A R T I C L E

"Symbols of embodied agency": The Reception of William Blake's Engravings for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative* (1796) in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture

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Introduction

1 A great deal of scholarly debate has centered on William Blake's attitudes toward racial difference and racial oppression. Since the time of David Erdman, scholars have endeavored to characterize Blake's views on the transatlantic slave trade—endeavors that often reveal their own attachments to and disavowals of what Morris Eaves once aptly termed "Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't." Many claim that Blake's stance was one of radical abolitionism, even if it was not always stated in the plainest terms (for example, Erdman, "Blake's Vision of Slavery" and *Prophet against Empire*; Simon), while others argue that his abolitionism has been overstated and focus instead on the exoticizing, whitewashing, and otherwise racist leanings in his poetry and visual art (for example, Thiong'o; Mellor; Bindman). For David Bindman, those leanings do not necessarily negate the "sincerity" of Blake's abolitionism outright, but they do "suggest that Blake was unable to free himself—no more than anyone else at the time—from the complex and often contradictory web of ancient and modern beliefs that had settled around Africa and Africans in the late eighteenth century" (382). These discussions have concentrated particularly on "The Little Black Boy" from *Songs of Innocence* (1789), the illuminated book *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), and the title-page vignette and further sixteen plates either signed by or attributed to Blake (after now-lost designs by Stedman) in John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796).[1] It is on the engravings for Stedman, and their recent reception in Britain and the US, that this article will focus.

2 Stedman, it should be noted from the outset, was certainly no abolitionist. He seems to have fallen more on the side of the reform, rather than the elimination, of slavery in the West Indies. A Dutch-Scottish soldier, he had voluntarily served in Surinam in the 1770s as part of the Scots Brigade tasked with suppressing the maroons, the groups of Africans who had escaped enslavement and lived in the sur-

1. The scholarship on these texts is vast, and I offer here a nonexhaustive list of examples.

On "The Little Black Boy": In his 1924 study, S. Foster Damon suggests that it evinces a negative view of African people (233). In "Blake's Vision of Slavery" and *Prophet against Empire*, Erdman regards the poem as anti-imperialistic; Alan Richardson similarly argues that it endorses emancipation. Anne K. Mellor makes the counterargument that "Blake here affirms the ideological construction of the African as one who finally benefits from Christianity" (359). By contrast, Morris Eaves contends that "ironic exposure, not advocacy, of the mother's apology for racism seems far more likely to be the aim of 'The Little Black Boy'"; a similar position has recently been taken by Jonathan Perris. Saree Makdisi also questions, briefly, the assumption of racism in the poem (252).

On *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: See, again, Erdman's optimistic reading in "Blake's Vision of Slavery" and *Prophet against Empire*. Mellor is more skeptical (359-70), as is Bindman, who finds "the references to physical slavery" in the poem to "add up to little more than a metaphor" (382).

On the Blake-Stedman engravings: Anne Rubenstein and Camilla Townsend identify an abolitionist agenda; see also Marcus Wood (181-94). For a less sympathetic reading, see Mellor's argument that Blake and Stedman were both complicit in a wider cultural practice of erasing racial "difference" (358). Many of these arguments are revisited by Richard and Sally Price, who suggest, for their part, that the engravings can be understood in terms of "Black stoicism" and "resistance" (Price and Price 296), a point to which I shall return later in this article.

The older scholarly orthodoxy regarding Blake's antislavery sentiments has also been echoed in art exhibitions. In 2007, Mind-Forg'd Manacles: William Blake and Slavery (Ferens Art Gallery, Burrell Collection, and Whitworth Art Gallery, 2007–08) was held in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade and the 250th anniversary of Blake's birth. In the catalogue, Bindman writes that Blake was "strongly opposed to slavery" (Bindman and Pinckney 11), though, as noted in the first paragraph of the present article, in his other writings Bindman has observed the coexistence of this stance with Blake's recourse to particular English and European racial prejudices. In a review, Jeremy Tambling nuances the notion of Blake's opposition to the enslavement of black people by questioning the exhibition's "oversimplifying" conflation of Blake's ideas about "mental slavery" with historical, physical slavery. Meanwhile, the celebration of the antislavery Blake was also upheld in a press release for 1807: Blake, Slavery and the Radical Mind (Tate Britain, 2007), which described his engravings for Stedman as "among the most powerful and shocking anti-slavery images."

rounding forests, regularly engaging in guerrilla warfare against the Dutch planters. His *Narrative* records in vivid detail the soldiers' and planters' cruel punishment of the enslaved and escapee people for their disobedience. While in Surinam, Stedman had also "married" an enslaved girl named Joanna, who was just fifteen at the time and whom he abandoned, along with their son, when he left for the Dutch Republic in 1777. As Natalie Zemon Davis records, many subsequent abolitionist readers criticized him for his treatment of Joanna as well as his apology for slavery.

3 The manuscript that Stedman composed upon his return to Europe and completed in 1790 differs in important ways from the text published in 1796. In the intervening years, Joseph Johnson asked an editor named William Thomson, an author of proslavery tracts, to revise the manuscript for publication. Stedman was outraged by the alterations and ordered all copies of the work to be destroyed, but the finalized 1796 version still bears clear traces of Thomson's interventions (Stedman xlviii-lv). According to Price and Price, Thomson's views distorted Stedman's original "amelioratonist" intentions; for instance, the 1796 text, in pursuit of "a rigid proslavery ideology," lacks passages in which Stedman had emphasized the humanity and dignity of enslaved people (Stedman lxii). Yet, as Gert J. Oostindie points out, this distinction may be overstated, for "other passages, notably those carrying antislavery messages, were rephrased without substantial changes" (142). In any case, the fact remains that Stedman's descriptions of African people in the manuscript version of the text are often highly derogatory, relying on eighteenth-century European paradigms of racial classification (Oostindie 142). Apparently, for Stedman and many of his contemporaries, there was little contradiction in simultaneously disparaging black men and women and expressing horror at acts of cruelty and violence toward them.

