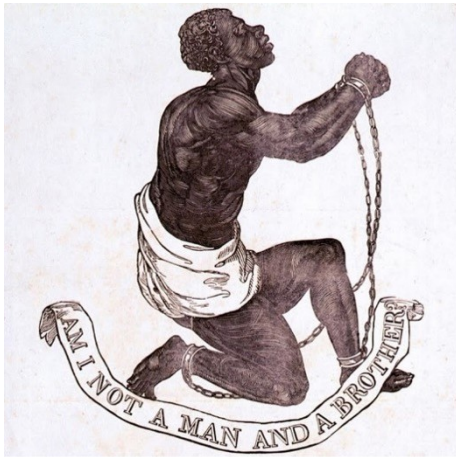


# Anti-slavery Art

## *Background notes*

Dr Emily Brady — 8 December 2021



**Josiah Wedgwood**, *“Am I Not A Man And A Brother?”*, as print and on sugar bowl, 1787.

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When we think of slavery, there are undoubtedly certain ideas and images that spring to mind. For many people, it is the image of the kneeling slave, chained hands raised in supplication, asking “Am I Not A Man And A Brother?” that informs their understanding of what slavery looks like. This iconic image, which became a significant visual logo for the American abolitionist movement, was designed by prominent white abolitionist Josiah Wedgewood as a medallion in 1787. It was reproduced countless times in varying capacities, from posters to teapots. Although its impact on the movement was significant, this image is intensely problematic. We see the man in this image as a passive victim, begging for freedom from a paternalistic external force. His semi-nakedness and chained hands and feet serve only to further exemplify his victimized status. It denies the enslaved any sort of independent agency.

Imagery such as this continues to complicate our visual representations of slavery in the modern context. As part of the activities to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in 2007, the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea used the image in banners above the exhibition area. In these banners, each individual logo represented one thousand slaves transported across the Atlantic. Scholars such as Geoffrey Cubit, Laurajane Smith and Ross Wilson have suggested that this approach “might be criticised for imaginatively reinforcing rather than undermined the commodification of African bodies that the slave trade itself had epitomized.” As we can see, usage of this image in historical memory of slavery is continues to spark criticism. Yet it carries a dangerous legacy with regard to modern slavery and human trafficking as well.

The image “Am I Not A Man And A Brother” equates slavery with passivity, chains, and subjugation. It is also racially coded, showing a black body in a state of enslaved subjugation.

In addition, the figure in this image is in a position in which he can ask for his freedom, whereas most slavery today is invisible. In the nineteenth century, slavery was easily recognisable, as the government sanctioned it until the American Civil War. Today, denying the enslaved the ability to speak out is intrinsic to their continued oppression. If we follow the image of slavery which Wedgewood presents to us, we will gain a hugely inaccurate idea of what slavery looks like today.



Rory Carnegie, *Invisible People*, <http://www.bjp-online.com/2018/01/carnegie-invisible-people/>, 2018.

Yet the legacies of these past representations persist today. In early 2018, The National Crime Agency launched a photo series called 'Invisible People.' This photographic exhibition by Rory Carnegie toured the country, travelling to several cities including Manchester, Belfast, Cardiff and London. One of the main objectives of this exhibition was to "portray the signs of slavery and exploitation." These images are intended to function as warnings to an audience, to help them recognise the signs of slavery in their everyday lives. In many of the interviews surrounding this campaign, photographer Rory Carnegie talks about his role working with trafficking survivors, stating:

*"Several years ago I worked on an extended project with young refugees, all without parents, helping them to take photographs and to visualise their feelings. When I was approached for this exhibition, it seemed like a natural extension of that work."*

Statements such as this are designed to add a degree of authenticity to the images presented. In reality, however, all of the people in this campaign are either actors or friends of the photographer. They are clearly staged and designed with theatricality in mind, rather than reality. In the above photograph, the viewer sees a woman, scantily clad under a jacket, lying on a mattress. That the aesthetics of this image were a priority in its creation can be evidenced by this quote:

*"I wanted the image to show how lonely and eventually numbing that experience is, and for that ugliness to be contrasted against the bright blue of the wig – a fancy dress item that we would usually associate with a fun event – but here is used as a disguise, perhaps of her own identity to herself - to further emphasise how unjust the situation is."*

The legacy of the image "Am I Not A Man Or A Brother" can be clearly seen here. The fact that the woman in this photograph is wearing a wig for no other reason than to create an artistic effect speaks to some skewed priorities in the composition of this image. Rather than observing reality, we see a fantastical imagining of a space in which slavery occurs. The "Am I Not A Man Or A Brother" was deliberately constructed in a way to draw sympathy from a white audience, and the image here was similarly constructed. The viewer is expected to not only sympathise with the woman in this image, but to learn from this depiction the realities of slavery.

In both of these images, we see figures in a state of undress in passive positions. Their disempowerment is evidenced in multiple ways: their lack of eye contact with the viewer, their submissive body language, and the positioning of the camera from the perspective of the perpetrator. This is compounded by the nakedness of all the figures. In an effort to convey vulnerability, the image creators risk creating highly sexualised imagery.

In addition, the background of the photograph is intentionally darkened. This is intended to make the situation feel all the more oppressive and bleak; the viewer feels the despair in a situation where even natural light is restricted, and their gaze is focussed closer on the figure within the picture. Therefore, the horrors of slavery are placed ever closer on the bodies of the victims, rather than the perpetrators or the complicit consumers. In this way, it is the suffering of the victims that are presented to the viewers for consumption rather than those responsible.



Unknown photographer, *Sojourner Truth*, date unknown.



In the nineteenth century, some of the most empowering abolitionist imagery came from survivors of slavery themselves. Sojourner Truth, for example, was an abolitionist who survived slavery, and selling portraits was a key part of her strategy. Truth's carte de visites (photographs) were branded with a recognisable slogan that identified them as hers, saying "I sell the shadow to support the substance." Augusta Rohrbach wrote of Truth that her "command of her image through her active use of iconography, legal protection, and marketing exposes Truth in her various roles as artful purveyor, producer, and product." Truth actively shaped the reproduction of her image and engaged with the photographic process at every stage. Her use of props, and the way she combined the "garb of Quaker womanhood" with a head wrap which "references an African past" asserted her dignity whilst maintaining her identity as a Black woman.



**Efe Bella**, courtesy of Voice of Freedom, 2018.

But what does this mean for the present? As in the past, some of the most empowering and effective imagery has been created by survivors of modern slavery themselves. Voice of Freedom is an organisation which has dedicated itself to survivor-generated photography. It is a British not for profit organisation, led by activist Leila Segal.

It takes into account two stages of photography – the choosing and framing of subjects, and the use of the resulting images. The image included here is from a series with ten Nigerian women who were trafficked through Libya to Italy. The photographer survivor of this image captioned her image by saying:

*"This how we sit when we are transported. This is how we sit in Libya; we don't go out. In the truck. Always. In the Lampedusa [boat] this is how we sit for the whole journey. They are moving you from here to here, and this is how you have to sit, so many people together. In this position it is very bad. It is like being a slave. In the boat, if I had fallen in I would never had survived."*

By focussing on survivor's experiences, we gain a new understanding of what trafficking looks like and what they had to endure in order to survive. Through this image, we get a sense how the simple act of sitting can represent something horrific without having to show it. We also see portrayals that are symbolic of their suffering without having to portray it in a way that re-enacts their trauma.

By examining these images, we have seen how interpretations of slavery in the past have informed its presentation today. Yet its not just images of slavery that are affected by this – there are countless genres of imagery that are informed directly by the images that are taken before. Images may be taken with the best of intentions, but ultimately play into ideas that are no longer relevant. Some of the solutions to these problems, lie in the same place they did in the past – with the people who experienced slavery themselves.

Can you think of any images that you have encountered, and how you may now understand them differently?

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