

Slavery, Abolition, and the Myth of White British Benevolence

by  
Sasha Johnston

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The College of Graduate Studies

Interdisciplinary Studies

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
OKANAGAN

May, 2009

© Sasha Johnston, 2009

## Abstract

This thesis interrogates gestures of remembrance in British culture, specifically as they serve to construct and maintain a collective memory of Britain's involvement in Atlantic slavery and abolitionism. I am particularly interested in what representations of slavery and abolitionism tell us about the permissible limits of Britain's historical narratives, and the relationship of those narratives to contemporary ideals of national identity. The achievement of abolition in the nineteenth century – or “the emancipation moment,” as David Brion Davis so appropriately describes it – enabled a form of strategic denial, wherein the self-congratulatory celebration of abolition was used to elide important moral and ethical questions engendered by Britain's participation in Atlantic slavery. As a result, Britain was not required to contend with its paradoxical position as champion of both slavery and abolition. Through an examination of various public debates initiated by the 2007 bicentennial of abolition in Britain, and an analysis of “Breaking the Chains” – an exhibit in Bristol's British Empire and Commonwealth Museum – I seek to demonstrate that the discursive formation of slavery and abolition in contemporary Britain continues to both inform and invoke what I am calling the myth of white British benevolence. This allows many Britons to cling to a national identity that is grounded in assumptions about racial whiteness, and to avoid having to confront the ways in which the legacy of slavery (and its abolition) informs racial/ethnic tensions in Britain, putting future policies and practices of multiculturalism into question.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
History and/in Contemporary British Society: An Introduction.....	1
I. Memory, Meaning, and Historical Narratives: A Review of the Literature.....	7
i. Imagining the Nation: Memory, History, Identity.....	7
ii. Representing Identity and the Role of the Museum.....	15
iii. Narratives of British Abolitionism.....	20
II. Patterns of Representation and Restitution:	
The Contemporary Debate over Britain’s Multi-ethnic Past.....	37
i. Confirming and Contesting the Need for Apology.....	37
ii. <i>The Parekh Report</i> & the Idea of British National Identity.....	49
III. Establishing and Rehearsing the Myth of Benevolence.....	62
i. The Structures of Visual Enslavement.....	63
ii. “Breaking the Chains” and the Maintenance of Master Narratives.....	74
Concluding Remarks:	
Bringing the ‘Then’ into the ‘Now’: Redressing the Cultural Denial of Slavery.....	92
Bibliography.....	103

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Adam Jones for his guidance and support in supervising this project.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Jessica Stites Mor and Jennifer Gustar for their time and assistance.

## History and/in Contemporary British Society: An Introduction

What we remember is defined by what we choose to forget,  
and how we choose to remember is defined by how we  
choose to ignore.

- Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory*

In October 2000, the Runnymede Trust – an independent think-tank committed to the promotion of racial justice in Britain – published *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report*, the result of two years of research undertaken and analyzed by over twenty members of various ethnic and professional backgrounds. Backed by the British Labour administration and launched by Home Secretary Jack Straw, the focus of *The Parekh Report* was to assess the contemporary condition of multi-ethnic Britain and to propose strategies for dealing with racial discrimination and disadvantage, thereby helping Britain become a more “confident and vibrant multi-cultural society at ease with its rich diversity.”<sup>1</sup> The report argued that despite widespread investment in and promotion of the idea of Britishness as an inclusive and accessible identity, various aspects of and attitudes within society served to limit the acceptance of racialized British citizens, and to perpetuate a conflation of Britishness with whiteness; thus, it called for a critical (re)examination of the idea of British identity.<sup>2</sup> As Stuart Hall, a recognized academic in cultural studies who served as a member of the commission, maintained, “if people from ethnic minorities are to become not only citizens with equal rights but also an integral part of the national culture, the meaning of the term ‘British’ will have to

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report*, (London: Profile Books, 2000), viii.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of clarity, throughout this thesis I will use the term ‘racialized’ to refer to people who, based primarily on physical characteristics, are perceived and defined as non-white. The issue of whiteness as a racial identity will be considered in chapter one.

become more inclusive of their experiences, values and aspirations.”<sup>3</sup> The report identified British history – for example, as it is represented in Britain’s educational curricula and popular media – as a problematic contributor to this narrow and exclusive idea of national identity; thus, in order to reconstitute the meaning of Britishness, the report recommended that the histories used to narrate this identity likewise be reconsidered.

While *The Parekh Report* specifically identified racial inequities and tensions within various British structures and institutions, and made numerous suggestions regarding the most constructive ways to address and remedy such issues, it was these two recommendations – that the idea of Britishness and the master narratives of British history ought to be seriously rethought – which instigated the fiercest controversies. In fact, Runnymede received hundreds of letters, phone calls and e-mails in response to the publication of the report, many of which were extremely threatening. Indeed, one disgruntled British citizen wrote, ““To show you what I think of your report, I’m going out of my house right now, and I’m going to slit the throat of the first Paki I meet.””<sup>4</sup> However, in his analysis of British reception of *The Parekh Report*, Julian Petley contends that such extreme and violent reactions were provoked not by the content of the report itself, but rather by the incendiary way in which it was represented by the media.<sup>5</sup> Coverage of *The Parekh Report* by *The Daily Telegraph*, in particular, was selective, focusing on just three of the report’s 417 pages; moreover, and quite unfortunately, the coverage by the *Telegraph* set the tone for other major newspapers. Writers for the *Mail*,

---

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, as cited in Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Julian Petley, “A case of mistaken identity: What went wrong between the UK media and a report on ‘multi-ethnic’ Britain?” *Index on Censorship*, 3 (2001): 20.

<sup>5</sup> This issue will be considered in greater detail in chapter two.

*Sun, Mirror, Evening Standard, Star,* and *Times* followed suit in denouncing the report, and, as Petley observes, “even the supposedly liberal *Guardian* joined the fray.”<sup>6</sup>

Provocative headlines such as “Straw wants to rewrite our history,” and “Why I am sick of the anti-British disease,” represented *The Parekh Report* as denouncing all things ‘British,’ threatening to erase the history and values through which many British citizens define themselves.

In an effort to contend with the response of the press, Bhikhu Parekh, chair of the commission, also wrote a column for the *Telegraph*.<sup>7</sup> Parekh acknowledged that while everyone may not agree with the recommendations put forth by the report, it was important that such dissent be registered respectfully, in order to facilitate productive discussions. “Debate cannot even begin,” Parekh argued, “if the media distort our report for partisan purposes or prejudice their readers’ minds about it.” The report does not state that the word British is racist, Parekh clarified, as the *Telegraph* had accused, but rather that it has “racial connotations” due to its long-standing equation with whiteness. Nor does it say that Britain should cease to be “a nation or a cohesive political community,” but rather that it should develop and foster a sense of nationhood “grounded in respect for legitimate diversities and differences, and weave them into a single cohesive community.” The report, Parekh argued, does not hold that Britain has no history of which to be proud, or that British history should not serve to inform the idea of British national identity. However, it does insist that if the idea of Britishness is ever to encompass the full spectrum of peoples living as British citizens, then the meanings

---

<sup>6</sup> Petley, “A case of mistaken identity,” 24.

<sup>7</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, “Why it is vital to change what it means to be British,” *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 2000. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255965/Why-it-is-vital-to-change-what-it-means-to-be-British.html>

constructed within and out of the grand narratives of British history – particularly as this history is publicly represented – must be carefully reconsidered to include the historical sensibilities and experiences of all British peoples.

One aspect of that history – and the focus of this thesis – is Britain’s collective memory of Atlantic slavery and British abolitionism. I want to consider gestures of remembrance in British culture as they serve to construct and maintain a collective memory of Atlantic slavery and British abolitionism, as I am interested in what such representations tell us about the permissible limits of Britain’s historical narratives, and the relationship of those narratives to contemporary ideals of national identity. The Atlantic slave trade existed between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and involved the enslavement of over 12 million African peoples. Between the 1730s and early 1800s, Britain fully dominated the trade, using and abusing the lives of an estimated 3 million Africans in the production of sugar in their Caribbean colonies. In 1807, an act of parliament banned Britain’s further participation in the slave trade; twenty-six years later, in 1833, another act abolished slavery itself in most British colonies. While these moments are of tremendous historical significance, Britain’s involvement in slavery and the slave trade did not serve to initiate debates in British society over issues such as the contradictions of a nation that professed values of universal equality and liberty while simultaneously enslaving fellow human beings. Instead, abolition was used to entrench an ideal of Britishness that emphasized the inherently enlightened, progressive, civilized character of British national identity. I argue, therefore, that the achievement of abolition in the nineteenth century – or “the emancipation moment,” as David Brion Davis so appropriately describes it – enabled a form of strategic denial, wherein the self-



congratulatory celebration of abolition was used to elide important moral and ethical questions engendered by Britain's participation in Atlantic slavery.

Two hundred years later, Britain's collective memory of slavery continues, in many ways, to be disavowed through the privileging of celebratory narratives of British abolitionism. Appeals to Britain's abolitionist lineage manifest in the many debates over the significance of these histories conducted in major British newspapers; in the positions and policies of the British state; and in cultural media, such as museums, meant to contend with and commemorate these histories. These gestures not only ignore many of the misconceptions concerning the historical effects of abolition itself – such as the fact that, economically, Britain benefited greatly from both slavery and, as Marika Sherwood has compellingly argued, its abolition – but also suggest that British abolitionism signified an end to British oppression, obscuring Britain's ongoing relationship with both slavery and imperialism. I will thus argue that the discursive formation of slavery and abolition in contemporary Britain continues to both inform and invoke what I am calling the myth of white British benevolence, and, as a result, Britain is not required to confront its paradoxical position as champion of both slavery and abolition. This enables many contemporary Britons to cling to a national identity that is grounded in assumptions about racial whiteness, and to avoid having to confront the ways in which the legacy of slavery (and its abolition) informs racial/ethnic tensions in Britain. As Hall writes, “we forget that slavery is what lies at the root of and shapes predominantly relations between blacks and whites in the west.”<sup>8</sup>

My thesis thus examines two related questions: first, how have slavery and abolition been represented, remembered, and commemorated in British culture; and, second, how

---

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, as cited in Kowaleski Wallace, *The Slave Trade*, 135.

have these narratives – which are constructed and deployed as historical ‘truths’ – been engaged to articulate, frame, and constitute the ideal of white British benevolence. I begin with a literature review pertaining to the relation of history, memory, and identity; the function of the museum in the constitution of identity; and the dominant narrative trends in abolition scholarship. In the second chapter, I engage with controversies initiated by the 2007 bicentennial of British abolition – primarily as they played out in the media – and position these debates in relation to the content and reception of *The Parekh Report*, in an effort to establish the place of historical narratives in contemporary struggles over the meaning of national identity. I then move to critically analyze “Breaking the Chains: The Parliamentary Campaign to End Slavery,” a temporary exhibit at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, UK, intended to mark the 2007 bicentennial. I conclude with a consideration of the multiple ways in which history may be used to redefine the idea of British national identity, with particular attention to correcting the ongoing cultural denial of slavery in Britain.

To be clear, my focus throughout this thesis is not specifically on the events of Atlantic slavery or its abolition, though these are undeniably valuable subjects of enquiry. I am concerned, rather, with the various ways in which these historical events are discursively constituted in British culture, and seek to determine what is at stake in the ongoing maintenance of a sanitized British history and the refusal or unwillingness to acknowledge the process and consequences of selective memory in contemporary social relations.

**I. Memory, Meaning, & Historical Narratives:  
A Review of the Literature**

In an effort to establish the theoretical framework informing my critical analysis, the following literature review is organized to consider the multiple relationships between memory, history, and national identity; the construction of identities in and through museums; and the historical scholarship that constitutes the dominant narratives of British abolitionism. In the interest of clarity and concision – not to mention brevity – my survey of the literature in each category is necessarily limited, aiming to contextualize and elucidate the basis upon which my discursive analysis is constructed.

**i. Imagining the Nation: Memory, History, Identity**

There is a broad and contentious body of scholarship pertaining to the concept of memory, though historian Alon Colfino argues that the notion of memory is one “more practiced than theorized.”<sup>9</sup> Memory is commonly understood as the process through which individuals conceptualize or experience a sense of the past; however, contrary to prevailing ‘intuitive’ or ‘commonsensical’ interpretations of memory as something both internal and individual, my concern is with what Maurice Halbwachs described as collective memory. For Halbwachs, collective memory refers to a shared identity that, in spite of internal heterogeneity, serves to unite a group. Collective memory is, of course, created through the concerted and collective acts of individuals, but these individuals are located “in a specific group context,” and, therefore, invoke that context “to remember or

---

<sup>9</sup> Alon Colfino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *The American Historical Review* 102(5), (Dec. 1997): 1386.

recreate the past.”<sup>10</sup> Thus memory does not correlate with a past authenticity, nor does it give us “verifiable access to the real”; as Andreas Huyssen argues, the past “is not simply there in memory, but... must be articulated to become memory.”<sup>11</sup> Collective memory is constituted, then, by the totality of individual and collective efforts to reconstruct the past, a process that is shaped by myriad social, historical, and cultural influences. It is in this sense that Halbwachs argued that both the form and content of collective memory is significantly shaped not by a supposed correlation with or reflection of the reality of the past, but rather by the events and interests of the present.

However, many scholars – and, in particular, historians – contest not only the application of collective memory, but also the ways in which it is conceptualized. Kerwin Lee Klein, for example, argues that in historical studies, the label ‘memory’ is too often used as a metahistorical category, which subsumes important distinctions existing between popular histories, oral histories, and myths.<sup>12</sup> Critics such as Wulf Kansteiner contend that studies of collective memory are tenuous in both the subject of their interest and their stated methodology.<sup>13</sup> In spite of such controversies, I invoke the idea of collective memory throughout this thesis, and do so with specific reference to the material evidence that constitutes its existence – that is, I explore the multiple discourses that collectively construct the shared memory of a particular historical event, or set of events, and the values and assumptions implicit in those discourses. In doing so, I am not suggesting that collective memories are fixed or static, but rather seek to demonstrate that

---

<sup>10</sup> Lewis A. Coser, “Introduction,” in Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22.

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” *Representations* 69, (Winter, 2000): 128.

<sup>13</sup> Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 41(2), (May, 2002): 180.

the content and significance of these memories shift and change according to both the concerns of the present, as well as the means and specific context in and through which they are constructed.

From this perspective, then, collective memory is a sort of imaginative production, constituted through various modes of cultural representation. These “vehicles of memory,” such as literature, art, theatre, popular media, museums and so forth, transform representations of the past into shared cultural ‘knowledge’ – that is, the dominant representations of the past are constructed as historical truths or reality.<sup>14</sup> Colfino argues that collective memory can be viewed as “an outcome of the relationship between a distinct representation of the past and the full spectrum of symbolic representations available in a given culture,” allowing for analysis of “the ideas, values, and practices embedded in and symbolized by its particular imagery.”<sup>15</sup> This suggests that the mode through which memory is represented, and the ideologies demarcating the parameters and content of representation, tell us a great deal about the culture within which such representations are manifested – that is, the repetitive use or privileging of particular narratives of memory reflects the ideals of that culture. Again, in this respect, collective memory is not necessarily significant for what it says about the past, but rather for the ways in which the representation of the past speaks to or is informed by identities in the present.

Identity, like memory, is a problematic concept too often assumed to be self-evident. For Halbwachs, memory, and the representation thereof, does not constitute identity, but rather is expressive or reflective of an identity that is already in existence. As

---

<sup>14</sup> Colfino, “Collective Memory,” 1386.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 1392.

Allan Megill writes, Halbwachs' work "deals with how an identity, whose integrity at a certain moment is assumed, goes about inventing a past congruent with that identity."<sup>16</sup> The view that established identities give rise to particular forms of remembering and narrative of memory is widely supported. John Gillis, for example, argues that what we remember is defined by an assumed identity, and that in order to accord with changing conceptions of identity, memory is a site of continual revision.<sup>17</sup> However, various theorists contest the interpretation that posits memory as a means through which an already-established identity is expressed: Megill, for example, argues that until recently, the idea of identity itself had not been subject to thorough interrogation; thus, the notion that memory served to "consolidate and carry forward identities already assumed to exist" was equally unproblematized.<sup>18</sup> Influenced by the insights of theorists such as Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall, in the field of cultural studies it is customary to argue that discourse constructs subject positions by recruiting individuals into particular versions of identity. Such identities, then, are not reflected in such representations, but are in fact discursively constituted. As Hall argues, it is more useful to conceive of identity not as an "already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent," but rather as an ongoing production, constituted firmly within representation.<sup>19</sup> Identity, in this sense, is a process that takes place according to an imaginary or ideal notion of being, informing and invoking narratives of memory.

---

<sup>16</sup> Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 47.

<sup>17</sup> John R. Gillis, "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship," in John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Megill, *Historical Knowledge*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Hall, as cited in Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*, (New York: Open University Press, 2004), 5.

Regardless of their varying positions on the relationship between memory and identity, Colfino, Gillis, and Megill agree there is a direct correlation between the volatility and uncertainty of an identity and the use of memory to resolve that instability. As Megill writes, “the more a community is imagined, the more it finds that ‘memory’ is necessary to it.”<sup>20</sup> They also agree that an integral aspect of remembering is, in fact, forgetting – what Benedict Anderson characterized as “collective amnesia.”<sup>21</sup> This collective amnesia is not the result of accident or omission, but is a largely concerted process, intended, on some level, to reconcile the collective memories of a group with a particular version of group identity. “Simply stated,” writes Colfino, the politics of memory concern “who wants to remember what, and why.”<sup>22</sup> Remembrance, then, is a selective act, pursued as a means to establish, solidify, and/or maintain group identity. As Hall argues, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past.”<sup>23</sup>

Similar to many of the issues concerning memory and identity, recent trends in the theorization of historical philosophies and methods problematize established narratives of the past and their relation to the politics of memory and identity, foregrounding the implication of contemporary concerns and interests in historical representation. As Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips suggest, “the rise of the word memory as a dominant meta-historical category represents a remaking of the historical imagination,” signifying a “blurring of boundaries between what is constituted as ‘myth’ and ‘reality’, ‘the past’ and

---

<sup>20</sup> Megill, *Historical Knowledge*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1991), 204.

<sup>22</sup> Colfino, “Collective Memory,” 1393.

<sup>23</sup> Hall, as quoted in Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 1.

‘history’ or ‘rationality’ and ‘imagination.’”<sup>24</sup> The idea of a singular historical truth observed from a position of objectivity is, particularly in the field of cultural studies, contested as a problematic construct, and historical narratives that purport to offer as much are confronted as only one among many interpretations of specific events or ideas competing for contemporary credibility. Furthermore, while the contention that the past is a cultural production of the present may surprise, or even cause offence to, those who retain a view of history as an objective re-creation of a past reality, this is an argument most historians are quite familiar with.<sup>25</sup> This is not to imply that certain interpretations are not more compelling, convincing, or substantiated than others. Indeed, scholarship must stand up to a rigorous set of standards in order to gain credibility in the historical community. However, there is a growing acceptance that one cannot ‘do’ history outside of history – that is, historical discourse pertaining to any period is written and represented within ‘the present,’ and is inevitably influenced by that present. As cultural theorist Chris Weedon writes, “history serves as a repository of symbols for the cultural politics of the present.”<sup>26</sup> Historians themselves are subject to the broad requirements of the society in which they live, as well as the more specific requirements of their superiors, and are also inescapably subject to their own ideological positions. This illustrates the impossibility of the ideal of historical objectivity, as historians construct their interpretations of the past from a subjective experience of the present.

The parallels between issues in historical writing and representation and those of memory are evident, as both memory and history share important relationships with

---

<sup>24</sup> Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips, “Introduction,” in Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips, eds., *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), xxviii.

<sup>25</sup> Colfino, “Collective Memory,” 1387.

<sup>26</sup> Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, 27.



contemporary identities. Megill argues, however, that there is an important boundary between the two – one that we cannot, and ought not, seek to erase.<sup>27</sup> While memory provides an affirming or legitimating function, the writing of history, Megill stresses, ought to assume a more critical stance, if for no other reason than the fact that the cultural discourses within any given society tend to be self-validating.<sup>28</sup> That is, the structures, institutions, values, and ideologies of a society are largely reinforced and reproduced by the dominant discourses of that culture. Despite the validity of this point, however, historical narratives, like memory, are frequently invoked to serve just such a purpose: to construct a collective memory of the past, which is accorded the status of knowledge due to its affiliation with ‘history,’ and is then employed to affirm or stabilize a presumably desirable identity in the present.