4 In designs that echo the vivid descriptions of violence in the *Narrative*, Blake—along with several other artists, including Thomas Conder, Inigo Barlow, and Francesco Bartolozzi—engraved plates for the quarto edition. Blake began this work in 1791. He and his fellow artists would have based their engravings on paintings and drawings made by Stedman himself, as well as, presumably, the 1790 manuscript. Only one of Stedman's watercolors that were engraved for the work survives.[2] This illustration was engraved by Barlow, rather than Blake, but it is nevertheless possible to extrapolate from Barlow's print that the artists had opportunities to introduce their own imaginative spin; scholars have noted several disparities between "Manner of Sleeping &c. in the Forest" and the watercolor by Stedman, so Blake's contributions may also contain artistic innovations suggestive of his own reactions to the *Narrative* and his views on slavery and the transatlantic slave trade (Stedman xliii-xlvi).

5 The *Narrative* and its accompanying designs have had a long afterlife in translations, reproductions, adaptations, and scholarly discussions. In an unpublished PhD thesis, Landeg White documents in detail the reception (via translations and creative adaptations) of the text and illustrations during the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain and abroad, when the work was often read through an abolitionist lens (White 233-70; Rubenstein and Townsend 273, 296n2). Shirley Dent and Jason Whittaker discuss David Dabydeen's reuse of plates from the *Narrative* in his 1984 poetry collection *Slave Song* (Dent and Whittaker 113-16). When it comes to scholarly responses to the engravings, Blake's plates have received by far the most attention. They have been variously construed as persuasively abolitionist and (sometimes concurrently) as highly suspect representations relying on sexualizing and dehumanizing tropes (see note 1). Recently revisiting these matters, Price and Price have argued "that the Stedman-Blake depictions of the deaths of Neptune (on the rack) and the anonymous Black man (on the gallows) involve more than a trope, and that we can legitimately read in these representations … something of value about the actors' mindsets, and not just those of the observers"; they find in the depiction of "Black stoicism in the face of being tortured by white oppressors" an "extreme case of resistance" (Price and Price 296). If there is a measure of wishful thinking in such scholarly interpretations, the impulse is shared to some extent in the pop-cultural and artistic legacy of the Blake-Stedman images, which has often sought to locate a sense of resistance or "agency" in them, despite their inherent historical and representational limitations.

6 Indeed, Blake's engravings have had a little-examined legacy within the recent visual culture of protest and counterculture, as well as in contemporary works of art that are overtly identifiable with affirming black rights and other activist causes. Mike Goode has fruitfully characterized the curious tendency of Blake's pictures to resurface in unexpected places as a "viral capability" inherent to the visual-verbal medium that he employed in his illuminated books. Although the Blake-Stedman engravings present a slightly different case, belonging to Blake's body of commercial book engravings, they typify a much wider phenomenon of the reuse, remediation, and adaptation of his artworks: "His pictures and portions of his pictures have proven no less capable than his words of adapting themselves to live and

2. However, there is also a surviving reproduction of a pen-and-ink sketch by Stedman depicting his house at Plantation L'Esperance, which provided the basis for Barlow's engraving of the half-plate entitled "Rural Retreat—The Cottage"; see Stedman lxxxix, note 35, #2, and White 186.

evolve in the world's ever-altering media ecologies" (Goode 69). Whatever viral capability we might, with Goode, ascribe to Blake's works on the basis of their formal affordances, part of that capability is surely also attributable to the fact that, in our day, his works undeniably belong to a canon of British art, despite his obscurity in his own lifetime. That status, curiously, both clashes and overlaps with his special posthumous association with counterculture and the political left, and both statuses in their own ways afford the images themselves a degree of authority or cultural capital. In other words, there is a fine line between the democratized virality that Goode seems to have in mind and a more conservative model of canonicity, within or adjacent to which Blake's work admittedly sits uneasily. But this canonical or near-canonical status also makes the images eminently suited to the critical response or subversive rewiring that can be witnessed in the works of the British and American contemporary artists Sokari Douglas Camp, Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, and Hew Locke. Indeed, their reuse of the Blake-Stedman engravings tends to be less a case of elevating or celebrating Blake himself than of evoking the spectre of the transatlantic slave trade and prompting critical modes of thought and action in the present.

7 I do not intend to characterize the work of these artists solely in terms of a homogenizing category of "black art." In practice, taking the Blake-Stedman engravings as an organizing principle or lens for this study runs the risk of perpetuating precisely this misconception, but my intention is not to present this slender vista as a key giving access to, or as a phenomenon generalizable to, all instances of "black art." Rather, in studying this grouping of artworks for the first time, I seek to attend, with Darby English, to "a historical vision of black art that assays the disproportionate influence of a past which creeps forward to speak in the present's voice; a vision that understands this past in terms both of limitations imposed and freedoms won" (English 31). The "past" that resurfaces in this cluster of artworks "speaks" with multiple voices, for it must be understood both as a real historical past and, simultaneously, as an art-historical past, resulting in a layering of mediations that resists unitary meaning.

