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Singing Songs of Freedom: International Slavery Remembrance Day at The National Maritime Museum, Saturday 23 August 2014

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This day was in my calendar a year ahead. I went last year, and I will go every year as a pilgrimage. The night of 22–23 August 1791 in Santo Domingo (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic) saw the beginning of the uprising that would play a major role in the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. I think it is very important, especially for those of us of African and Caribbean descent, to remember the victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We need to honour and remember those who suffered and died at the hands of a brutal slavery system which lasted over four hundred years and, in different forms, still exists today.

Why remember? Ritual observances of the past are educative, require discipline and a certain amount of unselfishness—thinking of others rather than constantly of ourselves. They also raise awareness of racism and prejudice, which are still prevalent in societies all over the world.

The National Maritime Museum successfully celebrated the resistance, creativity and extraordinary survival of the human spirit with a series of commemorative activities: Steve I. Martin led an archive session investigating transatlantic slavery through rare and revealing manuscripts which unlocked the hidden histories of enslaved people and their struggle for freedom. There was an object handling session to understand history through objects. There was a tour of the 'Slavery, Trade, Empire' gallery to learn about the movement of peoples, goods and ideas across and

around the Atlantic Ocean from the seventeenth century through to the nineteenth century. At Yinka Shonibare's *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* (just outside the Sammy Ofer Wing entrance) we learnt about what life was like for a Black sailor in Nelson's navy through the eyes of John Simmonds. From his home in Jamaica to serving at the Battle of Trafalgar, his moving story revealed the surprising realities of a life at sea, thus showing that Black people played an important part in the British navy, a fact which is often ignored.



Yinka Shonibare's *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*. Photographs ©National Maritime Museum. Used by permission.

I attended freelance historian Oneyka Nubia's lecture on *Africans in Tudor England*. He reminded us that Africans were present in Britain since Roman times, centuries before the system of transatlantic slavery classified them as perpetual slaves or dehumanised them on plantations as chattels. Whilst the Slave Trade was waging and raging, there was a conspicuous presence of Black Britons who

contributed to the making of modern Britain in many other ways and were integrated into English society as a result.

In the innovative 'Re:Think' gallery, artist-in-residence Maria Amidu was invited to rethink the collection inspired by Shonibare's newly acquired artwork of Art and Empire. Her work entitled *Workforce* is concerned with the millions of unrecorded people who built the British Empire including all those who were enslaved, especially Africans. Visitors could meet her for an informal discussion and tour her creative studio. Steve Martin offered another alternative tour of the 'Traders' gallery where we discovered the centuries-long African presence in South and East Asia. The indefatigable Martin also gave a walking tour through Greenwich, where merchants, slave traders, captains and seafarers once took up residence. He also marked out the forgotten lives of so many young people working in the houses of wealthy families in eighteenth century England, as seen in the recent film *Belle*. Two notable Africans, Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho also lived in Greenwich. Unfortunately, wearing my other hat of Volunteer Evaluator, I was unable to attend the talk by Royal Maritime Galleries curator, Heloise Finch-Boyer, who is a world expert on the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean and who focused on stories of resistance.

I attended a singing workshop, which was led by the singing group Equinox, who explored how songs were used as a powerful medium of resistance, while at the same time bringing about a message of solidarity, hope and freedom. The history of songs in slave society is a subject all of its own. Slaves used song and music to boost their spirits (Negro Spirituals). One of the most famous of these is 'Walk with me Lord, walk with me!' Most slaves were devout Christians. We learnt about the codes that were put into songs to relay secret messages among the slave community and about songs for the underground railroads ('Go Down, Moses'). For example, 'Wade in the Water' specifically explains to runaways how to escape from the bloodhounds and contains a reference to Jordan and the Promised Land (which also referred to Canada as it was a non-slave state). After Negro Spirituals came the Blues and then Jazz. I now want to learn more about Song and Slavery.

I also attended Malika Booker's poetry workshop in 'The Learning Space'. She is a writer, poet, multi-disciplinary artist, coach and teacher. Using artefacts connected to enslavement from the National Maritime Museum's collections, she guided a group of apprehensive amateur poets (including myself) in creating and performing a moving poem on the subject of slavery. I focused on a conch shell and a ratoon/ratoon; the latter is the new shoot that grows from near the root of the sugar cane, after the old growth has been cut back. It comes from the Spanish (eighteenth century) *retono*, young shoot. The sugar cane is one of the great symbols of slavery. With her energy and inspiration, we managed in the short time available to pen poems we could all be proud of (see below).

