Crafting Identities, Remapping Nationalities
Crafting Identities, Remapping Nationalities:
The English-Speaking World
in the Age of Globalization

Edited by

Cécile Coquet-Mokoko and Trevor Harris
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INTRODUCTION

Postmodern and post-colonial subjects though we may be, each of us is still confronted with the daily obligations of making sense of the contradictory experiences and expectations defining our place in the social structure, and presenting others with a credible, readable “front” on the stage of interpersonal power relations.\(^1\) Identities are therefore both ascribed and constantly challenged, as the power structures generating—or, at least, conditioning—them are endlessly engaged in adjusting to both inner subversion and outer pressure, and reinforcing their discourse of legitimacy to survive as consistent entities, both locally and in a world now radically reconfigured by globalization. This tension is all the more salient as increasingly serious crises in the international capitalist system have awakened new transnational demands and aspirations.

In the different versions of multiculturalism that have re-shaped English-speaking societies and political systems, identities appear more plastic than in societies which have constructed their national narratives on more stubborn denials of their colonial and patriarchal pasts; yet, the myth of purity (or authenticity) and separatist temptations remain very real parameters of identity politics.\(^2\) In such contexts, crafting an identity for oneself implies expectations of consistency, linked not only to the individual need to prove oneself and disprove stereotypes and statistics, but also to the broader political goal of dis-alienating, or de-Othering, oneself and one’s community, whether the latter be defined as a racial, ethnic, gendered, or socio-economic group.

How does the interplay between individual agency and the commodification of historically marginalized groups in popular cultures contribute to representing as either “loyal” or unpredictable their most volatile members—women or members of the younger generations, who are often dismissed as simply “mixed-up” in diasporic situations? What part

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do academic discourses on the cultures and literatures of formerly colonized, or otherwise “peripheral,” peoples play in the defense strategies of minority groups and mainstream cultures as both strive to maintain their respective ideals of purity versus hybridity?

National narratives also constantly require renewed commentary and analyses of institutional practices around identities. Who is entitled to deconstruct the national narratives and under what circumstances? How are national shame or denial represented in the way History is taught and imagined? How are the “undesirable,” “incompatible,” and closeted or “discrete” groups making up the national fabric integrated, empowered, or ignored in national celebrations and commemorations?

Policing the nation, finally, demands that the national fabric should make sense. How do “the powers that be” in each particular society tackle such issues as multilingualism, linguistic subversion of the received codes, conflicting loyalties, popular notions of deviant or nation-threatening identities and the legal implications of minority groups’ protests against such definitions of their agendas? How, and to what extent, are national identities re-mythologized in multicultural societies challenged by globalization, the critiques of wild capitalism, and the predictable end of White supremacy as we have known it?

The eight chapters which follow each discuss these questions from a specific angle, from the most institutional to the most intimate, helping the reader to de-center and re-center the articulations between the politics of memory and the creation of national narratives and communal or personal identities.

Philippe Vervaecke’s contribution addresses the intricate fashioning and re-fashioning of the United Kingdom’s institutional memory of the slave trade by deconstructing the political subtexts behind national commemorations of the British abolitionist movement. His “‘Wilberfest’ No More? The Memory of Slavery and Anti-Slavery in Britain, 1833-2007” provocatively discusses the recent challenges to the political consensus around the national antislavery heroes, as well as the implications of the steps taken towards institutional commemorations of the British slave trade and a wider recognition of Afro-British abolitionist figures such as Olaudah Equiano.

His comparison between the Frontier narrative and its Mexican American counter-narrative, both written on the occasion of the centennial of the Texas War of Independence, sheds light on the irreconcilable two-ness impersonated by the fictional character of George Washington/G. Gómez and the elusiveness of the notion of destiny in the crafting of a cohesive Border identity.

The space of Northern Ireland provides interesting ground for comparison in Hélène Hamayon-Alfaro’s piece, entitled “Empowerment through the arts: community arts in Belfast in the 1980s and 1990s.” On this likewise history-fraught border between two seemingly incompatible national communities, she demonstrates how artists have successfully dramatized ascribed identities by launching grassroots artistic projects. In doing so, they have re-informed communal identities with political meaning which not only gave back a voice to those men and women who felt misrepresented and demonized by the mainstream media and the official proponents of a monocultural society, but eventually created a space for dialog and emulation between the two communities.

In “The Emergence of ‘Indian’ Literature in the US Academic and Cultural Landscape,” Padmini Mongia also poses the question of the official recognition of cultural Otherness in self-validating, “authorized” circles and the role played by literature in combating misrepresentations of cultural complexity. She interrogates the context in which postcolonial literature by Indian writers from India or the diaspora gained an official voice in academic canons and the mainstream media, and the implications of the “canonization” of writers who translate and map the historically plural, multi-lingual, and constantly evolving cultural elements of “Indianness” into a simplified and stabilized, recognizable though exotic, text for English-speaking readerships to consume.

Camille Alexander’s contribution, “Lifting the Veils of Tradition: Deconstructing and Hybridizing Indian Female Identity in Indo-Caribbean Literature” provides an entry into one of these plural, diasporic communal identities, with a more specifically gendered focus which also addresses generational communication conflicts and their possible resolutions through literature. Caribbean literature here appears as a space of creolization, or hybridization, where individual female characters find the courage to make personal choices against the backdrop of traditions and invent their own voices over the community’s script, peacefully yet deliberately challenging their gendered roles in their minority communities and redefining their places as citizens in the wider national ensemble.