8 It is in part the very ambiguity of the engravings, and their accrued status as something of an emblem of or dubious proxy for the "past," that allow creative possibilities to multiply. Douglas Camp, Lee-Johnson, and Locke pick up on the engravings' almost emblematic cultural function as spectres of historical violence and its painful legacies and often interrogate the legitimacy of this accumulated authority. Yet the images' visceral forms also occasionally appear to afford a vitality, a life force of sorts, through which artists might access "symbols of embodied agency in the context of global slavery," as stated in the information page for *re{volt}ing*, a series by Lee-Johnson, which was specifically "created in response to John Gabriel Stedman's Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam" (Sehgal). In this article, I argue that these contemporary artists have responded to the Blake-Stedman engravings in ways that simultaneously keep in view the designs' historical context and circumstances of production and seek to dislocate them creatively from their original conception by reappropriating, remediating, and recontextualizing the images to model possibilities for ongoing emancipation and social change. In the process, they raise crucial questions about the politics of visual representation and especially the reproduction of or creative response to historical artworks representing slavery and colonial violence. I close with a discussion of these broader concepts.

Counterculture and Protest

9 The recurrent reproduction of the Blake-Stedman images in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century visual culture of protest represents a critical phase in the history of their afterlives. Tracing this part of the images' history will help to set the scene for the political charge that continues to animate the highly complex forms of adaptation found in more recent contemporary art. As Rubenstein and Townsend have written, "From its first publication to the present, its [the *Narrative*'s] illustrations by Blake have been used as if they were photographs of the horrors of slavery in works ranging from student textbooks to ACT UP billboards" (273). The ACT UP billboard to which they refer was designed by Julie Carson and Aaron Keppel and mounted in 1991 in New York City. The design featured three pictures, one of which was a depiction by Blake of a tortured enslaved man, along with the text "For 200 years the government has thought of us as expendable" (Atkins). The curious way in which these images have taken on the stature of documentary evidence *as if they were photographs* is not dissimilar, in some senses, from their reuse in contemporary art. However, generally speaking, when they do appear in protest graphics, the intention seems not so much to be the interrogation of the more ethically problematic aspects of the designs, nor the ethics of representation itself, in the manner of the artworks that I discuss later in this article. Rather, these uses arguably seek above all to elicit shock and to mobilize social and political action. They seem also to presuppose a relatively straightforward reading of the original engravings as unproblematic and laudably abolitionist in force, which is therefore taken as investing the images with continued political force in the present. On the other hand, these instances bring the engravings out from the cloistered space of the book or gallery, affording them distinctive potentialities for doing their own work in the world.

10 Whether through creative works like Dabydeen's *Slave Song*, Blake scholarship, exhibitions, or some other means, Blake's engravings for Stedman were evidently in circulation among countercultural networks in 1990s America. The ACT UP billboard attests to this fact, but the images also popped up in the commercial paraphernalia of popular counterculture: the silhouette of the engraving originally entitled "A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows" appears in miniature in an advertisement, of all things, for t-shirts manufactured by a company called the Neverending Vegetable, which was printed in issue 8 (1993) of the countercultural zine *Infinite Onion*, produced by Dave Fischer in Colorado Springs.[3] The tiny silhouette of the torture victim hangs within a border comprising eight narrow shapes that seem to be based on the much-reproduced eighteenth-century print showing cross-sections of the Liverpool slave ship *Brooks*. Underneath the Blake design is another small vignette, the source for which I have not been able to identify, seemingly depicting an execution or murder by rifle. Above the two are the words "MANIFEST DESTINY"; beneath is the phrase "WHITE MAKES RIGHT?" Viewers are apparently being asked to weigh up these racist slogans against the emblematic depictions of historical violence constellated within the graphic. The Blake image is surrounded by other graphics featuring symbols of resistance, including a fist crushing a swastika and antigovernment proclamations such as "ONLY SHEEP NEED A LEADER." The unmistakable presence of Blake's engraving in this advertisement for anarchist and antiracist paraphernalia suggests the persistent association between the designs and the legacies of slavery and the slave trade within American cultural consciousness: the image appears as a document of historical harm and as a convenient, ready-made shorthand for the prospective wearer's sociopolitical leanings. This reuse in a commercial context seems a far cry indeed from the examples I will discuss below, but it both demonstrates the prevalence of the Blake-Stedman engravings in activist popular culture and prompts, perhaps despite itself, questions about the ethico-political freight of reproducing them, particularly in decontextualized form.

11 Jumping next to Tate Britain in the year 2001, we find a reproduction of the same image in a poster pinned up outside the gallery. It was created by one of a group of protestors who had congregated on the final day of the Blake exhibition (11 February) to oppose the show's sponsorship by the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline.[4] Beneath the quotation "Cruelty has a human heart" sat a reproduction of the engraving depicting the brutalized black man being hung by the ribs to the gallows, along with the following lines:

> 18th Century:
> William Blake protests against the enslavement of Africans
>
> 21st Century:
> GlaxoSmithKline deny millions of African people access to life-saving medicines

Protestors handed out a leaflet further detailing the company's failure to license the production of affordable HIV medications for use among badly affected populations in African countries. The leaflet featured a quotation from "Holy Thursday" (*Experience*) and lines from *America* in which Blake imagines the emancipation of enslaved peoples. "While Blake railed against poverty and oppression," it stated, "GlaxoSmithKline is denying millions of African people with HIV access to drugs that could save their lives" ("Spassmaschine"). Here we have evidence of an unequivocal belief in Blake's antislavery motivations: the same cannot always straightforwardly be said of the artists whose work I will examine next, who often call into question the representational conventions on which the engravings rely, as well as Blake's and Stedman's positionalities as white chroniclers and creators.