I was then asked by broadcaster and actor Burt Caesar to read our creative piece out at the Closing Ceremony down by the River Thames. It was like a funeral procession: we moved in unison and sang *a cappella* as we walked down to the river where, to the bemusement of many onlookers, we meditated upon the innocent Africans who took enforced passage and perished at sea or crossed the Atlantic Ocean

against their will. Many of us are the descendants of such people, originally displaced from Mother Africa. We broke into the natural harmony of Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song: Song of Freedom', whose lyrics are very poignant and stirring, while we threw white rose petals into the water in an act of silent commemoration, emancipating ourselves from mental slavery.



Rovianne Matovu performing her poem at International Slavery Remembrance Day; Burt Caesar standing at the back.

Photograph ©National Maritime Museum. Used by permission.

The Conch of Truncheon's Past

Iron rod of the Rattoon, like
Flayed skin of the brown African, lynched and
Bound root of Oppression.
Washed up on the beach
The conch cries from our ancestral past
Nature rebirths our Children
Hearing sounds of our brothers and sisters,
Lost.

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23 August 2014

Closing Speech by Burt Caesar

The reason why we gather here beside the river Thames on International Slavery Remembrance Day, at the symbolic location of Greenwich, is to contemplate once more this relentless, elemental stretch of water which was the major port of the Atlantic slave trade so making London the prime beneficiary of nearly 250 years of people-trafficking, an estimated 12 million souls transported under duress from Africa to the Americas, from Senegal to San Salvador.

The first British trader in this trans-ocean cargo was the legendary Sir John Hawkins in the year 1562. He had the blessing and the support of his monarch, the first Queen Elizabeth. Research over the past few years has now identified approximately 2,870 slave ships which left London, along this river, between 1633 and the abolition of the trade in 1807.

This was also the period of the greatest profit for London's merchants, a prosperity based on the blood-soaked revenue from enslavement, degradation, exploitation. One of the eighteenth-century operators of this business here in the City of London, name of James Houston, wrote: 'What a glorious and advantageous trade this is... It is the hinge on which all the trade of this globe moves'. Well, it may sound like property but we must remember he was referring to people. Black people. People of Africa.

And those people numbered in the end around 12 million. And that's an estimate. It does not include those who perished under hard labour on the plantations they ended up in. Again, recent research estimates that overall up to 5.5 million of those Africans were borne into captivity to the West Indies; at Emancipation in 1838 only 800,000 survived. One and a half million were taken to Jamaica, 300,000 remained at Emancipation; 600,000 to Barbados, only 83,000 when freedom was granted. In 2001 UNESCO declared that the Atlantic slave trade had been a 'crime against humanity'. It marked a beginning, on the international stage, of acknowledging a period of history stretching over 400 years that today's commemoration bears witness to. The scale of this inhumanity which almost outwits the imagination—in the violence and the attempt to reckon with the numbers—amounts to nothing less than a catastrophe.

Another landmark date in London's history as a port must be June 1948 and the arrival of troopship *Empire Windrush* just down river at Tilbury. What is usually overlooked is that three-quarters or more of the passengers of that latter-day *Mayflower* were ex-servicemen, demobbed from the armed forces, who had survived harm in World War II and, as loyal subjects of the crown and patriots of the Empire, were returning to add muscle to the post-war recovery of beloved Blighty. 'Five hundred pairs of willing hands' the *Evening Standard* proclaimed under the banner headline 'WELCOME HOME'. All of those war veterans were descendants of enslaved Africans.

This year, 2014, marks the centenary of the start of World War I. By the end of that carnage in November 1918 over 15,000 Black men from the British Caribbean islands served another monarch of this same country in fending off the peril arising from that same part of Europe. At the beginning many travelled at their own expense to take part in the fight against the Germans before the official establishment of a racially segregated unit, the British West Indies Regiment. They, too, were descendants of enslaved Africans. Many would have known an ancestor born with the status of 'slave' separated, as they were, by a mere two generations since manumission in 1838. We must remember them all, today.

And, so, if we add the wealth generated by our forebears' toil on those island prisons we call plantations which then fed into the voracious mercantilism which underpinned this city's flourishing and expanding global power—add that to the

sacrifices of those who volunteered to defend the realm, this island, from conquest—then British history should never be fretting about the issue of 'integration' but, instead, should be taking account of our collective contribution.

As we look at it, this river flowing past us, linking to larger seas, is history. And those seas are a cemetery. I ask for a minute's silence in respect of those ancestors, all the innocents, who perished in the waters and those who survived but perished later on hard earth.

Burt Caesar
23 August 2014

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