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Transatlantic Slavery and the Literary Imagination

Roughly two years after the British celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade within the British empire on March 25, 2007, transatlantic slavery seems to have a relatively secure place in the nation's collective memory. In 2007, school children across the country read and discussed excerpts from Ottobah Cugnano and Olaudah Equiano's slave narratives; the English churches collaborated on a bicentennial (image)campaign called 'Set All Free'; movies such as Michael Apted's *Amazing Grace* were strategically released to coincide with the major celebrations; the National Portrait Gallery launched a special exhibition; the first International Slavery Museum opened in Liverpool; the BBC featured a handful of special programmes; and even then prime minister Tony Blair, just stopping short of an official apology, expressed "how profoundly shameful the slave trade was."¹

The recent hype should not make us forget, however, that an awareness of the British involvement in the slave trade was virtually absent in public debates and cultural production almost throughout the 20th century, in a way that it had hardly been before. In the field of literature in particular, the preoccupation with Atlantic slavery is almost as old as the British involvement in the triangular trade itself, as is most notably confirmed by Aphra Behn's early 1668 novel *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave*. *Oroonoko* relates the tragic tale of the grandson of an African king and his secret beloved Imoinda; they are betrayed, sold into slavery, and reunited on a plantation in Surinam where Oroonoko starts an abortive slave revolt. Behn's prose version of *Oroonoko* sold exceptionally well (though not during Behn's lifetime, sales picked up some two years after her death), and a dramatic adaptation by Thomas Southerne first staged in 1695 was extremely popular throughout the following century. During the 18th and early 19th century, when Britain rose to become the foremost European power trading in slaves, slavery was a persistent theme in literature and letters (in the works of writers as prominent as Samuel Johnson, James Thomson, William Blake or S.T. Coleridge); it was covered in a substantial number of travelogues by British visitors to the Caribbean (among others by gothic novelist 'Monk' Lewis), and was finally taken up by the earliest black British writers in slave narratives, the first of which was published by Ukawsaw Gronniosaw in 1772. After the abolition of

slavery in British colonies in August 1834, slavery (which legally continued in other parts of the world, e.g. in the US until 1865, in Cuba until 1886, and until 1888 in Brazil) and the slave trade (which persisted illegally up until the end of the 19th century) gradually ceased to be of major concern in British letters, yet the aftermath of slavery in the colonies did not, as is shown in John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle's heated debates over the 'negro question', culminating in Carlyle's infamous reaction to the events surrounding the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. Carlyle, together with many other intellectuals like Charles Dickens or John Ruskin, publicly rushed to the defence of Governor Edward Eyre, who reacted to an uprising of black plantation workers by declaring martial law, in the cause of which more than 400 former slaves were massacred, roughly 350 detained, and many later executed.

In the post-Victorian imagination, however, slavery and the slave trade rapidly faded from collective memory and hardly appeared in public or artistic discourses. This did not immediately change with the gradual establishment of a black British literary scene after the Second World War, either. The writers of the so-called 'Windrush' generation – named after the SS Empire Windrush which docked in Tilbury, Essex, in 1948 with more than 500 Jamaican men and women on board – often took only an indirect interest in the histories of slavery. Instead, the seminal writings of George Lamming, Sam Selvon and others revolved around the conditions of arrival and exile in Britain, and the memories of a Caribbean world lost to them except in the imagination. Since about the 1990s, however, things started to change with a new generation of Caribbean/British writers who finally began to powerfully re-inscribe transatlantic slavery into literary discourses. These writers – most notably Caryl Phillips (who was born on the island of St. Kitts but grew up in Leeds), Fred D'Aguiar (born in London, but mostly living in Guyana until the age of 12), and David Dabydeen (born in Guyana, and moving to London at the age of 13) – eventually took on the challenge of turning the horrors of the middle passage and of plantation slavery into poetry and fiction.

The Challenges of Turning Transatlantic Slavery into Literature

Writing about transatlantic slavery is not an easy task, which may explain why it took so long until writers confronted it head on again. The first problem that comes into play here is a familiar dilemma at the crossroads of aesthetics, ethics and politics which Theodore

Adorno famously formulated in view of fictionalisations of the Jewish holocaust and its overwhelming immensity of suffering and death. In his essay on “Commitment,” Adorno wrote:

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.²

With all due care not to conflate or unduly compare two historically distinct phenomena, Adorno’s argument must stand as a warning also for writers who wish to artistically render the unconceivable suffering in the hold of a slave ship: 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. Writing about transatlantic slavery is therefore a task that cannot and must not be taken easily; it demands artistic sincerity and the constant reflection of literary strategies and aesthetic choices, even if these choices lie, as in the case of David Dabydeen, in the deliberate transgression of Adorno’s warning.

