... Captain put a cup to my mouth, tilt back my head and make me sip the blood of the blue Man. He fold my hand and teach me to pray, how His Will Be Done On Earth, that I am borne of sin, that I must beg for his wrath to cleanse me. Only I can save you, he say' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 56). Thistlewood's strange recital of a garbled version of Christianity marks the beginnings of his madness. Despite their cultural differences and Mungo experiencing a new world in Thistlewood's cabin, he is able to identify his insanity, simply stating 'he is mad in truth, mad' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 69). Thistlewood's continual encouragement of Mungo to 'forget the land' is a result of his own longing for the England which he remembers. However this

remembrance is itself confused and muddled. Whilst Thistlewood recites recipes for herbal remedies which initially sound plausible, he eventually descends into claims that if wolf spittle 'be rubbed on the heads of boys who have eyes of different colours, it takes away the diversity', and that 'there was nothing in England that lived that had not magical properties' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 68). As his grip on reality loosens, Thistlewood descends more into the magical world which he describes to Mungo, who eventually watches as he frantically 'daubs the form of falcon and unicorn on his cabin wall for me to see the better world of his character' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 71).

It is difficult to interpret Dabydeen's intentions in presenting Thistlewood's descent into madness. In some ways it seems to serve as an explanation for how Thistlewood (and, by extension, slave trade captains in general) are able to fulfil their roles, meting out such cruelty to their crew and such inhumanity to their captive slaves. From a postcolonial perspective it would offer an understanding of the psychological make-up of those who took part in the trade, with the implication either that those who did participate were only able to do so because of an un-sound mind, or that the ensuing insanity was a kind of divine retribution for that participation. In an incident reminiscent of the slave ship *Zong*, it is revealed later in the novel that during the voyage Mungo endured, Thistlewood shackled forty sick slaves together and threw them overboard, with the intention of claiming for their loss at full cost from the insurance, rather than accepting a lower price for them upon sale in the West Indies. The incident is seized upon by the media, and it is variously reported in the newspapers that 'he was mad before the episode and killed out of such breakdown', that he 'was found hanged in the study of his house', and that he had 'given such sterling service to the African Trade, a patriot of the highest order in the revenues he generated for the company and the country... enjoying temporary and greatly deserved rest in his country retreat, before taking command of the *Apparition*, the latest addition to the company's fleet' (Dabydeen, 2000, pp. 198-199). In fact it is this event, the massacre of the slaves, which draws Lord Montague's attention to the advert for Mungo's sale, and therefore results in his purchase. Like the *Zong*, then, the event sparked public interest, with many differing opinions, ranging from the abolitionist view that the captain should be tried for murder, to the ship owning company's praise of his actions in ensuring their profits. If we are to take Thistlewood's case as standing for that of the *Zong*, then we know that the captain would have faced no such charges, that the matter was dealt with in the purely merchant manner of lost stock, and that he was free to captain many further voyages. In this way it is again important to consider Dabydeen's purpose in creating this figure. The fact that the mass murder of slaves did not result in any legal proceedings

against him highlights just how easy it was for slave trade captains to act outside of any legal restraints when it came to the slaves they carried. However, it also illustrates that Thistlewood's descent into madness and subsequent actions did not result in him suffering any penalty. Without the *Zong* incident, it would be possible to claim Dabydeen's intention to madden Thistlewood as punishment for his crimes; however the addition of this event merely serves to demonstrate that these characters suffered, in fact, nothing in the way of penalty or retribution. Whilst Thistlewood seems to stand for slave ship captain and slave owner, it is clear that neither of these occupational groups endured any punishment for their actions.

Re-imagining abolitionists

The characters of abolitionists are recreated in many postcolonial novels. Whilst this is often to bring life to historical figures such as Equiano, Clarkson or Wilberforce, Dabydeen does this with a fairly generic abolitionist figure, though with a loose basis on a historical person. Indeed one of the clearest re-writings of a character in terms of constituting a post-colonial questioning is that of abolitionist Thomas Pringle in *A Harlot's Progress*. Pringle is presented as an abolitionist working for the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery, who attempts to extract Mungo's story from him through sessions of dictation, with the intention of publishing and distributing the resultant narrative. Slave narratives were 'instrumental in the abolitionist cause, but they were part of a process of representing black people which was not devoid of exploitation' (Ward, 2007, p. 33). It is precisely this exploitation which the inclusion of Pringle's character seems to exist to demonstrate. From the beginning of the novel, Pringle's interaction with Mungo is inseparable from notions of economic exchange: Mungo is depicted in bed, 'covered over in a new blanket, a present from the Abolition Committee, which has been keeping him in food and clothing for months. He appears to be ungrateful. He will not return their benevolence with the gift of confession' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 1). Pringle's equation of Mungo's silence with ingratitude is telling of his motivations for offering the former slave assistance; this is not the work of benevolence or philanthropy – instead this assistance is offered purely as a means of exchange, proffering nourishment and comfort in return for his story. When Mungo's narration is not forthcoming, Pringle takes the telling of the story into his own hands, and 'resolves to colour and people a landscape out of his own imagination, thereby endowing Mungo with the gift of mind and eloquence' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 3). However, rather than presenting this story as one put together through investigation and hard work by an abolitionist faced with the 'ruined archive' which Mungo constitutes, Pringle intends to mislead his audience: 'the book Mr Pringle intends to write will be Mungo's portrait in the first person narrative' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 3). Pringle's motivation here is again subject to economic gain, as a book 'purporting to be a record of the Negro's own words...would bring great dividends to the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 3). Although the economic gain would not benefit Pringle personally - his reward instead being that he would be 'universally applauded for his dedication and achievement in recording the progress of the oldest African inhabitant of London' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 3) – it is nonetheless the money which would result from selling Mungo's tale which attracts Pringle to the task. The notion of the economic exploitation of former slaves by writers and artists is one which is frequently returned to

within the narrative. Most pointedly, Mungo complains of the pirated reproductions of the Hogarth engravings in which he featured, and how they have reduced his economic power: 'once I was affordable only to the very rich, a slave worth countless guineas, but because of Mr Hogarth I was possessed, in penny image, by thousands' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 274). Though Pringle is not the first to attempt this economic exploitation of Mungo, he certainly continues it, without recognising it as such, justifying his work to himself with the assertion that 'though too advanced in age for the enjoyment of it, the book would endow Mungo with the fame, if not fortune, he once possessed' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 4). The fortune, it is clear, would be due to the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery, rather than to Mungo. Indeed the very small financial gain available to Mungo through the committee's charity is put in jeopardy by Pringle's insistence on exploiting him; when he fears that he will not be able to extract the narration which he expects, Pringle is torn as to whether or not to give Mungo the coins he carries ready in his pocket as charity: 'he can see that I am hungry, for my mouth is dry, and three bright sores have appeared on my lips, foretelling malnutrition. But Mr Pringle is so eager for a snippet of my memoirs that he would rather see me starve than surrender his myrrh to me' (Dabydeen, 2000, p. 7).

The character of Thomas Pringle is given the same moniker as an actual abolitionist from the nineteenth century. This Pringle published England's first female slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*. Dabydeen's use of another historical figure in naming his character is even more specific than the use of Thomas Thistlewood. The real Pringle was Mary Prince's employer, and after hearing her story claimed that she insisted she wanted to share her experiences with the English public; Pringle therefore recorded Mary's dictation, and merely transcribed the words she used, making corrections only where necessary to ensure the reader's understanding. By naming his abolitionist Pringle, who then goes on to adopt unscrupulous methods of recording slave testimony, Dabydeen draws attention to the history of slave narration, and how those dictated to and transcribed by white abolitionists can never be fully trusted as accurate re-tellings of the slaves' stories; Pringle 'serves as a reminder that it is unwise to assume that slave narratives were actually representative of slaves – the slaves 'writing' their tales were inevitably Anglicized, and often had much assistance in constructing their stories' (Ward, 2007, p. 36). Indeed, before Pringle even realises that Mungo intends to keep his silence, and that he will therefore be constructing his story himself, he has drawn up a list of the life events which he expects Mungo to have endured, and the order in which they will be recounted in the narrative. Pringle thus 'already outlines a narrative grid – based mainly on what he infers about Mungo's life from Hogarth's prints – in which he intends to accommodate Mungo's

accounts' (Eckstein, 2006, p. 124). The very fact that this narrative grid is to 'accommodate' Mungo's story, rather than be dictated *by* the particulars of Mungo's experiences, is telling of Pringle's motivations towards the recording of his story. Dabydeen's creation of Pringle is a successful attempt to make his readers question the role and motivation of abolitionists in publishing slave narratives.

