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Steven Spielbergs Amistad vs. Guy
Deslauriers's Middle Passage

first published in:
Cultural Studies Review. - ISSN: 1446-8123. - 14 (2008) 1, S. 72-84.

Postprint published at the Institutional Repository of the Potsdam University:
In: Postprints der Universität Potsdam
Philosophische Reihe ; 84
<http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2012/5942/>
<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus-59422>

Postprints der Universität Potsdam
Philosophische Reihe ; 84

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Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* vs Guy
Deslauriers's *The Middle Passage*

LARS ECKSTEIN

— I

The transatlantic slave trade was probably more present in the collective consciousness of Britons in 2007 than it had been at any time since the turbulences of abolition in the early nineteenth century. On 25 March 2007, Britain celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the trade within the British Empire: school syllabuses took on excerpts from the slave narratives of Ottobah Cuguano and Olaudah Equiano as compulsory reading; the English churches collaborated on a bicentennial (image) campaign called 'Set All Free'; lecture series and services were held in the former slaving ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool; special exhibitions were launched (at the National Portrait Gallery among many others) while Liverpool opened the first International Slavery Museum in August 2007; the BBC featured radio programs and film documentaries covering Atlantic slavery and its legacy; Tony Blair, just stopping short of an official apology, expressed 'how profoundly shameful the slave trade was'.¹

In 2007, art that creatively engages with the slave trade had a particular currency. If proof were needed, the unlikely box office success of British film director Michael Apted's *Amazing Grace* should make for an illustrative example: strategically launched on Friday 23 March 2007 in British cinemas, it made more than \$US4 million on the opening weekend alone. Yet the critical responses to *Amazing Grace* have also revealed some of the continuing difficulties of creatively engaging with Atlantic slavery. As the title indicates, Apted set out to tell the story behind the famous hymn composed by John Newton, a notorious slaver turned pious churchman. *Amazing Grace*, however, really tells the story of abolitionist William

Wilberforce, who is the movie's undisputed protagonist and who is basically credited with more or less single-handedly achieving abolition through clever parliamentary dodges. Apted consequently elicited a range of furious criticism even before the movie was officially released. While some complained about the marginalisation of fellow abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, others rejected a 'prettifying' Eurocentrism. Thus Lee Jasper, secretary of the British Assembly Against Racism, proclaimed: 'The film prettifies the tragedy, the horror and the brutality of the slave trade. It seeks to give the impression that one man freed millions of slaves and negates the contribution of the enslaved Africans to their own freedom to a bit part.'²

Jasper's argument encapsulates how politically charged contemporary discourses around the memory of Atlantic slavery are, and points to a major ethical problem, namely the danger of belittling the immensity of historical suffering in filmic depictions. *Amazing Grace*, however, does not really provide much stuff for discussion here, as Apted shies away from actually picturing the sordid details of the slave trade in the first place—there are verbal reports and references to slave ships, yet there is no visual representation; in fact, there are hardly any black people in the film, one notable exception being Olaudah Equiano (played by Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour). British filmmakers have to this day, to my knowledge, avoided the political and ethical complexities of explicitly picturing Atlantic slavery, despite the fact that a number of Caribbean/British writers—most notably Caryl Phillips (*Crossing the River*, 1995), Fred D'Aguiar (*Feeding the Ghosts*, 1997) and David Dabydeen (*A Harlot's Progress*, 1999)—successfully took on the middle passage in their more recent fictional work. Cinema and TV schedulers, therefore, really depended on non-British films in the year of public commemoration, two of which I wish to discuss in this essay. First is Steven Spielberg's blockbusting *Amistad* (1997), the first movie ever to really depict life in the belly of a slave ship, albeit in an ethically and aesthetically dubious way; and second, Martinican filmmaker Guy Deslauriers's *Passage du Milieu* (1999), a film that is rarely mentioned in critical discourses although it has had a comparatively wide exposure since HBO produced an English translation (*The Middle Passage*) for the US TV market. A comparison of Spielberg's and Deslauriers's filmic approaches to the middle passage, I believe, is quite revealing of the dangers and pitfalls, yet also of the vital mnemonic potential, of artistically re-thinking the past when it comes to the uncomfortable flipsides of enlightened modernity. But before critically evaluating the mnemonic performance of both films, let me briefly sketch the more general political and historiographical challenges involved in picturing Atlantic slavery.