The use of history to legitimate identity is particularly evident in the narratives of national identity; as George L. Mosse argues, in many accounts, history itself becomes a national myth.<sup>29</sup> Because the idea of the national identity is itself constituted through imaginative acts, a critical aspect of its creation and continuance involves not only performances of remembrance, but also those of denial. As Ernest Renan argued late in the nineteenth century, “‘to forget and – I will venture to say – to get one’s history wrong, are essential factors in the making of a nation.... History is not the dead weight of the past on the present, but the very means whereby identity is shaped in an active and ongoing fashion.’”<sup>30</sup> National identities, then, are almost always accorded the distinction of longevity, and, in compliance with a set of contemporary ideals, the historical

---

<sup>27</sup> Megill, *Historical Knowledge*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1978), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ernst Renan (1882), as cited in Brocklehurst and Phillips, “Introduction,” xxiv.

narratives of a nation are constructed to deny its inconsistent loyalties, shameful episodes or events, and inherent contradictions. However, as Huyssen argues, the constitution of a nation's identity does not operate in isolation, but rather functions "in relation to other signifiers in a semantic chain including patriotism and chauvinism, civic spirit and ethnocentrism, democracy and authoritarianism, constitutional rights and xenophobic exclusions"; foremost among these discourses is that of racial identity.<sup>31</sup> While the once-supposed science of racial theory has now been fully discredited, the effects of this doctrine continue to resonate – that is, regardless of one's skin colour, the *perception* of race is still a powerful determinant, influencing both how we self-identity, as well as how we identify others. Racial identities are often applied, by white peoples, only to those who are perceived as 'non-white' – that is, whiteness, as Damien Riggs argues, is a racialized subject position that many white people are unaware of. This denial implicitly sets up whiteness as normative, and thereby justifies the hegemony of whiteness by denying white race privilege.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, racial whiteness often plays a powerful role in discursive formations of national identity.

Articulations and assertions of national identity are manifested in various forms of representation. These representations are, at times, overt – for example, by means such as the recital of a national anthem or the display of national symbols. However, the boundaries of national belonging are often demarcated in much more subtle ways, through an impressive range of stories, images, symbols, and events. Because the idea or celebration of history frequently serves as the focal point for expressions of national identity, it is important to remain cognisant of the strategic uses of history in the

---

<sup>31</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Damien Riggs, "Benevolence and the Management of Stake: On Being 'Good White People,'" *Philament: An Online Journal of the Arts and Culture* (4: "Untitled"), (August 2004): para. 1.

delineation of national identity, for, as I will argue, debates over the role of history in the public arena are often only thinly veiled deliberations regarding the character, meaning, and boundaries of national identity.

## **ii. Representing Identity and the Role of the Museum**

It is to the performance and production of identity that I now turn – specifically, to manifestations of these processes in and through the museum. This section considers the social roles performed by museums, examines changing expectations and understandings of the museum and its limitations, and explores difficulties in museum practices in an effort to situate my own position regarding such issues. As my particular interest concerns the implications of historical narratives in ideas and ideals of Britishness, I focus this section to specifically consider theoretical analyses interrogating the relationship between national identity and the museum.

The form of museum with which we are most familiar originated in the 1800s, and experienced extraordinary growth in Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Throughout that period, the museum was popularly imagined as a venue established for the impartial display of cultures, artefacts, or historical events as a means to transmit ‘knowledge.’ This expectation – inherent in what Eilean Hooper-Greenhill describes as the modernist museum – drew upon the ideals and philosophies of the Enlightenment in a claim to re-present ‘reality’ in supposedly unbiased terms.<sup>33</sup> The educational prerogative of the modernist museum was evident, drawing on a pedagogical philosophy that at once distinguished between the expert and the novice, while treating

---

<sup>33</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, (Routledge: London, 2000), 17.

the communication of knowledge from one to the other as a relatively straightforward issue. The material culture of the modernist museum was understood to speak for itself, establishing and sustaining master narratives connoting Eurocentric notions of progress.<sup>34</sup> The modernist museum, then, established an ideal of knowledge within the museum predicated in the assumption of objectivity, and perpetuated by particular relations of power, centred on the relationship between active curators and passive visitors.

In the field of cultural studies, the theories of representation informing the modernist museum are characterized as the *intentional* approach and the *reflective* or *mimetic* approach. According to the intentional approach, the meaning of an object is created out of and through the intentions of the object's creator, while the reflective or mimetic approach assumes that the meaning of objects is fixed and self-evident, reflective of the object's position in the material world.<sup>35</sup> According to Ivan Karp, such orientations continue to shape and inform both the mandate of many museums, as well as public expectations of the museum's role and function. In fact, the unproblematized assumption of impartiality invested in museums is, as Karp argues, the "very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience."<sup>36</sup> However, in spite of the premise upon which many museums continue to operate, theoretical analyses interrogating the social purposes and functions of the museum, such as Karp's, are constructed with an increased sensitivity to issues of identity politics. Drawing upon the compelling insights of intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, many theorists have come to view the museum as site within which knowledge,

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>35</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 24-26.

<sup>36</sup> Ivan Karp, "Culture and Representation," in Ivan and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 14.

power, and identities are discursively *produced* rather than merely displayed. Despite a semblance of or claim to objectivity, the contents of any museum's display are always informed by multiple assumptions regarding the capabilities of the museum's visitors (including their perception of the authenticity or veracity of the exhibit), the claims to authority made by the exhibit, and the various intentions of the exhibit's producers.<sup>37</sup> As Hooper-Greenhill maintains, "representation does not reflect reality, but grants meaning and confers value; in this way it is constitutive of reality."<sup>38</sup> Through the content of their holdings, the privileging of particular forms and types of material, and the arrangement of their displays, then, museums serve to discursively constitute meaning. Discourse is not an explicit product of subjectivity – that is, it is not produced through the agency of an individual or author, but functions, rather, to constitute symbolic systems of meaning. Within discursive formations, it is possible to identify patterns of regularity, established through the repetition of particular representations, concepts, and strategies, which constitute narratives and the 'knowledge' they denote.<sup>39</sup> The constitution of narratives in a museum does not exclusively reflect the curator's intentions, then, but rather informs and is informed by the broader historical and cultural influences that participate in the production of meaning.

The museum is one of many cultural locations within which memory, history, and identity are situated as central and persistent themes. The museum serves as a means through which collective memory is not merely expressed, but is, more specifically, constructed, sustained, and perpetuated. This interpretation accords with Halbwachs' view: that recollections of a collective past are only possible in a society that possesses

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 101.

the means to produce them.<sup>40</sup> This process of recollection – which is, in fact, a generative process – explains why some memories remain unyielding while others are more pliable, as the collective memory of any given group will modify according to the present circumstances and concerns of that group. As Lewis Coser relates, Halbwachs argued that the present generation in fact becomes “conscious of itself in counterposing its present to its own constructed past.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, similar to other gestures of ‘remembrance,’ the (re)construction of a collective past in the museum necessarily involves both imagination and distortion: imagination because no narrative of the past can ever be fully complete; distortion because aspects of the past must be altered to accord with contemporary circumstances.<sup>42</sup>

Karp argues that what is at stake in struggles over representation within the museum is the articulation of identity, whether this is manifested explicitly, through assertion, or implicitly, through insinuation. Museum exhibitions, Karp determines, narrate not only who we are, but, perhaps more meaningfully, who we are not.<sup>43</sup> Tony Bennett assumes a similar position, maintaining that the museum operates through “specific regimes of vision,” which engender “particular forms of ‘civic seeing’ in which the civic lessons embodied in those arrangements are to be seen, understood, and performed by the museum’s visitors. Or at least by those visitors who are included in the museum’s civic address.”<sup>44</sup> The issue, then, involves not only the way in which individuals are co-opted into particular forms of civic identity through a process of inclusion, but also how such a

---

<sup>40</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 183.

<sup>41</sup> Coser, “Introduction,” 24.

<sup>42</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 182.

<sup>43</sup> Karp, “Culture and Representation,” 15, emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> Tony Bennett, “Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision,” in Sharon MacDonald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 263.

process necessarily involves *exclusion*. Museums, therefore, are sites that render ‘difference’ visible according to historically contingent interpretations of civic belonging, which are variously influenced by restrictions based on class, gender, and race or ethnicity.<sup>45</sup> Through methods of inclusion and exclusion, privileging, emphasizing, marginalizing, and silencing, the museum serves as one discursive means through which national identity is constituted.

This is not to suggest that the narration of identity in and through the museum is a simple or straightforward process. Indeed, as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, among the many issues complicating representation are intense controversies over how history and museums ought to function socially. Katherine Prior, a historian of imperialism who has served as a consultant for various British museums, argues that museums are subject to demands and expectations that are not easily reconciled.<sup>46</sup> For example, the subjects that museums contend with are often issues of considerable controversy, as there are various interested parties (among them, those providing necessary funding) whose interests must be considered. Furthermore, the information used to inform museum exhibits is often provided through the work of academics, which introduces several complications. First, academic scholarship is generally intended for an academic audience, and thus engages in a level of discourse and analysis that is not always accessible to individuals outside academia, or, for that matter, from specific disciplines. Second, this scholarship is most often presented textually, that is, as a book or article. Curators must determine how best to convert this text to other modes of representation, and to do so without compromising the integrity of the analysis. For these

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

<sup>46</sup> Katherine Prior, “Commemorating Slavery 2007: A Personal View from Inside the Museums,” *History Workshop Journal* 64, (Autumn 2007): 203.

reasons, museums are often forced to translate sophisticated, and often quite dense, scholarship into textual, artistic, and interactive narratives that are engaging, informative, and broadly accessible.

Despite the unavoidable dilutions and distortions of academic scholarship, in order to interrogate the collective memory of any given event or experience, it is important to be familiar with the academic work that serves to inform representations of the past within cultural media such as the museum. Moreover, such representations also shape notions of the past for non-specialists, outside the confines of the academy – a process which is, in part, accomplished through accessible venues such as museums. As I am particularly interested in the collective memory of slavery and abolitionism in Britain, the final section of this chapter addresses the dominant narratives in this field of study.

### **iii. Narratives of British Abolitionism**

Between the 1730s and the early 1800s – the pinnacle of the Atlantic slave trade – Britain was responsible for the enslavement of approximately three million African people, and was, by most accounts, enjoying tremendous financial profits from the trade; yet, by 1807, the slave trade had been legally abolished and, by 1834, legislation to abolish slavery itself had been passed by British Parliament. In a relatively short period of time, then, Britain had been transformed from a nation that overwhelmingly accepted if not the legitimacy, then at least the necessity of slavery, to a nation in which the abolition of a long-standing and lucrative practice was accepted with apparent popular support.<sup>47</sup> According to many academics, this “stunning role reversal” still lacks

---

<sup>47</sup> J. R. Oldfield’s *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery* meticulously details abolitionism as the first truly successful social movement in Britain. See J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery*:



persuasive historical explanation.<sup>48</sup> The initial focus of this section, then, is British abolitionism rather than slavery itself. In part, this is because the historical event of abolition does appear to represent an interesting “role-reversal,” but also because the collective memory of slavery in Britain has been largely subsumed by that of abolition – a phenomenon that will be considered in the second part of this section, which deals more specifically with the relationship between academic scholarship and public expressions of remembrance. I am particularly interested in the ways in which these narratives function to inform and sustain the ideal of white British benevolence. The historical field of abolitionist studies is vast; thus, my survey of this literature is necessarily limited to what I have identified as the most influential perspectives, as well as some of the recent challenges to those views.

There is a significant and varied body of literature attempting to explain the impetus for and eventual success of the British abolition campaigns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Up to the mid-1900s, most assessments accepted that abolition of both the slave trade and slavery itself were the achievement of selfless abolitionists, such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, who had recognized the moral evil of slavery and subsequently fought long and hard against it. Clarkson’s 1808 publication, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, treated the abolition movement as self-explanatory – an obvious development within a Christian nation suddenly awakened to

---

*The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> James Walvin, “Slavery, Truth and Reconciliation,” in Gert Oostindie, ed., *Facing Up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*, (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001), 135.

the “presence of a horrific injustice.”<sup>49</sup> Clarkson, as Christopher Brown observes, established a narrative of abolition that persisted largely unquestioned well into the twentieth century: that abolitionism was “the working out of impulses deeply embedded in the society from which it emerged, as the elaboration of principles essential to British Protestantism, as the expression of a distinctively British devotion to liberty and the rule of law.”<sup>50</sup> When the character of British imperialism came under scrutiny during the first half of the twentieth century, this narrative of abolition proved extremely useful, as it insisted that though the British had been heavily involved in the Atlantic slave trade, “we had,” as John R. Seeley, wrote “published our own guilt, repented of it, and did at last renounce it.”<sup>51</sup> This rendition of abolitionism thus afforded ideological justification to an expanding British empire, as it posited Britain as the bearer of civility, justice, and order, establishing the British state as genuinely invested in the interests of Africa, even if such investments necessitated self-sacrifice.<sup>52</sup>

The first major challenge to this narrative emerged in 1944 with Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams maintained that the profits of slavery had enabled Britain’s industrial revolution, and that abolition had succeeded only because the slave trade had ceased to be as lucrative, and came, therefore, to be viewed as expendable.<sup>53</sup> As Marcus Wood writes, it was not until *Capitalism and Slavery* that an alternative thesis managed to ignite any measure of genuine controversy in abolitionism scholarship:

---

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> John R. Seeley, as cited in *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (1944; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

Williams was an angry and principled black Marxist historian who blew the lid off the historiographical orthodoxies, and moral complacency, which had been set up around the British narrative of its role in slavery and the slave trade.... The ideas he put forward relating to abolition as a moral smoke screen for a series of cold blooded policy changes within nineteenth century British imperial policy meant that it was no longer possible to see abolition simply as a space enabling Wilberforce and Clarkson to manufacture a great moral victory.<sup>54</sup>

While much of the quantitative evidence used by Williams has now been largely discredited, he “forever stigmatized the humanitarian narrative,” and established a much-needed alternative to what had become a hegemonic explanation for British abolitionism.<sup>55</sup>

Influenced in part by Williams, but also by the changing milieu of historical research and writing more generally, scholars have since broadened their assessments to allow for myriad economic, social, and cultural interests affecting and influencing abolitionism. David Brion Davis, for example, argues that abolition became more widely acceptable as capitalism displaced mercantilism and the newly emerging order came to view the slave trade as an impediment to free trade.<sup>56</sup> J. R. Oldfield focuses attention on the ways in which public opinion was mobilized, arguing that while the abolition of both the trade and slavery itself were ultimately effected through acts of parliament and the sagacity of politicians, abolitionism united the interests of an emerging middle class, prompting them to inundate parliament with more petitions than had ever before been

---

<sup>54</sup> Marcus Wood, “Packaging Liberty and Marketing the Gift of Freedom: 1807 and the Legacy of Clarkson’s Chest,” *Parliamentary History* 26, Supplement, (2007): 212.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 16.

<sup>56</sup> David Brion Davis, as referenced in Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 152.

submitted on a single topic of concern.<sup>57</sup> Claire Midgley disrupts the conspicuously male focus that characterizes most histories of abolition, demonstrating that female participation in British abolitionism is of much greater significance than was once recognized.<sup>58</sup> The respective emphasis of these scholars on changing economic ideologies, shifting class issues, and the gendered dimensions of abolition movements are but three examples in a field of British abolitionist studies that continues to grow.

However, Brown recently argued that many supposed explanations for the growth of abolitionism continue to operate according to the implicit presumption that the cessation of slavery and the slave trade was inevitable. In making such an assumption, they fail to account for how it was that abolitionist *sentiments* eventually brought about abolition itself. “For too long,” he writes, “the antislavery movement in Britain has been treated as a natural consequence of late-eighteenth-century trends, as if, in this era, organizing against the slave trade was an obvious and logical thing to do.”<sup>59</sup> Brown contends that this view is, in fact, contrary to the reality of the social context out of which abolitionism emerged, and that what is truly surprising is that British abolitionism developed in the first place.<sup>60</sup> He further maintains that in order to properly account for abolitionism, one must conceptualize both slavery and abolition within the larger context of the British empire – a perspective, he observes, that is also neglected by many scholars. Essentially, Brown’s argument is that as a result of the American revolution, the limits and legitimacy of British imperialism were brought into question, and that the cause of abolition was employed by the nation as a form of “moral capital.”

---

<sup>57</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, 186.

<sup>58</sup> Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>59</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 462.

Abolitionism, Brown contends, acted as a corrective to the tarnished reputation of British imperialism, used to reinforce an image of Britain as a benevolent humanitarian nation, both to the world at large and in the nation's imagined identity. Without the fracture to the empire caused by the American revolution, the abolitionists "would have seemed like agents of division rather than moral patriots aiming to restore the character of the nation and the empire."<sup>61</sup> Thus, Brown concludes, while the American revolution did not directly change the course of the abolitionist's cause, it did alter the political and cultural significance of British abolitionism.<sup>62</sup>

Nicholas Hudson presents an argument somewhat similar to Brown's, charging that the dominant narratives in abolition scholarship collectively constitute a Whig historiography. Abolition, writes Hudson, is understood and explained by historians as a social revolution initiated, according to David Brion Davis and Roger Antsey, by both intellectual and economic upheaval, or, as Seymour Drescher maintains, by the alienation of the working class suffering under industrial capitalism. All such explanations look to the left side of the political spectrum rather than to the right, construing abolition as a fundamental challenge to the status quo and the cause of dissenters, radicals, and nonconformists.<sup>63</sup> Hudson challenges this "virtual consensus in modern scholarship," maintaining that social conservatism and religious conformity were, in fact, completely compatible with abolitionism. He rejects the possibility that slavery had ceased to be financially profitable, concluding that abolitionism had less to do with economics than with a growing sense of, and concern with, British national identity. Britons increasingly

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 456.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 457.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Hudson, "'Britons Will Never Be Slaves': National Myth, Conservatism, and the Beginnings of British Antislavery," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 34(1), (2001): 559.

saw themselves as a nation of people who were inherently free, and whose patriotic responsibility it was to institute and maintain a similar type of freedom in other societies. Abolition, then, was “a mass movement fueled by a nationalist ideology that portrayed Britons as a ‘chosen’ people who had escaped ‘bondage,’ a myth nurtured in patriotic and pious circles.”<sup>64</sup> Like Brown, Hudson views abolitionism as a cause that had less to do with concern for the plight of enslaved peoples than with how Britain’s involvement in slavery compromised a particular notion of British national identity, and a particular representation of British imperialism.

Marika Sherwood similarly challenges mythologies surrounding British abolitionism, albeit on very different grounds. In *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807*, Sherwood vehemently contests the way in which the abolition of the slave trade is celebrated in British historiography. Among her many grievances is the common acceptance of Britain as the first nation to abolish the slave trade, as well as misinterpretations of the 1833 Abolition Act as actually having abolished slavery throughout the British empire. Sherwood duly points out that Denmark was the first country to abolish the slave trade, and that the act of 1833 abolished slavery gradually, and only did so in Canada, Cape Town, and the Caribbean. Furthermore, the 1833 act provided substantial financial compensation to plantation owners for their loss of ‘property’; it did nothing to address the plight of enslaved peoples. To be fair, British involvement in slavery at that time was heavily concentrated in the Caribbean, so the act of 1833 quite clearly had a momentous impact on the majority of Britain’s enslaved populations. However, as Sherwood remarks, this would have been of little consequence to those enslaved elsewhere in the empire – for example, the estimated ten to fifteen

---

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 570.

million enslaved in India throughout both the non-British territories and the British Protected States. By 1840, the number of slaves in British India far surpassed the number of those emancipated in the Caribbean, and it was not until 1843 that an Act was passed to initiate abolition in India.<sup>65</sup> In fact, it would be 1928 – almost one hundred years after the passage of the Abolition Act of 1833 – before the last of Britain’s colonial enslaved were emancipated.<sup>66</sup>

Sherwood concedes that the movement to abolish the slave trade was and is a complex issue. Nonetheless, she argues that explanations for abolition could be clarified by historical engagement beyond 1807. Sherwood questions why historians have maintained the (mis)interpretation that the passage of “that very famous Act stopped Britain from profiting from the slave trade, and from slavery? Is it still not possible to look at British history critically? Thoroughly? And honestly?”<sup>67</sup> She argues that British activities in the slave trade carried on well past 1807, producing economic profits both through outright involvement in illegal slaving activities, as well as through less direct means, such as investment and trade in slave-produced goods.