One of the issues with the ways in which the slave character is reimagined in the novels discussed in this chapter is that none of the protagonists are presented as an example of an average field slave on an English colonial plantation. The literacy which allows the characters to narrate their own stories sets these figures apart from the slave majority who were illiterate, and leads to their undertaking more skilled and less physically demanding tasks. Whilst Buckram is not set apart from other slaves in *Incomparable World*, he is an experienced groom, skilled with horses. This strategy does enable neo slave narratives to introduce readers to new slave experiences, and reveals the hypocrisy of the historic pro-slaver position of insisting slaves were by their nature intellectually deficient whilst simultaneously relying on slaves in key roles to organise life on the plantations and help masters maintain their records. However, though this strategy is effective at drawing attention to the skills and abilities of those who gained these trusted positions, it fails to address the need to rewrite the experiences of those who occupied nothing more than a standard position as a slave toiling away in a cane field. Thus the lives of the majority of the slave population should still be considered as under-represented by postcolonial writers.

The novels discussed in this chapter are very much written with the intention of challenging their readership. The subject matter itself prevents an easy identification with and empathy for the experiences of the protagonists, enduring experiences so outside of the reader's own. As a genre, Nun Halloran argues that these texts 'invent apocryphal histories that deviate from, but do not ultimately alter, the course of actual historical events rather than looking to the past as a source of recoverable knowledge' (2009, p. 17). It is because these novels do not carry the burden of 'conveying any concrete, historically verifiable information about slavery' that they are able to 'create a 'museum effect' by *exhibiting* slavery' (Nun Halloran, 2009, p. 17). Both Evaristo and Martin have acknowledged in interviews their desire to re-inscribe the history of the slave trade, and how this desire goes against the mode of representation readers would recognise. Evaristo has explained 'I really didn't want to write the kind of predictable novel about slavery that we're used to, where the reader knows where they are going emotionally and morally. My project as a

writer is always to push the boundaries, to venture into new, sometimes precarious territory' (Collins, 2008, p. 1202). Martin has spoken of his similar desire to write in a different way to other authors writing about the slave trade, asking why despite the serious subject matter 'can't you do it with humour? And why can't you do it with insight and humanity?' (Campbell & Kamali, 2005, p. 138). Martin also posits his fiction as countering the 'dreadful tradition of po-faced, puritanical, redemptory literature' which has emerged (Campbell & Kamali, 2005, p. 138).

Postcolonial writers have been working hard to challenge the abolition myth in their neo-slave narratives. While they have successfully confronted this myth, and inserted new stories into the cannon of slave narratives, there is more work that needs to be done. In particular, areas which have just been touched on by these writers need to be expanded on in further novels to reaffirm them. For example, the notion that abolitionists, in their public debate, did not consider or describe the lives they expected former slaves to be able to lead upon emancipation. Both *Incomparable World* and *The Book of Negroes* touch on the Sierra Leone project, but this has largely gone un-discussed in these postcolonial rewritings. The reality is that the Sierra Leone project was an ill-conceived solution to a difficult problem.

Chapter Five: Media engagement with the British slave trade in 2007 and beyond

In contemporary society, argues Rothberg, 'mediscapes of all kinds play a predominant role in the construction of the memory frameworks described by Halbwachs' (2009, p. 15). Landsberg also sees the media as essential for disseminating collective memory, urging that 'both the reach of mass culture and its modes of address and reception make it a powerful tool for changing the way people think about their world' (2004, p. 101). It is the mass appeal of the media to a broad audience that renders it so important. This aspect in respect of the memory of the slave trade also mirrors the intentions of the original abolition campaign, which sought mass appeal in order to bolster its cause. The ability to liken the height of public participation in the campaign to modern instances of the public coming together under one cause was one seized upon by government discussion of the bicentenary: 'a Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2006 publication argued that abolitionists "came from all walks of life" and compared the movement to the anti-apartheid and Make Poverty History campaigns' (Paton, 2009, p. 279). Both modern-day campaigns, of course, united people across racial and national lines in causes seeking to fight injustice; in the case of apartheid the crusade against racism was clear, whilst Make Poverty History focused much of its attention on Africa as a place which required salvation from a negative relationship with Western countries (who upheld national debts, instituted unfair trading practices and did not provide sufficient aid) – though the root cause of the negative aspects of this relationship were not explored in great detail. However, the ability to identify similarities in the public reach of a campaign affecting the lives of Africans in the eighteenth- and twenty-first centuries provided government with the opportunity to suggest that Britain had always had humanitarian principles at heart, and that multicultural social cohesion had ever been the state of the nation.

A poignant facet of the Make Poverty History campaign was that its mainstream success was largely the result of popular media saturation. Newspapers, radio stations, television programmes and websites all engaged with the movement, which encouraged public action in signing petitions, attending protests and large music events. The signing of petitions and attendance of protests mirrors the tactics of the abolitionists in their campaign. However, the use of newspapers, radio, television and the internet constitutes a newer way of interacting with the public on a large scale, and has been important in communicating the history of the slave trade more generally to the public. Though the numbers of visitors to slavery-themed museums in 2007 and since has been impressive, this pales in comparison with the sheer volume of people who will have had direct access to this history through

newspapers, television and film. As Walvin asserts, 'the public has become increasingly aware of slavery. Films (*Amistad*), novels (*Beloved*), television series (*Roots*) have confirmed and hastened the process' (2001, p. 135). What is notable about Walvin's comment is that the film, novel and television series he mentions are all American. Why are there no obvious examples of iconic representations of the slave trade produced by the British?

This chapter analyses the way that the media, in the form of television, film, radio and newspapers, responded to the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007, and how the response has continued since, in order to further an understanding of the way that the British public has been encouraged to view this history, through non-official channels. Analysis will include discussion of the differences between the way that slave trade heritage has varied between the USA and the UK, and how this is reflected in the wealth of iconic representations of slavery in American media and culture, in comparison with the relative dearth of output in the UK. Discussion will also focus on Tony Blair's official statement regarding the slave trade. The underlying concern of this chapter is regarding whether there exists a palpable difference between the representation of the slave trade which the public must seek out through visits to museums and libraries, and the one which they can passively accept through their televisions, newspapers and radios; if the latter distinction is found to exist, then does this affect the likelihood of success of any challenge to existing collective memory?

The importance of the media in capturing the public imagination regarding the desire for abolition in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries should not be underestimated. Carey argues that 'poets, novelists, philosophers and political writers joined hands with dramatists, artists, printmakers and musicians both to reflect and to influence public opinion, and in many cases writers and artists were the leaders of local and national antislavery organisations' (2006, p. 397). Alongside these forms of popular culture, newspapers became an important method of disseminating information and shaping public opinion; abolitionists particularly utilised print culture, and 'newspaper coverage of the parliamentary debates on the slave trade succeeded in rallying public opinion in favour of abolition' (Swaminathan, 2010, p. 487). During this period in particular, newspaper consumption increased as literacy rates and the population grew; 'before 1740 few country newspapers had a circulation of more than two or three hundred copies a week... by the 1780s and 1790s it was not unusual for a provincial newspaper to be selling 3,000 copies a week' (Oldfield, 1998, p. 8). Newspapers published during the

bicentennial year, however, displayed far less concern with revealing the history of the slave trade to their readership. The majority of newspaper coverage failed to engage with the bicentennial calendar of events, and where the bicentenary was mentioned, it tended to be in discussion of wider themes of slavery, rather than an engagement with a specific British history. Indeed, of the articles which did mention the slave trade and its abolition, most were relegated to the 'Comments' pages of newspapers, thus rendering the commemoration 'both present and absent' (Wilson, 2008).

The Daily Mail published an article in March 2007, two days before the bicentenary of abolition, with the headline 'How did the real hero of the anti-slavery movement get airbrushed out of history?' (Wolff, 2007). With the amount of attention already garnered on Wilberforce, the article's question raised hopes that a previously hidden part of abolition history was going to be excavated, with the reinstatement of an erstwhile obscured figure. However, rather than describing one of the many under-represented former slaves who agitated for abolition, the article goes on to name Thomas Clarkson as the 'real hero', and concludes by suggesting that 'if this month's bicentenary serves any purpose, then, it should be to reinstate Clarkson to his rightful place as one of the greatest of British heroes – an ordinary man who achieved truly extraordinary things' (Wolff, 2007), illustrating the newspaper's concerns with providing its readership with a revisionist history quite adroitly.

