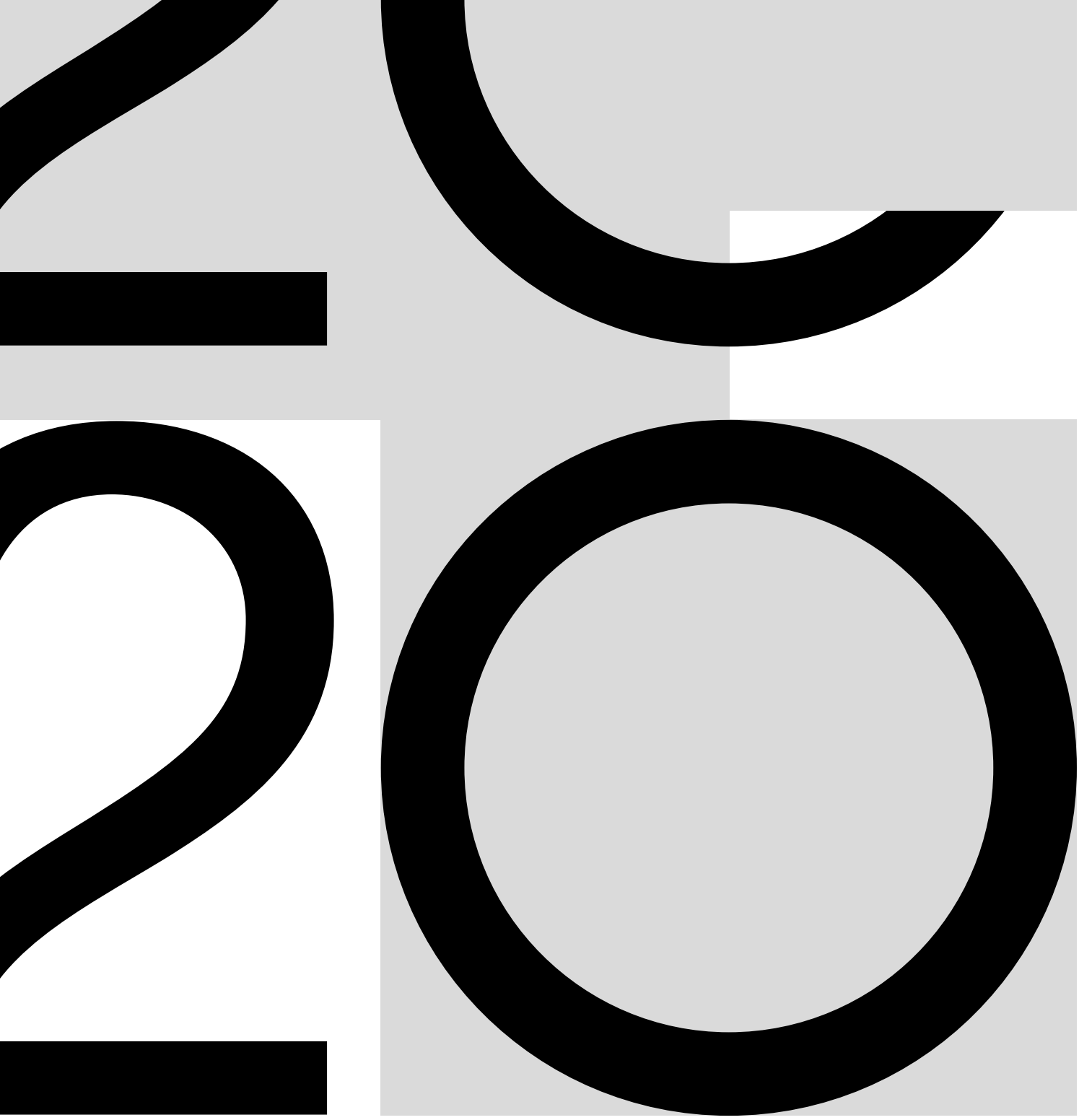

Cutting Checks

Derica Shields

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Freelands Foundation

20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

Holly Graham is aware of the enclosure of the neat and orderly, the trained line and fluted column that our still-colonial pedagogy teaches us to revere. She is aware of the cul-de-sac that talk of British abolition can be, where the invitation is to mill about in national liberal self-satisfaction. The artist frames her project for the 20/20 commission to puncture several misconceptions about abolition and its relationship to British profit from slavery.

