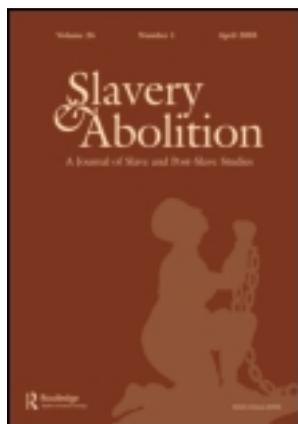


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Publisher: Routledge

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Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fsla20>

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Published online: 31 May 2013.

To cite this article: Eddie Chambers (2013): Remembering the Crack of the Whip: African-Caribbean Artists in the UK Visualise Slavery, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 34:2, 293-307

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.791179>

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Remembering the Crack of the Whip: African-Caribbean Artists in the UK Visualise Slavery

Eddie Chambers

This paper explores some of the ways in which Black-British artists of the 1980s visualised slavery. The paper begins with a consideration of the social and political factors that contributed to the work of these artists, before briefly discussing some of the ways in which slavery and abolition have been constructed within Britain and the ways in which black artists' practice might challenge some of these constructs. The paper discusses specific works by artists such as Mowbray Odonkor, Donald Rodney and Keith Piper. The paper argues that the works it discusses do much to shed light on the ways in which history and identity play out in the work of black artists, particularly during the fascinating decade of the 1980s.

The work of Black-British artists of the 1980s was (and in many ways continued to be, into the 1990s and beyond) overwhelmingly figurative. Whilst a small number of painters, such as Anthony Daley, Sylbert Bolton and David Somerville, eschewed representational forms that were recognisably derived from human life, the vast majority of black artists pursued practices that had at their core pronounced elements of figuration. Whilst we should be wary of generalisations, it is nonetheless the case that much of the work produced by Black-British artists during the 1980s concerned itself with social narratives, such as visibility, autobiography, societal comment, history and identity. One of the most compelling subjects to be utilised by a number of these artists was depicting the *memory*, the *experience*, of slavery and the slave trade. By the early 1980s, it seemed to a number of black people that their social status as British residents and citizens was little more than peripheral. The tragic house fire that occurred in New Cross, South London, early in 1981, which claimed the lives of some 13 young black partygoers, rapidly became known – in certain quarters – as the New Cross Massacre, reflecting an emphatically held belief, amongst some, that the victims

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died as a result of a racist arson attack.¹ The subsequent black People's Day of Action, served to further crystallise the sense, amongst some black people, that their black skins bequeathed them a wretched birthright of discrimination, marginalisation, *downpression* and what one sociologist termed *endless pressure*. The perceived sense of societal and governmental indifference to the tragedy served as a marker for black alienation and outrage. For good measure, the urban *disturbances* involving black youth and others in Bristol in 1980, and Brixton and elsewhere a year later, were interpreted as being compelling protest against the multiple racial grievances that some black people alleged. In the early to mid-1980s, when it came to allegations of racism, petty and not-so-petty discrimination, poor housing, underachievement at school and beyond, as well as tales of police brutality, for many Black-British youngsters, their cup ranneth over.

It was during this socially challenging, yet artistically fertile period that Black-British artists produced some of their most politically dynamic and compelling work that gave visual form to the sorts of grievances just mentioned. It is in this context, and this sense, that Black-British artists' practice that touches on aspects of slavery is particularly important. Within this work, slavery is visualised not so much, or not merely, as a seismic tragedy that gave rise to the African Diaspora. Instead, slavery is visualised as a motif or a symbol of ongoing misery and torment. In this regard there is a pronounced *racial* dynamic to the ways in which slavery is remembered. Bluntly put, slavery is remembered by White-British people in ways that are markedly different to its memory amongst Black-British people. Some historians aside, White-British people tend to construct their memory of slavery not around the systematic barbarity of the trade, of which Britain was a pioneering force; neither is this memory constructed around shenanigans of empire – the peopling of Britain's Caribbean possessions with stolen and enslaved Africans. Nor indeed does the White-British memory of slavery concern itself with the pillaging of the African continent itself, as a seemingly inexhaustible source of human cargo. Within the cultural memory of White British people, *slavery* exists not so much as several hundred years of the sordid and despicable degradation of African peoples, led by slaving nations such as Britain. Instead, the White British cultural memory of slavery has tended to be constructed solely around the benevolent notion of *abolition* (cast as a good deed reflective of the British people's love for justice and fair play). Consequently, cultural memory of slavery is allowed to exist in the minds of White-British people as an oftentimes vague but nevertheless distinct historical footnote that invariably casts up, in splendid isolation, the kind-hearted, compassionate and benign figure of William Wilberforce. By contrast, the *black* memory of slavery exists in altogether sharper and more dynamic focus. In looking at the practice of black artists that deals with slavery, such work brings to mind pronounced associations of loss, pain, suffering and righteous indignation. Simultaneously, such work brings to mind conspicuous and unmistakable sentiments of survival, endurance and triumph. It is this improbable duality that makes these artists' work – frequently bound up in keenly observed explorations of identity – so compelling, so fascinating and so much in need of continued acknowledgement and study.

