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# Black Lives Matter then and now

## Lancaster Black History Group and the politics of memory in the wake of new activism

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### 15.1 Introduction

Unlike many Lancashire towns whose signature architecture is Victorian back-to-back terraces, Lancaster is known for its streets of Georgian houses built in the second half of the 18th century. Looking up at its rich stone buildings, it resembles Bath and it is this grandeur that attracts tourists and encourages a kind of cloying, voyeuristic promenade around the city that focuses on opulence and plenty. There is a dark side to both cities' wealth, however, which was the direct consequence of their citizens' involvement in the slavery business, as slave-ship captains, slave merchants, plantation owners and dealers in plantation goods from the Americas. In both cities this history has been hidden, forgotten and often elided for generations while more famous port cities such as Liverpool have been foregrounded in debates about the importance of slavery to the development of modernity. Being smaller communities (having modern populations of 130,000 in Lancaster and 80,000 in Bath) with relatively low non-white populations (both less than 6%), both cities are quite visibly white in comparison to the metropoles of Bristol, Manchester or Liverpool. This means that developing resources to teach the slavery-infested and colonial histories of the cities

comes with specific challenges around ideas of representing that history in contexts of overwhelming whiteness and ignorance. Hence, the case study of Lancaster is particularly relevant as a comparator to Bath, as it shows ways that the city has used the development of walking tours and written trails building on work over two decades to move the debate forward and break the silence that surrounds its elegant streets. As 2017 Turner Prize-winner Lubaina Himid commented,

> Lancaster is a strange mixture of a place as cities often are; it has elegance but it's rough, urban and rural at one and the same time. You only have to visit the graveyards to be where slave ship owners are buried and the pubs to be where they made transactions. It feels like an important town and a tiny city, even sometimes like a small village. Often it poses as a genteel watering station, a gateway to the lakes.[1]

On 10 June 2020 the words 'Slave Trader' were spray-painted on a family grave; the red-painted graffiti on the large 18th-century gravesite memorial was a shocking intervention in the Lancaster Priory grounds, a site where summer picnickers would always gather, albeit socially distanced, at the height of lockdown. Here the veneer of respectability that Lancaster cloaks itself in is absolutely everyday in the quiet hallowed grounds, with views to Morecambe Bay and the Lake District beyond on one side and, across the town, views of its cotton mills and of terraced streets on the other. The activist had chosen their target well: the memorial was the family tomb of the Rawlinsons, who were one of the most notorious slave-merchant and West Indian trading families in Lancaster, with slave-trading business interests in Liverpool through Abraham Rawlinson Jr and Company and linked to other slave merchant families such as the Dillworths and Lindows through marriage. Indeed, William Lindow, who made his fortune in the West Indies trade and whose overseas estate included shares in three plantations in Grenada and St Vincent, was also interred alongside his business partners in 1786. Like many families, the Lindows and Rawlinsons showcased their wealth by buying large properties in town with Georgian family houses in Queen Street and High Street and by bringing from their estates in the West Indies slaves/servants to showcase their wealth. So, John Chance was baptised on 12 September 1777, 'a black, aged 22 years and upwards in the service of Mr Lindow' and on 22 January 1783 'Isaac Rawlinson, a Negro, an adult'.[2] The town's MP at the time the memorial was first commissioned in 1780 was Abraham Rawlinson, whose support of slavery and the

1 Himid 2007
2 Anon. 2007

transatlantic slave trade in Parliament was steadfast; he might not be buried at this spot but the graffiti was just as surely aimed at him too.

In the wake of such 'vandalism', the standard response would be to clean the grave as soon as possible. However, in June 2020, the context was different: there had been an outcry against the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May by Derek Chauvin which had galvanised and made international the Black Lives Matter movement. On 3 June in Lancaster a crowd of at least 350 took the knee in Dalton Square in front of the Town Hall in solidarity with George Floyd and against racism here in Britain. This activism was continued with weekly protests of taking the knee for the next few months. Lancaster, unlike Liverpool, London, Bristol, Birmingham, Coventry, Manchester or even Preston, does not have a significant Caribbean community to take on these issues but in this tumultuous time the community came together to speak out. Its small black community found its voice. For instance, Geraldine Onek, the daughter of Sudanese refugees and a primary-school teacher, became one of the primary spokespersons:

> When I look at what has happened over the last week, I have been overwhelmed. When I saw what happened to George Floyd, I immediately thought this is just the tip of the iceberg, and my reaction was 'that's enough'. The UK is not innocent and my frustration and anger comes from people seeing it as an isolated incident. I see comments on Facebook and quite often I get frustrated and don't say anything, I'm usually the quiet one, but after everything that has happened, I couldn't stay quiet.[3]

Onek's contention that 'the UK is not innocent' was often reiterated by black Britons at BLM demonstrations who supported the need to call out and organise against Britain's colonial past and racist present which is often hidden or conveniently forgotten. Racism is not a series of isolated incidents. Paul Gilroy has talked eloquently about the deadening legacy of this past felt across Britain:

