

Representing Slavery in Selected Works of Caryl Phillips, David
Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the authors Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar represent Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade in their recent fiction, poetry and non-fictional works. My approach is enabled by the novel engagements I make across postcolonial, poststructuralist and Holocaust theory, and my readings are also informed by a close attention to the history of Britain's involvement in slavery between the mid-sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.

I explore each author's imaginative return to slavery in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and the diverse problems experienced by Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar in so doing. I contend that three central concerns in returning to this past are: the history of slavery, the ethics of representing the trade, and the difficulty of how to remember slavery. In my first chapter, I explore Phillips's interest in, and concerns with, the historical archive and the voices missing from received history. In my second chapter, I discuss Dabydeen's struggle with the ethics of representing slavery and the problems of articulating this past. The third chapter focuses on the work of D'Aguiar, foregrounding his difficulties with the memory of slavery and the importance of counter-remembrance of this past. The UK's involvement in slavery has often been overlooked by historians or, when remembered, the focus tends to fall upon Britain's abolitionists; these authors arguably write partly in response to this inadequacy.

To this end, this thesis is divided into three chapters: one on each of my primary authors. These chapters are preceded by a general introduction to the ethical, creative, historical and theoretical issues surrounding an imaginative return to the past of British slavery. I conclude by exploring the divergence and convergence of these varying issues in the works of Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar. Ultimately, this thesis asserts that imaginatively returning to the past of slavery is all too necessary when faced with the struggle of multiculturalism in late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century Britain.

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[1.1] Ingrid Pollard, *Oceans Apart* (pigment on paper, 1989)

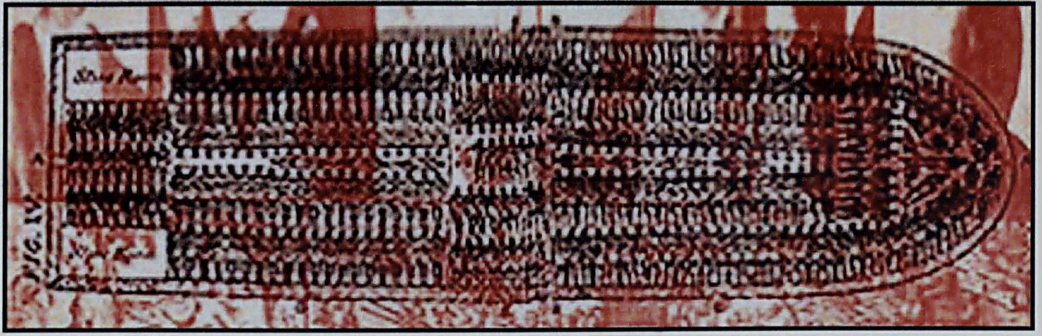
Introduction

Ingrid Pollard's photographic series, *Oceans Apart* (1989), stands as one of the few attempts by a contemporary British artist to reposition postwar Caribbean migration within a larger history of black and Asian migration (forced or voluntary) to Britain over several centuries. Within this series, one untitled picture in particular captures this move – it is with this image that I wish to begin [see figure 1.1].¹

In this photographic collage, Pollard uses a mixture of superimposed images in three horizontal colour bands: the overall density of the work necessitates careful unpacking. The first section, in red, comprises portraits of infamous men connected to slavery and colonialism, including John Hawkins, Christopher Columbus, James Cook and Walter Raleigh. Underneath these figures are scenes depicting first encounters between colonisers and indigenous peoples. Overlaid on these images is an acetate transparency of the *Description of a Slave Ship*, a detailed image of the inside of a slave ship, first published in 1789, which became central to the abolitionist cause.² The ship's prominence over the portraits of these notorious men suggests an attempt by Pollard at redressing received accounts of British history which glorify colonialists whilst simultaneously obscuring the slaves. In her collage, the slave ship partially masks the faces of the men, ensuring their celebrity is secondary to the business of slavery [see figure 1.2, below]. As I shall explore in a moment, Pollard's collage can be seen as an attempt at challenging received accounts of British history in which, abolition aside, slavery is still a largely silenced subject.

¹ This image has appeared on its own, in Ingrid Pollard's *Postcards Home*, and as one frame within the *Oceans Apart* series in the University Gallery in Leeds. For the purpose of this introduction, I am using the image as a complete piece of work in its own right. Its adaptability within Pollard's exhibitions attests to its versatility and the continually evolving nature of her work. I am indebted to Nadine Scheu for first bringing my attention to Pollard's work in her paper 'Double Loss: Ingrid Pollard and Fred Wilson', 'Perspectives on Endangerment Conference' at the Evangelische Akademie, Tutzing, Germany, 4-6 November 2003.

² As Marcus Wood writes, the *Description* was 'the most famous, widely reproduced and widely adapted image representing slave conditions on the middle passage ever made'. See Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 17.



[1.2] Pollard, *Oceans Apart* (detail)

Underneath the *Description* are black and white images of street signs in the Canary Wharf area of London – the only visible reminders of the financial origin of this lucrative area – ‘West India Dock Road’, ‘Tobago Street’, ‘Trinidad Street’, ‘East India Dock Road’ and ‘Cuba Street’. The street names bear witness to the area’s former colonial interests; by placing these signs next to explicit images of slavery and colonisation, Pollard reminds us of where much of London’s money was generated in the period spanning from the mid-sixteenth century until the end of the British empire.³ In addition, her inclusion of images of street names attesting to London’s slaving past can be seen to be raising the notion of slavery’s memorialisation. Where few monuments to slavery can be found in British towns and cities, street signs may act as the only visible reminders of Britain’s slave-trading activities. I investigate the means of memorialising slavery in my second and third chapters; as I shall show, the primary difficulty lies not only in finding an appropriate marker for this past, but also in whether fixed monuments are suitable means of beginning to remember the past of slavery.

Immediately beneath the street signs, though in the same colour band, is a repeated image of slaves aboard a slave ship. Underneath still is a blue section, in which there is reproduced probably the most well-known photograph of postwar Caribbean arrival: the scene at Victoria station, flanked at either side by a slave ship on the left and the *S. S. Empire Windrush* on the right [see figure 1.3, below].

³ London is not, of course, the only city whose architecture and street signs attest to its slaving past. In my work on Phillips I shall explore his portrayal of Liverpool as a city of amnesia concerning the slave trade.



[1.3] Pollard, *Oceans Apart* (detail)

In this frame, Pollard invites the viewer to consider the *Windrush* arrival in relation to a broader history of black arrivals to Britain than has perhaps been suggested by the focus in received historical accounts of the *Windrush* arrival as the primary moment of black British arrival. The *Windrush* docked at Tilbury on 22 June 1948 with 492 Caribbean migrants on board. These people had been granted British citizenship by the 1948 Nationality Act, and arrived in Britain in response to pleas from the British government for workers from the colonies to alleviate the postwar British labour shortage. In the next ten years, some 125,000 migrants from the Caribbean were to enter the country.⁴ This concentrated influx of black people to Britain has arguably eclipsed earlier arrivals, to the extent that the *Windrush* immigration is often considered to be the beginning of black arrival in Britain. As James Procter writes in his introduction to *Writing Black Britain: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (2000), ‘it is important to distinguish between 1948 as an *initiatory* rather than an *originary* moment, in terms of black settlement in Britain. This becomes especially urgent given that the narration of that year has tended to erase a black British presence before it.’⁵ In figure [1.1] the layers of images, their depth and intensity, render the overall picture difficult to see clearly and understand, perhaps suggestive of the way in which the pre-*Windrush* habitation of black people in Britain has, arguably, been at least partially obscured from British history by the focus on the mid-twentieth century period of Caribbean migration to Britain. In *Oceans Apart*, then, by juxtaposing slavery

⁴ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 372. Although Fryer describes these passengers as ‘Jamaicans’, James Procter is careful to point out that the *Empire Windrush* carried settlers from a number of Caribbean islands and not just from Jamaica. See the introduction to *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. by James Procter (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1-12 (p. 3). For this reason, I shall refer to them as Caribbean migrants.

⁵ Procter, p. 3.

with this much later arrival, Pollard seems to be readdressing British history by repositioning the *Windrush* as one of many black arrivals to Britain over several centuries. She ensures that the images in their new contexts demand thought: we might think of this as ‘creative revision’ – revising the past through a process of reinterpreting images.

‘Creative revision’ is a term I borrow from Mick Gidley, who employs the phrase in an essay entitled ‘Photography by Native Americans: Creation and Revision’ (2004). In this essay, he primarily examines the work of native American photographers who reuse and reinterpret old photographs of native Americans. As Gidley notes, ‘[i]n effect, in creating new work, photographers such as [Hulleah] Tsihnahnjinnie and [David] Avalos are also engaged in the revision of the past – indeed, revision is creation.’⁶ Creative revision may be thought of as being concerned with redressing received history and with how images of Native Americans or, in the case of Pollard, black people, have been used in the past. I argue in this thesis that the different ways in which the authors Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D’Aguiar return to the past of slavery offer responses to the apparent eclipsing of a pre-*Windrush* black British past in accounts of received history. This approach might also be thought of as imaginatively returning to the past of slavery in order to creatively revise the way in which this past is understood and remembered.

In Pollard’s work, images are collected, but not synthesised; *Oceans Apart* does not enact an untroubled placing of subjects. Instead, images are overlaid and over-typed, jostling for prominence and recognition. Collage seems a particularly useful technique in enabling her to make visible links across centuries between what she sees as ‘waves’ of migration. James Clifford suggests in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) that collage collates

elements that continually proclaim their foreignness to the context of presentation. These elements – like a newspaper clipping or a feather – are marked as real, as collected rather than invented by the artist-writer. The procedures of (a) cutting out and (b) assemblage are of course basic to any semiotic message; here they are the message. The cuts and sutures of the

⁶ Mick Gidley, ‘Photography by Native Americans: Creation and Revision’, in *Representing Realities: Essays on American Literature, Art and Culture*, ed. by Beverly Maeder (Verlag, Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004), pp. 107-127 (p. 115).

research process are left visible; there is no smoothing over or blending of the work's raw data into a homogeneous representation.⁷

In figure [1.1] the apparent incongruity of heterogeneous images – street names, slave ships, colonial figures, *Windrush* photographs – are shown to be connected within the broad history of slavery and its continuing legacies. Slavery and twentieth-century Caribbean migration to Britain are not, Pollard reminds us, unconnected events. Furthermore, the indistinct images and visible borders, or 'cuts and sutures', of her work are deliberately exposed – the images are initially seemingly incongruous, their borders and edges visible. The sticky-tape joining the transparency of the *Description* to the portraits is not concealed; the act of assembly can be seen as vital to the meaning of the work. Pictures jar against one another in a refusal to be merged or blended into a seamless and harmonised whole, perhaps indicative of her dissatisfaction with examining the past of slavery with history's clinical and homogeneous neatness. This is not a past that should be smoothed over: slavery, Pollard suggests, has left visible scars.

Pollard's collage from *Oceans Apart* is vital to my study of selected works of Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar, in foregrounding the link between slavery and the continuing twentieth- and twenty-first-century legacies of this past. I have explored this image because, specifically, it raises three central concerns of my thesis. The first is the inadequacy of received historical accounts of Britain's slave past; in particular, the way in which these accounts either gloss over Britain's involvement in the trade or, as I shall explore in a moment, focus exclusively on the role of British abolitionists. The former approach can be seen as indicative of the way in which received accounts of British history have tended to focus on what has occurred in Britain, rather than events occurring in the colonies, recalling the oft-cited comment of Salman Rushdie's character Whiskey Sisodia from *The Satanic Verses* (1988): the 'trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means'.⁸ The latter approach ensures that when slavery is written about, Britain

⁷ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 146.

⁸ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 343.

remembers its role as ending, rather than instigating, the trade. Secondly, in presenting images of the migration of black people to Britain, Pollard's collage raises the problematic issues of 'home' and belonging for non-white Britons; I shall be exploring in this thesis the historical context for the unbelonging experienced by black people in the UK. Thirdly, her collage foregrounds the issue of representation itself; specifically, how to commence remembrance or representation of the past of slavery. How, in the late twentieth century, does one go about reimagining the slave past? What might be at stake in enacting the creative revision of the past of slavery? Whilst Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar cite the necessity of returning to the past of slavery, there is immense difficulty (and delicacy) required in doing so.

Each of my three authors is involved in the vexed history and legacy of slavery and migration which Pollard exposes. Phillips was born on St Kitts in 1958, brought to Britain as an infant and raised in Leeds. He attended Oxford University and initially began his literary career as a playwright; his first play, *Strange Fruit*, was produced in 1980 at the Crucible theatre in Sheffield. Phillips's works, which include fiction, non-fiction and plays, range from the sixteenth-century Venice of his novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997) to the twentieth-century Britain of such novels as *The Final Passage* (1985) or *A Distant Shore* (2004). Prizes awarded to his works include the Malcolm X Prize, Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for literature, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Lannan Fellowship. His novel *Crossing the River* (1993) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and *A Distant Shore* won the 2004 Commonwealth Writers Prize.⁹ Having previously taught at Amherst College and Columbia University, he is now Professor of English at Yale University. To a greater extent than my other authors, Phillips engages with the problem of history, and close reading of his work reveals a web of intertextual relationships with older sources. His prevailing interest would seem to lie in exploring those voices absent from received historical accounts of slavery, whether that of a slave, or a plantation owner's daughter. One of Phillips's central contentions is that slavery does not just belong to the realm of so-called 'black history', but is central to the past and fortunes of white

⁹ For further biographical details and an overview of Phillips's works, see Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 1-16.

Britons as well. This contention has an important bearing on my thesis, and is all too often overlooked by both standard and revisionary accounts of slavery.

David Dabydeen was born in Guyana in 1955 and moved with his family to Britain in 1969. He read English at Cambridge University, and was awarded his doctorate from University College London. Currently, he is Director of the Centre for Caribbean Studies and Professor at the Centre for British Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Warwick.¹⁰ His collections of poetry include *Slave Song* (1984), *Coolie Odyssey* (1988) and *Turner* (1994), and novels span from the twentieth-century Britain of *The Intended* (1991), as viewed from a Guyanese immigrant's perspective, back to the eighteenth-century Hogarthian world of *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). Dabydeen has also edited a range of non-fictional works which include, together with Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (1988) and, with Brinsley Samaroo, *Across the Dark Waters* (1996). He has, in addition, completed two studies of William Hogarth's works, *Hogarth's Blacks* (1985) and *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain* (1987). In contrast to Phillips, my second chapter on Dabydeen sees a move away from the historical archive in responding to the past of slavery. Instead, Dabydeen exhibits a deliberate vandalisation of, and irreverence towards, received history; as a result, his is a much more confrontational and deliberately provocative approach to writing about this past. His primary concern, as I shall show, is with the ethics of representing slavery. Dabydeen's works reveal his anxieties about audience and received readers for his texts, drawing comparisons between the eighteenth-century slave narrator's reliance on the abolition market and twentieth-century readers' desire to consume books on slavery. In his novel *The Counting House* (1996) he also explores the role of Indian indentured labourers; although this is not part of the African slave trade, it remains important to my thesis. Often referred to as 'the new slavery', Indian indentured labour, like African-Caribbean slavery, is an overlooked part of British history which Dabydeen attempts to imagine using the surviving fragments and objects of this past.

¹⁰ For further biographical information on Dabydeen, see Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 118-121.

Fred D'Aguiar was born in London in 1960 and raised in Guyana. He returned to Britain when twelve, where he was educated, and now resides in the United States.¹¹ For three years he worked as a psychiatric nurse before studying English Literature at the University of Kent. His earliest works were poetry, including collections *Mama Dot* (1985), *Airy Hall* (1989) and *British Subjects* (1993), and long poems *Bill of Rights* (1998) and *Bloodlines* (2000). D'Aguiar's first novel, *The Longest Memory* (1994) won the Whitbread First Novel Award and David Higham Prize for Fiction, and was followed by *Dear Future* (1996), *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and *Bethany Bettany* (2003). Unlike Phillips or Dabydeen, there has been, to date, no collection of critical essays on his works, though novels other than *The Longest Memory* have received critical acclaim, with *Dear Future* awarded the Guyana Prize for Literature and *Feeding the Ghosts* short-listed for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In addition, his poetry, which oscillates between the Guyana of his youth and the bleak Britain of the late twentieth century, has received the Malcolm X, T. S. Eliot and Guyana Poetry Prizes. In a different way to Phillips or Dabydeen, D'Aguiar's primary interest is in the memory of slavery – specifically, how we are to remember this past almost two hundred years after slavery's abolition. Alongside D'Aguiar's particular anguish concerning the memorialisation of slavery, he indicates in *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Bloodlines* that the legacies of this past have continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, typically in the form of racism.

Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar are a dynamic trio for study because all three authors choose, in the late twentieth century, to return imaginatively to the past of slavery, and do so in strikingly different ways. Their varying concerns in returning to this past (which often include the history, ethics, memory and representation of slavery) illuminate very different problems inherent in exploring Britain's involvement in slavery. As we have seen, Pollard's collage from *Oceans Apart* suggests that received history has inadequately narrated the past of black Britain, failing to identify the links between the *Windrush* and previous black arrivals to Britain during the time of slavery. History, she indicates, has had a tendency to homogenise or 'smooth over'

¹¹ For further biographical content on D'Aguiar, see John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), especially pp. 169-170. See also Sukdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 311-312.

the past of slavery. Despite their often very close reliance on historical documents (particularly transparent in the case of Phillips), Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar deliberately avoid adding to the body of received historical accounts of slavery by choosing to write creatively about this past. Phillips may be seen as seeking to vocalise the past excluded from history by his ventriloquism of neglected voices and histories. On the other hand, Dabydeen attempts to question the motivation for, and ethics involved in, exploring the past of slavery. What, he asks, are the consequences of such acts of representation? For D'Aguiar, the question posed concerns what to do with this historical information: how do we manage the legacies of slavery in order to remember this past? Although all three authors are largely preoccupied with the problem of how to commence representing slavery, therefore, their approaches to this problem vary immensely, and my work shall investigate these differences.

This thesis is the first in-depth collective study of these three authors, and also the first to explore these writers specifically in terms of their differing representations of slavery.¹² As my title indicates, the ways in which slavery has been represented in history, literature and – to a lesser extent – art, is crucial to my project. I explore in my next section the problems of historical representations of slavery, and suggest what may, for my authors, be missing from this approach. When these three writers have been brought together previously, it has often been under the guise of 'black British literature'. James Procter, for instance, includes writing by each author in his anthology *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, and Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar also all feature in Mark Stein's *Black British Literature* (2004). However, whilst all three authors may be thought of as important figures in black British literature, Procter and Stein both acknowledge that defending the term is fraught terrain.¹³ As Stein writes:

For a variety of reasons, terms such as *post-colonial literature* or *black British literature* are often considered problematic. The heterogeneity of texts so labeled seems to defy the logic of these categories, which also

¹² Bénédicte Ledent's book on Phillips examines a broad range of his earlier novels, and reads *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* largely in relation to themes of exile and displacement. Critics writing about Dabydeen, as I shall show, tend to focus on his innovative poetry and use of creole, rather than his novels or the context of slavery. See *The Art of David Dabydeen*, ed. by Kevin Grant (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1997).

¹³ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), pp. 9-18.

applies to designations such as *English literature* or *British literature*. This raises the question whether a group of texts indeed has to be homogenous in order to be considered 'a group of texts' – whether English, British, or black British.¹⁴

The term 'black British Literature' is problematic, not only in its potential for the homogenous grouping of ethnically diverse texts, but also because both 'black' and 'British' are deceptively complex terms. As I shall show, 'black British writers' may not be an entirely appropriate way of describing my authors.

I will use the term 'black' to refer to both African and Caribbean-descended persons, fully aware that any racial category is, to quote Paul Gilroy, 'imagined – socially and politically constructed'.¹⁵ In a similar way, I employ the term 'white' to describe people of European origin; in neither case do I wish to dismiss the diversity and heterogeneity of people that fall within these constructed categories.¹⁶ I am, therefore, applying these labels as political alignments rather than biological categories, conscious of their inadequacy in doing so.¹⁷ It would seem that whiteness has been particularly under-conceptualised in debates about race and identity, which is, as Richard Dyer writes in *White* (1997), a serious problem: '[a]s long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.'¹⁸ Alistair Bonnett concurs, writing of the invisibility of whiteness in contemporary discussions about racial identity:

some of the most important questions for an anti-foundationalist anti-racism have remained undiscussed. Perhaps the most pertinent of these is how Whiteness can be made visible, exposed for critical inspection, while

¹⁴ Stein, p. xv.

¹⁵ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p. 20.

¹⁶ In so doing, I hope to avoid replicating the 'homogeneous representation' of peoples criticised by Clifford in the earlier quotation.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall has also warned against minimising the 'immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects'; see Hall, 'New Ethnicities' (1989), in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 441-449 (p. 443). See also Gideon Ben-Tovim, 'Why "Positive Action" is "Politically Correct"' in *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity and Community*, ed. by Tariq Modood and Pnina Werbner (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 209-222 (p. 218).

¹⁸ Richard Dyer, *White* (1997; London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 1.

at the same time opened as a myth [...] that needs to be, if not abolished, permanently caged between inverted commas.¹⁹

Dyer and Bonnett both indicate, then, that there is a need to critically think about 'whiteness' in order to ensure the 'normalcy' of the term ends. 'White' needs to be open for debate and continual definition, rather than taken for granted as the starting point from which to begin defining other ethnic or political identities.