— II

Politically, any engagement with the memory of Atlantic slavery is complicated by the fact that the atrocities and injustices of the trade's 300-year history still await proper recognition

on both sides of the Atlantic. This not only concerns proper documentation in the public realm (more so in the Americas than in Europe or Africa), but also involves questions of official political commitment and, lastly, financial reparation. In his essay 'Reparations, Truth and Reconciliation', Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka argues that historical reconciliation eventually depends not only on political, but also on financial gestures by those companies, banks and governments which profited most from the trade—not unlike the reparations afforded to forced labourers during the Third Reich in Germany.³ Soyinka, of course, is aware of a number of fundamental legal, ethical and practical problems in this context: is it possible to exactly trace who is to be held accountable for a crime that has been glossed over by Western governments for generations and only resurfaced with the movements of decolonisation and black power during the 1960s? How far does the African collaboration in the trade blur clear-cut distinctions between victims and perpetrators in the first place? And who shall profit from such compensation given that there are no surviving victims of the Atlantic slave trade, and given the instability and corruption haunting most post-independent African nation states?⁴ Still, any historian, writer or filmmaker who engages with Atlantic slavery treads highly politicised and emotionally charged terrain, and is in danger of catering to all sorts of ideological interests.

The ideological battles over the injustices of the trade are moreover fuelled by a pervasive scarcity of documentary evidence. Since the 1960s, historians and writers have fought over the sheer numbers of those who were forcefully transported to the Americas, the figures ranging between as little as two to three million to '60 million and more', as the famous epigraph to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has it.⁵ Most historians have settled by now on eleven to twelve million,⁶ which of course leaves out those victims of the trade who died on their way to the ships.⁷ The difficulty of assessing such numbers and purportedly 'objective' data is perhaps surpassed by the difficulty of reconstructing subjective views and emotional responses. While there are some resources that give us insight into the traders' view of things such as, for instance, the above mentioned John Newton's infamous *Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750–1754*,⁸ the case is much more difficult for the view of the victims. There are indeed hardly any documents that bear witness to life on board a slave ship from the slaves' point of view, for the simple fact that access to literacy was severely limited, particularly for first generation slaves, and was only to be obtained, if at all, at the cost of a thorough Christianising brainwash. Those slaves who set down their lives in narratives, moreover, had to balance their own desire for self-expression against very pragmatic constraints—there was always implicit or explicit editorial control exercised by their white benefactors, as well as a clear limit as to what could be expected of potential buyers of their tales.⁹

Even though it is quite misleading to read slave narratives as factual resources on these grounds, Vincent Carretta nevertheless recently dealt a severe blow to the transatlantic

memory industry when he contested the first two chapters of Olaudah Equiano's famous *Interesting Narrative*, first published in 1789, claiming them to be fictional. Equiano's is in fact the only surviving slave narrative which evokes the belly of a slave ship in some detail, and has been widely canonised over the last forty years to illustrate the injustices of the trade. Yet while the tales of Equiano's adult life can be verified as largely consistent with historical evidence, the account of his childhood in what is now Nigeria, as well as his first Atlantic crossing, seem to rely heavily on secondary rather than primary experience. Carretta chips in a number of arguments to sustain this, the most convincing ones involving a baptismal record and a ship's register identifying Equiano as 'born in Carolina'.¹⁰ The responses to Carretta's findings, especially among the African American communities, were expectedly very hostile, not only because he was committing sacrilege on a black cultural icon, but because he was seen to deliberately thwart the political aspirations of the black diaspora across the globe.¹¹

Yet cultural memories and, by extension, history, do not work along the lines of a clear division between factuality and fictionality; their embeddedness in collectively shared stories of the past implies that fact and fiction are often indistinguishably blurred, and their painful academic dissection may perhaps be beside the point, particularly in view of Atlantic slavery. If Carretta's recent findings shed doubt on the factuality of parts of Equiano's tale, they do not necessarily discredit it; rather, they add to it an exciting performative dimension of pragmatic self-fashioning in the midst of violently competing discourses.¹² Equiano's example indeed instructs that the history of Atlantic slavery is a history full of gaps and fissures which historiography may never be able to bridge. Rather than to devalue the fictional realm, then, fiction should indeed be cherished as perhaps the only domain in which the silences lingering beneath the surfaces of documentary accounts may be voiced. Today, it is especially the arts, and what Wilson Harris calls 'the unfinished genesis of the imagination',¹³ which offer the potential for a collective and creative reworking of the past.

