INTRODUCTION
THE PRACTICE OF MNEMONIC AESTHETICS

I spent years looking around the world trying to find slave ship pieces…as almost like a religious relic. [They] are really the only tangible evidence that these people existed.
—Lonnie G. Bunch III, director, National Museum of African American History and Culture (fig. I.1)

The multimedia installation La Bouche du Roi, or the Mouth of the King, was created by Romuald Hazoumé of the Republic of Benin between 1997 and 2005 (see fig. I.3). It is named after a well-known site of memory on the coast of Benin from which African captives were transported during the transatlantic slave trade with the blessing, or rather the avarice, of the king, and the collusion of African, European, and American traders. The artwork comprises 304 plastic petroleum canisters made to resemble masks, with the spout serving as a mouth and the handle as the nose. These dark plastic, bulbous canisters are arranged in rows forming the shape of the now iconic, schematic engraving of a slave ship successfully deployed by British abolitionists in the late eighteenth century to shed light on the horrors of the slave trade in order to build parliamentary support for its cessation. In Hazoumé’s installation, each mask represents a living person with a name, a voice, and individual beliefs while hidden microphones whisper their presence in the Yoruba language. Painted symbols and small objects affixed to the canisters, such as ibeji, carved wooden figures that represent the souls of deceased newborn twins, reiterate Yoruba religious and cultural beliefs and the orishas or deities to whom the enslaved might have prayed. Strategically placed between the masks following the pattern of the schematic template are cowrie shells, rifles, tobacco, beads, spices, and liquor bottles, which reference the trade goods that would have been used to barter for human beings. In my interview with the artist in March 2007 at the October Gallery in London, Hazoumé told me that he had seen pictures of Description of a Slave Ship (1789), the abolitionist print after which his installation is modeled, in textbooks and tourism brochures (fig. I.2). It was a familiar image, he said, in certain parts of the Republic of Benin, including Porto-Novo, where he lives, owing to the burgeoning commerce in heritage tourism and the UNESCO-sponsored slave routes project, both commercial ventures that have increased awareness about the shores of the Republic of Benin as important sites of memory.
I.2


of the transatlantic slave trade. Providing a contemporary context for Hazoumé’s slave ship is a video narrated by the artist discussing the treacherous, illegal gasoline trade from Nigeria to Benin. Still photographs from the video, contrasting individual motorcyclists weighed down by hazardous fuel canisters with gorgeous beaches of the mouth of the River Porto Novo, illustrate the devastating lingering effects of centuries of economic, social, and racial oppression (fig. I.3). The darkened exhibition space creates an ominous yet somber mood for the viewer, providing a place of reflection and commemoration.

La Bouche du Roi was acquired by the British Museum to mark the 2007 Bicentenary of the Parliamentary Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Act by the United Kingdom. The installation was on view at the British Museum in London from March 22 to May 13, 2007, prior to being sent on a carefully orchestrated tour to cities and institutions that were historically significant to the slave trade and its abolition: Hull, Liverpool, Bristol, Newcastle, and the Horniman Museum in London. That large-scale installation used Description of a Slave Ship to enter into a conversation between the past of the slave trade and the present-day corruption and loss of life that takes place along the route of the illegal gasoline trade between Nigeria and Benin.
I.3
During the bicentenary commemoration of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act by the United Kingdom, *Description of a Slave Ship* was at the center of several national and international commemorative events. It was featured in print form in numerous exhibitions around the country and even made part of the graphic imagery of postage stamps issued by the Royal Mail to mark the bicentenary (fig. I.4). The endeavors to enable this image to stand as a marker for the memory of the Middle Passage and the graphic violence of the transatlantic slave trade against black and white people vary in scale, scope, and intent. In recent years, several attempts have been made to revisit *Description of a Slave Ship*, to embody it, to reinvent it, to memorialize it. At Durham University in the United Kingdom, 274 school-age children commemorated the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act on July 13, 2007, by participating in a reenactment of *Description of a Slave Ship* on Palace Green in Durham City between the Castle and the Cathedral. Wearing black trousers and red T-shirts printed with rows of black figures, they laid themselves down on a full-size print-out of the most recognizable bullet-shaped section of *Description of a Slave Ship* to, in the words of Education Outreach Officer Sarah Price, “have a sense of what the stifling space was like in the hold, to know the sufferings of African captives in the confines of dank slave ships.” Aerial photographs taken of the scene recorded the life-size public performance of this unforgettable image.
while reinforcing the exacting technology of vision that has structured the visual empathy of *Description of a Slave Ship*, thereby reproducing the same way of seeing that the image has demanded for more than two hundred years. Not unlike the touring presentation of Hazoumé’s *La Bouche de Roi*, this was one of many times the public performance of *Description of a Slave Ship* was reenacted in the United Kingdom that year, revealing a practice of mnemonic aesthetics, a process of ritualized remembering, underlying contemporary presentations of the art of slavery.