In contrast to the perceived critical invisibility of whiteness, the concept of blackness has a high visibility in contemporary debate. The political deployment of the term 'black' is traced by Alison Donnell in the introduction to her *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* (2002). She notes that 'an articulation of specifically black British concerns' began to emerge in the late 1970s, and suggests that there was a gradual shift from projects being thought of as 'the black British presence in Britain to the black dimension of Britain by the 1980s'.²⁰ Donnell indicates that through the gradual integration of black cultures into mainstream Britain, by the 1980s the terms 'black' and 'British' were no longer thought of as completely incompatible. It was not long, however, before internal 'fractures were beginning to be felt and, by the mid-1980s, there was also a more sustained questioning of the usefulness of black as an organising category'.²¹ Such fractures might include D'Aguiar's assertion almost twenty years ago in his essay 'Against Black British Literature' (1988) that '[t]he dual function of black, as adjective and noun seems all-embracing. In fact it serves to enclose and prejudice the real and imaginary scope of that creativity. In addition it syphons off so-called blackness from the general drive of creativity in Britain.'²² Far from being an empowering identity, he

¹⁹ Alistair Bonnett, 'Constructions of Whiteness in European and American Anti-Racism', in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 173-192 (p. 188). See also Gary Taylor, *Buying Whiteness: Race, Culture, and Identity from Columbus to Hip Hop* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).

²⁰ Introduction to *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture*, ed. by Alison Donnell (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xii-xvi (p. xiii).

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Fred D'Aguiar, 'Against Black British Literature', in *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics*, ed. by Maggie Butcher (Sydney; Mundelstrup, Denmark and Coventry: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 106-114 (p.106). See also Alison Donnell, 'Nation and Contestation: Black British Writing', *Wasafiri*, 36 (2002), 11-17. It is worth pointing out that in the same year as his apparent rejection of the label 'black British', D'Aguiar was employing it in his discussion of 'black British poetry' in *The New British Poetry*, ed. by Gillian Allnutt, Fred D'Aguiar, Ken Edwards and Eric Mottram (London: Paladin, 1988), pp. 3-4.

suggests that the term 'black British' instead marginalises black creativity. 'Black' is, then, clearly not a straightforward or unproblematic term but, returning to Donnell, there is, it would seem, value in its continuing role as a political and identificatory alliance:

As difference becomes both more marketable and more nuanced, the notion of black as an identificatory category will surely both demand and seek constant re-definition; nevertheless, while institutionalised racism persists, it would seem that for many in Britain black remains a politically resonant and historically significant sign of alliance.²³

The repeated definition and assessment of the term 'black' is crucial; Stuart Hall has stressed the shifting nature of diasporan identities, which are, he writes, 'constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference'.²⁴ Importantly, for Donnell, 'black' provides a historicised political identity which is vital in contemporary challenges to the racism arguably institutionalised within British society.

As I have suggested, the term 'black British literature', as a description of the literary works produced by black men and women in Britain, is inevitably contentious. Indeed, as Dabydeen is the only one of my three authors now residing in Britain, the label 'black British' seems a particularly inappropriate way of describing these writers. Furthermore, in the following chapters it will become clear that many of the conclusions reached by my authors surrounding exclusionary national identities and problems with British history have been reached precisely because their habitation outside the UK enables their different critical perceptions on Britain. As John McLeod writes in his essay 'Some Problems with "British" in a "Black British Canon"' (2002), '[t]o approach the work of writers such as Johnson, Phillips, Kay and Selvon in terms of a national paradigm ultimately fails to address the transnational cultural influences and affiliations which impact upon their attempts to render the experiences of black peoples in Britain'.²⁵ Bearing this in mind, I shall, like McLeod, instead use the slightly unwieldy phrase 'black writing in Britain' as an attempt to avoid the closed-off nature of 'black British'. Instead, 'black writing in Britain' suggests the potential for movement,

²³ Donnell, *Companion*, p. xiv.

²⁴ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 402.

²⁵ John McLeod, 'Some Problems with "British" in a "Black British Canon"', *Wasafiri*, 36 (2002), 56-59 (p. 59).

heterogeneity and migration, recalling Hall's emphasis on diasporan identities 'constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew'. The phrase 'black writing in Britain' indicates a non-static, or non-fixed, identity that is perhaps particularly suited to my authors, whose transatlantic movements would seem to shake off attempts to fix identities as being rigidly, and solely, black *British*.²⁶

Slavery in History

My exploration of the works of Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar is informed by two primary contexts: the first is the historical. In order to explain some of the problems in accepting a conventionally historical approach to the past of slavery, some detail is required concerning slavery and much later twentieth-century black arrivals to Britain. My contention is that there are two significant problems with taking an entirely historical approach to the past of slavery. The first is that most received historical accounts have downplayed, or ignored completely, Britain's role as a slaving nation. The second problem is that, if slavery is remembered, the focus falls on the abolitionists, so Britain's role in this past is remembered only in terms of ending, rather than perpetuating, the trade.

Britain's involvement in slavery began in 1562, with the first voyage of John Hawkins to Guinea, and was abolished in Britain in 1807. The Slavery Abolition Act to end slavery in the British colonies, however, was not introduced until 1833.²⁷ Britain's entry into the slave trade has been considered a relatively late arrival into an already established and lucrative trade, but its part should not be underestimated. As Walvin has asserted, 'at the height of the Atlantic slave system, the British shipped more Africans than any other nation; their slave

²⁶ Nevertheless, 'within Britain' still suggests a (temporary) geographical grounding which may be troubled by the current habitation of two of my authors in the United States. Whilst using the term 'black writing in Britain', therefore, I am aware that this is an imperfect label.

²⁷ This Act became effective the following year. I cite the mid-sixteenth century as the beginning of Britain's involvement in the slave trade in accordance with Eric Williams, who writes of the voyage of John Hawkins in 1562 as being the 'first English slave-trading expedition'. See Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: André Deutsch, 1964), p. 30. See also Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1441-1870* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Papermac, 1998), p. 12. Ron Ramdin writes, however, that 'towards the end of 1555, John Lok had already returned from his second voyage bringing to England with him "certaine black slaves"'. See Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Gower, 1987), p. 7.

colonies disgorged produce (and its associated prosperity) on an unparalleled scale, and Britain itself benefited from slavery to a degree which largely goes unrecognized'.²⁸ Such unrecognised benefits included generating the wealth which enabled the construction of Britain's grand houses and public buildings in primary slave ports like Bristol, Liverpool and London. Today, these buildings may be thought of as visible reminders of Britain's involvement in this trade, yet British slavery continues to be a history that is largely unacknowledged. As Walvin has written in his study of the slave trade, *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora* (2000), received historical accounts have tended to downplay the importance of slavery to Britain's economy in the most lucrative period of the trade:

It is generally true that historians of Britain have persistently overlooked or minimized the degree to which British life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was integrated into the Atlantic slave system [...] British historians have tended to regard slavery as a distant (colonial, imperial, American, maritime) issue, of only marginal or passing interest to mainstream Britain.²⁹

Walvin not only emphasises the way in which historians have ignored the importance of the slave trade to Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also raises the crucial issue that slavery is the point of intersection of multiple histories (he names just four). Arguably, those dissatisfied with the received narration of Britain's involvement in slavery may offer alternative narratives of Britain in which the slave trade is far from marginal. As we shall see, there have been several attempts by contemporary black writers in Britain to articulate these alternative histories in their works, arguably in response to the racially homogeneous received history of Britain. Returning to Walvin's point, I would further argue that slavery has seemed 'distant' because, unlike the United States, Britain has never had slave societies in the 'motherland'.

Although the mid-twentieth century Caribbean migration that has come to be symbolised by the arrival of the *Windrush* is often understood to be the 'beginning' of black

²⁸ James Walvin, *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), p. x.

²⁹ Walvin, pp. x-xi. See also the introduction by Trevor Phillips to S. I. Martin's *Britain's Slave Trade* (London and Basingstoke: Channel 4 Books, 1999), pp. 1-8.

arrival in Britain, therefore, there has in fact been a black presence in Britain long before the late 1940s.³⁰ As Fryer writes, in his memorable opening to *Staying Power* (1984), '[t]here were Africans in Britain before the English came here. Some were soldiers in the Roman imperial army that occupied the southern part of our island for three and a half centuries. Others were slaves.'³¹ He suggests the earliest African presence in the UK may have been as early as 210, and that black people have lived continuously in Britain since about 1505.³² Numbers steadily grew over the following century until the amount of black citizens in London in the early seventeenth century prompted Elizabeth I to issue a declaration in 1601 calling for their deportation.³³ The slave trade was responsible for bringing more Africans to England and Scotland, to be used as servants and status symbols from the seventeenth century onwards in the houses of the wealthier classes; a practice which continued into the twentieth century.³⁴ Also, following the American War of Independence, many enlisted black men came to Britain and were unable to secure work, leading to large numbers of black beggars on the streets of prominent towns and cities, and the establishment of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, which devised the disastrous Sierra Leone resettlement project.³⁵ Although the black presence in Britain may have declined during the nineteenth century, as Jan Marsh writes in *Black Victorians* (2005), throughout this period, 'in certain cities and localities, such as London, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Kent, black residents were relatively common. So, while the African diaspora was not large, neither was it negligible.'³⁶

If we look at the postwar period, however, there is little sense of this wider history of black residence in the UK. The apparent 'forgetting' of this pre-1948 black history in Britain

³⁰ See, for example, Procter's introduction to *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998*, p. 1.

³¹ Fryer, p. 1.

³² *ibid.*, p. 1, 12.

³³ Ron Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain: Five Hundred Years of Black and Asian History* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 14.

³⁴ Fryer, pp. 19-25, 295.

³⁵ See Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain*, pp. 17-26. See also Stephen J. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786-1791* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994) and James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986), especially pp. 46-65. Gretchen Gerzina examines, in particular, the ways in which this black past has been erased from popular memory in *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995), pp. 2-3.

³⁶ Jan Marsh, 'The Black Presence in British Art 1800-1900: Introduction and Overview', in *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900*, ed. by Jan Marsh (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2005), pp. 12-22 (p. 14).

has been crucial in refuting the legitimacy of black habitation in Britain in the postwar years. Admitting that black people have lived in Britain longer than (in Fryer's words) 'the English' makes it difficult to cast them as recent intruders to the country. This rhetoric was used by figures like Enoch Powell, who arguably gave voice to a discontent earlier expressed in the series of postwar 'anti-black' riots, such as those of 1958 in Nottingham and Notting Hill, and the associated increase in racist violence and police brutality.³⁷ The violent rejection of non-white Britons was compounded by the media portrayal of black people as violent, unruly and unwanted visitors to a racially homogeneous Britain.³⁸ Furthermore, it would seem that this racism was legitimised by the introduction of various repressive legislative measures between 1948 and 1981 designed to regulate the entry of black and Asian arrivals into Britain.³⁹ Race was undeniably a central factor in the desire to stem immigration into Britain; as Bob Carter, Clive Harris and Shirley Joshi have pointed out, the government seemed to take an 'inordinate interest' in the 36,000 black immigrants who arrived in the UK between 1950 and 1955, yet little notice of the 250,000 Southern Irish or the thousands of European workers who came over during this period.⁴⁰

Yet, the moment that has come to symbolise most clearly what Robin Cohen has called the 'racialisation of the "immigration issue"' was the speech made by Powell in Birmingham in April 1968 against a new race relations bill, commonly termed the 'Rivers of Blood' speech.⁴¹ In this speech, Powell read aloud a letter allegedly written by an anonymous white British woman terrified and terrorised by the influx of black immigrants into 'her' neighbourhood, to

³⁷ For accounts of the violence against black people in the postwar period, see Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 1998).

³⁸ Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 142, 167. See also Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's *Imagining the New Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2001), especially pp. 123-153, and Stuart Hall, 'The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media', in *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, ed. by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 18-22.

³⁹ As Fryer writes, from the early 1950s there had also been a growing number of immigrants from India and Pakistan; by the end of 1958, these numbered around 55,000 (Fryer, p. 372). For details on the riots of 1958, see Fryer, pp. 376-381. For further information on legislation concerning postwar migration, see Robin Cohen, *Frontiers of Identity: The British and the Others* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), p. 18 and Smith, pp. 96-103.

⁴⁰ See Bob Carter, Clive Harris and Shirley Joshi, 'The 1951-1955 Conservative Government and the Racialization of Black Immigration', *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, ed. by Kwesi Owusu (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 21-36 (p. 24).

⁴¹ Cohen, p. 49.

whom she refuses to let rooms. As Gilroy has written, 'Britannia is portrayed as an old white woman, trapped and alone in the inner city. She is surrounded by blacks whose very blackness expresses not only the immediate threat they pose but the bleak inhumanity of urban decay.'⁴² Powell portrayed the woman as a helpless victim and used the letter to attack the legal system and the proposed race relations bill which would criminalise the woman's actions.⁴³ His vocabulary in this speech is telling, recounting a constituent's warning that 'in fifteen or twenty years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man'.⁴⁴ Powell's vocabulary provocatively reanimates a slave environment to scare a racist Britain. His metaphor can be seen as achieving two things: firstly, it reminds his audience of the supposed inferiority of black people, which was the argument used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to justify their enslavement. Secondly, it suggests that there may be a reversal of roles if immigration trends continue – within two decades, Powell indicates, white people would be almost certainly dominated by black people. Elsewhere in contemporaneous speeches he panders to imperialist sensibilities through his rhetoric concerning loss of empire:

In so short a time have a globe with one quarter of the land surface coloured red, our naval and air predominance, and our commercial, industrial and financial primacy become things of the past. History is littered with nations that have been destroyed for ever by the stress of lesser changes than these.⁴⁵

Powell was clearly indicating that although Britain's empire may have ended, it was possible to halt Caribbean immigration into Britain, and so prevent the reversal of roles outlined above; he was extremely careful to indicate that this kind of transformation was a 'preventable evil'.⁴⁶

Powell's mention of slavery as a means of mobilising anti-immigration support in the above example is extremely rare, as I would suggest that the portrayal of non-white people in the postwar period as alien to Britain is, on the whole, a consequence of *not* remembering

⁴² Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 86.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ J. Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, ed. by John Wood (Kingswood, Surrey: Eliot Right Way Books, 1969), p. 282.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 281.

slavery. By denying their habitation and involvement within Britain before 1948, the casting of them as outsiders by figures such as Powell was more easily facilitated.⁴⁷ However, at the same time, by talking about a slave environment, he bypasses the black presence in Britain by suggesting that black people do not belong in the UK, but in the plantation fields so, once again, casts them as outsiders.

Whilst racism may have had a long history in Britain, it only became the 'official', legitimised narrative through the passing of the 1981 Nationality Act, which enforced Powell's ideas about race and nation and arguably led to a form of legalised racism as national identity.⁴⁸ I therefore argue that the 'forgetting' of a pre-1948 black involvement and habitation in Britain, and the emphasis on the *Windrush* immigration as the original moment of black arrival in Britain, has supported a larger governmental campaign (which also included the series of repressive legislation I have mentioned and propagandist speeches made by Powell and Thatcher) to portray black people as alien threats to Britain, and so legitimise their exclusion from both Britain (where possible to do so) and British national identity. As I argue in this thesis, alongside the initial appeals for workers from the colonies, which were made possible only by Britain's role as a slaving and colonising nation, the racism sanctified by the postwar immigration legislation may also be thought of as a continuing legacy of slavery.

When slavery is remembered in the UK, accounts tend to focus on the part played by abolitionists in ending the trade. It would seem, then, that even sympathetic representations of this past may add to the obfuscation of the nature of Britain's true involvement in the slave trade. Alex Tyrrell and James Walvin write in their essay 'Whose History Is It? Memorialising Britain's Involvement in Slavery' (2004) about the memorial to Thomas Clarkson erected at Westminster abbey in 1996. As they acknowledge, whilst there has been a debate in Britain over how to remember the past of slavery, it has concerned the relative importance of different

⁴⁷ For more on the perceived national identity crisis following decolonisation, see Smith, p. 24.

⁴⁸ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 24.

British abolitionists, rather than focusing on how best to remember this past overall.⁴⁹ Tyrrell and Walvin write of Clarkson's memorial: '[i]n addition to his birthplace and dates of birth and death, the inscription [...] proclaimed only that he was "A friend to slaves"; those who read it were to recall the virtues of a man who had campaigned against slavery – not slavery itself.'⁵⁰ This inadequate inscription is arguably typical of a Britain which, if remembering slavery at all, chooses to focus on those figures instrumental in ceasing the slave trade, rather than the perpetuation of slavery by Britain over many years.

Even in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the refusal to acknowledge the active role played by Britain as a nation of slavers, it would seem, is surprisingly widespread. Anne Robinson, a judge on the Whitbread panel in 1994, the year that D'Aguiar's novel *The Longest Memory* won the Whitbread First Novel Award, unashamedly valued the book for its ability to 'fit into a medium-size Chanel handbag. Its cover – black with the title in an elegant green typeface – also looks impressive at the side of the bed'.⁵¹ Her suggestion that plantation slavery might be both a fashion accessory and suitable subject for bedtime reading is indicative of a persistent belief in Britain that slavery is something that happened safely in the past, to other people and without relevance today. It remains to be seen whether the programme of events planned for 2007 to commemorate two hundred years since slavery's abolition will inadvertently screen further Britain's initial role in the slave trade, or whether it will instigate a more truthful means of remembrance of this past.

My authors can be seen as exploring what is missing from both standard accounts of British history and historical accounts of slavery: namely, the effects of slavery's legacies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century on racism, identity and the politics of belonging. Through close reading of the works of Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar, I engage with such issues as the difficulty of representing slavery, and the ethics involved in so doing, the impossibility of accessing or 'returning to' this past, and the problem of remembering and

⁴⁹ Alex Tyrrell and James Walvin, 'Whose History Is It? Memorialising Britain's Involvement in Slavery', in *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Postwar Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell (Aldershot, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 147-169 (p. 151).

⁵⁰ Tyrrell and Wavin, p. 148.

⁵¹ Anne Robinson, 'Anne Robinson's Diary', *The Times*, 21 January 1995, Magazine section, p. 3.

memorialising Britain's involvement in the slave trade. Whilst two of the books I explore by D'Aguiar are set in the United States, my focus shall remain, on the whole, on British slavery, as the subject of American slavery has attracted much scholarly attention both in Britain and the United States throughout the twentieth century. I examine how my authors portray the involvement of British men and women in the past of slavery, a neglected area at the intersection of literature and history. Although historians such as Ramdin, Fryer and Walvin have made vital contributions to the wealth of available information on British slavery, as yet, literary representations of this past have been comparatively under-explored.

The last decade of the twentieth century was a productive period for black writers in Britain exploring the past of slavery, perhaps indicative of a need to understand this past in order to progress more smoothly into the new millennium, or what Paula Burnett has described, via Derek Walcott's trope of the rower, as the method of 'taking [one's] bearings by that which [one] has left behind'.⁵² Sam Durrant writes in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (2003) that the 'principal task' of postcolonial narrative, 'structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the liberatory promise of the future, [...] Is to engender a consciousness of the unjust foundations of the present and to open up the possibility of a just future'.⁵³ Through their writing, poised between past and present, my authors also seek to explore the past in order to reveal the reasons for not only the unjust foundations of the present – the continuing legacies of slavery into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – but also to begin to envisage the possibility of a 'just future'. There exists a contradiction between an 'unjust' Britain, described by Phillips as 'culturally and ethically homogeneous',⁵⁴ and the claims by other black Britons, such as Trevor Phillips, that '[m]ulticultural Britain is already a fact of life'.⁵⁵ The relevancy of understanding slavery is therefore perhaps all the more keenly

⁵² Paula Burnett, "Where Else to Row, but Backward?" Addressing Caribbean Futures through Revisions of the Past', *Ariel*, 30:1 (1999), 11-37 (p. 11).

⁵³ Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 1.

⁵⁴ Preface to *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*, ed. by Caryl Phillips (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. xiii-xvi (p. xiii).

⁵⁵ Trevor Phillips, 'Deal with Difference through integration says Trevor Phillips', The Commission for Racial Equality, 24 September 2004 <<http://www.cre.gov.uk>> [accessed 2 June 2006], (para. 15 of 16). See also the report produced by the Commission for Racial Equality entitled 'The Voice of Britain:

felt at a time when ongoing racial tensions and anxieties continue to undermine claims of Britain's identity in the twenty-first century as a multicultural society.⁵⁶

History as Slavery

The second important context for my study of works by Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar is the theoretical. In his important work *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (2000), Marcus Wood writes of the difficulties of representing visually the past of slavery:

Slavery caused a mass of suffering which the victims might never understand themselves let alone be able to, or wish to, communicate. The attempts of Western painters, sculptors, engravers and lithographers to provide European culture with a record of slave experience is consequently a history fraught with irony, paradox, voyeurism and erasure. The testimony produced by the slaves themselves, which is frequently projected through white creative and economic filters, is equally complicated in its relation to whatever we understand as historical truth.⁵⁷

This quotation raises several issues vital to my thesis concerning trauma and its communication, the ethics of representing slavery, history, memory, remembrance and memorialisation. For the remainder of this introduction I will briefly set out these different issues and the key thinkers who, in the bulk of this thesis, I shall be coming back to in exploring the work of Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar. In my thesis, then, I will provide a close textual analysis of literary works using a number of theorists and drawing upon some important contextual ideas which are not often brought to bear on this material.

Firstly, Wood indicates the extreme difficulty in attempts to narrate a traumatic past. The actual victims of slavery are long dead, but his suggestion that slaves 'might never understand themselves let alone be able to, or wish to, communicate' the past of slavery, may be understood in relation to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983).

Britain Beyond Rhetoric', April-May 2002 <<http://www.cre.gov.uk/downloads/moripoll.pdf>> [accessed 2 June 2006], pp. 1-17.

⁵⁶ 'Multicultural' is another oft-debated term; see the introduction to Modood and Werbner, pp. 1-25. See also Sunder Katwala, 'The Truth of Multicultural Britain', *Observer*, 25 November 2001 <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk>> [accessed 2 June 2006].

⁵⁷ Wood, p. 8.