— III

Let us turn to the two films, then, which took on the challenge of artistically imagining life on board a slave ship in sound and images. I wish to begin with Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*,¹⁴ which focuses on the historical Amistad trials that took place between 1839 and 1840 following one of the very few successful rebellions on a slaver.¹⁵ The African protagonist of Spielberg's film is Cinqué, who instigates a rebellion on a ship bound from Havana to Puerto Principe; Cinqué and his fellow slaves kill all the crew except the Spanish captain and two of his mates. The Spaniards, however, do not sail the slaves back to Africa as requested of them, but instead secretly steer the vessel north and anchor just off the coast of Long Island. Here the Africans are landed and accused of murder. Upon the intervention of the

abolitionists, a lengthy legal battle ensues. It goes all the way to the Supreme Court where, to cut a long story short, most slaves are acquitted and consequently returned to Africa at government expense. Spielberg's film is in fact mostly preoccupied with these legal proceedings, and thus mainly caters to the popular genre of the court movie. The bulk of the Africans' enslavement and middle passage is pictured only in a flashback during one of Cinqué's defence speeches.

I believe that Spielberg's multimedial aesthetic and ideological approach in these particular sequences is, as I have already indicated, seriously flawed. Before taking issue with the filmic technique and narrative approach in closer detail, it is helpful to briefly turn to an argument by Theodor W. Adorno, who famously took various stands against integrative fictionalisations of the Jewish holocaust on the basis of the overwhelming immensity of both individual and collective suffering at the hands of Nazi Germany.¹⁶ Without being able to do justice to the complexity and contradictoriness of Adorno's statements,¹⁷ I wish to focus on the one which seems most relevant in our context. Thus Adorno writes in his essay on 'Commitment':

The morality that forbids art to forget [the suffering] for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic stylistic principle ... make[s] the unthinkable appear to have had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, something of its horror removed. By this alone an injustice is done to the victims, yet no art that avoided the victims could stand up to the demands of justice.¹⁸

One need not subscribe to Adorno's rather questionable elitist avant-gardism, or his formalist mirror theory, to admit that he has a point here. By rendering accessible to the senses and thus making 'sense' of the—utterly senseless—deaths, the artist is perpetually in danger of belittling not only the enormity of historical injustice, but also of unduly exploiting the suffering of the individual victim. Adorno's warning against the moral injustices of aesthetic representation points to the core challenge that artists addressing histories of trauma confront:¹⁹ If trauma means the impossibility of narration,²⁰ how can traumatic events be narrativised, and aestheticised, at all? The aporia lies in the social imperative of memory and narration—Foucault argues that '[b]oundless misfortune, the resounding gift of the gods, marks the point where language begins'²¹—and their ethical and psychological denial: trauma is where language and representation should end.

If one of the core pitfalls of representing the traumatic realities of Atlantic slavery is thus to aestheticise the suffering of the victims in any way that instrumentalises their plight for 'sensational', both literally and figuratively, or cathartic effect, Spielberg's *Amistad* falls right in. I wish to illustrate this in view of three interrelated aspects: first, regarding Spielberg's more general aesthetic choices when picturing the plight of the slaves; second, the casting of his protagonist Cinqué; and third, the larger emplotment²² of slavery in the movie.

Spielberg's few representations of life in the belly of a slave ship may be subsumed under the overarching problem of an exaggeration of pathos drawing on a set repertoire of Hollywood clichés. While nothing that Spielberg depicts is historically implausible or unrealistic, his realism caters strongly to both the sentimental and the sublime. When we are allowed a glimpse under deck in *Amistad*, we are mostly in the midst of a raging thunderstorm, obviously one of the oldest topoi of the sublime (and immortalised in relation to the slave trade by J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting *Slave Ship*). The storm, as an objective correlative to the agony of the slaves, sets the visual pace and lighting of the frames; in the irregular flashes of lighting, we witness, for instance, how a dying mother holds up her infant child who is consequently rescued in a communal effort and transported overhead to a relative. In terms of the audio code, the sound of the raging storm is drowned in non-diegetic music, blending proto-African drumming with heavy string orchestration and an intense dose of choral chant. The innocent, screaming child, above the indistinguishable mass of bodies flashing up with each lightning, and the drowning music clearly work together to overwhelm the viewer with a cathartic overdose that seeks to generate an excess of pity and fear.