12 Still, a common thread between the adoptions in activist visual culture and in contemporary art can be traced in the frequent association of Blake's engravings with ongoing discursive agitation for black rights in the present, a continuing legacy that scholars have not yet studied in detail. These responses perform a double transformation, as the black bodies given form by Blake's graver are first detached from their original context as plates in a printed book and then, in their new contexts, come to stand in, however inadequately, for the real bodies of enslaved peoples. In the artworks to which I now turn, the images' quasi-documentary function and the silences that they nonetheless mask are foregrounded and thematized. In the process, the works raise important questions about the cultural role of images and the limits and possibilities of their reclamation and adaptation.

Artistic Afterlives: The Blake-Stedman Engravings for the Twenty-First Century

13 In their various ways, Sokari Douglas Camp, Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, and Hew Locke have deployed Blake's engravings as a kind of pivot point through which to pursue both revisionist and utopian imagining. Like the engravings themselves, these simulacra resist any simple resolution or interpretation. Each iteration seems actively to herald its own

3. I would like to thank the archivists in the Chapin Library at Williams College for generously giving me access to their zine collection.
4. This event is also discussed by Dent and Whittaker in the introduction to *Radical Blake* (2-3).

status as a copy of a copy of a copy. Their all too familiar shapes signal both presence and absence, evoking at once the vitality of flesh and the loss of human life and liberty, the reality of historical violence and the erasure of its sufferers' voices and perspectives from the historical record. Yet in some senses, what Blake or Stedman meant by the original images is no longer of primary concern: the images take on a life of their own and feature prominently in these artists' depictions of the transatlantic slave trade, its legacies, and ongoing racial inequality in the present.

14 In the catalogue for a 2016 exhibition entitled Primavera (October Gallery, London, 7 April–14 May), we find mention of Sokari Douglas Camp's steel sculpture *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015; illus. 1). The text states the work's revisionist aims:

> The Abolitionist Blake's allegorical etching presents the white figure of Europe supported by two darker figures personifying the continents of Africa and America. … Sokari's main revision is to clothe these figures in a variety of fabrics that denote the material styles of the different continents. The inspiration for these changes came from

1. Sokari Douglas Camp, *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015). © Sokari Douglas Camp. All rights reserved, DACS 2024. Photo: Jonathan Greet.

> an image of three Nigerian women sumptuously outfitted for a wedding, each wearing a distinctive combination of wrap, bodice and headdress. … Sokari's figures dressed in identifying clothing are less vulnerable to misinterpretation than their predecessors, and in her modernised version of the "exchange" that occurs between the three continents, subtle shifts have been introduced to imply that the imbalance and exploitation of former times is at last, finally beginning to be redressed. (Houghton 6)

Houghton clearly positions Blake as an abolitionist; however, the figures' dress and the "subtle shifts" in their relative positions are framed as revisionist corrections to the original design's Europeanization and sexualization of the women and the implied hierarchy between them, which are presumably the elements seen as making the engraving "vulnerable to misinterpretation." On her website, Douglas Camp connects her sculptural group to European iconographic traditions, especially the prototype of the Three Graces, often depicted (for instance, in Antonio Canova's marble sculpture) as naked, classically idealized women. As Mellor writes, Blake's engraving had in the first place channeled this tradition, in ways that whitewashed and homogenized the women, erasing racial and cultural differences: "All three women are represented in a European body type, with the same facial features and physiognomy: all three conform to eighteenth-century neoclassical prototypes of female beauty derived from the Venus of Medici and the Three Graces." For Mellor, this assimilation to a European sexual ideal demonstrates how "both Blake and Stedman participated in a cultural erasure of difference between races and individuals that gave priority to Western, white models" (358). For her part, Douglas Camp represents a sense of the "exploitation of former times" being literally and figuratively "redressed." Charles Omuaru notes that her "fusion" of European and Nigerian cultural models enables her to express "universal concerns" (131-32). Yet, as he also emphasizes (130), she goes to great lengths in her artistic practice to represent "endangered" elements of Kalabari culture, particularly masks and headpieces, thus working against the "erasure of difference" described by Mellor. Omuaru highlights how Douglas Camp reintroduces difference through dress as something to be asserted and respected.

15 The hierarchical imbalance at work in the engraving has also been identified by Kara Walker. One of the drawings from the series *Tate Fountain with Venus*, made in preparation for Walker's Tate Modern-commissioned sculpture *Fons Americanus* (2019), bears the inscription

> COLUMBIA AND EUROPA BEING SUPPORTED (Somewhat Reluctantly) by AN Allegorical but nameless African goddess Surrounded on all sides by a history of Capitalism and Exploitation upheld and Beautified in The ARTS—or—"The Impossibility of Blackness in the mind of Someone white." (quoted in Foster)

The composition of the Blake-Stedman engraving was not prominently echoed in the finished sculpture, but this inscriptional framing in a preparatory drawing indicates the artist's deep and critical engagement with the image and its representational premises. Crucially, Walker foregrounds its white authorship in a manner that, as we shall see, resonates with Lee-Johnson's examination of perspectives, subjectivity, and positionality.