Lyotard identifies the need to voice traumatic experience, but cites the troubling realisation that words can be incommensurate with what has occurred. He suggests that the chasm between what needs to be expressed and what can be accommodated within the existing frames of language necessitates the development of new modes of expression.⁵⁸ Lyotard's work may offer a helpful vocabulary with which to talk about the problems of narrating traumatic pasts, such as that of slavery. As I shall show, D'Aguiar's characters, in particular, struggle with the immense difficulty of trying to narrate traumatic experience without enacting retraumatisation. For example, Mintah, the protagonist of *Feeding the Ghosts* – having witnessed the murder of 131 of her fellow slaves aboard the slave ship *Zong* – struggles to narrate her story in conventional ways. Her inability to successfully communicate to others what she has experienced leaves her feeling alienated, unreal and 'ghostly'. The effect of trauma on Mintah, then, is so deeply felt that she is unable to fully participate in her life after the *Zong*. Her struggles with reality may be understood with reference to Theodor Adorno's essay 'Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz' (1966), in which he writes that survivors of the Holocaust often suffered from a 'sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator'.⁵⁹ Adorno's articulation of the otherworldliness of trauma survivors can provocatively be compared to the ghostliness experienced particularly by Mintah, where trauma is of such magnitude that it apparently negates her sense of existence. The metaphor of ghosts – used not just in the title, but throughout the novel – is helpful for D'Aguiar in suggesting not only the pressing demands of the past to be remembered in the present, but also the difficulty of imaginatively exploring this past, when slaves are faint and ghostly presences in received accounts of British history.

Secondly, Wood cites the problems involved in attempts by 'Westerners' to represent the past of slavery. The endeavours by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists such as Joshua Reynolds, William Hogarth and J. M. W. Turner to represent black people are, he indicates,

⁵⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 13. First published in French as *Le différend* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983).

⁵⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz', in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O' Connor (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 85-88 (p. 87). First published in German in *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966).

deeply problematic. Such attempts at representation, usually in the context of slavery or servitude have led, Wood claims, to 'irony, paradox, voyeurism and erasure' or, as Marsh has expressed, 'visual art inevitably reproduces what is termed the "colonialist gaze", seeing people from a white ethnic viewpoint'.⁶⁰ If we concur with Marsh in believing that the 'colonialist gaze' is an inevitable problem in paintings of black people by white artists, then a productive response to the problems posed by the dynamics of the gaze can be found in the work of Jacques Derrida. In *Memoirs of the Blind* (1993), he claims that the state of blindness may be helpful in revealing the '*alētheia*, the *truth* of the eyes'.⁶¹ This concept of rejecting sight in order to gain *insight* is particularly relevant to my chapter on Dabydeen and his reaction to Turner's painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* (1840), upon which his poem 'Turner' (1994) is based. There may be moments, Dabydeen seems to suggest, when it is necessary to look away from the past of slavery, as this is not a past to be voyeuristically gazed at. Instead, his poem turns to a 'blind', or textual, imagining of slavery which arguably enables a more ethical exploration of this past.

It is not, however, only Western art that has been accused of appropriating the past of slavery, or exploiting black subjects through their representation. As I shall demonstrate later, in *A Harlot's Progress*, Dabydeen raises important questions regarding the readership of novels about slavery, arguably part of his continuing concern with what he calls the 'pornography of empire'.⁶² In *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Graham Huggan discusses what he calls 'ethnic autobiographies'; such texts, he suggests, 'signal the possibility of indirect access to "exotic" cultures whose differences are acknowledged and celebrated even as they are rendered amenable to a mainstream reading public'.⁶³ It is not, it would seem, simply visual art that has the potential to exploit black people; written texts may also fuel the readers' perceived desires for 'exotic' stories about slavery. In a related – though very different – way, D'Aguiar also

⁶⁰ Marsh, p. 17.

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 126. First published in French as *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'auto-portrait et autres ruines* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1990).

⁶² See, for example, David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', in Butcher, pp. 121-135 (p. 121).

⁶³ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 155.

indicates that literature may at times be a vexed mode in which to explore this past. In particular, Derrida's notion of the *pharmakon*, defined as both drug and poison, may be seen as indexing some of D'Aguiar's concerns in *The Longest Memory* with regard to the dangers of the written text. Whilst his character Chapel is clearly entranced by literature, it brings him both pleasure and pain: it is simultaneously drug and poison.

Writing in the late twentieth century, authors like Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar, although writing about the past of slavery, are clear to distance themselves from any suspect notion of affiliation with slaves. My chosen authors acknowledge, at various points in their writing and interviews, their positions of privilege. As Dabydeen has admitted of his novels and poems about slavery: 'I'm living in the twentieth century in a position of privilege; nobody ever beat me, I never cut cane, I don't know the weight of a cutlass.'⁶⁴ Gayatri Spivak's involvement in uncovering what she calls the 'itinerary of silencing' may be seen as crucial here.⁶⁵ Spivak is perhaps the best known critic in the field of subaltern studies, and central to the study of subalterneity is the impossibility of representation for the subaltern, marginalised figure. As Spivak writes, '[f]or the (gender-unspecified) "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself.'⁶⁶ The paradox facing her is namely that, if the subaltern were to voice their history, they would no longer be subaltern. In addition, Wood also suggests that slave narratives are problematised 'through white creative and economic filters'. There is, as I have suggested, no access to the past of slavery and, in my chapter on Dabydeen, I explore the way in which anglicised slave narrators – in particular Equiano – have become figureheads for twentieth-century black Britain. Here, we have a difficult bind in exploring the past of slavery. Slaves were generally forbidden literacy, so few slave testimonies were penned; fewer still exist today. The accounts that do remain, including writing by Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, are

⁶⁴ Grant, p. 203.

⁶⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Geoffrey Hawthorn, 'The Post-Modern Condition: The End of Politics', in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 17-34 (p. 31).

⁶⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 272. Whilst Spivak uses 'subaltern' to describe non-elite Indian people, I am borrowing the term to refer to the slaves, poor whites, women and Indian indentured labourers who have been excluded from the received history of slavery.

somewhat troubled, and troubling, documents. In *A Harlot's Progress* Dabydeen problematises the slave narrator figure, indicating that such accounts were generally written for the abolition market, and that slave narrators, in writing their tales with such specific concerns about audience and marketability in mind, may be thought of as having been spoken for – unable to avoid being represented even as they strove to represent themselves.

Additionally, the widespread and deliberate illiteracy of slaves left the majority unable to pen their stories. In my third chapter, I explore means of bearing witness to the past of slavery in non-verbal forms. Michel Foucault provides us with a terminology for the physical inheritance of past experience; the body, he suggests, 'manifests the stigmata of past experience'.⁶⁷ Traumatic experience is arguably articulated through the body, creating 'a volume in perpetual disintegration'.⁶⁸ This phrase is particularly helpful in suggesting the textuality of the body. As will become evident, thinking about the body as a text may motion the possibility of alternative ways of narrating the slave past, vital to those for whom history or literature are inadequate or unavailable vessels for experience.⁶⁹

Wood also makes the rather vague suggestion that slave narratives might be complicated in their 'relation to whatever we understand as historical truth'. It is possible that he means that slave narratives might be thought of as in opposition to received accounts of history, in providing a contradictory version of the past. This notion of multiple, competing versions of the past can be explored with reference to the work of Homi Bhabha. In his essay 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation' (1990) Bhabha writes of the heterogeneity of the nation; the numerous histories and points of cultural difference that preclude the establishment of a homogeneous national identity. He has claimed, in particular, that the 'production of the nation as narration' is split between what he calls the 'continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical' and the 'repetitious, recursive strategy of the

⁶⁷ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (1977; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 139-164 (p. 148). This essay first appeared in French in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, ed. by Suzanne Bachelard, and others (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971).

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

performative'.⁷⁰ For Bhabha, the pedagogical exists in a continuous history, a linear movement through time, whereas the performative is continually repeating and non-progressive. The nation is caught between these dual forces; he calls this split 'double-writing or dissemination'.⁷¹ Counter-narratives are, then, an inevitable part of this heterogeneity and further disrupt any notion of national unity.⁷² We will see in my readings of Phillips's works, in particular, how these counter-narratives may work to unpick notions of essentialist identities in his creation of contrapuntal texts which bear witness to the plural voices of slavery. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said similarly writes of 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and on the peripheries'.⁷³ In order to examine the past of slavery, then, it is necessary to study different accounts of slavery, and narratives of both slave and slave-owner. Wood may be indicating that received history is complicated by the articulation of alternate histories posed by these other accounts.

There is a way of reading Wood's sentence, however, that could lead to a different position; the authors of slave narratives, conscious of their white audiences, may have corroborated with historical 'truth', or the received history of slavery. Equiano, we know, was heavily involved in the campaign for abolition; as I have indicated, when slavery is remembered at all in Britain, it is in terms of Britain's role in ending the trade. Equiano's narrative may, therefore, have inadvertently become part of this received remembrance of slavery in Britain which screens its earlier involvement in this past.

Thirdly, Wood could be alluding to the inherent 'fictionality' of both slave narratives and 'historical truth'. I have already mentioned some of the problems in examining slave testimonies, and there were a vast number of studies devoted to the subject of history as fiction in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including, probably most famously, the work done by Hayden White in historiography. Many such works explicitly interrogate the false boundary between history and fiction, and explore the notion of history as a narrative. As Hans Kellner wrote in

⁷⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 145.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 149.

⁷³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 72.

1995: '[l]iterary critics who once would have rejected historical writing as lacking the "fictionality" and "illusion" of great literature have shown a growing fascination with revealing precisely these aspects of history as the literature of the realist illusion.'⁷⁴ Exploring the 'fictionality' of history was also the approach adopted by Evelyn O' Callaghan in her essay 'Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*' (1993). As O'Callaghan notes, '*Cambridge* wears the mask of fiction (as the term is commonly used), but reveals its matrix in historical narratives, which are in turn unmasked by the text's process and shown to be rather insidiously fictional in their claim to "the truth".'⁷⁵ The amount of work done by critics like O'Callaghan in tracing the inherent fictionality of history, as evinced in work by Phillips, D'Aguiar or Dabydeen, makes it unnecessary to rehearse this debate in my thesis.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, I acknowledge that, like fiction, what is thought of as received history has been subject to concerns about audience, saleability, personal or political bias. Instead, and as I have suggested, I hope to show that if my authors are interested in the history of slavery, it is with revealing problems more complicated than the apparent fictionality of this approach.

Wood's claim that attempts to record slave experience may lead to 'erasure' might perhaps be thought of in relation to the work of Andreas Huyssen. Huyssen is perhaps best known for his work on Holocaust memorials and the search for suitable ways to remember this past. In 'Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age' (1994), he explores the value of monuments to the Holocaust, which stand all too often, he contends, as 'figures of forgetting'.⁷⁷ As I shall show, the memorialisation of the British slave trade raises similar problems concerning how to remember this past. Like the street signs in Pollard's collage, such 'accidental' monuments stand, all too often, as the only visible reminders of slavery. Wood argues that Turner's water in *Slavers* 'performs a memorial function':

⁷⁴ Hans Kellner, introduction to *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. by Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), pp. 1-18 (p. 1).

⁷⁵ Evelyn O' Callaghan, 'Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 29:2 (1993), 34-47 (p. 34).

⁷⁶ See also Lars Eckstein, 'Dialogism in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*, or the Democratisation of Cultural Memory', *World Literature Written in English*, 39:1 (2001), 54-74 (p. 54).

⁷⁷ Andreas Huyssen, 'Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age', in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. by James E. Young (New York and Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1994), pp. 9-17 (p. 9).

In concentrating upon the physical processes of drowning and dismemberment, Turner shows that the slaves are to be dissolved in the waters of the ocean, forever inextricably mixed with the element of their destruction. Turner's painting questions the limits of commemorative thought and gesture.⁷⁸

I believe this quotation, although motioning towards the existence of problems surrounding the limits of memorialisation, raises a more fundamental question, namely: what are the ethics of ascribing to a nineteenth-century painting by a white artist a memorial function to slavery? In my second chapter, I challenge Wood's contention that Turner's painting is an appropriate memorial to the slave trade. I suggest that Turner's motivation for painting the picture was far more concerned with a desire to distract attention away from the burgeoning black radicalism of mid-nineteenth-century Britain by focusing on a past where black people, as slaves, had no powers. In so doing, I argue that the painting may instead be seen as an attempt to forget a black present in order to dwell upon, or remember, the black past; or, as Procter has suggested in a postwar context, 'the renewed focus on and manufacture of a black British past might also form part of an escape from or evasion of the black British present/future'.⁷⁹ Remembrance of slavery is important, but the motivation for, and means of, remembering this past is crucial.

Finally, Wood's comment about attempts by Western artists to record for European culture 'slave experience' also subtly raises the distinction between memory and remembering. Like remembering, recording is an archival process; the act of trying to 'record' the slave past may be seen as an attempt to 'preserve' or 'remember' what has occurred. Derrida's subtle, and diaphanous, distinction in 'Plato's Pharmacy' between memory (*mnēmē*) and remembering (*hypomnēsis*), as we shall see, has peculiar resonance with regard to the problems facing my authors of how to write about, and remember, the past of slavery. Susanne Pichler has suggested that, in novels such as *Feeding the Ghosts*, slaves' 'memories are communicated, shared with others in a distributed collective memory'.⁸⁰ However, the temporal gap between

⁷⁸ Wood, p. 45.

⁷⁹ Procter, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁰ Susanne Pichler, 'Migrating Memories/Migrating Histories: Memories of Trauma/Traumatic Memories in Fred D'Aguiar's 1998 [sic] Novel *Feeding the Ghosts*', Congress CATH V: The Afterlife of Memory Conference, University of Leeds, 5-8 July 2006.

the demise of slavery and the late-twentieth-century attempts to write about this past, and absence of living witnesses, arguably indicates that such texts are concerned with remembering slavery, rather than with actual memories of this past. Derrida indicates the subtle, but important, difference between involuntary flashes of memory and archived remembrance, which is consciously recalled. Writing, he claims, can be thought of as a monument to the memory which has passed; this notion, as I will demonstrate, is particularly important in relation to some of the issues I have raised concerning how to remember or memorialise the past of slavery. If writing may be thought of as constructing a monument to what has passed, then it may suggest an alternative means of memorialising slavery to the physical monuments, or fixed location for remembrance, deemed necessary by such writers as Alan Rice. Rice has claimed that: '[w]ithout memorial sites, memorialization is problematic, especially in such a contested terrain as Britain's slave past, and Sambo's grave gives all Lancastrians an opportunity to remember'.⁸¹ On the contrary, I suggest that the memorialisation of slavery remains deeply problematic, despite sites such as Sambo's grave at Sunderland Point, Lancashire. The name 'Sambo' alone raises the issue of how slavery is to be remembered and who these designated memorial sites are actually for. Additionally, in contrast to the geographical limitations on physical monuments to slavery, literary monuments potentially may reach a significantly wider audience. The continued creation of new texts about slavery – and responses to these texts – may suggest a more fluid and dynamic exchange of ideas than static monuments allow, enabling remembrance of this past to evolve and change, as well as seeking to avoid the presumption that the monument is a guarantor of memory.

In exploring the temporal gap between the attempts made by my writers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to remember the past of slavery, the work of Marianne Hirsch is crucial. In her many influential essays, Hirsch coins the term 'postmemory' as a way of explaining what she calls the belated 'memories' experienced by those who did not

⁸¹ Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 216.

directly witness the traumatic events.⁸² Hirsch writes that, 'although familial inheritance offers the clearest model for it, postmemory need not be strictly an identity position. Instead, I prefer to see it as an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma'.⁸³ In writing about the possibility for postmemory as a potential space for cultural or collective trauma, Hirsch broadens the scope for empathy. Postmemory is therefore especially useful in thinking about the how my authors can explore the remembrance of slavery in the absence of direct experience of this past. As will become clear, postmemory is helpful in conceptualising the work of writers like Dabydeen, who do not claim to have experienced 'the weight of a cutlass', or the trauma of slavery, but – nonetheless – feel an empathetic remembrance of, or connection to, this past.

Engaging with postcolonial theory alongside Holocaust and poststructuralist theory is perhaps less of a theoretical leap than it may initially seem. Unlike the Holocaust, which took place in the more recent past of the mid-twentieth century, slavery has not often been theorised with regard to trauma and its expression, memory and remembrance. Those writing about slavery therefore arguably lack a vocabulary with which to talk about this past and its effects, indicating the need to look elsewhere to find means of writing about the problems of exploring this past. In borrowing a critical vocabulary from those examining the trauma of the Holocaust, I do not intend either to homogenise trauma or enter into a debate about the relative evil of the Holocaust and slave trade.⁸⁴ Instead, I believe these theorists offer insightful ways of thinking about how to phrase and remember traumatic pasts which may be helpful in thinking about slavery.

⁸² M. Hirsch, 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 2-23 (p. 8).

⁸³ Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14:1 (2002), 5-37 (p. 10).

⁸⁴ Laurence Mordekhai Thomas takes great pains to make the same point in his book about the Holocaust and American slavery, stating: 'I aim for a proper grasp of the moral pain of both Jews and Blacks. I write with the conviction that the moral pain of neither can be subsumed under nor assimilated into the moral pain of the other'. See Thomas, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. x. See also Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

Like the Holocaust theorists I have mentioned, the kind of postcolonial theory in which I am interested – namely, the work of Bhabha, Spivak and Said – has been undeniably influenced by poststructuralist thought. As Stephen Morton writes:

Derrida's deconstructive strategies have been particularly generative for postcolonial intellectuals such as Homi Bhabha, Robert Young and Gayatri Spivak because they provide a theoretical vocabulary and conceptual framework to question the very philosophical tradition that has also explained and justified the subjection, dispossession, and exploitation of non-western societies.⁸⁵

Morton identifies here the value of borrowing the tools of poststructuralism in order to examine the philosophy that has defended Western exploitation and imperialism. Alongside Derrida's considerable impact on Spivak who, of course, translated the 1976 edition of *Of Grammatology*, her writing was also influenced by the poststructuralists Foucault, Deleuze and Lacan.⁸⁶ Bhabha similarly includes a titular nod to Derrida in 'DissemiNation' and, as Bart Moore-Gilbert notes, poststructuralism was especially helpful for Bhabha in 'conceptuali[sing] the tension and disturbance within colonial discourse'.⁸⁷ Derrida is not the only significant influence on postcolonial theorists and, whilst Said has criticised Spivak for her use of Derrida, Foucault's influence on Said, particularly in *Culture and Imperialism*, is clearly discernible.⁸⁸ As Robert Young writes in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001):

It is not only with respect to discourse that Foucault has been a central theoretical reference point for postcolonial analysis. Whether early or late, so much of Foucault seems to be applicable to the colonial arena – his emphasis on forms of authority and exclusion, for example; his analysis of the operations of the technologies of power, of the apparatuses of surveillance, or of governmentality.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 27.

⁸⁶ See John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 191-192.

⁸⁷ Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 118, 115, 127. He notes, however, that 'Bhabha's enthusiasm for such theory is, however, by no means untempered' (p. 118). Moore-Gilbert traces other significant influences on Bhabha's work, including Bakhtin, Foucault and Barthes; see p. 115, 118, 127. See also Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), especially p. 68.

⁸⁸ See Valerie Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 25. Said has, however, also been particularly critical of Foucault; most famously comparing Foucault and Frantz Fanon, to the detriment of Foucault, at the end of *Culture and Imperialism*. See Said, pp. 335-336.

⁸⁹ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 395.

Young indicates that Foucault's interest, in particular, lay not only in discourse, but in power structures, struggles and the tools designed to maintain order: all things relevant to the 'colonial arena', as Young asserts. He notes, however, that an explicit discussion of how these components operated within colonialism, or according to race, was absent from his work.⁹⁰

Poststructuralism, it would seem, can only take us so far, though there is considerable value in approaching postcolonialism via a deconstructive attention to the mechanics and problems of the text. As Moore-Gilbert writes, '[s]ince Derrida is usually the chief bogeyman in attacks on postcolonial theory's reliance on European methodological models, it may be worth pointing out that throughout his career he has made Western ethnocentrism a primary theme of his criticism'.⁹¹ We might conclude that the rigidity of the distinction between postcolonial and deconstructive theory gives a false sense of opposition between the schools of thought, when Said's notion of 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories' may be a more apt analogy. I am excited by the possibilities for my project presented by using poststructuralist and Holocaust theories. As we have seen, poststructuralist thought, in particular, has helped to interrogate and understand the mechanics of history and narrative. I suggest that such a move is entirely necessary in order to commence the reimagining, or creative revision, of slavery undertaken by Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar.

Like the unabashed evidence of manufacture in Pollard's collage, then, the works of Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar can be seen as exposing, in different ways, the 'cuts and sutures' of slavery, or the mechanics of the narration of this past. As I shall demonstrate, this impacts upon both the subject of their narratives and their very form – perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of their work. Like Pollard's collage, such evidence of creation may indicate a refusal to portray slavery in a way that replicates homogenised, or 'smoothed over', received history. Rejecting a conventionally historical approach to slavery, these authors instead struggle, in diverse ways, with how to commence an act of literary creation upon this past: this thesis evaluates their struggles.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ Moore-Gilbert, p. 163.

Chapter One

‘Something “New” out of Something “Old”’: Caryl Phillips and the Absent Voices of History

Caryl Phillips’s latest novel, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) explores the life of black Broadway vaudeville performer, Bert Williams, in early twentieth-century America. It reveals Phillips’s ongoing concerns with the complexities of identity, race, sexuality and gender, as well as his interest in the historical: Williams is not a figment of Phillips’s imagination, but was a popular entertainer at the start of the last century. Phillips’s fascination with the historical archive and with the intersecting complexities mentioned above have already been staged in earlier novels about the slave trade, *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993), upon which I focus in the first two sections of this chapter. In the final section, I will explore his non-fictional works *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) and *A New World Order* (2001), which can be seen as interrogating the legacies of slavery.