At her residency at Manchester Art Gallery, Graham is working with her mother to construct a dress modelled on one that Sarah Parker Remond, an African American abolitionist, is pictured wearing. Parker Remond toured England throughout 1859 delivering anti-slavery speeches in cities including Manchester, where she spoke at the Athenaeum, one of four buildings that now make up Manchester Art Gallery.[1] Graham's focus on Parker Remond, who visited 20 years after Britain abolished slavery, is an affront to the idea that the nation's profits were limited to its plantation-owning era.

Parker Remond's speech in Manchester was strategic and timely. In the 1850s, Lancashire's mills and factories produced 40% of the world's textiles; and between 1846 and 1850, 80% of Britain's cotton imports came from the United States.[2] Britain had abolished chattel slavery in its colonies from 1833 to 1838, but as Parker Remond reminded the Manchester elite, American slave plantations grew 'the 125 millions of dollars' worth of cotton which supply your market'. She continued, pointedly, that 'not one cent of that money has ever reached the hands of the labourers', already making the case for reparations.[3]

In his 1944 study 'Capitalism and Slavery', the Trinidadian historian Eric Williams establishes the foundational role of slavery in the development of Europe's political and economic institutions.[4] He devotes a substantial chapter to Lancashire, and details the textile industry's profound dependence on the cheap imported cotton that was shipped in tonnes into Liverpool's port.

The cotton came first from Britain's West Indian plantations and then, once sugarcane took over as the islands' cash crop, from the American South. In this way, the labour of enslaved people multiplied the Lancashire labour force and spurred mechanical, transport and technological changes in the region, including a railway line connecting Liverpool to Manchester. Lancashire became a centre of the environmental catastrophe that we call the Industrial Revolution, and Manchester swelled from a small settlement to the city nicknamed Cottonopolis.[5]

Joseph Sanders was a leading figure in the first big intercity railway project in England, which linked Liverpool and Manchester. In 1824, Sanders withdrew from the Liverpool Anti-Slavery Society, apparently in fear of upsetting the planter class aka Men of West India Interest who were leading (and funding) the enterprise. The Men of West India Interest wanted to get their cotton from Liverpool to Manchester more cheaply than the rates that the canal owners who transported it allowed. When railway line opened September 1830, it broke the canal owners' monopoly on this transport route. Cotton continued to be transported mainly by canal but at much cheaper rates. Williams, 'Capitalism and Slavery', 105.

Eighty years later, British institutions are catching up to Williams's thesis. In the project 'Cotton Capital', British newspaper 'The Guardian' locates the wealth of its Mancunian founders in Britain's plantation colonies. 'Founders and Funders: Slavery and the Building of a University' (20 September 2023 – 23 March 2024), an exhibition at Manchester University's John Rylands Library, identified how 'slave trading, ownership of enslaved people, and manufacturing with slave-grown cotton' funded Manchester's cultural and educational sectors. Holly Graham cites both as points of reference that helped her frame her research questions.

If the stakes weren't so high—the miseducation of generations! toxic exposure to the colonial episteme!—this belatedness would be funny. The gag is that, although Williams wrote his doctoral dissertation at Oxford University, British publishers rejected 'Capitalism and Slavery', the book version of the PhD, until 1964. They found its argument, that economics not humanitarianism motivated abolition, heretical.

Graham surmised that if plantation labour founded the city of Manchester, then it must also have founded its oldest institutions. In search of figures that would help her understand the foundations of Manchester Art Gallery along similar lines as 'Cotton Capital' or 'Founders and Funders', Graham looked to MAG's origins in The Royal Manchester Institution for the Promotion of Literature, Science and the Arts and The Manchester Athenaeum for the Advancement and Diffusion of Knowledge, its institutional ancestors.

Established in 1823, Graham notes that the subscription-based Royal Manchester Institution attracted 710 paying members in its first year. Although neither the Institution nor the Athenaeum had art collections, the Institution held regular exhibitions and the Athenaeum, founded in 1835, attracted industrialists who enjoyed cultural activities, including minstrel shows. In 1883, the Royal Manchester Institution opened its doors to the public. The Athenaeum club ceased activities in 1938 and, in 2002, its building was extended and linked to Manchester Art Gallery. Graham approached Global Threads with a request for figures related to the membership of the Royal Manchester Institution:[6]

Accounts of the British Empire by its historians/apologists hide violence under elegant euphemisms. I treat certain words as flashpoints. Industrialist is one of them, merchant another. Eric Williams is helpful here: 'The term "merchant," in the eighteenth century context, not infrequently involved the gradations of slaver captain, privateer captain, privateer owner, before settling down on shore to the respectable business of commerce.' Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, 99.

1. What percentage of members were involved in the textile industry?
2. What percentage of members were slaveowners who were compensated by the British government for their loss of property following abolition?