There are other reasons why the visualising of slavery by Black-British artists is such an important aspect of their practice. Such work forms a bridge to other scattered components of the African Diaspora and, indeed, forms a bridge to the motherland, Africa itself. Depicting slavery is a way of black artists making sense of, or coming to terms with, their scattered, fractured and vulnerable existence as strangers in a strange land, easily spotted and easily victimised by the colour of their skin. By definition, what unites the peoples of the Black Atlantic is their shared history of slavery. Thus, within the work of Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Mowbray Odonkor, Tam Joseph and others, that touches on slavery, we can identify an emotive reaching out to, and empathy with, black peoples of the Americas, particularly the USA and the Caribbean. This joining hands across the sea, together with a declaration of fracture, loss and disconnect from Africa itself, can be perceived, time and again, in the practice of these artists. One of the most fascinating interplays within the work briefly discussed in this chapter is the interplay of slavery and migration, frequently portrayed through the symbolism of the ship or the boat. In simple terms, movement across the oceans is what created the African Diaspora, no less than movement across the oceans subsequently created the family histories of these individual artists.

A number of black-British artists found themselves mesmerised by archival images of slavery, particularly the infamous lithographs of a slave ship, the *Brookes* of Liverpool, depicting its human cargo packed below deck in the hold of the slave ship, like so many sardines in a tin. The origins of these lithographs of slave ships and their contents date back to the abolitionist movements of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The abolitionists had seized on this simple but effective graphic device as a means of driving home the horrors that had to be endured by captured Africans during the Middle Passage – the nightmarish journey by sea that took enslaved Africans from their homelands to slavery and death in the ‘New World’. As one historian has noted: ‘Of all the details of the slave trade that appalled anti-slavers, the most immediate – because the easiest to visualise – were those of how the human cargoes were stowed. The arrangements were made widely known in drawings . . .’²

However, these powerful lithographs would in time take on a significance that went way beyond their propaganda value of their day. The passage of time did little or nothing to diminish the memory of slavery on the collective and individual psyche of New World Africans and their descendants, in what we now commonly refer to as the African Diaspora. Indeed, a century and a half after the phased abolition of slavery by the British parliament, plans of laden slave ships were starting to become iconic shorthand graphic signifiers for the miserable, wretched legacy of slavery and the myriad ways in which that legacy spawned a thousand black liberation struggles. There are those who might regard slavery as something from the dim and distant and unspecific past, but for many black people, the experience seared itself on the psyche in a way that few non-black people could fully understand. This is one of the most profound ways in which slavery has, for many people of the African Diaspora, become a signifier of identity. The use of the slave ship motif by artists such as Keith Piper, Godfried Donkor, Mary Evans and others encapsulated and denoted much in

the way of black history, particularly as *lived* by themselves. The signifiers of enslavement, exploitation, bondage, torture and death are never far from their readings of the slave ship image. But neither are the redemptive expressions of survival, perseverance and the struggle for humanity.

Between the early-seventeenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, the Americas were transformed by, amongst other factors, the mass presence of people of African origin, who had been sold and driven into slavery. In this regard, the Middle Passage assumes a symbolism of seismic proportions, describing as it does the horrendous nightmarish journeys of the slave ships from Africa to the Americas. In the mid-twentieth century, Britain, the 'Motherland', the seat of the British Empire, was involved in another period of migration, movement and transformation, this time involving significant numbers of African-Caribbean migrants who travelled by ship from the islands and countries of the Caribbean to the industrial heartlands and major centres of urban population of England. These immigrants came seeking to fill employment vacancies, and seeking a better life for themselves and their families. In so doing, their presence impacted on, and indeed transformed, the societal make-up of much of urban Britain. Often meeting with pronounced racism, discrimination, hostility and resentment, the experiences of Caribbean migrants assumed wretched overtones that were, as far as certain artists were concerned, part of a mosaic of black experience that also included slavery and the slave trade.

In titling this text *Remembering the Crack of the Whip: African-Caribbean Artists in the UK Visualise Slavery*, I seek to make use of Bob Marley's powerful song, *Slave Driver*, from *Catch a Fire*, the major-label-debut album for Jamaican reggae band The Wailers, released on Island Records in the spring of 1973. In the song, which despite its powerful content, lasts somewhat less than three minutes, Bob Marley sings, 'Ev'ry time I hear the crack of a whip, my blood runs cold. I remember on the slave ship, how they brutalised our very souls'. In *Bob Marley: Lyrical: Genius*, Kwame Dawes observes that 'In "Slave Driver" Marley reveals the lessons that he has learned about the history of slavery and explores how this history shapes the life of a ghetto youth in Jamaica'.³ Within this song, Marley links historical *memories* of the slave trade to the plight of the modern-day Jamaican *sufferer* and other poor black people's modern-day poverty, degradation and servitude. This is one of the most profound ways in which slavery has, for many people of the African Diaspora, become a signifier of identity. This paper will seek to explore the iconography of slavery in the work of British artists of African-Caribbean background, and the ways in which these artists – who tended to be the children of the mid-twentieth century pioneering generation of black immigrants to Britain – have remembered what Bob Marley called *the crack of the whip*. These artists evoke a memory of slavery that locates this act of remembering, of visualising, at the heart of contemporary expressions of black-British identity, that crystallised in the wake of the New Cross Massacre and the 'riots' of the early 1980s.