Dividing her book into sections titled ‘Some British Companies and Slavery,’ ‘The Tale of Two Cities Built on Slavery,’ and ‘Cuba and Brazil,’ among others, Sherwood examines evidence demonstrating how Britain participated in and benefited from slavery in these respective areas following the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807. For example, while a popular boycott movement in the early nineteenth century protested the

---

<sup>65</sup> Ron Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain: Five Hundred Years of Black and Asian History*, (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 52; Brychan Carey and Peter J. Kitson, eds., “Introduction,” *Slavery and the Cultures of Abolition: Essays Marking the Bicentennial of the British Abolition Act of 1807*, (Cambridge: The English Association, 2007), 2.

<sup>66</sup> Marika Sherwood, *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade After 1807*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007), 1; 2. In Britain’s Gold Coast, slavery was legal until 1928.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

consumption of sugar produced in Britain's West Indian colonies, both the production and exportation of sugar in Cuba soared between the late 1780s and the mid-1800s, with approximately one quarter of Cuban exports bound for Britain by the 1840s.<sup>68</sup> In order to keep pace with increasing demands, the enslaved population correspondingly grew. In 1774, there were a documented 38, 979 slaves in Cuba. By 1841, this number had multiplied more than ten times, to 436, 495, and in both Cuba and Brazil, British merchants were financially invested in many of the slave plantations.<sup>69</sup> Sherwood also demonstrates the extent to which British urban centres – Liverpool and Manchester, in particular – were not merely dependent on, but in fact flourished as a result of, financial involvement in the slave trade long past 1807. In fact, by the 1820s, more than a third of Manchester's raw cotton was exported from slave plantations in Brazil.<sup>70</sup> Thus, while there may have been a growing concern with Britain's direct involvement in slavery and the slave trade, there seemed to have been little concern over consumption of goods produced by enslaved populations for which the British were not *directly* responsible. Moreover, as Sherwood demonstrates, the termination of the British trade in effect served to increase slave production and populations in countries such as Cuba and Brazil; thus the British knowingly continued to enjoy cheap coffee, sugar, cotton, and other goods produced by slave-labour, while simultaneously exonerating themselves from guilt or culpability in slavery through abolition.

The British government also established the Africa Squadron, whose apparent job was to police the slaving activities of other countries. However, as Sherwood relates, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) astutely noted that the true purpose of

---

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 86; 109.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 50.



the Squadron was to effect ““a quietening of the conscience of the nation whilst permitting the continuance of this greatest outrage on humanity.””<sup>71</sup> Thus, it seems that even during the period of abolitionism, there existed some popular awareness of the ways in which the nation’s rhetorical stance on slavery conflicted with the actions of both British citizens and government. Even more disconcerting, for Sherwood, is the fact that the British government was very much aware of these continued activities in the slave trade, yet did not act on that information. She cites copious evidence submitted to the British Parliament by the Royal Navy, the BFASS, and the government’s own Select Committees, detailing the various ways in which Britain continued to participate in and profit from slavery. “That nothing was done,” Sherwood writes, “that this wealth-creation from slavery was not and *still has not been acknowledged*, is why this book had to be written.” She acknowledges that while trade and investment with and in countries dependent on the profits of slave labour certainly did not violate British law, such activities were inconsistent with the supposedly abolitionist sentiments of Britain, and were in complete disagreement with the “much publicized abolitionist politics and propaganda” of the British government.<sup>72</sup>

Sherwood’s fundamental objections, then, are twofold. First, she contests the appalling contradictions between representations of Britain’s abolition of slavery and the slave trade, and the actual consequences of those actions. She argues that the myth of British abolitionism enabled Britain to convey a particular image of its national character while simultaneously continuing to profit from the trade in and abuse of human beings. In much the same vein as Brown, Sherwood contends that the anti-slavery activism of the

---

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

government, then, was little more than good publicity. She argues that the expenses incurred through the establishment of the Squadron and the organization of various Select Committees paled in comparison to the value of abolitionist propaganda, both within the Britain and internationally, combined with the profits accrued through *not* effectively contending with the trade in enslaved Africans and slave-produced goods.<sup>73</sup> Thus her second, and perhaps more critical, objection is that, despite the proliferation of slavery and abolition studies, academics continue to ignore the fundamental contradiction of British abolitionism, choosing, instead, to sustain and perpetuate the abolition myth. “Yes,” Sherwood concludes, “Britain passed the 1807 Act. But, unless I am wrong, it made more money out of slavery and the slave trade after 1807 than before. *Where are the analyses, the investigations, the books on this?*”<sup>74</sup>

Despite Sherwood’s justified frustration with the unwillingness of historians to adopt a more honest posture toward British abolitionism and to confront Britain’s ongoing participation in slavery and the slave trade, it must be recognized that within British studies of slavery and abolition there is a growing sense of critical self-consciousness concerning the historical event of abolition. For example, while the grand narrative of abolition continues to highlight white abolitionists, academics have increasingly come to realize the importance of actions undertaken by enslaved populations themselves. In fact, John Newsinger maintains that the Jamaican revolt of 1831 was *the* decisive factor pushing through the Abolition Act of 1833, as it made clear that slavery “was no longer a viable system of exploitation in the British Caribbean.”<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 175, emphasis mine.

<sup>75</sup> John Newsinger, *The Blood Never Dried: A People’s History of the British Empire*, (London: Bookmark Publications, 2006), 30.

Additionally, there are sustained accounts considering the many consequences of abolition within the Caribbean. The economic ramifications of abolition for former slaves, for example, are well documented. As Dresser points out, following emancipation in the British Caribbean, a protracted pattern of economic underdevelopment was rapidly entrenched. In fact, in 1938, a Royal Commission related that wages, in real terms, had not changed in the hundred years since emancipation.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, slavery in the Caribbean was quickly replaced by other deleterious systems of exploitation, such as apprenticeship and indentured labour. From 1830 to 1879, an estimated one to two million Indians were transported (usually forcibly or under false pretences) from India to the Caribbean plantations to work for minimal wages under hostile and exploitative conditions, a practice that continued until 1917.<sup>77</sup> Arguably, these conditions were little better than those experienced by the enslaved; in fact, a number of individuals (including former slaves themselves, as well as those forced into indentured labour) assert that at least under slavery there was some provision for shelter and sustenance. Moreover, the import of indentured labourers made it exceedingly difficult for a community of former slaves to obtain consistent or fair employment, leading to considerable tensions between such communities and incoming labourers.

The ideological implications of abolitionism are another important aspect of this history garnering critical attention. For example, while the achievement of abolition ostensibly suggests a waning of racist attitudes in nineteenth-century Britain, exactly the opposite was the case: British abolitionism and the event of abolition in fact exacerbated racialized views of African peoples. Felicity A. Nussbaum contends that the growing

---

<sup>76</sup> Made Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port*, (London: Continuum, 2001), 233.

<sup>77</sup> Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain*, 52; 54.

population of free black peoples in Britain following abolition paradoxically served to solidify racial boundaries, in part due to escalating anxiety regarding the possible ‘consequences’ of ‘miscegenation’ and the growing acceptance of racial theory as an irrefutable scientific reality.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, within Britain society, and particularly for those who had campaigned for abolition, there was a general disappointment with “‘the results of black freedom’” – that is, with the inability of former slaves to somehow transform hundreds of years of oppression, dislocation, and brutality into thriving economic and social systems.<sup>79</sup> This, as James Walvin argues, entrenched a popular perception of blacks as a lazy and incompetent people, unable or unwilling to look after themselves. Such an attitude neglected both the historical conditions out of which the African diaspora was created, as well as the contemporary conditions of the Caribbean, which featured massive social and economic disparities, a black population collectively traumatized by the experience of slavery, and a racist governing white population that had, for the most part, opposed emancipation from the outset.

Imagery depicting enslaved Africans as dependent, incapable, and desperately in need of the charity of the white British nation was largely propagated by the abolitionists themselves – an issue which will be considered in greater detail within the context of the “Breaking the Chains” exhibit. The present focus concerns the consequences of such an ideology. In what is often described as a neglected piece of scholarship, Ralph A. Austen and Woodrow D. Smith argued in 1969 that the debate over abolition between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries created a set of attitudes and political objectives that informed Britain’s imperial policy in Africa later in the nineteenth century. Central to

---

<sup>78</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>79</sup> James Walvin, as cited in Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, 233.

this ideology was the notion of Britain's responsibility towards 'backwards people.'<sup>80</sup> British colonialism in Africa and the notion of "'imperial trusteeship' for the betterment of native societies", Austen and Smith concluded, were justified by a particular orientation toward Africans as an uncivilized people in need – an attitude that found its origins in abolition ideology.<sup>81</sup> Various scholars have since located the roots of ideas such as British humanitarianism, altruism, and benevolence in abolition ideology, and argued that for the collective British conscience, these self-perceptions legitimated not merely the activity of, but indeed the critical need for imperial expansion. For Jennifer Pitts, this stance is remarkable, given that from the mid- to late eighteenth century, critics of slavery were very commonly critics of empire as well. By the early nineteenth century, however, this "marriage of 'humanitarian' causes" had dissolved; abolition, Pitts argues, "removed one of the most glaring injustices of eighteenth-century European politics and society from the sights of reformers. Radicals no longer could – or needed to – point to slavery as evidence of barbarousness or injustice of the European political order."<sup>82</sup> As a consequence, slavery was represented and interpreted as an evil vanquished by the good sense of the British, thereby legitimating further imperial expansion and colonial intervention.

Within the relevant scholarship, then, there is increased sensitivity to the ways in which the British abolitionist cause and its ideological underpinnings were used strategically by the British state to substantiate the notion of Britain's benevolent interests in Africa. Likewise, a growing number of historians – particularly those engaging in

---

<sup>80</sup> Ralph A. Austen and Woodrow D. Smith, "Images of Africa and British Slave-Trade Abolition: The Transition to an Imperialist Ideology, 1787-1807," *African Historical Studies* 2(1), (1969): 69.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>82</sup> Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15; 16.

racial and ethnic studies – are cognisant of how such actions obscured Britain’s role in slavery, demonstrating a greater readiness to confront the self-serving ways in which this gesture of denial or forgetting has been enacted. As Harry Goulbourne admits, if there exists a collective national memory of slavery, it is that Britain has “a proud record to boast.” This record, Goulbourne dryly relates, involves Britain’s admirable fight to end the slave trade, the commendable efforts and successes of (male) abolitionists, and Britain’s subsequent policing of the seas to regulate the actions of those nations lacking the moral certitude of the British. This narrative of “goodness,” as Goulbourne characterizes it, continues to shape and inform British national identity, and, as a result, little has been done to acknowledge, much less compensate for, the injustice of slavery itself.<sup>83</sup> In fact, in many narratives, Britain’s ‘gift’ of abolition to enslaved Africans *is* the compensation for slavery, and there is little thought given to the fact that Britain was complicit in creating the conditions that enabled them to bestow such a gift.

Abolition, then, functions to perpetuate a historical amnesia toward Britain’s sustained participation in slavery and the slave trade. It is important to remember, as Walvin admonishes, “that in the years *before* abolition, in the years when the British began to sing ‘Rule Britannia’ (with its ironic lines ‘Britons never, ever shall be slaves’), the British shipped something like three million Africans into American bondage.”<sup>84</sup> However, Walvin then goes on to make precisely the assertions that Sherwood challenges, maintaining that following the 1807 abolition of the slave trade, “the world’s leading slave trader became the loudest and most assertive abolitionist. It was a stunning

---

<sup>83</sup> Harry Goulbourne, “African Slaves and the Atlantic World,” in Gert Oostindie, ed., *Facing up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*, (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001), 127.

<sup>84</sup> Walvin, “Slavery, Truth and Reconciliation,” 135.

role reversal, still in need of full historical explanation.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, while Walvin acknowledges the calculating ways in which the memory of abolition was and is used to displace that of slavery, he also accepts that abolition effected in reality what it professed in rhetoric; no space is allowed wherein the idea of abolition itself is or can be questioned. Many historians remain perplexed by what Walvin characterizes as Britain’s “stunning role reversal,” arguing that despite extensive scholarship, abolitionism has yet to be fully accounted for. Few seem to consider that perhaps the reason abolitionism has henceforth defied explanation is a direct result of the content of the questions being posed.

Along lines similar to Hudson, then, Murray G. H. Pittock can argue with a measure of justification that the “death of Whig history called for by Sir Herbert Butterfield in 1931, and subsequently repeatedly announced, has simply not occurred.”<sup>86</sup> British historiography, for the most part, continues to operate according to the philosophical basis of Enlightenment historiography, characterized by an appeal to the notions of civility and progress, and an assumption of Britishness as a universal ideal. The prioritizations and absences embedded in modern histories of Britain – in particular, the accessible histories that most British citizens chose to consume – create what Pittock characterizes as a “historical comfort zone,” wherein the narratives of freedom and progress give meaning to Britain’s national identity, and underpin the myth of British benevolence. In their refusal to vacate this comfort zone, however, historians forgo the

---

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Murray G.H. Pittock, “Enlightenment Historiography and Its Legacy: Plurality, Authority and Power,” in Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips, eds., *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 33.

ability to conceptualize a coherent or satisfying explanation of social change.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps it is indeed the unwillingness or inability of historians to seriously reconsider the prevailing narratives of abolition that accounts for the unsatisfactory explanations of this historical moment. While historians such as Sherwood and Brown offer significant challenges to orthodox views, traditional narratives of British abolitionism – those emphasizing the importance of the abolition movement to the benevolent nature of British national character – continue to dominate.

Britain's collective memories of slavery and abolition, however, are not constituted exclusively out of academic interpretations of these events. In fact, Nussbaum contends that outside academia, it was possible to refer to Atlantic slavery, and Britain's involvement therein, as a secret or forgotten history throughout the twentieth century. The memory and/or significance of slavery, and, to a lesser extent, its abolition, were largely ignored in both public discourse and cultural media. However, the 2007 bicentennial of abolition thrust controversial issues regarding Britain's collective memory of slavery and abolition out of the academy into the forefront of social debate. It is to those debates that I now turn, in an effort to further explore the position of slavery and abolition in Britain's collective memory.

---

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 44.



## **II. Patterns of Representation and Restitution: The Contemporary Debate over Britain's Multi-ethnic Past**

In the second chapter of this thesis, I seek to locate the significance of Britain's historical participation in the Atlantic slave trade in the context of contemporary British social relations. I examine, first, the content and significance of debates conducted in major British newspapers in response to the 2007 bicentennial as a means to gauge existing interpretations of slavery and abolition. In particular, I am concerned with the question of whether or not Britain should apologize for its participation in Atlantic slavery, as this issue very directly links the history and legacy of slavery with contemporary British society. In the second part of this chapter, I return to assess the content and reception of *The Parekh Report*, in order to further elucidate existing ideas of 'Britishness,' and to consider how the legacy of slavery figures in continuing debates over the meaning of national identity.

### **i. Confirming and Contesting the Need for Apology**

In conjunction with the 2007 bicentennial of abolition, a number of public discussions were initiated regarding slavery, abolition, and the relevance of these histories to contemporary British society. Individuals such as Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn argued that the bicentennial provided an ideal opportunity for Britain to move past sanctimonious celebrations of abolition, in order to contend with the actual legacies of slavery in contemporary British society.<sup>88</sup> However, the majority of the media coverage related to the 2007 bicentennial predictably overlooked the significance of slavery, choosing, rather, to commemorate abolition. The media tended to invoke established

---

<sup>88</sup> Jeremy Corbyn, as referenced in J. R. Oldfield, *'Chords of Freedom': Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 109.

narratives of abolitionism, contrasting the helpless plight of the enslaved with the self-sacrificing, commendable actions of the British nation.<sup>89</sup> For example, columnists such as Arifa Akbar and Cahal Milmo overtly defined abolition as “William Wilberforce’s campaign,” or “the culmination of the mass movement led by William Wilberforce.”<sup>90</sup> Mark Steel challenged this tendency, arguing that the focus on Wilberforce distracted from other significant figures – such as Thomas Clarkson, who “was said to have ridden 35,000 miles on horseback with a mass petition, which included the signatures of one-fifth the population of Manchester.”<sup>91</sup> However, Steel also recognized that in retaining Wilberforce as the quintessential figurehead of abolition, the history of both slavery and abolition is rendered more palatable. “Wilberforce was clearly important,” Steel argued, but, unlike these more radical voices, he opposed the complete abolition of slavery, so he’s a safer figure to parade as the face of abolition. And he makes it easier to write books for schoolkids that go: “The British role in slavery was honourable and decent. You see, when we first started it we thought the slaves would enjoy the sunshine and it would be healthy and full of outdoor exercise. Why, the slaves could be immediately executed if they ate any of the sugar they picked, that’s how seriously the British were about ensuring the slaves had a healthy diet.”

While Steel thus acknowledged the portentous political considerations involved in the representation of slavery and abolition, his analysis overlooked the fact that in displacing the significance of Wilberforce in favor of Clarkson, the idea of abolition as a gift of

---

<sup>89</sup> Prior, “Commemorating Slavery 2007,” 203.

<sup>90</sup> Arifa Akbar, “Wilberforce family marks abolition of slavery,” *The Independent*, 2 March 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/wilberforce-family-marks-abolition-of-slavery-438513.html>; Cahal Milmo, “Slavery: Is it time for an apology?” *The Independent*, 11 May 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/slavery-is-it-time-for-an-apology-477715.html>

<sup>91</sup> Mark Steel, “Wilberforce would not stand a chance these days,” *The Independent*, 21 February 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/mark-steel/mark-steel-wilberforce-would-not-stand-a-chance-these-days-437173.html>

freedom from the benevolent white British nation to the oppressed black African peoples retains hegemony.

For many British citizens, the amount of time, effort, and funding allotted to the 2007 bicentennial served to reinforce the social and cultural privileging of Britain's abolitionist lineage. In doing so, it further marginalized the collective memory of slavery. Organizations such as Operation TRUTH 2007 characterized "Wilberfest 2007" as a "smokescreen," a "propaganda tool," and an "affront to all people of Afrikan descent," and thus attempted to use the bicentennial to call attention to Britain's ongoing cultural denial of slavery.<sup>92</sup> Operation TRUTH circulated petitions and engaged in other acts of resistance in an effort to demonstrate that 1807 had little significance to African freedoms in light of continued exploitation of African peoples and nations. Their website argued that for the sake of the moral conscience of Britain, it is incumbent upon those who are involved in the planning of events for 2007 to reconsider their plans to exclude contemporary African people from participation in the re-telling of their story: "The systematic and continuous undermining of community organisations is utterly transparent given the lack of qualitative consultation with and the last minute scrambling to get us to accept and endorse an agenda that perpetuates historical inaccuracies at the expense of the Truth." For an organized group of British citizens who identify as descendents of enslaved populations, then, the celebratory events of 2007 precluded the possibility of engaging in a serious consideration of how people of the African diaspora view the significance of 1807.

However, opposition to the celebration of the bicentennial was not widely represented in mainstream media coverage of the bicentennial. An issue that was engaged

---

<sup>92</sup> Operation TRUTH 2007, Mission, <http://www.operationtruth2007.co.uk/mission.htm>

in many newspapers concerned the question of whether the British government should extend a formal apology for its involvement in the trade. Scholars, politicians, and other members of the community published arguments in the press supporting and opposing the idea of apology, as well as debating the contemporary significance of such an act. A.C. Grayling, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of London and chair of a debate held in Bristol to address the question of apology, argued that such a gesture would merely serve to distract attention from the much larger problem of present-day slavery. “Apologising today for Britain's involvement in the slave trade two centuries ago,” Grayling wrote, “would be a futile cosmetic act more about contemporary PC gesture-politics than the real lessons of history. And these have profound lessons to teach.”<sup>93</sup> Grayling also maintained that since “Africans enslaved Africans, and the worst (the most extensive and brutal) slavers were Arabs,” the idea of apology itself is compromised, as it only leads to the question of who “should be apologizing most.” Moreover, Grayling concluded (and perhaps this is the central point), “we British ended the slave trade, and by that means helped eventually to end American slavery too. If there are to be rites of apology, how about rites of thanks too?”