The Daily Mirror featured an article on 21st February 2007 entitled 'Exclusive: Slavery 2007', which opened with the line 'It is 200 years since Britain abolished the Transatlantic slave trade' (Antonowicz, 2007). However, rather than commenting on the bicentenary, or offering any historical context for abolition, the article continues 'yet slavery has not disappeared. It is thriving in the UK and across the world' (Antonowicz, 2007). The article goes on to describe the experiences of several women trafficked from eastern Europe, Asia and Africa into positions of bonded labour in the UK. The article fails to make any link to the historic exploitation of Africans by the UK during the transatlantic slave trade. It also fails to make a link between the abolition campaign and the work of those attempting to end people trafficking. In fact, the mention of the transatlantic slave trade at the beginning of the article seems somewhat incongruous with the rest of its content. This was not the *Mirror's* only article in 2007 which mentioned the bicentenary of abolition but kept the slave trade itself at a distance. Reporting on 28th March, the day after a high profile service of commemoration at Westminster Abbey attended by the Queen, Prime Minister and other important political and cultural figures, the newspaper described the protest during

the service by human rights activist Toyin Agbetu. In the second sentence of the article, the service is described as being conducted 'to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Britain' (Parry, 2007). The factual inaccuracy of this statement is striking when considering the amount of attention that was being heaped on the bicentenary during the week in which it appeared: the conflation of the slave trade with slavery, and specifying the location as Britain rather than British territories fails to adequately describe the event which the bicentenary commemorated. It is also indicative of the broader lack of engagement with the bicentenary exhibited by the *Daily Mirror* during 2007. Indeed, the remainder of the article detailing Agbetu's high-profile protest mentions the names of the public figures who witnessed the act (including royalty and politicians) but does not offer any description of the Act which the service was commemorating.

The Guardian afforded the bicentenary more attention than did the *Mirror*, but similarly failed to offer a detailed and consistent reportage of the event. The main engagement with the bicentenary came in an article setting out Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's views on the subject. Prescott called for the slave trade to become part of the national curriculum in UK schools, and exhibited a desire for the UK to begin to participate in this part of its history in a way that it had not before: 'we need to get the proper history told, including the good, the bad and the dreadful' (Wintour, 2007). Prescott also spoke of the much broader public awareness of slavery heritage in the USA, and credited this to the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots*, which he saw as in turn inspiring heritage tours of former slave forts in Ghana. However, Prescott did not imply that cultural output could encourage the same change in attitudes in the UK; despite being involved in supervising the commissioning of the BBC's abolition season, being party to museum exhibitions, especially in his constituency of Hull, and being aware of the power of *Roots*' publication, his hope for the public's future connection with Britain's slave trading history lay not in cultural forms but in government-mandated change, such as the national curriculum. He also made the case for a national day of remembrance, 'so that every year, like Holocaust, we remind people of the horrors. Each year we should think about it and commemorate' (Wintour, 2007). Prescott's seeming ignorance of the existence of the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition on 23rd August each year since its inception in 1998 serves to somewhat diminish his call for a day of tribute as ill-informed; or at least to draw attention to his preoccupation with a particularly British reminiscence, where the concerns of those living in former British territories and descended from slaves are once again marginalised.

This sentiment is echoed once again when Prescott mentions the debate around apologies for the slave trade, claiming that in his experience this has not arisen in Africa, where the fact of African complicity in the trade prohibits such a desire: the discussion around apology, according to Prescott, 'has started a debate about whether you really want the native chiefs really to apologise for selling their own people. The traders only had to go to the ports and the slaves were delivered from inside Africa' (Wintour, 2007). The emphasis on African complicity in satisfying demand, rather than on African sorrow and anger at having lost millions of men, women and children to satisfy the demands of the slave trade, is symptomatic of a desire to share the burden of guilt to alleviate the load which Britain must bear for its part in the trade. This is emphasised by Prescott's quoting Ghanaian children who had apparently told him 'not every white man was guilty and not every black man was innocent', with unspecified Ghanaians telling him 'we don't want apologies. We want people to think what we can do to help us. What our ancestors did was horrific, but everyone feels we need to learn and move on from that experience' (Wintour, 2007). Present in Prescott's invective are the parliamentarians who refused to abolish the slave trade, abolitionists in the form of Wilberforce and members of the British public and African slave dealers, but notable by their absence are both the British slave owners who profited from the trade, and the slaves themselves. Prescott speaks in abstract terms about the trade being 'tragic and terrible', 'horrendous', and describes how on his visit to Elmina he could still feel 'the pain the dark the stench, the horror, the cold and the hole in the wall, the point of no return' (Wintour, 2007) but stops short of making reference to the slaves who endured this 'horror'. Prescott's acknowledgement of British guilt, and that this part of British history has previously been obscured (it 'defied anyone to discuss it because it was so horrendous') differs from the broader government output during 2007, and from Prime Minister Tony Blair's address on the issue (discussed below) in a way which allows readers to view the bicentenary from a different, somewhat revisionist, angle. However, the absence of any reference to the lived slave experience hearkens back to Wood's description of abolitionist propaganda which 'tended to keep the slave at a discreet and abstracted distance' (2007, p. 205), and serves ultimately to reinforce the abolitionist notion of the British being more central figures in the ending of the slave trade than the millions of people affected by the legislation. The way that Prescott's opinions were disseminated by *The Guardian* is significant because the newspaper would have been consumed by a large audience; with the article's subject being Deputy Prime Minister, the weight of officialdom lent to its contents would have been great. Thus a readership not

familiar with the history of the slave trade could consider this article to contain all that it was necessary to know on the subject.

Richard Gott's article 'Britain's vote to end its slave trade was a precursor to today's liberal imperialism' published on 17th January 2007, however, exhibited a revisionist approach to the history of the slave trade, and questioned whether it was appropriate to commemorate, let alone celebrate, the bicentenary. Arguing that 'ordinary citizens, as well as schoolteachers and makers of television programmes who may find themselves caught up in the prolonged bout of self-congratulation imposed by the government fiat (with the help of £16m from the Heritage Lottery Fund), will do well to reflect on aspects of this anniversary that are not so praiseworthy' (2007). Gott begins by reminding readers that for the two centuries prior to abolition, the slave trade was sanctioned by British society at all levels, and that it formed the basis for the nation's economic success, going as far as to link this financial power to the achievements of the industrial revolution, and that 'the surviving profits have remained a solid element within specific families and within British society generally, cascading down from generation to generation' (2007). Gott goes on to suggest that he is sympathetic towards the argument for reparations for the descendants of slaves, likening such claims to those put forward after the second world war seeking the return of good stolen by the Nazis; describing slaves as 'victims of that other Holocaust', he maintains that any search for reparations would be a matter of 'simply asking for the stolen fruits of their ancestors' labour power to be given back to their rightful heirs' (2007). Gott continues his tirade against commemoration, bestowing a sense of agency on slaves, whose rebelliousness he posits as contributing to the abolition of the slave trade as much as the work of abolitionists. He also points out that Britain was not the first nation to abolish the slave trade, following as it did France, Denmark and several American states. He finishes with the reminder that the 'final tragic aspect of the decision to end the slave trade was its arousal of the false expectation among slaves that their servitude might soon be abolished. It was to be more than 30 years after 1807 before the British finally abandoned slavery in their empire' (2007). The wide ranging nature of Gott's article allows it to take issue with many of the contested aspects of the portrayal of the slave trade and abolition during bicentennial commemoration. The discussion of reparations is particularly remarkable because as a subject evoking much controversy it received relatively little attention during 2007, especially from media circles or government.

Whilst Gott's article represents a surprisingly questioning outlook on the commemorative output of 2007, it must be noted that his piece appears in the 'Comments' section of the

newspaper; though *The Guardian* was happy to publish it, its relative placing implying it was not presented as vital 'news' was indicative of the newspaper's stance on the subject. Indeed Wilson has noted that across the range of newspaper coverage of the bicentenary of abolition, there was very little engagement with the subject in the main news pages, and that 'the exclusion of dissenting voices to the 'Comments' pages serves to undermine critics, by labelling them as on the fringe of acceptable society' (2007). In this way, different approaches to understanding the bicentenary of the slave trade were available to readers of British newspapers in 2007, but those seeking a more revisionist approach had to actively seek them out, in comments pages or supplements.