I begin with a selection of works from the 2007 bicentenary that use *Description of a Slave Ship* to start a conversation about the practice of mnemonic aesthetics and its crucial relationship with what I call the *slave ship icon*, the most enduring image from the history of transatlantic slavery. In this book, I trace a visual genealogy of the *slave ship icon* in the minds, memories, and creative work of black artists and their allies in the twentieth century and today. Throughout history, poets, painters, orators, and later, photographers, installation artists, performance artists, and sound artists have employed mnemonic strategies that contribute to a sustained and recognizable practice of remembrance in African diaspora visual culture. Without a doubt, the slave ship stands as the most prominent visual metaphor for the historical memory of the Middle Passage. As Paul Gilroy writes, “The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons,” serving as a lens through which we may, as he says, “focus attention on the Middle Passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts.”

The image I call the *slave ship icon* began as the official British abolitionist plan of the slave ship *Brooks*—a schematic representation of the crowded lower deck of the slave ship’s human cargo hold. When it was first created in England in 1788, the striking schematic engraving *Description of a Slave Ship* exposed the underbelly of a commercial vessel bearing human cargo, depicting the means of transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas via the Middle Passage, one of the formative experiences of the African diaspora. In studying this image, we find that it has had at least two lives. The British abolitionists who created it used it as a political print—a visual weapon—in their fight to end the transatlantic slave trade. The artists, engravers, and printers who modified and distributed it were white men working primarily in Europe and North America. The political and propagandistic activity surrounding the slave ship icon was particularly dynamic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, up until the abolition of both the slave trade and slavery itself. What followed was a period of dormancy, perhaps of apparent death.

Then, beginning with the New Negro Arts Movement (a.k.a. the Harlem Renaissance), the slave ship icon underwent a process of rebirth. In this second life, the slave ship icon was (and continues to be) reappropriated, symbolically repossessed, by the descendants of those who were the subject of the image, by diasporic Africans, that is, by black Atlantic artists and their allies. It has since come to have a
special place in the souls of those black folk who descend from that forced migration, and it has proven to be one of the most powerful images of the last 230 years. In looking for comparable images in Western culture, one must turn to such iconic subjects as the crucifixion. Undoubtedly, the crucifixion offers a compelling parallel, for both images have been repeatedly rendered and reworked over the centuries, but they simultaneously embody death and rebirth. The slave ship icon frequently has been likened to a coffin and to a womb. It is a site of death, of dying Africans, and of new life, of a people who would persevere in the face of slavery and unspeakable cruelty to become a free people who helped define the modern era.

Since the beginning of the New Negro Arts Movement, visual artists working in cosmopolitan metropoles around the black Atlantic rim—the coasts that circumscribe the passage from Africa to the Americas to western Europe—have reimagined the slave ship icon in their works. Miguel Covarrubias, Amiri Baraka, Betye Saar, Romare Bearden, Keith Piper, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Godfried Donkor, Hank Willis Thomas, and Romuald Hazoumé have taken hold of the slave ship icon in their works of book illustration, painting, theater, performance, installation, printmaking, photography, and film. These artists have redeployed the slave ship icon as a symbolic marker, making it central to their works as they relate the Middle Passage to their historical origins as well as their present moment. Public historians and exhibition designers at museums and memorials alike also have called upon its architectural schematic as a kind of blueprint for designs of installations that seek to tell the story of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and empire.

