

Weaving Bodies

Gill Perry

Just before sunset an agent bought her for two hundred and twenty-six dollars. She would have fetched more but for that season's glut of young girls. His suit was made of the whitest cloth she had ever seen. Rings set with coloured stones flashed on his fingers. When he pinched her breasts to see if she was in flower, the metal was cool on her skin. She was branded, not for the first or last time, and fettered to the rest of the day's acquisitions.

(Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*¹)

Over the last few decades, writers and feminist historians have been researching the everyday lives of enslaved Black women, expanding a history long dominated by the literature on male experience in the periods of the Antebellum and Caribbean slavery. As Deborah Gray White wrote in her groundbreaking book *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, first published in 1985: 'Slave women were everywhere, yet nowhere'.² Colson Whitehead's powerful novel *The Underground Railroad* explores some of this hidden history as he tells the harrowing story of Cora, a 'runaway' on a plantation in Georgia, who makes the courageous decision to escape with fellow enslaved person Caesar to the north. The grueling experiences and life choices of enslaved women are mediated through Cora's intensely physical, part fictional journey. As her story reveals, enslaved women's bodies were exploited both in the plantation fields and through sexual violation. Karen McLean's recent art installations make vivid use of metaphor and semiotically charged objects

¹ Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016), p. 5.

² Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1985), p.23. See also the influential research on this theme by Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Kingston: Heinemann Publishers, 1990).

to explore some parallel experiences, especially the important role of the body in both the representation and the resistance of enslaved women or 'bondwomen'.³

Born in Trinidad in 1959, McLean currently lives and works in Birmingham. Over the last decade the artist has consistently researched and referenced her Caribbean past in evocative installation works concerned with issues of identity, 'home' and postcolonial cultures (see, for example, her series *Primitive Matters*, 2010). This exhibition at Block 336 reveals her ongoing interest in the history, folklore and material cultures of Caribbean colonial history, and its close relationship with the history of slavery in the Antebellum South. Her ongoing interest in the roles of women within those histories is evident as she draws on a long tradition of female weaving, stitching and dyeing of fabrics. These are some of the gendered activities that were also deployed by bondwomen in their attempts to control commercial and social processes.⁴ Through her mimicry and aestheticisation of such processes, McLean has constructed a multilayered installation project that invites a contemporary audience to engage with a hidden history of women's suffering and resistance.

The branded, printed and stitched sacks of her two wall hangings *Woven Bodies 1* and *2* are replete with corporeal and symbolic references to the harsh lives of enslaved women, represented here as iconic figures, celebrated within a patchwork of hessian sacks. These allude to the commercial history of slavery; hessian is an ancient material derived from jute and is famously durable. Such sacks were used to carry produce from the plantations, such as sugar, coffee and tea; they were the vehicles of distribution to the colonial capitals and symbols of the accumulation of wealth that ensued. McLean sourced hers from various modern suppliers, including eBay, Brick Lane and an outlet in Hastings, combining different textures, tones and weaves. Each was dyed using tea and coffee, turned inside out to hide the old lettering, and cut in half. She then stitched on new hessian backs, creating her own reclaimed and recoloured sacks, imbued with laborious practices that echo those of the past. Imitating the gendered activities of dressmaking and quilting in enslaved societies, she laced them together with animal

³ Bondwomen', a term originating in the 14th century, is increasingly used by researchers as an alternative to 'female slaves' to describe women bound to labour without wages. I am using both terms in this essay.

⁴ There is a growing literature on the culture of resistance among bondwomen. Useful texts include: Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Loucynda Jensen, 'Searching the Silence: Finding Black Women's Resistance to Slavery in Antebellum U.S. History' in *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*, Vol 2: Iss 1, Article 23, 2006; Hilary McD. Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

suture thread, another corporeal reference to the wounded / sutured bodies of enslaved people, especially women. As Entela Bilali has argued: 'The weaving of stories into quilts became a way for Black women to defy the system of slavery and patriarchy and assert themselves... Black women weaved resistance into their daily lives.'⁵



Woven Bodies I, 2021

Black / gold screen printing and branding on hessian sacking dyed with tea and coffee, animal suture thread, 3D printed plastic spiders, cowry shells, snap fasteners, velcro tape

Two haunting, statuesque images of women, one wielding a machete and the other holding an abeng (animal horn)⁶ are repeated across the larger wall hanging. Both are composite images representing the iconic Queen Nanny of the Maroons. The Maroons were originally escaped

⁵ Entela Bilali, 'The Art of Quilting in Alice Walker's Fiction', The 2nd International Conference on Research and Education – Challenges Towards the Future (ICRAE2014), 30-31 May 2014, University of Shkroda, Albania. ISSN: 2308-0825.