Setting aside the problematic implications of a statement such as “the real lessons of history,” Grayling evades the fundamental question of how or why Britain’s historical involvement in slavery is relevant to *British society*, and how this historical relationship has privileged and continues to privilege Britain. Grayling’s argument is heavily invested in the rhetoric of benevolence, which, as Damien Riggs argues, invokes the idea of “white national good” in an effort to evade accusations of racism, white privilege, and

---

<sup>93</sup> A C Grayling, “Apologising for the slave trade would be a futile gesture,” *The Independent*, 11 May 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/a-c-grayling-apologising-for-the-slave-trade-would-be-a-futile-gesture-477659.html>

national histories of genocide and oppression.<sup>94</sup> Grayling shifts the focus away from the significance of British culpability in slavery and the slave trade to emphasize, firstly, the supposedly greater historical offence of Arab and African involvement; secondly, the urgent need for the British to effect changes in other societies today; and, finally, the absolution Britain achieved through the benevolent gift of freedom to her colonial enslaved. Grayling's assertion that Britain should be thanked for (theoretically) ending their participation in a practice that claimed the lives of millions is open to fundamental challenge: Have the British not been essentially "thanking" themselves for their part in abolition for the past two hundred years? Moreover, as John Beech incisively argues, "isn't the UK celebrating the abolition of slavery rather like celebrating that you've stopped beating your wife?"<sup>95</sup>

Public opinion on the need for, or desirability of, a formal government apology for the slave trade varied considerably, subject to local circumstance and events. Many people questioned why, as members of the British nation, they should be asked to apologize for a historical offence for which they are not responsible. For example, John Savage – chairman for a prominent business association in Bristol – treated the idea of apology dismissively. Characterizing the notion as "balderdash," Savage stated that a formal British apology for slavery "would be like asking the Italians to apologise on behalf of the Romans for killing Boudicca."<sup>96</sup> Savage's position found ample public support; in fact, a local poll prior to the debate in Bristol indicated that only 8.9 per cent

---

<sup>94</sup> Damien Riggs, "Constructing the national good: Howard and the rhetoric of benevolence," (refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Science Association Conference, University of Adelaide, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> John Beech, "A step forwards of a step sideways?: Some personal reflections of how the presentation of slavery has (and hasn't) changed in the last few years," para 13.

<http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/museums/step.html>

<sup>96</sup> Milmo, "Slavery: Is it time for an apology?"

of people supported an apology, while a national poll for BBC showed that 67 per cent of people opposed such an act. However, in Bristol, support for an official apology increased to 62.8 per cent subsequent to the debate.

This result speaks to the urgent need for public information and education concerning both Britain's historical involvement in the slave trade, as well as the contemporary meaning and relevance of an official government apology, as an apology would be empty in the absence of contextual background pertaining to slavery and Britain's role in that system. As Stuart Hall argued, "there is nothing to be gained from guilt- tripping people, just as we should not only celebrate Britain's role in achieving abolition."<sup>97</sup> Priyamvada Gopal also addressed the idea of guilt, arguing that there exists an important distinction between a notion of guilt as personal wrongdoing, and the more "demanding and necessary move" to acknowledge that "our lives are shaped by historical processes through which we have accrued benefits at the expense of others."<sup>98</sup> Both Hall and Gopal, then, stressed that while an apology for Britain's involvement in slavery necessitates explorations of complicity, culpability, and privilege, this process is not conducted as a means to identify so-called beneficiaries and victims, but rather in an effort to facilitate reconciliation in British society. Yet resistance to the idea of apology persisted, in large part because slavery was represented – particularly by the media – as a historical event that carries little significance for contemporary society. As Anthony Tibbles argued, despite the obvious contrast between the prosperity of European and

---

<sup>97</sup> Stuart Hall, as cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Priyamvada Gopal, "It is contradictory to condemn slavery and yet celebrate the empire," *The Guardian*, 2 April 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/apr/02/comment.race>

North American countries that benefited from slavery and the ongoing struggle of Africa and communities of African descent, slavery continued to be viewed in isolation.<sup>99</sup>

Controversy over the British government's position on the issue of an official apology for its involvement in slavery predated the more engaged 2007 debates conducted in the media. In 2001, African nations requested that a United Nations-sponsored conference on racism formally acknowledge that the slave trade is "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 transnational dimensions and especially its negation of the essence of the human nature of the victims."<sup>100</sup> According to Siphon Pityana, the director general of South Africa's foreign ministry, of all the nations involved, Britain was the most vocally opposed to this acknowledgment, maintaining that the slave trade was in fact legal until 1807, and therefore could not be considered a crime against humanity. British officials argued that while slavery was an "appalling tragedy in the history of humanity," international law throughout the period did not oppose such activities. The designation of slavery as a crime against humanity, they concluded, could not be applied retrospectively. Marcus Wood demonstrates the "preposterous, morally stupid, [and] ethically disastrous" nature of this reasoning by applying it to another well-known atrocity, the Jewish Holocaust:

According to the 'customary international law' adopted by countries which participated in the 'final solution', there was no crime. The Jewish Holocaust might now be seen as a crime against humanity but according to the complicit legal

---

<sup>99</sup> Anthony Tibbles, "Facing Slavery's Past: The Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade," *Slavery and Abolition*, 29(2), (June 2008): 294.

<sup>100</sup> As referenced in Chris McGreal, "Britain accused over slave trade," *The Guardian*, 21 May 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/may/21/unitednations>

systems which processed Jews... it cannot be deemed a crime. The very fact that so many countries, under Nazi instruction, instituted the policy means, according to the British logic cited above, that it cannot, in terms of a customary 'legal analysis', be constituted *post facto* as a crime against humanity.<sup>101</sup>

While Wood's point concerning the logical outcome of such reasoning when applied to the Holocaust is certainly compelling, it was, of course, unheeded by the British government.

In 2004, an "ad-hoc working party" was hastily organized by the Home Office in order to generate ideas for a ministerial speech on slavery in recognition of the United Nations Year marking Slavery.<sup>102</sup> Out of that meeting emerged three main requests: that the government make a formal apology for slavery; that the national school curriculum be amended to include education pertaining to slavery and the slave trade; and that reparations be made in the form of funding towards educational programs, combating discrimination in British society and institutions, and reducing third world debt. The government nonetheless continued to resist the calls for an apology. Hostility to the idea of apology or the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity resulted, in part, from the government's desire to avoid claims for compensation for slavery or colonialism. In 2001, British officials stated, "we are not prepared to link the question of development aid with past history."<sup>103</sup> In 2005, Prime Minister Tony Blair stated, "I don't see reparations as being the way forward".<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>102</sup> Tibbles, "Facing Slavery's Past," 300.

<sup>103</sup> McGreal, "Britain accused over slave trade."

<sup>104</sup> Tony Blair, as cited in Tibbles, "Facing Slavery's Past," 300.



In November 2006, just prior to the bicentenary of abolition, Blair finally made a public acknowledgement of slavery and the slave trade, but stopped short of a full apology. Blair expressed “deep sorrow” that the slave trade occurred, but unequivocally indicated the legality of slavery, stating, “it is hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time.”<sup>105</sup> He stated he was thankful that Britain was the first country to abolish the trade, and suggested that British citizens ought to “rejoice at the different and better times we live in today.” Blair acknowledged the contributions of “Black African and Caribbean communities to our nation,” then hastily referred to the “barriers to overcome before everyone can make the most of their talents and potential.” He also discussed the need “to respond to the problems of Africa and the challenges facing the African and Caribbean diaspora today,” maintaining that Britain is “playing its full part” through economic aid and international leadership.

Blair’s expression of “deep sorrow” was criticized from various angles. Dr John Sentamu, Britain’s first black archbishop, argued that Blair ought to have offered a full and genuine apology, while the conservative media broadsheet *The Daily Mail* ran inflammatory headlines such as, “Blair in a rush to apologise for our part in slave trade.”<sup>106</sup> Even articles for *The Guardian*, *Evening Standard*, and *BBC News* failed to constructively engage the issues of slavery, apology, or reparations, focusing instead on the report concurrently released by Save the Children UK, which addressed the problem

---

<sup>105</sup> “Tony Blair’s statement on the slave trade in full,” *Times Online*, 27 November 2006.  
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1088135.ece>

<sup>106</sup> “Sentamu seeks Blair slavery apology,” *The Metro*, 25 March 2007.  
[www.dailymail.com.uk/news/article-416946](http://www.metro.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=42518&in_page_id=34&in_a_source; Blair in a rush to apologise for our part in slave trade,” The Daily Mail, 17 November 2006.<br/><a href=)

of child labour in the world today and detailed Britain's efforts to combat it.<sup>107</sup> While Blair understandably could not spend significant time rehearsing the many racial and ethnic struggles experienced in Britain, he made comparatively little effort to correlate ongoing debates regarding issues of racism and discrimination in contemporary British society with the nation's history of systematic racial exploitation – a fact that went unnoticed, or at least unstated, in many prominent newspapers. The significance of slavery to conflicts and debates in *British* society was effectively dispensed with, officially by the British state, and unofficially in the media response to the state's position.

In his assessment of the statement, Tibbles wrote that he was taken aback by Blair's willingness to address issues of contemporary aid to Africa, as these were the very issues of reparations that, only a year earlier, Blair had stated he did not want to discuss.<sup>108</sup> Yet perhaps this tactic is not all that surprising. Blair offered no contextual background explaining the historical causes of contemporary African struggles, nor did he explicitly correlate these struggles with the injustices of slavery or colonialism. He simply spoke of the need to "help Africa tackle its problems," in part through "debt relief." He made no allusions to what may be *owing* to a continent repeatedly exploited by Britain (and Spain, and France, and Germany, and so forth). Instead, Blair constructed 'help' as an act of charity and benevolence, undertaken not as an act of restitution, but rather as a gesture of goodwill. The humanitarian ethic of Britain was reinforced, while Britain was

---

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/blair-refuses-to-bow-to-slave-trade-apology-demands-441913.html>; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/6492291.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6492291.stm); <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/newsheadlines/article-23390223-details/Sentamu+seeks+Blair+slavery+apology/article.do>

<sup>108</sup> Tibbles, "Facing Slavery's Past," 301.

simultaneously distanced from any responsibility for the very issues they are supposedly attempting to assist with.

Indeed, if the myth of white British benevolence is to be sustained, then it is necessary to construct debt relief within a philanthropic discourse, as to pay reparations, Gopal argues, “would be to acknowledge that you are not so much moral beacon and ‘rescuer’ as culpable party. It would mean conceding the obvious: that in economic terms, *it is the ‘developed’ world that is indebted to the ‘developing’ world.*”<sup>109</sup> Rhetorically, then, Blair’s statement very vaguely acknowledged that British involvement in slavery was economically beneficial to the nation, and that this prosperity came at a cost to African peoples. In practice, however, there is no commitment to act accordingly, and therefore no *genuine* recognition of these injustices and their contemporary currency. The role of benevolent donor is retained, as Britain’s actions are discursively constructed as altruistic gestures of charity: in the nineteenth century, Britain gave her slaves their freedom; in the twenty-first century, Britain gives Africa aid. However, benevolence – specifically as articulated or legitimated through the act of gift-giving – is a *manifestation* of white privilege, as such acts disguise the construction of power that determines which groups are positioned as providers and recipients of benevolence. Thus, as Riggs concludes, “the ability to be benevolent is always already predicated upon the power to do so – it does not require the giving up or challenging of power, but rather is *reliant upon* an imbalance of power to instantiate the categories of giver and receiver.”<sup>110</sup> It is far easier to emphasize the achievements of the abolitionists, or Britain’s contemporary efforts to help those ‘less fortunate,’ as the celebration of British philanthropy places

---

<sup>109</sup> Gopal, “It is contradictory,” emphasis added.

<sup>110</sup> Riggs, “Constructing the national good,” p. 8, emphasis added.

Britain in a position of moral superiority. It does not necessitate the same uncomfortable explorations of guilt, culpability, or ongoing complicity demanded by critical engagement with the legacy of slavery. Furthermore, the continuous rehearsal of the benevolence narrative enables nations such as Britain to retain a powerful position in the contemporary world, while skilfully evading the question of how that position was achieved in the first place. As Yasmin Alibhai-Brown argues, “the powerful moral and strategic position of being creditor and benevolent dispenser of aid is too useful for Britain and other western nations to give up.”<sup>111</sup>

However, while Blair’s non-apology was problematic in various ways, the implications of a genuine apology for Britain’s role in slavery are also contentious. Alibhai-Brown, for example, astutely points out that if an official apology were extended for slavery, then this gesture would create a terrible contradiction, as the modern British state continues to operate according to many of the same beliefs and assumptions that historically served to enable Britain’s involvement in slavery. Alibhai-Brown thus identifies and confronts views that continue to inform Britain’s official positions and policies, a sensitive topic that is, more often than not, cloaked in euphemistic rhetoric that effectively works to elide what are fundamentally racist assumptions about equality, values, and rights:

How does the EU let the genocide in Darfur carry on? Easy, they are only blacks.

Robert Mugabe is a villain who must be deposed but the extraordinary concern for his violations is aroused because whites are his victims, unlike those tortured and killed in Darfur and Uganda and the Congo.

---

<sup>111</sup>Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, “It’s understanding we need, not apologies,” *The Independent*, 26 March 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/yasmin-alibhai-brown/yasmin-alibhaibrown-its-understanding-we-need-not-apologies-441944.html>

The legacy of slavery, Alibhai-Brown concludes, thus persists in “the devaluation of black and other non-white lives here and abroad.” This ongoing violence of racism, however, is whitewashed through the continuous rehearsal of the myth of British benevolence. As Susan Ryan demonstrates, the practice of benevolence is intrinsically hierarchical, as it is grounded in the assumption that particular groups of people are in a position to determine the moral worth of those groups whom are understood to be in need of assistance – determinations that are inherently predicated on assumptions of racial hierarchy.<sup>112</sup>

Divorcing the contemporary conditions of countries from their historical experiences with slavery and colonization implicitly suggests that the cause of these struggles is attributable to the failings of the people, or the nation, rather than the consequences of hundreds of years of exploitation. Likewise, detaching the racial conflicts of contemporary Britain from the nation’s historical involvement in perniciously racist systems of exploitation negates important economic, social, and cultural consequences of slavery and colonialism. In the next section, I interrogate these contemporary consequences, considering the possibility of Britain’s future as a thriving “multi-ethnic” nation, and the relation of that future to the past.

## **ii. *The Parekh Report & the Idea of British National Identity***

As related in the introduction, one important issue considered by *The Parekh Report* concerned the ways in which British citizens define themselves as such – in particular, the commission sought to reveal how such definitions function either implicitly or explicitly to exclude racialized members of the population. The point was to

---

<sup>112</sup> Susan Ryan, as cited in Riggs, “Benevolence and the Management of Stake,” para. 12.

offer constructive solutions regarding how Britain may embrace both a formal policy and an informal practice of multiculturalism, which, according to the report, necessitated a reconsideration of the idea of Britishness as well as the historical narratives informing that identity.

These recommendations were met with considerable hostility, particularly by the conservative press. As one columnist perspicaciously noted, “If you really want to take the racial temperature in Britain, you would be better off examining the reactions to the report on multi-ethnic Britain rather than the report itself.”<sup>113</sup> In response to the report’s suggestion that Britain should adopt a formal policy of multiculturalism, many columnists demonstrated a preoccupation with just how ‘diverse’ Britain truly is. Phillip Johnston, for example, drew on demographic statistics in order to argue that Britain is not really a “racial mix,” because out of a total population of 57 million, only four million people are “non-white.”<sup>114</sup> Likewise, Norman Lamont argued that although all national identities are based on myths to some degree, for a nation in which only six per cent of the population is an “ethnic minority,” multiculturalism is “certainly a myth,” and thus ought to be foreclosed.<sup>115</sup> Such sentiments were echoed, too, by various members of parliament. For example, Tory MP Gerald Howarth stated that the report’s recommendations are “an extraordinary affront to the 94 per cent of the population which is not from ethnic minorities. The native British,” Howarth concluded, “must stand up for

---

<sup>113</sup> Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, 31.

<sup>114</sup> Phillip Johnston, “Analysis: Thinkers who want to consign our island story to history,” *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2000. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1369664/Analysis-Thinkers-who-want-to-consign-our-island-story-to-history.html>

<sup>115</sup> Norman Lamont, “Down with multiculturalism, book-burning and fatwas,” *Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 2002. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3576323/Down-with-multiculturalism-book-burning-and-fatwas.html>

themselves.”<sup>116</sup> Columnist Tom Utley went so far as to suggest that rather than encouraging greater acceptance, the report is a “blueprint for racial discord,” and that a case could be made for “prosecuting the report’s authors under the Race Relations Act.”<sup>117</sup> Similarly, William Hague argued that *The Parekh Report* perfectly exemplifies the “anti-British disease,” which manifests in “the tyranny of political correctness and the assault on British culture and history”:

If the Commission’s principal recommendations were implemented, then our police would be paralysed, school exams would be fiddled, classroom discipline would collapse and our political institutions would be stuffed with people on the basis of their colour rather than on whether they could do the job.

Hague went on to state, however, that it was not the report’s recommendations that should engender real alarm, but the thinking of the individuals who drafted it: “In short,” Hague concluded, “they hate who we are, where we have come from and where we are going.”<sup>118</sup>

The response of the conservative media tellingly exemplified the very attitudes that *The Parekh Report* aimed to address, leading Paul Gilroy to describe such reactions as “deeply symptomatic.”<sup>119</sup> Comments such as Howarth’s accord mutual exclusivity to the categories of “ethnic minority” and “native British” – does he mean to suggest that one cannot simultaneously identify as an “ethnic minority” *and* as a “native” of Britain? Furthermore, the various comments suggesting that one should not be employed based on

---

<sup>116</sup> Philip Johnston, “Straw wants to rewrite our history,” *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2000.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1369663/Straw-wants-to-rewrite-our-history.html>

<sup>117</sup> Tom Utley, “They met at Runnymede – to boss us all around,” *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October 2000.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255755/They-met-at-Runnymede---to-boss-us-all-around.html>

<sup>118</sup> William Hague, “Why I am sick of the anti-British disease,” *Daily Telegraph*, 13 October 2000.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255816/Why-I-am-sick-of-the-anti-British-disease.html>

<sup>119</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Post-colonial Melancholia*, (New York: Columbia Press, 2005). xi.

racial or ethnic background reveal a disregard for (or ignorance of) the fact that people *are* discriminated against daily based on just such criterion. Affirmative action practices such as those suggested by the report seek only to redress or counteract such inequities, striving to ensure that all segments of the population are proportionately represented in positions of every level.

As renowned writer Fred D'Aguiar argues, the idea of Britishness should implicitly evoke notions of pluralism, as Britain, from its origins, was a collection of diverse countries, ethnicities, and histories, and thus has only ever been multicultural in nature.<sup>120</sup> However, within dominant cultural representations of British national identity, notions of cultural and biological identity are customarily conflated, and there exists a long-standing strategic confusion of Britishness with whiteness. As Gilroy maintains, “the politics of ‘race’ in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between ‘race’ and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect.”<sup>121</sup> While national identity is increasingly accepted as an imaginary construct, its effects – both material and ideological – are quite tangible; there is, therefore, a vested interest in the preservation of narratives that serve to construct the nation as obviously or inherently white. As a result of efforts to destabilize the racial implications of Britishness, there is, for white British citizens, a growing sense that the privileges wrought through this conflation are increasingly under siege. Any meaningful explanation for the “postmodern nationalism” evident in response to the suggestion that British citizens ought to reconceive of their national identity to be more honestly inclusive of Britain’s historical and contemporary citizenry must acknowledge, as Gilroy

---

<sup>120</sup> Fred D'Aguiar, as cited in Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade*, 11.

<sup>121</sup> Paul Gilroy, *There ain't no Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 44.



argues, “that exceptionally powerful feelings of comfort and compensation” are generated by the “recovery or preservation of endangered whiteness”.<sup>122</sup> *The Parekh Report* presented an *overt* destabilization of the racialized assumptions implicit to prevailing ideas of Britishness, provoking many responses that exhibited feelings of fear and xenophobia. These feelings, for many British citizens, justified more *explicitly* racialized versions of national identity. Indeed, as Charles Moore, editor for the *Daily Telegraph*, tellingly confessed, “‘Britain is basically English speaking, Christian and white and if one starts to think it might become basically Urdu speaking and Muslim and brown one gets frightened.’”<sup>123</sup> The extraordinary resistance expressed in response to the suggestion that British identity ought to be reconsidered thus represents a troubling sort of nationalistic defensiveness, I am arguing, underpinned by what are essentially racist assumptions about identity and the ‘reasonable’ limits of inclusion.

