

Henry Box Brown, African Atlantic Artists and Radical Interventions

Professor Alan Rice, University of Central Lancashire

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It’s 1849, you’re a Southern functionary in charge of the Penitentiary in Richmond, Virginia and you have to numerate your prisoners, divide them into black and white, make sure the register tallies and accurately document a novel and idiosyncratic crime to sit alongside the others:

3/1 For murder in the second degree
3/0 For slave stealing
1/0 For aiding slaves to abscond
5/1 For larceny
13/3 For forgery
1/1 For bigamy
1/0 For arson
1/0 For barn burning
1/0 For highway robbery
1/0 For having a ½ dollar die to counterfeit with
1/0 For enticing slaves to be boxed up.¹

In the 21st century, this record is now in the archives and the factual record of a novel form of slave fugitivity is captured in the bureaucratic discourse of the Southern slave power. It is recorded as a specific form of criminality with its own row in the column. We might with Dionne Brand speculate as to the way such a functionary would undertake his account keeping. She describes how:

In this museum are records, books, lists, names of the enslaved and their age, sex and physical condition.... I look down each list, I try to imagine someone writing these lists. Would they have written them down ... (contemporaneously) ... or would they have kept a running record? Would they have had a cup of tea before going to the job or would they

¹ Jeffrey Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2003), p. 66.

have stopped in the middle, gone home to have an afternoon nap, and returned thinking what a nuisance paperwork was? Or would this person have written the (facts and figures) quite happily with a flourish in the wrist, congratulating himself (on the completion of his task)?²

The task is to leave a complete record without blemish. The task of the prison guard/plantation owner/slave ship captain/archivist is to make the enumeration everyday, ordinary, so as to dispel any doubt that this is normality. Brand's description of the workaday nature of agents within the panoptical control of the peculiar institution articulates the archive's powerful message of a controlled world to which there is no alternative. As Stephanie Smallwood reminds us, such business narratives are often the only evidence we have of individuals who lived everyday lives in the slave system:

The ledgers double-entry pages and the neat grid of the invoice gave purposeful shape to the story they told. Through their graphic simplicity and economy, invoices and ledgers (and logs) effaced the personal histories that fuelled the slaving economy. Containing only what could fit within the clean lines of their columns and rows, they reduced an enormous system of traffic in (and control of) human commodities to a concise chronicle of quantitative 'facts'.³

All such bureaucratic activity erases from view the politics that underlays the neat account keeping. However, it is here in the archives of the punitive regime that we find conclusive proof that Henry Box Brown's method of escape from slavery disrupted bureaucratic order, requiring a new row in the jailer's account. Hortense Spillers succinctly reminds us that in slavery the 'cultural subject is concealed beneath the debris of the itemised account...'⁴ and this is true for criminality as much as it is for everyday life on the plantation.

² Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001), pp. 203-4.

³ Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.98.

⁴ Spillers, Hortense, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar', in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p.461.

Of course here the prisoner is the white man who helped the slave to escape and for once the itemised account is unable to contain the black man who has flown. Far from being concealed beneath the debris, Box Brown has spirited himself away leaving only speculation and disorder behind him. His white accomplice, Samuel Smith is jailed for trying to repeat the act and spirit other slaves away in packing boxes. Southern discourse reveals its ideology as it describes how infantilised slaves have to be “enticed” by evil men to enter a box. They are described rather like Medieval child stealers, Pied Pipers, gulling innocent and happy slaves away from their homes. Giorgio Agamben has talked about the ideological workings of the archives of such repressive regimes:

the archive designates the system of relations between the unsaid and the said.... The archive’s constitution presupposed the bracketing of the subject, who was reduced to a simple function or an empty position; it was founded on the subject’s disappearance into the anonymous murmur of statements.⁵

The written record here is reductive and is anonymised so that these criminal subjects disappear and are replaced by a discourse that attempts to wholly contain them. It is a form of containment as Susan Stewart describes the archival collection, “the threat of infinity is always met with the articulation of boundaries.... The collection thus appears as a mode of control and containment insofar as it is a mode of generation and series.”⁶ The list gets ever longer, but is always controlled, it tells us nothing new. The archive of the controlling state does its job “as the dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete act of speech”⁷, making them all subject to the hegemonic discourse of the slave polity. Despite its power which was to be enhanced even more by the oncoming Fugitive Slave Law that will operate beyond its borders in the

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller Roazan (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p.145.

⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p.159.

⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.144.

Northern States, the peculiar institution and its meticulous record keeping cannot contain Henry Box Brown and his spiriting away from Richmond.

If Frederick Douglass had had his way, this record of Box Brown's escape might have been the only clue left behind, as he urged slave fugitives not to boast of their methods lest they harmed the chances of those that followed. Instead the archive gives us not only this fragmentary record, but a veritable treasure trove of material from which contemporary visual artists have mined. I want to investigate three of these excavations to outline the differing effects of dynamic uses of the archival record of slavery and abolition to remember the past and comment on contemporary racial realities. James E. Young has commented on the limitations of archival sources:

museums, archives, and ruins may not house our memory-work so much as displace it with claims of material evidence and proof ... the archivist's traditional veneration of the trace is tied directly to their need for proof or evidence of a particular past ... but in this they too often confuse proof that something existed with proof that it existed in a particular way, for seemingly self-evident reasons.⁸

For Young, "authentic historical artifacts" too often encourage those who use them as evidence or indeed for other purposes "to naturalize particular versions of the past".⁹ In discussing Pat Ward Williams, Glen Ligon and Simeon Barclay's mining of the slavery and in particular the Henry Box Brown archive, I will show how all three move beyond such limited and self-serving prescriptive attitudes to open out the implications of Box Brown's remarkable historical trace making it have radical implications in new geographies and for contemporary racial and political realities now and in the future. Their works exemplify "... the palimpsestic presence of slavery that haunts temporal and spacial borders, continuing to have profound

⁸ James E., Young, *At Memory's Edge: After Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p.127.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.147.

material, emotional and psychological effects on the formation of the present.”¹⁰ All three have at the centre the Box that was both confining prison for our protagonist and his vehicle for escape “express”. All three use as exhibit one in their mining of the archives the famous prints of Box Brown emerging from his packing case. Thus they concentrate on the fugitive body and it is through its tangible possibilities that they are able to disrupt Anglo-American hegemonic power. As Elizabeth Alexander discusses:

If any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in this country, it might be that the white authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know. There have always been narratives to justify the barbaric practices of slavery and lynching. African Americans have always existed in a counter-citizen relationship to the law; how else to contend with knowing oneself as a whole human being when the Constitution defines you as ‘three-fifths’? The American way with regard to the actual lived experience of African Americans has been to write a counter-narrative, where needed that erased bodily information as we knew it and substituted a counter-text which has, in many cases, become a version of national memory.¹¹

These reactionary counter-narratives are contested in their radical art works that reinscribe bodily information and articulate anew “the histories of African American bodies”. Pat Ward Williams’s *Thirty Hours in a Box ... Still Counting* (1987) installation is a multi-faceted take on the Box Brown escape. The packing case sits on a square plinth surrounded by four large wooden pillars at each corner at about double its height. Each one has framed images attached of a skyscraper, a violin, a rose and a doll’s eye. These columns are connected by barbed wire. The box itself is closed as if en route, however, we see inside it cyanotype images of a crouched black male body. On the base of the piece are the words “Henry Box Brown who escaped slavery enclosed in a box 3 feet wide and 2 long”.¹² Here Brown’s fugitive status is used as an analogue for the position of the black man in contemporary America and this is confirmed by “passages Williams has inscribed on the floor around the box describing

¹⁰ Ibid, p.75

¹¹ Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (St. Paul, MS: Graywolf Press, 2004), pp.179-80.