The difference between the way that newspapers reported the history of the slave trade during the bicentennial year and during the abolition campaign reflects the changes in the position that newspapers occupy in British society. In the eighteenth century, newspapers 'became an integral part of urban culture and helped to shape public opinion' (Swaminathan, 2010, p. 486); a particularly useful tool for abolitionists to utilise in gaining sympathy for their cause. Twenty-first century Britain relies far less on newspapers for accessing the news: television, radio and the internet mean that newspapers have become less powerful influencers of public opinion. However, twenty-first century newspapers have often been at the forefront of contemporary causes, such as the introduction of 'Sarah's Law', as well as seeming capable of influencing politics by exerting constant pressure on government regarding scandals such as the allegation that Andrew Mitchell referred to a police officer as a 'pleb' in September 2012. It is worth considering whether the relative lack of column inches dedicated to the slave trade in the newspapers of 2007 was the result of a reduced concern with influencing public opinion, or with a deliberate avoidance of engaging with the subject. Naturally it was impossible for the newspapers to completely avoid mentioning the slave trade during 2007, but most stories which were ostensibly about the bicentenary of abolition quickly made the link to modern forms of enslavement and conceived of the bicentenary as an inspiration for further work by the Britain to abolish slavery. As Wilson notes, 'this performance of commemoration induces the belief that enslavement is certainly not an issue for white Britons and those who dissent from this view are the minority troublemakers' (Kindly Act). The opportunity to link the legacy of the slave trade with issues of racism in modern Britain was avoided by the Daily Mirror, who ran their 'Hope not Hate' campaign against racism throughout 2007, but failed to make any connection between the two.

Katherine Prior has commented on the types of images used by the media in connection with the bicentenary of abolition, asserting that the majority of media coverage 'preferred to go down the older path of celebrating Wilberforce and pitying the shackled slave', with any (limited) reference to an active black presence usually confined to the figure of Equiano (2007, p. 203). Prior explains that 'museum press departments and image-libraries will have been asked to provide historical images of the abuse of slaves and photographs of instruments of restraint and punishment to illustrate press releases about their 2007 projects' (2007, pp. 203-204). Many of the images used for articles and press releases were the same compromised images used during the abolition campaign, which Wood's *Blind Memory* in particular has argued serve only to further the stereotypes and imagery put forth by abolitionists, framed around a very specific political agenda. The government's '2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act Calendar of Events' leaflet published by the Department for Communities and Local Government features a border with the repeated image of two hands facing each other, clenched into fists – each hand has a cuff around the wrist and is holding one end of a chain, which has been broken into two, presumably by the force of the hands tearing it apart. Though the sentiment of attaining freedom is clear, the presence of the chains to a critical viewer is somewhat disturbing. As has been discussed in the previous chapters regarding compromised artefacts in museology, the danger with displaying instruments of bondage or torture is that they 'simply invite sadomasochistic fantasy, and sentimental self-identification' (Wood, 2007, p. 203). The selection of an appropriate image for such an undertaking may seem fraught with the potential to cause offence; if the central signifiers of chains and whips are precluded then the selection of an alternative image which would be immediately identifiable is complicated. However, an organisation which achieves this remarkably well is Anti-Slavery International, with a logo showing a hand clenched around a large key. The focus here is not on bondage or enslavement, and the instruments of both are absent, along with any implication of force or struggle. Instead, the presence of the key indicates that the holder has been successful in unlocking their own life, and thus imbues them with a sense of agency and power.

Baroness Lola Young's article 'The Truth in Chains' published in *The Guardian* on 15th March 2007 sought to expose the 'myths, half-truths and ignorance' surrounding the bicentenary of abolition. One of the focal points of her article was around dispelling the notion of victimhood, arguing that although the slave trade has left a lasting legacy, the descendants of the enslaved should not consider themselves victims. Young also opposes the imagery of slaves themselves as victims, asserting that a 'damaging side effect of the focus on white

people's role in abolition is that Africans are represented as being passive in the face of oppression' (Young, 2007). However, the image accompanying Young's article is of slaves packed tightly into the hold of a slave ship. Whilst this adequately signifies to the reader that the story is concerned with the slave trade rather than slavery (in a way which many generic images of enslavement do not), and also manages to avoid implying that the article discusses the end of enslavement, it does present slaves in their stereotypical pose of meek, oppressed victims.

Under pressure to give a public acknowledgment of British involvement in the slave trade (with increasing demand for an official apology), Tony Blair, then Prime Minister, issued a statement in November 2006. Falling short of an apology, Blair's statement of 'regret' focuses much more on remembering those who fought to abolish the slave trade than on those who were affected by it. He mentions the different walks of life which abolitionist agitators came from, and gives names; however, when it comes to mentioning those who endured slavery, the entirety of his description is that we should "remember those who were bought and sold into slavery" (Blair, 2006), thus omitting any description of the kinds of people this included, or that they also came from many walks of life and age groups, from Chiefs and Princes down to children.

A further omission of Blair's is his failure to describe the legacies of the slave trade. At the beginning of his speech he states that "slavery's impact upon Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe was profound" (2006), with no further elucidation on what that impact included. However, towards the close of his speech, he describes the "enormous contribution today of Black African and Caribbean communities to our nation. Britain is richer in every way – for example, in business, politics, sport, the arts and science – because of the part played by these communities in every aspect of our national life" (2006). His desire to describe the many ways that the African diaspora has influenced Britain in a positive way is illustrative of the broader desire to champion Britain as a multicultural nation, whilst the failure to list any of the legacies of slavery on modern Africa seems symptomatic of a wish to almost underplay the damage done by British slave traders. By way of comparison, the issue of legacies and damage is engaged with in some detail within the public sphere by the ISM, whose panel text goes to great length to outline the many effects of slavery on modern Africa: "Arms and ammunition brought to Africa by European traders helped perpetuate conflict and political instability. Robbing the workforce of young and healthy individuals caused industrial and economic stagnation" (p. 14). As well as the political and economic factors, the panels also point out that trade and

culture were affected too, and that “the labour and inventiveness of enslaved peoples shaped the Americas and enriched Western Europe, rather than their African homelands” (p. 14). A later ISM panel also argues that slavery left a “dangerous legacy of racism”, and put African, Caribbean and South American nations in positions of “abject poverty and long-term under-development” (p. 23), highlighting not only the direct legacy of slavery, but its continuing impact and connection to contemporary problems. It is significant that Blair’s statement chose to omit these legacies which were available to the public through other mediums. Interestingly, Blair does make reference to these legacies in his statement, but fails to identify them *as* legacies. Seemingly unconnected to the discussion of the history of slavery and abolition, Blair states that ‘we also need to respond to the problems of Africa and the challenges facing the African and Caribbean diaspora today’, describing Africa as ‘the only continent getting poorer and where, in many places, life expectancy is falling’, the response to which is ‘to write off the debts of the poorest countries and massively to increase funding to tackle AIDS and improve healthcare and education’ (2006). Blair also makes reference to the legacies of inequality prevalent in modern Britain for the African diaspora, with his assertion that ‘we are investing in tackling inequality in education, health, employment, housing and the criminal justice system. I want to see a future in which everyone can achieve their potential’ (2006). By refusing to overtly make the connection between the slave trade and these modern problems (and thus between Britain’s historic actions and the injustice and suffering endured by many today), the listing of the initiatives to tackle these social problems is presented more as a result of humanitarian concern than a kind of reparation.