One of the first black artists of the 1980s' generation to pay particular, considered and deeply penetrating attention to the iconography of slavery was Donald Rodney, a British artist of African-Caribbean background, born in Smethwick, Birmingham, in

1961.⁴ One of the most consistently innovative, resourceful and intelligent artists of his generation, he battled with sickle-cell anaemia – a frequently debilitating disease of the blood, from which he suffered – until he succumbed to the condition, dying in March 1998. Rodney's work, from his earliest days as an art student at Trent Polytechnic, in Nottingham, in the East Midlands through to his final one-man show at South London Gallery, some six months before he died, had consistent and distinctive qualities that marked him out as a practitioner of unique ability and sensitivity. In a gesture that was typical of his devastating intellect, Rodney made a seemingly simple, yet profound work that utilised the familiar, everyday box of household matches, *England's Glory*. Manufactured by Bryant and May, the boxes of matches were commonly used by smokers, householders and anyone else who needed to strike a light. The trademark on the front of the box of matches, garlanded by the words ENGLAND'S GLORY, was a lithograph of a sea-going vessel, above and below which, the words MORELAND GLOUCESTER appeared, a reference to the Gloucester matchmaker S.J. Moreland and Sons, a firm who made and sold matches under the trade name *England's Glory*, and was taken over by Bryant and May early in the twentieth century. In a simple yet brilliant act, Rodney replaced the familiar image of the vessel with an equally familiar, but altogether different ship, the *Brookes of Liverpool*, which infamously depicted captured and shackled Africans. With this singular montage, Rodney effortlessly parodied England's glory and in so doing advanced the proposition that England's glory was more accurately England's shame.

The artistic device of linking Britain, or England, with the history of slavery was a hugely important one, used not only by Rodney but also other Black-British artists. As mentioned earlier, British people tended to regard slavery as an abomination that happened elsewhere, and was the fault or the enterprise of other people. This was perhaps a consequence of so relatively few Africans in servitude being landed on Britain's shores during the centuries of the Atlantic Slave Trade. With relatively few enslaved Africans in the country during the centuries of slavery, Britain's subsequent memory of its involvement in slavery suffered from pronounced bouts of historical muddle and selective amnesia, in which slavery was cast primarily as an American iniquity, from which wretched Africans and Negroes were freed by the good graces of William Wilberforce and others. However, Rodney was here to tell British people that they were involved in and implicated in the whole sordid enterprise of slavery, as much as evil-doers elsewhere in the world.

Rodney's work, even those pieces that touched on issues of slavery sometimes contained a marked and distinctive humour, and were always executed with considerable intelligence. His work of the early 1980s consisted largely of loose, exuberant paintings on canvas and wall-mounted assemblages, such as *100% Cotton, the South's Favourite Cloth*, a large diptych which depicted a white lady and a military gentleman of the Confederate South, waltzing at a ball, their faces twisted in grotesque, manic grins. No images of slave ships, no images of brutalised black people. Yet the painting's messages were clear and its readings were strong. Two figures – her ball gown puffed out by folds of cotton canvas – used to comprehensively reference the whole wretched enterprise of American slavery and its attendant legacies and manifestations of racism. To

some, *100% Cotton* may at first have seemed harmless enough, playful even. Others, more perceptively, could see the unmissable menace of its subtext that lay immediately beyond the humour of the painting and the effective, seemingly effortless ways in which it parodied *Gone with the Wind* and the frequently troubling nostalgia that the film evoked in certain quarters.

Mention was made, earlier in this text, of the notion that, bluntly put, slavery is remembered by white people in ways that are markedly different to its memory amongst black people. The decidedly problematic ways in which white people frequently approach the memory of slavery is nowhere more keenly highlighted than in the proliferation, during the 1960s and 1970s of trashy, pulp-fiction novels of sex and slavery, set in the antebellum Southern states. The pioneering work in this regard was Kyle Onstott's epic novel, *Mandingo*, which first appeared in the late 1950s. *Mandingo* spawned an entire genre of sex-on-the-plantation potboilers that recast as titillation the brutality of the sexual exploitation of men, women and children by slave masters and others close to them. Such potboilers were given a whole new lease of life when filmed versions, namely *Mandingo* and *Drum*, both starring Ken Norton, were released in the mid-1970s. Onstott himself proffered the view that 'The *Mandingo* in my novel is the handsome slave around whom a complicated fabric of violent and raw emotional turmoil evolves'.⁵ The sequel to *Mandingo*, *Drum*, declared itself to be 'an electrifying novel of the slave-breeding South and its legacy of passion, violence and depravity'.⁶ The covers of these novels frequently left little to the imagination in their allusions to inter-racial sex, set in the ever-present context of a wistful remembering of the great days of the chivalrous, socially ordered and well-mannered South.⁷ Such books, and their unmistakable covers, intrigued Donald Rodney, who made use of the covers of sex and slavery potboilers for his contribution to *Black Markets: Images of Black People in Advertising & Packaging in Britain (1880–1990)*.⁸ Rodney's was one of several contributions made by contemporary black artists, set alongside displays of archival material. It is worth quoting Rodney's catalogue statement in full:

The dominant culture: white, male, Christian, western, has throughout history found creative focus in re-staging the past.

Books like *Mandingo*, *Master of Falconhurst*, *Black Sapphire* etc. etc. all belong to a particular genre dealing with the slave trade. Those of us who have researched the slave trade will find little if any recognition of the reality of slavery within these novels. They are a type of fact/fiction utilising genuine historical fact combined with eroticised romanticism of that time. The books revolve around plantation life but usually have key characteristics that link them all, black stereotypes of sexual omnipotence; graphic depictions of a sado-masochistic nature and the fear/thrill of miscegenation.

I question what can be considered genuine territory for historical romance. Their I.S.B.N. classification under this name is both offensive and telling of the society they operate within. The past is being rewritten before us, and marketed for us to consume. The book covers themselves epitomise this rewriting of history. With their almost pornographic imagery, it is these covers which first confront and seduce the buyer.