At the same time, the thunderstorm has not only an awe-inspiring, but also a sanitising effect. The images of Spielberg's slave hold are meant to induce terror, but not disgust. There is nothing of the unbearable stench, heat and filth which Equiano's *Narrative* describes in one of its unsettling transitions from horror to the ordinary ('Many a time we were near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days altogether. This, and the stench from the necessary tubs, carried off many. During the passage I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much'²³). In Spielberg's frame, the bodies of the slaves are attractive rather than repelling, washed over by the rain, and gleam in the lightning. They are aestheticised in a way which indeed facilitates an aspect of the sublime highlighted by Edmund Burke in his 'Philosophical Enquiry', namely its capacity to induce not only terror, but also a latent excitement and forbidden quasi-erotic pleasure when witnessed from a position of relative personal safety.²⁴

Spielberg's approach here is particularly questionable with regard to his protagonist Cinqué whose impressive physique is one of the most distracting and, indeed, unsettling elements of the film. Spielberg's camera is oddly obsessed with Cinqué's body throughout, in a way that it is not with any of the white characters. Novelist Caryl Phillips remarks in a review of *Amistad*:

Cinque will keep taking his clothes off. At moments I had to ask myself if this was a serious dramatic reconstruction of slavery or a black gay porno flick. There is something vaguely obscene about the way in which Spielberg's camera exoticises the black male form. Mapplethorpe does the Middle Passage?²⁵

Phillips's unnerved remark is indeed closer to the truth than he may have known, as the actor playing Cinqué, Benin-born Djimon Hounsou, began his career as a fashion model for designer Thierry Mugler and was one of 'Herb Ritts's subjects in the photography book *Men and Women*'.²⁶ Even though Hounsou is a talented actor, his physical appearance makes him a rather serious case of miscasting. As Phillips goes on to ask,

would any captive who had endured the horrors of an Atlantic crossing, which included malnourishment, beatings, exposure to contagious diseases, and many other deprivations of an unimaginable nature, really have emerged looking like an Olympic athlete?²⁷

What is at stake, again, is not only the historical implausibility of Cinqué's physical appearance, but a highly questionable fetishisation of the black body in the midst of a dramatisation of sublime terror. Indeed, *Amistad* hardly really disturbs, but often provides for an arousing, surreptitiously invigorating and, perhaps, cleansing, rush of emotional excess.

This dubious cathartic quality, I believe, is also firmly embedded in Spielberg's choice of narrative emplotment and the film's larger ideological framework. The plot's emphasis on the Amistad trials and their legal complexities (starring the movie's actual heroes: Matthew McConaughey as an aspiring young lawyer, Morgan Freeman as a black abolitionist—who is nowhere to be found in the historical records—and Anthony Hopkins as former president Quincy Adams) contextualises the transatlantic slave trade in a way that I find highly problematic. Despite the grounding in historical events, the film's emplotment basically renders the slave trade as a dark episode in the spiritual biography of the American nation; an episode, however, which was triumphantly overcome by outstanding liberals representing the true spirit of the constitution. The iconic image concluding the film, showing Cinqué and some of his mates dressed like apostles in white tunics on a boat returning to Africa, is therefore particularly unfortunate. The redemption it promises is not so much the redemption from historical trauma as a redemption alleviating the occasional bouts of bad consciousness on the part of its primary implied audience—the white liberal America, that is, of Spielberg's own background.

— IV

Spielberg's example illustrates that picturing the historical suffering of Atlantic slavery and the middle passage is indeed not a thing that can or should be taken easily. Ideally, it requires artists to negotiate very carefully the liberating potential of storytelling with Adorno's warning not to unduly redeem historical suffering—after all, Walter Benjamin warns us in another context that 'what draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about'.²⁸ Representations of slavery and the slave trade should unite

the effects of narrative exemplarity with aesthetic techniques which refuse complacency or easy resolutions; and they should allow us to rethink the past without surrendering it to a surreptitious sensationalism, pitiful sentimentalism or other self-serving ideological stratagems. All this sounds like a tall order, yet I do believe that the only other recent film on the issue of Atlantic slavery which eventually made it to mainstream audiences lives up to this challenge.