Although Blair is keen to celebrate the contributions of Black African and Caribbean communities to British society in more modern times, he is reluctant to draw attention to the many benefits which the slave trade brought to England and its prosperity; he says that “British industry and ports were intimately intertwined in it. Britain’s rise to global pre-eminence was partially dependent on a system of colonial slave labour” (2006). The fact that he situates ports as so closely associated with the slave trade serves to further distance it from the commerce of contemporary Britain. This also prevents any connection to specific people or groups who were connected with the slave trade. As Hall argues, ‘Blair’s statement pointed to the merchants as those responsible for the trade, erasing state complicity in the Royal Africa Company and the navy’s protection of the trade, not to speak of imperial military conquest’ (2010, p. 197). The claim of ‘partial’ dependence on the slave trade is also significant in attempting to limit the inferences about financial gain made from it. This is symptomatic of what John Beech sees as a failure in many museum

representations of today; to show “the massive impact on the UK economy that slavery generated... that not only did slavery create massive pain, suffering and misfortune... but also enormous gains, financially, socially and politically for the white traders without any apparent moral qualms” (2008, p. 3). It is perhaps significant that the £20 million paid in compensation to slave traders upon abolition is not mentioned here. The ISM again is keen to reinscribe this aspect of the slave trade’s history on the public consciousness, with a panel entitled “Economic Benefits of Slavery” which describes not only how slavery’s profits “helped change the industrial and economic landscape of Britain and other parts of Western Europe”, but also that “successful slave owners were able to amass vast personal fortunes”, which they could then invest “in other enterprises, such as iron, coal and banking” (p. 15). This highlighting of the personal nature of the money gained from slave trading, alongside its more societal impact marks a different perspective from Blair’s statement, along with those of many other cultural institutions.

Blair states that people who fought against slavery included ‘slaves and former slaves like Olaudah Equiano’ (2006). As discussed in chapter three, Equiano is a figure very easy for Britain to champion; erudite, articulate and hard-working, he illustrates the possibility of overcoming enslavement and using the language and customs of Britain to become an established and respected member of the middle-class community. Having bought his freedom rather than violently rebelling, Equiano’s emancipation constituted no physical danger to any British slave-trading subjects, whilst his subsequent voluntary occupation in the slave trade as an overseer, before repenting and turning to abolitionism, mirrors the reformation of John Newton. Other resistance figures, however, were ignored by many commentators. The failure of most commentators in 2007 to include a nod to Toussaint Louverture, leader of the most famous and most successful slave rebellion, illustrated a disinclination to legitimise the freedom gained by those who sought it under their own terms, especially when it necessitated violent opposition to colonial slave owners. Although Toussaint’s actions in Haiti did not directly affect Britain and its slave holdings, the ramifications were felt across the Caribbean; the unease about slaves and their ability to organise themselves into a fully functioning, effective and brutal resistance force went some way towards persuading people of the need to abolish slavery before plantations were laid to waste by rebelling slaves.

A discussion of the television programming commissioned and aired during 2007 in recognition of the bicentenary represents an opportunity to view the way that this media engaged with this history, and how it presented it to viewers. By focusing specifically on

the output of the BBC as funded by taxpayers and therefore liable to most scrutiny, and most reflective of a conservative interpretation of history, it is significant to discuss the commissioning process and the tropes which spanned the entire output. As television figures are so closely monitored, it should be considered that programming intended to reach and interest as broad an audience as possible; therefore discussion of this output allows for consideration of the stories and level of detail which the BBC believes the public wishes to consume.

Ross Wilson has argued that the BBC Abolition Season 'admitted the involvement of Britain in the enslavement of Africans', but 'still sought to emphasise the positive role of British abolitionists and the apparently more enlightened times we live in today... What was promoted in these programmes was not recognition and reconciliation but a remembering to forget' (2008, pp. 391-392). The scale of the BBC's bicentenary-themed output, however, was comparatively vast: 'the schedule featured programmes on Radio 3, Radio 4 and Radio 2, as well as output on BBC1, BBC2 and BBC4. These programmes were wide ranging and encompassed a great deal of detail. They featured debate, discussion, historical analysis, historical drama, comedy and music' (2008, pp. 393-394). The presence of then Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott as Chair of the Advisory Group meeting to discuss the commissioning of programming should be considered an instance of government endorsement of and influence on such programming (2008, p. 393).

BBC1's *Rough Crossings* is discussed by Wilson as a programme which embodies the problems with the BBC's Abolition Season. Whilst it excavates a previously forgotten part of British history regarding the settling of Freetown, Sierra Leone and the granting of freedom to American slaves who left their plantations to fight for the British during the War of Independence, what the programme lacks is any indication to the audience of why such a story should be important in 2007 in particular; it is also 'not the brutality of enslavement that is discussed but the work of those who tried to bring it to a halt' (2008, p. 397). This failure to interrogate the reasoning behind the programme's production in 2007 was prevalent across the range of BBC output, both television and radio. Similarly, the focus on abolitionists was prevalent, with Radio 4 programme *In Our Time* detailing the life of Wilberforce with such veneration that Wilson concludes 'the audience is presented with such based evidence that anyone who would consider criticising Wilberforce is presented as jealous and motivated by self-interest' (2008, p. 399). 'The BBC Abolition Season,' Wilson concludes, 'both creates and conforms to the wider public memory of enslavement and abolition. This is a memory that is singularly located within a white, British/English

perspective, which pays only a cursory attention to the victims of enslavement or its legacy in British society. The abolition season was therefore a means of remembering to forget' (2008, p. 401). It is disappointing that the BBC, with the power to reach such a large audience, did not attempt to engage viewers or listeners with the challenging story of slavery hiding behind abolition.

A later interaction with the history of the slave trade by the BBC appeared with an episode of *Garrow's Law* aired on 15th November 2010. Three years after the BBC's Abolition Season, many of the same tropes could be identified in this episode of the series which centres on eighteenth-century barrister William Garrow's experiences at the Old Bailey. This episode was concerned with a historical event from the height of the slave trade, which was repeated incessantly during the abolition campaign as justification for ending the trade, and resurfaced during the bicentenary in discussions of the way that the British legal system's interaction with slavery altered over the course of three decades: the slave ship *Zong*. The *Zong* came to prominence after its captain Luke Collingwood murdered 133 ailing slaves by throwing them overboard in order to preserve water supplies after the journey to the West Indies took longer than anticipated. Collingwood was able to make a claim to the ship's insurers for lost cargo; however the insurers disputed the claim based on a crew member's statement that Collingwood had in fact jettisoned the slaves as they were ill and unlikely to sell for as much at market as he could claim for their loss at sea. Abolitionists seized upon the story to illustrate the inhumanity of Britain's involvement in the slave trade, whereby people could be legally considered in the same way as animals, and murder go unprosecuted – instead almost rewarded with the pay-out of compensation for loss. However, this mass interest in the case was not immediate. Though Granville Sharp took an interest and attempted (unsuccessfully) to bring a charge of murder against the ship's crew, the case received 'relatively minor coverage' in newspapers of the time (Swaminathan, 2010, p. 487). In fact, although the incident took place in 1781, it was not until the height of abolitionism at the end of the decade that the story reached its peak of public awareness. Indeed, similar to the way that the name *Brookes* came to be omitted from reproductions of the *Description of a Slave Ship* so that it could be used to stand for any slave ship, so with the case of the *Zong*, the abolitionist 'recountings often redacted the name of the ship or the captain, creating instead a portrait of abuse that could be mapped onto any ship in the Middle Passage' (Swaminathan, 2010, p.484).

The episode of *Garrow's Law* sees Garrow employed by the ship's insurers to defend their decision not to settle the insurance claim because of the allegation that Collingwood

deliberately and unnecessarily threw ailing slaves overboard rather than be faced with their reduced value. The episode features an appearance by Equiano, who seeks Garrow out to persuade him that the case is not merely about cargo and insurance, but that the captain should face charges of murder. Garrow's associate Southouse tells Equiano that a case for murder could not be brought because 'cargo cannot be murdered! Africans are viewed as no different from other forms of property, like horses and cattle' (Marchant, 2010, p. 17a). Equiano reacts angrily, telling Southouse that 'slaves have 'agency' in the way of insurrection at sea! And when they are killed for it, the owners claim!' (Marchant, 2010, p. 17a). The inclusion of Equiano as a character in this episode serves to make the link for the viewer to the history of the slave trade which was presented by the BBC in 2007. The use of a historical figure also lends the story more weight. Equiano's insistence on slaves having agency, on their actively rebelling, and his fury that Collingwood will not be tried for murder marks a change in the way that the figure of the slave is represented by the BBC. Though the case centres around a murdered group of slaves, Equiano's presence draws attention to the desire of slaves to fight against their imprisonment, and to the work of a former slave in seeking out legal retribution for murder; Equiano seeks out Garrow and makes his case alone, without the company of any white British abolitionists.