Britain’s national identity crisis is both ongoing and long-standing. In the late 1990s, conservative councillor and former history teacher Paul Johnston suggested that the remedy for the persistent uncertainty plaguing the idea of Britishness could be found in historical literature: “‘It is all there, in Holinshed and Clarendon, in Macaulay and Carlyle, in Trevelyan and Arthur Bryant’.”<sup>124</sup> But, as Kenneth Lunn points out, these writers serve only to “contribute towards the mythology of identity which draws on a particular version of the past,”<sup>125</sup> effectively perpetuating the conflation of Britishness with whiteness. However, like the entreaty to rethink the constitution of British national

---

<sup>122</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 88.

<sup>123</sup> As cited in Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *Who Do We Think We Are? Imagining the New Britain*, (London: The Penguin Press, 2000), 10.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Johnston, as cited in Kenneth Lunn, “Reconsidering ‘Britishness’: The Construction and Significance of National Identity in Twentieth-Century Britain,” in Brian Jenkins and Spyros A Sofos, Eds., *Nation & Identity in Contemporary Europe*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 86

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

identity, the media similarly, and summarily, dismissed *The Parekh Report's* recommendation that the very historical narratives to which Johnston appealed ought to be reconsidered.

In a column entitled “We know in our hearts what Britain means,” for example, Andrew Roberts wrote that since England, Scotland and Wales were “united under the same crown...we have had nearly four centuries of generally very successful political development, and one century, between 1815 and 1914, of untarnishable world-dominating glory.”<sup>126</sup> Needless to say, to celebrate the pinnacle of British imperialism as a period of “untarnishable world-dominating glory” reflects a complete disregard for how the empire was actually experienced by colonized peoples worldwide (not to mention its detrimental affects on the ‘colonizers’ themselves). The issue here concerns not only the historical narratives of British imperialism, but also the ways in which individuals – historians, politicians, journalists, and so forth – choose to represent and remember those narratives in contemporary British culture. In contrast to Roberts’ celebratory remembrance of imperialism, proposals for a new monument representing the historical event of slavery were met with widespread opposition in the period leading up to the bicentennial. Suggestions that existing monuments depicting historical events or individuals with direct connections to the trade be altered to make those links more visible were likewise rejected. The arguments sustaining such opposition, writes Madge Dresser, were that “we cannot ‘read back into’ history, that ‘we’ should not ‘dwell on the past,’ that ‘we’ should eschew ‘political correctness’ and focus instead on the present.”<sup>127</sup> Such arguments not only assume a collective “we” for which slavery is an event that

---

<sup>126</sup> Andrew Roberts, “We know in our hearts what Britain means,” *Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 2000. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255878/We-know-in-our-hearts-what-Britain-means.html>

<sup>127</sup> Dresser, “Set in Stone?” 91.

should obviously be forgotten, but also effect a remarkable contradiction: In one moment, Britain's period of "untarnishable world-dominating glory" (or her 'gift' of freedom to the enslaved) is celebrated with unqualified enthusiasm; in the next, Britain is advised not to dwell on lamentable or discomfoting aspects of its past.

Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace explains the resistance to a more critical or inclusive public representation of British history as engendered by a disjuncture existing between the attitude of historical revisionism and critique that has developed in academic scholarship and the historical sensibilities of the public at large. Essentially, Kowaleski Wallace maintains that although academics have long engaged in a more considered assessment of, for example, the consequences of British imperialism and its relevance to contemporary society, this critical stance, in general, is not aired before the public.<sup>128</sup> Despite the partial validity of Wallace's assessment – that scholarly views are not customarily reflected in popular media – academics, too, contribute to celebratory commemorations of British history and shallow assessments of social relations. As I suggested in the previous chapter, it is frequently academics themselves who are at least partially responsible for the preservation and perpetuation of particular interpretations of national identity through the 'historical' validation of those identities.

James Walvin, for example, writes that in 1998, various television networks celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the emigration of West Indians to Britain and their subsequent impact on British culture. Walvin argues that "this impact is now so obvious and celebrated widely; from the number of black sportsmen who play soccer and cricket for England, through to the iconography of the black past which is extensively used in

---

<sup>128</sup> Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade*, 16.

posters, adverts and the like.”<sup>129</sup> To conclude that ethnic diversity is not merely accepted, but is in fact “celebrated widely” based on the fact that black people are now permitted to play on British sports teams and are more visible in advertising provides a rather superficial analysis of contemporary British ethnic relations, and ignores experiences of British culture articulated by members of racialized populations. Racism is not always manifested in obvious ways (such as the exclusion of black peoples from sports and advertising, for example), but is, rather, a subtle and intricate phenomenon. While it may be overtly based on physical features, such as skin colour, it also intersects with perceived differences that may be more implicit, such as cultural practices that diverge from a set of assumed norms. Rhetorically, as Parekh stresses, racism may “affirm equality of human worth but implicitly deny this by insisting on the absolute superiority of a particular culture.”<sup>130</sup> According to this more sustained exposition of racism, then, Walvin’s identification of the more visible presence of black peoples in British culture demonstrates only a limited type of tolerance, rather than a genuine acceptance, much less a “celebration,” of ethnic diversity. As Elizabeth Buettner demonstrates in relation to the celebration of ethnic foods in British culture, such gestures represent a form of restricted multiculturalism – a white consumer practice that is “all too readily seized upon as an easy substitute for a deeper accommodation of cultural and ethnic diversity in Britain.”<sup>131</sup> In sharp contrast to Walvin’s perception of British celebrations of ethnic diversity, Alibhai-Brown argues that Britain continues to grapple with the implications to British society and national identity wrought by the large-scale migrations of the late

---

<sup>129</sup> Walvin, “Slavery, Truth and Reconciliation,” 136.

<sup>130</sup> Parekh, “Preface,” *The Parekh Report*, ix.

<sup>131</sup> Elizabeth Buettner, “‘Going for an Indian’: South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain,” *The Journal of Modern History* 80(4), (December 2008): 869.

1940s, arguing that there was more optimism about the future of British multiculturalism in the 1960s than is evident today.<sup>132</sup>

However, Walvin's assessment may be interpreted as little more than oversimplified optimism, and is far less problematic than the deeply defensive nationalistic stance evident in other scholarship. Acclaimed historian Niall Ferguson, for example, recently published an interpretation of British imperialism that serves not merely as a justification for, but, more disconcertingly, as a celebration of British empire. Contemptuously labelling the British empire as one of history's "Bad Things," Ferguson argues that the question we should ask of imperialism is "whether there could have been a less bloody path to modernity. Perhaps in theory there could have been. But in practice?"<sup>133</sup> He contends that although incidents such as slavery and the slave trade, the Irish potato famine, or the Amritsar massacre cannot be overlooked, "this balance sheet of the British imperial achievement does not omit the credit side either." According to Ferguson, the advantages of empire include, to list but a few, the "triumph of capitalism as the optimal system of economic organization," "the internalization of the English language," and "above all," "the survival of parliamentary institutions, which far worse empires were poised to extinguish in the 1940s."<sup>134</sup> The trouble with the many successes of the British empire, Ferguson maintains, is that "they are much more likely to be taken for granted than the sins of empire."<sup>135</sup>

Ferguson conveniently discounts the fact that various aspects of British culture negate the detrimental effects of its period of "untarnishable world-dominating glory," as

---

<sup>132</sup> Alibhai-Brown, *Who Do We Think We Are?* 1.

<sup>133</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003), xxvi.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, xxv.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, xxi.

Roberts stated with disquieting arrogance, while celebrating its century of, well, “untarnishable world-dominating glory.”<sup>136</sup> As such, Ferguson’s popular account of British imperialism aptly illustrates what Gilroy has fittingly characterized as Britain’s “postcolonial melancholia,” a sort of nostalgic longing for the bygone years of British global hegemony. While there was a period in the mid- to late twentieth century when Britain seemed to be gesturing toward a position of genuine acknowledgement of the perilous effects of its global hegemony, the past twenty years have signalled a retreat from such recognition to a site of rationalization and/or denial. This “mysterious evacuation of Britain’s postcolonial conflicts from national consciousness,” Gilroy argues, “has become a significant cultural and historical event in its own right.”<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, this evacuation is arguably correlated with a growing insecurity, as illustrated in the comments of Moore, engendered by the visibly shifting composition of Britain’s citizenry, which produces the urgent desire to reassert an imaginary racial homogeneity.

In his response to *The Parekh Report*, Alistair Campbell, Blair’s official spokesman, attempted to divorce the idea of Britishness from both national and racial connotations, arguing that Britishness ““is served not by ethnic nationalism... [but is] about how you develop and promote your values in the wider world.””<sup>138</sup> This statement is contentious in various ways. Firstly, the idea that British national identity is not informed and shaped by perceptions of racial or ethnic difference is almost humorous. Britishness is largely contingent upon an erroneous or imagined conflation of Britishness with whiteness, and, as a consequence, is critically informed by a sense of racialized

---

<sup>136</sup> Cultural celebrations of British imperialism will be considered more specifically in chapter three.

<sup>137</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 89.

<sup>138</sup> As cited in Petley, “A Case of Mistaken Identity,” 26.

identity. Second, the notion that national identity is defined by how British values are developed and promoted in the wider world assumes that all British citizens subscribe to a set of shared values, and speaks to the incredibly problematic ways in which these values are considered universally applicable. This statement echoes imperial rhetoric of the nineteenth century, when the benefits of British values were unselfconsciously considered a blessing to all humanity, regardless of the various losses incurred by the imposition of such blessings. As Weedon perceptively argues, the basic assumptions of humanism – “that all human beings share a common humanity, with specific needs and rights” – can be constructively employed in an effort to effect a more inclusive, accepting global community. However, the limits of humanist discourse are revealed in the all too common erasures of ethnic, historical, and cultural specificity. There is, as Weedon contends, “more to the constitution of subjectivities and identities than humanism is readily able to theorize.”<sup>139</sup> Taken in the context of Britain’s history of intervention and continuing attempts to position itself as a nation championing the importance of human rights, statements such as Campbell’s suggest that rather than contending with a history of human rights violations, Britain will continue to elide these issues, opting instead to push the idea of benevolence, which will unquestionably perpetuate existing ethnic and racial tensions in British society.

In 2004, the Runnymede Trust issued “Realizing the Vision,” a paper that assessed the status of the recommendations put forth in *The Parekh Report*. The tone of the paper was overwhelmingly positive, stating that not only had over two-thirds of the recommendations been put into practice, but also that “issues relating to British identity, pluralism, cohesion and reconsideration of the traditional narrative of the country’s

---

<sup>139</sup> Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, 8.

history are now being debated in public.”<sup>140</sup> The tremendous public controversies initiated by the report’s recommendations were thus considered beneficial, in that such debates managed to foreground issues that had hitherto been neglected in public discourse. However, “Realising the Vision” maintained that while such developments were to be applauded, many of the core issues addressed by *The Parekh Report* remained relevant. For example, although Runnymede set up the Real Histories Directory, an online resource pertaining to cultural diversity in Britain, there had been no amendments to the national curriculum compelling teachers to modify or supplement their teaching of British history to be more inclusive of the experiences of racialized British citizens.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, while the idea of Britain as inherently multi-ethnic seemed to gain greater credibility, an official declaration of Britain as a multicultural state had yet to be considered by the government. “Realising the Vision” argued that the process of drafting an official policy of multiculturalism would provide a constructive means of assessing issues of community cohesion, offering British citizens the opportunity to develop shared conceptions of British national identity. Indeed, if the conflation of Britishness with whiteness is to be resisted or altered in any form, then the institutions and cultural representations perpetuating this conflation must actively seek to revise their narratives.

In this chapter, I have addressed disputes conducted in and through the British media in an effort to both identify prevailing ideas and ideals of Britishness, and to examine the relationship that this identity is imagined to share with the past. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to historical representations of British benevolence, and the

---

<sup>140</sup> “Realising the Vision: Progress and further challenges,” Runnymede Trust, April 2004. <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/30/74.html>

<sup>141</sup> Changes to secondary school curricula in Britain were implemented in the fall of 2008, requiring teachers to be more inclusive of the histories and cultures of black Britons.



multiple ways in which this myth is actively maintained, particularly in cultural institutions such as museums.

### III. Establishing and Rehearsing the Myth of Benevolence

In this chapter, I consider representations of slavery and abolition in media such as art, public memorials, and, in particular, museums – that is, the discourses constituting and perpetuating Britain’s collective memories of slavery and abolition. Specifically, I am interested in what such representations tell us about the permissible limits of Britain’s historical narratives, and the relationship of those narratives to contemporary ideals of national identity. In order to establish the contextual background informing my analysis, I first consider the dominant narrative codes regulating representations of slavery and abolition in Britain, and the institution of these codes by abolitionist discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From the late 1780s through the mid-1830s, abolitionist societies inundated the British population with books and pamphlets featuring images and descriptions of slavery and abolition, and thus were highly influential in constructing a shared understanding of Britain’s moral relationship to both slavery and abolition.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, the narrative frameworks established in the abolitionist period have survived with remarkable tenacity and, as I will demonstrate, continue to regulate representations of slavery and abolition in contemporary Britain.

As a means to explore the ways in which slavery and abolition are currently represented, I engage in a more specific and sustained analysis of “Breaking the Chains: The Fight to End Slavery,” a museum exhibit in Bristol constructed as one of many cultural media commemorating the 2007 bicentennial of British abolition. The bicentennial was celebrated in numerous forms of cultural media throughout Britain, and, as such, presented an ideal opportunity to move beyond the limiting narrative structures

---

<sup>142</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery*, 64.

that constitute the collective memories of slavery and abolition in order to challenge both the historical and contemporary myths shaping and informing British identity. My assessment of “Breaking the Chains,” which is informed by a process of critical discursive analysis, thus interrogates how representations of slavery and abolition in this particular museum function to contest, destabilize and/or reinforce master narratives of slavery and abolition. Throughout this chapter, I am particularly concerned with how the rehearsals of such narratives through and in these representations serve to constitute and inform the ideal of white British benevolence.

### **i. The Structures of Visual Enslavement**

Throughout the period of British abolitionism – specifically, from the 1780s through the 1830s – literary, theatrical and artistic representations often constructed the black body as an enslaved body.<sup>143</sup> For many British citizens, then, black peoples were first and foremost associated with slavery, and, by extension, with their legal designation as chattel or property. The idea of a freed black populace evoked fear in a culture that was accustomed to, and for a long time quite comfortable with, the idea of blacks as little more than slaves. As Madge Dresser observes of Bristol, a leading slave port throughout the eighteenth century, due to the coverage of local press, in addition to other cultural depictions of blacks, most Bristolians were convinced that ‘Africans’ were a “violent and alien lot with a decided potential for harm.”<sup>144</sup> The fear of black violence was exacerbated by reports that appeared in both the domestic and colonial presses – reports frequently embellished or exaggerated by those with a vested interest in keeping the

---

<sup>143</sup> For example, see Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*; Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade*; or, Nussbaum *The Limits of the Human*.

<sup>144</sup> Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, 61.

British population anxious about the possible consequences of abolition.<sup>145</sup> However, the black body was also, and unavoidably, human (perhaps of a lesser degree or kind, it was often thought, but human nonetheless), introducing a problematic tension within a society becoming increasingly fluent in the language of universal human rights and equality. The abolitionists thus realized that if they were to garner the public's sympathy and support for their cause, they must remain sensitive to this tension. Specifically, in their literary, and, in particular, visual representations of African people, they had to find a way to evoke public pity while simultaneously avoid exacerbating public fear.

The abolitionists thus proceeded to institute what Marcus Wood characterizes as the “white art of emancipation,” constituted through the ubiquitous imagery of blacks as a people in need: in need of help, in need of salvation, in need of the benevolence and charity of the (white) British nation. It is, Wood argues, “a central and virtually unbroken tenet of abolition thought that blacks must be portrayed as harmless and passive victims if they are to merit our pity.”<sup>146</sup> There are numerous examples of the ways in which black peoples were denied cultural representation in abolitionist discourse. One highly successful tactic used by the abolitionists involved mass propagation of the *Description of the Slave Ship Brookes*, a print depicting the practice known as tight packing, which was the deplorable way that most enslaved Africans experienced the Middle Passage. The abolitionists used the *Description* to illustrate the inhumanity of the slave trade; however, the image also erased the humanity of African peoples by reinforcing their status as cargo. The *Description*, Wood argues, came to be the quintessential image associated with the Middle Passage precisely because it portrayed black peoples in precisely the way

---

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>146</sup> Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, 85.

that white audiences wanted to think of them: “Silent, supine, suffering: in their quiet order they provide a space for white meditation, but not for black empowerment.”<sup>147</sup>

Indeed, the *Description* foregrounds the position of blacks as passive victims, effectively mitigating white fear of black agency or autonomy.

Another example of problematic abolitionist imagery is the seal of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST), which features a kneeling black slave, imploring a presumably white audience, “Am I not a man and a brother?” This image was reproduced widely throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, adorning broaches, medallions, hairpins, and even snuffboxes, inviting the viewer to identify with either the supplicant or the donor. While the accompanying text (am I not a man and a brother?) challenges the viewer to recognize the humanity of the enslaved, the representation of the prostrate pleading man suggests that there is a specific hierarchy within this humanity, wherein it is the white audience who is in a position to negotiate the conditions of equality. Freedom, this image suggests, is something that must be both requested and granted; thus, freedom, when and if it comes for the black slave, will be the gift of the white British nation.

For the most part, then, British abolitionists did not attempt to convince the British population of the moral wrong of slavery through the appeal to a notion of universal human equality. In fact, many of the leading abolitionist societies staunchly refused to support immediate abolition, not only because members of these societies themselves feared the consequences of such actions, but also because it was widely thought that to officially espouse the need for immediate abolition would be to sacrifice

---

<sup>147</sup> Wood, “Popular Graphic Images,” 148.

the much needed support of the British public for the abolitionist cause.<sup>148</sup> Thus, between the initial abolitionist campaigning of the late 1780s and the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, imagery such as that of the *Description* and the seal were employed by the abolitionists as a means to generate opposition to the trade specifically, rather than slavery in general, and did so through the depiction of black peoples as helpless, harmless, *objects* of need. As Wood argues, the seal, similar to representations of the Middle Passage, “conforms, to a frightening extent, to [Henry Louis] Gates’s description of erasure. The black as cultural absentee, the black as a blank page for white guilt to inscribe, emerged as a necessary pre-condition for abolitionist polemic against the slave trade.”<sup>149</sup> Blacks were portrayed not as equal human beings or autonomous agents, inherently deserving of their lives and liberties, but were instead infantilised through their depiction as a people in need of various forms of help. In these ways, the white art of emancipation, as Brychan Carey and Peter Kitson argue, “is deeply imbricated in a Hegelian model of slavery which denies the enslaved the agency of recapturing a freedom which was never their enslavers’ right to restore, any more than to take from them in the first place.”<sup>150</sup> Despite the critical significance of slave mutinies, protests, and innumerable other acts of resistance, abolitionists constructed abolition as the cause and eventual achievement of the British nation. Throughout this imagery, then, there is a

---

<sup>148</sup> The views of Elizabeth Heyrick, who was among the most prominent supporters of immediate abolition, were widely described as too radical. In fact, there was a critical distinction between the female and male abolitionist societies, and their respective views of slavery and abolition. However, I neglect the gendered dimension of the abolitionist movement due to considerations of length. For a thorough analysis of this argument, see Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>149</sup> Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22.

<sup>150</sup> Carey and Kitson, “Introduction,” 6.

prevalent contrast between black subjection and inferiority and white authority and empowerment.