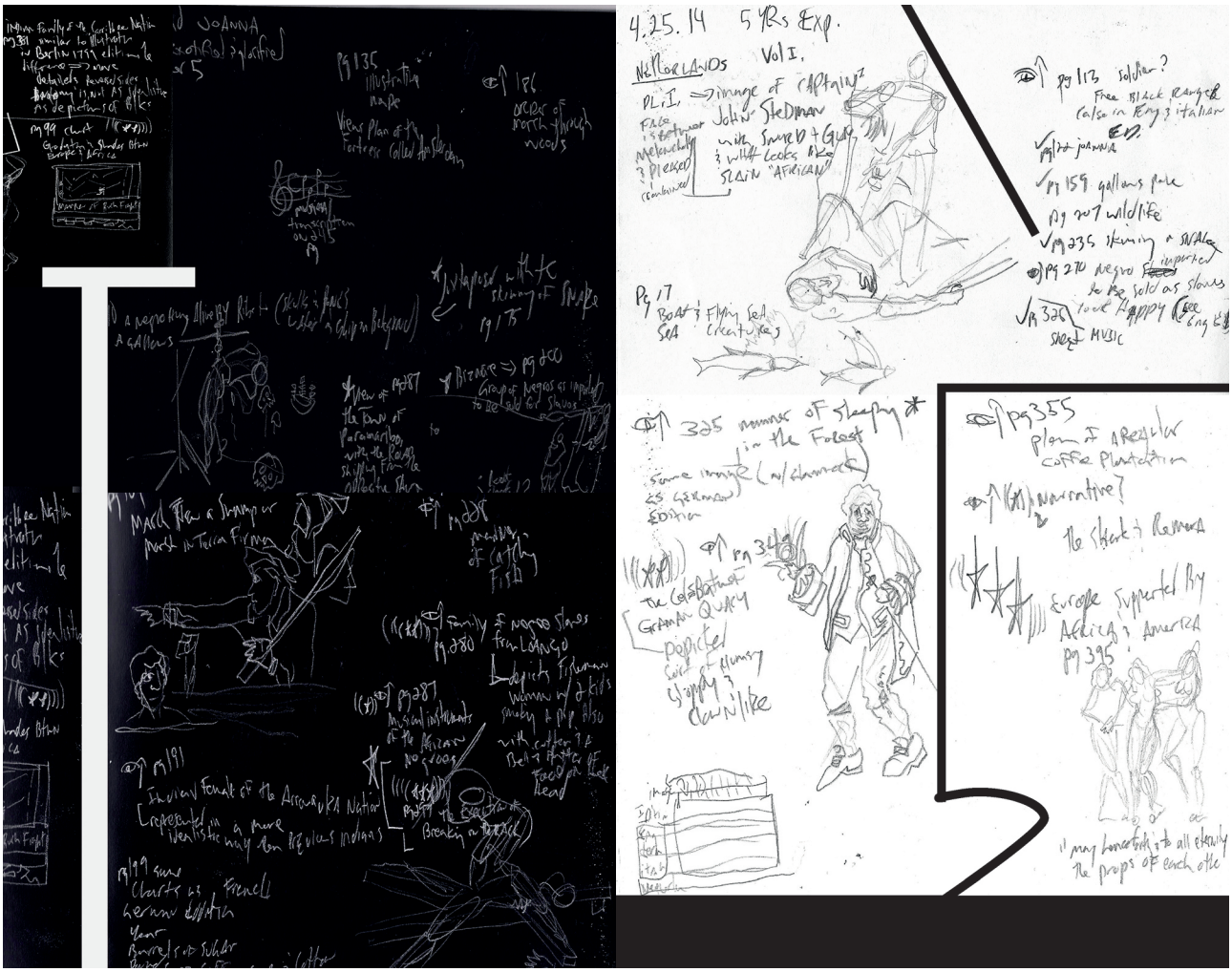
16 An article on the Victoria and Albert Museum's website on the occasion of the display of Douglas Camp's *Europe Supported by Africa and America* in 2022 (coinciding with the exhibition Africa Fashion, 2 July 2022–16 April 2023) further details the artwork's revisionism:

> The figures' outfits denote the material style of each continent: Europe wears a Mondrian-like pattern; Africa a West African *Kente* cloth; but the artist adds to the reading of her work by dressing America in Paisley—a textile whose patterns are of Persian and Indian origins, but whose name derives from the Scottish town and centre of production of that fabric. In doing so, she reminds us that cloth carries within itself interwoven narratives of trade, often complicated by geopolitics.

This historical revisionism goes hand in hand with present-day activist intent. The wreath that the three figures hold terminates in petroleum nozzles, alluding both to "the environmental and human impact of fossil fuel extraction, an economic colonialism perpetuated by multinational oil companies" and to humanity's "shared responsibility to care for the environment" (Victoria and Albert Museum).

17 The multimedia series *re{volt}ing* (2018) by Jazzmen Lee-Johnson is similarly poised between past and future, revisionism and utopian potentiality. As I noted in the introduction, *re{volt}ing* was conceived in direct response to Stedman's *Narrative* and its engravings, specifically those produced by Blake. It comprises animations and linocut prints and was accompanied by a visual essay, *The Critical Fables of Captives: Sketches in Potentiality*. Lee-Johnson works here "under the aliases of twin selves: Academia Graphít and Discourse Jockey—one a revisionist, the other a futurist seer" (Sehgal). The title *re{volt}ing*, Sehgal continues, "signals not only a visceral reaction to the disgusting violence perpetrated under racial slavery, but also the insurgent potential of revolution, the energy of the volt."