The slave ship icon has remained a persistent phenomenon in contemporary culture here in the United States and throughout the black Atlantic. It appears with remarkable frequency in fashion, film, and digital media as well as in works of fine art. It has been a favored design for T-shirts that recast the history of slavery in cataclysmic, unforgiving terms, with the slogans “African Holocaust” (fig. I.5) or “Never Forgive, Never Forget.” Posters protesting the prison industrial complex and the rise of global capitalism have featured the plan of the slave ship as a visual reminder not only of the way things used to be but also as a portent of the future. The plan of the slave ship seems to have inexhaustible uses in digital space as well, inching across the opening page of the Keith Piper’s Relocating the Remains CD-ROM and website (2000) and appearing on countless other websites and blogs about African American and African diaspora history and culture. Even as the disaster of Hurricane Katrina unfolded in late summer 2005, some political and cultural commentators noted how residents of New Orleans stranded on Interstate 10 brought to mind images of the slave ship icon. In a live interview with reporter Anderson Cooper of CNN, the Reverend Jesse Jackson remarked, “Today I saw five thousand African Americans on the I-10 causeway desperate, dehydrated, babies dying. It looked like Africans in the hull of a slave ship” (fig. I.6). In a more recent and recurring tragedy at sea (fig. I.7), where thousands of African migrants attempt to reach the shores of Europe in makeshift boats, aerial photographs and installations by artists, such as Hazoumé, use the slave ship icon to position and/or to lend a certain urgency to their depictions. Even illustrated...
I.5 Bernie Staggers posing with the African Holocaust T-shirt designed by Daryl McRay, Nubian, New York, 1999, showing the slave ship icon and other popular images from the history of slavery, New Haven, Connecticut.

I.6 Thousands of residents wait in the rain on Interstate 10 outside of New Orleans to be moved to shelters, Thursday, September 1, 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

I.7 June 7, 2014—Mediterranean Sea: Italian navy rescues asylum seekers traveling by boat off the coast of Africa.
I.8 Above
Two-page spread from Felicity’s World, American Girl doll book.

I.9 Left
Robert Croslin, Slave Ship Bracelet, 24-carat gold, 10 inches, worn by Dr. David C. Driskell.

I.10 Below

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children's books published for the American Girl doll franchise have illustrated an early version of the slave ship icon to discuss the life of Felicity, a young girl whose lifetime is set on a plantation during slavery (fig. I.8). Dr. David Driskell, the venerable historian of African American art, owns a gold bracelet designed by Robert Croslin of Hyattsville, Maryland, which he regularly wears (fig. I.9). At Swann Galleries in New York annual auctions of African Americana held since 1998 have sold examples of the slave ship icon taken from abolitionist tracts and books. In the February 2010 auction, three different versions were offered for sale with estimates ranging from $300 to $2,500 (fig. I.10). Regardless of commercialization, this image continues to inflict a psychic impact on the black and white people who wear it, view it, and in other ways consume it.

Despite the evident and ongoing generative power of this image, its visual and cultural history, told from the point of view of art history and African American studies, has remained largely untold until now. What about the graphic quality of the slave ship icon enables it to continue to have resonance for us today? What has compelled artists and curators to use it as a visual memory aid and a teaching tool? Why is there an urgent need for ordinary people to attempt to embody it, to revisit the terror it represents, to reenact its profound silence and pain? How has the symbolic possession of the past through the use of the slave ship icon shaped an artistic practice of mnemonic aesthetics among an increasing number of African diaspora artists, architects, and cultural innovators? In this first-ever art-historical study to illustrate the significance of this image in the black Atlantic imagination, I have set out to answer these questions. By unpacking the contents of the hold, so to speak, we can begin to understand how the slave ship icon has stood as a template for the historical memory of the Middle Passage for visual artists around the black Atlantic.