The narrative of slavery abolitionists presented to the public – which became more pronounced in the early 1830s, when abolitionists began to focus their energies on emancipation – was likewise mediated through the perspective of white observers or acquaintances, and was frequently diluted so as not to offend the sensibilities of the public at large. Representations of torture or death were customarily conveyed through the testimonies of white witnesses, while the issue of sexual abuse and exploitation was largely avoided altogether. Through the visual and textual testimony of white witnesses, and almost always in accordance with the overarching redemptive gesture of abolition, the unpalatable, multiple experiences of enslavement were funnelled into a digestible, consistent, more or less innocuous narrative. Personal slave narratives – the singular means through which a limited number of black peoples were ‘permitted’ a voice – were almost always prefaced by a white guarantor’s testament to the reputable character of the author, as though the experience of enslavement was not sufficient to allow one to speak or write of it with authority. Overall, then, the abolitionists’ campaign propagated representations of slavery that portrayed an abstracted enslaved body, and either implicitly or explicitly refuted the equality of black peoples, leaving it to the agency of the personalized, sanctified, celebrated white male abolitionists of the British nation to right the moral wrong of slavery.<sup>151</sup> In fact, as Alex Tyrrell and James Walvin argue, such representations were not intended to illuminate the deleterious effects of slavery, or

---

<sup>151</sup> Wood, “Packaging Liberty,” 205.

to convince the public of the common humanity of black peoples, but rather to present impressive examples of the Whigs as a philanthropic, civilizing force.<sup>152</sup>

Following the abolition acts of 1807 and 1833, the British abolitionist movement subsided, and representations of slavery circulated by the abolitionists correspondingly waned. For the British nation, slavery was no longer a pressing or pertinent issue; it was abolitionism that was to be remembered. In 1808, for example, a commemorative plate was produced as a part of the official celebration of the abolition of the slave trade. The plate features three white, female figures – Justice, Britannia, and Religion – respectively brandishing the scales of justice, the Union Jack, and the Bible; a pile of broken shackles lies under the feet of Britannia. The image includes a bust of Wilberforce, a list of the members of Parliament who voted in favour of the Abolition Act, a text relating the horrors of slavery, the British lion, and what is presumably a slave ship sailing into the horizon. Significantly, within this celebrated image intended to mark the historical passage of the abolition of the slave trade, there is no reference to those most directly affected by such an act – that is, Britain’s colonial enslaved. Furthermore, this image does not indicate the contributions of enslaved populations to the achievement of abolition. In fact, the single weak connection that can be made to the slaves themselves is through the broken shackles; the irony, however, is that the enslaved remained shackled. While the Abolition Act of 1807 theoretically guaranteed that the British would enslave no African peoples after January 1808, it made no provisions for those who were already enslaved in the British Caribbean. This image, then, aptly illustrates Wood’s notion of the white art of emancipation: the reality of slavery is subsumed by the triumphant

---

<sup>152</sup> Alex Tyrrell and James Walvin, “Whose History is it? Memorialising Britain’s Involvement in Slavery,” in Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, eds., *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 152.



celebration of abolition – a gesture that is considered most significant for how it reflects the philanthropic character of the British nation.

*The Commemorative Wreath*, a collection of poetry published in 1834 to pay tribute to the glory and good nature of the British, provides another illustration of the ways in which the meaning and memory of slavery was denied by that of abolition. As the writer of “On Negro Emancipation” wrote,

Yes Britain! Who can boast like thee/ Of all that’s good, and wise, and free?....  
Justice at length asserts her sway/ On Britain dawns a brighter day.... England –  
conscious England now/ Has washed this stain from off her brow.... And Britain to  
the world shall be/ An *Emblem* of true *Liberty!*<sup>153</sup>

Throughout this poem – and, indeed, this collection – the moral capital accrued through Britain’s selfless act of abolition is continuously invoked to exculpate the nation from any guilt incurred by their protracted involvement in slavery. Similar to the commemorative plate, the “stain” of slavery is absolved by the glorious triumph of abolition, which is celebrated exclusively for the ways in which it reinforces the ideal of British national benevolence.

The meaning of slavery, therefore, was immediately and officially transformed by the event of British abolitionism. British citizens, and, perhaps more disturbingly, Britain’s colonial subjects, were taught to view the significance of slavery through the redemptive story of abolition.<sup>154</sup> Britain’s abolition of slavery was used as a testimonial to the enlightened compassion of the nation, and, as Britain moved to celebrate its

---

<sup>153</sup> G. B. K. “On Negro Emancipation,” *The Commemorative Wreath, In Celebration of the Extinction of Negro Slavery in the British Dominions*, (London: J. Masters, 173, Printer, Aldersgate Street, 1834), 17-20.

<sup>154</sup> Oldfield, ‘*Chords of Freedom*,’ 172.

cessation, the onus of guilt for slavery and the slave trade was conveniently forgotten. In fact, the subsequent horrors inflicted through apprenticeship and indentured labour failed to capture the British popular imagination in quite the same ways as had abolition. As Wood argues, the reason for this is evident:

Once a nation has made a down payment on its own myth of abolition (in this case a literal cash payment of £20 million in compensation to planters) and has been consumed by its own myth of liberation, no nation wants – or indeed may possess the moral capacity – to see beyond the veil of self-aggrandisement.<sup>155</sup>

Thus the memory of Britain's role in slavery was immediately disowned as the nation moved to invest itself in the myth of white British benevolence. This gesture of denial, however, did not emerge due to accident or oversight; rather, the memory and significance of slavery was, as Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace argues, "made 'gone' through the agency of those who participated in the trade, as well as those who came after them."<sup>156</sup> The fortunes of many British elites were amassed through activities related to Atlantic slavery; consequently, such individuals retained a personal interest in displacing the significance of slavery with that of abolition. Likewise, as Christopher Brown argues, the British state had little to gain in terms of moral capital through sustaining a memory of the nation's extensive involvement in such a brutal and exploitative system. The various cultural materials that were produced to mark the place of abolitionism in British history thus represent the official version of how such elites wanted to remember – or, rather, disremember – slavery. As Wood argues, the codification of British abolitionism through and in these cultural representations can be read as "an act of cultural policing by

---

<sup>155</sup> Wood, "Popular Graphic Images," 143.

<sup>156</sup> Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade*, 60.

Britain,” wherein slavery, abolition, and the legacy of these historical moments are reinvented and monumentalized.<sup>157</sup>

The mechanisms of control and denial established by abolitionists in the nineteenth century continue to regulate and limit contemporary cultural representations of slavery and abolition in Britain. These narrative codes – particularly as they are manifested in public memorials and museums – perpetuate an ongoing cultural denial of the significance or extent of Britain’s involvement in slavery, while entrenching the importance of abolitionism to the narrative of British national identity. This is evident, first and foremost, in the scarcity of cultural media taking slavery and the enslaved (rather than abolition and the abolitionists) as their focus. For example, although there are very few monuments erected to slavery in Britain, there are numerous acknowledging the honoured position of abolition’s heroes – specifically, William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and James Fox. These commemorative conventions of the British state thus serve to officially sanctify the centrality of British abolitionism to the metanarrative of British national benevolence. The memorialization of slavery in Britain – or lack thereof – contributes to a culture of silence regarding the significance of the nation’s historical complicity in slavery, as well as the benefits and privileges that that collusion continues to bestow. If monuments are about remembering those aspects of history considered critical to the narratives of national history, as Dresser argues, then the events and individuals who are neglected or ‘forgotten’ are of equal importance.<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> Marcus Wood, “Popular Graphic Images of Slavery and Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century England,” in Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth, eds., *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum*, (Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2007), 138.

<sup>158</sup> Dresser, “Set in Stone?” 165.

Representations in British museums similarly rehearse established narratives of slavery and abolitionism, simultaneously drawing on and contributing to the mythology of national benevolence. The construction of slavery, for example, tends to adhere to one of two dominant narrative structures. Slavery is either considered as the necessary prologue to the grander story of British abolitionism, in which case the agency of enslaved peoples is marginalized or altogether erased, and the significance of Britain's involvement in slavery is mediated through abolitionism; or the narrative featuring the white heroes of abolition is amended to accommodate the black heroes of slavery. Significantly, these black heroes are, in almost every instance, those individuals who accord most closely with a European definition of civilization. As Tyrrell and Walvin argue, contemporary depictions of slavery in British museums focus on the 'respectable' ex-slave:

In the preferred image of [Oladuah] Equiano we see the black man dressed like a propertied Briton of his day. He is a literate, devout, refined man of sensibility who at a glance could persuade white peers that here were blacks of attainment. He and [Ignatius] Sancho were, to put it crudely, the kind of black men that white men liked to deal with.<sup>159</sup>

In adjusting the story of abolition's white heroes to allow for the contributions of black heroes, the dominant narrative structure of abolition is altered only marginally, and the overall message conveyed continues to emphasize liberal, enlightenment values.

Representations of slavery and abolition in the museum are thus largely informed, as J.R. Oldfield argues, by "the white liberal imagination," and thus are really about "'our'

---

<sup>159</sup> Tyrrell and Walvin, "Whose History Is It?" 163.

needs, ‘our’ guilt, and ‘our’ sense of the past.”<sup>160</sup> Abolition is constructed as the paradigmatic act of British benevolence in a larger narrative relating Britain’s long-standing, progressive march towards universal equality; however, the ideals, values, and assumptions giving meaning to notions of freedom and progress are unexamined. In an important sense, then, this iconography has little to do with slavery, but rather constitutes a hagiographic narrative of British abolitionism – a “white mythology which ... works hard to deny the possibility of gaining knowledge of the disaster of the Atlantic slave trade.”<sup>161</sup> As a result of such representational practices, the cultural memory of slavery has become – and, indeed, always was – subsumed by that of its abolition. In fact, the myth of abolitionism precludes the possibility for serious engagement with the legacy of slavery, as slavery is always already redeemed by abolition.

For British citizens such as historian Ross Wilson, the 2007 bicentennial of British abolition presented the opportunity to redefine the meaning of slavery and abolition in British culture and memory.<sup>162</sup> As discussed in the first chapter, the bicentennial not only initiated important social debates concerning the significance of slavery in British history, but also the relation of that history to contemporary meanings of Britishness. In addition, the bicentennial prompted prominent museums in Liverpool, London, Manchester, and Bristol to construct new exhibits on slavery and abolition. In the following analysis, I examine one such exhibit, and situate the discursive strategies employed by the curators of this exhibit in the context of dominant narrative structures regulating representations of slavery and abolition

---

<sup>160</sup> Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom*, 127.

<sup>161</sup> Wood, *Blind Memory*, 8.

<sup>162</sup> Ross Wilson, “Memory matters: Britain and the abolition of the slave trade, 1807-2007,” *1807 Commemorated: The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 2008, para 8.  
<http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/discussion/memory.html>

## ii. “Breaking the Chains” and the Maintenance of Master Narratives

Bristol’s “Breaking the Chains: The Fight to End Slavery” ran at The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum from April 2007-October 2008. The exhibit was short-listed for the 2008 Art Fund Prize, and praised by various reviewers as “ground-breaking,” “informative,” and “authentic,” said to stress the importance of “endurance, resistance, and survival.”<sup>163</sup> “Breaking the Chains” consists of six galleries: What is slavery?; Africa and Europe; The Caribbean; The Age of Abolition; Voices of the Caribbean; and, An end to slavery? With only one of its six galleries expressly devoted to abolitionism, the very structure of the exhibit appears to move beyond the conventional privileging of abolition narratives, making a clear attempt to emphasize previously marginalized or neglected perspectives. The “Africa and Europe” gallery brings together diverse textual and artistic displays, as well as historical artefacts, to represent the histories of various African societies. This gallery does not subsume distinct and varied societies to create a general picture of ‘Africa,’ but rather specifically names, for example, Yoruba, Benin, and Asante peoples, and makes a concerted effort to stress the longevity of these civilizations. Through such techniques, the autonomous status of black peoples prior to their encounters with Europeans is accentuated. The gallery “What is slavery?” constructs the experience of enslavement – from the initial capture of African peoples, through the brutality of the Middle Passage (in this exhibit described as the Atlantic Crossing), to the severity of labour and living conditions on Caribbean plantations – through a varied and interesting use of artefacts, artistic representations, and the oral and written testimonials of both the enslaved, as well as witnesses to slavery. The

---

<sup>163</sup> [http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/bristol/events/EDR42153.html?ixsid=;](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/bristol/events/EDR42153.html?ixsid=)  
<http://www.abolition200.org.uk/listings/EDR42153.html>

economic, cultural, and social costs that African civilizations paid for slavery are considered through an engaging display of textual panels and photographs; however, through the depiction of various revolts, rebellions and other acts of defiance, this gallery also stresses the prevalence of resistance, thereby constituting the enslaved as independent, active agents who did not submissively accept their collective fate as slaves. There is, therefore, an obvious effort on the part of curators to construct enslavement as a complex experience, and to do so from the perspectives of African peoples.

Similarly, “Breaking the Chains” makes a clear effort to represent emancipation as a complex event. The “Voices of the Caribbean” gallery invokes the testimonials of former slaves to describe the poverty and destitution experienced by many following the abolition of slavery and the detrimental affects of apprenticeship and indentured labour. For example, one large text panel features a quote from a 1842 petition drafted by emancipated slaves: “During our slavery, we was clothed, ration, and seported in all manner of respets. Now we are free mens (free indeed), we are to work for nothing. Then we might actually say, we becomes slaves again. [*sic*]” By employing the voices and analyses of black peoples, then, this gallery does not depict emancipation as a simple, painless, or fully redemptive experience. Through the display of artistic goods and handicrafts, this gallery also stresses the thriving cultures of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora. In fact, Oldfield – one of only a handful of academics to review the exhibit – argues that the approach adopted by the museum is “uncompromising,” maintaining that although the abolitionists are rightly represented as having tirelessly laboured to provoke opposition to the slave trade in Britain, the museum’s curators have gone to great lengths to

“incorporate black voices into their displays.” Oldfield concludes that the overall emphasis of the exhibit thus highlights the importance of black agency.<sup>164</sup>

In his analysis of “Breaking the Chains,” Oldfield assumes that the incorporation of black perspectives into existing narratives of abolition is an unproblematic process; however, as I have argued at various points throughout this thesis, it is those very narratives which preclude a more honest and historically inclusive representation of slavery. While the representation of black peoples by this exhibit certainly effects a more comprehensive picture of slavery than can be found in the abolitionist imagery of the nineteenth century, there is not a rigorous or consistent challenge to many of the fundamental assumptions established through that imagery. Oldfield’s analysis, then, is quite accurate: “Breaking the Chains” effectively incorporates black perspectives into the white abolitionist narrative, which is precisely the problem with this exhibit.

For example, the introductory gallery, “What is slavery?” features a panel entitled “Fighting Back Against Slavery.” While this panel does mention the resistance of enslaved people prior to commenting on the work of abolitionists in Britain, featured directly underneath this text is the seal of the SEAST – the image of the kneeling slave begging for his freedom. The textual privileging of the resistance of the enslaved, therefore, is compromised by the conflicting connotations of this imagery. As Wood argues, “within the racial dynamic of this print the white power to say yes (which of course implicitly tenders an antithesis, the right to say no) is the necessary pre-condition by which the possibility of black freedom is allowed to be introduced.”<sup>165</sup> Moreover,

---

<sup>164</sup> Oldfield, ‘*Chords of Freedom*,’ 127-129.

<sup>165</sup> Marcus Wood, “Emancipation Art,” in Brychan Carey and Peter J. Kitson, eds., *Slavery and the Cultures of Abolition: Essays Marking the Bicentennial of the British Abolition Act of 1807*, (Cambridge: The English Association, 2007), 22.



while the seal is clearly an artefact with an important historical relationship to abolitionism, it is not used as an object of analysis. That is, while the image appears at least six times throughout the exhibit, its implications regarding the abolitionists' views of the enslaved are considered only once. Accompanying an image of the kneeling slave upon a conspicuously large piece of stained glass, and following a description of its origins, the exhibit finally acknowledges that the image suggests the abolitionists "regarded African slaves as helpless victims in need of their assistance." That the meaning of this image is interrogated at all is commendable, particularly when one considers the ways in which it has historically been celebrated. However, this recognition comes almost as an afterthought, and is not used to further discussion or debate regarding its significance. In this way, then, the repeated and largely unproblematized use of the seal reinscribes its aesthetic significance as a celebrated icon, and serves to reproduce the idea of abolition as the charitable donation of white Britain. The racialized views of Africans held by abolitionists themselves are not suggested or considered in any other context, and the forces or beliefs motivating the actions of the abolitionists are likewise left unquestioned in this exhibit. Similar to Brown's observations regarding explanations of abolitionism in historical literature (or lack thereof), abolitionism is depicted as an obvious or self-explanatory development in British society.

This is a recurring pattern throughout "Breaking the Chains": the exhibit introduces important aspects of slavery and abolition, but in such a way that reinforces Britain's abolitionist lineage, while distancing the nation from its role in slavery. For example, sexual abuse and exploitation— an omnipresent threat for many slaves — is acknowledged by two different panels, but is neither considered in a meaningful way nor connected to

the daily, lived experience of enslavement. Sexual exploitation may have affected women most directly, but, as parents, partners, siblings and members of a community, entire populations experienced the extreme trauma wrought by the threat and practice of sexual abuse. In eliding the centrality of sexual abuse to the experience of enslavement (as well as various ingenious forms of resistance devised by the enslaved), the exhibit whitewashes a critical aspect of slavery. This element is further distanced from the British people by the fact that the perpetrators of such actions are not identified – that is, these routine acts of sexual violence are not connected to British slaveholders, plantation owners and managers, ship crews, or anyone at all. As the one panel that actually acknowledges the existence of sexual violence states: “Acts of rape and violence went unpunished.” There is no reference to either the victims or perpetrators of such acts; we are left to conclude that they simply happened, and in this way, do not have to contend with how this perpetration of violence contradicts the ideal of British benevolence.

The representation of racism provides another example of the ways in which “Breaking the Chains” sanitizes slavery and abolition. Racism is referred to only four times in the exhibit, and is not represented in a way that encourages a sustained or careful consideration of its implications for either Atlantic slavery or British abolitionism. Clearly, racism was in various respects a central ideological aspect enabling slavery, both within the colonies and in Britain itself. However, as I have previously argued, a racialized view of black people also informed the views, actions, and strategies of the abolitionists. This is certainly not to state that all British abolitionists were necessarily racists, in the sense that this term is constructed today. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the abolitionists were motivated by forces other than an untainted and uncompromising

belief in the equality of all peoples, which encourages a less hagiographic view of abolitionism itself. Because this exhibit leaves the issue of racism largely unexplored, visitors are implicitly invited to read abolitionism as indicative of waning racial attitudes. In fact, it seems logical to conclude that the abolition of slavery implied a greater acceptance of racial equality. However, while racialized thinking was prevalent throughout the 1700s, the idea of race as a *scientific reality* did not gain popular acceptance until the mid-1800s, long after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Many scholars thus identify a positive correlation between abolitionism and a more entrenched and prevalent racism in British society. As Felicity Nussbaum argues, the event of abolition “paradoxically exacerbated the racism that had fostered black slavery in England... [and] encouraged racism’s evolution into newer, more modern, and more firmly fixed forms of credible fictions.”<sup>166</sup> Similarly, the culture of abolitionism tended to encourage a paternalist, demeaning, and essentially racist view of African peoples – an ideological position central to the nineteenth century colonial ‘scramble for Africa.’ As Wood argues, the construction of African peoples in abolition propaganda served to justify white imperialism.<sup>167</sup> The relationship between racism, slavery, and abolition, then, was clearly multifaceted; however, “Breaking the Chains” makes no attempt to represent these important ideological elements of slavery and abolition in ways that initiate discussion, debate, and/or self-reflection. Instead, like the sexual trauma of slavery, the representation of racism is left sufficiently – and reassuringly – vague.

The narratives of slavery and abolition constructed by “Breaking the Chains,” then, are not informed solely by the materials that the curators have opted to include, but also

---

<sup>166</sup> Nussbaum, *Limits of the Human*, 238.

<sup>167</sup> Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, 9.

by the content and perspectives that have been omitted; and the materials that have been omitted are those that challenge or undermine the myth of British national benevolence. As John Beech argues, far from encouraging contemporary Britain to contend with the significance of its historical involvement in slavery, exhibits such as “Breaking the Chains” instead serve to further distance the British nation from the “inconvenient truth” of slavery: “Not only did slavery create massive pain, suffering and misfortune for black people,” Beech maintains, “but also enormous gains, financially, socially and politically for the white traders without any apparent moral qualms.”<sup>168</sup> The massive “pain, suffering and misfortune” of slavery was, for the most part, administered by white British individuals, with the tacit approval of the white British nation. “Breaking the Chains” does not encourage engagement with the idea or significance of British culpability or complicity; the exhibit thus foregrounds the role of the British nation in abolition, but not in slavery. Through the disavowal of those aspects of slavery and abolition that threaten the myth of British benevolence, the significance of Britain’s historical relationship with slavery continues to be effectively mediated through the redemptive lens of abolition.

The emphasis of the exhibit is made quite clear, in fact, by the very first set of panels, which introduce “Breaking the Chains” as, “An Exhibition to Commemorate the British Parliamentary Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in 1807”:

This exhibition tells the story of the British Transatlantic Slave Trade and its abolition.... Campaigners in Britain, fired by humanitarian and religious ideals, worked tirelessly for many years to have this brutal trade abolished. The Transatlantic Slave Trade, but not slavery, was outlawed by an Act of Parliament in 1807. Slavery in British colonies was finally abolished in 1834. In 2007 we

---

<sup>168</sup> Beech, “A step forwards of a step sideways?” para 9.

remember the courage and strength of all those who fought and campaigned against slavery – in Africa, Britain and the Caribbean.