The work of Edward Said is particularly crucial to this chapter, in providing a critical input when thinking about Phillips’ motivation for returning to the past of slavery. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said argues that contemporary ‘[a]ppeals to the past’ are in part motivated by ‘not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps’.¹ Here, Said identifies three impulses in returning to the past. Whilst one is a broadly philosophical question about historiography and what exactly the past was, he also makes the important contention that the past may continue into the present in altered forms. As I demonstrate, Phillips also suggests in his works that, while slavery may have ended, the legacies of this past – such as racism and the attempted exclusion of non-white people from British national identity – continue into the late twentieth century in related, if different, forms.²

¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 1.

² For further discussion of how racism may have continued in altered forms, see Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Penguin, 2000).

Said's final point concerning 'appeals to the past' introduces the notion of interpretation, and the inevitable disagreements about what actually happened in the past. The proliferation of conflicting viewpoints leads, in turn, to the notion of multiple histories. As we shall see, these disagreements are fundamental in approaching the work of Phillips, who arguably seeks to destabilise the assumption that one version of received history, or homogeneous main narrative, is adequate representation for Britain's diverse citizens. Referring to Western literature, Said has argued:

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.³

Said indicates the necessity of reading the separate pasts simultaneously; each history is different, but needs to be read contrapuntally, alongside and in dialogue with the others. If we look carefully at the received history of Britain, therefore, we may be able to discern traces of other forgotten histories that challenge the prevailing narrative of this past.

What Said demands in reading, Phillips produces in a contrapuntal writing. The work of Said enables me to read the novels *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* and his non-fictional works *The Atlantic Sound* and *A New World Order* in a way which complicates the Manichean polarisation of slavery and its legacies. My readings of Phillips's works will suggest that counter-narratives – articulated in his creation of contrapuntal texts – may indeed serve to disrupt the notion of one main narrative, with implications for racialised models of British national identity. In *Cambridge*, for example, we find the narrative of a slave placed alongside that of a slave-owner's daughter and, in *Crossing the River*, an eighteenth-century slave-ship captain's log is juxtaposed with a narrative about a nineteenth-century black female pioneer. I contend that in *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* Phillips aims, via polyphonic voices, to counter the homogeneity of the narrative of received British history, from which, he proposes, several of these voices might have been excluded as slavery has been quietly forgotten. In my reading of *Cambridge*, therefore, I explore Phillips's close reliance on conflicting and biased

³ Said, p. 59.

historical documents which, I argue, conspires with the novel's fragmented form to expose the problems of adopting a homophonic approach to the past of slavery. In thinking about the novel's form, I examine how his 'patchwork' of texts might be seen as exposing the creolisation of *Cambridge*, also evident within the story in the trope of clothing as national identity.

In my reading of *Crossing the River* I further discuss the connections made by Phillips between different centuries, characters and locations. In including accounts by black and white characters in both *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, he stresses contrapuntally – that is, through juxtaposition of voices – that slavery has circumscribed disparate people. Drawing upon Said's notions of filiation and affiliation, I shall examine how Phillips explores the limitations of filiation, instead proposing that affiliative bonds may enable connections vital to his characters' survival. I argue that, by juxtaposing Hamilton's log book and love letters to his wife, Phillips also complicates his portrayal of the slave-ship captain; in so doing, he demonstrates that his is a complex and non-retributive approach to examining the past of slavery.

In my exploration of *A New World Order* and *The Atlantic Sound*, Said's notion of diasporan crossings will be helpful in identifying provocative connections suggested by Phillips between Africa, Britain and the United States. Although each location seems to respond differently to the past of slavery, there are important connections – especially, it would seem, between the ways in which some Africans and Britons may seek to forget the past of slavery. Although my reading of Phillips's works via a postcolonial framework may seem, at first glance, conventional, I hope to show how his particular focus on slavery is novel, in demanding that this past is reinstated as a vital part of British history. The legacies of slavery, Phillips contends, may be seen in the struggles of non-white people within Britain with notions of 'home' and identity, which are traced in *A New World Order* and *The Atlantic Sound*. In the latter text, his ultimate rejection of an exclusive national identity is captured by his conception of what he calls his 'Atlantic home' – a point in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean between the UK, Africa and the Caribbean. As I demonstrate, whilst this may seem a liberating alignment, this notion of what he calls the 'watery crossroads' of identity is not a realistic or plausible solution to the complexities of diasporan identity.

As the chapter progresses it will become clear that I differ from those critics who seek to locate Phillips's works either within a rhetoric of blame – by which I mean the demand for retribution from white people for their part in the slave trade – or as being concerned solely with 'black history'. Instead, I argue Phillips's work may be seen to fragment and complicate these notions. In his review of *A Distant Shore*, Jonathan Heawood alleges that Phillips's work has 'never achieved the popular recognition it deserves', suggesting, '[i]s this because he writes, unremittingly, about being black?'.⁴ Arguably, Phillips's writing has not achieved due recognition in the UK, because the received history of Britain, as I proposed in my Introduction, has largely ignored the past of slavery, and this is a past crucial to many of Phillips's works. However, rather than writing solely about 'being black', as Heawood claims, Phillips relentlessly writes – through his use of contrapuntal voices and what I call 'creolised' narratives – in his plays, fiction and non-fiction about slavery as a past comprising black *and* white people. In *The Atlantic Sound*, for example, he discusses the racism he endured as a black child growing up in the north of England, but also explores the feeling of unbelonging experienced by a white judge in the United States, ostracised by his own community for his support of black voting rights. Phillips, similarly, has condemned those critics who implied Barry Unsworth's novel about the slave trade, *Sacred Hunger* (1992), was an inappropriate book for a white author to write: '[t]hose morons [...] who suggest he "culturally appropriated" material should ask themselves serious questions about who was involved in slavery. It wasn't just black people, it was white people too. It was *their* history'.⁵ As I will demonstrate, in illustrating that slavery has connected people of differing races, Phillips's works signal his political dissent from racially exclusionary and forgetful works of British history that ignore the centrality of slavery. We will see, however, that his is not an unguarded optimism for the future, but a tentative hope for a meeting point between people of different races, based on the understanding of a differing, though shared, past.

⁴ Jonathan Heawood, 'Distance Learning', *Observer*, 23 March 2003, Reviews section, p. 17. Heawood's claim comes despite Phillips's comment, cited in the same article that, '[a]s soon as you put a black character into a book in any Western society [...] the novel will be perceived through a prism of race'.

⁵ Maya Jaggi, 'Interview with Caryl Phillips', *Brick*, 49 (1994), 73-77 (p. 74).

Cambridge

[T]he dramatized mnemonic references in *Cambridge* go far beyond mere correspondences in genre and language. [In this chapter the] truly fragmentary and polyphonic dimension of the novel only unfolds fully when [...] *Cambridge* is read as a palimpsest which assembles specific passages from older texts in an artistic montage. (Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic*)⁶

Dominant readings of Phillips's novel *Cambridge* (1991) have concentrated on its form. Evelyn O'Callaghan and Richard Patteson have both gone so far as to suggest its form and meaning are synonymous – a 'narrative of separations [...] with structure and meaning all but indistinguishable', as Patteson has asserted.⁷ With access to Phillips's drafts and notes, in his book on mnemonic strategies in work by Phillips, Dabydeen and Toni Morrison, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic* (2006), Lars Eckstein painstakingly traces the accounts used by Phillips in the construction of *Cambridge*. Such sources include Olaudah Equiano's narrative and writing by Janet Schaw, Lady Nugent and Monk Lewis.⁸ As the above quotation illustrates, he reads *Cambridge* as a palimpsest; that is, as a text which reveals traces of these earlier writings utilised by Phillips in its creation. Often, such sources are not only traceable, but undisguised; in the construction of narratives by his protagonists Emily and Cambridge, for example, Phillips quotes entire paragraphs unchanged from the original sources.

Such unabashed 'borrowing' led Paul Edwards to starkly criticise a draft of the novel in a letter to Phillips dated 10 August 1990:

I think rather that the narrative degenerates into easily recognisable pastiche, a kind of impersonal patchwork with little contemporary value, since the original sources have said it all already. I think that the narrative of *Cambridge* must derive much more from your own imagination, but as it stands, what you do is repeat material from the past. That's not what a modern novelist must do with material like this.⁹

⁶ Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 69. An early version of this section appeared as 'Vanishing Creoles: Tracing White Caribbeans', in *Perspectives on Endangerment*, ed. by Graham Huggan and Stephan Klasen (Hildersheim, Zürich and New York: Olms, 2005), pp. 121-128.

⁷ Richard F. Patteson, *Caribbean Passages: A Critical Perspective on New Fiction from the West Indies* (Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 130.

⁸ For details of further sources used by Phillips in the creation of *Cambridge*, see Eckstein, pp. 74-94.

⁹ Letter from Paul Edwards to Caryl Phillips, 10 August 1990, cited in Eckstein, p. 71.

Edwards's criticisms arise from Phillips's heavy reliance on his sources, apparently believing that his use of these disparate accounts was unoriginal. He fails to see, perhaps, that the act of creating the 'patchwork' of sources is vital. Like Pollard's collage, with which I began my Introduction, in *Cambridge*, the 'cuts and sutures' of Phillips's work are (especially for Edwards) curiously visible. In exposing the mechanics of construction, Phillips arguably reveals the inadequacy of relying upon one source, or standard account (such as that of received history) to narrate the past of slavery. Instead, it is only in comparing accounts, and constructing a contrapuntal montage from these documents, that the complexities and contradictions at the heart of attempts to represent slavery are exposed. I shall argue that the novel's multifaceted form plays a definitive role in Phillips's critique of the historical representation of slavery, and can be seen as engaging with the 'itinerary of silencing' posited by Gayatri Spivak through the juxtaposition of conflicting narratives.¹⁰ In this way, received history may be thought of as the survival of the most dominant of many narratives; thereby dispelling the myth of one authoritative narrative, or truth, of the past.

Interesting as is the work done by Eckstein (and O'Callaghan before him), attention only to identifying the sources that shaped *Cambridge* may detract from Phillips's considerable skill and narrative technique in creatively revising these older accounts to form his literary montage. *Cambridge* is more than just a collation of different documents from the slave trade; in blending and constructing his story of plantation life in the nineteenth century, Phillips was, he asserts in his response to Edwards, 'trying to make something "new" out of something "old"'.¹¹ Whilst I do not dispute Eckstein's central contention that 'the montage of bits of earlier texts [...] constitutes the backbone of the novel', I would suggest that he does not entirely get to grips with the reasons behind Phillips's creative revision of these older sources.¹² In his concluding remarks about the novel, Eckstein writes that Phillips 'manages to stage not only the confrontation between two fictional characters, but also that between two entire literary and

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Geoffrey Hawthorn, 'The Post-Modern Condition: The End of Politics', in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 17-34 (p. 31).

¹¹ Undated draft of a letter from Phillips to Edwards, cited in Eckstein, p. 72.

¹² Eckstein, p. 74.

ideological discourses'.¹³ Here, he seems to mean the juxtaposition of an account based on slave testimonies and an account based on colonial travel writing, but I believe Eckstein over-exaggerates the oppositional nature of the two discourses. As I explore in some detail in a moment, slave narratives are not straightforward documents and cannot be so easily opposed to the writing produced by white eighteenth- or nineteenth-century authors. We might think, perhaps, of Ignatius Sancho's long and creative friendship with Laurence Sterne, or the considerable role played by white editors in shaping slave testimonies. I argue that these narratives were much more closely involved in the literary and ideological discourses of eighteenth-century Britain than Eckstein suggests.¹⁴

Indeed, I hope to demonstrate that the form of *Cambridge* is instrumental in illustrating the dynamic creolisation of, specifically, nineteenth-century encounters between black and white people. If the nation is a narrative, as Homi Bhabha has claimed, then the exclusion from national history, or narrative, enacts one's exclusion from national identity.¹⁵ One possible response to this dual exclusion is the construction of multiple alternative histories, narratives and identities which run counter to, and destabilise the notion of, what Phillips has called the homogeneous 'main narrative' of Britain.¹⁶ I argue that both Emily and Cambridge, in response to their specific exclusions from received British history and identity, construct their different counter-narratives in an attempt to create new, creolised, diasporic identities. Furthermore, the restrictive nature of British national identity is manifested within the story, whereby Phillips expresses the pedagogical demands of national conformity through the correct usage of language and also the complex metaphor of clothing. Crucial to his novel is how his characters adapt, or are confined by, their apparel as identity, though this is not a simple, or straightforward, metaphor. I shall accordingly examine the narratives of Emily and Cambridge in order to indicate how they struggle, in different ways, with garments of national identity. I

¹³ Eckstein, p. 111.

¹⁴ Eckstein notes: '[a]t one stage, Cambridge's narrative takes recourse to [Henry Angelo's] reminiscences about Soubise, thus incorporating a white man's voice into the black man's character', yet despite such creolisation, Eckstein still sees the narratives of Cambridge and Emily as rigidly opposed discourses. See Eckstein, p. 85.

¹⁵ Introduction to *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-7 (p. 1).

¹⁶ Preface to *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*, ed. by Caryl Phillips (1997; London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. xiii-xvi (p. xiii).

hope to show that both characters play with these forms and vestments inherited from their positions in early nineteenth-century British society, and that this adaptation and playful behaviour is indicative of their differing, creolised, roles in the Caribbean. Therefore, I argue that *Cambridge*'s most important contribution is in bringing to crisis the fictions of static, exclusionary forms of identity and belonging by portraying slavery's unravelling of these forms.

Cambridge is a multi-narrated, interwoven tale of plantation life on an unnamed Caribbean island in the period between the abolition of slavery in 1807 and emancipation of slaves in 1834; as I will show, the Caribbean portrayed by Phillips in this novel is a terrifying, unstable and creolised space. Whilst the multiple and unreliable narrators make a simple description of the plot no easy task, it would seem that Emily Cartwright has been sent from England to the island in order to report back to her father the state of his plantation. Whilst there, she becomes pregnant; the father of her child would appear to be the plantation manager, Mr Brown, who has also been conducting a relationship with the slave Cambridge's wife, Christiania. Not long after, Mr Brown is murdered by Cambridge, and Emily moves from the Great House on the plantation to the deserted Hawthorn Cottage, where she gives birth to a stillborn child. The novel ends as she ponders her now uncertain future in light of her father's decision to sell the plantation, and we learn that Cambridge has been hanged.

The narratives of Emily and Cambridge are followed by a sensationalised newspaper report, reproduced almost without change from Mrs Flannigan's *Antigua and the Antiguans* (1844), which details the murder of Mr Brown by Cambridge.¹⁷ This is an important source for Phillips, in providing not only names for Cambridge, Mr Brown and Christiania (Christiana in the original document), but also in sealing the fate of Cambridge. The novel is framed by a prologue and epilogue, narrated by an omniscient narrator, which provides Emily with a more rounded character than is portrayed by her often condescending and prejudiced first-person account, which may distance her from the reader.

Although brief, I would suggest that the title of *Cambridge* is significant for four reasons. Firstly, whilst the novel shares its title with the name of a plantation slave, the longest

¹⁷ See Mrs Flannigan, *Antigua and the Antiguans: A Full Account of the Colony and its Inhabitants from the Time of the Caribs to the Present Day*, 2 vols (1844; London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 89-92.

narrative within *Cambridge* is a travel journal written by Emily. This flawed expectation of the leading narrative voice is typical of Phillips who, throughout the text, creates and positions characters who appear to conform to his readers' expectations, only to confound these expectations with figures that cannot be simply read or understood. As an anglicised African, Cambridge's voice, it would seem, is indicative of such a tactic of flawed expectations, in his refusal to conform to an 'authentic' African voice. He instead articulates his thoughts in what is arguably a clearly genteel English manner and style. Emily, an unmarried middle-class woman at the start of the nineteenth century, also subverts standard expectations of her by becoming pregnant. In their shared transgressions and refusal to conform to both readers' expectations and the expectations of early nineteenth-century English society, Phillips shows that such characters as Emily and Cambridge are not predictable; they are more complicated than allegorical figures of black slave and white slave-owner.

Secondly, Emily's centrality to the novel makes it different to many other twentieth-century novels about slavery. Phillips writes the majority of *Cambridge* from the viewpoint of a person who would not normally be a central figure in accounts of this history, due to her position as both a woman and, as the novel progresses, in relation to the poor whites on the Caribbean island. As I shall explore, by the end of *Cambridge*, although Emily is not quite yet a poor white, the forthcoming sale of the plantation indicates her increasing economic insecurity. As will become evident, in this novel Phillips is interested in those that have been excluded from the received narration of this past.

Thirdly, Emily's prominent narrative presence within a novel entitled *Cambridge* also suggests the integrated nature of the relationship between the protagonists, despite their minimal contact. Cambridge figures rarely in Emily's account, and she even less in his: '[t]he Englishwoman did not concern me' (p. 164). It would seem that Phillips is particularly interested in the connections between black men and white women, a relationship he explores in other works including, for example, his play *The Shelter* (1984) and novel *Crossing the River*. In his introduction to *The Shelter* he writes that the relationship between black men and white women is an area rarely explored: '[a]n explosive, perhaps the most explosive of all

relationships, seldom written about, seldom explained [;] feared, observed, hated'.¹⁸ Phillips does not bring Emily and Cambridge together in a sexual encounter as one can find in, for example, Fred D'Aguiar's poem, *Bloodlines* (2000) or in the coarse sexuality of David Dabydeen's collection of poems, *Slave Song* (1984). Neither does he revel in the antithesis between the characters, but instead subverts expectations by illustrating their similarities, or what Bénédict Ledent has called, the 'often neglected cross-cultural potentialities of the colonial situation'.¹⁹ Importantly, these similarities include their shared exclusion from narratives of English identity and differing experiences of 'enslavement'. Whilst Emily's enslavement through her gender and, later, economic position, is in no way commensurable with Cambridge's slavery, Phillips posits their accounts in a way which highlights their similarities as both enslaved by, and excluded from, narratives of English identity though, as I indicate, they are 'enslaved' in very different, and unequal, ways.

In allowing Emily more narrative room in the novel, Phillips also reminds us that slavery, though unequally shared, is a shared past nonetheless. As he has stated:

It wasn't just black people, it was white people too. It was their history [...] British people forget they know very little about history. Why? Because most of their history took place in India and Africa and the Caribbean, where they could pretend it didn't happen.²⁰

We can detect in this quotation a striking echo of Whiskey Sisodia's claims that the 'trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas'.²¹ As I proposed in my Introduction, British twentieth-century 'amnesia' surrounding the past of slavery arguably has been instrumental in the construction of non-white people as alien to Britain. Phillips suggests the falsity of such a forgetful position; slavery is not only 'black history', but the intersection of a number of disparate lives and histories. By calling the novel after a British town as well as a West Indian slave, Phillips emphasises the novel's dual position as part of both British and Caribbean history, perhaps suggesting the 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories

¹⁸ Caryl Phillips, introduction to *The Shelter* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1984), pp. 7-12 (pp. 10-11). See also Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (New York: Verso, 1993), especially p. 29.

¹⁹ Ledent, p. 100.

²⁰ Jaggi, p. 26.

²¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 343.

common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and on the peripheries' of which Said has written.²²

Finally, by naming the novel *Cambridge* Phillips also reiterates the point that his male protagonist is no longer African Olumide or English David, but Caribbean Cambridge; as we shall see, like (and yet different from) Emily, Cambridge is of a creole, liminal status. His testimony traces each of his identities, detailing his life from the Africa of his boyhood to his transportation to England and, following his manumission, his subsequent recapture into slavery and remainder of his life on the Caribbean island. As a slave testimony, this narrative draws upon a long history of British writing by slaves, which includes well-known figures such as Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoana and Ignatius Sancho. Although slaves were prohibited from reading or writing, as owners feared the potential for subversion and discontent that may come from their literacy, there were notable exceptions. Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen write in their introduction to their edited anthology *Black Writers in Britain 1760-1890* (1991) that, by the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth, a 'considerable body' of black writing had been published in Britain which played an important role in the campaigns of abolitionists.²³ I explore in further detail the problems and complexities of slave narratives in my second chapter, but would stress here that this 'considerable body' must be kept in perspective. Renowned ex-slaves like Sancho and Equiano were notable exceptions to an otherwise illiterate and unprivileged mass of slaves in Britain and its colonies. Furthermore, even when accounts written by slaves were published, there was often significant doubt as to the authenticity of the writing. Such doubts were fuelled in part by assumptions that black people were insufficiently intelligent to produce these narratives, and also by the substantial role played by white editors and ghost writers in the creation of slave testimonies. In addition, many of these accounts will not have survived. In *Cambridge*, Phillips historicises the figure of the slave narrator, arguably in response to the ways in which eighteenth-century writers like Equiano have been held aloft as iconic figureheads for black Britain. We shall see in a moment that

²² Said, p. 72.

²³ Introduction to *Black Writers in Britain 1760-1890*, ed. by Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp. ix-xv (p. x). See also C. L. Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Phillips challenges this iconolatry, suggesting that these characters may be problematic figures in their position as anglicised Africans.²⁴

Whilst the accounts of Cambridge and Emily provide different views of largely the same events, it is not as simplistic as Cambridge's narrative being the 'missing piece' of Emily's account, or vice versa. Writing in the preface to the collection of essays edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, entitled *Selected Subaltern Studies* (1988), Said has emphasised the interdependency of elite and subaltern histories: 'no matter how one tried to extricate subaltern from elite histories, they are different but overlapping and curiously interdependent territories [...] For if subaltern history is constructed to be only a separatist enterprise [...] then it runs the risk of just being a mirror opposite the writing whose tyranny it disputes.'²⁵ No matter how marginalised a history has been, therefore, if it is allowed to dominate other histories it is no better than the original elite history it deposed. The histories of the oppressed and elite are inseparable, or 'curiously interdependent'. In examining the past of slavery, it is therefore necessary to hear the histories of both slave and slave owner. Yet, only the history of the slave owner has traditionally been recorded, which has proved problematic for those exploring the history of oppressed groups. In *Cambridge*, Phillips suggests that narratives such as those by Emily or Cambridge are overlapping fragments of an untotalisable past and should be read *alongside* one another, or contrapuntally. His apparent disinterest in paraphrasing perhaps more subtly his sources, or blending the conflicting accounts, can be seen as a refusal to create one homogeneous version of the slave past, instead emphasising its polyphony.