Personal choices associating history and modernity, ancestry and transnational yearnings, are also central to Anu Bissoonauth’s article,
“Attitudes towards English in Mauritius: linguistic paradox or cultural pragmatism?” Through her interviews with high school students from an island with a multiple colonial and ethnic heritage, we see two successive generations of young Mauritians of Indian descent actively crafting their linguistic identities, negotiating their personal multilingualism on the basis of personal loyalty to their forefathers, rural or urban cultural roots, private attachment to Mauritian (French) Creole, and their varying perceptions of “languages that matter” in the modern world and an economy partly based on tourism.

The ambiguous place of Creole in postcolonial English-speaking societies is further discussed by Sandra Colly-Durand in her contribution, entitled “An analysis of Jamaican teachers’ social representation of Creole in 2011.” Linguistic identities are also being deliberately adjusted and crafted in this other postcolonial context, as the players of the educational field address the urgent need for students and teachers to find common ground to achieve mutual understanding and overcome the educational gaps which plague the nation. In her interviews with teachers, we delve into the often contradictory personal choices they feel must be made in transmitting culture, language, and their own sense of what matters for the future of the next generation of Jamaicans.

Finally, Cécile Coquet-Mokoko discusses the political implications of the choice of marrying “out of their race” for African American females in her paper, “African American Women in Interracial Couples: Rethinking the Bonds of Race Loyalty.” In the context of a society that was historically shaped by racial separatism and in spite of the integrationist goals of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, the burden of History remains unmediated by any process of hybridization that would have worked towards deeper mutual understanding. This is especially observable in the Deep South, where cultural contact between the two communities was construed as illegitimate from the colonial beginnings of the nation. Hence, racial borders are still enforced and reinforced on both sides of the color line and prove increasingly difficult to renegotiate in terms of self-preservation or individual “pursuit of happiness.”
CHAPTER ONE

“WILBERFEST” NO MORE?
THE MEMORY OF SLAVERY
AND ANTI-SLAVERY IN BRITAIN 1833-2007

PHILIPPE VERVAECKE

On March 27, 2007, during a service at Westminster Abbey staged for the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade by the British Parliament, Toyin Agbetu, an African British activist, disrupted the stately proceedings to protest against what he felt was an insult against Africans.¹ Calling on the Queen and Tony Blair, both present at the service, to apologize and atone for Britain's rôle in the slave trade, Agbetu's gesture of defiance caused a stir. “When the guests emerged [from the service]”, wryly noted one of the journalists who witnessed the scene, “they were not talking about William Wilberforce”². In an article published a week later in the Guardian, Agbetu explained that he had barged in on what he called this ‘Wilberfest’ ceremonial “to make a collective voice heard at the commemorative ritual of appeasement and self-approval”.³

If anything, this incident made it clear that the memory of slavery remained a contentious issue in Britain and the “memorial policies”⁴

¹ Agbetu is London-born and bred and has Nigerian origins. He remains active in Ligali, a Pan-African organisation he founded in 2000. Ligali was originally created to challenge media misrepresentation of the “African British community”, a term Ligali judges more adequate than “West Indian, Afro-Caribbean, or Black British”. Ligali website, accessed on September 7th 2011.
² “You, the Queen, should be ashamed!”, The Guardian, March 27, 2007.
⁴ I borrow the concept from French scholar Johann Michel, who defines “memorial policies” (politiques mémorielles in French) as attempts by any institution, whether
implemented in 2007 by government, cultural institutions, the media, local authorities and the charitable sector would necessarily come under scrutiny. As early as 2004, controversies over the necessity for the Queen or the State to apologise should have been an indication that heated debate was likely to be renewed in 2007.\footnote{This was asked by, among others, Kofi Mawuli Klu, then coordinator of Rendezvous of Victory, a group designed to fight against modern slavery and inequalities (“200 years on, the Queen is told to say sorry for Britain's rôle in slave trade”, \textit{The Observer}, December 5, 2004). Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, issued a statement to support reparations by the Church for its rôle in slavery, in particular for operating the notorious Codrington plantation (\textit{The Guardian}, March 26, 2007), and so did Ken Livingstone for London's prominent—though often overlooked—rôle in the slave trade (\textit{The Guardian}, March 21, 2007). Anglican Bishops urged Blair to express an official apology (\textit{The Observer}, March 25, 2007), but Blair stopped short of this when, in 2006, he chose to express his “sorrow and regret” over Britain's involvement in slavery (\textit{BBC News}, November 27, 2006).}

Tempers ran high when a public discussion was organised by the Bristol local authorities in 2006 to consider if it would be judicious for the city, one of the main hubs of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, to officially apologize for the part it played in the triangular trade. “It would be an empty gesture. It would be like asking the Italians to apologise on behalf of the Romans for killing Boudicca”, one local businessman is reported to have snorted back at the proposal.\footnote{“Slavery: Is it time for an apology?”, \textit{The Independent}, May 11, 2006.}

Undeterred, the Lord Mayor of Bristol issued a formal declaration of regret in early January 2007 with local church leaders and Labour city councillors.\footnote{The document is reproduced in Dresser (233). For the recent evolution of memorial policies in Bristol, see Christine Chivallon, « L’usage politique de la mémoire de l’esclavage dans les anciens ports négriers de Bordeaux et Bristol », in Weil and Dufoix (559-584). Chivallon’s paper is one of the few scholarly works comparing France’s and Britain’s memorial policies regarding slavery. We shall briefly return to this comparison between the two national contexts later on in the article.}

Nation-wide, where the “apology” controversy occupied much column space in the press, public opinion, to judge from calls to the BBC and from a flurry of letters to the editor, was clearly on the side of “no apology”, as one Canadian observer noted.\footnote{“Sorry, but not yet an apology”, \textit{The Star}, March 26, 2007.}

Still, much had been done to make sure that the 2007 celebrations governmental or otherwise, to regulate and impose contents of memory related to events with a political dimension. This, according to Michel, means that memorial policies consist, especially for public authorities, in acting directly upon the “imaginary institution of collective identities” (my translation). See Michel, p. 4-5.
would give a new direction to the way the public memory of slavery and antislavery is approached in the country. In March 2006, the government had issued a set of recommendations to define a framework for the vast commemorative process that was then under way. The pamphlet entitled “Reflecting on the past and looking into the future” was jointly released by David Lammy, Minister of Culture, and Paul Goggins, Minister for Communities and Race Equality, so as to define what was at stake with the 2007 bicentenary:

Whilst it would be another 30 years before slavery itself was finally abolished throughout the British Empire, the Bicentenary in 2007 gives us the opportunity to remember the millions who suffered; to pay tribute to the courage and moral conviction of all those–black and white–who campaigned for abolition; and to demand to know why today, in some parts of the world, forms of slavery still persist two centuries after the argument for abolition in this country was won.  