**THE BLACK ATLANTIC**

This enduring image served to galvanize the formation of African diaspora identity and aesthetic practice in the second half of the twentieth century and today in a process that hinges on a ritualized politics of remembering that I call mnemonic aesthetics. The parameters of this study are mapped out by the artistic, geographic, and philosophical definitions of the black Atlantic, a redemptive space in which the slave ship icon developed, traveled, and was eventually reclaimed by African diaspora artists and their allies. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson first charted this discursive space in his pioneering work on Afro-Atlantic artistic exchanges, circulations, and traditions, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art* (1983). In that work, he asserted, “since the Atlantic slave trade, ancient African organizing principles of song and dance have crossed the seas from the Old World to the New” and went on to show how the same was true for art:

Aspects of the art and philosophy of the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Republic of Bénin; the Bakongo of Bas-Zaïre and neighboring Cabinda, Congo-Brazzaville, and Angola; the Fon and Ewe of the Republic of Bénin and Togo; the Mande of
Male and neighboring territory; and the Ejagham of the Cross River in southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, have come from sub-Saharan Africa to the western hemisphere.\(^9\)

Thompson’s notion of the black Atlantic was expanded and reaffirmed in later works like *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (1993) and influential essays such as “The Song That Named the Land: The Visionary Presence of African-American Art” (1989).\(^{10}\) These works and the exhibitions, artists, and musicians they have inspired remain pivotal for shaping the field of African diaspora art history and for the ways in which they discursively map the black Atlantic through a ritual return to Africa from the Americas and back again in the performance, percussive, musical, and visual traditions of black people, suggesting spiritual, aural, oral, and visual connections that are affirmed in works of art today and in years past.

Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy’s assertion that the slave ship connected the points of the black Atlantic world is also an essential part of the framework in which this study operates:

> It should be emphasized that ships were the living means by which the points within the Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces between the fixed places that they connected. Accordingly they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. They were something more—a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production.\(^{11}\)

Gilroy’s formulation of the black Atlantic, charted in his seminal work the *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, has given shape to this book and its insistence on how mnemonic strategies influence cultural practices and their waves of resurgence, their ebbs and flows in and out of cosmopolitan centers around the Atlantic rim. His incisive claim that the slave ships were “a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production” is further affirmed in the works of art produced by contemporary black artists and their allies as they interrogate, redeploy, and imagine the eighteenth-century engraving that is the subject of this study.

**THE PRACTICE OF MNEMONIC AESTHETICS**

Naturally, art-historical inquiry into the visual culture of slavery is often chronologically bound to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when most of the imagery of slavery and the slave trade was produced. By recognizing the vital role of memory in the works and working habits of contemporary artists, the conversation can be extended into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Contemporary artists employ a practice of remembering as a creative strategy—a mnemonic aesthetics.

In a purposeful, artistic process that I have called *symbolic possession of the past*, contemporary African American and African diaspora artists have found it necessary to reach back in time to reclaim important emblems and icons of history as a...
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way of understanding their relationship to the present. Practicing a form of mnemonic aesthetics, they reinterpret the symbols of the past to focus on the unfolding of black history, identity, and culture.

To be sure, the use of visual and literary metaphors to recreate the memory of the Middle Passage has been one of the defining characteristics of black Atlantic artistic practice. Beginning with the slave narrative, filtering through the autobiographical novel, and taking hold of the literature of migration, the memory of slavery has been used as a strategy for reclaiming the past, a tool of resistance, and a means of reinforcing personal and group identity. Contemporary visual artists recalling the historical memory of slavery rely on images, testimony, and archival records that evoke the pain, suffering, and gruesome details of the experience of slavery, but at the same time hint at the strength and perseverance necessary to survive, in Gilroy’s words, its “ineffable sublime terror.” These artists often work and rework, reimagine and reinterpret the material sources they use as a base. By making ritual sojourns to the past, visual artists exercise the same sense of responsibility for their history that Toni Morrison has identified in the work of African American writers. As she notes, “Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experiences into art.”