¹² Catherine Lord (Ed.), *The Theatre of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993), p.51

contemporary discrimination, something that African Americans have been subjected to for 2 long”.¹³ Confined and boxed, in a foetal position, the figure will at some point spring free. As Coco Fusco asserts “the subject’s emancipation is connected to self-conscious manipulation of his status as an object, forcing his way out of slavery through the repossession of his own body”,¹⁴ however, as Williams discusses:

outside the box are the pillars of Western thought: Western beauty, culture, the way we live (the framed images). It talks about the way that Box Brown escaped from one slavery to another, very much like Nelson Mandela being released from prison and still not allowed to vote in his own country.¹⁵

The barbed wire symbolises the oppressive nature of the society beyond the box both then and now and how the escape from slave status will not be a panacea; this is reinforced by the crouched position the prints show which encodes a memory of confinement stretching back to the Middle Passage. The columns surrounding the box indicate that Anglo-American cultural and political hegemony will limit any freedom he might attain. Williams’s installation interrupts the playful, joyous resurrection of Brown that the prints had depicted to take us back to Brown en-route and endangered, but also to take us forward to the problematics of a limited freedom because of the operations of racism and discrimination both for Brown and for the black men and women that will follow him. These limitations are squarely placed on the body so that slavery’s ownership continues to have its manifestations long after the end of the peculiar institution, as Dionne Brand asserts:

The body is the place of captivity. The black body is situated as a sign of particular cultural and political meanings in the Diaspora ... as if those leaping bodies, those prostrate bodies, those bodies made to dance and then to work, those bodies curling under the singing of whips, those bodies cursed, those bodies valued, those bodies remain

¹³ Kellie Jones, *EyeMinded: Living and Writing in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.212.

¹⁴ Coco Fusco, *The Bodies that Were Not Ours and Other Writings* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.7.

¹⁵ Lord (Ed.), *The Theatre of Refusal*, p.59

curved in these attitudes. They remain fixed in the ether of history. They leap onto the backs of the contemporary – they cleave not only to the collective and acquired memories of their descendants but also to the collective and acquired memories of the other. We all enter those bodies.¹⁶

Body-memory here means that escape from slavery's consequences is impossible both for those descendants of the enslaved and of their oppressors. The installation was a key exhibit in the Thelma Golden's curated Whitney Museum *Black Male* show in 1994¹⁷ highlighting its intervention into debates around contemporary black masculinity. Williams had looked for inspiration in the archival record of Box Brown, as she says:

I think as black people we have to find different solutions to overcome the obstacles that are in our lives politically and also personally. This is a piece about Henry Box Brown and problem solving.¹⁸

This rather perfunctory explanation illuminates a pragmatism and world-weariness at the heart of Williams's installation, which is confirmed by the title that places African Americans confined and still counting down the hours to a full emancipation which has gone on "2 long". Yet it also celebrates the ingenious solution that Box Brown brings to the problematic of black male personhood under the panoptic regime of slavery and the way that this should be an inspiration for those men and women living under contemporary regimes of power. Brown's imaginative escape according to Daphne A. Brookes talks to,

...the transient positions of protagonists who are repeatedly and often wilfully displaced and set to roaming. Box Brown could make this kind of generic black male experience painfully clear with his restaged mobile imprisonment. Affirming the trope of the 'outside manqué' and bringing such a status literally and figuratively to life, his use of the legendary box symbolically communicated a decision to remove himself from the visible world while *still moving through it*. In doing so, his travelling entrapment offered a

¹⁶ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, p.35.

¹⁷ Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art), 1994, p.71.

¹⁸ Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*, p.172.

signifying metaphor of physical resistance to the antebellum period's rigorous literal and figurative colonization of black bodies.¹⁹

Brown's escape encodes an optical illusion as his encased body encased moves "express" whilst it remains still. It is such messing with perceived realities, with the time/space continuum even if only as an illusion that will make for the "different solutions" to contemporary problems that Williams calls for. Williams's strategic reworking of Box Brown's fugitivity offers an exemplar for the possibilities of breaking free from hegemonic ideas about limitations on black freedom in the here and now, even as it acknowledges the barriers to doing so.