While keen not to inject any triumphalism about the past into their prose, Lammy and Goggins devoted nearly half of the brochure to discussion of Labour’s contemporary attempts to tackle racial discrimination in the UK and human trafficking world-wide. In the first section, “Reflecting on the past”, emphasis was placed upon the importance of Black agency, the impact of the slave trade upon the British economy and the grass-roots dimension of anti-slavery campaigns. This seemed to herald a new understanding of the anti-slavery movement and a move away from the Westminster- and Parliament-centred, Anglo-centric, self-congratulatory approach to abolitionism. It also indicated a readiness not solely to celebrate the passing of the 1807 Act, “an important point in this country’s development towards the nation it is today—a critical step into the modern world, and into a new and more just moral universe”, but also to confront Britain’s responsibility in slavery and to insist on the government’s duty to fight racism and discrimination. Similarly, Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho and Robert Wedderburn, three non-White anti-slavery activists, were conjured up to highlight the extent to which anti-slavery could not be construed as the achievement of notorious White abolitionists like Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson.

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9 This document, entitled “Reflecting on the past: looking into the future. The 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire,” is accessible on the web site of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (full address in the bibliography).
10 Ibid.
At a time when, in the wake of the “riots” of 2001 in Bradford and of the 2005 London terrorist attacks, Labour policies put “community cohesion” at a premium, the bicentenary was thus ideally suited to project a consensual, multicultural image of the country, to promote the idea of pacified race relations and to publicise Labour’s supposedly spotless record on anti-racism and equal opportunities.

Marcus Wood has brilliantly analysed elsewhere the way the 2007 bicentenary was the chance for New Labour “to re-establish national ownership of a much sought after brand, the ‘Liberty’ brand” (311), and how much of the government’s energy was deployed to control the terms in which the bicentennial was to operate. This was nowhere more obvious than in the way 1807 was celebrated by the British Council in Ghana, with scant recognition of Britain's misdeeds both as a slaving and as a colonial power, and much focus on Britain's rôle as a benign actor in Ghanaian history, as Manu Herbstein (2009) has showed.

In this paper, we shall look at how the memorial framework established from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1980s imposed a hagiographic, Anglo-centric perspective on slavery and anti-slavery, and then we shall assess to what extent this frame of remembrance has been altered by the 2007 commemoration.

The purpose of the paper is not so much to present the whole gamut of memorial projects—which included, among others, monuments, museum exhibitions, arts projects, church services, expiatory marches, the issue of commemorative stamps and medals, the release of countless films and documentaries—as to assess how far the memorial framework evolved, in what direction and with contributions by what sections of society. The general idea is to define how British perspectives on slavery and anti-slavery have fared in this shift from “a dearth” to a “glut of memory”, to paraphrase Paul Ricoeur's interpretation of the dilemmas of collective memory. Key to the changes that shall be highlighted is the rôle played by academics and activists from the West Indian and African community organisations in the UK, the combined influence of which contributed, albeit in a very partial way, to transform memorial policies in Britain.

The “Saints” as National Icons, 1833-1983

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Wilberforce and his associates in the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade,

chiefly Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp, came to be widely known as the “Saints”. Much mythologising took place about the leaders of the anti-slavery campaign, not least in the shape of hagiographical biographies, in particular the one published in 1838 by Wilberforce’s sons, Robert and Samuel, and later the study dedicated to him in 1923 by imperial historian Reginald Coupland, a keen Wilberforce devotee.

By and large, the memory of anti-slavery obliterated the memory of slavery itself, a process very much akin to what took place in France, too, where the cult of Schoelcher did much to obfuscate France’s involvement in slave-trading and slavery and to create the myth of a virtuous, republican France finally embracing equality and liberty in 1848. As Françoise Vergès notes, “in its national myth, France chose to place emphasis on abolitionism, thus erasing what had happened before and what followed” (71).12

Much the same may be said about Britain. As Victorian historian Lecky famously stated on abolitionism, “the unweary, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations”.13 Such a viewpoint on anti-slavery turned Britain’s rejection of the slave trade first and slavery later into principled and selfless policies which could easily fit into the gospel of enlightened imperialism.