⁶ An abeng is an animal horn and musical instrument used by the Akan people. It is often found in Jamaica where it is associated with the Maroon people.

slaves who ran away from their Spanish-owned plantations when the British took the Caribbean island of Jamaica from Spain in 1655.⁷ Queen Nanny or Nanny of the Maroons led a community of former African slaves called the Windward Maroons, and is now a celebrated figure in Jamaican history. During the early 18th century the Maroons fought for many years against the British colonists and terrorised British troops, until a peace treaty was signed in 1740.⁸ Drawing on multiple sources including a portrait on the Jamaican 500 dollar banknote, a sculpture of Nanny in the National Hero Park in Jamaica and archive photographs, McLean has woven together various physical characteristics and metonymic objects (such as the distinctive headwrap and abeng) into two single figure studies. They are presented as powerful symbols of local resistance, printed in black onto dyed sacks in a celebratory repetition of their struggles. McLean grew up saturated in Caribbean folklore in which myths of the Jamaican Nanny resonated across the then newly independent islands such as Trinidad and Jamaica (both achieved independence in 1962). Moreover, Nanny's symbolic status as a figure of anti-colonial struggle was inseparable from her gender: she was consistently claimed as the brave mother of resistance against slavery. These powerful mothers of resistance can be seen to contribute to a rich and evolving artistic tradition. Goddesses, witches and uncomfortable feminine archetypes have been reappropriated by some of the best known feminist artists working in Europe and the USA over the last four decades, including Nancy Spero, Carolee Schneemann, Louise Bourgeois and Cindy Sherman.⁹ McLean has appropriated this tradition to re-insert the enslaved Black woman into a real and symbolic setting. Her statuesque Nannys are composite female archetypes, celebrating a (partly) lost history of women's resistance to slavery.¹⁰

⁷ The Spanish called these free slaves 'maroons', derived from the word cimarron which means fierce or unruly. The Jamaican Maroons occupied a mountainous region of deep forests known as the Cockpit, where they constructed crude fortresses and followed cultural traditions derived from Africa and Europe. The figure of 'Nanny' (usually without a definite article) reputedly originally came from Ghana. Although there is little surviving information about the origins and activities of Queen Nanny, some useful research has been done by Karla Gottlieb and Mario Azevedo. For a summary see <https://www.eiu.edu/historia/Eberle2017.pdf>.

⁸ See Mavis Christine Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: a history of resistance, collaboration & betrayal*, 1990 (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press), and Lucille Mathurin Mair, *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies During Slavery* (University of the West Indies Press, 1995).

⁹ For a fuller discussion of this issue and the symbolic potential of women's bodies, see my catalogue essay 'Witches, Housewives and Mothers: Crossing (Irish) Borders in the Body Politic', in Fiona Barber (ed), *Elliptical Affinities*, Highlands Gallery, Drogheda, 2019-20, pp. 18-27.

¹⁰ As such these Nannys might also be seen to contribute to a reclaiming of the visibility of Black women within history and mythology. For example, Maud Sulter's series *Zabat* (1989), a series of photographs of Black women posing as the nine muses of mythology. See for example *Urania* in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/48638>).



Woven Bodies 1 (detail), 2020

Handmade hessian sacks from recycled and new materials, animal suture thread, branded wombs, screen print, cowrie shells.