Let me turn first to Emily's narrative, which assumes the form of a travel journal. The travel narrative was a popular form in the nineteenth century, though it was thought to be a particularly masculine genre.²⁶ Sara Mills writes in *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of*

²⁴ See also S. I. Martin's novel *Incomparable World* (London: Quartet Books, 1996), which deals with the underside of black society in eighteenth-century London. The status of writers such as Equiano and Sancho as anglicised Africans leads me to disagree, therefore, with Anthony Ilona's contention that their writing can provide us with access to a buried African 'voice'. See Ilona, 'Crossing the River: A Chronicle of the Black Diaspora', *Wasafiri*, 22 (1995), 3-9 (p. 3).

²⁵ Edward Said, Foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. v-x (p. viii).

²⁶ For a general examination of travel literature of the nineteenth century, see Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Pandora Press, 1986), especially pp. 1-9.

Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism (1992) of the tensions implicit in women's travel narratives within the context of imperialism, arguing that 'women travel writers were unable to adopt the imperialist voice with the ease with which male writers did'.²⁷ Mills argues this problem was manifested in a more hesitant manner of writing: '[t]he writing which they produced tended to be more tentative than male writing, less able to assert the "truths" of British rule without qualification.'²⁸ Whilst Emily's narrative is set at the start of the nineteenth century, and Mills's study primarily covers the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I would argue it is still pertinent to my discussion, especially in Emily's optimistic self-definition as adventuring coloniser: 'I retired to my small cabin with [...] a heart light with anticipatory joy at what I might witness in this new world that I had crossed the ocean to discover' (p. 18). The act of writing her travel narrative indicates her endeavour to 'wear' an identity; in this example Emily attempts to 'cross-dress' as a (male) imperial adventurer.

She does not, however, assume this new identity with ease, and I therefore disagree with Eckstein's view that 'Emily's narrative *fits in* with the tradition of the numerous travelogues written by British visitors to the colonies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' [my italics].²⁹ Like her elaborate clothing, which becomes increasingly ill-fitting and unwearable in her time on the island, the travel narrative genre does not comfortably accommodate Emily's writing. Its inadequacy is arguably implied in her reluctance to be restricted, or enslaved, by its form: 'I wished to go beyond the commonplace memoirs of previous travellers, [which find] nought worthy of record but the most bizarre features of this tropical life' (p. 97). We can see in this quotation that Emily desires to transcend, or 'go beyond' the confinements of the travel narrative form with its focus on the 'most bizarre' or exotic aspects of travel, which suggests her reluctance to be bound to the expectations of the form. Also evident in her journal is the tentativeness to which Mills alludes; Emily is heavily reliant on the information imparted to her about the slaves by the white men on the plantation. Her narrative is littered with phrases such as '[a]ccording to Mr McDonald', or '[i]t was Mr

²⁷ Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Eckstein, p. 69.

McDonald who informed me' (p. 36). Mills has suggested that female writers were caught between the twin discourses of imperialism and femininity, 'neither of which they could wholeheartedly adopt'.³⁰ It is, she indicates, in the struggle between these two discourses 'that their writing exposes the unsteady foundations on which it is based'.³¹ Although Emily's journal is, of course, a staged nineteenth-century travel journal created by a man in the late twentieth century, if we look at her narrative we can see how Phillips instils these tensions in her writing, most visibly aboard the ship, where shipping terms are crudely spliced into the narrative and left disjointed and unexplained.³² This especially unsteady moment is a good example of the 'cuts and sutures' of Phillips's 'patchwork', where the nautical terms rest uncomfortably within her narrative:

Attached to each *bed* are straps of rope. We have been informed that these are to lash us in of an evening irrespective of the weather appearing clear or inclement.

Sea terms: WINDWARD, whence the wind blows; LEEWARD, to which it blows [...] the BUNTLINES, the ropes which move the body of the sail, the BUNT being the body; the BOWLINES, those which spread out the sails and make them swell.

Out on deck Isabella and I surveyed the dingy sky. It promised rough sea, sudden squalls and a stormy passage. (pp. 8-9)

We also perhaps detect here that Emily is enduring a 'stormy passage' with masculine imperial language; the vocabulary of shipping does not quite enable her to successfully articulate her voyage. Like the restraining straps inside the cabin, therefore, Emily is to some extent restrained or confined by this language and, at this moment, we can see one example of her several enslavements.

Emily's freedom is also restricted through her position as a wealthy woman in early nineteenth-century Britain. Although there is a continuation of patriarchal values on the Caribbean island, the trip to her father's plantation is clearly an attempt to escape from patriarchal Britain, where she is expected to marry the ageing widower Thomas Lockwood. The

³⁰ Mills, p. 3.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Several critics have seen Phillips's ventriloquism of a nineteenth-century white woman's voice as problematic. Jasper Rees, for instance, claims that 'for a late-20th-century black male to adopt the voice of an early 19th-century white female is bold indeed', in 'Black and White of Two Worlds', *The Times*, 21 March 1991, p. 22. Suzie Mackenzie discusses the criticism Phillips received for writing as a nineteenth-century white woman in her article 'The History Man', *Guardian*, 1 February 1997, section Weekend, pp. 22-23, 25 (p. 22).

prologue reveals the powerlessness of women at this time: 'daughters sacrificed to strangers. A woman might play upon a delicate keyboard, paint water-colours, or sing' (p. 3). This quotation also reveals how Emily learns to be an English woman in the early nineteenth century, in her cultivation of feminine accomplishments.³³ The journey to the Caribbean is, therefore, a chance for Emily to escape from prescribed roles:

The truth was she was fleeing the lonely regime which fastened her into backboards, corsets and stays to improve her posture. The same friendless regime which advertised her as an ambassadress of grace. Almost thirty. Too old to be secretly stifling her misery into lace handkerchiefs. (p. 4)

Emily's life in England is one of loneliness, restraint and concealed sadness, where her body is imprisoned in repressive and rigid garments and she 'stifl[es] her misery' into a symbol of English respectability, her lace handkerchief. Indeed, and as we shall see, the notion of containment is indicative of her identity as an English woman; once away from England, she is soon able to loosen the vestments of her identity.

If, in some ways, Emily is cast as a Britannia figure – a representative of Britain, or rather England, on the Caribbean island – it is a role she assumes both imperfectly and unwillingly.³⁴ Here we have another flawed expectation; Emily may appear to be a representative of England in the Caribbean, but her experiences differ widely from this portrayal, and she arguably struggles to divest herself of this repressive identity. In *Gender and Nation* (2000), Nira Yuval Davis re-examines the familiar notion of the state as divided into two spheres, public and private. Whilst men operate largely in the first of these categories, women have tended to be located in the private sphere, and '[a]s nationalism and nations have usually

³³ This suggestion of the performative nature of gender identity has been most famously expressed by Simone de Beauvoir, who has claimed that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. by H. M. Parshley (1953; London: Vintage, 1997), p. 295. First published in French as *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). I would add that this notion may also be relevant in terms of national identity, where one is not born an English man or woman, but can perhaps become one: something we shall soon see in play in Cambridge's narrative. This claim is perhaps especially true of the latter half of the twentieth century, with the introduction of *jus sanguinis* which removed rights to British citizenship for those born in this country. From this moment, it was not always possible to be British if born in Britain.

³⁴ Elsewhere, Cambridge refers to the 'jolly Union Jack' as an 'English flag' (p. 150); this kind of interchangeable use of 'England' for 'Britain' is something I wish to avoid. For clarity of argument, I refer to English identity, rather than British, in accordance with the narratives of Emily and Cambridge, but the inclusion of the Scottish doctor on the island, Mr McDonald, suggests that Phillips depicts a British, rather than English, society in the Caribbean.

been discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has affected their exclusion from that discourse as well.’³⁵ Arguably, Emily’s exclusion from English national identity is made evident at several points in the novel and is metaphorically linked to notions of vestments and clothing. Throughout her narrative we find her writing that she feels confined or smothered; whilst on board the ship, for instance, she complains: ‘I am occasionally seized by a suffocating sensation [...] I have in consequence thrown off my shop-dress’ (p. 15). Her increasingly informal standards of dress aboard the ship signify that she is relaxing out of an English identity.

National identity is, therefore, frequently portrayed in the novel in terms of the proper clothing to be worn or removed, according to the situation, and Emily invests much importance in the notion that clothes reflect one’s social position. Once on the island, she objects to what she sees as Christiania’s ‘insubordination’ for sitting at the dining table in the Great House and refusing to serve her. Here we see Emily’s belief in the importance of dressing appropriate to one’s (social and racial) position: ‘I informed this coal-black *ape-woman* that I desired her to put on a serving gown and take up a role among my attendants’ (p. 73). She therefore seeks out Mr Brown and demands he ban Christiania from the dining table. Emily writes: ‘[f]or some time we stood, toe to toe, two solitary white people under the powerful sun, casting off our garments of white decorum before the black hordes, each vying for supremacy over the other’ (p. 77). English identity is portrayed as a repressive article of politeness and manners which must be removed in any attempt to demonstrate power. This is an interesting description, as Emily depicts herself and Mr Brown to be united by their race, and very much aware of the audience to their performance, or ‘black hordes’. At the same time, they are in clear opposition to one another in their battle for control of the situation. Emily is sufficiently enraged to disregard conventional codes of femininity and challenge Mr Brown’s patriarchal authority. Her assertion of power is, however, short-lived, as the encounter quickly ends when she vomits and faints. This reaction is arguably prompted not only by the slave Fox, at Mr Brown’s command, placing ‘his black hands upon [her] body’ (p. 78), but also by the temporary shedding of her

³⁵ Nira Yuval Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), pp. 12-13.

respectability. Without the constraints of the 'garments of white decorum' her body cannot be limited; vomiting may be seen as a clear symbol of this failure of containment and, therefore, the effect upon Emily of freedom from English identity.

Whilst Emily imagines casting off her repressive English clothing in her encounter with Mr Brown, she cannot, at this stage, actually disrobe. In her restrictive and burdensome outfit, she envies the slaves' ability to dress according to the climate:

I [...] noted that the negro men wore thin-clothed apparel which left scarce anything to the imagination, and that their women wandered hither and thither barely stirring to cover their bodies. Certainly most had nothing about them more substantial than a petticoat. I imagined that in such heat as this clothing would indeed become burdensome, so I did envy the negroes their ability to dress without concern for conventional morality. (p. 21)

Here, quite ironically, we see the apparently free Emily expressing envy at the slaves for flouting the rules of 'conventional morality' or polite English society, as she, as we have seen, is frustrated by these very rules. Her anxieties over the seemingly inadequate clothing of the slaves are arguably partly linked to her fear at the transition she longs to make to a similar creolised state of undress. She is here caught between two opposing forces; there is the sense, perhaps, that her identity is coming undone. Emily envies the slaves, yet is aware that their clothing does not conform to the rules of English codes of decency – an indication that her unsteady, 'stormy passage', which began on the ship, continues long beyond the end of her sea voyage. As she writes: 'I find myself adrift, not on threatening waves, but upon an ocean of negroes who care little for my fears' (p. 89). She is afloat in a frightening, Caribbean, creolised world. Vitally, the ocean comprises black people, illustrating her fear of her identity being submerged, or creolised, by her contact with the 'other'.

Emily's twinned responses of fear and desire at transgressing the boundaries of both polite English society and her own identity are illustrated in her preoccupation with 'proper' dress and reliance on order. She comments that '[w]ithout rank and order any society, no matter how sophisticated, is doomed to admit the worst kind of anarchy' (p. 72). Such statements reveal her concerns about (yet longing for) a collapse of social order and of her own descent into a 'disreputable' creole life; she wonders of her father: '[d]oes he have no conception of

what would claim us all in the tropics were we to slip an inch below the surface of respectability? In these climes all is possible' (p. 127). Emily arguably both fears and desires such a conclusion; she craves the freedom that accompanies casting off the rules of polite society, yet fears the consequences of this creolisation.

In contrast to the insubstantial clothing of the slaves, Emily describes the over-dressed white inhabitants of Baytown: '[s]uch exquisitely fashioned clothing must, in these climes, give cause to considerable discomfort. Arnold and I observed a cluster of men half melting under heavy, richly embroidered coats and waistcoats, and a solitary English belle clad in the thickest taffetas and satins, some embossed with gold and silver brocades' (p. 102). The English on the island feel it necessary to dress to reflect national identity, yet this is inappropriate clothing for the climate. Apparel is clearly a badge, a wearisome marker of nationality. Furthermore, it would seem that the maintenance of an English identity is so constrictive that it leads to deformity; the slaves are '[e]rect and well-formed, their quality is attributed [...] directly to their lack of tight clothing, which in infancy and childhood can lead to deformities among white and civilized people' (p. 35). Phillips suggests, then, that so burdensome is English national identity that it can deform people, questioning the positive value of this identity. Paul Gilroy writes in *After Empire* (2004): '[w]herever nationalism is politically engaged, all the perversity of race thinking will not be far away.'³⁶ In a way similar to Gilroy, perhaps, Phillips implies the intimate relationship between national identity and racism, and the potentially deforming nature of this alliance.

If English national identity, in its metaphor as clothing, is burdensome, then it is, according to Emily, a burden only white people should endure. Having described the usual flimsy attire of the slaves, she is clear to record her discomfort at their dressing on Sundays and holidays in what she sees as a parody of English clothing:

The *sable-belles* are no less extravagantly modish in their ornamental silk dresses, gauze flounces and highly coloured petticoats which, though of the best quality, display patterns more commonly employed in England for window-curtains. [...] I for one take great comfort in viewing the negroes, male and female, in their filthy native garb, for in these circumstances they

³⁶ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 122.

do not violate laws of taste which civilized peoples have spent many a century to establish. (p. 66)

Just as Emily disapproves of Cambridge's 'highly fanciful English' (p. 92), therefore, she also objects to black people dressing up in an 'English' fashion. This strategy is employed by Phillips in order to suggest the constructed, and confining notion of identity, as well as its adaptability.³⁷ If one overlooks for a moment Emily's condescending tone, the slaves' use of material with 'patterns more commonly employed in England for window-curtains' can be seen as a reflection of their creolisation; their own response to enslavement and a measure of their creativity in bending the rules of 'conventional morality'. Her derision arguably comes from her inability to read this creativity; unlike the slaves, Emily cannot yet break the rules.

Whilst the slaves may adapt English clothing to suit their creolised status, Emily's shedding of her English identity leaves her unsteady and fragmented. In the epilogue, following the loss of her baby, the ensuing exchange takes place between her and the doctor, Mr McDonald:

'And when will you be returning to our country?'

'Our country?'

'England, of course.'

England. Emily smiled to herself. The doctor delivered the phrase as though this England was a dependable garment that one simply slipped into or out of according to one's whim. Did he not understand that people grow and change? Did he not understand that one day a discovery might be made that this country-garb is no longer of a correct measure? (p. 177)³⁸

The implication here, of course, is that Emily no longer 'fits' within England; far from the familiarity of a 'dependable garment', an English identity is now ill-fitting and unwearable. She has quite literally grown on her time on the island, as her pregnancy has altered her body, yet the notion that her character may have grown, or developed, may be a positive effect of her

³⁷ A contemporary artist playing with these ideas of clothing and identity is Yinka Shonibare, who has made eighteenth- and nineteenth-century costumes from an African-styled batik material. The material, however, is manufactured in Europe and sold not only to European consumers, but also to Africans, raising interesting issues concerning 'authenticity' and the consumption of African products. See Anon., 'Original: Marq Kearey, Virginia Nimarkoh, Johannes Phokela, Yinka Shonibare', Gasworks website <<http://www.gasworks.org.uk/shows/orig>> [accessed 16 November 2003].

³⁸ This quotation illustrates the abovementioned frequent slippage in *Cambridge* between 'English' and 'British'; Mr McDonald is Scottish, which makes it unlikely that he would refer to England as 'our country'.

visit. Although her attitudes towards black people on the island remain problematic throughout *Cambridge*, by the end of the novel Emily is able to question her satisfaction with English identity, as well as the necessity of rejoining her father. In the time spent on the island she has changed to such an extent that she does not know if she can return to what was formerly her 'home'. Following the loss of her child, England briefly becomes a surrogate infant, a possible new start: 'Emily dreamed of something that she might give Stella to replace that which had been lost. Something that the two of them might share. England?' (p. 178). The key word here is, perhaps, 'dreamed'; Emily's realisation that she can never truly belong within England is now fixed in this final section of the text. So, whilst she asserts, "I expect I will soon return to England." Emily paused. "After all, it is my home" (p. 178), the pause is significant in pointing to what is *not* being said, and crucial in signalling her uncertainty about the statement that follows. In an earlier moment in her narrative, Emily had wondered about taking Stella back to England upon her return, but concluded: 'my fear is that she may be mocked as an exotic, as are the other blacks who congregate about the parish of St Giles and in divers parts of our kingdom' (p. 78). Emily, however, perhaps like Cambridge, now exists in a liminal world between identities; neither simply English, nor West Indian, but a diasporan creole misfit. She ponders her fate, with a new-found acceptance of her creolisation: '[w]as I doomed to become an exotic for the rest of my days? This, it now seemed to me, would be no bad thing' (p. 114). It is therefore Emily who has become the exotic, creolised figure, though she seems by this point quite readily to accept her new condition.

Emily's ultimate state of nakedness and fragmented identity is the culmination of a process that began early in the novel. Her journey into island life has been also an expedition into what she refers to the 'darkness' of her identity and the disintegration of self, where she can no longer be certain of anything: '[i]n these climes all is possible. Perhaps this is why a certain type of man (and woman) longs to settle in these parts. I do not know. How can I know? I have so much still to learn' (p. 127). Although this quotation suggests that the island offers her a degree of freedom not permitted in England, for Emily, it had quickly turned from a 'tropical paradise' (p. 18) into an altogether more frightening prospect: 'I was breaking the last remaining link with a past that I understood. From this moment I would be entering a dark tropical

unknown' (p. 22). Yet, implicit in this journey into the 'dark tropical unknown' is, I would argue, a certain excitement at going beyond boundaries and limits of her race and class which she could not transgress in England; the 'darkness' of the unknown is vital. Earlier in the novel, having rejected the courtship of Mr McDonald, Emily reflects on the white men on the island: 'I retired to my chamber and looked into my mirror. Perhaps the affections of all these men turn in due course to some brown-faced beauty' (pp. 122-123). Whilst Christiania may seem to be foremost in her mind at this moment, the mirror signals that Emily is scrutinising her own appearance. By the close of the novel, her stay on the island has arguably transformed her into a 'brown-faced beauty'.

The 'dark tropical unknown' can therefore be seen as a creolised space which enables her to achieve a greater degree of freedom, in escaping the enslavement which stems from her position as a wealthy woman in early nineteenth-century England. It is also a less judging society, with different social standards, where rules are to some extent broken; as Mr Brown had earlier advised her, 'everything is not as in England' (p. 58), yet this freedom is dangerous. In the epilogue, with the realisation that she cannot return to England, Emily stands naked in the mirror, disrobed of her cloak of English identity and confronting what she has become: 'Emily stood before the mirror. And now sunrise. She knew that she must bear the weight of yet another day' (p. 184). She has been divested of the vestments of imperial femininity and is forced to confront what she is without this cover, clothed only in 'indifference, wrapping it around her like an old and friendly blanket' (p. 181). No longer conforming to protocol, her identity is unstable and fragmented. The epilogue moves seamlessly between third- and first-person narrators, articulating a sense of instability and precariousness. We see through the character of Emily that a refusal to conform to the rules of 'conventional morality' leads to feelings of displacement and unbelonging; she fits nowhere. Phillips does not leave the book with a utopian vision of happiness on the Caribbean island – indeed, his ending is somewhat ambiguous; the sunrise suggesting not only continuity and hope, but also monotony and a recognition of the inevitability that life must, and shall, go on. The stillborn child may indicate a resigned pessimism about the future for white individuals upon the island; this is, Phillips reminds us, an uncertain, turbulent time for such people.

If Emily is in some ways enslaved by her gender, she is also towards the close of the novel arguably enslaved through her identification with the poor whites on the island. The end of slavery and her father's decision to sell the plantation leaves her future on the island uncertain. She had earlier recorded her shock at seeing what she refers to as 'pale-fleshed *niggers*' (p. 108); this is our first introduction in the novel to the plight of poor whites in the Caribbean. For Emily, these 'degraded white people appear to be the offscum, the offscouring, indeed the very dregs of English life' (p. 51). The position of the poor whites mirrors that of the slaves upon the island: '[u]nable to marry a free person without the consent of their master, [...] they existed in a pitiable state of bondage, and were as likely to be subject to a public whipping or imprisonment as the common negro' (p. 108). The poor whites are also enslaved, therefore, but on economic rather than racial grounds, and many are now reliant upon the generosity of their ex-slaves:

the most destitute among them now rely upon the kindly benevolence of negroes. These black Samaritans feel pity for the white unfortunates and take a mess of stewed produce, with a proportion of garden-stuff from their own grounds made savoury by a little salt meat, to their old *misses* and *massa*. (p. 108)

This description has later echoes in Emily's residence at Hawthorn Cottage: '[t]hey were kind, they journeyed up the hill and brought her food. [...] The mistress, she had a position' (pp. 182-183). Phillips shows through the character of Emily the plight of both women and poor whites in the Caribbean in this period, largely silenced from history and excluded from respectable colonial society.³⁹ The history of white indentured labourers in the Caribbean is curiously absent from most standard and revisionary histories of British slavery, though Eric Williams has asserted the importance of this labour as the 'historic base upon which Negro slavery was constructed'.⁴⁰ Black and white people, Williams reminds us once again, were inextricably intertwined in the course of slavery, and not only as slaves and masters. Perhaps like the erasure of poor whites from historical accounts of slavery, Emily records her effacement from history:

³⁹ For the plight of the poor whites in Caribbean society, see Gad Heuman, 'The Social Structure of the Slave Societies in the Caribbean', in *General History of the Caribbean*, ed. by Franklin W. Knight, 6 vols (London and Basingstoke: Unesco Publishing and Macmillan, 1997-2000), III: *The Slave Societies of the Caribbean* (1997), pp. 138-168 (p. 152).