These figures do not currently exist. Graham notes that although the Science and Industry Museum established Global Threads to draw out histories of enslavement within its collection, until recently they have not foregrounded the slave labour underpinning the industry of Manchester in their displays.

Graham does not see the absence of figures as a deterrent to her work. She continued to look for where enslaved labour appears in the Manchester Art Gallery collections beyond the objects relating to abolition (a brooch, a mug) that Graham saw on her first visit. It was always one of her aims to focus on enslaved labour rather than slaveowners, and to find a way to 'channel' Parker Remond's 'voice back into the space'.[7]

The Costume and Textiles Collection at Manchester Art Gallery holds pattern books filled with swatches of printed cotton that were donated to the Museum by the Calico Printers' Association (1899–1968), a group of textile printers and merchants who collectivised to protect their financial interests.[8] The pattern books contain the designs that cotton print manufacturers all over Lancashire produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for internal use, as a way to keep track of their designs. In the archive, Graham also found fabric from South Asia and West Africa, carried to Lancashire textile manufacturers by merchants where the designs were copied and printed onto slave-produced cotton. Merchants took these Lancashire-printed fabrics to West Africa where they sold or exchanged them for coffles of enslaved people.

The pattern book is a technology of measurement. Its authors establish a set of standards against which to measure all future products. Future patterns refer to the past-present and replicate it. Perfect copies are a mainstay of industrialised production whereby perfection is to produce an identical product. The product to be copied perfectly is the one that generates demand. Demand is past-present desire collected. The pattern book records desire, fossilises desire, contours desire, sells it back.

Graham tells me that the 10 pattern books donated by the Calico Printers' Association are uncatalogued.[9] They have not been accessioned, meaning they are not formally part of the Manchester Art Gallery collection. In the moment, I think of the creative theft that remains hidden by this exclusion. By keeping an entity or object without documenting it, the institution insures against calls for return or reparation: who can demand what they don't know is there? In a follow-up email, Graham explains that unlike the pattern books, the fabrics from West Africa and South Asia are accessioned but not well-documented, with most of the information about them pertaining to the Europeans who took, transported and/or collected them. To rectify this, MAG has instigated projects such as 776 Pieces of Cloth, a study group that invites the public to 'unlock the secrets of West African textiles' and, as a result of Graham's project, is in the process of accessioning the pattern books.[10]

The imperative to identify specific types of cotton was bound up with profitability. A colonial travelogue by French writer F.A. Michaux provides a nice example. He starts by declaring Georgia cotton 'best' for its fibres, 'fine and very long'. This cotton has several different names: among the French it is 'Georgia cotton' or 'fine wool', while in England it is 'Sea Island cotton,' a variation with potential for confusion that Linnaeus's system offered to eliminate. Fianlly, Michaux notes that 'In February 1803, it sold at Charleston at 1s. 8d, per pound.' (in R.G. Thwaites, Early Western Travels 1748-1846 (Cleaveland, Ohio: 1904).

The Royal Manchester Institution and the Manchester Athenaeum stand on the hatched lines of the cotton field, planted this way to permit an industrial scale harvest by enslaved people whose labour cost the slaveowner a neat zero; planted to grant the mounted overseer clear sight down each row, the horse a clear path, the whip an easy flight; and to secure the largest possible yield. But the problem of the Western museum is not only that it was established with plantation dividends, it is its function to position Euro-America as the producer, protector and location of knowledge: the museum hoards entities, artworks, artefacts,

human remains and information to cement its centrality. Adding to the museum's knowledge does not interrupt this colonial function – that quest for total knowledge – it bolsters it. Of course, museums surfacing their collections helps us understand our history, but if these violent dynamics could be named and their dividents enumerated by Sarah Parker Remond in 1859 and by Eric Williams in 1944 (and many more before, between and since), then surely in 2024 we can formulate the terms and type of destruction and reparation we need.

In my own research on cotton I've been drawn to mess, particularly the arguments over taxonomy and categorisation that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and beyond. The Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus established his significance in the field of taxonomy with 'Systema Naturae'.[11] His magnum opus, published in 1735 while living in the Netherlands – where the shipyards, markets, coasts and canals were thrumming with the trade in slaves and its dependent economies – situated Black Africans as the 'missing link' between humans (rational) and non-human animals (irrational). When a pre-eminent scientist publishes a scientific tome that claims Black African peoples need to be governed by other superior races, and that directly supports Europe's economic interests of the time, we understand why the explanation of reality that Linnaeus offered became not just science but common sense. That is to say, the Venn diagram of eighteenth-century scientific enquiry and capitalism looks like a circle labelled 'taxonomy ordered by commerce'.