I've rephotographed the covers in and out of focus, distorting and dulling the images. It's an attempt as in my x-ray drawings to find what's the truth below the surface. If our history is being rewritten, whether it be under the guise of fiction, we should resist.⁹

In 1996, just two years before he died, Donald Rodney was the subject of a film made by the Black Audio Film Collective. Though the film was by no means the most compelling work produced by the Collective, it nevertheless contained several lucid moments, one of which involved Rodney speaking about a work he was proposing to make. The envisaged work comprised a scale model of the Tate Gallery (which in later years came to be known as Tate Britain) made from white sugar cubes. Though the work itself was never made, we can perhaps visualise it and, certainly, we can appreciate the significance of the idea and the ways in which it animates, with startling originality and simplicity, issues of slavery, art world shenanigans and exclusion. At a stroke, with his sugar-cube scale-model idea, Rodney animated not only the ugly realities of the sugar industry and its history but also the ways in which exploitation was at the financial and cultural base of one of the nation's greatest institutions of art appreciation, the Tate having been established through the good graces of Sir Henry Tate (described in a recent Tate Britain publication as 'one of Britain's foremost industrialists'), a nineteenth-century English sugar refiner and merchant.¹⁰

Rodney's envisaged *Sugar Cube Tate* piece typified work that animated not only the history of slavery itself, but simultaneously invigorated or gave form to contemporary grievances, in this instance, the dubious financial cornerstone of one of Britain's greatest collections of art, and the ways in which that collection – the Tate Gallery – continued to exist as a symbol of the exclusion of black people from it, as artists, as senior staff and as casual visitors. Sir Henry Tate was born into a world in which the systems and mechanisms of slavery, particularly as applied to the cultivation of sugar cane, were still very much in place throughout the British Caribbean and elsewhere, though the trade itself was in the process of being abolished at the time of his birth. As a sugar refiner and merchant of the Victorian era, Tate was a pronounced beneficiary of the economic realities of slavery's legacies: a workforce made largely compliant through poverty, who could find no other labour, and an industrial system that continued to reap huge profits for industrialists (thereby enabling their philanthropy).

Mowbray Odonkor's compelling work, *Onward Christian Soldiers* from 1987 (otherwise known as *Self-Portrait with Red Gold and Green Flag*) (Figure 1) is one of the defining works of the 1980s that takes as its central themes slavery and the slave trade. Of crucial importance within the painting are the ways in which Odonkor, a British artist born of Ghanaian parentage in the early 1960s, regards the history of slavery as being inextricably bound together with her own being, her own identity. *Onward Christian Soldiers* is a work divided into several sections, and having in some ways the structure of an Asafo flag. Such flags have their origins in Asafo companies, military organisations that first existed several centuries ago among the Akan peoples who peopled the southern parts of what we now refer to as Ghana. Dating back to the seventeenth century, Asafo companies were in effect disciplined and

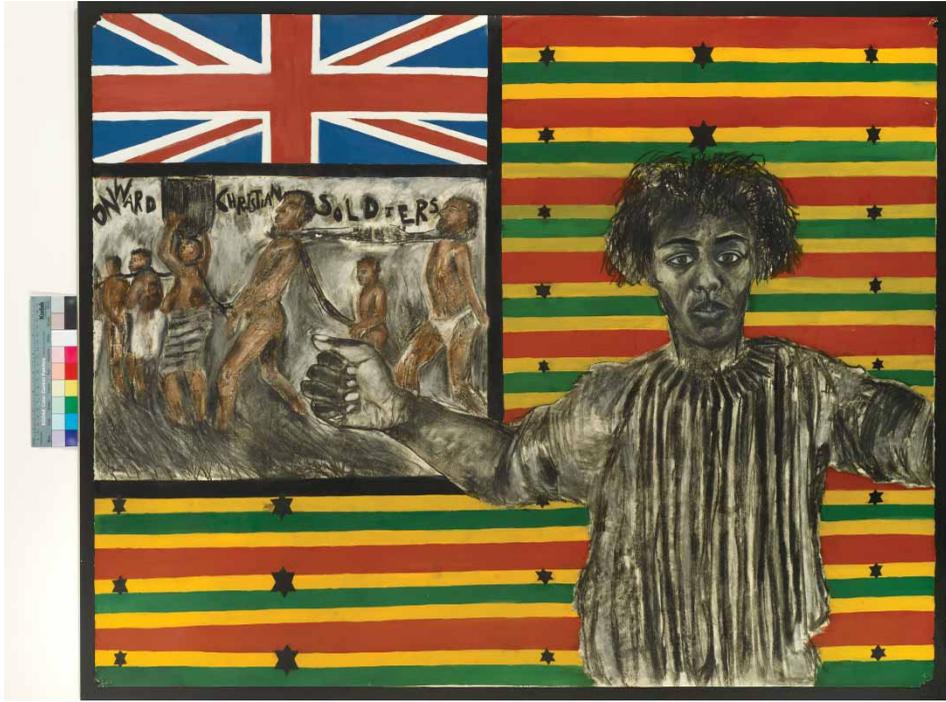


Figure 1 Mowbray Odonkor, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, 1987, Acrylic on paper, 152 × 182 cm. Reproduced with permission from Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