> Once the history of empire becomes a source of discomfort, shame and perplexity, its complications and ambiguities were readily set aside. Rather than work through those feelings, that unsettling history was diminished, denied and then if possible actively forgotten. The resulting silence feeds an additional catastrophe: the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects.[4]

3 Lakin 2021a
4 Gilroy 2004, 98

Black Britons, in this context where they are seen as 'alien intruders', are fighting back through direct action. It was in this context of the BLM movement and its local manifestations that the vicar of the Priory, the Reverend Chris Newlands, was emboldened into the radical action of not employing stone cleaners. His articulate defence of his action was framed through the history of Lancaster's slave-trading past and the lack of a memorial to the victims of the slave trade in the Priory grounds, which he said would be 'a necessary corrective to trophy-memorials such as this'.[5] His description of a heretofore-hallowed grave as a 'trophy-memorial', because of its links to slave-produced wealth, was a significant calling out of Lancaster's shame-ridden history by a scion of the community. His further remarks articulated a future context too, which I want to examine more carefully as it is crucial to the way that Lancaster activists were to move forward over the next two years:

> I am not endorsing this vandalism, though I do understand the righteous anger which made it happen. People are more important than monuments, let me be clear about that. This monument is a part of the history of our city, whether we like it or not. And this graffiti is now also a part of that history, representing a moment in time when anger over the death of a black man's murder by a white policeman in the United States, spread across the world.[6]

Newlands' description of how the graffiti is itself now part of the history of the city reflecting new realities shows how the graffiti creates what I have called elsewhere a guerrilla memorialisation,[7] like intervention that seeks to change the complacency about Lancaster's slave-trade past and wake Lancastrians up to the way its history has helped create the transnational racism that affects us all now. The altered, unwashed grave means that Lancaster citizens are not allowed to forget or drift into complacency. Here they are confronted daily by the anger inherent in the graffiti, ultimately created by the historical indifference to seemingly commercial decisions

5 Lakin 2021b

6 Lakin 2021b

7 My use of this term here relates to the way I used the expression in my study *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic* and elsewhere to describe the way memorialising sometimes takes on an overtly political character in order to challenge dominating historical narratives. I prefer the term to the idea developed in Germany around Holocaust monuments of 'counter-memorials' because it is a more active and performative expression and seems to more accurately describe the processes and creative works I describe.

taken by men categorised as respectable and deserving monuments and streets named after them in their town of birth.

## 15.2 Refocusing the Lancaster Trail on Black agency

In the wake of the protests, Lancaster Black History Group (LBHG) was formed in June 2020 with the express aim of creating not 'a moment, but a movement'. It established a constitution that would never allow a black minority membership on its steering group and was eventually to consist of teachers, schoolchildren, academics, social workers, councillors and community activists of various professions. It deliberately foregrounded history because of Lancaster's status as the fourth-largest slave port in Britain and what they saw as the amnesia in the wider community about that history. LBHG is best seen as a campaigning, grassroots group which is decidedly independent of establishment organisations and aspires to Paul Gilroy's description of valuable organisations in the decolonial project that work against the 'postcolonial melancholia' he has identified as the defining narrative in British culture. He looks to groups 'close to the centre of Britain's vernacular dissidence, lending energy to an ordinary, demotic multiculturalism that is not the outcome of government drift and institutional indifference but of concrete oppositional work: political, aesthetic, cultural, scholarly'.[8]

Our endeavours were concerned with Gilroy's four key phrases and within three months LBHG had gained funding to run a community history project (the Lancaster Slavery Family Trees Project), taken a lead role in community activism around racial discrimination in the city (including being key founders of the commissioning board at the Priory for a new memorial for enslaved African victims) and supported the development to print of a new version of the Lancaster, Slave Trade, Abolition and Fair Trade Trail. The history project was to involve investigations by seven different community/school groups into key slave-merchant families such as the Rawlinsons, Satterthwaites, Lindows, Hindes and Gillows involving over 30 individuals, from teenagers to pensioners. The idea was to feed new, reliably sourced information about the wide extent of the slave trade into initiatives like the Slave Trail and to do so constantly trying to find evidence of black agency in the city to counteract the majoritarian narrative of passivity. In doing this we would create new knowledge which would enable learning as an adjunct to memorial projects, for as Richard Price has asserted, 'memorials [should] run less to bricks and mortar than to knowledge and its diffusion. What if we tried to make sure that every schoolchild in Europe, the Americas

8 Gilroy 2004, 108

and Africa is exposed as fully as possible to the history of slavery and its legacies?'[9]

Our project in Lancaster would be one small part of the jigsaw that creates this knowledge base and our logo that places a black jigsaw piece into the red rose of Lancaster was a visual symbol for this endeavour. The Priory commissioning board was galvanised by the presence of these activists and the coalition between churchgoers and BLM-inspired individuals has enabled ground-breaking, fully funded projects which are literally changing the landscape of the city and the interiors of its museums.[10] The Facing the Past project, funded by the National Lottery to the tune of over £200,000, will support educational projects including pedagogic materials on slavery for all Lancaster Key Stage 2 schoolchildren and the development of the trail into a dynamic digital version.[11]