The ethical and political challenges of writing about traumatic historical experience are complicated, furthermore, by a relative scarcity of historical evidence more generally, yet particularly by the sheer absence of any reliable accounts of the site of trauma from the perspective of the victims. There is a rather substantial number of documents which provide insight into the perpetrator’s point of view; two of the most revealing testaments, for instance, are John Newton’s *Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750-1754*, which in cold detail records the triangular trade from the point of view of a slave ship captain, and the 14.000 page diary of the planter Thomas Thistlewood, which intimately chronicles the life of a Jamaican plantation between 1750 and 1786. For the side of the victims of the middle passage, however, things are different. There are very few documents that bear witness to transatlantic slavery, here, which crucially has to do with the fact that especially first generation slaves who experienced the middle passage in person were and remained illiterate with very few exceptions. Those who did learn to read and write, moreover, could only obtain their education through select Christian organisations, and literacy thus invariably came at the cost of a thorough religious and ideological brainwash. The reliability of the small handful of surviving slave narratives which actually touch upon the

experience of the middle passage from Africa to the Americas is therefore difficult to assess, also because the early authors of slave narratives had to balance their own desire for self-expression against very pragmatic constraints. There was always implicit or explicit editorial control exercised by the white abolitionists who often wrote down the stories for the slaves, controlled the publishing processes, or at least administered the finances; also, there would have been a great deal of self-censorship in view of the dominant market, i.e. sympathetic white British buyers whose sympathy was not to be jeopardised with too many ‘sordid details.’

It nevertheless came as a shock when in the late 1990s, historical evidence was brought forth that contested the factuality of the first two chapters of the by far most famous of all British slave narratives, Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, first published in 1789. Indeed, while the account of Equiano’s adult life can be verified as largely consistent with historical evidence, the account of his childhood in today’s Nigeria, as well as his first Atlantic crossing seem to rely heavily on secondary rather than primary experience – this much at least is indicated by a baptismal record and a ship’s register identifying Equiano as ‘born in Carolina.’ Even if the evidence doubting the veracity of parts of the *Interesting Narrative* may not be fully conclusive, the case of Equiano shows that the only available source material that gives us the slaves’ own view of the trade is not to be treated as objective evidence, but needs to be read as thoroughly literary material already in itself. Slave narratives are performative texts which bear the traces of creative self-fashioning and political aspiration as much as the traces of historical event.

It is on these grounds that transatlantic slavery puts a particular challenge to contemporary writers: on the one hand, there is only limited access, as it were, to the sites of trauma, and the few sources there are are ideologically charged in complex ways; on the other hand, there is an ethical impulse to unearth the stories of the past, to imaginatively bridge the gaps and silences, in a way that somehow does justice to the victims. The following briefly looks at some aesthetic strategies that writers have employed to meet this challenge.

A Polyphony of Historical Voices: Caryl Phillips’s Dialogic Imagination

Caryl Phillips’s creative response to the difficulties of turning transatlantic slavery into literature is rooted in a hesitance to personally inscribe himself into the stories of the past.

Instead, Phillips's art to a large extent resides in the faithful and imaginative imitation, recreation, and recuperation of historical voices. His most radical experiment in this fashion is certainly his 1991 novel *Cambridge*, a novel that for the largest part consists of two distinct voices and narratives that are juxtaposed to each other.

The first narrative is that of Emily Cartwright, who visits her father's Caribbean estate sometime in-between the abolition of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery. The journal she keeps on her trip makes up about two thirds of the novel, and dutifully records her observations of flora, fauna, and the English, Creole, and African population. While she initially sympathises with anti-slavery campaigns, her journal gradually shift toward the ingrained racism of the planters' society, and increasingly so when she begins an affair with the overseer of the plantation, Brown, a man she had initially detested. At one point, Emily briefly comes into contact with an educated, Christian slave called Cambridge; and it is this Cambridge who in the end kills Brown whose child Emily expects.