The ritualized politics of remembering—which I call mnemonic aesthetics—is a key cultural practice of artists of the African diaspora today. This practice both rehearses and privileges the fragile and fleeting associations of memory and forgetting. Based on repetition and rhythm, with references to the mechanical reproduction of ephemera, the aural and visual shape of sonic communication, and the seriality of film and postmodernist practices of installation and performance, mnemonic aesthetics “adopt a variety of forms” according to film theorist Vivian Sobchack, such as “rote quotation, duplication, appropriation, cyclical recurrence or the repeated use of images, objects, and sounds; rhythmic and repetitious patterning of images, objects, sounds and music whose modes can be ritualistic, mantric, or spiritual.” These aesthetic strategies of repetition and rhythm are mobilized in a concentrated effort to keep hold of a memory that threatens to disappear. It is no wonder, perhaps, that mnemonic aesthetics was first born out of the age of mechanical reproduction and later reborn in the postmodernist practices of performance, installation, new media, and sound art.

The practice of mnemonic aesthetics further reveals how artists have found it important to insist on their connection to the history of slavery, so that present generations can understand its contemporary ramifications for the processes of identity formation. This strategy of making history tangible and present is vital to the practice of remembrance, identified by Walter Benjamin as key for the survival of oppressed peoples, as a safeguard against the recurrence of unspeakable crimes. To be sure, as French historian Pierre Nora has pointed out, “The passage of memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history.” Artists working in this tradition of remembrance mark the points of pain and suffering or strength and resistance as loci of collective memory and means of building group identity. For the artists of the African
diaspora, this tradition of remembrance is constituted in such themes as the Middle Passage, lynching, rape, plantation slavery, racial violence, and slave revolts. Of these themes, the Middle Passage, marking the painful origins of the African diaspora in the transatlantic slave trade, is one to which artists have returned with passionate frequency.

**WHAT MAKES AN ICON?**

How does a cheaply made political print become an artifact, and then an icon? This process moved along two interrelated trajectories. First, artists and engravers subjected the image to a constant, if uneven process of refinement and transformation. They redrew it in response to changing circumstances and political strategies in the struggle to end the slave trade; those who created and subsequently re conceived the image often had strong ideas, more or less explicitly articulated, on how it should function politically and aesthetically. In many respects, the original plan of the slave ship was an “anti-art” image. Its creators recognized that it was a brutal, painful, and political image, a calculated outrage, even an obscenity. It certainly differed from many of the decorative, satirical, narrative, or sentimental prints and engravings based on well-known paintings that enlivened middle-class homes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as works by William Hogarth, Isaac Cruikshank, or George Morland. And yet within little time, as the image achieved its reproductive and polemical zenith, this is exactly what happened: Quakers and other members of the abolitionist movement and their sympathizers began hanging the image in their homes.

We must consider the ways in which the slave ship icon affected people who saw it posted as a broadside or printed in a tract in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as those who experience it today. This image tore at the hearts of many who saw it, and this effect was greatly ramified by the revolution in printing technology occurring at roughly the same time. An image of such power inevitably exceeded the narrow purposes of illustration. It became a political weapon that was appropriated for a variety of causes. Eventually it was used not just to advocate for the end of the slave trade, its initial purpose, but the end of slavery itself. In a simultaneous, unlikely reversal, Swedish-born naturalist Carl Bernhard Wadström in his Essay on Colonization also used it to promote African colonization as an alternative to the slave trade in the late eighteenth century. The slave ship icon was conceived at a time of great change that shaped the modern era: from the age of enlightenment to the era of colonialism, from mercantilism to industrialization. None of these historical developments escaped its effect or failed to influence its reception.

Refer to “that image of the slave ship” in conversation with just about anyone, and they will know what you are talking about; he or she will surely conjure some vague facsimile of the image in their head. In this study, I refer to this almost universally known image as the _slave ship icon_. The word _icon_ comes to us from the ancient Greek _eikon_, meaning image or picture, but it has a deeper significance in both the sacred and secular realms. In the history of Byzantine art, _icon_ refers to a painting of a holy person or one of the traditional scenes from Orthodox
Christianity, the religion of the Byzantine Empire. Byzantine icon paintings were placed in the sacred space of the church in order for parishioners to develop a connection to the holy persons and events they depicted. The pictorial language of icon paintings provided the symbolic reinforcement of the liturgical teachings meant to create and sustain belief. In other words, icons provided a link between earthbound believers and the divine, and between the material and the spiritual worlds. The icon thus became integral to liminal space, between these two worlds, as well as a transportive vessel, moving between two continents.