Although both the community history project and the Priory memorial initiatives are important markers in the development of Lancaster's responses to BLM – and I will return to them in this essay – I want to mainly concentrate on the trail/tour as its development enables an interesting discussion about confronting amnesia in the everyday memoryscape. Walking tours are a particularly useful performative action to interrogate a cityscape and its seeming neutrality. The Lancaster walking tour is particularly performative and participatory, as I will discuss. The cultural critic Susan Stewart has talked about how modern cities have a silencing function:

> To walk in the city is to experience the disjuncture of partial vision/partial consciousness. The narrativity of this walking is belied by a simultaneity we know and yet cannot experience. As we turn a corner, our object disappears around the next corner. The sides of the street conspire against us; each attention suppresses a field of possibilities. The discourse of the city is a syncretic discourse, political in its untranslatability. Hence the language of the state elides it. Unable to speak all the city's languages, unable to speak all at once, the state's language becomes monumental, the silence of headquarters, the silence of the bank. In this transcendent and anonymous silence is the miming of corporate relations.[12]

9 Price 2001, 61

10 Between 15 October 2022 and 26 February 2023 an exhibition based on the research undertaken in the Lancaster Slave Family Trees Project was displayed in the Lancaster City Museum: https://www.lancasterguardian.co.uk/heritage-and-retro/heritage/lancaster-black-history-group-and-lancaster-city-museums-launch-slavery-family-trees-exhibition-3863109 [accessed on 14 November 2022]

11 https://lancasterpriory.org/uncategorised/major-funding-boost-for-lancaster-slave-trade-project/ [accessed on 1 July 2022]

12 Stewart 1993, 2

### 15.3 Dialogic work with communities

The tour works against such silencing, providing information the buildings do not reveal in themselves, of past slave-merchant activity and black residents working against the unthinking 'miming of corporate relations'. In investigating these hitherto-hidden histories, the trail followed the lead of the Turner Prize-winning artist Lubaina Himid, whose 2007 exhibition, 'Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service', at the Judges' Lodgings with its 100 overpainted 18th- and early 19th-century plates, jugs and tureens made an inspiring intervention for us, illustrating both the slave owners in their caricatured finery and the slaves/servants shown as a presence in a city where they had largely been ignored. Himid characterised the research for her project thus:

> I have looked at documents, ship designs, prints, watercolours, more details and more splendid doorways. These led into the houses of Lancaster ship owners such as Dodshon Foster, William Lindow and John Satterthwaite. I have tried to imagine the lives of the almost invisible slave servants these men owned, brought from the plantations to work in quiet isolation in this chilly place. I looked for clues, connections, ghosts and heroes.[13]

Our praxis was similar, to try to reveal the hidden histories, but through a walking and printed tour. The Lancaster Trail had been in existence in the city since around 2006–7 as part of the same 'Abolished?' project as Himid's 'Swallow Hard'. With the assistance of the historian of the Lancaster Slave Trade, Melinda Elder and the local artist Sue Flowers, schoolchildren from Dallas Road Primary School wrote and illustrated a written tour of slave sites (see Figure 15.1). This had been added to by the charities Global Link and the Fig Tree in 2015, making for a tour that included more references to Fair Trade. These were great initiatives. However, as a local cultural historian and veteran slave-site tour giver, I felt the trail needed an overhaul to include a greater emphasis on black agency, to foreground abolition to a greater extent and, crucially, to take the story beyond the 18th century to include the 19th-century cotton mills whose use of American-produced cotton placed Lancashire at the centre of the network of economic relations that supported the continuation of the horrors of plantation slavery until 1865. Those of African descent who undertook the trail with me had been critical of the volume of stories of black agency there were in the original trail and it was important to undertake extra research to find these stories. Histories of abolition in Lancaster are particularly hard to find. At the time

13 Himid 2007

Figure 15.1 Professor Alan Rice leading his Lancaster Slave Trade Trail, in front of the Judges' Lodgings Museum and adjacent to the Gillows warehouse, 18 July 2023.

of petitioning against slavery it had been one of the few towns to organise a petition in favour of the trade, which was so important to its economic wellbeing. We did, however, unearth new abolitionist visitors, including Sarah Parker Remond who spoke at the Palatine Hall in 1860. The expanded timeline to include plantation slavery through the story of cotton and the industrial revolution was also useful to highlight the issue of wage slavery and child exploitation in the mills and the ways that exploitations abroad were linked to those at home, an issue that local people felt was important in telling the full story of the effects of the transatlantic slave trade.