⁴⁰ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; London: André Deutsch, 1964), p. 19.

'[l]ike goods in a shop-window, Emily knew she was becoming faded by too many bright mornings' (p. 181). This quotation also reveals her portrayal as commodity; like goods on display in a shop window, Emily's gender leaves her continually subject to sale, or to the 'rude mechanics of horse-trading' (p. 4). Paradoxically, then, whilst the poor whites are arguably enslaved by their economic status, her growing identification with them seems to offer Emily a marginally greater freedom, in granting to her more relaxed social and moral standards than were available as an unmarried middle-class woman. Yet, it remains a liminal, difficult location: this is not a celebratory creolisation. In *Cambridge* the poor whites inhabit an interstitial, in-between status; prevented from identification with either wealthier whites in the Caribbean (through their lack of economic power and social standing) or black people (due to race).

Just as Phillips uses clothing as a metaphor for English identity in Emily's narrative, we also witness Cambridge writing of identity as a garment, and experiencing a similarly unstable, shifting identity. Cambridge's account, as I have already stated, takes the form of a slave testimony. In examining the narratives of slaves, we arrive at the paradox of self-representation for the subaltern figure. To quote Spivak: 'for the (gender-unspecified) "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself'.⁴¹ In writing his narrative, Cambridge can be seen as relinquishing his subalterneity. One can deduce from the poise and stylised writing of slaves such as Sancho or Equiano that they were what we would call anglicised; Cambridge, too, adopts a tone of writing that reflects his anglicised identity, or what Paul Smethurst has referred to as 'the voice of a *translated* slave'.⁴² Like Emily, therefore, Cambridge is in some ways enslaved by the formal language of early nineteenth-century England. Ironically, though, whilst Emily longs to escape from this society, this is exactly the kind of world that Cambridge aspires to be accepted into.

Whilst Cambridge clearly sees himself as English David Henderson, however, his skin colour is a permanent and visible marker that differentiates him from other Englishmen. This is, for Cambridge, a painful reminder that identity is forged by contact with others. Emily, for

⁴¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 272.

⁴² Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), p. 249.

example, is quite clear about Cambridge's status as an outsider: 'he seemed determined to adopt a *lunatic* precision in his dealings with our English words, as though the black imagined himself to be a part of our white race' (p. 120). This quotation highlights that, perhaps like twentieth-century Britain, in the nineteenth century, English identity was established by identifying those who did not 'belong'. It also indicates that certain linguistic registers were thought to be the preserve of white English people; just as Emily admitted to 'taking great comfort' from the slaves wearing 'filthy native garb' rather than English-styled clothing, she expects Cambridge to speak in an 'exotic' manner. His familiarity with, and employment of, correct English leads her to conclude he is not of sane mind; such is the incongruity of a black person pertaining to be English.⁴³ We might remember Emily's struggles with nautical and imperial language, indicating the ways in which speech, like writing or clothing, is an essential, and performative, component of identity.

Cambridge's belief in his English nationality makes his subsequent recapture into slavery all the harder to accept: '[t]hat I, a virtual Englishman, was to be treated as base African cargo, caused me such hurtful pain as I was barely able to endure' (p. 156). Here, he employs a useful phrase, in describing himself as a 'virtual' Englishman, recalling Smethurst's notion of the 'translated' slave. As an anglicised African, he is not actually English, but virtually so. His race prevents the perfect assimilation of English national identity; in a different way, Cambridge is, like Emily, of a creole, in-between status.⁴⁴ Yet, if he may be thought of as a 'virtual Englishman', this is just part of a larger process of shifting identity, and is inextricably linked to the tricky concept of 'home'. In a similar way to Emily, who quickly realises that England can no longer be described as her home, Cambridge's conception of home shifts with his changing locations and multiple identities: 'I, Olumide, who had become black Tom, then David Henderson, and now Cambridge' (p. 167). Whilst Africa is initially his home, therefore, it is soon replaced by England, where he 'sheds' his African persona with the acquisition of Christianity. For Cambridge, nationality seemingly is like clothing – easily cast aside: '[m]y

⁴³ This moment is paralleled with Cambridge's description in the third part of the novel as an 'insane man' (p. 171).

⁴⁴ Homi K. Bhabha similarly writes of the mimic man; 'the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English'. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 87.

uncivilized African demeanour began to fall from my person, as I resolved to conduct myself along lines that would be agreeable to my God' (p. 144). Cambridge's changing identity can be thought of in relation to Stuart Hall's essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' (1990), in which he describes identity as being far from a stable presence, writing instead of 'a "production" which is never complete, always in process'.⁴⁵ The concept of identity as being continually developed and adapted seems particularly relevant when considering how Cambridge and Emily reinvent, or shape, their identities through the use of different dress and language, although I would reiterate that Phillips does not portray their unstable identities in an uncomplicatedly positive way.

If Cambridge is able to 'remove' his African identity like a garment, English identity soon becomes burdensome. He is reluctant to assume the new name Thomas, but concedes: 'my condition far out-ranked my betrayed bretheren, whose backs were breaking under perpetual toil while I carried only the featherish burden of a new name' (pp. 140-41). Whilst his burden of identity may be light, it is nevertheless still an encumbrance – an identity to be endured rather than enjoyed. Not long after, Cambridge is 'reborn' as David Henderson: '[Miss Spencer] set a crown upon my head; banished was black Tom, and newly born she gave to the world, David Henderson' (p. 144). We can see here the importance of name in this rebirth and the 'crowning' of Cambridge with an English, and Christian, identity; his crown is as equally likely to be of thorns as gold. Following this moment, Cambridge enthusiastically casts himself into the role of an Englishman: '[t]ruly I was now an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion!' (p. 147). It is perhaps not insignificant that, following his conversion to Christianity and assimilation of an English identity, his master buys him new clothing: '[h]e promptly ordered a new livery for myself, and announced a shilling increase in my allowance' (p. 144). This clothing is a reward for Cambridge's 'progress' in learning the rules and language of nineteenth-century England, and is also a recognition of his new status as a 'virtual' Englishman. However, his apparel as 'livery' is a further reminder that he is, at this point, servant to both his master and an imperfect English identity.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 392-403 (p. 392).

Cambridge, in his garb of the 'virtual Englishman', then, impersonates what he believes it means to be an English Christian: 'I earnestly wished to imbibe the spirit and imitate the manners of Christian men, for already Africa spoke to me of a barbarity I had fortunately fled' (p. 143). This moment reveals not only his acquired anglicisation, in believing in the 'barbarity' of Africa, but also the performative nature of identity, as an act requiring the correct lines and costume in order to be convincing. Cambridge had earlier referred to himself as 'dressed in the spiritual and physical guise of *Mungo*' (p. 136) but, once in England, attempts to learn the language and wear the clothing of the English. The perfect assimilation of this identity is, however, as I have shown, impossible due to his 'smudgy complexion', which leads other English people to attempt to cast him into another role: that of the African.

Ironically, then, Cambridge is quick to criticise the 'blasphemous' acting of the black man of society, Clarence de Quincy: '[h]is perfumed appearance, made complete only by the ostentatious donning of white gloves, bestowed upon him much renown [...] this bantam-cock reduced the smaller part of the audience to peals of irreverent laughter with his Drury Lane antics' (p. 152). One might note the significance of the white gloves as both theatrical costume and status symbol, and Cambridge's reference to Drury Lane locates this behaviour quite clearly in the world of the stage. His disapproval is ironic, considering the various performances and roles he enacts; including, for instance, that of a preacher. The language he employs to describe his preaching distinctly echoes that of the stage; he reports, for instance, that '[h]uzza's [*sic*] and tears often followed [his] delivery' (p. 149) and speaks of his 'audiences' (p. 150) to whom he 'present[s] a spectacle of salvation' (p. 147). It would seem that, like national identity, a religious identity may be a kind of performance.

I have suggested that Emily is in some ways enslaved, or restrained, by her position as an English woman in the early nineteenth century. In his time in England, Cambridge also finds that the bondage of slavery is replaced by a very different enslavement, in his adherence to nineteenth-century English identity and codes of conduct. We can see from his descriptions of other black people that he feels himself to be superior; Cambridge, he is clear to emphasise, is no 'common slave' (p. 157), and his purpose in returning to Africa is to teach 'the laws of civilization' (p. 149). Just as I have suggested that Emily's narrative – often prejudiced and

disdainful – may distance her from the reader, so Cambridge, when given his own voice, reveals that he, like Emily, is prejudiced towards the black people he encounters. Whilst such behaviour indicates his position as an anglicised African, arguably it further distances him from the reader.

In initially moving Cambridge from Africa to Britain, Phillips not only illustrates the historical bond between the countries, but also dispels the myth that black people came to Britain for the first time in the mid-twentieth century. Cambridge records the substantial black presence in London in the late eighteenth, or early nineteenth, century: 'I went forth into London society and soon discovered myself haunted by black men occupying all ranks of life' (p. 142). His use of 'haunted' is pertinent, in revealing his construction of black people as 'other', or ghostly reminders of his racial identity – as I have already suggested, he is a problematic figure. Cambridge describes black people of ranging social positions, from the companions of rich white people, to prostitutes and street performers, yet it is clear from his tone that he does not relate to them:

The bustling narrow cobbled streets of London were indeed teeming with a variety of unfortunate negroes. [...] It was the *comical* street entertainers who were the real aristocrats of the destitute blacks, and chief among this ungodly scourge was one who sported a wooden leg and a quite ludicrous hat. I suspect this man is more responsible than most for fixing us in the minds of the English people as little more than undignified objects for their mirth and entertainment. (p. 143)

The beggar with the 'quite ludicrous hat' recalls either the figure of 'Black Billy', a one-legged beggar famous for his feathered hat and 'peculiar antics',⁴⁶ or perhaps the figure of Joseph Johnson; a black beggar on the streets of London at the start of the nineteenth century who wore a ship on his head, captured by the cartoonist John Thomas Smith in *Vagabondia* (1815) [see figure 2.1, below].

⁴⁶ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 231.



[2.1] John Thomas Smith, *Joseph Johnson* (etching, 1815)

As Kwame Dawes writes, as an immigrant, Johnson quite literally wore the badge of his difference: 'the ship was his instantaneous narrative of journey. [...] It was that vessel that explained his presence in England as a black man, and at the same time proclaimed his alienness and his marginalised and migrant status'.⁴⁷ If Phillips is alluding to Johnson, it is not surprising that Cambridge would reject the figure – he sees himself as no different to other (white) Londoners and it seems unlikely that he would voluntarily carry such a symbol of his past. In the previous long quotation, Cambridge suggests that the street entertainers and beggars are responsible for perpetuating stereotypes of blackness within Britain, though he experiences extreme poverty following his master's death and also resorts to charity.

Whilst in London, Cambridge encounters prejudice surrounding mixed-race relationships. He falls in love with, and marries, a white servant called Anna. Although his master has been conducting a relationship with his black servant, Mahogany Nell, it seems that this is a more socially acceptable pairing. As Cambridge reports:

I confessed that while walking abroad with this female in the Haymarket
I had been rudely set upon by a swarm of white *gallants* with epithets of

⁴⁷ Kwame Dawes, 'Negotiating the Ship on The Head: Black British Fiction', *Wasafiri*, 29 (1999), 18-24 (p. 18).

black devil, while she that was under my protection received considerably worse for being in company with a man of colour. (p. 145)

Once again, we find that the relationships between black men and white women, in particular, would seem to have a history that cannot be cast aside. In *Cambridge* Phillips illustrates the far-reaching nature of such relationships; these did not begin with the arrival of the *Windrush*, but with the first contact between black and white people in the slave trade. He suggests it is therefore necessary to unpick and explore the roots of this antagonism; *Cambridge* allows the reader to see how the relationships between disparate people have been entwined by the process of slavery. Whilst there may have been an effort to separate the histories of black and white people in the twentieth century, Phillips rejoins their narratives within his text, if only to illustrate their separateness in, or absence from, standard versions of history. Frequently in his writing we reach this notion of amnesia surrounding history; slavery he reminds us, though unequally shared, is a shared past nonetheless.

In the (perhaps surprising) twinning of his protagonists, Phillips demonstrates the scope of enslavement. In revealing the different forms of enslavement experienced by Emily and Cambridge – the former on grounds of gender, the latter on race – Phillips questions what it means to be enslaved. Furthermore, as we have seen, Emily is partially enslaved by her English identity, but at the same time, is denied full participation in this identity because she is female. Cambridge aspires to being English, but is also excluded from the narrative of English nationality because he is black: both, it would seem, are imperfectly assimilated into this identity. The protagonists in some ways write as a protest against these enslavements and exclusions. Their narratives indicate the destabilisation of English identity at the start of the nineteenth century, and point to the proliferation of alternative, and difficult, creolised conceptions of identity. Phillips does not write of slavery via an accusatory, dissident, politics of race, therefore, but as a way of unravelling the propriety and purity of national identity itself.

However, as we have seen, neither Emily nor Cambridge has a fortuitous outcome from their act of rebellion; Cambridge is killed, and Emily's attempt to write her own script proves hazardous. The slaves' use of language and dress suggests a creolised adaptability and creativity, yet Emily's refusal to conform to English rules of femininity, and subsequent

shedding of her English identity, leads to dislocation and instability. Like Cambridge, Emily may seem to no longer belong in England, but neither does she belong in the Caribbean, leading her to ask: '[a]re there no ships that might take me away? But take me away to what and to whom?' (p. 183). Phillips therefore questions what there is for those that refuse, or are not allowed to engage with, English rules and society. We arguably see in the problems experienced by both Emily and Cambridge with English identity Phillips's deep-set dissatisfaction with the 'main narrative' of British identity, as irrevocably flawed in its exclusion and marginalisation of people on grounds of race, gender or class.

To conclude, Eckstein claims, then, that Phillips 'assembles specific passages from older texts in an artistic montage', which may, I suggested, remind us of Pollard's collage.⁴⁸ Like her complicated and densely overlaid images, in *Cambridge* Phillips also constructs his story from layers of older texts. However, rather than illuminate the differences between these fragments, or between his protagonists, Phillips, like Pollard, arguably demonstrates how seemingly diverse accounts are, in fact, linked by the course of slavery and are perhaps more interconnected than Eckstein's work suggests. Instead, as I have sought to show, Phillips reveals how both protagonists labour, in differing ways, with the exclusivity and constraints of English national identity, yet neither is entirely successful in constructing viable alternative identities. Their creolisation does not enable a celebratory freedom, but precarious and liminal positions which, whilst indicating the importance of forging new identities, also highlight the dangers of creolisation, revealing the paradox of diasporan identity arguably at the core of this novel.

Crossing the River

No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things. (Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*)⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Eckstein, p. 69.

⁴⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 408.

Johanna Garvey has argued in her essay 'Passages to Identity: Re-Membering the Diaspora in Marshall, Phillips, and Cliff' that Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993) is a novel of 'irreparable fragmentation'.⁵⁰ The novel's form is certainly very disjointed: split into four distinct parts, with a framing epilogue and prologue set in a transhistorical mode. Letters and diary entries within the sections are often non-chronological and incomplete, and each story tells a tale of broken familial bonds. Slavery, Phillips seems to suggest, is a fractured and untotalisable past. However, I contend that, despite such fragmentation, *Crossing the River* importantly traces, in Said's terms, the 'connections between things'; more specifically, the unexpected connections between people, centuries, countries and histories made possible because of the transatlantic slave trade. In the above quotation, Said indicates that, whilst differences will always exist between traditions, habitations, languages and cultural terrains, survival is enabled by tracing the affirmative connections between these different elements.

My contention that *Crossing the River* demonstrates that connections are crucial to survival is supported by Phillips's comments that he 'wanted to make an affirmative connection, not a connection based upon exploitation or suffering or misery, but a connection based upon a kind of survival'.⁵¹ Within his novel, the importance of connections is slowly revealed as we follow the fortunes of three children sold into slavery. Over two hundred and fifty years, the survival of these allegorical protagonists depends on their ability to forge bonds with others. Unlike *Cambridge*, which covered a relatively short period of time in the nineteenth century, *Crossing the River* spans two and a half centuries, and its subjects range across the globe. The novel moves from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Africa, through nineteenth-century America to Britain during, and after, the Second World War. With reference to Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1984) I shall illustrate that, although it is impossible to restore the original familial connections or erase the past of slavery, there is the possibility of creating new connections in the form of affiliative bonds. I am going to explore the failure of filiation in

⁵⁰ Johanna X. K. Garvey, 'Passages to Identity: Re-Membering the Diaspora in Marshall, Phillips, and Cliff', in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. by Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Carl Pedersen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 255-270 (p. 260).

⁵¹ Carol Margaret Davison, 'Crisscrossing the River: An Interview with Caryl Phillips', *Ariel*, 25:4 (1994), 91-99 (p. 93).

Crossing the River before showing how Phillips suggests these affiliative bonds may, with different degrees of success, enable the survival of his disparate characters.

The prologue reveals the voice of a guilty African father: '[a] desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember [...] And soon after, the chorus of a common memory began to haunt me'.⁵² If the plural voices of *Cambridge* suggested a history of slavery comprising many overlapping stories and lives, then in *Crossing the River*, these histories are simultaneously articulated to create a polyphonic, intertwined 'many-tongued chorus of the common memory' (p. 235). Phillips's use of 'haunt' stresses the insistence of the past to be resurrected; it would seem that what has happened cannot remain buried, but somehow exists, though 'in different forms', in the present.⁵³ In *Crossing the River*, the father is haunted by memories of the past and the moment of separation from his children. His voice is interspersed with other irreconcilable voices, such as that of the slave captain of the third section of the novel, James Hamilton. This conjunction recalls Said's advocacy of 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories' in its seamless interchange: '[t]hree children only. I jettisoned them at this point, where the tributary stumbles and swims out in all directions to meet the sea. *Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl*' (p. 1). The same overlapping device occurs in the other stories; we should, Phillips implies, think not of separate black and white accounts of the past, but of a connected – yet fragmentary – narrative of slavery which intertwines all these histories.

The first section of *Crossing the River* recounts the story of Edward Williams; upon the death of his wife, he journeys from America to Africa to search for his former slave, Nash, with whom it is suggested he has had a sexual relationship. Nash had ventured to Liberia as a missionary, but gradually lost contact with Edward, whose wife had secretly destroyed Nash's letters. After a period of sickness in Sierra Leone, Edward travels into Liberia and learns from another ex-slave, Madison, that Nash is dead. The second, and shortest, section recounts the life of Martha, an ex-slave, now pioneer, on her way across America to simultaneously join her friend and search for her daughter, Eliza Mae, in California. Taken in off the streets by an anonymous white woman in the depths of winter, Martha dies that night. The third section

⁵² Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (1993; New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 1. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

⁵³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 1.

comprises the log book of a slaver captain, James Hamilton, contrasted with love letters written to his wife.⁵⁴ This section ends with his purchase of the children of the prologue. The final section, which is by far the longest, is set largely during the Second World War and takes place in the north of England. The narrator, Joyce, is a white working-class woman trapped in an unhappy marriage to the violent and abusive Len. Her diary entries reveal that she falls in love with a black American serviceman, Travis, and becomes pregnant. They marry, but he dies soon after whilst serving in Italy, and Joyce is persuaded to give up her baby son, Greer. Eighteen years later, the remarried Joyce receives a visit from her now grown-up son.

My focus will be on one of the more critically neglected sections – Hamilton's acquisition of slaves – which I shall look at alongside the longest final section, as these are the parts of the novel that best enable a critical discussion of slavery and the repercussions of this past. The relationship between Joyce and Travis is a bond made possible only by slavery; were it not for the actions of men like Hamilton who transported African slaves to the Americas, Joyce and Travis would not have met. I would suggest that the critical neglect of Hamilton's section, in particular, is largely due to Phillips's compassionate portrayal of the captain of a slave ship; I show that this is a challenging and complex representation which resists conventional categorisation along racial lines of black victim or white figure of blame. *Crossing the River* may be a novel about slavery and its continuing legacies, but it is not simply an accusatory novel. I would therefore strongly contest the claim of the anonymous writer in *The Economist* that it is a novel of 'saintly blacks and sinful whites'.⁵⁵ I indicate that, instead of a literature of recrimination and retribution, Phillips's novel envisages a meeting between black and white people; an acknowledgement and understanding of the past of slavery which rejects a rhetoric of blame.

It is therefore important to note that Phillips dedicates his book to 'those who crossed the river', which acknowledges all the people – black and white – that made the journey; his river is not crossed by slaves, or their descendants, alone. In this respect, I remain unconvinced by Anthony Illona's contention that *Crossing the River* is 'one of a growing number of works

⁵⁴ Interestingly, many critics fail to comment on these letters, instead writing only of the log; see, for example, Garvey, p. 262.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, 'The Booker Prize – Devalued', *The Economist*, 23 October 1993, p. 108.

which sets its hook in the none too pleasant past of black history'.⁵⁶ In order to justify his argument, he writes that the fourth section of the novel is Travis's story, though much of this section is narrated before Joyce meets Travis, and he refers to Nash, Martha and Travis as the 'three protagonists'.⁵⁷ In fact, and quite crucially, in the epilogue, the 'children' include Joyce: 'I hope that amongst these survivors' voices I might occasionally hear those of my own children. My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. My daughter. Joyce. All. Hurt but determined' (p. 237). Unlike Illona's perhaps limiting reading of *Crossing the River* as a tale solely of black history, I argue Phillips rejects the notion that slavery involved only black people and, in *Crossing the River*, transcends racial categories to explore a past, and a future, that comprises black and white.