Emily's story is confronted, however, with Cambridge's view of events. Cambridge's own narrative recounts his childhood in West Africa, how he is kidnapped, survives the middle passage, and immediately returns to England where he is baptised and marries a white servant. Freed after the death of his master, he tours England as an abolitionist until his wife and child die, yet on his way to become a missionary in Africa, Cambridge is robbed and once more sold into slavery. His third crossing of the Atlantic takes the staunch Christian to the Cartwright plantation, where he marries another outsider, the *obeah*-woman Christiania. Things get out of hand, finally, when Brown seduces Christiania and accuses Cambridge of stealing provisions, and the narrative ends with Cambridge's confession that he accidentally killed Brown.

Each of the two fictional voices – Emily's and Cambridge's – has its own coherent tone and style, its own subtle uncertainties and crude convictions. Yet it is only in their juxtaposition that the vanities and delusions of each voice about the other party are exposed, and that the overwhelmingly tragic irony of transatlantic slavery becomes palpable. The ingenious move of Phillips's novel, however, is that *Cambridge* not only sets two voices into dialogue, but two entire literary traditions which hide beneath the novel's coherent surface. Each part, namely, is an elaborate *montage* of innumerable scraps and bits of actual historical texts that are masterfully puzzled together and adjusted

to form a singular coherent narrative. Emily's voice is composed of a large number of travelogues and historiographies from the late 18th and early 19th century, while Cambridge's tale contains many bits and pieces of historical slave narratives and other writings by and about black people from the same period.³ Thus, the mutual exposition of ideological blindness extends beyond the fictional encounter of Emily and Cambridge, and dynamically pitches to two entire historical discourses about slavery against each other which the novel lifts from the oblivion of archives into the living consciousness of today's readers.

This technique is also at work in Phillips's most popular work on transatlantic slavery and its legacy to date, *Crossing the River* (1993). Here, four competitive narrative fragments span together 250 years of Black Atlantic history: The story of Nash, a freed American slave resettled in Liberia, is followed by the tale of Martha, who is separated from her husband and child on the auction block and tries to make a life in the American West; the heartless logbook of a slave ship captain – interrupted by two elegiac letters to his young wife – is followed by diary entries of the white English woman Joyce, who falls in love with a black GI during the Second World War. Again, the individual voices are genuine and idiosyncratic, yet at the same time also representative of larger historical discourses. In the first part of *Crossing the River*, for example, Nash's letters from Liberia to his former owner are evidently based on historical letters by repatriated African American slaves, and the third part of the novel largely quotes *verbatim* from Newton's aforementioned *Journal of a Slave Trader*. The result, again, is a polyphony of painfully disparate texts and voices which Phillips refuses to unravel for us – in Phillips's fictional universe, it is left to the readers to imaginatively bridge the rifts and silences and draw their own conclusions.

Literary Imagination and the Zong Massacre: Fred D'Aguiar and David Dabydeen

In order to illustrate alternative approaches to writing transatlantic slavery, let me briefly turn to the Zong 'incident', which had an enormous impact on British society and the abolitionist cause in the heyday of Britain's involvement in the trade. The event in question occurred in December 1781 on board the British slave ship 'Zong', when Captain Luke Collingwood, justifying his acts with an alleged shortage of water and the danger of an epidemic disease among his 'cargo', ordered to throw 132 living slaves into the sea. His

true motivation, though, was presumably purely economical and counted on the fact that the insurance money for 'lost cargo' would have exceeded the estimated profit from selling the surviving slaves. His deeds led to a court case filed by the insurers who refused to pay (not out of humanitarian, but purely financial concerns, of course), based on the testimony of the first mate who claimed that Jamaica was near and water was plenty, so that there was no need for the killings. The court ruled in favour of the ship's owners and Collingwood in the first instance; however, the insurers appealed, and the abolitionists came in at last: Olaudah Equiano got word of Collingwood's actions and reported them to the renowned philanthropist Granville Sharp, who tried to put Collingwood and his crew on trial for murder. Sharp never succeeded and Captain and crew went free; still the case received enormous public attention and won the abolitionists many sympathies.