In terms of black agency, in the tour I am able to use the setting of the Priory to enact a guerrilla memorialisation. Taking to the pulpit I first pointed out the memorials to slave owners inside the church, the Hindes and the Satterthwaites, the latter right at the core of the church on the floor beside the pulpit, then I read out the names of those without memorials, the 39 black slave servants baptised in the church in the late 18th century. My aim was to make their absence present again in a building where they, unlike their oppressors, have been forgotten. By doing so, I wanted to enact a change, to work towards a new history where their contributions can no longer be ignored. A focus group after one of my tours, led by Daniel

Harrison and colleagues, showcased how participants were moved by this guerrilla memorialisation:

> I think it is really easy to like walk past like plaques and stuff […] when you were talking about it being sensory and like important to listen I do really feel that. When we were in the church and Alan was reading out all [the enslaved Africans] names, I found that much more impactful than seeing names written down in a list. There's something about hearing somebody's name or hearing somebody whose name is forgotten or not recorded.[14]

Making these names matter is enabled on a tour more readily as the embodied experience of being in the place makes for a more visceral reaction to the history, one where you are literally placed where those baptisms happened. As Sarah Pink states, 'it is these multi-sensory bodily experiences which render us either in place or out of place'[15] – there in the Priory close to the font, the audience can imagine those ceremonies with their conflicted meanings for people often miles from their original homes. What we want to do in the tour is a kind of haunting of the contemporary with its amnesiacal history with these ghosts from the past, to conjure new histories through the introduction of these formerly absent presences:

> What kind of case is a case of a ghost? It is a case of haunting, a story about what happens when we admit the ghost – that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present – into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world. It is a case of the difference it makes to start with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly with what we never even notice.[16]

By bringing the marginal to the centre, the trail hopes to dialogise hegemonic historical narratives and create new narrative realities. Another way the agency of enslaved Africans is brought into the tour and trail is through runaway advertisements, which show Africans as so rebellious against their conditions that they just upped and ran. The most effective of the Lancaster district runaway adverts to read out from the pulpit in the context of the Priory concerns an Igbo boy who ran away in 1765, not because he was baptised there but actually because he was not. Owned by the clergyman Thomas Clarkson of St Peter's Church, Heysham, who is venerated in his

14 Harrison et al. n.d.
15 Pink 2008, 179
16 Gordon 1997, 24–5

home church for his long service (1756–89), the boy was never baptised, showing, one might conjecture, a lack of care for him allied to him being bereft of a Christian name. I read his advertisement from the pulpit as a guerrilla memorialisation to revel in his escape from this so-called Christian master: the advert appeared in the 10 September 1765 edition of the London-based newspaper the *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*:

> RUN away from the House of the Rev- Mr. Clarkson, Rector of Heysham, near Lancaster, early in the Morning of Monday the 26th of August last, a Negro Boy, of the Ebo Country, slender made, about five Feet three Inches high, his Left Knee bending inwards, which makes him ha[l]t, a small Lump on his Forehead, with his Country Marks on his Temples; had on, when eloped, a blue Jacket, a grey Waistcoat, and Leather Breeches; he speaks broad Lancashire Dialect.
>
> Whoever brings him to his Master at Heysham, or to his Master's Brother, Mr. William Clarkson, Surgeon, in Drury-Lane, Leverpoole, shall be handsomely rewarded, and all Charges paid; but whoever harbours him shall be prosecuted with the utmost Rigour of the Law.[17]

The advertisement shows the abuse the Igbo boy has suffered at the hands of the Rector, with his limp and the lump on his forehead. It also places in clear daylight the historic complicity of the Church of England in slaveholding, which by reading it from the pulpit I emphasise. The Legacies of British Slaveholding project enumerates numerous church beneficiaries of compensation and calculates that about 5% of the total money distributed went to the Anglican Church. Here where numerous clergymen have stood before me, some have been slave owners themselves. Interestingly, the Igbo boy has scarification marks on his forehead ('Country Marks on his Temples') which shows he was born in what is now Nigeria. By the time of his escape, however, he speaks 'broad Lancashire Dialect'. Almost certainly, trying to get to London to merge into the crowds, his 'country marks' would be two-a-penny in an African crowd; however, his 'broad Lancashire Dialect' would make him very easy to spot among all the cockneys.

Another runaway advertisement I read out from the pulpit is that of Henry (Harry) Hinde, who had been baptised in the Priory: 'Henry Hind, an adult Negro, May 31 1761'.[18] I read out this baptismal record just underneath the memorial in the church to the Hinde family, a notorious trading family in enslaved Africans in the city. This did not stop them from

17 https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/database/display/?rid=796 [accessed on 1 July 2022]

18 Anon. 2007, 7

being pillars of the community, and Thomas Hinde (1720–99) was twice mayor of Lancaster. He was such a successful captain on voyages bearing enslaved Africans that he elevated himself to become a rich merchant. He sent more ships to West Africa and stayed in the trade longer than anyone else at Lancaster. He conducted five voyages himself as captain, including in the inaptly named *Jolly Bachelor* in 1748, before becoming a merchant and investor in slave-trade voyages and the West Indian trade. His brother James, who was involved in the slavery business too as a mercer in the city[19] and an investor in voyages, was Henry's so-called master and when he escaped in 1764, he placed a runaway advertisement in the *St. James Chronicle*, determined to recapture him.