Glenn Ligon's 1993 installation *To Dismebark* is also a response to rooting in the archives: as he says himself his practice at this time was influenced by Black British artists like Isaac Julien and their use of history, discovering "how one uses the archive, how one might bring the archive to the present, how you fill in gaps in things that cannot be represented".²⁰ In this way Ligon in Jean Fisher's words pays "homage to the voiceless and often disavowed ghosts of the past that haunt the archives of our collective histories"²¹ (208)

This knowledge he uncovers is vital to the way he develops his installation, using gaps and elisions as positives to create new artistic realities rather than hamstringing barriers to productivity. Like Williams he discovers Box Brown as an exemplary figure in the archives with resonances not only for recovering history but also for his own self-discovery as well as highlighting contemporary American racial realities: he says:

I read Henry Brown's narrative and I began to organize an exhibition around the idea of the box, the missing slave and the slave telling the story of his escape. Nineteenth-century travelling shows put on by abolitionists restaged the escape of slaves from the South, but

¹⁹ Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2006, p.67.

²⁰ Glenn Ligon, *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p.167.

²¹ Jean Fisher, "Diaspora, Trauma and the Poetics of Remembrance" in Kobena Mercer (ed.) *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* (London: Iniva, 2008), pp. 190-212 (p.208).

my aim was never to re-create Henry Brown's escape. I was interested, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, in how I positioned myself and was positioned by these narratives of the past. I am positioning myself against a certain historical experience and trying to find the connections between it and who I am.²²

The legacies of slavery for Ligon in the present are interrogated by his installation. Nine wooden packing boxes of varying but similar sizes are strewn across the gallery on whose walls are what at first seem facsimiles of slave runaway posters (*Runaways*) and Abolitionist publications (*Narratives*). The boxes are plain contemporary wooden freight containers with international signage for goods marked "fragile". Their very modernity and the fact that they are all bigger than the exact dimensions of Brown's box show that Ligon is not interested in verisimilitude here, but instead wants to convey the multiple commodification of black bodies which resemble most contemporary international logistics and the way it transports and records the movement of goods. The boxes and their putative contents are restricted in a slave polity which saw African Americans as chattel to be brought, sold and exchanged. Unlike the slave escapee though, fated to keep quiet so as to avoid detection, Ligon placed speakers in each of the boxes playing disparate soundtracks: Billie Holiday, Paul Robeson, Bob Marley and KRS-One and plantation work songs as well as himself reading Brown's 1849 narrative. These multiple soundscapes speak to survival after the horror of slavery, promoting voiced African Atlantic figures in opposition to the silencing of commodification. However, these soundscapes are ambivalent disclosing the problematics of "freedom" that follows un-boxing. Although Robeson's "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" and Marley's "Redemption Song" are jubilant anthems of escape, Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and KRS-One's "Sound of Da Police" express the power of a violent, repressive, surveillance and control culture that outlives slavery and continues through eras of segregation and Jim Crow into the contemporary period. As Saidiya Hartman describes Ligon shows through this installation "that the afterlife of slavery

²² Ligon, *Yourself in the World*, p.77.

is not only a political and social problem but an aesthetic one as well” (112). The graphic effect of the *Runaway* series adds to the feeling of unease and surveillance which surrounds the boxes.

Saidiya Hartman continues:

The runaway posters and the frontispiece of the narratives employed by Ligon suggest that fugitivity might be a practice without a terminus and as close to freedom as we might come so long as the ex-slave and the emancipated are tethered to received narratives of the past, if only because their claims are incoherent and lives illegible in any other terms. Once again freedom is the endlessly deferred and never-arrived-at destination. The wooden boxes secret the escaped slave and also render him invisible.²³

The faux Runaway ads were developed by Ligon as descriptions of himself by friends which could figure as police wanted posters but juxtaposed with the graphic mark of slavery – men with knapsacks, kneeling slaves and a woman carrying a cloth bag. As Scott Rothkopf discusses:

“The collective portrait that emerges from these ten lithographs implies that identity is indeed a construct. Ligon’s comic lightness of touch masks both his work’s theoretical underpinnings and the chilling analogy he draws between the black man’s historical role as property and his all too common contemporary portrayal as a criminal suspect.”²⁴

The *Narratives* on the other hand show how even the emancipated and self defining African American is still beholden to narrative frames from the majority culture – probably most telling is “Black Rage; or, How I Got Over It” where on the frontispiece bell hooks is quoted:

When we talk about the commodification of blackness, we aren’t just talking about how white people consume those images, but how black people and other people of color consume them, and how these become ways of knowing ourselves.²⁵

²³ Saidiya Hartman, “Will Answer to the Name Given”, in Rothkopf, Scott, *Glen Ligon - America* (New Haven,CT: Yale University Press, 2011), pp.110-113 (p.112).

²⁴ Scott Rothkopf, *Glen Ligon - America* (New Haven,CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p.33.

²⁵ Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural American* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p.133.

This notion of circularity, of how stereotyping creates monstrous realities that curtail the freedom to self-identify, show Ligon using the Box Brown story to investigate boxed realities far beyond the packing case. The multiple boxes could in this sense be seen as havens from a discourse within which American culture continues to hold black folk under surveillance, curtails them and creates warped realities that undermine their full potential as human beings. Maybe “removing oneself from the visible world while *still moving through it*” is not only a strategy useful for escaping during slavery but has resonances for the contemporary. As Huey Copeland contends

...in his work, blackness, slavery, and its aftermaths are not simply agencies of oppression or marks of foreclosure, but expansive openings through which we might see the modern, the aesthetic and ourselves differently.²⁶

Moreover, Ligon’s installation not only talks to the past and the present, but to the future too and more specifically to Afro-Futurism. In discussing the work of David Hammons, Ligon invokes the career of the maverick and wonderful musician Sun Ra who often described how black people “did not exist in this society”.²⁷ In transit, “hiding in plain sight”, “spiriting themselves away” maybe Ligon’s disembarking people come to resemble non-human goods in order to escape to a future-framed humanity away from an American reality that denies them full personhood. As Ligon says:

Not being from here is a movement towards placelessness, towards the utopic, the post-human, and a deep critique of American society ... (this has) particular resonance with a people historically positioned at the margin of what was considered human.²⁸

To Disembark posits oceanic journeys but also in its navigation between chronologies enables Ligon to envision not only past and present realities, but also Utopian futures that transitory packing cases with projected and possible human cargo allude to. Again Sun Ra

²⁶ Ibid, p.117.

²⁷ Ligon, *Yourself in the World*, p.7.

²⁸ Ibid, p.9

shows the way with his extolling of African American flying myths so foundational for slave fugitivity:

Ra's interest in flight is a kind of politics. Being light is a refusal of the limitations of what is considered human ... the human has always been a treacherous category for black people, given our historic exclusion from that domain.... To be light, to be able to fly away, is to be able to imagine something beyond what we see.... Ra's ability to see beyond his particular historical moment as a way to change it remains compelling.²⁹

It is this Utopian vision that rescues Ligon's installation from the dangers of mere postmodern affect as through it the historical triumph of Box Brown's escape is not contained by the discourse (albeit challenged) of historical and contemporary American hegemony that surrounds it, but posits new future-directed liberations, even if the story is contained almost magically in a series of packing cases. In this fantastic projection the boxes wait in plain sight, containing their cargoes, full of fugitive possibilities, performing their Utopian magic trick of removing endangered and exploited people from the "visible world whilst still moving through it". Saidiya Hartman rightly cautions that "nine wooden crates arranged in the gallery of a museum serve to remind us that fugitivity is an ongoing, if not interminable, condition and that a free state might be nowhere at all"³⁰ – or, to paraphrase Ligon's discussion of Sun Ra's philosophy, at least not here, at least not yet.