highly structured warrior groups established on the Gold Coast (the historical name by which modern-day Ghana was known). Upon contact with explorers representing European powers, Asafo members were on occasion hired by Europeans as auxiliary soldiers. Asafo companies exist up to the present day, though their function is now largely ceremonial. The ensigns of these companies frequently featured a version of the British flag in one or other of the upper corners of the appliqué work, pointing to the colonial power that took possession of this wealthy and important area of West Africa. After Ghana's independence, the now familiar tricolour of the red gold and green national flag, complete with five-pointed black star in its centre, sometimes replaced the Union flag in Asafo banners. Possibly the most important characteristic of Asafo flags were the ways in which each flag, through words, images and symbols, declared its own proverb, reflective of the military company in question. As is frequently the case in African cultures, proverbs involving animals featured prominently. Sometimes, these animals are instantly recognisable; at other times, they took the form of strange, multi-limbed or otherwise unusual beasts. But the Asafo flags also bear witness to profound European influences such as heraldry, royal coats of arms and regimental colours.¹¹ Looking at *Onwards Christian Soldiers* the viewer instantly appreciates that Odonkor, offering the viewer a number of hugely important access points, into the work, is telling multiple stories.

In part, the Union flag in the upper left-hand corner of the work points to the artist's own biography and identity. Odonkor was not just British by upbringing and residence, but Britain also featured prominently in the history of Ghana, the country of her parents' birth. Like countless people across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and indeed, other parts of the world, Odonkor's parents grew up under the British flag. Colonised by Britain, countries such as the Gold Coast found themselves part and parcel of the British Empire, the legacy of which is still keenly felt to this day. Within this work, Odonkor confronts the historical legacy that her biography, and that of her family, cannot escape. Simultaneously, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, through its use of the British flag, utilises the artistic device of linking Britain with the history of slavery. It is worth reiterating that British people tended to regard slavery as an abomination that happened elsewhere, and was the fault or the enterprise of other people. Furthermore, within the popular imagination, Britain's historical involvement in Africa was still regarded as a benign and selfless one, in which heroic missionaries and administrators worked tirelessly to combat slavery and superstition, and lift African people out of darkness. Odonkor seeks to emphatically counter this view by an explicit coupling of Britain with the enslaving of Africans, because directly below the British flag there appears a tableau of a slave coffle, a group of slaves chained together in a line and compelled to walk, oftentimes many miles.

Like the lithograph of the Brookes of Liverpool, the depiction of a slave coffle, on which Odonkor based her own drawing, is a familiar and frequently reproduced illustration of the barbarity of the slave trade. The image first appeared in a book by David Livingstone and Charles Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries; and of the Discovery of the Lakes Shirwa and Nyassa, 1858–1864*, first published in London 1865, and reprinted in New York the following year. Within the print, some 17 shackled and manacled Africans are present, linked one to the other, though the coffle depicted was likely to have been longer, as the first of these enslaved people exits the lithograph on the left-hand side, whilst the last figure enters the print on the right side. The group, comprising men, women and children, are shown being forced to march through the African landscape under the merciless eyes of two armed African slavers. Three of the women in the coffle have babies on their backs, and one of these women carries a sizeable basket on her head, as does a man, elsewhere in the line.¹² Odonkor crops the original infamous image, and, depicting only six of the group, inserts the words *Onward Christian Soldiers* above and between the heads of the captured Africans. *Onward, Christian Soldiers* is a tub-thumping hymn with an enduring popularity in church services. It may or may not be ironic that the hymn dates from the precise time period during which the slave coffle was depicted. At a stroke, Odonkor charges Christianity and the established churches with active complicity in the enslaving of African people and the despoiling of the African continent. In the hymn, 'Onward, Christian soldiers', are pictured 'marching as to war'. In Odonkor's painting, shackled Africans – babies included – are marched to relentless misery and death.

And yet, Odonkor's work resonates with profound narratives of Christianity that might well run counter to, or at least contrast with, accusations that Christianity coluded in the tormenting of Africa and its peoples. In the self-portrait, Odonkor depicts

herself with outstretched arms, as if bound to an imaginary or not explicitly visible cross. Hence, the work resonates with symbolism of crucifixion, sacrificial offering, martyrdom, sainthood and so on. Within the composition, the viewer is obliged to speculate on the extent to which to endure slavery is to experience a sort of martyrdom. Early Christians may have been horribly persecuted for their faith, but enslaved Africans were, over a nightmarishly long period of history, mercilessly persecuted by the experience of slavery. Within *Onward Christian Soldiers*, slavery exists as Odonkor's stigmata. In Christian tradition, stigmata refers to marks corresponding to those left on Jesus' body by the Crucifixion, and said to have been impressed by divine favour on the bodies of St. Francis of Assisi and other martyrs. But here in this work, Odonkor posits that slavery has left its own painful wounds on the psyche of its victims, on the African continent itself, and on a society that refuses to relinquish racism.

Odonkor positioned herself in the work in front of an expansive and visually dynamic repeated horizontal tricolour of red, gold and green. Since the 1970s, the colours had become instant signifiers of a particular type of black presence. Numerous flags of Africa utilised the red, gold and green colours, in a variety of compositions, but primarily as horizontal or vertical tricolours. Examples include Senegal, Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, Benin, Cameroon, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Mali and Congo. (In the case of a country such as Rwanda, the country's red, yellow and green vertical tricolour, complete with capital R in the centre band, was replaced after the horrific period of genocide that the country went through in the mid-1990s. The replacing of the old Rwanda flag was part of the country's attempts to shed associations with that violent and traumatic episode of its existence.)

