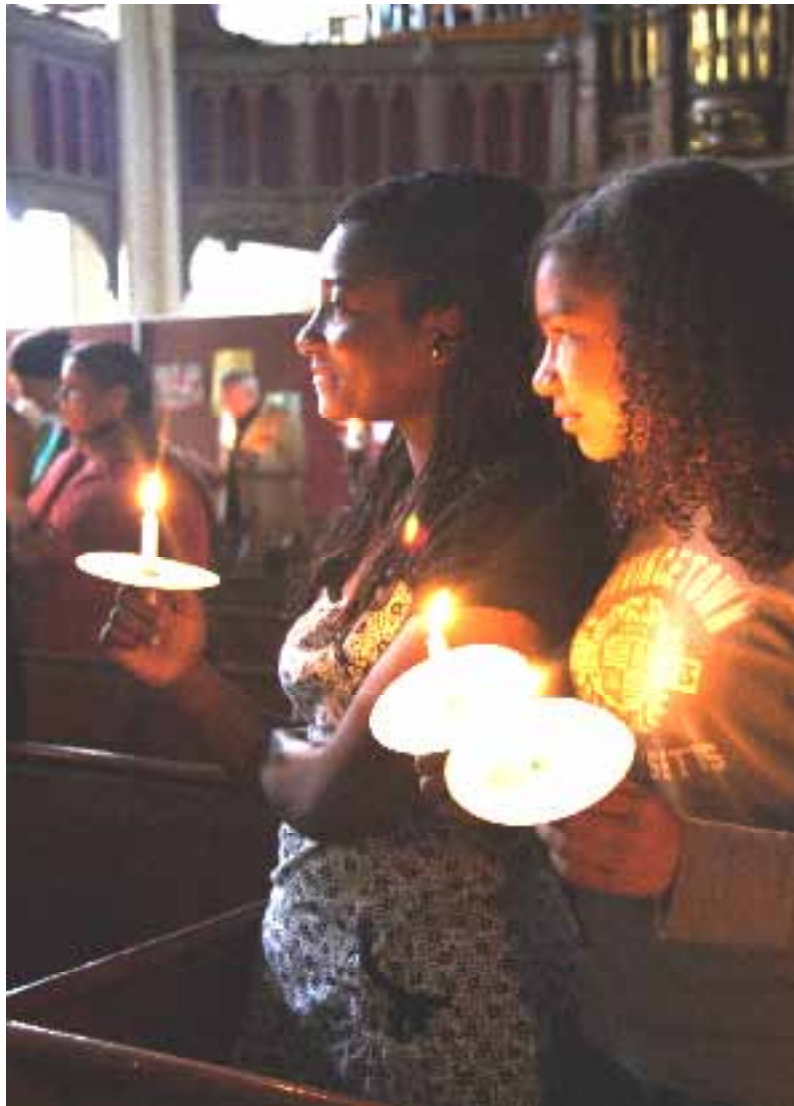


# Freedom Think Tank



A black perspective on trans-Atlantic enslavement



This report on Freedom Think Tank seeks to document and celebrate the achievements of a small black-led community group which sought to bring a black perspective into the North East commemoration of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, thus contributing to dismantling popularly accepted dogmas and ways of organising that diminish black experience. This report also analyses the factors that contributed to the success of the group and that limited its achievements in order that all may become more aware of the hurdles to black activism, and appreciative of the resilience required.

## The Beginning



In December 2006 **Osa Osmogorobe** called together a few 'movers and shakers' and said 'black people should take forward the agenda on freedom from enslavement rather than others for us'. Fifteen people attended the first meeting, some with ideas for the group and others wanting to offer their skills to the group.

**Beverley Prevatt-Goldstein**, a regional activist and ex-Chief Executive Officer of BECON, opened the meeting and suggested that the group could influence and communicate regional work on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of abolition of the slave trade in British colonies



**Tony Suadwa** Chair of Intercultural Arts and North East England African Community Association (NEEACA) wanted to understand what already was planned in the region and influence the work.