> RUN away from Lancaster, on Friday the 23d Day of November last, a Negro Man named Harry, about twenty Years old, five Feet four Inches high, strong made, and one of his Ears bored; the Colour of his Clothes is unknown, as he absconded in the Night without his Clothes, and is supposed to be gone for London. Whoever secures the said Negro shall be well rewarded, and all Expences paid, upon applying to Mr. James Hinde, Merchant, in Lancaster, or Mr. Smith, Book-keeper, at the Swan-with-two-Necks, Lad-Lane, London.[20]

The description of Henry 'with one of his Ears bored' is telling as this indicates he had already been punished for some kind of rebellious act. Reading out this advertisement in the Priory in close proximity to the Hinde memorial is a powerful act of reparative history, ventriloquising rebellious black agency in a place where passivity and amnesia had previously held sway. The action is designed to make the audience question the veneration the church historically has given to those involved in the slavery business and aims to be part of the movement for change exemplified by the vicar of the Priory's response to the graffitied gravesite outside its doors. The tour, by telling such stories, seeks to give agency to these black Lancastrians whose life experiences are only now finally being plucked from the shadows of the archives and to use that agency in the present as a guerrilla memorialisation for change that is based on revealing black histories through ongoing community research. Lancaster Black History Group's purpose is not to cancel history but to challenge the hegemonic national and imperial narratives that still all too often hold sway by dialogising them through the uncovering of counter-histories/memories that create new, more inclusive and multivocal narratives. As Jean Fisher articulates, such work of recovery

19 For more on the Hinde Family, see Elder 1992.

20 https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/database/display/?rid=340 [accessed on 1 July 2022]

and discovery in the archive is vital to reconstructing historical frames that do justice to the multiple histories of a multicultural Britain. She describes how

> hegemonic culture has assembled the historical archive, withheld or released its contents and authorised its interpretive discourses as 'history' […]. As such historical representation is never impartial, but always mediated and manipulated by the ideological biases that reflect the needs and desires of a particular historiographic moment. The archive is, therefore, open to the abuse of institutional concealment, disavowal or wilful amnesia, to a blurring of the boundaries between historiography and mythography and hence a potential ideological weapon by which the place of power obliterates the experience of the marginal.[21]

The tour works against such obliteration and to make the hitherto marginal central to the narratives Lancastrians have access to. Central to this endeavour are black Lancastrians who have also been explored through the Lancaster Slavery Family Trees History Project, where their links to the major slave merchants in the city are revealed. As this project developed, local craftworkers at the Sewing Café, Lancaster offered to make a banner graphically illustrating their stories.[22] Lancaster Black History Group ran a series of workshops for the Sewing Café members outlining the research on numerous black Lancastrians before they started the work. Under the direction of designer Victoria Frausin, it took over 1,000 collaborative hours to complete. With the title 'Lancaster Black History', it links black Lancastrians to their local and international geographies, names those baptised and in a brightly coloured collage tells the stories of key individuals (see Figure 15.2). Henry Hinde is named but also depicted, not unclothed as mentioned in the advertisement but dressed in archetypical clothing as described for the Igbo boy, with his bored ear showing. This was a way of making him stand for all of those runaway enslaved people, and his pose with cloth bag over his shoulder approximates the graphical depiction of runaways on some of the slave advertisements. Another enslaved servant depicted, who was brought from St Kitts by her mistress Mary (Polly Rawlins) in 1777 and baptised '2nd April 1778 Frances Elizabeth Johnson, a black woman servt. To Mr John Satterthwaite, an adult aged 27 years'[23] is shown resplendent in a St Kitts flag headdress. A third, Thomas Anson, is shown blowing a trumpet. This instrument encapsulates his freedom because, after

21 Fisher 2008, 204

22 https://www.lancasterslaveryfamilytrees.com/the-slavery-family-tree-banner-a-collaboration-with-sewing-cafe-lancaster/ [accessed on 1 July 2022]