It was the use of the red, gold and green colours in the Ethiopian flag, complete with the imperial Lion of Judah in the centre of the ensign, which led to the colours being so insistently used, worn, displayed and used as adornment by adherents of Rastafari, first in Jamaica and subsequently throughout the international black world.¹³ Within the context of Rastafari and its attendant 'Dread' culture, the red, gold and green colours represented powerful symbolism. Published discussions of Rastas frequently alluded to the symbolism. For example, 'Rastafarianism's sacred colors are red (for the blood of the martyrs), green (for Zion's abundant vegetation), and gold (for the wealth of Africa)'.¹⁴ When Rasta emerged in English cities in the mid-1970s, neighbourhoods, buildings and people, all were identified by the presence of colours. Another commentator noted that 'the wearing of the colours' red, gold and green was a 'visible symbol which denotes the Rasta . . . Often the colours are worn in the form of a knitted hat, but they may also be worn as a badge, as epaulettes, or woven into a cord tied round the waist'.¹⁵ In English cities such as Liverpool, signs denoting street names in *Frontline* districts were painted in the colours, thereby decisively demarcating the territory. This though, was simply a version of what had long since been happening in Jamaica. 'Every Rastafarian commune is identifiable by these colors which appear everywhere, even painted on the trunks of trees in the yards'.¹⁶

The colours came to signify a particularly *conscious* type of black presence. When worn on an individual, the colours confirmed that the wearer aspired to *upful*

living. When adorning musical instruments such as drums, the colours signified that the drums in question were employed in the righteous task of *chanting down Babylon*. And when the red, gold and green colours adorned dwellings, the message went out that no *weakheart cannot enter*. Thus, Odonkor's use of red, gold and green emphatically marked her as a *conscious dawtah*, a *righteous sistah*, of Africa and its Diaspora. In the parlance of African-American lingo of the street, Odonkor declares herself to be someone *who knows what time it is*. At regimented intervals, in the alternate bands of gold, Odonkor placed black stars. These, though, were not the five-pointed black star of the Ghanaian flag, but more indicative of the six-pointed *Shield of David*, more commonly referred to as the *Star of David*. Thus, Odonkor gave an emphatic nod to the sensibilities of Rastafari and its language of Twelve Tribes of Israel, Zion and other phraseology that owed much to Old Testament stories.¹⁷

Another Birmingham-raised artist, Keith Piper, made recurring use of the slave ship motif throughout the 1980s. One of his earliest uses was his employment of the image in the poster for his first solo exhibition, which took place at The Black-Art Gallery in 1984. Titled *Past Imperfect Future Tense*, the exhibition's poster was a montage in which the words *Imperfect* and *Tense* from the exhibition's title were laid over corresponding images.¹⁸ *Imperfect* was laid over the slave ship diagram, whilst *Tense* was laid over the four-times repeated image of a black South African schoolboy, doing battle with the authorities, during the Soweto uprising. The Soweto uprising was the series of clashes in Soweto that began in mid-June 1976 between black youths and the South African authorities. The black youth – predominantly school children – were protesting against being taught in Afrikaans, a language they judged to be that of their oppressors. The protest grew into a pronounced anti-apartheid declaration, against which the South African government reacted with great violence. The Soweto uprising represented, at the time, the latest bloody and violent episode in the anti-apartheid struggle. Over a period of some several months, 'Police and soldiers shot dead more than a thousand young people, wounding or maiming thousands of others as the uprising spread throughout South Africa.'¹⁹ The image that Piper used featured, in cut-out and dramatic isolation, a schoolboy seeking to defend himself with the aid of a dustbin lid. (In the original photograph, the youth appeared in the company of a number of other protesters, who were responding to live rounds fired at them by throwing stones at their tormentors.) In the poster, Piper depicted a black protester, fearless, heroically standing up to the full force of one of Africa's most sophisticated militaries, unleashed, with extreme prejudice, on unarmed demonstrating school children.

Within the striking montage, we observe Piper bringing together the twin markers of slavery and apartheid. Slavery and apartheid are in the same mix, both existing as signifiers of black diasporic identity in the late twentieth century. The memory and the experience of slavery were here being inextricably linked to an understanding of present-day difficulties which, in this instance, took the form of South Africa's apartheid system. Not only that, but Piper's memory of slavery was a compelling foundation on which he based present-day and future struggles of black liberation.

Keith Piper had poignantly alluded to the symbolism of Tate and sugar in his compelling mixed-media narrative of the mid-1980s, 'The Seven Rages of Man' (the title riffing off the seven ages of man, in the celebrated monologue from William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*). Piper's grand, expansive work featured seven busts, each a partial cast of his own head, and each set against a montage of images and text. Piper took the viewer through seven stages of his existence as an African man, beginning with a recollection of life in the pre-colonial days of Africa's great ancient kingdoms. The narrative then progressed to a section recalling the brutality and horror of the slave trade. Piper's second and third sections recalled the barbarity of the Middle Passage, life on the plantation and the days of slavery. A fourth panel showed Piper as a young Caribbean immigrant to Britain, calling to mind the dapper-suited young men who, having arrived as West Indian migrants, full of confidence in their ability to make good lives for themselves in the 'mother country', often found themselves on the receiving end of the host community's racism and discrimination. The fifth panel – depicting Piper as a conscious 'youtman' recalled the 'riots' of the early 1980s – mentioned at the beginning of this text and the ways in which 'the great insurrection' set the social and political agenda for young Black Britain. (The *yout* in this panel wears the red, gold and green colours briefly discussed in relation to Mowbray Odonkor's work.) The sixth panel laid out some of the parameters of struggle and agendas for militancy that Piper considered must be undertaken if a politically brighter day was to dawn. The seventh and final panel of Piper's history anticipated a bright, liberated future for a united, socialist continent of Africa, at one and at peace with the sons and daughters of its Diaspora, whose struggles for advancement in Britain had similarly been rewarded. Though each of the chronological sections was hugely important, it was perhaps the panels depicting, or recalling, the slavery experience that were the most arresting.