Whilst I disagree with Garvey that *Crossing the River* is a novel of hopeless fragmentation it is, as I have indicated, certainly a text rife with broken familial bonds, although we see a subsequent emergence of new, non-familial connections. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said writes that '[c]hildless couples, orphaned children, aborted childbirths, and unregenerately celibate men and women populate the world of high modernism with remarkable insistence, all of them suggesting the difficulties of filiation'.⁵⁸ I would argue that the apparent 'difficulties of filiation' are not merely traits of 'high modernism'; we can find evidence of almost all the figures listed by Said in *Crossing the River*, where slavery and its aftermath have, it seems, led to the problems of filiation. Edward and his wife are childless and Martha is looking for her daughter. Hamilton is searching to retrace the last movements of his late father in Africa, though his desire to trace his family connections contrasts ironically with his role as a slave-trader. Finally, Joyce has had an abortion, loses both parents through different wars, and is eventually persuaded to give up the child she has with Travis. Phillips's portrayal of 'families' in this novel as fragmented or dissolute might suggest his dissatisfaction with the concept of the stable family unit. The families he presents span centuries, yet none fit standard representations of 'nuclear' families, whether due to war, plantation slavery or (in the case of Edward) perhaps

⁵⁶ Illona, p. 3.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

⁵⁸ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1984; London: Vintage, 1991), p. 17.

sexuality. The disruption of the stable family unit, one could argue, is one of the legacies of slavery although, as I explain, in this novel it is replaced with affiliative 'families'.⁵⁹

Aside from the guilty father of the prologue, the first character we meet that is suffering the effects of broken familial bonds is Martha. Her husband Lucas and daughter Eliza Mae were separated from her, and each other, when their owner died and they were resold: '[s]he no longer possessed either a husband or daughter, but her memory of their loss was clear' (p. 78). As I have mentioned, Martha is journeying across America to join her friend Lucy and find her daughter. Yet, there is a simultaneous realisation of the impossibility of this task, as her encounter with the white woman reveals: '[t]he woman stretched out her gloved hand and Martha stared hard at it. Eliza Mae was gone. This hand could no more lead her back to her daughter than it could lead Martha back to her own youthful self' (p. 75). This movement pre-empted the epilogue's conclusion that '[t]here is no return' (p. 237). The past cannot be undone, and so Martha's dream of familial reunion will remain only a dream:

Soon it was time for Martha to leave, but her daughter simply forbade her mother to return east. Martha, feeling old and tired, sat down and wept openly, and in front of her grandchildren. She would not be going any place. She would never again head east. [...] She had a westward soul which had found its natural-born home in the bosom of her daughter. (p. 94)

At no point in the novel do we find the kind of utopian 'return' or resurrection of filial relationships projected in her dream. The closest Phillips allows us to get to this utopian moment of meeting is in the final section of the text, though this is, in many ways, a far from utopian encounter, as I shall discuss later.

In the section entitled 'Crossing the River', we encounter, as I have suggested, broken filial bonds in James Hamilton's search to retrace his father's last steps, but it is arguably in the final section of the novel that Phillips explores in greatest depth the figure of the absent father. Joyce's father died during the First World War, and she records searching for his name, lost amongst the many others, on the town's war memorial: '[o]ccasionally I've found my dad on a

⁵⁹ Numerous historians have written about the impact and legacies of slavery on family life. See, for example, Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976) and Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

bronze plaque, near the Town Hall, but his name is scattered among the names of hundreds of others. This is merely a place to find him, but not to discover him' (p. 133). We can see here the impossibility of knowing her father; the war memorial may list the dead, but that is all it does – her father's name is indistinguishable from the numerous names of other men. The anonymity of the soldiers mirrors the anonymity of the slaves in part three of the novel, and here Phillips perhaps raises the problem of memorials to the dead; like monuments to slavery, war memorials are not places 'to discover' the dead. Instead, Phillips's imaginative exploration of slavery in novels like *Cambridge* or *Crossing the River* arguably suggests an alternative means of discovering this past. The war is clearly a time for absent fathers, as Joyce tells her friend Sandra: 'I pointed out the obvious. That this is a war. That if Tommy ends up without a father, he won't be the first and he won't be the last' (p. 157). Travis's death means that he, too, briefly becomes an absent father, before Greer is given up for adoption. Absent fathers are not the extent of familial fragmentation, however; Joyce also suffers the death of her mother in the passage of the book, killed by a bomb dropped upon the town. Furthermore, Greer is not the first child she has been unable to keep; before her marriage to Len, she became pregnant by an actor named Herbert and had an abortion.

Yet, if filial relationships are impossible, Said suggests the development of affiliative bonds, borne out of 'the pressure to produce new and different ways of conceiving human relationships'. As Said writes,

if biological reproduction is either too difficult or too unpleasant, is there some other way by which men and women can create social bonds between each other that would substitute for those ties that connect members of the same family across generations?⁶⁰

In *Crossing the River*, we can see a similar substitution of familial bonds with affiliative connections; 'social bonds' constructed between biologically unrelated people. However, these bonds may not necessarily prove positive or equal, as in the case of Edward and Nash. The relationship between them is clearly not filial, despite the paternal vocabulary. According to Edward, his yearning for Nash is for the 'unconditional love of a child' (p. 55), though the

⁶⁰ Said, *The World*, p. 17.

'child' in question is an adult, and no kin of Edward. Said has stated that 'affiliation sometimes reproduces filiation', hence the imitation of a paternal relationship in this section (and Joyce's transition to 'daughter' in the epilogue).⁶¹ The paternalistic relationship between, in this case, former master and slave, or coloniser and colonised, is complicated by the implication of a sexual relationship between the men. Having received little communication from Edward, Nash's letters to his '[d]ear Father' reveal he feels like an abandoned son: '[w]hy your heart remains hard against me is a mystery which has caused me emotions of great distress. But so it must be. I can never guide your hand' (p. 38). Like the father of the prologue, Edward is also, perhaps, a guilty father: '[i]t occurred to him that perhaps the fever, the sleepless nights, the complex welter of emotions that he had been subjected to since his arrival in Africa were nothing more than manifestations of a profound guilt' (p. 52). This guilt may arise from having sent Nash to Africa (where he dies shortly before Edward's arrival) and also from their implied sexual relationship. Edward's guilt at abandoning his 'son' has, it would seem, an imperfect mirroring in the fourth section, in Joyce's decision to give up Greer for adoption – a point I return to in my reading of this section of the novel. I would argue that there is also a simultaneous mirroring between Nash and Greer as both come to terms with, and so acknowledge, the past. For Nash, Liberia is an awakening from the 'garb of ignorance' (pp. 61-2) that had been his identity as an American. I believe here we can see the effect of Nash's crossing of the river, in his growing resentment and anger as he comes to terms with his various exploitations. These exploitations include that of slavery; Nash records his anger at America's continuing involvement in the trade, declaiming: '[w]e, the colored man, have been oppressed long enough. We need to contend for our rights, stand our ground, and feel the love of liberty that can never be found in your America' (p. 61). His anger is also personal – directed at Edward for exploiting, and then abandoning, him: '[p]erhaps [...] you might explain to me why you used me for your purposes and then expelled me to this Liberian paradise' (p. 62). Nash may have found paradise on the other side of the river, but it is at the cost of painful self-discovery. In this part of the book, affiliative relations are not shown to be always positive; it is only by rejecting the relationship with Edward that Nash is able to cross the river.

⁶¹ Said, *The World*, p. 24.

Affiliative bonds can also be found in the second section, which examines another connection between black and white people. Though less exploitative than that of Edward and Nash, the uncertainty of the relationship between Martha and the white woman that offers her shelter is manifested in the gesture of an outreached hand: '[a]fter countless years of journeying, the hand was both insult and salvation, but the woman was not to know this' (p. 75).⁶² Despite the ambiguity of the gesture, and their prescribed historical roles ('[p]erhaps this woman had bought her daughter?', pp. 74-5), a connection is nevertheless forged and, for a while, their lives come together. The woman may not know Martha's name, as we do, but then neither we – nor, it would seem, Martha – know hers. She is just as anonymous; a benevolent, almost allegorical, white figure.

If the bond between Martha and the white woman may seem to be an unlikely connection, the third part of *Crossing the River* demonstrates another apparently unusual connection between Hamilton, as a white slave ship captain, and the children of the prologue: '[a]pproached by a quiet fellow. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl' (p. 124). This encounter between black and white characters is arguably the crux of the novel: the transaction upon which the book rests. As if to emphasise the point, this section is positioned at the centre of the text, and is named 'Crossing the River'. Phillips acknowledges at the start of the novel his reliance on the journal of the slave captain John Newton in order to write the section of the book, and the historical note at the beginning of this section is important, in suggesting its emulation of a historical record: '[j]ournal of a voyage intended (by God's permission) in the *Duke of York*, snow, from Liverpool to the Windward Coast of Africa, etc., commenced the 24th August 1752' (p. 97). Phillips inserts ellipses into the journal entries with frequency, which suggests, firstly, that the source may have been edited, but also that the history of slavery is fragmented and incomplete. In these gaps we can perhaps sense the unspoken or missing parts

⁶² The image of the outreached hand is a significant one, as I shall explore later. This is not the first time the image of an open white hand has been seized upon in the course of slavery and its abolition. In 1844 Jonathan Walker was prosecuted for attempting to help slaves in Florida escape to the Bahamas. His punishment included the branding of 'SS' ('Slave Stealer') onto his hand. As Marcus Wood reports, 'Walker's hand became the most infamous hand and the most visible brand in the history of American slavery. The white hand of Walker became a fragmentary monument to the cause of abolition and the suffering of the slave.' See Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 246. The white woman's gesture towards Martha, it would seem, has a historical legacy.

of this past, such as the voices, or stories, of the slaves (and of other, poorer, crew members), of whom we hear nothing. For example:

At 7 p.m. departed this life Edward White, Carpenter's Mate, 7 days ill of a nervous fever. Buried him at once. Put overboard a boy, No. 29, being very bad with a violent body flux. Have now 3 whites not able to help themselves ... (p. 116)

This section, furthermore, serves as a reminder of who exactly crossed the river; we can see from the above quotation that the middle passage was also gruelling for white people, who died alongside the slaves, though they at least are named rather than numbered.⁶³ Phillips also includes at the start of this section a list of crew members and their fates; another stark reminder of the white death toll.⁶⁴ The deaths of slaves and crew are all related to the reader in a dispassionate log, as are Hamilton's acquisitions of slaves: '[w]as shown 11 slaves, of whom I picked 5, viz., 4 men, 1 woman' (p. 105). These staccato entries contrast with the passionate, heartfelt letters to his wife:

I confess that, when alone, the recollection of my past with you overpowers me with a tender concern, and such thoughts give me a pleasure, second only to that of being actually with you. I have written myself into tears, yet I feel a serenity I never imagined till I was able to call you mine. (p. 110)

Hamilton's letters are written in flowing, eloquent and romantic language, full of hyperbole and sentiment. They demonstrate his loneliness and capacity to love, thereby humanising and complicating his characterisation; Hamilton's log and letters pose a testing juxtaposition. Phillips has created a multidimensional and intriguing character, arguably indicative of the complexities of slavery, where ordinary men, often with wives and families, became embroiled in the trade. Whilst Hamilton's letters evince his potential for compassion, he cannot relate this kindness to the slaves; a disjunction that renders this section particularly difficult. I would argue

⁶³ Equiano also records how the white crew were often treated harshly by the captain: '[o]ne white man in particular I saw [...] flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast that he died in consequence of it'. See *Equiano's Travels*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Oxford: Heinemann, 1996), p. 24.

⁶⁴ For statistics of deaths among crew members of slave ships during the eighteenth century, see Stephen D. Behrendt, 'Crew Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century', in *Routes to Slavery: Direction, Ethnicity and Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, ed. by David Eltis and David Richardson (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), pp. 49-71. See also W. E. F. Ward, *The Royal Navy and the Slavers: The Suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), which describes conditions on board slaving vessels for the crew.

that the reluctance of some critics to discuss this narrative also arises from Phillips's refusal to position Hamilton within their preferred rhetoric of slavery as specifically black history. The association with Newton demonstrates the ambiguous position of Hamilton, as Newton evolved from being one of the more notorious slave captains to a determined speaker against the slave trade.⁶⁵

Like Emily in *Cambridge*, then, Hamilton is an unusual choice of protagonist. In a way typical of Phillips, he returns to a character that has previously been portrayed (especially in abolitionist literature and tracts) as a dehumanised monster, and problematises this image. Eighteenth-century examples of this dehumanisation include pictorial depictions of cruel slave captains, created for the abolitionist cause, such as Isaac Cruikshank's etching *The Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1792), which shows a female slave roped upside down on the deck of the ship, watched by a leering captain and reputedly based on a real event [see figure 2.2, below].⁶⁶



[2.2] Isaac Cruikshank, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade* (hand-coloured etching, 1792)

⁶⁵ Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1518-1865* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1963), pp. 133-137. There are multiple written examples of extreme cruelty towards both slaves and crew; see, for example, John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader: With Newton's Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, ed. by Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: Epworth Press, 1962).

⁶⁶ Wood, p. 161. Also, George Morland's painting *Execrable Human Traffic* (1788) depicts a trader holding a bludgeon over a slave's head, often copied in engravings; see J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade 1787-1807* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 169, 172.

Alongside such pictorial depictions came infamous stories of cruelty aboard slave ships; in *Black Cargoes* (1963) Daniel Mannix and Malcolm Cowley include an account of a captain who 'amused himself by tearing at the men's faces with his long nails or cutting them with a pocket knife [...] He killed the cook with his own spit for having burned the roast'.⁶⁷ The case of the *Zong* is another example of a slave-ship captain's behaviour being particularly inhumane. In 1781, Luke Collingwood, captain of *Zong*, fearing his slaves – many of whom had become ill – may not survive or be healthy enough to provide him with a good return, made the decision to jettison them alive for the insurance money.⁶⁸ Cases such as these were further ammunition for the abolitionist cause, and authors contemporary to Phillips have also imaginatively returned to these events. Fred D'Aguiar's novel, *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), for example, is based on the incidents aboard the *Zong* and the ensuing court case. Unlike Phillips, however, D'Aguiar adheres to more conventional portrayals of the slave-ship captain, and his captain Cunningham arguably lacks the multidimensionality of Hamilton.⁶⁹

Phillips's representation of Hamilton is, as I have suggested, complex. Especially in the early days of slavery, participation in the trade was considered legitimate; there was no conception of its immorality, largely because slaves were not considered to be fully human. We realise the precariousness of the captain's life when, with crew members dying around him, he too contracts an illness. His journal ends not with his safe arrival on land, but somewhere in the ocean; the last entry reads:

Friday 21st May . . . During the night a hard wind came on so quick, with heavy rain. Occasioned a lofty sea, of which I was much afraid, for I do not remember ever meeting anything equal to it since using the sea. At dawn brought the ill-humoured slaves upon deck, but the air is so sharp they cannot endure, neither to wash nor to dance. They huddle together, and sing their melancholy lamentations. We have lost sight of Africa . . . (p. 124)

Hamilton is suspended in the act of crossing the river and does not, unlike the children he carries, necessarily ever reach the other side; the ellipsis trails off tantalisingly into an uncertain

⁶⁷ Mannix and Cowley, p. 147.

⁶⁸ James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 42. See also Mannix and Cowley, pp. 125-7.

⁶⁹ Similarly, in his novel *Middle Passage* (1990), Charles Johnson's ex-slave narrator, Rutherford Calhoun, notes '[r]ight then I decided our captain was more than just evil. He was the devil'. See Johnson, *Middle Passage* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1990), p. 120..

future. This uncertainty concerning his destiny is reinforced by the crew list at the start, which records names, positions and fates. The latter column is left blank for certain crew members, including the captain; we cannot be sure of what happened to him, only that the ship, and the slaves, reached their destination. The stark list of crew members predicts the anonymous listing of the dead on the war memorial in the last part of the novel. Here, too, in the crew list, we encounter a place to know, but not discover, these men. Slave-ship ledgers, whether real or fictional, lead one to question who actually gains from the slave trade; a point underscored by Cowley, who writes that 'popular opinion is mistaken when it holds that Negroes were the sole victims of the trade. White sailors before the mast were also treated as mere items in the ledger.'⁷⁰ While it is problematic to compare too closely enslaved Africans with free, if harshly treated, white crew members, I would argue that Phillips also suggests that those who truly profited from the trade cannot be found aboard his ship.

Whilst this third section of the novel may seem incongruous, in that it is not the 'voice' of one of the children, it is linked to the others, not only in the figure of the absent father, but also in the sale of the three children at the end to Hamilton. Furthermore, we might remember Said's advocacy of reading 'contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts'.⁷¹ The dominating discourse in the history of slavery has chiefly been the voice of the wealthy, white male; in this case, arguably represented by the narrative of Hamilton. Yet, even the accounts that have survived, such as the journal of Newton, provide a very one-sided view of these men. It is therefore necessary to read Hamilton's log alongside his letters in order to better understand the complexity of the captain, and of the other narratives in the novel.

I suggest, then, that the various histories articulated in *Crossing the River* need to be read together in any attempt to come to terms with the complex history of slavery and imperialism. Hamilton's voice is, as much as the children's, part of the novel's 'chorus of the common memory'. James Walvin, in *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (1986), writes

⁷⁰ Cowley also notes that the mortality rate for seamen was higher than that of the slaves on Guinea voyages. See Mannix and Cowley, p. xi.

⁷¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 59.

of the 'distinctive historical forces which have bound black and white together, over many centuries, in [...] a special interdependence'.⁷² Like Phillips, Walvin stresses the inextricable nature of the relationship between black and white people and, furthermore, in the case of both *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, the most prominent 'force' to which Walvin alludes is that of slavery; it makes possible, in its continuing legacies, the positions of all the characters with whom we are confronted. If Hamilton's story is the 'moment', or a microcosm, of slavery, then we see the continuing legacies of this moment in each of the other sections. For example, Nash and Martha were both slaves in America; again, as a direct result of the slave trade. In the last part of the novel, the relationship between Joyce and Travis, as I have indicated, is made possible precisely because of slavery; like Nash and Martha, Travis is a black American. However, the prejudice and racism they encounter towards their relationship can also be seen as a legacy of this past. Slavery therefore both enables and hinders their relationship, and their child Greer is also bound to this past.

From the beginning of this final part of the novel, it is immediately clear that Joyce does not 'belong' within the small village community.⁷³ She is a threat to the villagers because obviously different; her lack of prejudice and friendly nature contrasts her to the others. She values her difference and is pleased to be told by Travis that she is unlike the others: 'I guess you don't act like them in some ways. Can't say how exactly, but just different. Inside I was smiling. That was just what I wanted to hear' (p. 163). Joyce is also, presumably, unique because she is what several critics have called 'colour blind' – it is some time before she reveals that Travis is black.⁷⁴ As a newcomer from the town, she is further alienated by her decision to not 'stick' by Len when he is sent to prison for dealing on the black market, and by her subsequent relationship with Travis:

I tried to avoid the way people were looking. They were looking at me. Not him. They just nodded at him [...] I knew what they were thinking. That he

⁷² Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom*, p. 13.

⁷³ In her refusal to conform to what she sees as village small-mindedness, Joyce prefigures Phillips's character Dorothy in his novel *A Distant Shore* (2003).

⁷⁴ Just two examples are Bénédicte Ledent, "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories": Cross-Culturality in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 30:1 (1995), 55-62 (p. 59) and Gail Low, "A Chorus of Common Memory": Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, *Research into African Literatures*, 29: 4 (1998), 122-40 (p. 138).

was just using me for fun. There was no ring on my finger, but I didn't think that they had the right to look at me in that way. (p. 202)⁷⁵

Wendy Webster, in *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (1998) writes that '[t]he concept of "miscegenation" – widely used in race discourse in the 1950s – signalled not only the idea that races were biological categories marked by difference, but also that the mixing of these in heterosexual relations was deeply problematic and unnatural.'⁷⁶ As Webster states, then, those writing about race at this time were quick to seize upon what they saw as the 'unnaturalness' of mixed-race relationships. Joyce is similarly warned by the army officer: 'it's not that we don't want our men to mix with you village girls, it's not that at all. It's just that we don't want any incidents' (p. 206); for 'incidents' we can read 'pregnancies'. Len similarly tells her she's a 'traitor to [her] own kind' (p. 217), his vocabulary emphasising the perceived unnaturalness of their attraction, in crossing racial boundaries. His use of 'traitor' also signals that this is, for Len, a kind of war, based on a polarised vision of black and white. Unfortunately, Joyce cannot live with Travis in the United States because of the segregation laws; their relationship, it seems, is a connection thrown up by slavery that is not approved of.⁷⁷

If the villagers are untrusting of Joyce, they also react with hostility to what they perceive as threats from 'outsiders', demonstrated with the arrival of the American servicemen. In my opening quotation, Said mentions the 'fear and prejudice' involved in maintaining the 'separation and distinctiveness' of traditions and cultures. The village landlord excepted, the behaviour of the villagers towards the servicemen demonstrates this 'fear and prejudice': '[s]ome of the villagers couldn't contain themselves. They began to whisper to each other, and they pointed [...] I wanted to warn them, but in no time at all they were gone. It was too late' (p. 129). The wartime language of invasion that was, in later decades, used by Enoch Powell and

⁷⁵ We might remember the way in which Cambridge's wife bore the brunt of people's hostility for their relationship; to recall Cambridge's words, 'she that was under my protection received considerably worse for being in company with a man of colour' (p. 145).