Linnaeus's system identified similarities and differences across living beings and ascribed them a meaning based not on relationship, communication or proximity between the plants, but on his examination of their organs of reproduction. His binomial system disciplined endless variation through categorisation and hierarchy; it was widely adopted.

Following his publication of 'Species Plantarum', another major work, in 1753, Linnaeus received letters from European scientists, physicians, botanists, naturalists and biologists with corrections and addendums. His entry on cotton, specifically 'Gossypium barbadense' and 'Gossypium hirsutum' drew particular attention. These were profitable types of cotton that European colonisers found in the Americas and then sent to each other, tweaked and cultivated to maximise profits. Securing the seed that made the longest-fibre cotton depended on being able to identify the plant. Conversely, what could not be categorised could not be fully exploited.

'William Brisbane, of St Paul's, amassed sufficient wealth in two years of growing Sea-Island cotton, to retire ... Planters believed the secret of quality was in seed selection, and soon all were experimenting in an effort to raise a silky staple.' —The Story of Sea-Island Cotton, 1941.
Within a system where replication is the means to wealth, there was a rush to categorise and understand all cotton types; if each one was named, it could be cultivated or eliminated. Yet they were unable to neatly categorise all of the cotton that was growing. This inability gestures to an undocumented history of indigenous cotton cultivation and trading, and of enslaved people's pre-Middle Passage histories with cotton and enduring relationship with the plant in the Americas, not limited to forced labour.

If standardised naming repeats the appropriation that Graham traces in the pattern books of Manchester Gallery's Costume and Textile Collection, and if coloniality values replicability, then Graham cites Parker Remond's dress without attempting to replicate it. Graham's dress is a hybrid, pulling elements from the many forms of document to combine and recombine each one.

Graham uses the Victorian silhouette of Parker Remond's dress to play with replication. Each layer is printed with a distinct texture. The outermost expands and repeats the check prints that she found in the Costume and Textile Collection, but these checks are shot through with red lines, referencing the ordering grids of an accounting book, an attempt to surface the slave economy on which European civil society rests. The layer of the dress closest to the body uses the marbled motif often seen in the endpapers of colonial era books and journals. In the colours Graham has chosen, the motif is at once watery, fiery and visceral, its red, white and suppurating yellows alluding to flesh.

This innermost layer will only become visible as Graham lifts the dress over the course of her gallery tour, speaking a text that combines her own research and reflections with the conversations she has held with researchers, museum staff and members of the Manchester public during the residency. The dress construction plays with expectation, concealment and revelation, and offers, in performance only, an interior that is in excess of its outward appearance.

Endnotes

[1] The Royal Manchester Institution, the Athenaeum, Platt Hall and Queen's Park make up today's Manchester Art Gallery. The Queen's Park site stores much of the museum's collection, outside of its costume and textiles which are housed at Platt Hall.

[2] Eric Williams, 'Capitalism and Slavery', Russell & Russell, New York, 1944, p.128.

[3] Sarah Parker Remond, 'Why Slavery is Still Rampant in the Land', lecture, The Manchester Athenaeum, 17 September 1859; see 'Manchester Weekly Times' transcription, Black Abolitionist Archives, doc. no.21048, https://libraries.udmercy.edu/digital_collections/baa/Remond_21048spe.pdf.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p.68. See also Matthew Stallard, David Blood and Lydia McMullan, 'Cotton Capital: How Slavery Made Manchester the World's First Industrial City', 'The Guardian', 3 April 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/news/ng-interactive/2023/apr/03/cotton-capital-how-slavery-made-manchester-the-worlds-first-industrial-city.

[6] Global Threads is a collaboration between the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester and University College London's The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery.

[7] Holly Graham, Google Meet conversation with the author, 25 July 2024.

[8] 'The term "merchant," in the eighteenth century context, not infrequently involved the gradations of slaver captain, privateer captain, privateer owner, before settling down on shore to the respectable business of commerce', Williams 1944, p.99.

[9] 'Manchester tried to compete with the East India Company; bafts, for example, were cheap cotton fabrics from the East later copied in England for the African market. But the backwardness of the English dyeing process made it impossible for Manchester to get the fast red, green and yellow colours popular on the [African slave] coast', ibid., p.69.

[10] Quoted language from @mag_platthall Instagram page, 17 May 2024. Clarification email correspondance with Holly Graham, 18 October 2024.

[11] See Carrie Anderson and Marsely L. Kehoe, 'Textile Circulation in the Dutch Global Market: A Digital Approach,' 'Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art', vol.15, no.1, 2023, 10.5092/jhna.2023.15.1.1.

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