Garrow's reaction to the case, and to Equiano's pursuit of a murder charge indicate more of an engagement with the previous abolition myth, whereby he asserts that the only way to achieve any sense of justice for the people murdered on the *Zong* is through a protracted legal evolution. Garrow suggests that if he can prove the insurance claim to be fraudulent, then insurers of slaving vessels in the future will provide 'the least possible indemnity for slaves murdered in passage' which will eventually 'inhibit the murder of slaves' (Marchant, 2010, p. 17b). This stance draws parallels with the abolitionist campaigners' insistence that the only way to end slavery was by first ending the slave trade. Equiano's impatience with this strategy as 'inch[ing] towards justice and not demand[ing] it' (Marchant, 2010, p. 17b) provides a previously-absent dissenting voice, dissatisfied with the lack of immediate action.

Janina Struk has commented on how media representation which can be so powerful as to contribute to affecting public opinion and effecting political change, can eventually reach saturation point, where these same images come to be rejected by a public which no longer wants to consume them. Writing about photography of the Holocaust, Struk contends that after the second world war, 'images which had been so powerfully placed in the public consciousness slowly faded from public view' (2005, p. 150). This was the result

of a new political landscape, whereby the importance of West Germany as a 'buffer state against the Soviet Bloc' emerged, and it became 'no longer politic to continue to remind the British and American public of the evils of Nazism' (2005, p. 150). These circumstances could easily be applied to the way that the public appetite for slave trade representations has altered since 1807. Once abolition had been achieved, it was no longer an obligation for the British to be exposed to the brutal reality of the slave trade; following emancipation the necessity of remembering slavery at all was vastly diminished, especially with the onset of imperial expansion, whereby the benevolence and philanthropy of the British needed to be emphasised in order to justify colonisation.

During the course of 2007, one of the subjects which arose on a regular basis and stimulated somewhat fierce debate, especially in the media and public reaction, was that of apology. Prescott's argument in his interview in *The Guardian* that apology was not appropriate given African complicity in the slave trade was one that was repeated by many that year, including the Bishop of Rochester who wrote in the *Daily Mail* that he refused to apologise for slavery because 'if a civilisation is constantly criticised, run down and apologised for, the danger is that its virtues will cease to flourish' (Nazir-Ali, 2007), believing that the bicentenary instead presented an opportunity for celebration of and thanksgiving for Britain's role in ending the trade. This frustration with calls for apology could be likened to Struk's description of how the British reacted to the Nuremberg trials, when the public grew 'weary of hearing about them', considering them a 'waste of time, waste of money and unnecessary from the start' because 'the defendants were obviously all guilty even before the trial opened' (2005, p. 156).

Paton and Webster point out that the bicentenary of the slave trade to the US in 2008 did not receive 'anything like the attention given to British abolition in 2007' (2009, p. 162) p.162). This is an often-cited point in analysis of bicentennial commemoration, and the authors define this as being because 'the significance of the antebellum period means that it would be much harder to make the mistake – made by many involved in the British commemorations – of confusing the abolition of the slave trade with the abolition of slavery itself' (2009, p. 162). However, rather than simply being a case of the UK conflating the end of the slave trade with the end of slavery, it is important to note that slavery heritage differs greatly between the US and the UK, and to understand why this is. Seaton has argued that 'one of the sinister and poignant features of slavery is that it is a phantom industry that leaves scant traces; its capital lies in people, long since dead, not machinery' (2001, p. 117). Whilst this is true for both the US and the UK, the constriction is more acute

in the UK because the US landscape has 'physical locations that had been associated with slavery, most notably plantation houses and estates, but also sites of slave markets, battles and memorials involving slaves' (2001, p. 117). This is not the case in the UK, which features none of the locations. Seaton also argues that the numbers of black people making up the population of each country is also a significant factor in the differing levels of slavery heritage. In Britain, black people make up 5.5% of the population, a figure which is much higher in the US, where absolute numbers are therefore also higher. Because of this, 'the dimensions of excluded history would be greater if slavery were not a heritage issue' (Seaton, 2001, p. 118).

A further distinguishing feature Seaton identifies is the 'role of slavery in official versions of national history' (2001, p. 120). He argues that the US was 'created out of the trauma of the Civil War, whose antagonists were polarized on the question of slavery. There is no way of avoiding the issue for any coherent version of history' (2001, p. 120). As this thesis has argued, a similar imperative to face this history is absent in the UK, where avoidance has gone largely unchallenged for two centuries: 'the zenith of Britain's imperial power was after the abolition of slavery, so that the story of the Empire can be, and certainly has been, told without significant attention to slavery, except for a positive narrative about Britain's role in its abolition' (2001, p. 12). A difference in the way that people involved in the slave trade were affected by its abolition is also at play: 'while the American Civil War ruined many southern families who derived their wealth from slavery, in the UK the corresponding economic and social legacies continue...the direct and indirect beneficiaries of slavery included families and institutions that still exist today' (2001, p. 121).

A significant way to illustrate the differences between the way that the US and UK have engaged with their slavery heritage is through the medium of film. As quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Walvin has listed *Roots* and *Amistad* as cultural productions which have helped further understanding of the slave trade. Steven Spielberg's 1997 film *Amistad*, the 1807 Commemorated review claims, 'succeeds on the basis of two core themes, suffering and survival' (1807 Commemorated, 2008). In terms of survival, 'the enslaved Africans are not represented as supplicants: they have fought for their freedom', whilst survival is demonstrated through the way 'sickness, brutality, mutilation and death are depicted in these scenes; blood is splattered across the deck of the ship as the visceral horrors of enslavement are brought to attention' (1807 Commemorated, 2008). Released ten years before Britain's commemoration of the bicentenary of abolition, the UK produced no films during the intervening years which sought to engage with the history of the slave

trade – and the practice of rebellion – in the same way. One of the critically acclaimed aspects of the film is that ‘Sengbe, the lead member of the enslaved Africans, is shown as strong, knowledgeable and highly intelligent. Rather than turn the story of the *Amistad* into a celebration of the kindness and generosity of white abolitionists, Sengbe is shown to be the instigator and cause of the freedom which is eventually granted to the enslaved Africans’ (1807 Commemorated, 2008).

The only British cinematic film released to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade was 2007’s *Amazing Grace*. Telling the story of Wilberforce’s battle to achieve parliamentary abolition of the slave trade, the film places Wilberforce at the centre of this history. Depicted as hardworking and virtuous, Wilberforce’s character is totally unimpeachable. As the 1807 Commemorated review asserts, ‘any characteristics which might appear to detract from his greatness, such as his opium addiction or his failure to get the Abolition Bill passed, is shown as either forced upon him or the result of his betrayal by others’ (1807 Commemorated, 2008). The glaringly obvious omission from the film is the presence of any of the slaves for whose freedom Wilberforce is fighting. The film lacks any depiction of the slave trade whatsoever, and the only images of enslavement are in brief, abstract dream sequences Wilberforce has after reading an abolitionist’s account of the work undertaken by slaves on sugar plantations. Whilst I consider this to be an abject failing of the film, *Guardian* reviewer Philip French stated that ‘wisely, the movie steers clear of dramatic depictions of the slave trade and life on the plantations (avoiding the sensational, sado-masochism of such films as the dubious *Mandingo* and its dire sequel, *Drum*’ (French, 2007). French makes a valid point regarding sensationalist representations of slavery, but the lack of any slave presence is striking in a film with this subject matter. The only black character featured in the film is Equiano, played by Youssou N’Dour, who Stephen Moss describes as ‘disappointingly inert in the film, but that’s probably the fault of the part, which calls on him to be unfailingly noble and dignified while white abolitionist William Wilberforce and lots of 18th-century Whigs in wigs shout at each other’ (Moss, 2007). Moss argues that Equiano’s extraordinary life story ‘merits a film in its own right’, but notes that in *Amazing Grace* he is the ‘noble, boundlessly dignified former slave who tears open his jacket to show Wilberforce the symbol of ownership branded on his chest. Equiano is the conscience of *Amazing Grace*, but as a character he is only sketched’ (Moss, 2007).