Martinican filmmaker Guy Deslauriers's *Passage du Milieu*, released in 1999, was produced with amateur actors at historical sites with a fraction of Spielberg's budget. It relates an ordinary Atlantic crossing of an eighteenth-century slaver in patient detail, framed by images of the shores of today's Africa and the Caribbean, and occasionally interrupted by memories of pre-colonial Africa. The middle passage traced by the film is slow, painful, and unspectacular; significantly, a rebellion towards the end of the voyage is brutally gunned down by the slavers. The French original had a fairly successful run at festivals and fringe cinemas across the globe before it was bought by HBO, and translated for the US TV-market as *The Middle Passage*.²⁹ The choice of writer and narrator of the film's English voice-over narration clearly betrays an interest in mainstream economic ends: Walter Mosley (an author of popular mysteries) was chosen for the narrative, and—not surprisingly after the financial success of *Amistad*—Djimon Hounsou for voice-over narrator. Both decisions, however, have proven not to be detrimental. Mosley's narration keeps fairly close to the French original,³⁰ and Djimon Hounsou's voice—disembodied, as it were, this time—does little or no harm to the film.

Even if HBO certainly employed Hounsou to create a meaningful relation to Spielberg's *Amistad*, the two films could not be more different in their aesthetic and ideological scope. Deslauriers's slave hold significantly lacks the pathos and sublimity of Spielberg's version; it is slowly familiarised to the viewer in patient, long takes with very little movement. Instead of excitement, there is exhaustion; instead of gleaming bodies, one finds grey, sore and barely alive shapes whose dignity is strangely unbroken in the midst of rats, cockroaches and dried faeces.

Yet more importantly, Deslauriers chooses an aesthetic approach which interrupts audience expectations of unproblematic mimetic representation. Like Spielberg, he makes use of what Adorno condemns as the 'aesthetic stylistic principle', yet while Spielberg produces what one is tempted to call a laundered gothic sentimentalism, Deslauriers's aesthetic stylisation has an almost Brechtian, alienating thrust. The camera in *Passage du Milieu* tends to jump incoherently, and thus fragments the visual experience. The overall speed of the film stays deliberately slow; images and frames are often repeated and convey a sense of the painful dullness of an Atlantic crossing. At certain stages, Deslauriers works with overdubbed images



Figure 1: Film still from *Passage du Milieu*, by courtesy of Guy Deslauriers and Kreol Productions; photography by Jacques Boumendil

producing an artificial, spectre-like quality. At other times, he doggedly stays with the perfect clarity of a single frame, forcing the viewer to take in the sordid details, yet also the

absurd beauty, of suffering and death in oddly stylised images such as can be seen in Figure 1.

Like Spielberg, Deslauriers deliberately aestheticises the black body—yet he does not fetishise it. His dramatisation of beauty is disturbingly unreal compared to Spielberg's realism; Deslauriers stylises the body in a way that self-consciously highlights its status as a representation. The dead slaves are depicted in naturalistic detail, yet their perfect arrangement in the composition of the image, as if in a terrible still life, simultaneously signals that they are artificial rather than real victims of the trade. Deslauriers's technique admits to the vanity of mimetic discourse, and instead points toward something absent, something underneath the visible images which, I believe, haunts the viewer all the more.

This pairing of bleak realism with a constant sense of modernist alienation also marks the striking voice-over narration of *The Middle Passage* and the emplotment it provides. Shifting between the first and third person plural, the narrator here represents a disembodied collective of all victims of the Atlantic slave trade speaking in synecdochal extension. Walter Mosley's text has surely benefited heavily from the sensuous brilliance of the French original provided by the Martinican poet and novelist Patrick Chamoiseau. Its particular characteristics lie in the combination of realist detail with a highly poetic imagery that is indebted

to both French symbolism and the Afro-Caribbean oral tradition. It provides an idiosyncratic language in the trajectory of Chamoiseau's Martinican predecessors Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant, a language that in fact mirrors the filmic technique of always combining authentic detail with self-conscious aesthetic stylisation:

In an effort to stem the loss of cargo, they tell us that we will be better off in the new world. They natter at us like angry birds, but we don't even have the strength to sneer. What do you strange birds want from us? Are you birds of misfortune sent from some hell? Or are you here merely to accompany the souls of the dead to escort them to their final resting place?