The enslaved African in Piper's second panel was shown manacled by his neck, a few links of chain dangling earthwards. Stencilled (or, more accurately perhaps, branded) onto the chest of Piper's second incarnation, as a captured African bound for hell, were the words 'PROPERTY OF TATE & LYLE'. Liberally reproduced, as a backdrop to the bust of the enslaved African, was the familiar motif of the Brookes of Liverpool. Thus, within this section of *Seven Rages of Man*, the long-standing links between sugar and slavery were further illuminated. In this grand, panoramic work, Piper 'remembered' being a slave, 'remembered' the Middle Passage and being transported on the slave ship, 'remembered' working on the plantation. This was much more than empathy; this was almost direct memory of earlier existences as well as steadfast hopes and expectations, based on struggle, for a brighter tomorrow.

Tate & Lyle was one of the largest producers of sugar in the Caribbean, and one of the largest distributors of the commodity in the UK, with a history that stretches inevitably, albeit indirectly, back into the days of slavery. In the mid-twentieth century, Tate & Lyle's Jamaican sugar operation was known locally as Wisco – the West Indies Sugar Company, the dominant player in the industry in Jamaica.²⁰ For good measure, it might be added that Wisco was caught up in the labour unrest and strikes that took

place in Jamaica in 1938 and marked such an important episode in that country's quest for dignity of the labouring masses and subsequent demands for nationhood.²¹ In a simple but profound way, Piper visually linked present-day consumerism with the most brutal legacies and experiences of slavery as well as post-slavery industrial abuses of labour on sugar plantations. Something as supposedly innocuous as buying a bag of sugar in a supermarket or using a sachet of sugar with one's cup of coffee or tea – these things are forcefully and visually linked with slavery, the slave trade and exploitation of labour. Furthermore, Piper's work made none-too-subtle references to the Tate Gallery and the ways in which the Tate came into existence in large part through the endeavours of Sir Henry Tate, sugar merchant and one half of the original Tate & Lyle. As reflected in this work and the *Sugar Cube Tate* envisaged by Donald Rodney, it could be said that one of the great cornerstones of British art owed its existence to slavery. And the Tate was an institution that had traditionally excluded, or failed to recognise, black artists. Therefore, in Piper's work, layer upon layer of meaning were added to his remembrance of the days of slavery.

In this instance, some of that layered meaning took the form of accusations of marginalisation and discrimination being levelled at the Tate Gallery for its apparent treatment of black artists. Along with its seeming failure or inability to recognise black artists, other charges were, during the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, made against the Tate. Such grievances were that it resisted the acquisition of work by black artists for its collection, and failed to develop black audiences, being indifferent to the notion that audiences might exist in some sort of cultural or ethnic plurality. Similarly, save for catering staff, guards, caretakers and security staff, the Tate had the appearance of not being inclined to employ black people or otherwise seek their services as curators, librarians, archivists and so on.

Gen Doy drew grim attention to the absence of black people from the galleries of the country, including the Tate, as senior staff and as visitors, in a passage of her book, *Black Visual Culture*. Her recollection made uncomfortable reading, as she clearly asserted that the only black presence that existed in the Tate Gallery, on the occasion of her visit, took the form of oftentimes-peripheral subject matter in the paintings of a modest exhibit. Wrote Doy,

I was reminded of the many times I have visited exhibitions where all the gallery attendants were black, but the exhibition directors and organisers were white. In particular I noticed when I visited the small exhibition entitled *Picturing blackness in British Art*, at the Tate Gallery, London, a couple of years ago, the only black person in the room who was not in a painting was the attendant.²²

In 1987, Piper again deployed the Brookes of Liverpool motif in an engaging, expansive series of photomontages titled *Go West Young Man*.²³ The famous words 'Go West. Young Man, Go West' were first used in a newspaper editorial to encourage the westward migration of Americans, in the middle of the nineteenth century. According to David C. King, *Westward Expansion* (American Heritage, American Voices series), in 1851, a newspaper editor named John B. L. Soule wrote those words in a newspaper, the *Terre Haute [Indiana] Express*. Horace Greenley, well-known editor of the

New-York Tribune, was so impressed by the enthusiastic editorial that he printed the entire piece in the *Tribune*.²⁴

In a brilliant gesture that served to counter or challenge the pathology that it was perfectly in order for the Aboriginal peoples of America to be dispossessed of their land, Piper juxtaposed the romanticised admonition of the newspaper editorial with the image of the slave ship. In so doing, he created a plethora of new meanings. One of the most striking of these new meanings was the interplay between forced migration and perhaps more voluntary (or at least, less forced) forms of migration. The USA is a country of immigrants, with two striking exceptions. First, those Aboriginal peoples massacred and dispossessed of their land and, second, those captured Africans who arrived in chains, and were destined for the auction block. The romanticised memory of noble migrants, westward-bound, took no respectful account (or indeed, interest in) the woeful experiences of those two hapless groups of people. Piper, though, obliges us to do so, as the slave ship represents in the most graphic and violent of terms forced travel, forced movement and forced migration. It is this interplay between the sentimental portrayal of the frontiersman, and the wretched existence of the slave, that gave the first panel of Piper's *Go West Young Man*, such power. Similarly, this interplay acted as a substantial and scene-setting introduction to the other 13 parts of the historical panorama that Piper again offered.