Naming is another means of controlling and defining a workforce. Researching in the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in Brixton, McLean found indentures from the Gale Plantation, in which enslaved people were listed by first names (and as male or female, distempered, midwives, boilers, etc.) as part of the owners' chattels. This listing usually included the designations 'negro', 'mulatto', or 'Quadroon' according to the perceived degree of black or white; ethnicity was described as 'African' or 'Creole'. From these listings she selected the names printed above the wombs, which resemble decorative shapes scattered across the hanging sacks. All are printed in Helvetica Neue, a popular typeface on the original plantation sacks and a signifier of their commodity status. Many enslaved women were given anglicised names (such as Sophia, Charlotte, Grace, Priscilla, Esther) as part of their absorption into colonial culture and the eradication of their African heritage. Some others retained their African names, or hybrid versions

(such as Phibbah, Betty Bah), an indication, perhaps, of resistance to acculturation. The black, shadowy shapes of the wombs are achieved through a process of branding, echoing both the violent physical abuse (of the branding iron on the body) and the 'ownership' involved in the slave trade. Yet McLean seeks to reinstate some status originally denied to her subjects by adding the prefix 'MISS' - a title formerly denied to Black women - to her names, and by screen printing the uterus in gold onto the sackcloth. Expensive and coveted, gold helps to reframe the terms of this seemingly coarse patchwork hanging and the objects that surround it.

Female reproduction was itself an important source of value; it ensured an ongoing source of income for the plantation owners, hence the smaller sacks that McLean has stitched onto the wall hanging. These break the lines of stitching and reference the ubiquitous hessian sacks, some of which would have contained dead babies (whether stillborn, aborted, or from infanticide).¹¹ The desire to control women's reproductive and sexual functions was part of the ethos of colonial and Antebellum slave owners. As Stephanie Camp has argued, 'the slave body, most intensely women's, served as the "bio text" on which shareholders inscribed their authority and indeed their very mastery.'¹² Yet women's reproductive capacities were also often deployed by bondwomen as a means of resistance.¹³ McLean mediates this resistance through her use of crude hessian, quietly embellished with glitter, shining with double meaning.

Other objects heavy with historical meaning also adorn - or impinge upon - the sacks. Wire mesh obscures our view of the smaller wall hanging (*Woven Bodies 2*) as it references the fettering of enslaved communities and constraints on women's freedom. In contrast, small cream coloured cowrie shells form delicate trails suggesting ovaries on *Woven Bodies 1*, and rattle gently below a line of three hanging sacks branded with wombs (*Silence me not – me ah rise!*). Branded black on one side, they glisten with printed gold on the other. The branding has left parts of the hessian ruptured with holes, another process that helps to aestheticise an evocative display, rich in double meanings. Cowrie shells are replete with symbolic resonances as a substitute for money in parts of Africa, as jewellery when threaded into bracelets and necklaces, and as charms and symbols of the feminine. Cowries were a key currency in the eighteenth and nineteenth century trade for both slaves and gold, an historical elision that is nicely referenced in McLean's work.¹⁴

¹¹ See p. 5 below and footnote 13.

¹² Camp, 2004, p.67.

¹³ This form of resistance is explored in much of the recent scholarship on bondwomen. See, for example, Camp, 2004 and Jensen, 2006.

¹⁴ By the 18th century the cowrie had become the currency of choice along the trade routes of West Africa. It continued as a means of payment, also adopted by colonisers, until the early twentieth century.

Issues of social, economic and gendered value haunt her installation, quietly suffusing its aesthetic power.



Silence me not... me ah rise, 2020

Hessian sacks dyed with tea, gold screen print, black screen print, branding, brass strips and brass screws, dyed cowry shells, 18 & 24 carat gold beads, beaded gold wire, waxed metallic gold thread and acrylic.

An oversized black metal spider (*Anansi*) appears to scale one of the exhibition walls. Smaller spiders also meander across the large wall hanging. These mischievous arachnids reference the cultural symbolism of Anansi, a character from Akan folklore. In West African, African American and Caribbean folklore, Anansi often takes the form of a spider and is an inventive trickster, or god of knowledge of stories. In the postcolonial Caribbean, Anansi is often celebrated as an historic symbol of individualism and slave resistance, a mythical figure that had enabled enslaved

See M. Şaul (2004). 'Money in Colonial Transition: Cowries and Francs in West Africa.' *American Anthropologist*, 106(1), 71- 84.

Africans to establish a sense of continuity with their African past.¹⁵ As they scuttle across the hessian, these emblems of Black resistance remind the viewer of an oral history heavy in tales of loss and struggle. For an audience schooled in European art history, they may also evoke the French American artist Louise Bourgeois' series of huge metal spiders titled *Maman* (first cast in 1996); oversized symbols of maternal power and protection.