18 Despite this abundant "energy," in conceptualizing *re{volt}ing* Lee-Johnson seems to have gone to great lengths to foreground the epistemic gaps and impossibilities of recovering the perspectives of enslaved peoples. In *Critical Fables*, she



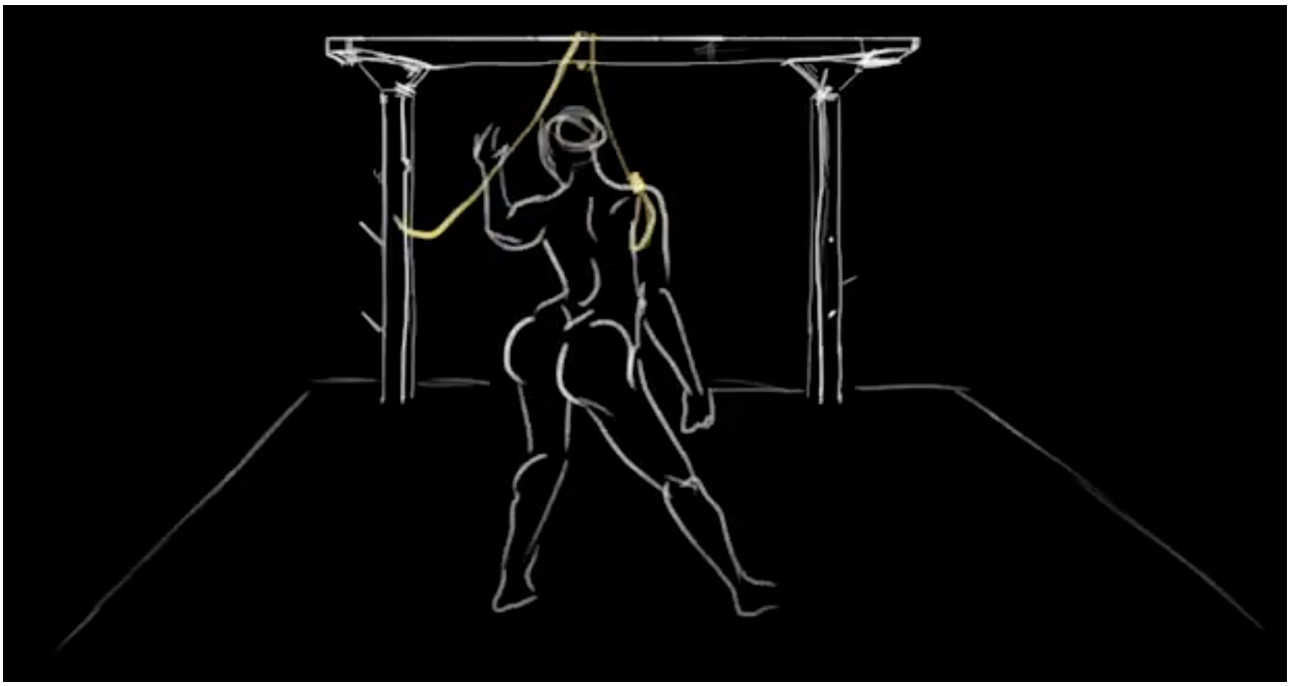
2. Pages from Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, *The Critical Fables of Captives: Sketches in Potentiality* (2018). © Jazzmen Lee-Johnson.

outlines her debt to Saidiya Hartman's influential notion of "critical fabulation" and views as her task the "reshaping and rectifying" of Blake's engravings. She "surveyed eleven editions of the [*Narrative*], concentrating primarily on the engravings created by William Blake in concert with the text based on Stedman's sketches and descriptions of what he witnessed." Throughout the essay, she reproduces her sketches of those engravings, including "Europe Supported by Africa and America," "A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows," "The Celebrated Graman Quacy," and "The Execution of Breaking on the Rack" (illus. 2). Recognizing the sexualizing and dehumanizing tendencies of the engravings and dissatisfied with her own reproductive sketches alone, Lee-Johnson, "as an artist, as a descendant of slaves," produced in the final series what she calls "sketches of potentiality" to draw out "the imagined perspective of the slave." Her efforts to do so were, she recognizes, inherently limited from the outset: "My error lies in perspective. I attempt to represent a culture of slavery on its own terms without having access to any accounts from those enslaved, rather I rely on the accounts of a White outsider." This essential fact is the cause, it seems, of her frustration: "I am still left wanting," she writes toward the conclusion of the essay, "wanting to treat and heal the wounds of a whipped woman, a hanging man and a bashed man. … I am not satisfied. I want to see what they saw and understand what they felt. All I can do is imagine."

19 Lee-Johnson's works reconfigure the tortured bodies of Blake's engravings, exploring different perspectival angles to encourage new ways of looking and to problematize the very act of looking. The lurching perspectives and contorted forms of the bodies in her sketches and prints create visual paradoxes, exemplified by the work entitled "The

3. Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, “The Onlookers” (2018). Linocut print with oil-based ink on BFK rives paper. 45 x 24 in. © Jazzmen Lee-Johnson.

Onlookers" (illus. 3), in which the tortured figure's extremities are enlarged to the point of incongruity, and we the onlookers are drawn into a struggle between subject and object, reality and imaginative distortion. But the forms are also energized by resilience and rapture, as in the jarring animated loop *Joanna Twerk Left*, in which a naked, dancing woman faces a gallows, "twerking" with her back to the viewer (illus. 4). As Sehgal suggests, "We don't know if Joanna (Stedman's long-time sexual partner, an enslaved black woman), dancing at the gallows, is rejoicing [in] her newfound independence or twerking for her life." In these moments, Lee-Johnson pushes into the potential for individual agency and power in the present, generating "symbols of embodied agency in the context of global slavery" (Sehgal) through her artistic responses to the engravings, whose corporeality somehow affords a vital force that might be channeled into new forms and possibilities.



4. Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, *Joanna Twerk Left* (2018). Screenshot from a hand-drawn animated loop, chalk on construction paper. © Jazzmen Lee-Johnson.