The Zong massacre is one of the very few crimes in the 300 year history of the British slave trade which is well documented (in official papers, newspaper reports, and especially in the *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* of 1820), and thus provides an excellent point of entry for the literary imagination. In his harrowing, yet also luminously poetic novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), Fred D'Aguiar draws heavily on the available source material, but he also makes more fully use of his fictional license than Phillips tends to do, to alter the course of historical events. In D'Aguiar's imagination, one of the slaves thrown overboard, a young woman called Mintah, managed to get hold of a rope, climb back on board and remain hidden with the help of another character who does not appear in the records, a dull but good-hearted cook's assistant, Simon. *Feeding the Ghosts* offers a fragmented and multi-perspectival narrative, full of disturbing metaphors which lyrically merge the semantic fields of body, water and wood, and gives a haunting voice to the victims of transatlantic slavery against the traders' inhumanity. Yet the novel also offers a vision of redemption in the interracial love affair between Mintah and Simon, who ultimately 'betrays' his fellow crew by handing over a diary that Mintah kept to the party of the insurers, which in the fictional context turns the tables against Collingwood (called Cunningham in the novel) at court. Until her death in Kingston, Mintah is haunted by the ghosts of the millions that are buried in the Atlantic, yet till the end she also has visions of a reunification with Simon, visions that express hope for a better, transcultural future based on the very essentials of human understanding.

Already a year before D'Aguiar, fellow Guyanese/British poet and novelist David Dabydeen also took on the Zong massacre in a long poem titled "Turner," an extraordinary achievement which in a much more radical way emphasises the vitality of the writer's individual imagination for the process of recovering the traumata of the middle passage. Other than D'Aguiar, Dabydeen takes no interest in the written testimonies of the Zong case, but imaginatively starts from a single painting, J.M.W. Turner's notorious *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon [sic] Coming On*, first exhibited in 1840. The image, also simply known as *Slave Ship*, depicts a sublime seascape dominated by brownish and red colours; just left of the centre, a ship struggles in a turmoil of waves, while at the bottom right, the shackled leg of an African slave, attacked by fish and sea-gulls, emerges from the waters. While it is most likely that Turner's inspiration to *Slave Ship* was taken from James Thomson's poem "The Seasons," it is rather probable that he also referred to the events on the *Zong*, as Dabydeen himself stated in a review of D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*.

In "Turner," Dabydeen gives a voice to the drowned African in the foreground of Turner's painting which lyrically evokes the endless rhythm of the raging Atlantic. Severed from his African past and violently denied a New World future, the speaker creates alternative, idyllic versions of a past and future for himself, but is interrupted by a stillborn child thrown overboard by yet another slave ship. The speaker tries to be father and mother for this latest victim of the trade (he calls the child 'Turner', which is also the name of the pederast captain of his own fatal middle passage) and offers his imaginary fantasies as consolation; the child, however, "his unconscious and his origin", as Dabydeen explains in a foreword, "cannot bear the future and its inventions, drowned as it is in memory of ancient cruelty."

"Turner" is deeply harrowing and disturbing, not least as a result of Dabydeen's programmatic decision to violate Adorno's dictum against the "aestheticisation principle" – like J.M.W. Turner's brush on his canvas, Dabydeen's lyrical language consciously moves to bring out the perverse beauty of unspeakable violence and death. He thus pushes readers to also confront the illicit pleasures we tend to take from scenes of horror when contemplated from a secure distance (as already described by Edmund Burke in his discussions of the 'sublime'), and to question our own role and involvement in the representations of the past. As in his 1999 *A Harlot's Progress*, a novel inspired by

William Hogarth's eponymous 1732 cycle of prints, *Dabydeen* unveils the history of transatlantic slavery not only as an economic, but also as an erotic project of enormous proportions whose legacy still haunts us today, and which tends to be censored in the official acts of commemoration.

Perspectives

In their widely different works and approaches of the 1990s, Phillips, D'Aguiar and *Dabydeen* have done much to re-establish slavery and the slave trade as a central theme in British writing. They have paved the way for new fictional experiments, the most exciting of which have been contributed by female writers (with an African background) so far, most notably by Simi Bedford (*Not with Silver*, 2007) and Bernadine Evaristo, who in *Blonde Roots* (2008) provokingly inverts the history of slavery, imagining that it was the Africans who enslaved the Europeans. In *Blonde Roots*, Doris, a spirited daughter of poor English cabbage serfs is abducted, endures the horrors of the middle passage, and finally ends up as a house slave in 'Londolo,' glorious capital of the 'United Kingdom of Ambossa' off the coast of 'Aphrika'. Evaristo's may well be the most daring literary evocation of the past to date, which gives further evidence to the fact there exists a new fearlessness and confidence among writers today to keep the legacy of slavery alive in ever new artistic forms and transformations. Whatever the future will bring, there is hope that transatlantic slavery will continue to live in the British literary imagination.

¹ 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. March 2008).

² Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Columbia UP: New York, 1992) 76-94, qtd. 88.

³ For a detailed discussion, see Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006).