**Daljeet Singh** developed engagement with Freedom Think Tank on behalf of Tyne and Wear Museum as Diversity Officer. Daljeet wanted to inform the group about the national programme commemorating the bill ending Britain's part in the trans-Atlantic slave trade where the museum service was actively involved. He said that the group had a possibility to influence events planned in Tyne and Wear.

After his resignation from the museum service, he joined the group an individual member.



**Gerrad Barrie** said the group must look at advice, contact and information as important area of its role. He added that abolition of slavery also had economic background which is generally ignored. He added that there was an active movement of black people in the North East against slavery.



An activist working with black communities in Newcastle, **Spencer Morgan** was keen to highlight the profound way enslavement has altered black people's lives.

**Bill Pickard** is an actor/performer. He has some experience of working in TV/films and was present on Osa's invitation. He wanted to contribute towards a theatrical production next year and support whatever the group decided to organise.



**Amanda Main** said she was interested in how we worked together and with different groups. She mentioned that in all celebrations a tendency is to forget process of slavery, which was an oppression of black people and black people struggling for their own freedom.

**Kelechi Dibia** North Tyneside Council Equal Opportunities Officer. She agreed that the group should influence work planned in the region. She said that the group must ensure that events should reflect slavery and not patronise.







**Dawn Pollock**, an African-American, was studying at the University of Newcastle. She wanted to know how Britain approached commemoration of abolition of trans-Atlantic slave trade in comparison to the US.

**Tim Rowley** plays drums and teaches music in Gateshead schools. Works as freelancer. Works with a band which plays African music.

**Caroline Afolabi**, Director of Success for All, wanted from her engagement with schools and the Nigerian Christian Fellowship.



**Robin Brooke** said he wanted to participate in the group



**Juliana Nnaji**, Chair of BECON, wanted people to hear things from a black perspective. As a black person she felt connected to the history and was moved by the possibility that members of her family were shipped to the US.



**Gail Graham** worked with English Heritage and was interested in contributing to the group's activities and resourcing them.

**Lourdes** was interested in working with this organisation. She is a student in Northumbria University and was hoping to become involved in working with communities.

**Sumera Rizwani** is a volunteer with Newcastle Community Green Festival

This group, diverse in age, gender, faith and racialised identity, was subsequently joined by **Dean T. Huggins**, and **Francis Kanu** while **Lourdes**, **Tim**, **Robin** and **Sumera** did not attend further meetings.

Two significant decisions were made at the first meeting, the principles of the group and the name of the group. The following principles were agreed:

- Ordinary people, black and white, participated in the abolition of enslavement of black people
- Use of term 'enslaved' as the term 'slavery' is associated with humiliation of black people. It was important to use terminology like 'enslavement' which highlighted slavery as an oppressive process.
- Rebellions of black people to be highlighted
- We need to be sure of accuracy of our information
- Why enslavement happened and ended – economic reasons
- Value of commemorating the 200<sup>th</sup> year

Osa suggested that the name 'Think Tank' would challenge the perception of black people as objects, as passive non-thinking beings and after discussion 'Freedom' was added to signify not only the aim of the abolition of enslavement but the aim of this group-freedom for those oppressed.

At the end of the first meeting there was some consensus on activity, i.e. that this should include working with and influencing other organisations to embed these principles in their commemorations. Specific projects such as a performance on enslavement received only partial endorsement. A secretary was appointed but other structural and constitutional issues deferred. Yet, the formation of an identity and a name at this early stage and a consensus on the principles that needed to be at the root of any activity was significant to the cohesion and strength of the group.