The leaders of the abolitionist movement were duly refashioned into national heroes proudly holding forth the beacon of conscience and humanity. Thanks to “the energy” of those “good men […] mankind had been successfully lifted onto a higher plane, and the world breathed a more kindly air”, G. M. Trevelyan, the Oxford Professor of History, reflected on the centenary of Wilberforce’s death. Trevelyan went on to praise Wilberforce, a High-Church Tory with little taste for popular agitation, for single-handedly ushering in the age of democracy and out-of-door pressure: “The methods of Wilberforce were afterwards imitated by the myriad societies and leagues—political, religious, philanthropic and cultural—which have ever since been the arteries of English life”. Trevelyan’s dithyramb ended with the conclusion that Wilberforce fully deserved his place in the national pantheon: “He was one of the greatest of Englishmen and his life’s story is most peculiarly English in its spirit and in its setting”.14 Even the fact that the anti-slavery struggle had taken

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12 My translation.
so long could be presented as in keeping with good old British incrementalism and prudent, conservative reformism, given that the Victorian age “was accustomed to think of freedom as ‘slowly broadening down from precedent to precedent’”, as a *Times* editorial suggested on the same day.\(^\text{15}\)

Wilberforce died in 1833, a few days after the passing of the bill emancipating slaves in the British West Indies. This coincidence did much to conflate the anniversary of his death with that of emancipation. Such was the case for the centenary in 1933, when huge celebrations were staged in Hull and London, but also for the 150\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary in 1983. In 1933, most of the commemorative process took place in Hull itself, with ceremonies including a civic procession with a “salute by aircraft”, the unveiling of a memorial plaque at the grammar school once attended by Wilberforce, a church service at which Negro spirituals were sung by “coloured artists”, and various exhibitions at which one could see Wilberforce “relics” such as autograph letters and a Wilberforce waxwork figure donated by Madame Tussaud’s. Special services were organised at Saint Paul’s, and Westminster Abbey, the latter to commemorate three centenaries, those of the passing of the Act for abolition of slavery, the death of Wilberforce and the birth of Charles Gordon, the “martyr of Khartoum” who died during an ill-timed expedition against the slave trade in the Sudan; the latter for the Wilberforce centenary only. A procession with the Mayor, churchmen and school-children was staged at Battersea, where Wilberforce’s house used to stand before it was demolished in 1904. “To memorialise [Wilberforce]’s name and achievement”, the Duke of York made an appeal for the endowment of a Wilberforce Chair of History in the University College of Hull. Further afield, on the same day as in Hull, the Wilberforce centenary was also commemorated in Sierra Leone, where a ceremony was held at the Wilberforce Memorial Hall in Freetown and thanksgiving services were reported to take place in “all the churches and the mosques”.\(^\text{16}\) In 1983, public attention also seems to have focussed on the notorious MP for Hull, with medals minted for the “champion of freedom and humanity”.\(^\text{17}\) On both occasions, reverence for Wilberforce

\(^{15}\text{The Times, “The Liberator”, July 29, 1933, p. 13.}\)

\(^{16}\text{The Times, July 13, 1933, p. 8; July 24, 1933, p. 7; July 25, 1933, p. 12, p. 16; August 12, 1933, p. 13.}\)

\(^{17}\text{The Times, July 23, 1983, p. 3; July 29, 1983, p. 16. In its July 29 edition, the Times reproduced photographs of Wilberforce’s statue at Westminster Abbey, of his waxwork manikin in Hull and of the oak in Holwood Park, William Pitt’s residence, where Wilberforce was said to have been resolved to take up the cause of abolition of the slave trade. In that issue of the Times, not a word was wasted on the 150\(^{\text{th}}\)\).}\)
the “Liberator” thus overshadowed the commemoration of emancipation.

The “cult of saint William” had in fact begun immediately after his death. He was buried in stately pomp in Westminster Abbey next to his long-time friend William Pitt, and a seated statue of him was erected there in 1840. In 1834, his fellow-citizens of Hull launched a public subscription which made it possible to erect a 102-foot-high column which still towers over the city. His native home was purchased by the City Council in 1903 and a Wilberforce Museum opened its doors in 1907.

Wilberforce was not the only abolitionist to be thus memorialised. Although for a long time air-brushed out of the abolitionist mythology, Thomas Clarkson was duly awarded his rightful place in the antislavery pantheon. It was only belatedly, though, precisely in 1996 for the 150th anniversary of his death, that Clarkson’s contribution to the campaign was recognised with a memorial tablet dedicated to his memory, which was placed next to Wilberforce’s Monument in Westminster Abbey, where Zachary Macaulay, another one of the “Saints”, had had his own Memorial since 1842. Westminster Abbey, or the “national Valhalla” as Oldfield dubs it, also contains memorials to Granville Sharp and Charles James Fox.\(^{18}\)

The Buxton Drinking Fountain, dedicated to Thomas Folwell Buxton and his fellow-abolitionists, was built in 1865 and now stands in Victorian Embankment Gardens next to Parliament. Both a Clarkson monument and a Clarkson museum were inaugurated in his home town, Wisbech, the first in 1881, and the second in 1993. A Clarkson Memorial was erected in 1857 near Ipswich in the Playford churchyard where Clarkson is buried.

Westminster Abbey, Hull and Wisbech were thus the most visible sites of antislavery memory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By contrast, the memory of slavery was all but obliterated, especially in the slaving ports. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, many British cities staged historical pageants to celebrate their history. These were grand events, involving thousands of volunteers to create the costumes and to appear on the *tableaux vivants* retracing the city’s history, and with huge audiences attending those spectacular civic extravaganzas. Interestingly, the two major slaving ports organised such events, but little was said about that murky part in their past. In 1907, Liverpool’s pageant only gave “passing sidelights of the slave trade and the days of privateers”, in one part of the performance mostly dedicated to highlighting the city’s “commercial greatness and its reputation for charitable deeds”.

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\(^{18}\) Oldfield, 59. This section of my paper borrows freely from Oldfield’s thoroughly-researched book, though care has been taken to use original material to argue the case.
Bristol organised its own pageant in 1924, none of the seven episodes addressed the city’s involvement in the slave trade, and one scene only did show events from the eighteenth century, namely the election of Edmund Burke, about whom posterity has all but forgotten that he too wrote against the slave trade.19

Monuments to the victims of slavery or to emancipation remain few and far between. A memorial archway to commemorate the abolition of slavery was built in Stroud in 1834, but it was not meant as a public monument as it stood on someone’s property and could only be seen by visitors. To this day, the only memorials to the victims of slavery are to be found in Bristol, with the ‘Pero’ Bridge, which was inaugurated in 1999 and named after a slave who lived in the city, and the “Captured Africans” memorial erected in Lancaster in 2005.