23 Anon. 2007, 7

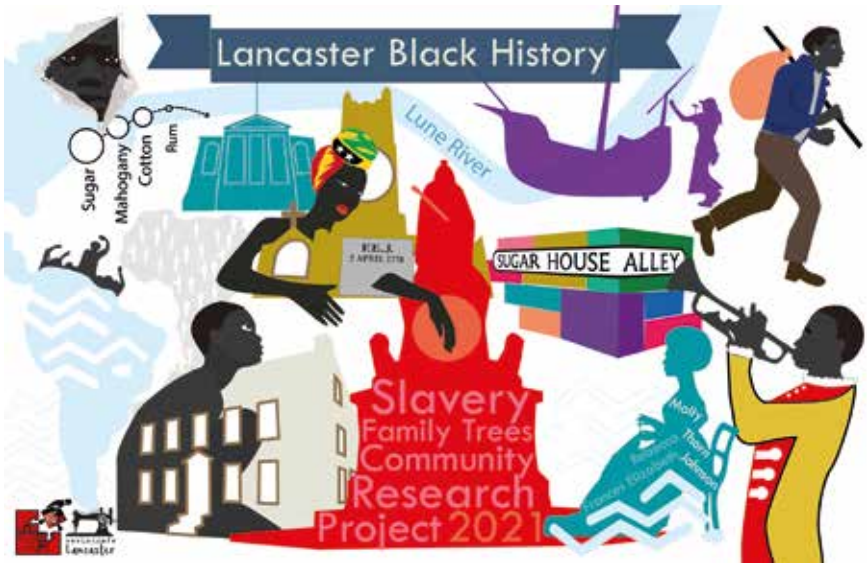


Figure 15.2 Lancaster Black History Group banner, made by Lancaster Sewing Café, designed by Victoria Frausin.

escaping from his so-called master, Edmund Sill, in Dent (a small village up the Lune Valley from Lancaster) in 1758, he managed to join the 4th Dragoons of the British Army in London as a musician in 1760. When invalided out in 1768, he was awarded a pension.[24] The Igbo boy is shown too, in the top corner, as if breaking through the material itself in his quest for freedom. His revolutionary breaking of the frame is a symbol of the way black people have to make their own history, breaking through the white framing of majoritarian historical narratives. This brightly coloured and pedagogical banner is used as a mobile memorial, travelling between educational establishments, museums and community venues foregrounding a black history that hitherto had not been readily available. An accompanying leaflet explicates all these formally unacknowledged black lives.

The banner has been broadly welcomed in Lancaster but there has been mixed reaction to the BLM protests, the formation of Lancaster Black History Group and the efforts of the Priory at reparation. This has probably been best seen at the Rawlinson grave memorial where there has been much pushback at the decision to leave the graffiti unwhitewashed. For instance, when the tour has stopped in front of the memorial, sometimes there has been confrontations with locals opposed to the Priory's stance. In one particular

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heated argument, a resident shouted that we were cancelling culture, not admitting to African tribes' and states' involvement in the transatlantic slave trade by selling 'their' people. After participants in the tour told the resident that, indeed, African merchants' role had been outlined in the opening remarks, he changed tack, saying that the desecration of graves was a heinous act on a par with slavery itself: 'that what's happened on the grave is worse than what happened in the history of slavery because you know that this is a disgrace because it is a desecration'. Such comments compelled us to alter the schoolchildren's version of the tour into using the Rawlinson tomb as an occasion for a moral philosophy debate – splitting the children into groups, we asked them to discuss the morality of the decision of the graffiti being left in place and whether this was right. In March 2022, a year-six Bowerham school pupil said that graffiti was antisocial and he did not like it, but that it was important here as it highlighted a historical wrong. In June 2022, a year-six girl from Willow Lane Primary School astutely commented 'While the graffiti isn't acceptable, it does show the real history of the statue. This man disrespected an entire culture and that needs to be recognised'. The pupils' discussion of 'disrespect' highlights the way the graffiti enables debate across chronologies, showing that memorial meaning is often mobile and not static; veneration from one era might well change into vilification in another and historical actors like the spray-paint wielder have an important role to play in ongoing debates around Lancaster's history.

The pupil's articulation of the complex issues around the graffiti was picked up by the focus groups a local MA student, Daniel Harrison, set up, many of whom found the Rawlinson memorial a very effective part of the tour because it dramatised the debates unleashed by the BLM movement and the local Lancaster demonstrations. In describing what happened at the Rawlinson memorial, I told Harrison how

> I see the emotion of the person who chose to graffiti it […] we talk about whether we think the history of Lancaster is hidden. Obviously these people have thought that it's so hidden that they need to take it into their own hands to make people aware that these people were slave traders.[25]

The graffiti has highlighted the city's past amnesia, during which time the Rawlinson memorial has stood untouched by any official or unofficial counter memorialisation. The graffiti refuses the sweeping of this history under the carpet, naming and shaming Lancaster's historical residents as complicit in crimes against humanity. This graffiti and its guerrilla memorialisation dialogise dominant historical narratives with a history from below that refuses

25 Harrison et al. n.d.

amnesia and complacency. As one of the participants in the focus groups put it, 'You can almost see two histories here. You can see the memorial. And then you can see the history of the aftermath of George Floyd'.[26] These two conflicting histories could be said to be contestatory on the very stone of the memorial, with it becoming an exemplar of the way narratives and actions set loose by the reaction to contemporary racism challenge widely accepted hegemonic historical narratives such as those that have long accepted Lancaster slave traders as pillars of their community deserving memorial plaudit. And, of course, such actions provoke pushback from conservative forces for whom BLM narratives are a threat to their worldview. It is only by such actions that minority histories and the memories that underpin them can challenge such pushback. As Michael Rothberg asserts,