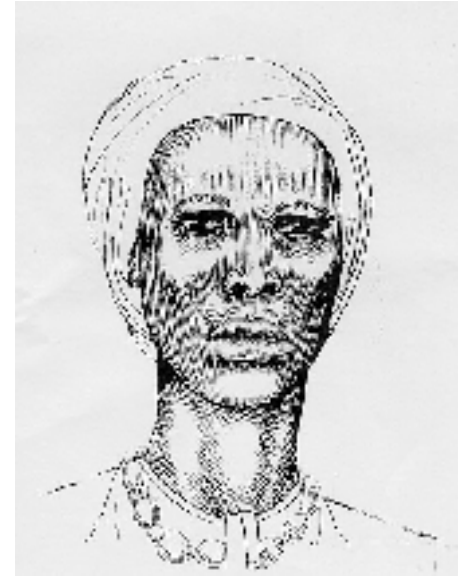
**They will remember that we were sold but they won't remember that we were strong. They will remember that we were bought, but not that we were strong**

**(William Prescott, former slave in the United States, 1937)**

## Rationale for developing Freedom Think Tank

Freedom Think Tank was established because of the perception that the events organised to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade were being organised by white people and organisations from a white perspective. As these events developed they confirmed the perceptions of the members of Freedom Think Tank.

All the events publicised in 2006-07 were being organised by white led organisations. This appeared inconsistent with an awareness of the struggles against white domination that was at the root of the struggles against the Atlantic Slave Trade. The commemoration seemed to provide an opportunity for the development of the careers of white people and the sustainability of white led organisations, with black artists and organisations being invited by white organisations to play a minor role in assisting this development. Freedom Think Tank considered that all have a role to play in commemorating the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade but that this role has to be played with an awareness of racialised power dynamics and the willingness to challenge it, if the legacy of enslavement is to be disrupted.



In some events there was a focus only on the evil of enslavement and the activities of white liberationists, such as William Wilberforce. This reinforced, for some white individuals, a negative, demeaning image of black people and could be particularly damaging to the images internalised by young people, black and white.

Other events, possibly in order to avoid the above, focused on the artistic achievements of black people. This, while funded under the guise of commemorating the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade, ignored it, and while celebrating black artistic achievements, minimised the impact of enslavement and the resilience of black people.

Some events used the commemoration of the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade to campaign against modern day slavery. This, again while funded to commemorate the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade, bypassed the impact of this trade, the struggles by the enslaved and others to end the trade and slavery, the resilience of many black people and the many negative consequences of trans-Atlantic enslavement.

There were, in the North East during 2005-2008, some black led activities, including by NEEACA. However, in late 2006 and early 2007 the discourse in the North East was overwhelmingly one of white leadership and ownership and celebration of white achievements in abolishing the slave trade, particularly local ones such as the Quaker movement. Freedom Think Tank sought to disrupt this discourse by claiming voice as a black led group and by insisting that the following four themes were essential components to any commemoration of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade:

- **The Richness of African civilisations prior to enslavement**
- **Enslavement and its Erosion**
- **Achievements of the descendants of the enslaved**
- **Legacy of Enslavement—Racism and World Disorder**



## Activities with other organisations

Freedom Think Tank considered that working with other organisations was a cost effective way of working given the resources of the group; that this would maximise our influence and that it would be unprincipled to ignore activities which led to negative and limited perceptions of black people. Our three initiatives, with Tyne and Wear Museum, with Gateshead Leisure Services, with local authorities in Tyne and Wear were prompted by the networks of our members.

We were invited onto the steering group organising the commemoration activities of Tyne and Wear Museum. We sought to have included:

- In their exhibition, references to the struggles by black people to abolish the slave trade and enslavement.
- In their exhibition, references to racism as one of the legacies of enslavement.
- In their artefacts on display, artefacts evincing African achievements as well as the degrading conditions of the enslaved.
- In their work with school, all the above.

We challenged:

- The focus on entertainment and crafts without reference to enslavement in their family activities commemorating the abolition of the slave trade.
- The emphasis on modern day slavery in their proposed displays.
- The inclusion of debates for and against slavery in their work with schools.

We were successful in steering both the exhibition and the accompanying slide show to refer to the achievements of the enslaved in challenging the slave trade and enslavement. This exhibition was shown in two galleries across the region and seen by one hundred and sixty eight people. We were unsuccessful in influencing their work with schools. This section of the museum establishment appeared to see nothing amiss in encouraging students to debate the positives of enslavement, despite the parallels we drew with discussing the positives of the Holocaust, of rape. This section seemed to ignore the impact a consistently negative depiction of black people had on the self-image of isolated black children and of their white contemporaries.