In terms of commemorative ceremonies, what is striking is how little interest the centenary of the abolition of the slave trade elicited in 1907, at a time when the whole of the country was seized by what one historian has called the “cult of the centenary”.20 Ironically enough, 1907 coincided with the closing down of Exeter Hall, which since 1831 had hosted many anti-slavery conventions, in particular the first international anti-slavery congress in 1840.21

Still, August 1st, the date on which the first emancipation bill was passed in 1833 and was supposed to take effect a year later, but also on which emancipation was finally proclaimed in 1838, gave rise to a range of commemorative ceremonies, both in the West Indies, in Britain and in America. A slavery abolition anniversary was organised as early as 1837 in Edinburgh and 1838 in Dublin and Birmingham, and other similar festivities took place throughout the century.22 In the British West Indies, in 1840, the Governor-General of Jamaica appointed that date as a day of general thanksgiving while British papers often praised the “orderly and peaceable conduct” of the emancipated on that occasion.23

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19 *The Times*, August 5, 1907, p. 9; May 27, 1924, p. 18.
21 *The Times*, July 23, 1907, p. 8.
23 The standard coverage of August 1st festivities in the metropolitan press related that the day “[had] passed in the usual satisfactory manner”. As early as 1844, the Dublin-based *Freeman’s Journal* noted the “lately enfranchised” already regarded
In Britain, anti-slavery activists, the churches and Radicals like George Thompson did much to raise the profile of that anniversary. Although some insisted that the emancipation of the Negroes, a “public triumph”, was “the property of the nation” and that as such it belonged “to no clique, no party, no band of platform orators”, it is mostly in Radical and Liberal ranks that the anniversary was celebrated, and most of the anniversary meetings we have found evidence of were held in the three decades following the passing of the 1833 Act.

Once emancipation was proclaimed in the USA, one finds far fewer instances of commemorative undertakings, apart from the Anti-Slavery Jubilee held under the auspices of the Prince of Wales and of the Anti-Slavery Society for the 50th anniversary of emancipation in 1884. Before emancipation in the United States, commemorative meetings were the opportunity for the British Anti-Slavery Society to show its support for its American brethren. For example, in 1852, a meeting was held in London to keep “before the British public the slavery of the United States”. Among speakers, one notes the presence of the Reverend William Douglas, a “perfect Negro [whose] language and demeanour [gave] proof that the ‘man of colour’ [was] qualified by nature for freedom and to take his place with the white man in civilised society”, of William Wells Brown, a runaway from the Southern States of America, and of the veteran of abolitionism, George Thompson.

It is thus in the United States itself that the anniversary of West Indian emancipation became a high-profile affair. American abolitionists indeed took up August 1st as the main date in the yearly calendar of their organisations, with, for example, the activist Frederick Douglas and the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson both taking part in a picnic with the friends of the day “with indifference”. Freeman's Journal, September 18, 1844. For other reports on August 1st celebrations in the West Indies, see Bradford Observer, September 17, 1840; Essex Standard, October 13, 1843; September 16, 1863; Aberdeen Journal, September 25, 1844; Penny Illustrated Paper, September 19, 1863. During the American Civil War, the August 1st celebrations were the opportunity for meetings to be convened to pass resolutions calling for the downfall of slavery in America.

Another notorious Radical, Thomas Perronet Thompson, was committed through his life to the plight of the West Indies and to anti-slavery advocacy within Radical ranks. For a more detailed discussion see the article by Michael Turner.

Morning Chronicle, August 3, 1859.

Manchester News, August 7, 1852. For similar instances of anniversary meetings, see Leeds Mercury, July 2, 1853; Manchester Times, July 8, 1854; Bristol Mercury, August 7, 1858; Essex Standard, August 8, 1860; August 7, 1861; Leeds Mercury, August 3, 1861.
freedom at Concord, Mass., in 1844. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass responded to critics who thought that it was inappropriate that, even after American emancipation, American abolitionists kept celebrating West Indian emancipation:

Why go abroad, say they, when we might as well stay at home? The answer is easily given. Human liberty excludes all idea of home and abroad. It is universal and spurns localization. [...] What though [emancipation] was not American, but British; what though it was not Republican, but Monarchical; [...] what though it was not from the chair of a President, but from the throne of a Queen, it was none the less a triumph of right over wrong, of good over evil, and a victory for the whole human race. England can take no step forward in the pathway of a higher civilization without drawing us in the same direction. She is still the mother country, and the mother, too, of our abolition movement.

The Saints’ status as national and–more crucially as international–icons thus contributed to the perpetuation of their central role in the public memory of anti-slavery and reinforced the process of obfuscation of slavery itself at work in collective memory.

Before turning to the question of the impact of 2007 on the memory of slavery and anti-slavery, there is one last aspect in the memorialisation of slavery which needs to be discussed, namely the slow rise of slavery museums in Britain. The two most interesting cases are the Wilberforce museum, which was completely refurbished in 1983, and the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery which opened in 1994 at the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool. The Wilberforce House museum, while keeping its status as a shrine of sorts to its former resident, was rearranged so as to give greater visibility to slave-trading, with one room supposed to recreate the conditions of the Middle Passage. Very much the same approach was developed in Liverpool. While these initiatives showed a readiness to face the reality of slavery, both exhibits came under fire for exaggeratedly–and questionably–focussing on conditions on slave ships and for insufficiently presenting slavery itself. As one academic suggested, this boiled down to a “maritimisation” of the history of slavery which stopped short of presenting the working and living conditions of West Indian slaves in as much detail as necessary for Britons to more fully appreciate the nation’s

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27 Manchester Times and Gazette, August 10, 1844.
28 Douglass, 486-487. As Oldfield notes (152), August 1st nevertheless started losing its appeal to Black Americans by the end of the nineteenth century, when Lincoln’s Birthday (12 February 1809) gradually replaced it.
involvement in slavery.²⁹

Preparations for “Abolition 200”, as the bicentenary came to be known in government and media parlance, thus went ahead against a highly charged backdrop, with a deeply embedded tradition of “Wilbermania” and a neglect for slavery itself which had partially and belatedly been made up for during the 1990s.