For Henry Box Brown like many other nineteenth century abolitionists the "free state" he travelled to, in the wake of an August 1850 attempt to kidnap and re-enslave him on the streets of Providence, Rhode Island, was Britain. Like Frederick Douglass he escaped "Republican slavery to Monarchical freedom" and found himself enjoying levels of freedom far beyond those he could enjoy in an American state beholden to the peculiar institution. It is his long-term residence in Britain that piqued the interest of the Black British artist Simeon Barclay in creating a performance art piece based on Brown's political and performance

²⁹ Ibid, p.63.

³⁰ Hartman, "Will Answer to the Name Given", p.113,

persona as he undertook abolitionist activity in the 1850s. Barclay's performance was developed in the wake of the 2007 Bicentenary commemorations of the Abolition of the slave trade which led to a series of events, exhibitions, films and performances throughout the country ranging from a controversial National service in St. Paul's Cathedral, London through re-enactments such as that of a human sculpture of the slave ship Brooks performed by schoolchildren in Durham to projects such as Revealing Histories in Manchester which used exhibitions, websites and performances to link the city's wealth to the institution of slavery. Like Williams and Ligon, Barclay used the famous image of the un-boxing as his ur-image, however, the British manifestations of Brown's performances made for significant additions to the foundational American narrative. Two archival objects in particular were source material for Barclay's British nuanced performance piece. The first was only uncovered in 2008 and was a playbill for a Mr. Henry Box Brown event at the Music Hall in Shrewsbury.³¹ The playbill provides new information about Brown's life as a performer and activist beyond that outlined in the excellent Jeffrey Ruggles biography *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* (2003). The bill promotes 'For Five Days Only' in December 1859 Brown's 'Grand Moving Mirror of Africa and America! Followed by the Diorama of the Holy Land!' Central to the former was (of course) his escape in the box which also provides the major visual image on the bill. By 1859, Brown's unconventional escape had become the visual signifier that framed his other performative activities. The text on the poster unselfconsciously promotes the aesthetic dimension of his life and work as a framework for his political agenda:

The public . . . when they witness this entertainment, . . . will not only appreciate it as a work of art but also award it that approbation that all faithfully executed paintings should command.³²

³¹ Entertainments Bill, *Henry Box Brown showing a Mirror of Africa and America at the Music Hall*, 12-17 December 1859, 665/4/367, Shropshire Archives.

³² Ibid.

These details underline the importance of visual iconography and the performative in fully understanding not just Brown but the wider culture of abolition, as Marcus Wood reminds us in his seminal studies.³³ Brown uses his black bodily presence as a weapon against slavery, but with an eye to entertainment value that establishes him as the showman par excellence. Playbills posted throughout a town or city invited the non-literate or those unable to access slave narratives into the exotic, counter-cultural world of African American abolitionism. They advertise the presence of radical black transatlantic figures, transmitting information about the institution of chattel slavery beyond the sphere of the chattering classes, making inroads into popular culture at the same time as helping to define the political arena. As Daphne Brooks describes:

Brown effectively transcended the discursive restrictions of the slave narrative and redirected the uses of the Transatlantic body toward politically insurgent ends. In this regard, Brown engineered multiple ruptures in the cultural arm of mid-century Transatlantic Abolitionism.³⁴ (68-69)

It is this radical performative aspect, this public persona aspect of Brown's British sojourn that Barclay sought to portray. The other archival source that Barclay used was a report from the Leeds Mercury (May 24th 1851) which detailed a re-enactment of his Un-boxing of an unusual and maybe unique kind. According to the report:

“(Brown) was packed up in the box at Bradford about half-past five o'clock and forwarded to Leeds by the six o'clock train. On arriving at the Wellington station, the box was placed in a coach and preceded by a band of music and banners, representing the Stars and Stripes of America, paraded through the principal streets of the town. The procession was attended by an immense concourse of spectators. (The box was) opened ... at the Music Hall. Mr Brown's last “resurrection” from the box took place at a quarter past eight o'clock, so that he had been confined in the space ... for two and a three-quarter hours.³⁵

³³ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) and *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: Georgia University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, pp.68-9.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.120.