We corresponded with Gateshead Leisure Services who had received funding for the commemoration and held a meeting with them to discuss their celebratory approach to the abolition of the slave trade in their festival 'Sugar and Spice'. We were informed that ten black people had not objected to the title, that they were not organising anything around the bill for abolition of the trade in enslaved people but celebrating the African and Caribbean cultures.

The three local authorities (North Tyneside, Gateshead and Sunderland) contacted were not willing to engage with Freedom Think Tank.

## Learning

Our relative success with Tyne and Wear museum can be attributed to:

- The openness to our perspectives of some of the staff co-ordinating and administering the museum's commemoration activities
- The sensitivity of the museum to the need to collaborate and be seen to collaborate with black community groups
- The endorsement of Freedom Think Tank perspectives by the other black member of the steering group
- The support for these perspectives from two employees of Tyne and Wear Museum who were members of Freedom Think Tank

Our limited success with Tyne and Wear Museums and lack of success with the Gateshead Leisure Services and the local authorities in the region may be attributed to:

- Plans having already been made by these organisations before Freedom Think Tank approached them.
- The complexity of Freedom Think Tank's perspectives which included enslavement and achievement.
- The challenge to public bodies in the North East of mentioning racism.
- The lack of status and power of Freedom Think Tank, a new, small, black-led voluntary group.

## Freedom Think Tank Led Activities



It was an anomaly that Freedom Think Tank, a black led group set up to challenge the white led direction of the commemoration of the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade should work only within the parameters set by white organisations. We decided to organise our own commemoration ceremony. This required becoming constituted, opening a bank account and obtaining funding. The latter was initially unsuccessful as we did not fit any neat box and

funding for the commemoration had already been awarded, principally to white public bodies in the North East. We were fortunate to be approached and offered some funding by English Heritage and by one of our members via Community Champions.

Our commemoration was held at and supported by a local Christian church in Newcastle city centre with the photography and audio system provided by local Muslim businessmen. The video images at the beginning and the statements read by members of Freedom Think Tank and young people from the Nigerian Christian Fellowship reflected the achievements of African civilisations, enslavement, its erosion, the involvement of the enslaved and others in challenging enslavement, the achievements of the descendants of the enslaved and the legacy of racism and economic disorder.

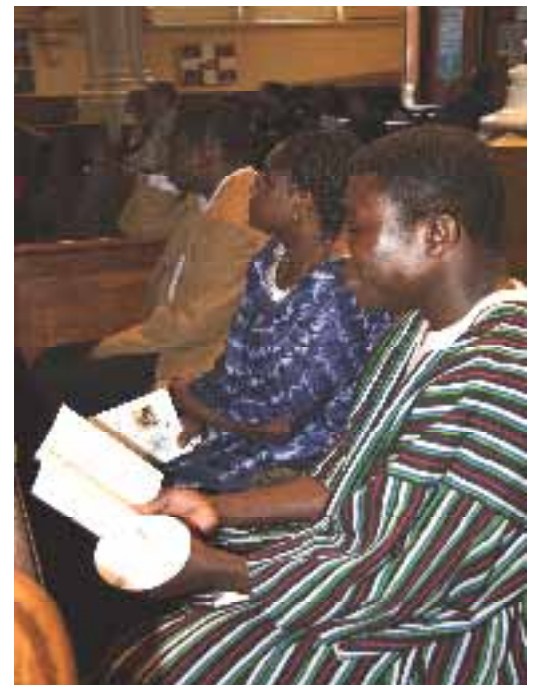




The drumming, the singing, led by Eric Pemberton of Banyan, the personal testimonies of the congregation, the call and response to the statements, the poetry reading contributed to a moving personalised testimonial. The numbers attending were small (under 100) with all saying it was both enjoyable and moving. Freedom Think Tank was satisfied that the commemoration reflected its themes of both joy and sorrow and was experienced as a black led community event attended by many

of the communities in Newcastle.