“William carries on”³⁰

Shortly before the bicentennial, William Cook contended in a puzzling judgement that Wilberforce was by then Britain’s forgotten hero and that he was more famous in Sierra Leone than in Britain.³¹ A few months later, the release of a Hollywood biopic on Wilberforce, Amazing Grace, and that of former Conservative leader William Hague’s biography were to give renewed prominence to Wilberforce, if his star had ever faded.³² To judge from the way politicians and the media discussed the bicentenary, one could be tempted to think that little had changed, and that Wilbermania was going unabated. Although due to tokenism Equiano was more often referred to as one of the prominent campaigners against the slave trade, Wilberforce and his saintly ilk remained pivotal. The movie Amazing Grace is a good example of this, as it restricted the character of Equiano, played by Youssou N'Dour, to grotesque cameo appearances and remained oblivious of the actual plight of the slaves.³³ But the tangible changes in the memory of slavery and anti-slavery one witnessed during the bicentenary should not be overlooked.

Given the impressive scope of events staged in 2007 and the numerous studies subsequently dedicated to the analysis of the bicentenary, this

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³⁰ The phrase is taken from Melvyn Bragg’s review of William Hague’s biography of Wilberforce (The New Statesman, June 16, 2007), in which Bragg repeated the claim he had made in his Radio 4 broadcast on Wilberforce that the great men theory should be reinstated when one considers Wilberforce’s career.
³² Hague’s book was an attempt to place Wilberforce within both the national and Conservative pantheon, at a time when some within Labour were trying to politicise Abolition 200 by claiming that abolition had been accomplished against the power of “Tory” money.
³³ See Wood’s scathing review of the film, an “amazing disgrace” according to him. (Wood, 344-353).
section of the paper shall offer only a partial account of “Abolition 200”. The 2007 commemorations gave rise to careful planning—and significant financial efforts—by the government, local authorities, such national institutions as Parliament, the churches, the BBC or the National Portrait Gallery, so probably the most striking feature of the bicentennial was the extraordinary ubiquity and diversity of commemorative initiatives nationwide, which prompted Yasmin Alibhai-Brown to call such a cumbersome programme of events “binge remembering”. A carnival of sorts it indeed was, as the Notting Hill Carnival took the bicentenary as its theme.

Far from being localised to places obviously related to slavery and anti-slavery, for example Westminster, Bristol, Liverpool and Hull, the city where Wilberforce was born, the bicentennial gave rise to events in localities not usually associated with slavery, such as Leicester, Manchester, Norwich, Fulham, Ipswich or Nottingham. This contrasted with what used to be stated as late as the 1990s about Britain’s amnesia concerning the part it played in slavery and about the highly selective way in which anti-slavery used to be remembered, in particular in former slaving ports which were often viewed as stubbornly reluctant to face their past.

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34 For a thorough analysis of 2007, see Wood’s chapter, “The Horrible Gift of Freedom and the 1807-2007 Bicentennial” (296-353). To complement Wood’s impeccably caustic, and nonetheless balanced, analysis of the bicentennial, readers are invited to consult the special issue dedicated to the 2007 celebrations by the journal *Slavery and Abolition* which was published in June 2009.

35 Liverpool’s International Slavery Museum received a government grant of £500,000, but the bulk of the costs incurred by Abolition 200 were covered by local authorities and by the Heritage Lottery Fund, through which 200 projects were financed.


37 For a study on the various strategies pursued by local authorities and museums to connect their locality with slavery and abolition, see the article by Geoffrey Cubbit.

38 Greater willingness to recognise how much slavery impacted and continues to impact upon “metropolitan” societies is not specific to Britain. Much the same process is under way in France, where calls for the creation of a “Centre national pour la mémoire des esclavages et de leurs abolitions” were heard in 2007. This institution has yet to materialise, though the “Comité pour la Mémoire et l’Histoire de l’Esclavage” gained official recognition by the French government in 2009. For French discussions on the memory of slavery, see the work of Édouard Glissant cited in the bibliography. The main difference between France and Britain is probably how divisive the issue of official remembrance is among historians. On France’s recent “memorial wars” see Prochasson.
What is noteworthy about the spate of slavery exhibitions held in 2007 is how much they drew attention to slavery itself, to Black resistance and more widely to Black agency. The most regularly featured artefacts were nonetheless two items predicated upon slave passivity and submission, namely the Brookes diagram showing slaves on a ship like sardines in a tin and the Wedgwood medallion with its kneeling slave entreating the white man to consider him “a man and a brother”. In accordance with the government’s official recommendations, a good deal of effort had been made to address African under-development, the fight against modern slavery and the contribution of ethnic minorities to Britain’s history. To some, this proved an unpalatable cocktail of political correctness, as evidenced by the angry reactions to Abolition 200 one museum curator documents.

This notable shift may partly be ascribed to the way museums actively sought the cooperation of academics and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) organisations in their preparations for 2007. Of course, such collaboration was at times fraught with tensions and cannot be considered entirely successful, according to one curator who regrets that “decision-making by committee is seldom radical”. But some of her colleagues, in particular Tom Wareham, in charge of the “London, Sugar and Slavery” exhibition at the Docklands Museum, did enjoy the consultative process with academics. His team of advisers, which included Catherine Hall among others, urged the museum “not to pussyfoot around”, as according to them “there was far more politics in this story” and this had to be made clear.