> varied strategies of aggressively foregrounding the 'haunting past' do not produce divisiveness but rather seek to uncover already existing unresolved divisions. Their acts of uncovering hidden histories, traumas and social divisions constitute the ethical dimensions of multidirectional memory.[27]

Rothberg articulates that silence in the face of historical injustice is not the answer, even if it is convenient and comforting to many citizens whose forgetfulness is a default position that is strongly defended. Rothberg's positing of a multidirectional memory envisages a different, more multivocal city narrative which can be part of a healing of the past trauma of slavery and colonialism. One focus-group participant outlines how important it is that the graffiti stays to reflect the way BLM narratives have challenged the status quo. In doing so, he compares the guerrilla action in Lancaster to the larger and more famous collective action against the Colston statue in Bristol, which led to its downfall and launching into the Avon. He sees the graffiti as essential to making people aware of a hidden history:

> there are people whose families are probably still benefitting from the wealth that was accumulated during the slave trade and like the property as well, probably came with that and so to have the Rawlinson memorial that is still glorifying that, it doesn't sit right with me. And like thinking about the Colston statue and how it was pulled down and there's all these conversations about that and um yeah. I understand the controversial debate around it and like I'm still open to hearing different sides but for me like its yeah, I would rather just keep the graffiti and I think that says a lot.[28]

26 Harrison et al. n.d.
27 Rothberg 2009, 172
28 Harrison et al. n.d.

For Lancaster, then, this challenging of the status quo with parallels to the Colston statue toppling enables a debate that is maybe missing in polities where contestation has not taken such a visible form, such as in Bath. The discussions provoked by such actions might be difficult and sometimes even dangerous; however, they do seem to help move the discussion forward. Maybe it is only through contestation that true reconciliation can be aimed for. An honest discussion can only be had after there has been challenge to the visible status quo.

### 15.4 Engaging with difficult legacies in museum collections

Contested history is not just present in Lancaster at the graffitied grave, but also in more comfortable spaces such as the Judges' Lodgings, an early-17th-century dwelling used later for circuit judges. It is now a museum with the largest collection of Gillows' fine mahogany furniture in Britain. The Gillows company was formed by Robert Gillow in around 1730, and he and his brother Richard, as well as owning a share of the slave ship *Gambia* which made two voyages in the 1750s, used slave-forested timber from the West Indies, Honduras and elsewhere in the Caribbean basin. Lancaster slave ships which supplied Gillows were implicated in the direct trade of mahogany for enslaved Africans. This is best illustrated by an event of 1785 when the slave-ship captain William Keirson Harrison, acting for the merchant James Sawrey, exchanged his entire cargo of 174 enslaved Africans on board the ship *Fenton* for 541 planks of mahogany. One of the most important pieces made by Gillows is the bookcase commissioned by Mary Hutton Rawlinson (1715–86) in 1772. A Quaker, Mary was a member of the slave- and West Indian-trading Dillworth family and widow of Thomas Hutton Rawlinson (1712–69), who owned the Goyave plantation in Grenada and left her more than £49,000 (over £4 million at current values) in his will.[29]

According to the Art Fund website, the piece made for their 'rich and powerful' client has 'wholly exceptional carving, marquetry and superb veneers' and cost 20 guineas (£1,800).[30] Many of the plantation products used in the slave trade have now been consumed or have not survived, such as sugar, tobacco, rum, cotton, rice and indigo. However, mahogany survives as luxury antiques. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Lancaster, where the concentration of mahogany imports from the West Indies makes it the most important port for the commodity in 18th-century Britain. Worked at

29 Elder 1992

30 https://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/10115/rawlinson-bookcase [accessed on 1 July 2022]

so that its slavery origins are obscured – there are no signs of the cuts made by enslaved Africans labouring and dying in tropical rainforests – mahogany, nevertheless, survives as witness to the super-exploitation of black bodies for the luxurious comfort of rich British families. As Simon Gikandi discusses,

> The line dividing cosmopolitan culture and the moral geography of slavery was not […] as wide as the images of the salon and the slave port […] might suggest […] it was precisely the proximity of these two spheres of social existence – a cosmopolitan culture and the world of bondage – that necessitated their cultural separation. For if the goal of the project of taste was to quarantine the modern European subject from contaminating forces associated with the political economy of slavery and commerce in general, the desire for cultural purity was consciously haunted by what it excluded or repressed.[31]

The 'contamination' of the slavery business in the world of fine taste is revealed through new interpretations of objects in the museum to reveal their hidden narratives. The invisibility of African labour here spans geographies as tropical labourers and black servants are both 'excluded or repressed'. Although we cannot be sure that the baptised slave/servant Isaac Rawlinson belonged to Mary's family, his surname leaves little doubt as to his ownership by one of the many Rawlinsons with West Indian connections. The irony of a bookshelf being made of mahogany forested by enslaved Africans existing as a status symbol in a slave merchant's house where literacy is denied to those of a darker hue is one that enables us to link conspicuous consumption and boastful learning to the exploited labour of enslaved Africans thousands of miles away and the exploitation of slave labour in Lancaster too. In the wake of BLM and the formation of Lancaster Black History Group, the local musician Gordon Walker added his song 'The Cutter' to the repertoire of his group Peloton. The allusive lyrics make a link from the abuse of labour that forests the trees by overseers and colonial soldiers to the way the mahogany adds value to Lancaster hallways and to an environmental discourse about the destruction of Jamaica's natural landscape through the despoilation of the mahogany resources:

> The cutter cut the tree, the branches and leaves
> The soldier cut the father, the brother and the child
> The trees lost to the soil, the blood stain on the sand
> But wood shines in the Hall
> Who cut the cutter
> Who cut the tree

31 Gikandi 2011, 100

Who cut Jamaica
Our history
Who cut the cutter
Who cut the tree
Who cut Jamaica
Mahogany…
From Jamaica to Lancaster, the wood piled high, 500 dark and strong
Mahogany for high society, for Lancaster's Prosperity.[32]

This song is performed in local venues, highlighting how a company Lancastrians have been encouraged to be proud of was in fact complicit in human rights abuses and environmental despoilation. The beauty of the Gillows furniture in the Judges' Lodgings cannot now be so innocently enjoyed. Again, majoritarian history has been dialogised from below in this song that refuses to see historical furniture as merely wondrous articles but wants to interrogate who was harmed to create aesthetically beautiful objects and, through this, aims to decolonise this particular institution.

It is not just the furniture that illuminates difficult legacies for the museum. Throughout the museum are portraits of slave-merchant members of the Satterthwaite, Rawlinson and Lindow families. At a talk I gave at the museum in 2020, I was asked in the Q&A what the museum could do to more fully reflect the history of black Lancastrians. I had a short answer: 'you should get some portraits of historical black figures on the walls'. I was thinking particularly of the portraits of the Rawlinsons, Mary and Thomas, by the famous portraitist George Romney, which are often shown in the midst of luxurious Gillows furniture and other plush furniture. Mary's portrait is placed next to the bookcase she commissioned and shows her in an unshowy pose, dressed with Quaker restraint. Mary was no shrinking violet, though, and Rawlinson account books from the 1750s show her owning one-sixth of the business. In Lancaster, some of the slave merchants were women and Quaker women at that. My intervention and other calls by LBHG members for reparative measures at our museums galvanised curators and museum managers at Lancaster venues into devising projects that would lead to achieving the aim of gaining better representation of black agency in our museums. In January 2022, the Judges' Lodgings obtained £62,000 from the Art Fund and the Association of Independent Museums New Stories, New Audiences fund for a Facing the Past project to decolonise and reinterpret their collections relating to the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, with LBHG as key partners. They have commissioned a series of portraits of historical black Lancastrians from the Kendal-based artist Lela

32 Walker 2021

Figure 15.3 Artist Lela Harris leading a tour of her exhibition, 'Facing the Past', at the Judges' Lodgings, 18 July 2023. She is standing in front of her portrait of the black Lancastrian John Chance with George Romney's portrait of Lancaster MP Abraham Rawlinson in the background.

Harris to be displayed opposite existing portraits like that of Mary Hutton Rawlinson (see Figure 15.3). She has based her choice of characters on the existent Slave Trail and community research undertaken by LBHG. The wider community will be engaged by school workshops that will make portraits to be displayed in the museum in an accompanying exhibition.[33] The work will conjure presences that have hitherto been absent (and in previous generations wilfully suppressed) in the museum, foregrounding those whose labour had made possible the luxurious surroundings. Young describes such 'guerrilla memorialisation' or counter memorialisation thus: '[the] aim is not to reassure or console, but to haunt visitors with the unpleasant – uncanny – sensation of calling into consciousness that which has been previously – even happily – repressed'.[34]

Such dialogic work with community engagement as a means of decolonising can serve as an exemplar for other museums in slave ports such as Bristol and towns built on significant slave wealth such as Bath. Hopefully,

33 https://ibaruclan.com/judges_lodgings_commissions_lela_harris/ [accessed on 1 July 2022]

34 Young 2001

work in the wake of BLM through community history projects, enhanced slave trails and tours, art exhibitions that foreground forgotten black lives and the Priory's Facing the Past project (working towards a permanent memorial to those black lives in its grounds, to counter the slave merchants' grave memorials) will fulfil the agenda Lubaina Himid outlined for her 'Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service' project:

> Hopefully the intervention will explain what makes Lancaster the complicated place it is. It is a city in which traders became abolitionists and in which Quakers owned slave ships. There are beautiful buildings designed by men involved in horrible deeds. Behind doors in attics and underground are the hidden histories of a few almost invisible African people who were owned by families engaged in an immoral strategy to make a lot of money fast. This work is not a memorial but more an encouraging incentive for everyone committed to restoring the balance, revealing the truths and continuing the dialogues.[35]

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35 Himid 2007

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