The learning from this event was that a small minimally funded black led community group could organise an inspiring and joyful event which was supported by people from all faiths and backgrounds in Newcastle. However, it also demonstrated that an event by a low status group, on this subject, in inclement weather, does not attract great numbers of black or white people.



## Family Day at South Shields Museum

Freedom Think Tank had been offered the opportunity to organise the family day at South Shields at a meeting with Tyne and Wear in February 2007 and submitted a programme and costings in June 2007.

Freedom Think Tank's insistence at the steering group meetings of the Tyne and Wear museum that activities for families could address enslavement had led the museum staff to suggest in February 2007 that while they would not change their planned family days, Freedom Think Tank could organise a family day at one of their venues—South Shields Museum. Freedom Think Tank proposed that the family day would focus on age-related activities which demonstrated the four themes outlined on page 8.

Their proposals and costings were agreed and Freedom Think Tank then:

- Ordered books from Letterbox Library for ages 0-13 years that reflected the four themes
- Collected artefacts that demonstrated the four themes
- Engaged two experienced black story tellers who would model black achievement, and tell stories of struggle and achievement
- Engaged the nationally renowned Black Voices singing group who would model black achievement and involve participants of all ages in singing of struggle and joy.
- Designed activities including learning about and drawing images of some of the descendants of the enslaved whose achievements had been recognised and enabling children to experience the discomfort of being squashed into a small space, as on a slave ship





## The Freedom Think Tank activities were rated a success



## Learning from the Family Day

The day demonstrated that:

- It was possible to interest local people, parents, grandparents and children in the sorrow of enslavement and the achievements of African civilisations and the descendants of the enslaved and that there was a wealth of family centred ways of doing so.
- The importance of good publicity . Despite the pleas from Freedom Think Tank and our collaboration in the design of a flyer in June, the museum did not publicise the event to the general public till a few days before the event and despite the advice of Freedom Think Tank they did not target black voluntary and community organisations nor the wider sub-region. The family day was therefore sparsely attended (50). The good weather at the sea side venue also reduced the attraction of the event.

- The low status of Freedom Think Tank vis a vis the Museum. Despite minuted agreements from March 2007 the agenda was changed, with a formal event; family activities questioned, rooms unprepared, and the name Freedom Think Tank omitted from the final posters. While changing and varied co-ordinators at the Museum, the disruption due to holidays and the lack of a formal memorandum of understanding between Freedom Think Tank and Tyne and Wear Museum all contributed, in essence, it was about power imbalance.



## Discussion groups at the Laing Art Gallery

Freedom Think Tank's insistence at the steering group of Tyne and Wear Museums that the exhibition on enslavement should mention racism led to a proposal that Freedom Think Tank could liaise with the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle to include this in their exhibition of *La Bouche du Roi*.

Du Roi's recreation of the sights, sounds and smells of the slave ship was 'A meditation on human greed and exploitation: the Atlantic Slave Trade of the past, and the different forms of oppression that continue today.' Following constructive discussions with the learning co-ordinator at The Laing, Freedom Think Tank facilitated two discussion groups at the Laing. Both were preceded by Freedom Think Tank's short slide show on the four themes relevant to commemorating the abolition of the trans Atlantic slave trade: the riches of African civilisations pre enslavement, enslavement and its erosion, the achievements of the descendants of the enslaved and the legacy of enslavement.

Both discussion groups were poorly attended (22) with the first being 'a lively exciting discussion' and the second a thoughtful, reflective discussion

### La Bouche Du Roi Discussion group

Saturday 19 January 2008  
2-4pm

Facilitated by **Freedom Think Tank**, on the themes of the 'La Bouche du Roi' exhibition: *A meditation on human greed and exploitation: the Atlantic Slave Trade of the past, and the different forms of oppression that continue today.*

A lively discussion to provoke thought and action.

This discussion group will focus on the achievements of the descendants of the enslaved and the legacies of enslavement: racism and world disorder. The discussion group will start with a very short slide show and will be actively facilitated by **FREEDOM THINK TANK**.