This event in Leeds showed the depth of Abolitionist sentiment in the radical city. The carnivalesque atmosphere of such events upset many of the more po-faced abolitionists, but was undoubtedly important in publicising the Abolitionist cause to the widest possible audience. Tickets for the show in Leeds cost from one to two shillings and Brown's transmogrification from Abolitionist orator to performing showman was sealed by such successful *coups de theatre*.³⁶ At Leeds Brown "showed how excruciating confinement could be recycled into a symbol of corporeal subversion."³⁷ Despite its success, Brown's signal performance was almost completely forgotten and had left no trace in official or indeed unofficial histories of the city. Barclay, a resident of Leeds decided to reinstate the memory of the event into the city. His impetus was made even greater because the 2007 commemorations had almost wholly past the city by with no significant exhibition and very few events. A postgraduate student at Leeds Metropolitan University, he first heard of Brown at a lecture I gave there in 2007 and got more access to the remarkable story by visiting Manchester and seeing the display case detailing Box Brown's relation to the city as part of the Trade and Empire exhibition at the Whitworth in 2007-8. He was as astonished by Brown's performative brilliance in Leeds as he was by the fact that it had been entirely elided in histories of the city. Barclay's response to this opening up for him of archival records he had known nothing about highlights the potential malleability of the archive by black diasporic artists which Jean Fisher has commented on, she describes how:

...the archive is always in process, subject to additions, subtractions and reconfigurations – interventions, conditioned by new experiences and perspectives ... as Derrida says, "the question of the archive is not [...] the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not [...] it is a question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow."³⁸

³⁶ Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*, pp.127-8.

³⁷ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, p. 120

³⁸ Fisher, "Diaspora, Trauma...", p.205.

The exploitation of such archival possibilities was an opportunity Barclay relished. He decided to re-enact Brown's Leeds performance, dressed in Victorian garb and having himself placed and transported in the box for the same amount of time that Brown had been. Barclay's dynamic performance piece is in the traditions of such postcolonial artists as Coco Fusco who describes how such works "shift black artistic practice away from 'representing the race to representing what it means to be raced by offering their own bodies as subjects and objects.'"³⁹ (16). His plan to travel from Bradford to Leeds was thwarted by Northern Train's Health and Safety rules, however, the transit van that brought him from Bradford to the steps of Leeds City Museum did little to undermine the buzz in the city on October 31, 2009. A crowd of hundreds including local television and other media witnessed Barclay emerge from the box and ventriloquise a Box Brown speech detailing his escape and his happiness to be in Leeds. Barclay performed as Box Brown, not only in terms of his actual transportation in the box but also in using archival playbills about his sojourn in Britain to emphasise the showman element of his personality as well as his political purpose. Barclay's aim was to spectacularly reinsert Box Brown into the region's historical memory. He achieved this and more. In fact his intervention exemplifies what I would call a guerrilla memorialisation that works against the silencing of minority histories. By "guerrilla memorialisation" here I mean to describe the way memorialising sometimes takes on an overtly political character in order to challenge dominating historical narratives.⁴⁰ As Box Brown had collapsed geography in his 1851 re-enactment (what might be called an earlier guerrilla memorialisation) so Barclay had collapsed chronology in his 2009 homage. In doing this he is following Williams and Ligon in their use

³⁹ Fusco, *The Bodies that Were Not Ours*, p.16.

⁴⁰ Alan Rice, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp.11 & 64.

of the legacy of Henry Box Brown that they find in the archive to restage his escape and liberate its meanings from the dead hand of history. As Jean Fisher contends:

In confronting the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ by reference to the historical archive and individual testimony, black diasporic artists reassembled a body to be mourned from the fragments of the past to produce a radical revision of our representation of historical process, national culture and the construction of subjectivities.⁴¹

In this instance, for once in the tragic history of the black Atlantic, that body has a name. He is Henry Box Brown and he is not only to be mourned but celebrated as well as the achievements of each of these artists who so successfully memorialise his spectacular escape and subsequent stellar performances.

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⁴¹ Fisher, “Diaspora, Trauma...”, p.192

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