It is not least due to this integrating narrative voice, I believe, that Deslauriers's film artistically succeeds against all odds. It supports the visual approach of always maintaining a precarious balance between realist immediacy and a modernist reflexivity; and it continuously makes its viewers aware that the images they see are in fact unimaginable, and what is spoken is in fact unspeakable. Yet the collective voice and its poetic quality also resonates with a haunting depth and humanity that dialogically reaches out, and may convince the viewer that imagining the unspeakable is vital, as much for contemporary viewers as it is for the victims of the past.

— V

Having said all this, it may be appropriate to close with a brief exit from the ivory tower of academic discontent. The fact that I find Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*—like most of his takes on 'serious' topics—seriously flawed (as is quite fashionable among academics, of course), and Guy Deslauriers's *The Middle Passage* both ethically and aesthetically inspiring, won't change another, rather uncomfortable, fact: hundreds of millions continue to view Spielberg's work, whereas Deslauriers's audience remains rather small. The comparatively wide exposure of *The Middle Passage*, moreover, was probably not a result of its artistic integrity, but of HBO's marketing instincts (subtitled the film, for instance, with the grossly out of place and context line 'We are dying, but we will be reborn'). *The Middle Passage* is a painful movie to watch, and its alienation techniques, I suspect, will have alienated many viewers enough to switch the channel to something more palatable and gratifying to watch. Certainly, the ethical and aesthetic challenge of representing the unspeakable is of crucial concern; yet, as Caryl Phillips puts it in the larger context of remembering the slave trade, in times when 'it's difficult enough to encourage people to remember in the world as it is now because people's sense of history, people's sense of wanting to make the effort to understand and digest their own history is shrinking',³¹ another dilemma obviously comes into play: if art has didactic aspirations (which

both *Amistad* and *The Middle Passage* have), how can it popularise the unpopular? Or, how experimental can histories in the arts be without falling prey to avant-gardist solipsism? I certainly have no definitive answer to these questions. I do stand firm in my judgement of the artistic value of Spielberg's and Deslauriers's treatments of the middle passage. Yet were I, by some divine intervention, asked to delete one from the memory of the world, I would find it very hard to choose one or the other: the ethically and aesthetically admirable and haunting one whose popular impact, however, has been rather small; or the awfully flawed one over which tens of millions have had a good cry.

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1. Tony Blair qtd in 'Blair "Sorrow" over Slave Trade', *BBC News*, 27 November 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6185176.stm> (15 May 2007).
2. Lee Jasper, qtd in Ruth Gledhill, 'Film Row on "Prettifying" of Slave Trade', *The Times*, 10 February 2007.
3. Wole Soyinka, 'Reparations, Truth and Reconciliation', in Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 23–92.
4. For a critical review of Soyinka's propositions, see Caryl Phillips, 'The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness by Wole Soyinka', in Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Essays*, Secker and Warburg, London, 2001, pp. 122–8.
5. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Vintage, London, 1998, n.p.
6. See James Walvin, *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora*, Cassell, London and New York, 2000, p. ix, or more comprehensively, David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein (comp.), *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1999.
7. According to James Walvin, the overall population of Africa amounted to only around twenty-five million in 1850, but should have been between forty-six and fifty million without the consequences of the transatlantic trade. See James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery*, Howard University Press, Washington D.C., 1994, p. 321. Estimations of the mortality rate on slave ships range between 10 per cent and 40 per cent.
8. John Newton, *Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750–1754*, Epworth, London, 1962.
9. As Toni Morrison puts it, 'whatever the level of eloquence or form, popular taste discouraged the writers [of slave narratives] from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience'. Toni Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', in Russell Ferguson et al. (eds), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 1990, pp. 299–305, qtd p. 301.
10. Vincent Carretta, 'Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity', in *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 20, no. 3, December 1999, pp. 96–105, qtd p. 102. See also Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA, 2005.
11. For an up-to-date discussion of academic responses to the question of Equiano's origin, see Jennifer Howard, 'Unravelling the Narrative', in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2005, p. A2.
12. I have argued this in some more detail in *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2006, especially pp. 25–34.

13. Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination—Expeditions into Cross-Culturality; into the Labyrinth of the Family of Mankind, Creation and Creature; into Space, Psyche and Time*, ed. Andrew Bundy, Routledge, London and New York, 1999.
14. Steven Spielberg (dir), *Amistad*, 1997, DVD, Dreamworks 4909812.
15. The *Amistad* incident had already provided the material for Robert Hayden's excellent poem 'Middle Passage'. Most rebellions on slave ships proved to be fatal since without nautical skills returning to the African coast was impossible and the slaves were doomed to starve at sea.
16. By drawing on Adorno's reflections on representations of the Jewish holocaust I do not wish to undermine the ideological differences and historical particularities of the holocaust and the transatlantic slave trade. As Paul Gilroy argues, setting the holocaust and Atlantic slavery in relation 'need not in any way undermine the uniqueness of the Holocaust. It is therefore essential', he continues, 'not to use that invocation of uniqueness to close down the possibility that a combined if not comparative discussion of its horrors ... might be fruitful in making sense of modern racism'. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 214. For a comparative analysis of the ideologies of the holocaust and Atlantic slavery see Seymour Drescher, 'The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Holocaust: A Comparative Analysis', in Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, Westview, Boulder and Oxford, 1996, pp. 65–87, and Lawrence Thomas, 'American Slavery and the Holocaust: Their Ideologies Compared', in Tommy L. Lott (ed.), *Subjugation and Bondage: Critical Essays on Slavery and Social Philosophy*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York and Oxford, 1998, pp. 255–79.
17. For a lucid resource on Adorno's changing positions on writing after Auschwitz, see Petra Kiedaisch (ed.), *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 1995.
18. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 76–94, qtd p. 88.
19. Poet and historian Edouard Glissant suggests reading the history of the Americas as one of collective traumatic shock and neurosis: 'Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency, 'emancipation' in 1848 as reactivation, our everyday fantasies as symptoms...?' Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1999, pp. 65–6.
20. As cultural historian and literary critic Aleida Assmann puts it, 'trauma ... inscribes itself immediately on the body and therefore renders the experience inaccessible to verbal and interpretational efforts. Trauma means the impossibility of narration.' Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, Beck, München, 1999, p. 264, my trans., italics in the original.
21. Michel Foucault, 'Language to Infinity', in Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 2: *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al., Penguin, London, 1998, pp. 69–90, qtd p. 89.
22. I am taking recourse here to Hayden White's notion of 'emplotment' as expressed in 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact', in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kosicki (eds), *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison and London, 1978, pp. 41–62. White's core argument is that one role historiography may assume is to redress collective historical traumata through successful 'emplotments' of a repressed collective past. Historiography may 're-familiarise' historical events which are looming unresolved and threatening in the collective memories of groups or nations by integrating them into a culturally relevant plot-structure and providing them with due sense and reference to other events. White's notion of 'redemptive' emplotment has been criticised among historians, particularly for favouring integrative narratives which may be instrumentalised by all sorts of parties where the acceptance of and engagement with fragmentation and disruption seems ethically paramount. Cf. the forum on 'The Public Role of History' in *History and Theory*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2005.
23. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, reprint of the ninth edition, ed. Vincent Carretta, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995, p. 59.
24. Burke's example is of a London earthquake, contemplated from a safe distance. See Edmund Burke, 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful', in Edmund Burke, *The Writing and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 1: *The Early Writings*, ed. T.O.

- McLoughlin and James T. Bolton, Clarendon, Oxford, 1997, pp. 185–320, especially p. 223.
25. Caryl Phillips, 'Amistad', in Phillips, *A New World Order*, pp. 75–88, qtd. p. 83.
26. 'Cast and Crew Bios', in Guy Deslauriers (dir), *The Middle Passage*. 2003, DVD, HBO 91859.
27. Phillips, 'Amistad', p. 83.
28. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1973, p. 101.
29. Deslauriers (dir), *The Middle Passage*.
30. As far as I can remember it from my first viewing it at a German festival; unfortunately the French original is not available on DVD or video.
31. Caryl Phillips in Lars Eckstein, 'The Insistence of Voices—An Interview with Caryl Phillips', in *ARIEL*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2001, pp. 33–43, qtd p. 42.