In interview with Moss, N’Dour explains that he saw the part of Equiano ‘as a window opening on to something... I felt that I was representing black people, African people’

(Moss, 2007). N'Dour also asserts that he is not the only black artist concerned with representing black people on the screen, and predicts that the history of slavery will soon be appropriated by black filmmakers: 'the fact that white directors are now addressing it means that black directors, African directors, are going to be drawn into the story, too. With time, they will start to tell their own stories and bring out different elements from their own perspective' (Moss, 2007). This would be a most welcome development in the story of media representations of the slave trade, especially of British origin. In a year when two American films about slavery (engaging with the subject in vastly different ways) were so critically acclaimed that they received the Oscars for Best Actor (Daniel Day Lewis for *Lincoln*), Best Supporting Actor (Christoph Waltz for *Django Unchained*) and Best Original Screenplay (Quentin Tarantino for *Django Unchained*) it is remarkable that Britain still lacks an iconic filmic engagement with the subject.

For its failings as a film representing any depiction of the slave experience or the slave trade, *Amazing Grace* does succeed in informing viewers that the campaign to abolish the trade took decades to reach fruition because the British parliament simply did not want to pass the Act. Rather than battling caricatures of greedy and violent slave traders, Wilberforce is pitted against sound, reasoned and experienced MPs who refuse to abolish the trade until it becomes impossible not to, for fear of a loss of revenue to the nation. This aspect of the abolition campaign has been under-represented in the media, and requires more depiction in order to draw attention to the failure of people with the same education and social backgrounds as Wilberforce to act to end the enslavement of fellow human beings, or to even relate the slave trade to human experience rather than simply economic transaction and revenue.

The media's engagement with the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade was varied, with differences between the coverage presented by tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, television and radio programmes and film. Newspaper coverage tended to report in its main section only stories relating to the bicentenary which were also connected to other news stories – such as *The Mirror's* description of Toyin Agbetu's protest, or its depiction of modern slavery in Britain. A broader description of the bicentenary and what it was commemorating was absent from all except the Comments pages, likely to be read only by those seeking out such clarification. With the BBC's television and radio programming seeking to reinforce the abolition myth, a key opportunity was missed to reach probably the widest audience of any of the cultural forms discussed in this thesis with a revised history of the slave trade to consider alongside that

of abolition. The film *Amazing Grace* similarly conformed to the original abolition myth, and did not provide viewers with any new access to this history.

Conclusion

'When *Schindler's List* was first released in cinemas,' writes Mala Tribich in *The Times* on 8th April 2013, 'millions of people flocked to see it. They started talking about the Holocaust in a different way. They imagined the lives of individuals not so different from themselves; men, women and children living in unending fear. For some, abstract knowledge of what had happened became coupled with empathy – we were people, just like them' (Tribich, 2013). The increase in public interest in this history gave Holocaust survivors 'the courage to speak about what had happened to us and our families, and people were ready to listen. When they heard us, speaking as British citizens, they felt that the Holocaust was part of this country's history too. A door had been opened for other films to be made, helping to give the Holocaust a permanent place in the public consciousness' (Tribich, 2013). The kind of public exposure to history through the medium of culture which Tribich describes attains a great power in shaping collective memory. The identification of viewers with those who suffered through the Holocaust as being 'just like them' made this history more vital to viewers, whose interest was piqued by the cultural medium used to represent this historical event. This level of engagement, interest and understanding is what, I would argue, the bicentennial events of 2007 aimed to achieve; a rapid altering of the way that Britons engage with their past and the legacy of that past in the present. In many ways, this did not come to pass. However, the attempts made by various cultural forms to achieve a significant level of re-engagement with the history of the slave trade necessitate evaluation.

Many commentators have evaluated the extent to which various cultural forms managed to challenge the abolition myth. However, where this thesis differs is in conducting that evaluation based on the differing forms of museums, literature and media, and coming to an understanding of the roundedness of the image of the slave trade presented when considered through all 3 forms.

As easily-accessible cultural forms, the museum, novel and media represent classic forms of entertainment, and their comparison within this thesis has aimed to evaluate the relative successes of each as a means of non-formal education regarding the history of the British slave trade and abolition. However, it must be recognised that the differences between these forms mean that they are experienced in different ways by those who access them. One of the key differences is temporal: the only medium which dictates how long the viewer engages with it is the cinema, where the person is compelled to absorb the entire film from start to finish, at the pace directed by the filmmaker. The novel can keep a

reader engrossed over a much longer period if read in chunks rather than one sitting; however, the length of time spent actively reading each part is dictated by the preferences of the reader. With museums, there is no supervision or guidance on how to engage with exhibitions, and indeed a visitor can pass through an exhibition reading only a handful of the panels on display, casting the merest glances at artefacts, and emerge from the exhibition in a fraction of the time which the curator had intended. In this way it could be assumed that the cultural medium most able to affect viewers in such a way to alter their engagement with a subject such as the slave trade would be cinema. The relative dearth of cinematic engagement with the history of the slave trade, and particularly with the British slave trade, means this assumption has yet to be tested.

A further temporal difference between the three cultural forms, which affects the pace and extent to which they can effect change in public opinion, is that of production time: novels can take many years or even decades to be written (especially when based on extensive historical research), while the time taken for films to go from writing through to filming and then distribution can take several years. Museums, however, often find themselves under pressure to produce exhibitions within shortened timeframes in order to qualify for funding and to fit into calendars of events such as the abolition bicentenary. Thus museum exhibitions represent the form most able to respond rapidly for the need to expand a community's understanding of a historical period.

Diana Paton has written that 'despite the efforts of many in the museum and educational world, and of campaigning African-British organisations, a narrative of white British self-congratulation and pride dominated the most visible responses to the bicentenary' (2009, p. 279). Wood seems to agree, asserting that 'in so many ways nothing has changed much in two hundred years. All in all, Britain's societal response to 2007 hid behind a date...to avoid thinking of the wider implications of the outfall of the slave trade now' (2010, p. 163). This seems an unnecessarily critical view of the work museums have undertaken. Whilst many exhibitions featured the same abolitionist figures and compromised artefacts as those championed 200 years ago, the success of the International Slavery Museum represents a vast improvement in museological engagement with the slave trade, and its impact should not be underestimated. Similarly, the V&A's *Uncomfortable Truths* drew attention to the nature of the slave trade's invisibility in plain sight.

A danger in analysing the content of museum exhibitions is that far more interpretation can be read into curatorial choices than was intended by the curator. Alan Rice believes it is important to explain the process by which exhibitions which he worked on during 2007

were constructed, because 'important objects left out of the exhibition, mainly because of space or aesthetic taste, meant that certain narratives remained in the storeroom' (2012, p.58). This constraint of exhibition construction should be borne in mind when analysing what ended up on display, so that the narrative of the whole exhibition is read and interpreted, rather than simply the individual artefacts which did or did not appear.

Perhaps one of the most problematic aspects of museum production in 2007 from a critical perspective is that of prosthetic memory, and whether or not its use is appropriate in this context. Cubitt argues that museums:

'labored to persuade black members of British society that museums – long regarded as temples of white supremacy – could now be places for the articulation of their voices, for the honest acknowledgment of their ancestors' histories of suffering and achievement, and for recognition of their own entitlement as full members of British society... What it required was not a simple shift in presentational emphasis, a redirection of curatorial authority, but commitment to an opening up of the social relations and institutional structures within which views of the past are framed and formulated' (Cubitt, 2012).

In order to appeal to a new black British audience whose own heritage had previously been omitted, then, museums found themselves in a position where it was imperative they created new exhibits and displayed artefacts which would enable access to this heritage, whilst at the same time ensuring that traditional white, middle class audiences were not alienated. This necessity for a broad appeal and deep impact simultaneously led to the creation in many exhibitions of prosthetic memories of the slave trade, whose power lies in their 'visceral, painful, and scarring' nature, as well as their ability to 'unsettle, to produce ruptures, to disfigure, and to defamiliarise the very conditions of existence in the present' (Landsberg, 2004, p. 106). However, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the problem with the creation of prosthetic memories is that they are, by their very nature, prosthetic: they 'engage spectators across racial lines, to create prosthetic memories even in those to whom the memories do not "properly" belong' (Landsberg, 2004, p. 109). Therefore their impact is lessened by their inability to be entirely specific to the cultural group for whose benefit they were ostensibly created. In terms of the attempt which Cubitt describes to open up museums to a new audience these prosthetic memories represent a novel way for both new and traditional museum visitors to access, engage with and understand this previously neglected history in the same way; the disadvantage being that a deeper connection with a missing part of their heritage by black British audiences is problematised.