20 A kindred duality presents itself in Hew Locke's works *Washington, Federal Hall* (2018) and *The Procession* (2022), both of which incorporate details from Blake's engravings for Stedman. *Washington* (illus. 5) is part of a series entitled *Patriots*, based on statues of historical figures (George Washington, J. Marion Sims, Alexander Hamilton, Christopher Columbus, a pilgrim father, and two of Peter Stuyvesant) on display in public spaces in New York, many of which have since sparked debate over potential removal. Locke mounted enlarged photographs of the statues on aluminium and "dressed" them with chains and other accoutrements, including, in the case of *Washington*, metal figures of enslaved people—one of which is based on a Blake engraving—which dangle from the likeness of the slaveholder. The exaggerated pomp and ceremony of the works travesty the pedestalization of these perpetrators of violence in the name of empire, while the use of chains and the borrowing from Blake-Stedman bluntly proclaim the misguided impulse of this kind of hero worship.

21 Similarly, *The Procession*, produced by commission for Tate Britain and installed in the Duveen Galleries from March 2022 to January 2023, includes 140 figures embodying the legacies of British and European colonial oppression, adorned with reproductions of Benin bronzes, further colonial spoils, newspaper articles, and other historical artifacts and documents (illus. 6). One of the figures wears a headdress that features laser-cut wood reproductions of the tortured figure from "A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows" (illus. 7), while an etched brass version of the same image is attached to the back of a different figure's clothing. In addition to *Washington*, Locke had already vi-

5. Hew Locke, *Washington, Federal Hall* (2018). Mixed media (fabric, metal, etc.) collaged on aluminium-mounted C-type photograph. 183 x 122 x 6.5 cm. © Hew Locke. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2024.

6. Hew Locke, *The Procession* (2022), detail. Mixed media, including cardboard, fabric, glue gun, PVA, plastic, fibreglass, wood, metal, resin, and paint. © Hew Locke. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2024.

sually "cited" this particular engraving in *Cui Bono?* (2017), which was originally installed at Rathaus Bremen, Germany, as part of the exhibition The Blind Spot: Bremen and Art in the Colonial Era; a version also appears in a recent fabric piece, *Raw Materials 24*. His exhibition at the British Museum, Hew Locke: What Have We Here? (17 October 2024–9 February 2025), includes a display of three prints from the Stedman series: Blake's "An Armed Coromantyn Free Ranger" and "The Skinning of the Aboma Snake," as well as Bartolozzi's frontispiece for the *Narrative*. Overall, the exhibition comprises written and sculptural interventions focusing on the colonial histories underpinning the museum's methods of collecting and displaying objects.

22 At Tate, *The Procession* likewise sought to mediate visitor encounters with the cultural institution. Drawing on a wide range of visual materials, it actively thematizes the historical relationship between art and empire. In addition to the echoes of the Blake-Stedman engravings, Locke includes a reproduction of John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781* (1783), which romanticizes the unity and loyalty of peoples subjected to British rule by depicting the major's servant, a black man, shooting a French soldier who has just killed Peirson. The reproduction is printed on the fabric of a palanquin carried by two figures representative of Haiti's colonization and the Haitian Revolution (illus. 8). This visual citation of a painting from Tate's own collection foregrounded the space of the gallery itself—the institution from which Locke received the commission and also a repository for works of art associated with colonialism, slavery, and empire.

23 Both the assemblage technique and the depth and eclecticism of Locke's engagement with historic art and visual cul-

7. Hew Locke, *The Procession* (2022), detail of figure 42.

ture recall other important British and American works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many of which have similarly used the "master's tools" *within* the "master's house" of the cultural institution as a mode of critique, to adopt the terms of Audre Lorde's seminal 1979 lecture. Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum (1992–93) at the Maryland Historical Society provides a particularly striking point of comparison, insofar as Wilson's onsite intervention took its substance from the objects and artworks housed in the society's collection, bringing out for display artifacts that had previously been invisibilized, consigned to storage and hence preservation in undisturbed obscurity—including Justus Engelhardt Kuhn's portrait of Henry Darnall III (c. 1710), which depicts an enslaved, metal-collared black child stooping behind the young Darnall, his enslaver.

24 Locke's work can also be likened to the collages of Romare Bearden. Bearden's *Projections* (1964) comprises twenty-one large-scale photographs of collages made from "fragmented images culled from magazines and [his] vast store of art-historical reproductions" (Glazer 413). According to Lee Stephens Glazer, "This technique, combined with narratives of black life, allowed Bearden to acknowledge the significance of the art-historical past even as he revised its forms to accommodate new representations of African American identity" (411). In contrast to Locke's reuse of historic artworks depicting black people, Bearden's works tend to register their relative *absence* in the vast majority of celebrated Western art. His intention was, he explained, to "establish a world through art in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic" (quoted in Childs 62). Although differing in kind and cultural moment, Bearden's and Locke's engagement with historic artworks points to a shared impulse to revise and remediate canonical art-historical images as a fundamental aspect of their practice and its driving sociopolitical critique.

25 Speaking of *The Procession* in a short promotional film produced by Tate, Locke reflects that "the piece of work has a life of its own. So how this work is perceived over time will change and evolve." This statement also seems eminently applicable to Locke's (and, indeed, to Douglas Camp's and Lee-Johnson's) incorporation of elements from the Blake-Stedman engravings—the engravings very much take on a life of their own, and function as emblems for the human pain and suffering that were foundational to European colonialism and slavery. However, Locke's installation is not solely oriented toward the past; its mysterious, carnivalesque explosion of matter is also intended to look to the future: "There's an energy there which is about hope—the future—let's make something positive," he muses at the end of the film. Yet his hope for "something positive" seems to exist in uneasy tension with the tokens of violence that he harnesses toward that hope—the detritus of colonialism could only ever be positioned as positively generative in spite of itself, only through radical disruption and toil. Like Lee-Johnson's frustration with the limits of imagination alone, Locke appears to dramatize a kind of imaginative toil, along with the ongoing struggle both to recover what has been lost and to body forth something new. In the artworks that I have examined in this article, the spectres of the Blake-Stedman engravings are poised precisely on that fault-line, disclosing violence that is at once unimaginable and impossible to forget.