The image of the slave ship functions in some ways as a religious icon. It becomes the de facto but unacknowledged icon of Quakers and radical Christians, who generally banned religious images from their practice of worship and from their homes. Rejecting traditional Christian icons, they created their own contemporary versions. The slave ship icon was, according to a leading figure in the fight to end the slave trade in Britain and member of the London Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade Thomas Clarkson, “designed to give the spectator an idea of the sufferings of the Africans in the Middle Passage.”16

The enslaved African, individually and collectively, experienced some of the same ordeals and tortures that were suffered by Christ. Just as the crucifix, as a powerful icon, serves as the focal point of Christian beliefs and represents Jesus’s sacrifice to redeem humanity, the slave ship icon was made by abolitionists to convert nonbelievers to a cause that was deeply religious, humanitarian, and moral—of which the need to abolish the slave trade was but one immediate substantiation. Nor should we be surprised to find that the slave ship icon has continued religious resonance in the twentieth century and today. In 2000, a new and radically revised rose window was installed at the Chicago-based New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church in which the torso of an Africanized Christ figure is emblazoned with the crowded lower deck of the slave ship icon.

An analysis of the formal elements of Description of a Slave Ship reveals the semiotic aspects of its iconicity and begins to answer the question of why this image, of the many images of slaves and the slave trade produced and circulated during slavery’s long history, has been so lasting in our imagination. The repeating visual details—the shackles; the sexualized female bodies; the compacted bodies in discomfort; the uniform, silent, anonymous bodies; the keenly planned distribution of the bodies within the compartments—were purposefully and systematically employed to generate the icon’s semiotic effectiveness and remain meaningful visual testimonies to the system of New World slavery.

Equally and perhaps more significant than the vivid presences in Description of a Slave Ship are the absences—the glaring omission of sailors and slave traders, and more subtle absences of affective detail. Of course, what remains completely invisible, perhaps too great to be seen at all, are the corporate and individual investors in the slave trade, the governments that supported the commerce, the African traders who supplied their countrymen and women, and the church that condoned the trade. These absences signal a historical amnesia that artists of the twentieth century and today find it necessary to restore.
The formal elements that are there have become buoys, beacons, and anchors for visual artists, writers, and cultural workers in the twentieth century and today as they lay claim to and assert control over their past. It is precisely this combination of visual presence and absence that has helped make the plan of the slave ship so generative in the black Atlantic imagination. As we shall see, these absences have left spaces for other narratives to be told. The slave ship icon becomes complete only with the added perspective of the viewer. It calls out to the viewer to make it whole.

THE ICON AND AFRICAN DIAPORSA ART

In his seminal study, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*, art historian Robert Farris Thompson lays out a theory of icons in black Atlantic expressive culture, particularly that of the Yoruba in dance, ritual, and movement. This work has informed my own study in its insistence on the ways in which icons of the body convey meaning through the consolidation and refinement of expressive forms in rituals of repetition and renewal. Thompson notes, “The icons of African art are…frequently attitudes…of the body, arranged in groupings which suggest a grand equation of stability and reconciliation.”

Thompson’s relationship of the icon to the body also suggests the spiritual nature of icons when performed in the Yoruba sense or when worshiped or painted in the Byzantine sense. That icons in the Yoruba sense are “attitudes” further reinforces this point. As Thompson explains, “Thus, icons of elevated happening and command, standing, sitting, and riding on horseback, seem balanced by icons of service or submission: kneeling, supporting with the hands, and balancing loads on the head.” He points out that these icons of bodily motion or attitude appear and reappear in the carved arts of the Yoruba as well. Moreover, these icons of dance or performance and icons of religious images possess a hypnotizing power—a control over the imagination that can produce a transcendental state through ritual repetition, performance, and practice—linking the performer or painter to a higher state of consciousness. “The intensification of iconic resonance by simplification of expressive means,” Thompson suggests, is a key mode in which icons convey meaning in African and African diaspora art.