The exhibit, then, is not simply meant to commemorate the abolition of slavery, but the “British Parliamentary” abolition of slavery; and what “we” remember is not really slavery or the significance of Britain’s involvement therein, but rather those who fought to have it extinguished. In these ways, the dominant message conveyed by “Breaking the Chains” echoes that of the nineteenth century: abolition was achieved by the British, who then selflessly proceeded to induce the rest of the world to follow suit. For example, in the final gallery, “An end to slavery?” a series of three panels are devoted to the celebration of Britain’s worldwide “policing of the slave trade,” which eventually led to the “defeat of slavery.” The panels emphasize that policing the trade entailed tremendous sacrifice on the part of the British nation, which undertook this activity despite the extraordinary financial strain and loss of British lives that ensued. These panels follow “The Age of Abolition” gallery, the whole of which is devoted to the rehearsal of familiar narratives of abolitionism in Britain. Thus, Britain’s primary and continuing role in abolition warrants ample space and consideration, while an engaged consideration of the acts and consequences of Britain’s much longer participation in slavery is discounted. What this suggests is that British society need not feel any sense of responsibility for the past, but is, as Priyamvada Gopal argues, “allowed, indeed exhorted to feel pride in it. We are to distance ourselves from those who actively participated in slavery, but we can rightfully claim an abolitionist lineage.”<sup>169</sup>

An appeal to Britain’s abolitionist lineage is also evident in the ways in which “Breaking the Chains” constructs the contemporary relevance of Britain’s historical

---

<sup>169</sup> Gopal, “It is contradictory to condemn slavery.”

involvement in slavery and abolition exclusively through Britain's continuing acts of benevolence. In the final gallery, "An end to slavery?", a series of textual panels describe British efforts to end slavery in East and West Africa, Turkey, Egypt, and Persia; British challenges to the colonial exploits of the Spanish in South America; and British opposition to the horrific conditions in King Leopold's so-called Congo Free State. The gallery questions whether slavery exists in Britain today (for the most part the answer is no, though rising incidences of trafficking and forced labour are acknowledged), and concludes with a set of three large panels paying tribute to people working in countries where slavery continues to exist as a genuine social problem: India, the Philippines, and Sudan. This gallery does not suggest that Britain's involvement in slavery may have carried on past the Abolition Act of 1807, as Marika Sherwood so adamantly argues; nor does it mention that it was 1928 before slavery was abolished in all British colonies. There is no reference to the imperial conquests of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or the deleterious consequences of British colonization – the effects of which continue to resonate in former colonies. Instead, the British are depicted as a people who have, since their moral awakening of the nineteenth century, worked tirelessly to render the world more equitable and accepting, while the social injustice of slavery is construed as an issue that is only pertinent in other societies – societies the British are doing their best to help.

What this final gallery implies is that in order to understand the consequences or legacy of slavery, one must simply be made aware of the problem of slavery in the contemporary world. In fact, throughout the exhibit, the implications of Britain's involvement in slavery for contemporary society – that is, its lasting influence within various institutions, ideologies, and social relations – are ignored. While the curators

make specific reference to the relationship between Bristol's urban development and the slave trade, this is the single correlation made between the wealth of Britain and the profits of slavery; there is little attempt to interrogate the significance of this economic relationship for historical or contemporary Britain. Similarly, a summary quotation acknowledging the "ignorance and discrimination" faced by large waves of West Indians who relocated to Britain following the Second World War is the closest this exhibit comes to suggesting an ideological correlation between the racism that 'justified' Britain's historical involvement in slavery and "discrimination" in contemporary society. Current ethnic tensions and racist attitudes in Britain are not mentioned, much less connected with the legacy of slavery. Likewise, the exhibit neither acknowledges the cultural and institutional denial of Britain's historical involvement in slavery, nor considers what is denoted by this collective denial. There is, to state it simply, very little information to indicate why Britain's involvement in slavery should be of concern for contemporary British citizens.

Yet, despite the exhibit's patent lack of engagement with the contemporary relevance of Britain's involvement in slavery, it was The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum that organized and facilitated the debate held in Bristol over whether Britain should formally apologize for its role in slavery and the slave trade. Indeed, there are posters advertising the debate throughout the museum. However, the museum also displays several articles published in the local and national presses opposing the idea of an official apology. Such a view is expressed in the comments left by one visitor in the response book: "Apologise to whom? It is so far in the past, and WE instigated the freedom," beside which is penciled in "so true." Another visitor wrote: "This was tribe

against tribe. Africans sold each other,” while yet another emphatically stated, “SLAVERY WAS JUST BUSINESS.” If one’s sole source on slavery and abolition consisted of this exhibit, these would arguably be reasonable conclusions. British involvement in the Atlantic slave trade is not effectively or constructively examined; in fact, in discursively privileging Britain’s historical relationship to abolitionism, the exhibit construes Britain as having apologized for slavery through the act of abolition. The presentation of slavery and abolition in this exhibit thus constitutes another example of the white art of emancipation, portraying slavery as a grievous mistake, but one that has certainly been forgiven given the fact that it was, after all, the British who granted ‘their’ slaves freedom.

The context in which this exhibit is constructed further lends to the sense of an unselfconscious celebration of British humanitarianism.<sup>170</sup> “Breaking the Chains” was housed in The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum (BECM). In order to enter the exhibit, one must walk through several galleries on the first floor. The prelude to this temporary exhibit marking British abolitionism is thus a permanent series of images, texts, and artefacts harkening back to the glory days of empire. Despite the museum’s professed purpose – to examine the “evidence of Britain’s colonial history” and to consider this history’s “present-day legacy” – the collection of items and accompanying text lacks consistent critique regarding what the imposition of British rule meant to millions of colonized people worldwide. While the museum makes a clear effort to employ diverse perspectives to construct varied experiences of colonization, a number of highly significant figures are missing. The overall message is thus confusing and

---

<sup>170</sup> My intent here is not to offer a sustained review of the museum itself, but only to convey my impressions regarding the significance of the “Breaking the Chains” exhibit in such a venue.



contradictory, and does not achieve the sense of critical engagement one would expect from a museum dedicated to the exposition of such a devastating and long-lasting system of exploitation. For example, though there are a number of panels featuring colonized India, none mention the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, his beliefs or philosophies, or his importance to India's independence movements. Another panel states that, "pious, dutiful and fertile, Queen Victoria was the perfect mother-figure" for a growing "imperial family." The museum makes no effort to destabilize this euphemistic rhetoric, and, as a consequence, the status of the Queen is realigned with the notion of imperial benevolence. To neglect the historical significance of Gandhi to India's decolonization, or to refer to a vast and varied expanse of territory and peoples acquired through violence, manipulation, and coercion as a "family" constructs what is, at best, a highly selective interpretation regarding the significance of British colonialism.

A large textual panel entitled "Law and order: colonial policing and the legal system," which explains the introduction of British civility and governance to the colonies, typifies the presumption of British superiority implicit in the discursive constitution of imperialism throughout the BECM:

The British established the rule of law in their colonies. The courts used a mix of English law with local customs and traditional beliefs.... The British avoided interfering with customary law in the colonies. They banned practices deemed contrary to natural justice such as human sacrifice and infanticide. But they respected local beliefs, especially in disputes about land, debt, marriage and inheritance.

This panel effects several extremely troubling insinuations regarding British colonialism. First, the panel subsumes the numerous societies that the British colonized under the general descriptor of “British colony.” There is no recognition of the tremendous diversity of these societies, as their importance is constructed to exist exclusively through their status as a colony of the British. Second, the panel suggests that these societies lacked a cohesive “rule of law” prior to the arrival of the British: the ‘colonies’ had only “local customs and traditional beliefs,” which apparently did not constitute a cohesive or capable system of governance. British ‘customs and beliefs’ are deployed as “law” and associated with “natural justice,” thereby legitimizing their universal applicability, while the customs and beliefs of the indigenous peoples are portrayed as little more than superstitions or folk traditions. Third, this panel further debases the “customs and beliefs” of indigenous peoples by very generally correlating them with human sacrifice and infanticide. The museum’s referencing of these practices with no indication of their specific cultural or historical contexts invites the visitor to conclude that such practices were in fact common in “the colonies.” Finally, the panel goes to great lengths to stress the respect that the British extended to all but the most barbaric “local customs and beliefs,” implying that British law brought civility and order to the savage colonies, and did so with the utmost esteem for all local customs and beliefs that the British deemed acceptable. In much the same way that “Breaking the Chains” distances the British nation from complicity in the horrors of slavery, the museum upholds the notion that Britain’s relationship with its colonies was distinguished first and foremost by a sense of charitable responsibility, while the critical significance of oppression, coercion, and condescension to British colonialism is negated.

The BECM's portrayal of the relationship between imperialism, slavery, and abolition is also perplexing. Within the permanent galleries, Britain's role in the Atlantic slave trade is hastily represented, primarily through a large glassed display of slave-related artefacts such as whips, shackles, and chains.<sup>171</sup> While Wood argues that the exhibition of such objects "as if they are precious archaeological treasure" serves to position slavery at a comfortable distance from the present, the museum has at least attempted to situate Britain's relationship to slavery in the larger context of imperialism.<sup>172</sup> "Breaking the Chains," on the other hand, does not consider slavery or abolition in the context of imperialism. The result is a troubling disconnect within the museum, as visitors are forced to exit the temporary exhibit through the permanent galleries, and it is unclear how Britain's ongoing imperialism follows from or is related to the abolition of the slave trade. In fact, as previously remarked, one leaves "Breaking the Chains" with the impression that the end of slavery signified an end to British oppression and the dawning of a new era of British philanthropy. Implicitly, then, this gesture construes imperialism as an aspect of British benevolence, effectively perpetuating the myth of white British benevolence.

Chris Weedon argues that in the context of contemporary British culture, various aspects of Britain's imperial past are either overtly celebrated or subject to selective amnesia – an argument that is well illustrated by this museum's exhibitions.<sup>173</sup> The narratives of imperialism rehearsed by the BECM suggest that while the empire may have constituted a somewhat dysfunctional "imperial family," it was a family

---

<sup>171</sup> Abolition is also represented in the main part of the museum, in a gallery called "The Humanitarian Impulse," which follows the exit to the "Breaking the Chains" exhibit.

<sup>172</sup> Marcus Wood, "Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums: The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum as a Test Case," *Slavery and Abolition*, 29(2), (June 2008): 158.

<sup>173</sup> Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, 26.

nonetheless. This attitude is reinforced by an introductory panel describing the Commonwealth as a “voluntary association of 54 independent states” that “emerged from countries that were part of the empire.” The panel offers no consideration of the factors inducing and/or compelling newly “independent” states to retain ties to Britain. Visitors are left to conclude that former colonies simply desired to preserve such connections; and, if they desired such relations, then the experience of empire as a British colony must not have been so bad after all. Similar to the strategic silences prevalent in “Breaking the Chains,” the constitution of British imperialism in the museum’s permanent galleries involves key elisions and implicit denials. The history and significance of British imperialism is largely sanitized and sanctified, and the general milieu of the museum serves as a fitting example of Britain’s postcolonial melancholy.<sup>174</sup>

It stands to reason that many visitors to the BECM would be perfectly comfortable with the museum’s celebratory constructions of abolitionism and its nostalgic memories of a mythical imperial family. As I have argued throughout this thesis, these are familiar narratives that serve to reinforce the ideal of white British benevolence. However, other visitors expressed grave misgivings concerning the rationales informing both the museum’s representation of slavery and abolitionism, as well as its portrayal of British imperialism. As one self-described “slave descendent from the Caribbean” wrote of “Breaking the Chains” in the visitor book,

This is a small gesture towards the very long, deep suffering of the Blacks of this world. A gesture that does not fully do justice or enough to redress or rectify the

---

<sup>174</sup> The sense of postcolonial melancholy is also evident in the museum’s gift shop, which offers various replicas of ‘historical’ artwork testifying to the amicable relations between the British and their colonies. There are also multiple items available for children, including colouring books with questionable titles such as “The Indians.”

grave effects that impacted the descendents of slavery. The truth is there for all to see and to research. Why then do the British ruling classes who benefited from slavery and still do, refuse to or avoid offering the African world an apology for this atrocity?

Another “African American female” wrote,

I applaud the attempt to recognize Britain’s place in the institution of slavery.

However, a museum whose purpose is to “Commemorate Abolition” (the quote in bold letters at the entrance of your museum) is not the best place to start.... Are you celebrating African culture or are you subtly defending the institution of slavery and its profitable advantage? I’m extremely confused by the intentions and the purpose of this museum and I would rather you sweep this subject under the rug for all eternity than to make a mockery of my ancestors as you have done.

Still another visitor stated that “Breaking the Chains” makes a “spectacle out of one of the worst human atrocities in our history,” while the museum, in general, is “offensive and patronizing.” Indeed, as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill writes, research conducted within ethnic communities in England reveals that many individuals feel their histories are marginalized or excluded within museums, which are accused of operating according to a “colonial view of the past.”<sup>175</sup> This is certainly true of the BECM, where the histories of slavery, abolition, and British imperialism are not considered significant for their effects on enslaved, emancipated, or colonial populations – and, by extension, the descendents of these populations, many of whom are British citizens – but rather are constructed to validate an ideal of white British benevolence.

---

<sup>175</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 7.

Thus, both the temporary “Breaking the Chains” exhibit, and the permanent galleries of the BECM fail to either destabilize the celebratory tradition of abolition, or to redress the collective amnesia surrounding Britain’s involvement in the Atlantic slave trade; in fact, the mechanisms of control and denial established by abolitionists in the nineteenth century are evident in the representational practices of this exhibit. Yes, both the offence of slavery and the fact of empire are acknowledged, and, for many British citizens, these may be quite surprising revelations. But the frameworks within which they are represented reaffirm conventional narratives of Britishness. In this sense, then, abolition is still not valued as a movement for social justice or racial equality, but represented as Britain’s *gift* of freedom to enslaved peoples. The fact that Britain was complicit in creating the very conditions enabling them to bestow such a gift is not acknowledged, and the myth of white British benevolence prevails. Britain is constructed as a benevolent “giver” of freedom of all kinds, whether it be through the gift of abolition to its slaves, the gift of law and good governance to its imperial subjects, or the gift of independence to its colonies. The multiple ways in which Britain’s extensive involvement in slavery and imperialism contradict or undermine this idea of Britishness are not examined in meaningful or constructive ways. As a consequence, an important opportunity to move toward redress and reconciliation is lost, and, with it, the possibility to effect a more inclusive sense of British national identity.

At the entrance to “Breaking the Chains,” set among the pictures of abolition’s ‘heroes’ – Wilberforce, Clarkson, and Equiano – is a large text panel featuring a 1937 quotation from former slave William Prescott: “They will remember that we were sold, but they won’t remember that we were strong. They will remember that we were bought,

but not that we were brave.” The import of this quotation is particularly ironic, as the denial of slavery in Britain’s collective memory is partially attributable to the very narratives upheld by exhibits such as “Breaking the Chains.” That said, I want to make the following points very clear: I am not suggesting that those individuals and organizations who did work extremely hard for the abolitionist cause should not be acknowledged for their efforts; or that all those who visit “Breaking the Chains” ought to emerge with a clear and consistent message regarding slavery and abolition; or that combating present-day slavery is not an urgent issue. However, I do think that it is worth questioning why, two hundred years after the fact, institutions such as The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum continue to resist a more critical examination of both the historical events of Atlantic slavery and British abolitionism, as well as the ways in which these histories are culturally remembered.

## **Concluding Remarks:**

### **Bringing the ‘Then’ into the ‘Now’: Redressing the Cultural Denial of Slavery**

In concluding this study, let us return to the quotation with which we began: Marcus Wood contends that “what we remember is defined by what we choose to forget, and how we choose to remember is defined by how we choose to ignore.”<sup>176</sup> In foregrounding the idea of choice, it is clear that the act of forgetting is not due to inadvertent oversights or omissions. It is predicated, rather, on concerted elisions of problematic or discomforting aspects of history. I have attempted to substantiate Wood’s position, arguing that the collective memories of a nation are constituted through performances of remembrance and commemoration, as well as strategic gestures of denial. Furthermore, the rehearsal of these narratives affords critical insight into the ways in which a nation imagines and sustains a particular sense of its self, as ideas and ideals of national identity at once inform and are informed by the multiple meanings, assumptions, and values denoted in the discursive formation of a nation’s history. It is in these ways, then, that a collective sense of national identity is in a continuous process of production.

My objective throughout this thesis has been to demonstrate that the discursive constitution of British history – specifically, through and in academic scholarship, popular rhetoric, and cultural institutions such as the museum – has little to do with the historical events of slavery, abolition, or imperialism. Rather, it narrates and sustains the ideal of white British benevolence, and the position of Britain as the historical subject in its own narrative of salvation. For those British citizens who retain a personal or familial connection with these histories, however – specifically, the descendents of enslaved or

---

<sup>176</sup> Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 145.



colonized peoples – Britain’s concerted effort to both whitewash the experience of empire, and distance the nation from responsibility for the horrors of slavery, denies the lived experiences of their ancestors and inhibits the development of a more inclusive discourse of Britishness. The cultural erasure of Britain’s historical relationship with Atlantic slavery is accepted, I believe, because the histories of Britain’s black citizens are not deemed relevant or important to the overall narration of British national identity. As Hakim Adi argues, “there has been an ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Britain’s history, so that the presence, participation and contributions of black people have been very largely obscured.”<sup>177</sup> In fact, many elements of these histories directly contradict the image of Britain that has been so carefully maintained; thus, it is not only convenient, but, indeed, quite necessary to excise these episodes from the national narratives. The disavowal of slavery, then, is but one symptom of the nation’s postcolonial melancholia, which seeks to censor aspects of British history that do not resonate with the myth of white British benevolence.

Paul Gilroy argues that in order for Britain to come to terms with its diverse origins and constitution, the “language of British nationalism which is stained with the memory of imperial greatness” must be sacrificed.<sup>178</sup> As I have sought to demonstrate, British nationalism very often equates to white nationalism, which, as Damien Riggs maintains, is constituted through and in “discourses of white good.” The idea of benevolence works to repress and deny histories of genocide and dispossession, and is therefore the means

---

<sup>177</sup> Hakim Adi, “Black People in Britain,” in Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth, eds., *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum*, (Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2007), 94.

<sup>178</sup> Gilroy, *There ain’t no Black in the Union Jack*, 69.

through which white invasion and hegemony are justified.<sup>179</sup> It is when those constituted as racialized others seek to challenge the hegemony of whiteness, then, that the inherent benevolence of whiteness becomes most important. *The Parekh Report* represents just such a challenge to the language of British nationalism and the hegemony of whiteness, and, as demonstrated in chapter two, the suggestion that the basis of these ideas be subject to critical interrogation provokes considerable anxiety. However, until Britain finds a way to overtly confront the ongoing conflation of Britishness with whiteness, and the multiple discourses that serve to perpetuate that identity, there can, as John Beech writes, “be little prospect of reconciliation, and our society will continue to be deeply divided.”<sup>180</sup> A 2009 report published by Runnymede found that there is a troubling tendency among Britain’s white working class to attribute the difficulties they experience finding employment to the preferential hiring of racialized British citizens. The report states that while the white working class experience various forms of discrimination, such inequalities are not the result of their whiteness. Nevertheless, the perception that the white working class has been “left behind by multiculturalism, or indeed because of it” remains.<sup>181</sup> The prevalence of this view speaks to the urgent need for a more honest and socially inclusive national discussion regarding the meaning of multiculturalism – a discussion that cannot materialize if the British media continues to depict multiculturalism as a threat to white Britain.

If Britain does aspire to realize a genuine practice of multiculturalism, then it is critical to create the space for a more critical, inclusive narrative of British history. That

---

<sup>179</sup> Riggs, “Benevolence and the Management of Stake,” para. 9.

<sup>180</sup> Beech, “A step forwards or a step sideways?” para 14.