Coda: On Reproduction

26 Reproduction is central to this article's thematic emphasis on the reuse, adaptation, and circulation of images. As such, a consideration has been whether I ought to reproduce the engravings themselves as illustrative figures. This practice has certainly been prevalent in Blake scholarship that discusses them—and, of course, it is also enacted in a different context in the visual culture and works of art that I describe

above. I have decided to follow Nicholas Mirzoeff's principle that "placing racist imagery in circulation yet again in order to criticize it … perpetuates harm" (Mirzoeff viii-ix). In his British Museum exhibition What Have We Here?, Locke comments on his firsthand experience of harm when viewing reproductions of the Stedman engravings. Alongside the prints, he has inserted a text panel that reads, "I've chosen not to pick the most violent images of torture because I'm tired of seeing images of broken Black bodies"; however, he decided to include Bartolozzi's frontispiece engraving showing "a dead enslaved person" on the grounds that this "is an image of somebody who fought back."

27 Whether or not we laud Blake as an abolitionist, the Blake-Stedman engravings ultimately cleave to a tendency within British art of the eighteenth century to routinely represent black people in positions of degradation and subjugation. Reproducing the images merely for the purpose of illustration would perpetuate these representational conventions. However, there is, I think, a difference between the creative reappropriations being enacted by the contemporary artists considered here and the casual reuse of the images in contexts wherein their formal integrity, cultural authority, or ethical premises are neither primarily nor ultimately called into question. For this reason, as well as omitting figures of the engravings, I have also excluded illustrations of the t-shirt graphic and the protest poster mentioned earlier in this article. While these reuses undoubtedly came with strongly politicized, antiracist agendas, which I certainly do not wish to dismiss, in those contexts the Blake-Sted-

8. Hew Locke, *The Procession* (2022), detail. © Hew Locke. All rights reserved, DACS 2024. Photo: © Tate (Joe Humphrys).

man images retained a certain moral and quasi-documentary authority—indeed, their force relied in part on that authority—such that, I believe, reproducing them would in its own way uphold that status.

28 My decision not to reproduce the engravings may well seem redundant: clearly, as we have seen, the images are well and truly alive and circulating in various pockets of popular culture and in the art world in Britain and America. Moreover, I have, although indirectly, reproduced them in some sense by including photographs of contemporary artworks that respond to or visually "cite" them in the first place. Indeed, removing the images from circulation entirely would also remove the ability of artists to create new works responding to them. But, since the task of this study has primarily been to trace the engravings' legacies and the important work being done by artists to interrogate, remediate, and rethink the images critically, it is not necessary to reproduce the originals. That absence is also, I think, fitting for images that have well and truly taken on lives of their own, leaping beyond the confines of their conception as plates designed to illustrate an eighteenth-century book.

29 The contemporary artworks discussed here rehearse a vexed, dialectical relation to the Blake-Stedman engravings and to the representational and symbolic authority that has accrued to them since their initial production. Rather than simply reproducing the images wholesale, the artists have radically altered their formal and material composition—from paper to steel, fabric, or animated film; from their originally idealized, congruous proportions to the "impossible," to quote Lee-Johnson, perspectives of her sketches. These artists refuse to eradicate the Blake-Stedman images, the physical violence that they emblematize, and the discursive violence that they both embody and perpetuate, but the artists also refuse to grant the images gratuitous entry into their expressive, eclectic assemblages. *Pace* Mirzoeff, then, it seems that for them there is something to be said for reproducing such images in certain contexts—but certainly not uncritically, and certainly not without significant intervention. The results are uneven, searching, necessarily irresolvable: Douglas Camp's rendition of "Europe Supported by Africa and America" is hopeful yet cast in the mold of oppressive Western standards of beauty and embodiment; Lee-Johnson takes the images apart, holds their bodies up to the microscope, listens for their subjects' voices, and still finds herself "wanting"; and Locke's emanations are joyous as much as elegiac, seeking novelty as much as they reject complete rupture with the colonial "past," its enduring artifacts, and its present-day reincarnations.

30 Whether or not we need them to be—whether or not we *want* them to be—the images, as the artists well know, are already there, lodged in a collective imaginary. But the continuation of their presence as cultural actants is far from guaranteed or automatic. They continue to be recycled and remediated—as spectres of violence that they could only ever approximate, and as substitutes for perspectives that are unlikely ever to be recoverable. Yet, as their creative adaptors have amply demonstrated, they are just as meaningful to engage with precisely *because of* their deficiencies and ethical problems. Moreover, they appear at times to afford a space, even if only aporetically, for the kind of "potentiality" or vitality that Lee-Johnson, for her part, seeks out. As much as reproducing the images might allow them to retain their authority, so might removing them from view without direct and serious critique: the arguments for both sides are approximately familiar from recent debates over the memorialization of colonizers and slave traders, including those whose statues have been travestied by Locke. The case is far from closed. Whatever work the Blake-Stedman engravings go on to do in the world, the course of their afterlives seems to have taken a distinctive, and compelling, turn in recent works of art from both sides of the Atlantic. Above all, these artworks represent a phase in the images' afterlives in which their emblematic, quasi-documentary, and canonical authority, which has for so long characterized the nature of their reception and reuse, is no longer being taken for granted.

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