Freedom Think Tank is a time limited black led voluntary group established to influence the commemoration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of trans-Atlantic slave trade from a black and anti-racist perspective.

**TYNE & WEAR  
MUSEUMS**

To book a free place contact the learning team on 0191 211 2102 or email [Julie.Watson@twmuseums.org.uk](mailto:Julie.Watson@twmuseums.org.uk)

**LAING  
ART GALLERY**

## Learning from the discussion groups

**Partnership:** Freedom Think Tank's engagement with the Laing demonstrated that there could be good communication, co-working and mutually shared agendas between Freedom Think Tank and Tyne and Wear Museum.

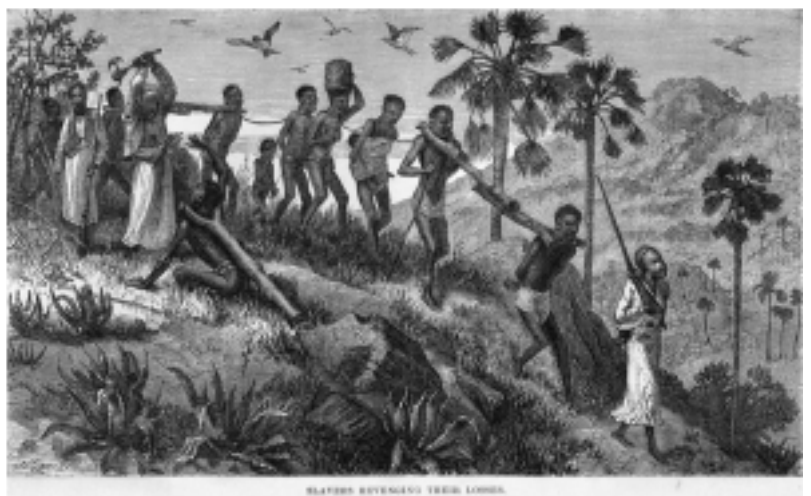


Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali

**Publicity:** Publicity for the discussion groups via Tyne and Wear museums was better, with a press release and flyers being produced early before the events. The group used the BECON network and the lectures on enslavement at the Literary and Philosophical Society as well as other personal contacts to notify all black voluntary groups in the North East and anyone who had evinced an interest in the topic. The low

turn out may have been less due to gaps in publicity as to the nature of the topic, the timings of the group and the lack of status of a small black-led voluntary group.

It may be concluded that the topic and the status of the group militated against high attendance and that both greater publicity, perhaps greater than this group could arrange, and contentment with the numbers attending is to be recommended.



Slave Coffle, Central Africa (1866)



**Emotional Challenges:** There had been high emotional content of the discussions and the challenge of facilitating this.



**Olaudah Equiano** (1745-97), campaigned in the UK on behalf of enslaved people

There had been many excellent lectures on enslavement in the region, largely hosted by the Literary and Philosophical Society, but this was the first opportunity many had for a free-ranging discussion and everyone became emotionally engaged. This indicated that while a space for discussion was much needed, ground rules, stricter chairing and support from museum security could have been considered.

Freedom Think Tank had provided an opportunity, not only for the general public, but for members of the group to develop their learning and understanding. This was a significant, though unanticipated outcome.



**Rosa Parks** (1913-2005) was an African-American civil rights activist, also known as Mother of the Modern Day Civil Rights Movement



## Freedom Think Tank's Achievements

Through its engagement, Freedom Think Tank:

- Developed a cohesive group who learned more about the complexities of enslavement and its legacies and acted together to disseminate this.
- Influenced Tyne and Wear Museums to include a strengths based perspective in describing the enslaved.
- Enhanced Tyne and Wear Museum's resources by providing a stock of anti-racist children books.
- Enhanced Tyne and Wear Museum's learning materials by providing a simple evaluation tool.
- Demonstrated that family activities can be anti-racist, meaningful and fun.
- Provided a coherent framework for learning about enslavement that challenged negative portrayals of black people.
- Provided diverse opportunities for communities in Tyne and Wear to reflect on enslavement: a sung candlelit commemoration, a family day and a discussion group.
- Demonstrated that a small black-led group of volunteers can be an active think tank for freedom.