McLean's multi-layered installation is loaded with references that reaffirm the (often hidden) role of women in the history of Caribbean slavery. A row of twelve smaller sacks with laser-cut lettering on each that spells out 'Ar'n't I a Woman!', is displayed along the right-hand entrance wall. They were stitched together by McLean and embroidered by a women's collective local to her home, Walsall Black Sisters, many of whom are from Jamaican Windrush families. McLean deploys women's labour in the present post-imperial context to celebrate the struggles and achievements of their Caribbean ancestors in a colonial past. The central motif of the sturdy hessian sack, reduced here in scale, evokes not only the plantation container for sugar or coffee, but also poignant histories of infanticide, abortion and miscarriage - all too common in enslaved societies.¹⁶ Tiny bodies were often buried or hidden in sacks, a powerful signifier of women's control - or lack of control - over their reproductive functions and economic 'value'. And each sack is made with a threaded loop at the top, tied closed, like a lynching noose.

Repetition, or partial repetition, is another visual strategy deployed by McLean. What Briony Fer has described as a 'serial aesthetic'¹⁷ has been imaginatively adopted not simply to reinforce and heighten the semiotic power of the material image (sack, cowrie shell, uterus, etc.) but also to reveal an aesthetic power, a serial patterning that adds to the affective potential of the work. As in works by Bourgeois or American artist Eva Hesse, the intense, tactile nature of the materials, and their corporeal resonances, contribute to the effect - and affect - of repetition. McLean, however, rejects the 'modern' materials of latex or rubber often favoured by Bourgeois or Hesse (see, for example, Hesse's *Contingent*), using textiles that more directly reference her colonised subjects.

¹⁵ For example, 'Anansi stories' are Jamaican folk tales that were brought to Jamaica by Ashanti slaves and handed down through generations. For an excellent account of the roles and history of Anansi stories and folklore see Emily Zobel Marshall, *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance* (University of the West Indies Press, 2012).

¹⁶ See Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)

¹⁷ Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art After Modernism* (London and Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2004).



Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1969, sculptures, cheesecloth, latex, fibre glass

© The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

In *Silence me not – me ah rise!*, McLean again uses materials heavy with historical significance, giving each sack a bondswoman's name. In the process she liberates seriality from its minimalist associations and formulates her own 'decolonised' practice as a Trinidadian born artist working in a hybrid European context.¹⁸ The line of three hanging strips of hessian, suspended by threaded cowrie shells and gold beads, and imprinted with wombs, echo the serial strategies of Hesse, while also reinforcing the complex, labour intensive nature of McLean's practice. Each hanging sack is bordered by brass strips at the top and bottom. McLean herself milled the brass strips in a metal workshop. Each has twenty holes for the strings of shells and beads suspended from the ceiling and below the hessian. The tiny beads are plated in a mixture of 18 and 22 carat gold. Such delicate, value-laden materials help to embellish a female subject previously seen largely as a vessel for economic profit within a colonial marketplace. The artist originally planned to thread only dazzling 22 carat gold beads but the outbreak of coronavirus during the production process caused sourcing problems. The impact of coronavirus on the plans and schedules for

¹⁸ For a useful overview of recent debates on the need for a 'decolonising' of Art History, see Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, 'Decolonising Art History' in *Art History*, 43/1/February, 2020, pp. 8 – 66.

this exhibition remind us that the modern globalised world can have both positive and negative effects on attempts to retrieve and rewrite some of its most painful histories. The exhibition *Ar'n't I a Woman!* presents works that are both visually seductive and heavy in emblematic references. The multi-toned hessian surfaces; tinkling cowrie shells; decorative branded wombs; gold embellishments; and named figures both reveal - and conceal - the work of the human hand. These are intensely *handmade* works that both allure and challenge the viewer. Weaving, stitching, dyeing, screen printing and milling are the laborious processes that enable this installation to reconfigure and ventriloquise past activities adopted by bondwomen. They also contribute to a multilayered visual celebration of those intensely physical practices of resistance and survival that have characterised the history of slavery. While Colson Whitehead's slave was 'branded, not for the first or the last time' as she was fettered to her master, McLean's sacks are imaginatively reconceived and *re-branded* as part of an aestheticised resistance to the 'fettering' and cruel exploitations of that history.