In the next decade, the 1990s, more imaginative and poignant work referencing slavery was to be created by other Black-British artists such as Godfried Donkor, Mary Evans and Tam Joseph. That, though, is another story.

Notes

- [1] For an account of the tragedy, see Cecily Jones, 'New Cross Fire', in *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, ed. David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 341–2. See also *The New Cross Massacre Story: Interviews with John La Rose* (London: Alliance of the Black Parents Movement, Black Youth Movement and The Race Today Collective, 1984) and Peter Fryer, 'The New Generation', in Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1985), 387–99. See also Stephen Cook, 'Unsolved: Accident or Arson?', *Unsolved* 4, no. 42 (1984): 829–48.
- [2] Susanne Everett, *History of Slavery* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1978), 46.
- [3] Kwame Dawes, *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius* (London: Sanctuary, 2002), 56. For more on 'Slave Driver' see also 'Slave Drive' in *Soul Rebel: The Stories Behind Every Bob Marley Song 1962–1981*, ed. Maureen Sheridan (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1999), 35.
- [4] For information and material on Donald Rodney, see Richard Hylton, ed., *Doublethink* (essays by Eddie Chambers and Virginia Nimarkoh) (London: Autograph, 2003) and 'His Catechism: The Art of Donald Rodney', *Third Text* 44 (Autumn 1998): 43–54.
- [5] From the author's introduction to Kyle Onstott, *Mandingo* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1978).
- [6] From the cover of Kyle Onstott, *Drum* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1965).
- [7] The realities of sexual exploitation during slavery were altogether and immeasurably more brutal, violent and horrific than the sexual encounters depicted in sex-and-slavery pulp fiction.
- [8] *Black Markets: Images of Black People in Advertising & Packaging in Britain (1880–1990)* (Manchester: Cornerhouse), 27 October–2 December 1990, then touring to venues in Wolverhampton, London and Coventry, between March and July 1991.
- [9] Artist's statement in the catalogue *Black Markets*, n.p.

- [10] Martin Myrone, *Tate Britain* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), n.p.
- [11] For more on Asafo flags, see Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard, *Asafo! African Flags of the Fante* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992).
- [12] An original copy is in the Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, which provides the following information.
Men linked by forked logs, children and women attached by chains or ropes, with their African guards armed with guns. Caption reads: 'Gang of Captives met at Mbame's on their way to Tette.' The scene was witnessed in July, 1861. Mbame was a village chief, friendly to Livingstone. Tette/Tete, a village (now a town) on the Zambezi River, located in present-day Western Mozambique was the last Portuguese outpost on the Zambezi. This image was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (vol. 32 [Dec. 1865–May 1866], 719) not long after the appearance of the New York edition to accompany an article, 'Livingstone's Last African Expedition' (pp. 709–23); the article gives a summary account of the Livingstones' 'Narrative of an Expedition'. The captives shown in this illustration were destined for the East African trade . . . The image and its historical context, as well as sources in which it is found, is discussed at length in Jerome Handler and Annis Steiner, 'Identifying Pictorial Images of Atlantic Slavery: Three Case Studies', *Slavery and Abolition* 27 (2006): 52–4.
- [13] In the iconography of Rastafari, 'The Lion of Judah' symbolises the Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, who was crowned in 1930, taking the titles King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and Power of the Trinity. Rastafarians hold Haile Selassie in the highest esteem, believing him to be a direct descendant of the Israelite Tribe of Judah, tracing his lineage through the line of King David and Solomon. Further, Rastafarians assert that Haile Selassie is the personage of the Lion of Judah mentioned in the New Testament Book of Revelation.
- [14] Nicholas J. Saunders, ed., *The Peoples of the Caribbean: An Encyclopedia of Archaeology and Traditional Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 235.
- [15] John Plummer, *Movement of Jah People: The Growth of the Rastafarians* (Birmingham: Press Gang, 1978), 38.
- [16] Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians: The Dreadlocks of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann/Sangsters, 1977), 143.
- [17] A marked and pronounced interplay between Rastafarianism and Judaism characterised one of Rastafarianism's most dominant sects, the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Adherents of *Twelve Tribes* are distinguished, in part, by the taking of the name of one of Jacob's twelve sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin), chosen on the basis of the calendar month in which the believer was born. 'Thus', wrote Stephen Davis, 'black people would recognize themselves as the true lost tribes of Israel, struggling in Babylonian captivity, yearning for redemption and Zion.' See Stephen Davis, *Bob Marley: Conquering Lion of Reggae* (London: Plexus, 1994), 195. One Vernon Carrington, also known as the Prophet Gad, founded the Twelve Tribes sect in 1968. See Chris Potash, *Reggae, Rasta, Revolution: Jamaican Music from Ska to Dub* (London: Books With Attitude, 1997), 54.
- [18] Keith Piper, *Past Imperfect Future Tense*, The Black-Art Gallery, June 7–July 22, 1984.
- [19] *Unity in Action: A Photographic History of the African National Congress* (London: African National Congress, n.d., circa 1982), 122–3.
- [20] Mona Macmillan, *The Land of Look Behind: A Study of Jamaica* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 129.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 129.
- [22] Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 54.
- [23] Keith Piper, *Go West Young Man*, photograph on paper mounted on board, in 14 parts, each: 840 × 560 mm on paper, unique. Tate Collection.
- [24] David C. King, *Westward Expansion* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2003), 85.