## **What enabled Freedom Think Tank's achievements?**

Group commitment to identified principles

Diverse skills and networks of group members

Group members links with public bodies such as Tyne and Wear Museum and black community organisations such as BECON, NEEACA, Nigerian Christian Fellowship, Sierra Leone Association

The willingness of Tyne and Wear Museum and BECON to engage with Freedom Think Tank

The support and funding offered by English Heritage

The co-operation from Black Voices and Banyam

The support received from two Christian churches and two Muslim businessmen

The interest demonstrated by diverse people in the North East, all ages, faiths, both genders and both racialised groupings.

## **What limited Freedom Think Tank's achievements?**

Low status of the group did not attract black or white communities to participate or organisations to engage on equal terms

The topic of enslavement has limited appeal — a white distance because of disassociation or guilt; black distance because of stigma.

The complexity of the group's message, combining sorrow and achievement, strength and oppression and racism as a legacy of enslavement did not fit the simple message organisations wished to promulgate in this commemoration.

## **Freedom Think Tank's recommendations to other groups working towards freedom.**

- Focus on cohesion around principles
- Go overboard on publicity for events
- Recognise limiting effects of power imbalances and unpopular messages
- Celebrate achievements

## Selection of achievements of some of the descendants of the enslaved



**Alice Walker** (1944) is an American author and poet and is most famous for the critically acclaimed novel *The Colour Purple*.



**Malcolm X** (1925-65), a prominent African-American leader, public speaker and human rights activist.



**Garrett Morgan** (1877—1963) was an African American inventor. He is credited with inventing the traffic lights.



**bell hooks** is an African-American intellectual, feminist and social activist.



**Mohammad Ali** (1942) is a world renowned African-American boxing champion

**Diane Abbott** (1953) is a British Labour politician and a Member of Parliament since 1987. She was the first black woman to be elected to the House of Commons.



## Redemption Song

One of the songs powerfully sung by Bob Marley was also sung by the congregation in St. Thomas Church in Newcastle on 30 June 2007 led by Eric Pemberton from Banyam

Old pirates, yes, they rob I;  
Sold I to the merchant ships,  
Minutes after they took I  
From the bottomless pit.  
But my hand was made strong  
By the 'and of the Almighty.  
We forward in this generation  
Triumphantly.  
Won't you help to sing  
This songs of freedom  
'Cause all I ever have:  
Redemption songs;  
Redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental  
slavery;  
None but ourselves can free our minds.  
Have no fear for atomic energy,  
'Cause none of them can stop the time.  
How long shall they kill our prophets,  
While we stand aside and look? Ooh!  
Some say it's just a part of it:  
We've got to fullfil the book.

Won't you help to sing  
This songs of freedom-  
'Cause all I ever have:  
Redemption songs;  
Redemption songs;  
Redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slav-  
ery;  
None but ourselves can free our mind.  
Wo! Have no fear for atomic energy,  
'Cause none of them-a can-a stop-a the  
time.  
How long shall they kill our prophets,  
While we stand aside and look?  
Yes, some say it's just a part of it:  
We've got to fullfil the book.  
Won't you have to sing  
This songs of freedom? -  
'Cause all I ever had:  
Redemption songs -  
All I ever had:  
Redemption songs:  
These songs of freedom,  
Songs of freedom.



**Robert Nesta 'Bob' Marley** was a Jamaican singer, songwriter and musician





Members of Freedom Think Tank would like to convey their heartfelt thanks to:

BECON

Black Voices

English Heritage

Eric Pemberton and Banyam

Jesmond Methodist Church, Newcastle

Mohammad Rayaz

Mumtaz Sanam

Nigerian Christian Fellowship

North East of England African Community Association

Sierra Leone Association

St. Thomas Church, Newcastle

Tyne and Wear Museums