<sup>181</sup> *The white working class; Britain’s forgotten race victims?* The Runnymede Trust, 22 January 2009. [www.runnymedetrust.org/index](http://www.runnymedetrust.org/index)

is, Britain must find a way not merely to accommodate the historical perspectives of all its contemporary citizenry, but rather render them central to the historical narratives that shape and inform the meaning of Britishness. Granted, the reconsideration of British history, and the ways in which it is culturally represented, is no small task. The critical interrogation of Britain's involvement in slavery threatens the ideal of national identity, as the nation is forced to forfeit comforting narratives of British benevolence in order to confront painful issues of national responsibility and ongoing white privilege. As J. E. Young observes, it is rare for a nation to acknowledge and commemorate the historical crimes for which it is liable: "Where are the national monuments to the genocide of American Indians, the millions of Africans enslaved and murdered, to the Russian Kulaks and peasants starved to death by the millions? They barely exist."<sup>182</sup> Young's point is, of course, painfully accurate. Britain, like most nations, has yet to successfully find a way to represent the more shameful aspects of its history in ways that may well pose a significant challenge to the generally celebratory narratives of British history.

This is not to suggest that Britain's relationship to Atlantic slavery cannot be adequately acknowledged through cultural means such as the museum. In fact, according to Celeste Bernier and Judie Newman, two British museums have attempted to confront Britain's self-serving historical narratives of slavery and abolition, and with commendable results. It is worth devoting extended attention to these cases, as they represent a much-needed alternative to Britain's prevailing cultural privileging of narratives of benevolence. The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, which opened in August 2007, denies the customary prominence accorded to British

---

<sup>182</sup> J. E. Young, as cited in John Lennon and Malcom Foley, "Interpretation of the Unimaginable: The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C., and Dark Tourism," *Journal of Travel Research* 38, (August, 1999), 8.

abolitionism, and, in doing so, refuses to “pander to national myths of British philanthropy.”<sup>183</sup> Instead, the museum states their intent is to “set the truth free” by exploring experiences of slavery, abolition, and emancipation from the perspectives of enslaved Africans, and thus asks that visitors remember “not that we were freed but that we fought.” In fact, the museum refuses to refer to enslaved Africans as ‘slaves,’ arguing that in doing so, individuals – who were farmers, merchants, mothers, sons, Igbo, Akan, and so forth – are stripped of their identity.<sup>184</sup> According to the museum’s website, it is the survival and resilience of Africans, rather than the dedication and commitment of the abolitionists, that is emphasized and celebrated as a “testament to the unquenchable nature of the human spirit.”<sup>185</sup>

The International Slavery Museum thus avoids reproducing the myth of white British benevolence, and, as a result, the significance of slavery for enslaved populations and their descendants, as well as the British nation, is confronted with greater honesty and openness. For example, the website does not highlight the 2007 bicentennial of British abolitionism, but rather provides information on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, Slavery Remembrance Day. Through Slavery Remembrance Day, the museum seeks to, commemorate the lives and deaths of the millions of enslaved Africans and their descendants who were central to the rise of Britain as an industrial power; remember that we live with the legacies of transatlantic slavery such as racism and discrimination and ongoing inequalities, injustices and exploitation; [and] celebrate the resistance, rebellion and revolution that ended slavery, as well as the rise of

---

<sup>183</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman, “Public Art, Artefacts and Atlantic Slavery: Introduction,” *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 29(2), (June 2008): 140.

<sup>184</sup> “History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/slavery/>

<sup>185</sup> “About the International Slavery Museum,” <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/about/>

popular movements for racial justice and social change that said both then and now ‘never again’.<sup>186</sup>

This powerful statement provides meaningful engagements with the past in a way that openly confronts the experiences of that past for all of Britain’s contemporary citizenry. Slavery is candidly confronted as a system that demanded the lives of African peoples in order to amass the tremendous wealth that enabled Britain’s industrial revolution. Furthermore, the racism and inequalities that manifest in contemporary Britain are explicitly linked to this history, and the resistance of those working for social change, in the past and the present, is openly celebrated. Slavery, then, is not constructed as a historically distant event, but rather as an ongoing legacy.

The Whitworth Art Gallery’s “Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery,” in Manchester, provides another example of the innovative approaches adopted by curators to contest established narratives of slavery and abolitionism. The exhibit does not merely address the historical events of slavery and abolition, but also the problematic ways in which these histories are discursively constituted through cultural representations. “Trade and Empire,” write Bernier and Newman, is the first exhibition to “self-consciously juxtapose artworks and artefacts in a critique of white mainstream tendencies towards black objectification, appropriation and commodification.”<sup>187</sup> The exhibit thus foregrounds the problematic ways in which the cultural productions of white peoples have constructed slavery, and, indeed, the idea of race. Additionally, online visitors are invited to participate in various discussions, such as debates over whether or not the

---

<sup>186</sup> Slavery Remembrance Day, <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/srd/>

<sup>187</sup> Bernier and Newman, “Public Art, Artefacts and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” 144.

museum itself reproduces racist views in its representations of black peoples.<sup>188</sup> Such techniques create a space in which the traditional museum experience is consciously undermined, as the visitor is here valued for their active participation rather than recruited into a role of passive observance. Moreover, the authoritative voice traditionally assumed by museums is consciously destabilized by the gallery's willingness to reflect on the discursive affects of their own practices. This is best exemplified by the online message from SuAndi, who served as one of the guest curators for "Trade and Empire." SuAndi questions the practices of museums, writing "in the drawing rooms of high society, on the walls of galleries and in the glass cases of museums, African culture had been stolen from its creators and displayed as a backdrop to the bloodiest of holocausts in the history of civilisation."<sup>189</sup> While the curators for "Trade and Empire" engaged in some remarkably creative and novel forms of expression to create this exhibit, the museum itself contains many African cultural artefacts. It is, therefore, both notable and commendable that the space has been made in which the effects of these practices can be overtly considered and contested.

It is clear, then, through the examples of the International Slavery Museum and the "Trade and Empire" exhibit, that an attitude of critical self-reflection on the part of the museum is essential to effecting inclusive, accountable representations of slavery and its legacy. In the context of a museum exhibit, the most constructive way to account for the persistent denial of slavery in Britain is to use it to exemplify the established ways in which remembrance has hitherto been enacted. This provides opportunities to explore important connections between this denial and existing ideals of British identity.

---

<sup>188</sup> "Revealing Histories, Debating Slavery," <http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/debate>

<sup>189</sup> SuAndi, <http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/a-message-from-suandi>

Moreover, the overt recognition of the cultural elision of slavery may serve not only to initiate greater recognition of the multiple effects of such exclusionary acts, but also to create a space in which Atlantic slavery may be more truthfully confronted. I am arguing, then, that an exhibit dedicated to traumatic and contentious experiences should not reinforce existing interpretations of these issues through customary tropes of representation, but rather should destabilize visitor expectations, and actively seek to provoke a sense of unfamiliarity and discomfort. “Breaking the Chains,” for example, could be altered to include a more reflective consideration of the ways in which it perpetuates the myth of white British benevolence by sustaining celebratory narratives of Britain’s role in abolition, while denying or mitigating the significance of Britain’s role in slavery. Such an act would also enable a critical interrogation of the many ways in which representations of British history function to reproduce the conflation of Britishness with whiteness. Similar to strategies employed by “Trade and Empire,” the traditional construction of authority is thus destabilized by the museum’s willingness to reflect on problematic aspects of its own representational practices; moreover, the illusory expectation that visitors will exit the museum with a complete or definitive account of slavery or abolition is challenged in the hopes that visitors will come to understand that there is no definitive account of this past. Museums and visitors are then forced to recognize their own roles in the discursive production of these historical accounts.

Finally, a critical part of any attempt to represent Britain’s involvement in Atlantic slavery demands that its relevance to British society, in both the past and the present, be rendered explicit. In many museum representations, including “Breaking the Chains,” slavery is constituted as a historically distant and abstract event that simply occurred.

Little consideration is given to the active participation and/or complicity of individuals, institutions, or nations. Such representations construct Atlantic slavery as an episode that a contemporary ‘we’ can point to as an *historical* travesty of justice, congratulating ourselves in the process for the more enlightened western world that ‘we’ have accomplished since. However, the ‘progress’ of the western world has in many ways been achieved through the tremendous sacrifices of others, with little thought given as to how progress is defined. As Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace argues, an engaged and socially meaningful construction of Britain’s relationship to slavery thus requires the situation of moral agents— individuals who have learned “how personal choices have invisible repercussions on a global scale and who become both more self-reflective and politically proactive as a result.”<sup>190</sup> This also involves the exploration of individuals whose personal choices brought about powerful repercussions, yet who opted to proceed in spite of professed views and values that ideologically demanded quite a different course of action. To put it plainly, the inherent hypocrisy of Britain’s involvement in slavery must be confronted.

The act of situating moral agents does not require a contemporary audience to empathize with a historically, racially, or culturally distant ‘other,’ as such an exercise is fraught with troublesome implications regarding the ways in which we imagine our ‘selves’ in relation to an ‘object’ of empathy. What is necessary, rather, is an interrogation of the social, economic, and ideological conditions that enabled the systematic exploitation of people, in an effort to recognize the contemporary currency of such conditions. As Kowaleski Wallace maintains,

---

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, 27.



It is a mistake to think that we live ‘after’ those who came before us; we live *with* them on a historical continuum that links our behaviors to theirs and allows us to learn from them. Thus, the question is not whether we assume their guilt but whether we learn valuable moral lessons through our connectedness to them.<sup>191</sup>

In effect, then, the identification of moral agents makes two demands. The first is that a contemporary ‘we’ – specifically, a contemporary western ‘we’ – acknowledge the full implications of our connectedness to the past. This involves a critical destabilization of the idea of benevolence, not only for Britain, but rather for all countries that were involved in and benefited from slavery and the slave trade. To confront the historical conditions out of which so-called first and third world countries were created is to forsake the notion that a contemporary western ‘we’ are engaging in acts of charity and benevolence through development aid projects, and to recognize that this ‘aid’ is a paltry sum when we consider the social, cultural, and economic price that African peoples paid to enable the ‘first world’ conditions in which we live. Acknowledging our connectedness to the past demands that the rhetoric of aid and development be abandoned, and substituted with a discourse of redress and restitution.

Finally, the situation of moral agents requires that individuals, institutions, and nations accept slavery as an atrocious practice of social injustice, and, in doing so, seek to identify the ways in which this legacy is inherited by the contemporary world. This involves a critical destabilization of the idea of benevolence, as we are forced to contend with the multiple ways in which we create the very conditions necessary to position ourselves as ‘saviours,’ through everyday complicity in *ongoing* structures of social and racial injustices. It is in this way, then, that Wood argues that the history of the Atlantic

---

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

slave trade and Britain's participation therein is not over, but rather is evolving: "The memory of slavery belongs to us all, and requires our acknowledgement, *if only we dare to look.*"<sup>192</sup>

---

<sup>192</sup> Wood, *Blind Memory*, 305, emphasis added.

## Bibliography

“Abolition of the Slave Trade Act,” *Directgov*,  
[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/DG\\_065859](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/DG_065859)

“About the International Slavery Museum,”  
<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/about/>

Adi, Hakim “Black People in Britain,” in Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth, eds.,  
*Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum*. Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2007, pp. 94-101.

Akbar, Arifa. “Wilberforce Family Marks Abolition of Slavery,” *The Independent*, 2  
March 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/wilberforce-family-marks-abolition-of-slavery-438513.html>

Alibhai-Brown, Yasmin. “It’s understanding we need, not apologies,” *The Independent*,  
26 March 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/yasmin-alibhai-brown/yasmin-alibhaibrown-its-understanding-we-need-not-apologies-441944.html>

------. *Who Do We Think We Are? Imagining the New Britain*. London: The Penguin Press, 2000.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Austen, Ralph A. and Woodrow D. Smith, “Images of Africa and British Slave-Trade Abolition: The Transition to an Imperialist Ideology, 1787-1807,” *African Historical Studies* 2(1), (1969): 69-83.

Beech, John. "A step forwards of a step sideways? Some personal reflections of how the presentation of slavery has (and hasn't) changed in the last few years," *1807 Commemorated: The Abolition of the Slave Trade*.

<http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/museums/step.html>

Bennett, Tony. "Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision," in Sharon Macdonald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 263-281.

Bernier, Celeste-Marie and Judie Newman. "Public Art, Artefacts and Atlantic Slavery: Introduction," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 29(2), (June 2008): 135-150.

"Blair in a rush to apologise for our part in slave trade," *The Daily Mail*, 17 November 2006. [www.dailymail.com.uk/news/article-416946](http://www.dailymail.com.uk/news/article-416946)

Brocklehurst, Helen and Robert Phillips. "Introduction," in Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips, eds., *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. xx-xxxi.

Brown, Christopher Leslie. *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Buettner, Elizabeth. "'Going for an Indian': South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain," *The Journal of Modern History* 80(4), (December 2008): 865-901.

Carey, Brycchan and Peter J. Kitson. "Introduction," in Brycchan Carey and Peter J. Kitson, eds., *Slavery and the Cultures of Abolition: Essays Marking the Bicentennial of the British Abolition Act of 1807*. Cambridge: The English Association, 2007, pp. 1-10.

Colfino, Alon. "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *The American Historical Review* 102(5), (Dec. 1997): 1386-1403.

Dresser, Madge. "Set in Stone? Statues and Slavery in London," *History Workshop Journal* 64(1), (Autumn, 2007): 162-199.

------. *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port*. London: Continuum, 2001.

Ferguson, Niall. *The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

G. B. K. "On Negro Emancipation," *The Commemorative Wreath, In Celebration of The Extinction of Negro Slavery in the British Dominions*. London: J. Masters, 173, Printer, Aldersgate Street, 1834.

Gillis, John R. "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship," in John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 3-24.

Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia Press, 2005.

------. *'There ain't no Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. London: Hutchinson, 1987.

Gopal, Priyamvada. "It is contradictory to condemn slavery and yet celebrate the empire," *The Guardian*, 2 April 2007.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/apr/02/comment.race>

- Goulbourne, Harry. "African Slaves and the Atlantic World," in Gert Oostindie, ed., *Facing Up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*. Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001, pp. 127-132.
- Grayling, A.C. "Apologising for the slave trade would be a futile gesture," *The Independent*, 11 May 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/a-c-grayling-apologising-for-the-slave-trade-would-be-a-futile-gesture-477659.html>
- Hague, William. "Why I am sick of the anti-British disease," *Daily Telegraph*, 13 October 2000. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255816/Why-I-am-sick-of-the-anti-British-disease.html>
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*, with introduction by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, pp. 13-74.
- Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. Routledge: London, 2000.
- Hudson, Nicholas. "'Britons Will Never Be Slaves': National Myth, Conservatism, and the Beginnings of British Antislavery," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 34(1), (2001): 559-576.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Johnston, Phillip. "Analysis: Thinkers who want to consign our island story to history," *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2000.

[http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1369664/Analysis-Thinkers-who-want-to-  
consign-our-island-story-to-history.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1369664/Analysis-Thinkers-who-want-to-<br/>consign-our-island-story-to-history.html)

----- . "Straw wants to rewrite our history," *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2000.

[http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1369663/Straw-wants-to-rewrite-our-  
history.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1369663/Straw-wants-to-rewrite-our-<br/>history.html)

Kansteiner, Wulf. "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of  
Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41(2), (May, 2002): 179-197.

Karp, Ivan. "Culture and Representation," in Ivan and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting  
Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington: Smithsonian  
Institution Press, 1991, pp. 11-24.

Klein, Kerwin Lee. "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,"  
*Representations* 69, (Winter, 2000): 127-150.

Kowaleski Wallace, Elizabeth. *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*. New York:  
Columbia University Press, 2006.

Lamont, Norman. "Down with multiculturalism, book-burning and fatwas," *The Daily  
Telegraph*, 8 May 2002. [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-  
view/3576323/Down-with-multiculturalism-book-burning-and-fatwas.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-<br/>view/3576323/Down-with-multiculturalism-book-burning-and-fatwas.html)

Lennon, John and Malcom Foley. "Interpretation of the Unimaginable: The U.S.  
Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C., and Dark Tourism," *Journal of  
Travel Research* 38, (August, 1999): 46-50.

Lunn, Kenneth. "Reconsidering 'Britishness': The Construction and Significance of  
National Identity in Twentieth-Century Britain," in Brian Jenkins and Spyros A

Sofos, Eds., *Nation & Identity in Contemporary Europe*. London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 83-100.

Macey, David. *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Megill, Allan. *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

McGreal, Chris. "Britain accused over slave trade," *The Guardian*, 21 May 2001.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/may/21/unitednations>

Midgley, Clare. *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Milmo, Cahil. "Slavery: Is it time for an apology?" *The Independent*, 11 May 2006.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/slavery-is-it-time-for-an-apology-477715.html>

Morgan, Kenneth. *Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. *The Past within Us: Media, Memory, History*. New York: Verso, 2005.

Mosse, George L. *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*. New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1978.



- Newsinger, John. *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire*. London: Bookmark Publications, 2006.
- Nussbaum, Felicity A. *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Oldfield, J. R. *'Chords of Freedom': Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.
- , *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.
- Operation TRUTH 2007, Mission, <http://www.operationtruth2007.co.uk/mission.htm>
- Parekh, Bhikhu, "Why it is vital to change what it means to be British," *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 2000. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255965/Why-it-is-vital-to-change-what-it-means-to-be-British.html>
- Petley, Julian. "A Case of Mistaken Identity: What Went Wrong Between the UK Media and a Report on 'Multi-Ethnic' Britain?" *Index on Censorship*, 30(3), (2001): 20-30.
- Pittock, Murray G. H. "Enlightenment Historiography and Its Legacy: Plurality, Authority and Power," in Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips, eds., *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 33-44.
- Pitts, Jennifer. *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Prior, Katherine. "Commemorating Slavery 2007: A Personal View from Inside the Museums," *History Workshop Journal* 64, (Autumn 2007): 200-210.

Ramdin, Ron. *Reimagining Britain: Five Hundred Years of Black and Asian History*. London: Pluto Press, 1999.

“Realising the Vision: Progress and further challenges,” Runnymede Trust, April 2004. <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/30/74.html>

“Revealing Histories, Debating Slavery,” <http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/debate>

Riggs, Damien. “Benevolence and the Management of Stake: On Being ‘Good White People,’” *Philament: An Online Journal of the Arts and Culture* 4:Untitled, (August 2004).

----- “Constructing the national good: Howard and the rhetoric of benevolence.” Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Science Association Conference, University of Adelaide, 2004.

Roberts, Andrew. “We know in our hearts what Britain means,” *Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 2000. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255878/We-know-in-our-hearts-what-Britain-means.html>

“Sentamu seeks Blair slavery apology,” *The Metro*, 25 March 2007. [http://www.metro.co.uk/news/article.html?in\\_article\\_id=42518&in\\_page\\_id=34&in\\_a\\_source](http://www.metro.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=42518&in_page_id=34&in_a_source)

Sherwood, Marika. *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade After 1807*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007.

Steel, Mark. “Wilberforce would not stand a chance these days,” *The Independent*, 21 February 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/mark-steel/mark-steel-wilberforce-would-not-stand-a-chance-these-days-437173.html>

*The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report*. London: Profile Books, 2000.

*The white working class: Britain's forgotten race victims?* The Runnymede Trust, 22 January 2009. [www.runnymedetrust.org/index](http://www.runnymedetrust.org/index)

Tibbles, Anthony. "Facing Slavery's Past: The Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade," *Slavery and Abolition*, 29(2), (June 2008): 293-303.

"Tony Blair's statement on the slave trade in full," *Times Online*, 27 November 2006. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1088135.ece>

Tyrrell, Alex and James Walvin. "Whose History is it? Memorialising Britain's Involvement in Slavery," in Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, eds., *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004, pp. 147-169.

Utley, Tom. "They met at Runnymede – to boss us all around," *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October 2000. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4255755/They-met-at-Runnymede---to-boss-us-all-around.html>

Walvin, James. "Slavery, Truth and Reconciliation," in Gert Oostindie, ed., *Facing Up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*. Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001, pp. 133-137.

Weedon, Chris. *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*. New York: Open University Press, 2004.

Williams, Eric. *Capitalism and Slavery*. 1944. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Wilson, Ross. "Memory matters: Britain and the abolition of the slave trade, 1807-2007,"  
*1807 Commemorated: The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 2008.  
<http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/discussion/memory.html>

Wood, Marcus. "Atlantic Slavery and Traumatic Representation in Museums: The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum as a Test Case," *Slavery and Abolition*, 29(2), (June 2008): 151-171.

----- . *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

----- . "Packaging Liberty and Marketing the Gift of Freedom: 1807 and the Legacy of Clarkson's Chest," *Parliamentary History* 26, Supplement, (2007): 203-223.

----- . "Popular Graphic Images of Slavery and Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century England," in Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth, eds., *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum*. Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2007, pp. 138-153.

----- . *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.