The representation of the slave trade in popular media constituted, I would argue, the least critical engagement with the abolition myth. Wilson describes the BBC Abolition Season as revealing a 'desire not to be confronted by painful and traumatic histories whilst maintaining the sense that abolitionism reflects the munificence of Britain,' illustrating a 'concern not to confront the perceivably potentially damaging and disrupting memory of the transatlantic slave trade' (Wilson, 2008, p. 401). This concern was definitely evident in televisual representation of the slave trade during 2007, though perhaps the inclusion of the story of the *Zong* in a 2010 episode of *Garrow's Law* could be considered indicative of an attempt since the bicentenary to provide the viewing public with a wider sense of Britain's slave trading, and legal attempts to protect the industry.

Whilst American filmmakers have shown a skill in addressing slavery in the cinema, British filmmaking on the subject is still sparse and lacking in any critical examination of the abolition myth. The fact that *Amazing Grace* features only one black character and no lasting depictions of the enslaved or the slave industry serves to erase the slave presence from British heritage from the outset of abolitionism.

Newspapers provided the opportunity for their readers to learn more about the slave trade and Britain's place within it – but only if readers were willing to seek out that information. The rather piecemeal engagement of newspapers with the slave trade seemed less indicative of a desire to obscure it, and more the result of not deeming it important enough to dedicate column inches to.

The analysis undertaken for this thesis has led to the conclusion that currently the only cultural form which uniformly interrogates the abolition myth is the historical novel. Not merely concerned with setting their novels during the height of the British slave trade, these authors sought to draw attention to many of the aspects of abolition production which have previously been ignored or under-explored, in order to illustrate how the abolition myth should be considered compromised. In bringing the slave experience to readers' attention, these novels offer a reworking of key figures of the slave trade, in order to examine their actions through the lens of a modern reader. In reimagining the slave figure, these novelists bring personality to the figure from this history which has most often been denied any sense of agency, personal desire or indeed individual differentiation.

January 2014 saw the release of a film which interestingly combined the traits of novel, film and museum. Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* was based on the novel of the same name by Solomon Northup, written in 1853 about his experience of being a free man living in

New York with his family who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in the south. The film garnered a huge amount of critical acclaim, and made McQueen, a former Turner Prize-winning visual artist, the first black director to win an Oscar for Best Picture. Having adapted the screenplay from the book which he described as 'so much like a script' already, McQueen explained that part of the appeal of making a film about slavery was its visual and visceral nature: 'I mean, people talk about being beaten or what happened to them, but when you see it visually and interpret it or imagine it within images, it becomes a different thing' (Mitchell, 2014). This visceral imagining of Northup's experiences has attracted astonishing amounts of critical admiration, with many critics praising McQueen's unflinching depiction of the violence of the slave trade. As Aitkenhead describes, the film 'pitilessly documents the beatings, lynchings, rape and brutality of a slave-owning class half-demented by its own moral corruption, and routinely reduces audiences to tears. "I hadn't realised slavery was that bad," is the comment its director keeps hearing' (Aitkenhead, 2014). McQueen puts this down to a 'kind of amnesia...or not wanting to focus on this, because of it being so painful...We can deal with the second world war and the Holocaust and so forth and what not, but this side of history, maybe because it was so hideous, people just do not want to see' (Aitkenhead, 2014). McQueen's film, however, does seem to have awoken a desire to see and to engage with this history, or at least with the film's depiction of it. The critical praise of a visual artist's graphic depiction of slave trade violence is particularly interesting to note given Wood's insistence that such displays merely invite the opportunity for 'sado-masochistic fantasy, and sentimental self-identification' (2007, p. 203). The extent to which McQueen's depiction leads to further engagement with this history will serve, in time, to explore whether Wood is correct.

McQueen mentions fellow Oscar-winning film about slavery, *Django Unchained* when describing meeting Tarantino, who was working on *Django* at the time, and who told him "'I'd hope there could be more than one film about slavery.'" It's interesting because there are a bunch of westerns, a bunch of gangster movies, a bunch of sex or war movies' (Mitchell, 2014). Indeed, there will need to be many more films about slavery released before it can become a standard cinematic genre.

Despite its many strengths as an example of British film-making about the slave trade, *12 Years a Slave* cannot truly be considered a step towards a greater understanding of the history of Britain's slave trading because it is a distinctly American story: Northup was born free in America, where he was kidnapped and sold into slavery on American plantations; he did not endure the Middle Passage or enslavement under British plantation owners. It is

interesting to note that a black British director seeking to make a film about slavery chose Northrup's narrative, rather than a story detailing the involvement in slavery of his own nation. Critic David Cox makes the connection between the film and Britain's own slave trading history, noting that 'the world depicted in *12 Years a Slave* was in part a product of British entrepreneurship. On this, our own cinema has so far had little to say' (Cox, 2014). However, he then goes on to argue that 'slavery is not the same issue for us that it is across the Atlantic. It's not just that Britain blazed the trail to abolition: we lack the poisonous racial legacy that the practice endowed upon America' (Cox, 2014). The ease with which Cox, writing in *The Guardian*, is able to sweep aside the entire legacy of the slave trade in Britain is indicative of a distinct failure to recognise the inheritances of this period which institutions like the International Slavery Museum go to great lengths to highlight.

One of the criticisms of the popularity of the American TV series (and arguably cultural phenomenon) *Roots* which Landsberg identified was that it was 'too much about the pleasure of healing and not enough about the pain of remembering' (2004, p. 16). In many ways the bicentenary events of 2007 also conformed to this failure to confront painful truths, in favour of taking a more 'healing' perspective. Indeed, Waterton and Wilson describe the abolition discourse prevalent in 2007 as being 'inherently bi-polar and contradictory' (2009, p. 384). On the one hand, they argue, the slave trade is reduced to 'a dehumanised process, in which links between Britain, the "evil trade"...and the consequent actions of a range of people are obfuscated. On the other hand, the abolitionists receive no such nominalisation, such that the diverse aspects of the abolition movement – and the specific actions of specific people within that campaign – are foregrounded' (2009, p. 384). Cox's brief statement on the British slave trade, in comparison with America's experience, deftly conforms to this bi-polar perspective.

Taken as a whole, cultural engagement with the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade has only achieved partial success in its attempt to bring the history of British involvement in slavery into collective memory. However, I would argue that it has been important to lay the foundations from which this memory can grow. Although currently this memory has to be sought out either through museums or novels, or newspaper supplements, it does now exist, and has a permanent place on the edges of public discourse. If, as N'Dour hopes, more black directors will begin to tackle the subject of slavery in films, then perhaps the reach of this history may start to spread beyond those seeking it out, to become a pervasive and unavoidable aspect of British collective remembrance. McQueen has argued that 'people want to engage with this subject...They

want to look at this side of history, to examine it and discuss it, and the best thing, for me, is if a film can start a discussion' (Mitchell, 2014). If the discussion still unfolding around *12 years a Slave* can lead to a greater engagement with the British slave trade then perhaps there will soon be a director ready to make a film about this history.

Hall effectively summarises the potential for change in her assertion that 'it will be a long time before we know what all this adds up to. But the floodgates have been opened and cannot now be shut. Toni Morrison famously wrote of the unrepresentability of the horrors of slavery: *Beloved* was forgotten 'like a bad dream, remembering seemed unwise'. What we saw in 2007 was a struggle to remember' (2010, p. 199).

In fact, in many ways 2007 represented a concerted effort on the part of official institutions to remember to forget. The use of the abolition discourse 'deftly side-stepped issues of "race" and "guilt", becoming a process that gently – and disingenuously – disarmed the potency of such a controversial history' (Emma Waterton, Ross Wilson, 2009, p. 382). As Waterton and Wilson further argue, this discourse served to dissipate responsibility by remembering the slave trade as 'something that was "acceptable" at the time' and therefore 'part of a past that finds no congruence in the present' (2009, pp. 388-389).

However, the impact of the sheer number of ways in which the history of the slave trade was accessed and disseminated as part of the bicentennial commemorations of 2007 should not be underestimated. As Cubitt argues, 'it is simply harder now than it was before 2007 for members of British society to behave as if abolitionism were the only point of contact between slavery and the nation's history' (Cubitt, 2012). The increase in the instances of cultural engagement with the history of the British slave trade, and especially the rise in its depiction within popular culture enable an optimistic hope that slave trade history will become more openly recognised and discussed in the same way that Tribich found *Schindler's List* served to open up dialogue around the Holocaust.

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