

PROPERTY RELATIONS

David Bussel on Cameron Rowland at the ICA, London

In this year's March issue on "Property," we examined some of the theses within Critical Black Studies to show how contemporary ownership and accumulation are linked to historical expropriation, a colonialist principle of domination, and the slave trade. Few artists demonstrate the fact that these principles are firmly inscribed in Western aesthetics and philosophies as clearly as Cameron Rowland in his conceptual practice. His ICA exhibition in London has provided an appropriate occasion to show how profoundly modern international capitalism has been shaped by the systematic slave trade of the British Empire.

Although the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 respectively repealed both the right to traffic and the right to possess slaves, the ratification of these acts did not foreclose the right to "compensation" for the loss of said "property."¹ In Britain, the colonial "afterlives" of trade and enslavement, i.e., as property, persist through the political economy of abstract legal regimes that collectively reproduce socially dispossessed, racialized subjects. This history provides the foundation for Cameron Rowland's current exhibition at London's ICA.

In the accompanying pamphlet, the artist chronicles Britain's tentacular participation in the capture, detainment, and transport of peoples from West Africa to the New World colonies as human chattel, whose labor and capital as property returned to Britain in the form of commodities and profits within a triangular transatlantic circuit. As Rowland announces at the start of his text: "Abolition preserved the property established by slavery. This property is maintained in the market and the state."²

The artist continues, quoting from historical research, situating this history thus:

"The Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 encouraged a version of overseas empire based upon formal imperial institutions such as monopoly trading companies.... The Royal African Company [RAC] was designed to be central to this system." In 1660, Charles II chartered the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa to dig for gold in the Gambia. In 1663, the company was re-chartered to include the trade of slaves and, in 1672, renamed the Royal African Company. It was structured as a public-private company governed by Charles's brother James, Duke of York. [...] "The Royal African Company of England shipped more enslaved African [people] to the Americas than any other single institution during the entire period of the transatlantic slave trade."

Entitled "3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73" – the chapter citation of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act of Parliament under the reign of William IV – the exhibition employs a kind of comparative genealogical methodology in its presentation of historical and contemporary artifacts, documents, and financial mediations. Site- and context-specific objects and interventions are sparsely arrayed in such a fashion that, consequently, only augments the violent discursive and material continuities of their forms and effects in a freighted, visually arresting encounter with the viewer.

In the lower ground-floor exhibition space we find three historical objects: a closed, portable, mahogany writing desk (Credit; all exhibited works 2020), which served as a sort of mobile office where credit notes and letters were issued en route; a framed, two-guinea coin from 1664 (Guineas), made from African gold and imported



Cameron Rowland, *Pacotille*, 2020

Brass manillas manufactured in Birmingham, 18th century; glass beads manufactured in Venice, 18th century
103 × 68 × 3 cm (40 ½ × 26 ¾ × 1 ½ inches)

Rental

European goods traded for enslaved people were manufactured specifically for this purpose. Manillas were used as a one-directional currency, which Europeans would offer as payment but would never accept. The Portuguese determined the value of slave life at 12–15 manillas in the early 1500s.¹ Birmingham was the primary producer of brass manillas in Britain, prior to the city's central role in the Industrial Revolution. The British also used cheap beads acquired throughout Europe to buy slaves. Eric Williams describes the "triple stimulus to British industry" provided through the export of British goods manufactured for the purchasing of slaves, the processing of raw materials grown by slaves, and the formation of new colonial markets for British-made goods.² The production of European goods for the slave trade supported domestic manufacturing markets. British trade in West Africa was understood to be nearly 100% profit.

What renders the Negroe-Trade still more estimable and important is, that near Nine-tenths of those Negroes are paid for in Africa with British Produce and Manufactures only. . . . We send no Specie or Bullion to pay for the Products of Africa, but, 'tis certain, we bring from thence very large Quantities of Gold; . . . From which Facts, the Trade to Africa may very truly be said to be, as it were, all Profit to the Nation.³

Goods produced for the trade of slaves, which carried nearly no value in Europe, were called *pacotille*. *Pacotille* translates from French to English as "rubbish."⁴

1. A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, "The Major Currencies in Nigerian History," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 1 (December 1960): 146.
2. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 2nd ed. (1944; repr. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 52.
3. Malachy Postlethwayt, *The National and Private Advantages of the African Trade Considered*, 2nd ed. (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1746; London: William Otridge, Bookseller, 1772), 3. Citations refer to the Otridge edition.
4. Marie-Hélène Corréard, "pacotille," in *Pocket Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary: French-English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 594.

by the Royal African Company, and which, as a unit of currency, ushered in Britain's practice of the gold standard; and a tangle of brass manillas and glass beads (*Pacotille*), inexpensive, European-made "one-directional currency" for the purchase of slaves, and which, like other works by the artist, can only be rented and not sold, recoding the art market's "one-directional" trade in art and ownership. Each of these elements played an integral part in producing the spoils of the slave economy in Africa, an immensely "successful" and massively lucrative enterprise yielding "nearly 100% profit." Or, as the RAC's director, Malachy Postlethwayt, wrote in 1746:

What renders the Negroe-Trade still more estimable and important, is, that near Nine-tenths of those Negroes are paid for in Africa with British Produce and Manufactures only. ... We send no Specie or Bullion to pay for the Products of Africa, but, 'tis certain, we bring from thence very large Quantities of Gold; ... From which Facts, the Trade to Africa may very truly be said to be, as it were, all Profit to the Nation.