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39 On how unsatisfactory curatorial use of these two items was, see the article by Jane Webster. Wood (263-295) also makes the point that the Brookes diagram was abundantly cut and pasted, sometimes with insensitivity, sometimes with flair, as in the re-creation of the slave deck of the ship by several hundred children from the Wilberforce Primary School in Westminster.
40 See Prior, 204-205. For unabashed racist reactions to Agbetu’s protest, see Wood, 307-308.
41 Prior regrets that relations between academics and museum staff were sometimes “one-sided”, but she calls for more “ongoing, permanent networks” (206) between the universities and cultural workers. She also admits that given “the dearth of curatorial staff of African-Caribbean descent in British museums” (207), seeking co-operation with BME organisations was “an uphill battle” (209). The recently established research centres in Hull and Liverpool, which link museum and university, might further co-operation between these two professional worlds.
42 From http://history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/interviews/wareham.html – an Interview with Tom Wareham. The “1807 Commemorated” study, led by the University of York, contains a host of interviews with curators and exhibition reports all available at: http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/
A diverse range of bodies, among others Rendezvous of Victory, the Equiano Society (founded in 1996) and the Black and Asian Studies Association, which gathers activists and academics, did much to facilitate communication between the official bodies in charge of organising and funding events and community-based organisations. To make sure that cooperation would be effective, representatives from community organisations and local race relations officers sat in local organising committees, like the one in Bristol and the one in Scotland. Ligali, the Pan-African charity of which Toyin Agbetu is an active member, added its own contribution to the bicentennial with the release of a documentary entitled Maafa: Legacy, in which it exposed “the euro-academic view that British slavery was just ‘trade’”. Attendance figures for the BME public seem to suggest that museum exhibitions elicited interest from that section of the population. For example, people belonging to BME groups represented 44.7% of visitors at the Docklands Museum, 17% for the Equiano Exhibition organised in Birmingham and 23.4% at Liverpool's International Slavery Museum, which is for all three cases way above the national average for that part of the population (5%).

One aspect of Abolition 200 which is to prove of lasting effect and use is the way much money was invested in archiving Internet material related to the 2007 commemoration and more widely to anti-slavery. The British Slave Trade Legacies (BSTL) Project, a Web archiving project for material related to slavery and anti-slavery, is probably among such lasting programmes. Under the supervision of Rose Roberto, a Black American archivist, this constitutes a thorough online archive on Abolition 200, the completion of which received the support of the London-based Black Cultural Archives. Anti-Slavery International (ASI) also developed the Recovered Histories so as to “reawaken the narratives of enslavement,

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43 This organisation was founded in 1991 to encourage and disseminate research into African and Asian peoples in Britain.
44 The minutes of the Scotland and Bristol organising committees are available online at http://www.scotlandagainstracism.com/onescotland/266.1.146.html; and, for Bristol, at http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ccm/content/Leisure-Culture/Local-History-Heritage/abolition-200.
45 http://www.ligali.org/aboutus/donations/order_maafalegacy.htm
46 Audience surveys conducted under the aegis of the Institute of Historical Research and the University of York may be consulted at the following address : http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/audiences/reports/. Unfortunately, the surveys have no data either on the age groups to which BME visitors belonged, or on whether they came on their own, in adult groups, in family groups or in organised trips, or on the motivations and response of BME visitors.
47 On BSTL, see the article by Rose Roberto.
resistance and the fight for freedom”. It benefited from Lottery funding, which allowed, among other aspects of this ambitious educational project, the digitisation of the collections of anti-slavery pamphlets held by ASI. Countless online resources and teacher’s packs were also devised for educational purposes, in particular the Understanding Slavery website, which must have come in handy soon afterwards as the government decided in 2008 to make the study of slavery compulsory for 11-14-year-old schoolchildren.48

The unprecedented mobilisation to which 2007 gave rise allowed, albeit in a tentative way, to expand the public’s awareness of recent research into slavery and abolitionism. This is probably the key factor which brought about noticeable shifts in public discourse about slavery and its abolition, although some grey areas remained, in particular concerning the impact of abolition on Africa and the influence of domestic politics upon the passing of the 1807 Act. As Paton argues, there was little interest, whether “from mainstream media and museum presentation” (282), in Robin Blackburn’s view that abolition of the slave trade may be construed as a politically conservative and patriotic move designed to stem popular unrest against the Napoleonic Wars and the then unreformed parliamentary system.

Perhaps the most visible change in the memory of antislavery was the insistence on the part played by Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho in the campaign to abolish the slave trade. Both appeared on Royal Mail stamps, in a collection of portraits comprising the inevitable Wilberforce, Sharp and Clarkson and, in a gesture of recognition towards female activism, the poetess and committed abolitionist Hannah More. In general terms, generally, if one takes a look at new sites added to officially listed buildings in 2007 and 2008, one notices a similar acknowledgement of Black activists, of obscure figures of anti-slavery and of worthies of the cause whose burial grounds had not yet been listed. Among the new list entries was a range of funerary monuments dedicated to Joanna Vassa, Equiano’s daughter, in Stoke Newington’s cemetery, to John Newton, the composer of “Amazing Grace” in Olney, to Rasselas Belfield’s, “a native of Abyssinia” who died in 1822 in Windermere, and to Anna Laetitia Barbauld, a minor anti-slavery poet also buried in Stoke Newington.

Conclusion

2007 did correspond to a significant modification in the memory of slavery and anti-slavery, especially if one contrasts that commemoration with previous ones of 1933 and 1983, and even more so if one looks back at the nineteenth century, which one may call the hagiographic moment in the memory of anti-slavery. But Wilberforce continued to hog the show, especially in the mainstream media.