While *Description of a Slave Ship* was created in a late eighteenth-century Western tradition of printmaking deeply indebted to Enlightenment-era attitudes and ideas of scientific and economic measurement, in the hands of artists and cultural producers of the late twentieth century and today it has been revitalized and transformed through a series of mnemonic practices that reference Thompson’s notion of “iconic resonance” as well as theories and practices in African American music, film, literature, and performance. Visual artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa talks about African diaspora creative transformation as situated in the “space of treatment rather than the space of material.” He offers the example of John Coltrane’s repeated performance of Rogers and Hammerstein’s *My Favorite Things*:

What interests me is how Coltrane’s improvisations never seek to entirely erase the original melodic material….Coltrane keeps his transformations and the
original sources equally evident. That’s because it’s not primarily about the point of departure or the point of arrival, but the spaces between these points. This transformation is related to what Huston Baker Jr. calls the deformation of mastery, which transforms an obscene situation into a “single self/cultural expression.” The artist Betye Saar, for instance, does this in her series of assemblage constructions that reclaim and empower the old stereotype of Aunt Jemima with a new sense of agency and purpose. Although the creators of Description of a Slave Ship were purposely revealing an obscene situation in order to destroy it, they could not transform it in the terms suggested by Jafa or Baker. They created the “material” but they could not turn the obscene into black self-expression. As Baker metaphorically describes this process, it is “the tunneling out of the black holes of possession and ‘tight places’ of old clothes, into, perhaps, a new universe.”

The focus on the “space of treatment” or the “deformation of mastery” is also closely aligned with literary historian Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s consideration of African American literary aesthetics, with his emphasis on reversal and repetition with a signal difference. In his seminal study, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates declares, “The texts in the Afro-American canon can be said to configure into relationships based on the sorts of repetition and revision inherent in parody and pastiche.” In this influential work, Gates theorized a uniquely African American practice of “signifying” as a creative tradition of revision found in the slave narrative. As he elaborates, “Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience.” This has obvious parallels in the visual arts and is particularly relevant when the question of the black experience turns to the Middle Passage. With the slave ship icon, the people whose ancestors were the object of the drawing take symbolic possession of the image in the twentieth century and make it their own.

The artists’ works and exhibitions discussed in parts II and III of this book demonstrate the afterlife of the slave ship icon and what Marianne Hirsch has termed the postmemory—how “the memories of traumatic events live on to mark the lives of those who were not there to experience them.” Many of the artists I interviewed have alluded to a ritual need to refashion and reform this image. Frequently, the works they have produced are not singular; rather, they exist in series, installations, or successive works on the same theme completed over a period of time, revealing a practice of mnemonic aesthetics. For example, the installation and video artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons first reimagined the slave ship icon in the installation *Tra…*, short for the Spanish *travesía*, or crossing, exhibited at the Havana Biennale in 1991. The following year, she redeployed the slave ship icon in the installation and performance *The Seven Powers Come by the Sea* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. In both works, the artist marked life-size wooden planks resembling coffins with stick figures in the schematic layout of the slave ship icon. The act of using and then *reusing* or, in the words of Arthur Jafa, “shaping and...
reshaping" their own work might be likened to the kind of ritualized aesthetic practice that defines mnemonic aesthetics. This is especially true of the artist Willie Cole, who uses the scorch of an iron to make prints that resemble the slave ship icon and refer to rituals of scarification, on the one hand, and branding, on the other.

The idea of ritual associated with mnemonic aesthetics refers back to the dimension of spiritual conversion of the icon. Underlying these practices is a strong sense of duty: the responsibility to create works that recall the history of the artists' African origins and to ensure that this history's significance is never forgotten. They use memory as an aesthetic tool and organizing principle to emphasize recurrent themes that have shaped the African diaspora: the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, the longing for Africa, and racial violence directed at black people, to name a few. In this way, individual works of art make visible and commemorate the stories of pain and suffering, strength and resistance, or triumph and celebration that reconnect these artists to their roots. The practice of mnemonic aesthetics takes a further cue from Paul Gilroy, who argues that the artistic urge to return to the memory of slavery is a way of "organizing the consciousness of the racial group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity—the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performative, that are required to invent, maintain and renew identity." Thus, mnemonic aesthetics aid in identity formation through visual art production, dissemination, and display. Their projects constantly relate a sense of communal diasporic history to their own personal experience and continually carry on a conversation between individual and group experience that is part of the process of shaping identity, affirming group belonging, and marking a sense of temporal and geographical place. This process of relating the present and personal to the historic and communal is a validating process, one that reasserts both the presence and existence of the artist and the African diaspora in time and space.

**BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SECTIONS OF THE BOOK**

Part I, “Sources/Roots,” establishes the slave ship icon as the preeminent image of the abolitionist movement in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England and America. It offers a brief history of the original image, including its political and historical context, conception, distribution, and initial use. It provides the reader with the analytical tools to understand the historical significance of the slave ship icon, its visual organizing principles, and the political and artistic movements that propelled its widespread circulation around the Atlantic rim. Part II, “Meanings/Routes,” considers the postmemory of the slave ship icon in the context of three of the major artistic movements of the twentieth century: the New Negro Arts Movement (1919–29), the Black Arts Movement in the United States (1965–76), and the Black Arts Movement in the United Kingdom (1981–95). The third and final section of the book, “Rites/Reinventions,” examines the continued presence of the slave ship icon in our daily lives: in the built environment of museums and monuments; in the popular culture of T-shirts, jewelry, film, and body adornment; and in performance, installation art, and art that informs and is informed by
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religious practice. Here I show how mnemonic aesthetics influence contemporary vernacular culture and political strategies of reparations as well as forms of religious worship. This section of the book discusses the urge to inhabit the psychic if not physical space that the slave ship icon suggests.

How has the slave ship icon come to so richly enfold and ignite the black diaspora’s imagination about their shared history of transformation? In providing an art-historical timeline, a consideration of the ways the slave ship icon has been appropriated and reimagined, adopted for different artistic purposes, and ritually returned to again and again, my book reveals salient aspects of contemporary African American and African diaspora art practices and canon formation. The practice of mnemonic aesthetics is indeed an artistic practice of survival; like the Sankofa bird, these artists are engaged in a process of “go back and retrieve it,” gathering up the lessons of history and refashioning, reimagining their emblems for their present moment, if not for the future.

THE 2007 BICENTENARY AND THE PRACTICE OF MNEMONIC AESTHETICS

The tour of Romuald Hazoumé’s La Bouche de Roi to six carefully chosen venues around the United Kingdom from March 22, 2007, to March 1, 2009, charts an orchestrated program of national absolution, repentance, and perhaps admission of guilt, but it also demonstrates the practice of mnemonic aesthetics. All venues had ties to the history of the slave trade or its abolition. London was a principal port engaged in the slave trade in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It also profited heavily from slave-grown sugar after the abolition of the slave trade. Liverpool was the leading slave trading port in all of the United Kingdom, especially in the last half of the eighteenth century. Bristol was an important slave trading port. Manchester manufactured trade goods that were used to barter for African captives. Hull was the home of Member of Parliament William Wilberforce, who first introduced legislation before Parliament calling for the abolition of the slave trade. La Bouche de Roi’s choreographed movements around the United Kingdom suggest a pilgrimage of reconciliation in spite of protests that the brutal history of Britain’s involvement in the slave trade was overlooked in the framing and execution of bicentenary events. The repetition of bodies and sections that are illustrated in the slave ship icon are not only reworked in plastic petroleum canisters that compose La Bouche de Roi, but also in the very circulation of the installation to its various venues. Its tour emulates the vast dissemination of the original prints of Description of a Slave Ship to the countryside, city centers, and abroad during the busiest period of slave trade abolitionism in the United Kingdom from 1789 to 1807. Through this state-led effort, La Bouche de Roi (and the historical and contemporary references it makes) was promoted as a symbol of national memory and reconciliation during the bicentenary celebrations. By using the popular abolitionist’s engraving to comment upon contemporary social, political, and economic ills—and by inserting images, narratives, and objects that were not visualized in the original engraving—Romuald Hazoumé breathes new life and new meaning into the slave ship icon.