Rowland's exhibition is about the materialist conditions of racialized property relations, that is, the abstract relations between bourgeois private property and those of the state, whose laws and regulations reify it, made possible by settler colonial structures that enclose land and efface indigeneity. Here, as Chris Chen suggests, the category of "race" is codified such that "black chattel slavery in the United States constituted 'free' labour as white, and whiteness as unenslaveability and unalienable property."² Toward a critique of political economy, then, how does one abolish or

suspend racialized property relations as such? The answer for Rowland, perhaps, is by performatively withdrawing and extending one's own (artistic) labor negatively.

Mooring is a framed letter and contract from the Canal & River Trust of England and Wales to the artist, acknowledging Rowland's rental of a boat mooring for £2,710.50 per annum at Albert Dock in Liverpool, once a major global port for the slave trade. The mooring is located on the former site of Rathbone and Sons, a timber merchant whose raw materials, including mahogany, were extracted by slave labor, and who also supplied wood for the slave ship trade as well as to furniture makers: "This mooring has been rented for the purpose of not being used." Another work, entitled *probability of escape*, is installed along the walkway facing the lower ground-floor gallery, where three police car searchlights hang menacingly. These modern surveillance devices suggest how, from the late 17th century until today, laws protect private property over human life such that, in colonial times, any white property owner or other white person would "not be accountable" for the nocturnal killing of a fugitive slave or one in possession of stolen goods; the same holds true today in South Carolina, for example, for anyone who trespasses or steals.

By the late 18th century, the slave trade operated as a highly administered, financialized industry such that slaves were classed as a kind of double asset: as property in and of themselves, and as real estate – as any other part of the plantation and thus mortgageable. Therefore,

slaves simultaneously functioned as collateral for the debts of their masters, while labouring intergenerationally under the debt of the



Cameron Rowland
Behavioral Intervention, 2020
Officer monitor for probation, parole, detention

Electronic monitoring is used to track people. In the U.S., it is often a condition of probation, parole, home detention, and release from immigration detention. It is described as an alternative to incarceration. It is legally termed “partial confinement.” Electronic monitoring imposes curfews stipulating when the person being monitored may and may not leave their home, and exclusion zones stipulating where they can and cannot go. Electronic monitoring in the U.S. rose 140% between 2005 and 2015. If the terms of electronic monitoring are violated, the person being monitored may be “fully confined” in prison.

The officer monitor manufactured by BI Incorporated is “a portable, handheld receiver that detects the presence of HomeGuard or TAD bracelets from several hundred feet away. It enables officers to conveniently monitor clients from outside a home, work, school, or any location.”¹

1. BI Incorporated provides Behavioral Interventions® services. It is a GEO Group company.

master. The taxation of plantation products imported to Britain, as well as the taxation of interest paid to plantation lenders, provided revenue for Parliament and income for the monarch.

On the upper ground-floor galleries of the ICA’s leased building at 12 Carlton House Terrace – part of a street of residences commissioned by George IV to raise revenue for the Crown Estate – are a suite of mahogany doors and a handrail that provide entry and exit to rooms: a corridor and

a staircase, respectively. Encumbrance comprises these objects along with a series of framed legal documents in an otherwise “empty” room, having been mortgaged by the gallery to Encumbrance Inc., assumedly Rowland himself, for £1000 each. But as Rowland asserts,

These loans will not be repaid by the ICA. As security for these outstanding debts, Encumbrance Inc. will retain a security interest in these mahogany elements. This interest will constitute an encumbrance on the future

transaction of 12 Carlton House Terrace. An encumbrance is a right or interest in real property that does not prohibit its exchange but diminishes its value. The encumbrance will remain on 12 Carlton House Terrace as long as the mahogany elements are part of the building. As reparation, this encumbrance seeks to limit the property's continued accumulation of value for the Crown Estate.

In another room on the same floor is an arrangement of three works that, like the police car searchlights in the gallery below, contrast the history of private property from colonial times with that of the present through the interface of surveillance technology, which suggests the ways in which protection is administered and risk is harnessed and the brutal legal mechanisms that frame these procedures. They include *Probation Order Under 18 U.S.C. § 3607*, a framed US probation order form, and *Behavioral Intervention*, a police officer's monitor that surveils electronically "tagged" people on probation, parole or detention, practices that literally displace and externalize carcerality from the prison to the body as corporeal prison. These objects can be seen as iterative representations of the abiding carceral technologies and spatial relations of the African factory, fort, and barracoon, the Middle Passage ship, and the New World plantation. *Society* is a group of cattle brands, which like *Pacotille*, is only rented to a collector or institution but never sold, and relates to a colonial planter named Christopher Codrington, who bequeathed "his three plantations in Barbados to the Church of England. The Codrington plantations were operated by the Church to fund the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Enslaved people on

the Codrington plantations were branded with the word 'society'."

Through probing research, charged objects, and financial spatial interventions, Rowland's exhibition sets forth profound questions about the administered violence of property relations and their laws as adjuncts of power; the nuances of ownership and possession, including those of the artist's; and the asymmetrical subject positions they engender. If slavery is generative of and can be indexed through enduring property relations embedded in the state and racial capitalism, by extension, so too must it be generative of and indexed through Britain's populist imaginary, a pageant of empire and (economic) hegemony based upon a contrivance of nostalgia and amnesia to "reclaim" its obdurate sovereignty.

"Cameron Rowland: 3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73," ICA, London, January 29, 2020–TBC (exhibition will resume, and a new end date announced, when the ICA re-opens)

Notes

- 1 Compensation for planters and their creditors amounted to £20,000,000, then 40 percent of UK government expenditure. The fiscal debt of the UK taxpayer was only paid off in 2015 thanks to the financial instruments created for this purpose.
- 2 All quotes, unless otherwise noted, taken from Cameron Rowland, 3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73, exhibition pamphlet, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2020, unpaginated.
- 3 Chris Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism," *Endnotes*, no. 3 (September 2013), <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/chris-chen-the-limit-point-of-capitalist-equality>.