The most important evolution probably resides in the way many insisted that 2007 was about commemorating, not celebrating. Tristram Hunt’s 2006 advice seems to have been heeded, and thus in 2007 the motto was “easy on the euphoria”. 49 Still, some of the 2007 ceremonies, especially the one held at Westminster Abbey, evinced a lack of sensitivity about Britain’s leading role in slavery and the slave trade that one may hope will not be witnessed again in 2034 for the centenary of emancipation. What Agbetu’s disruption revealed was thus that, for all the attempts to encourage the participation of BME people in the framing of the ceremonies, some in the Black British community 50 nevertheless felt that the 2007 ceremonies had insufficiently taken on board the impact of the slave trade on the history of both Black Britons and the nation at large.

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   http://www.recoveredhistories.org/
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Times Digital Archive
19th Century British Library Newspapers Database

50 Sympathy for Agbetu’s gesture was expressed among others by Reverend Katei Kirby a member of the African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance who was also present in the congregation and who felt equally “unhappy with the tone of the service”. BBC News, “Support for Abbey slavery protest”, March 28, 2007.
Secondary sources


CHAPTER TWO

THE COLLISION OF CULTURAL MEMORIES ON THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER:
THE TEXAS RANGERS: A CENTURY OF FRONTIER DEFENSE AND GEORGE WASHINGTON GÓMEZ

JOHN DEAN

A cultural narrative, whether it presents itself as official history, historical fiction, or fiction, selects and contextualizes events that reinforce national unity to create a coherent cultural memory. Such is the stuff of Frontier history, a collection of competing stories that produces nations and states. On April 21, 1836, Texans marked Frontier history with “Remember the Alamo!” as their battle cry on the San Jacinto battlefield. American newspaper accounts, such as the July 4, 1836 Huron Reflector, which claims that the entire civilized world would like to see Santa Anna, a treaty-breaking murderer, shot, and movies, including John Wayne’s The Alamo (1960), Burt Kennedy’s The Alamo: Thirteen Days to Glory (1987), and John Lee Hancock’s The Alamo (2004), have brought Santa Anna’s “barbarism” and Anglo-America’s “civilizing mission” into the popular western imagination, thereby creating a cohesive narrative of frontier history that legitimized the westward expansion of Anglo-American settlers and ultimately led to the creation of the US-Mexico border.

The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo articulated the official border between Texas (which included central and eastern New Mexico) and Mexico, with the Rio Grande and Gila Rivers as the international line.¹ Texan and Mexican cultural narratives, each of which is directed toward a specific discourse community to legitimize that community’s social order,

¹ The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo also signed over to the US California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and part of Colorado and Wyoming. It was not until the 1853 Gadsden Purchase that today’s southern borders of New Mexico and Arizona were signed over to the US.
clash on the Texas-Mexico border, a contested site mapped out in cultural memory. Whereas Texans may imagine a border that clearly separates Texas from Mexico, borderland scholars such as Richard Bauman, José E. Limón, and Héctor Calderón, who study US-Mexico historical and cultural narratives, see the same geographical space as “Greater Mexico,” a term first articulated by Américo Paredes in his 1958 *With a Pistol in His Hand*. Bauman defines Greater Mexico as Mexico Adentro, “encompassed by the political borders of the Republic of Mexico,” and Mexico Afuera, “taking in all those other parts of North America where people of Mexican descent have established a presence and have maintained their Mexicanness as a key part of their cultural identity” (xi). In Mexican cultural memory, informed by generations of Mexicans living in what had been northern Mexico, between the Nueces and Rio Grande, the US-Mexico border was imposed on Mexicans who never left Mexico.

The cultural conflicts between Anglo-Texans and Mexicans from 1835, the beginning of the Texas Revolution, to the Texas Centennial, are alive and well today as discursive constructs of conflicting cultural memories which collide on the Texas-Mexico border. Two seminal works, Walter Prescott Webb’s *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (1935) and Americo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* (1990), compete for

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2 Mexico governed Texas from 1821 to 1836. By 1835 Anglo-Texans, who had been invited by the Mexican government in 1824 to settle northern Mexico, did not want to live under Mexican rule, which decreed that each citizen become naturalized and convert to Catholicism. A large portion of Anglos refused to follow either edict. Further, many Anglo immigrants to Texas owned slaves, and Mexico had outlawed slavery. In 1836 Texas declared its independence from Mexico and became the Republic of Texas, and after joining the US in 1845, Texas fought in the 1846-1848 US-Mexico War, which ended with the 1848 signing of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Although much of what had been Mexico was now the US, including South Texas, many Anglo-Texans did not see Texas-Mexicans as Americans. Anglo-Texans used legal sleight of hand and intimidation to remove Texas-Mexicans from lands they had owned for generations. From 1914-1915 the Texas-Mexican seditionist movement, led by Aniceto Pizaña and Louis de la Rosa, was an outgrowth of the failed “Plan de San Diego,” a revolutionary manifesto calling for the unifying of Texas-Mexicans and Mexicans with Native Americans, African-Americans, and Asian Americans to take back the Southwest. Pizaña and de la Rosa’s *sediciosos* interrupted commerce and terrified Anglo-Americans in South Texas by derailing a train and raiding both Anglo military outposts and ranches. The *sediciosos* killed dozens of Americans, and the *rinches* (a disparaging term for Texas Rangers) killed thousands of innocent Texas-Mexicans in retaliation. Such racial confrontations continued into the 1920s as hundreds of Mexicans, along with hundreds of African-Americans, were lynched in South Texas. In the 1930s many Anglo-Texans still viewed Texas-Mexicans as abject subjects.