⁷⁶ Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. 48. Webster adds that '[a]llarms about "miscegenation" were nearly always about reproduction as well as sexuality, urging the dangers of producing "half-caste" children' (p. 51). In *Crossing the River*, Greer is a realisation of such fears. Despite her use of the loaded term, 'unnatural', Webster makes no mention of interracial homosexual relationships.

⁷⁷ The fact the Joyce is not allowed to go to America with Nash contrasts with the approval wartime brides met when bride and groom were of the same race; see *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. by Margaret Randolph Higgonet, and others (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), especially pp. 11-12.

Margaret Thatcher to depict postwar Caribbean immigrants is, in this section, employed to describe the Americans: '[i]t's all over the papers. We're having an invasion all right, but it's not Jerry. We've been invaded by bloody Yanks' (p. 134). It is not only Joyce and the American servicemen that are viewed with suspicion and outright hostility; the evacuated children sent to the village are also resented: '[t]hey can bloody well go back where they come from' (p. 144), as Len asserts. This statement, of course, echoes sentiments expressed towards black men and women in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century – instructed with some frequency to go back to 'where [they] came from'.⁷⁸ Joyce describes: '[b]efore us stood a dozen frightened children, the farmers eyeing the husky lads, the girls and scrawny boys close to tears' (p. 144). This scene is also reminiscent of a slave auction – the children lined up with 'an identification tag around their necks' (p. 144). Again, Phillips is tracing connections between disparate people and times – in this case, along lines of exploitation. The 'husky lads' are viewed in terms of their physical strength, or economic value, to the farmers; slaves were similarly assessed by potential owners in terms of strength, breeding potential and other criteria. This is, it would seem, another ghost of slavery, or continuation of the past in the present in altered forms.

Although Phillips's three black protagonists die, I would suggest that the ending of *Crossing the River* implies hope for the future in the character of Greer. I therefore differ from Smethurst's belief that

In Phillips's novels, the contact between two cultures never betokens assimilation and reconciliation. Two cultures meet, but a line is drawn under the meeting. The future is curtailed, history is either ruptured, or it loops back on itself, repeating the prejudices and persecutions that difference makes.⁷⁹

Smethurst seems to indicate the hopeless futility of contact between black and white characters who, he claims, are held in positions of stasis or 'irreparable fragmentation', to return to Garvey. I would, however, disagree; in *Crossing the River*, Greer suggests a future which is not 'curtailed' or 'loop[ing] back on itself'. As the child of Joyce and Travis, and the result of their

⁷⁸ Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (1998; London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 81.

⁷⁹ Smethurst, p. 12.

relationship and love, he is perhaps a positive outcome of this meeting between black and white cultures.

If Greer's arrival at Joyce's house in 1963 suggests a hope for the future, however, it does not signify the resurrecting of familial bonds, any more than it implies that Greer has returned 'home'. This term is particularly problematic for Phillips, and the delicacy with which it is employed is illustrated by Joyce's reaction to Greer's arrival: '[c]ome in, come in. He stepped by me, dipping a shoulder as he did so in order that we didn't have to touch [...] I almost said make yourself at home, but I didn't. At least I avoided that' (pp. 231-232). One might recall Emily's uncertainty about her 'home' towards the end of *Cambridge*: '[a]re there no ships that might take me away? But take me away to what and to whom?' (p. 183). The problem of 'home' and belonging resurfaces throughout Phillips's works and is something I shall look at in more detail in the context of his non-fictional texts. Greer's arrival, therefore, does not result in a joyous recovering of familial bonds ('[t]here is no return'), but a new relationship. One that is, perhaps, more honest, and replete with an acceptance of the impossibility of changing the past. Phillips does not provide a utopian moment of meeting, but an awkward and difficult moment: 'I knew he would never call me mother' (p. 223). This is a key encounter in the novel; it is significant that the chapter ends with a note of painful tentativeness – a hope (but not certainty) for the future of reconciliation and understanding. Joyce cannot be absolved of the guilt of giving up her child for adoption, but is also not blamed by Phillips for her act: '[t]he silences had become more awkward, but at least they remained free of accusation' (p. 223). I have already mentioned Edward's guilt concerning Nash, and implicit in all these 'silences' is, perhaps, a historical guilt which spans back to earlier rejections by white people; specifically, the refusal of plantation overseers or owners to acknowledge the children that were the product of their sexual union with slaves. In the case of Joyce, however, this acknowledgement *is* made, if somewhat late: '[m]y God, I wanted to hug him. I wanted him to know that I did have feelings for him. Both then and now. He was my son. Our son' (p. 224). Unlike Edward and Nash, Martha and Eliza Mae or Hamilton and his father, therefore, Joyce and Greer are reunited, though they are unable to recover the past or, in any unproblematic way, be mother and son. It is, as we have seen, impossible to alter what has happened; but it is

possible, Phillips seems to suggest, to forge new relationships based on honesty and understanding. *Crossing the River*, therefore, rejects an accusatory rhetoric; his reluctance to blame men like Edward and Hamilton, or women who have given up their children, like Joyce, ensures Phillips's novel, like the silences between Joyce and Greer, remains 'free of accusation'.

The voices of the protagonists that comprise the main stories are just a few of the numerous diasporic voices of slavery. These voices feature both in the prologue and, more extensively, in the epilogue:

I wait. And then listen as the many-tongued chorus of the common memory begins again to swell, and insist that I acknowledge greetings from those who lever pints of ale in the pubs of London. Receive salutations from those who submit to (what the French call) neurotic inter-racial urges in the boulevards of Paris. ('No first-class nation can afford to produce a race of mongrels.') But my Joyce, and my other children, their voices hurt but determined, they will survive the hardships of the far bank. (p. 235)

The global scale of this diasporic living is reflected in references to various countries across the world and to such figures as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Miles Davis, James Baldwin, Marvin Gaye and Martin Luther King. These diasporic survivors have endured slavery and imperialism, and continue to survive (and not *just* survive) in contemporary society which is, as we have seen, infused with the ghosts of the slavery. Despite the fractures incurred by diasporic living, there remains an overwhelming sense of connectedness in the novel, though this does not arise only from these recurring hauntings of the past. I have already quoted from Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, in which he writes of the 'massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences'.⁸⁰ In *Crossing the River*, we can see the existence of these overlapping and interconnected experiences, and the way in which, despite the fundamental disruptions incurred by diasporan living, connections can still be made. In the epilogue, Phillips quotes Martin Luther King:

I have listened to the voice that cried: I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. (p. 237)

⁸⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 36.

In *Crossing the River*, this dream is at least partly realised, in the bonds forged between black and white characters. Greer may not be able to call Joyce's house his 'home', but he is invited to sit down with her as they begin to construct their new relationship: 'I almost said make yourself at home, but I didn't. At least I avoided that. Sit down. Please, sit down' (p. 232). The act of sitting becomes, for Phillips, a physical manifestation of the affiliative utopianism projected in this novel. In each of the stories, the children are striving for survival through affiliative bonds – through their determined attempts to connect with their surroundings. As Phillips states:

I wouldn't say I've always wanted to be an explorer of the fissures and crevices of migration. I have seen connectedness and 'celebrated' the qualities of survival that people in all sorts of predicaments are able to keep hold of with clenched fists. I didn't want to leave this novel as an analysis of fracture, because I felt such an overwhelming, passionate attachment to all the voices, and I kept thinking it seemed almost choral. These people were talking in harmonies I could hear.⁸¹

As with Said's contrapuntal reading, the emphasis is on consonance. Whilst *Crossing the River* is comprised of different voices, all are part of the 'chorus of a common memory' and linked by affiliative bonds. If the various families are fragmented in this book through the course of slavery and its repercussions, Phillips intimates the necessity of creating new affiliative relationships. These connections fall not just between people and races, but also, as I have sought to show, between centuries.⁸²

Yet, in *Crossing the River*, survival is made possible not only, as Phillips suggests, by 'clenched fists' but also, as we have seen, by outreached hands. This gesture first occurs when the white woman reaches out to Martha, but can also be found on a metaphorical level in Joyce's refusal to treat Travis differently on the grounds of his skin colour. It is important to recall that the gesture is not an attempt to return to the past, just as the epilogue concludes '[t]here is no return' (p. 237). *Crossing the River*, whilst acknowledging the past, does not gaze only backwards, nor does it dwell on the politics of blame, concluding with the confirmation

⁸¹ Jaggi, p. 76.

⁸² Phillips has also described his writing in *Crossing the River* as 'connecting across centuries' (Davison, p. 93).

that the children 'arrived on the far bank of the river, loved' (p. 237). Instead, it points quite determinedly to a shared, if utopian, future in which all are invited to 'sit down together', irrespective of race. It is therefore Phillips who makes the greatest outreaching gesture of all. In his refusal to be lured into writing a literature of blame or recrimination, his novel becomes an outreached hand – towards people like the African father, Edward or Hamilton who, if not innocent, are also not demonised, and are certainly not blamed by him.

The Atlantic Sound and A New World Order

[C]ulture has to be seen as not only excluding but also *exported*; there is this tradition which you are required to understand and learn and so on, but you cannot really be *of* it. And that to me is a deeply interesting question and needs more study because no exclusionary practice can maintain itself for very long. Then you get the crossings over [...] and then of course the whole problematic of *exile and immigration* enters into it, the people who simply don't belong in any culture. (Edward Said, 'Media, Margins and Modernity')⁸³

Said's focus on 'crossings over', within the context of migration and diaspora, is vital to my study of Phillips's works, as the act of crossing is also a central motion in his fictional and non-fictional texts. Said provides a theoretical vocabulary for this idea of crossing as an unfinished or incomplete state, where even when migrants physically cross over to another place, they find that they 'simply don't belong in any culture'. Further, the relevancy of Said's comment about culture's 'exclusionary practice' is evident in its link to what Phillips has called in *Extravagant Strangers* (1998) the British 'mythology of homogeneity' and, as I have suggested in my Introduction, the fierce policing of British boundaries and identities in attempts to control immigration from non-white citizens.⁸⁴ This apparently exclusionary practice is, I contend, instrumental in engendering feelings of unbelonging for those who are unable to 'participate fully in the main narrative of British life'.⁸⁵

⁸³ Edward Said, 'Media, Margins and Modernity' (1986), in Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. by Tony Pinkney (London and New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 177-197, (p. 196).

⁸⁴ Phillips, *Extravagant Strangers*, p. xiv.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. xiii.

This section is quite obviously different to my readings of *Cambridge* or *Crossing the River* in its focus on two of Phillips's non-fictional works: the historical travelogue *The Atlantic Sound* and collection of essays *A New World Order*. Additionally, as these texts are partly autobiographical, they are situated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, so might initially seem less preoccupied with slavery than the novels I have examined in this chapter. However, these works are vital in exploring what Phillips shows to be the continuing legacies of slavery, including racism and the problems facing non-white people in twenty-first century Britain with national identity. Arguably, it is precisely this under-explored relationship between the anxieties of contemporary Britain and the past of slavery that motivates Phillips's imaginative return to slavery in his fiction.

Phillips's non-fictional works have received little critical comment in comparison to his novels, which are necessarily more easily categorised by genre. Reviewers have struggled, especially, to position *The Atlantic Sound* within a specific literary category, being part travelogue and part historical journey, in which Phillips attempts to unpick the tangled web of diasporan identities. Travel writing was a popular genre for the first generation of Caribbean migrants to Britain. *The Atlantic Sound* is written in a similar travelogue style to V. S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* (1962), which splices historical information with Naipaul's current impressions and thoughts on the places he visits. There are further comparisons to be made between Phillips's non-fictional works and Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A Way in the World: A Sequence* (1994), both of which are written in a style that seamlessly fuses autobiography and fiction – an achievement matched by Phillips in *The Atlantic Sound*. He has suggested, however, that Naipaul's work is tainted by an 'undisguised contempt for people of the Third World', and I am particularly aware that he and Naipaul are two very different authors.⁸⁶ In comparing their works, I do so with due caution.

Rob Nixon writes in his book on Naipaul, *London Calling* (1992), that 'travel literature, as a hybrid genre, places two quite different styles of authority at Naipaul's disposal: a semiethnographic, distanced, analytic mode and an autobiographical, subjective, emotionally

⁸⁶ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), p. 192. All subsequent references will be to this edition. Where ambiguity exists, in ensuing references I will abbreviate *A New World Order* to NWO and *The Atlantic Sound* to AS.

entangled mode'.⁸⁷ It is perhaps fitting that Naipaul and Phillips should choose a 'hybrid genre' to reflect identities which, as diasporan writers, are in themselves complex and hybrid. The alternation of styles described by Nixon can also be found in *The Atlantic Sound*, as Phillips oscillates between almost confessional, autobiographical moments and the neutral, distanced tone he engages when describing those he meets – ensuring that, unlike Naipaul, his is a narrative voice which remains on the whole 'free of accusation', although, like Naipaul, he is unafraid of being critical of those he meets.⁸⁸

I will be concentrating on those essays from *A New World Order* that deal with concepts of identity, belonging and diaspora – themes which are dominant in *The Atlantic Sound*, which is to be the main focus of study. Both books are divided into geographical sections; in *A New World Order*, these are the four zones of transatlantic slavery: 'The United States', 'Africa', 'The Caribbean' and 'Britain' – the latter section will be my primary concern. In *The Atlantic Sound*, whilst there is a similar geographical split, the labelling differs. It begins with the 'Atlantic Crossing', where Phillips travels by 'banana boat' from the Caribbean to Britain, retracing the journey he had undertaken as an infant with his parents as they emigrated from St Kitts. This is followed by a chapter about Liverpool entitled 'Leaving Home'; the first part examines the story of John Ocansey who, in 1881 came to Liverpool from Africa to investigate his father's missing money, owed for goods sent to a Liverpool merchant. In the second part, Phillips returns to Liverpool, where he meets up with a 'Liverpool Born Black' called Stephen. The next chapter, 'Homeward Bound', sees Phillips travel to Ghana, where he attends 'Panafest' and explores the politics and pitfalls of Pan-Africanism. He then travels, in 'Home', to Charleston in the United States, and delves into the life of Judge Waring, who campaigned to ensure the vote for all. Finally, in the Epilogue, entitled 'Exodus', Phillips visits a group of African-Americans who have decided to live in the Negev desert in Israel, returning to the land of their biblical ancestors.

⁸⁷ Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 15.

⁸⁸ Indeed, his occasionally scathing tone has lead Emilia Ippolito, in her review of the novel, to refer to his 'sarcastic eye'. See Ippolito, Review of *The Atlantic Sound*, *Wasafiri*, 33 (2001), 85-86 (p. 85). I would, however, disagree with her contention that Phillips is critical of the 'rootlessness' of postcolonial or diasporan people, for reasons which will become apparent.

I wish to begin by exploring the unusual form of *The Atlantic Sound* in particular, before examining what is, for Phillips, the difficult issue of 'home'. As I shall demonstrate, writing about his ambiguous relationship with football and British national identity enables Phillips to interrogate the notion of belonging. Bhabha's concepts of the pedagogical and performative will be crucial in exploring the workings of British national identity, and Gilroy provides a theoretical vocabulary for discussing the relationship between nationalism and racism, specifically in relation to football. As I have mentioned, Phillips suggests in these texts that the problems experienced by non-white British citizens with a national identity may be seen as a legacy of slavery, and are arguably maintained by the widespread forgetting of this past. In order to illustrate this point, we shall explore how slavery is remembered or forgotten in Liverpool, Charleston and Ghana. Finally, via Gilroy's rejection of 'roots' in favour of the term 'routes', I will demonstrate how Phillips traces the trajectories of slavery in positing an oceanic identity though, as we shall see, ultimately I argue that this is not a viable solution to the exclusionary mechanics of national identity formation.

The Atlantic Sound is, therefore, by its very nature, fragmentary and dissolute – arguably reflecting the fragmentation which, as I shall show, for writers such as Phillips is an integral part of diasporan identity. Reviews of *The Atlantic Sound*, in comparison to those of his other works, have been less than enthusiastic. I would contend that this is largely because both its fragmentary form and weighty content render it a difficult, or challenging, book on which to write. Alongside those critics, like Ferdinand Dennis who, in his review, dismissed it as 'a tired lament',⁸⁹ we might place others, such as Anthony Sattin, who appears to have grossly misunderstood Phillips's purpose and drive, clumsily announcing that, '*in spite of his colour*, Phillips insists that Africa is not his home' [my italics].⁹⁰ Sattin seems to imply that Africa should be home to Phillips because he is black; we can see in Sattin's comments apparently the same certainty in the coalition of race and national identity that Cambridge struggled against in the early nineteenth century. I have argued in my readings of *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*

⁸⁹ Ferdinand Dennis, 'A Symphony of Human Suffering', *Independent*, 30 May 2000, Reviews section, p. 5. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown concurs, '[y]ou start this book and by page six you want to get off. You are exhausted; ennui has settled inside your brain'. See Alibhai-Brown, 'Three Sides to the Story', *Observer*, 21 May 2000 in *NewsBank* <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com>> [accessed 17 February 2004], (para. 1 of 8).

⁹⁰ Anthony Sattin, Review of *The Atlantic Sound*, *Sunday Times*, 2 July 2000 in *NewsBank* <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com>> [accessed 17 February 2004], (para. 1 of 11).

that Phillips's works transcend a politics of race and that he writes, quite relentlessly, about slavery as a history comprised of black *and* white people. This trait is not confined to his fiction; indeed, from the beginning of *The Atlantic Sound*, Phillips is keen to emphasise that black people of the diaspora are not alone in their experience of crossing the Atlantic. Gilroy writes that '[t]he themes of nationality, exile, and cultural affiliation accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject.'⁹¹ I would add, however, that for Phillips, this 'fragmentation and differentiation' is not an inescapable aspect of *just* the black subject. He has explained that his trip on the banana boat was an attempt to 'relive not just [his] parents' voyage but Columbus's, the slave ships', and the Irish and Russian flotsam migrating to the New World'.⁹² The Atlantic Ocean has been crossed for many centuries by people of all races – sometimes voluntarily; at others, in chains. I would furthermore suggest that critics like David Honigmann have missed the point of *The Atlantic Sound*, in arguing that 'Phillips offers no recommendations to any of the children of the diaspora, no vision of his own'.⁹³ I would instead posit that diasporan identity can have no easy concluding recommendation; as Phillips states in *A New World Order*, 'I realize that for me – [...] born elsewhere – that there will never be any closure to this conundrum of "home"' (p. 308). This 'conundrum' may be seen as a focal point of both his fictional and non-fictional works, including, as is evident from just the titles of the chapters, *The Atlantic Sound*. In this book, Phillips explores the multifarious understandings of home, not only from his own perspective, but from the viewpoints of people he encounters, or whose lives he explores, along the way.

I mentioned both in my Introduction and reading of Cambridge Stuart Hall's essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in which he stresses the shifting nature, in particular, of diasporan identities, which are 'constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference'.⁹⁴ Although this conception of the fluidity and reproduction of identity is helpful in thinking about Phillips's works, Phillips's articulation of the

⁹¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p. 35.

⁹² Maya Jaggi, 'Caryl Phillips: Rites of Passage', *Guardian*, 3 November 2001 in *NewsBank* <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com>> [accessed 17 February 2004] (para. 1 of 46).

⁹³ David Honigmann, 'Disunited Children of Slavery', *Financial Times*, 13 May 2000, section Weekend, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Hall, p. 402.

complexity of diasporan identity in *A New World Order* and *The Atlantic Sound*, as we shall see, is arguably much more pessimistic. Said has quite simply stated that '[n]o one today is purely *one thing*',⁹⁵ and for Phillips – who was born in St Kitts, raised in Britain, and now resides principally in the United States – identity is necessarily composite. His uneasy position as a black child within postwar Britain is articulated in his introduction to *A New World Order*:

I am seven years old in the north of England; too late to be coloured, but too soon to be British. I recognise the place, I feel at home here, but I don't belong. I am of, and not of, this place. History dealt me four cards; an ambiguous hand. (p. 4)

Unlike the first generation of Caribbean migrants to Britain, Phillips reflects a slowly changing country, and an identity that therefore falls between the labels 'coloured' and 'British'. Furthermore, he finds himself caught between the four cards of Africa, Britain, the Caribbean and the United States. Regardless of in which of these places Phillips resides, the refrain remains the same: 'I recognise the place, I feel at home here, but I don't belong. I am of, and not of, this place'. Phillips's identity is one that is, to use Bhabha's vocabulary, 'interstitial' or 'liminal' – reflected most succinctly in the phrase 'of, and not of, this place'. He also makes the distinction between feeling at home and belonging, implying that whilst somewhere may be 'home', it can still be a place one does not belong.⁹⁶ This notion, as we shall see, is particularly pertinent with regard to *The Atlantic Sound*, where Judge Waring ultimately finds he does not belong in what has been his home town of Charleston.

In my Introduction I raised the notion that British identity has been predicated on exclusions and argued that, in the postwar period, this was enforced by the passing of legislation designed specifically to exclude non-white people. Phillips has also stated that, '[a]cross the centuries British identity has been primarily a racially constructed concept. [...] Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fixity.'⁹⁷ This defensive wall is, furthermore,

⁹⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 407.

⁹⁶ In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said also writes of the 'nuances, principally of reassurance, fitness, belonging, association, and community, entailed in the phrase *at home* or *in place*' (p. 8).

⁹⁷ Caryl Phillips, 'A Dream Deferred: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain', *Kunapipi*, 21:2 (1999), 106-118 (p. 112).

fiercely policed, as Rosemary Marangoly George, in her book *The Politics of Home* (1996), writes:

One distinguishing feature of places called home is that they are built on select inclusions. The inclusions are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion. Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control.⁹⁸

This idea of an enforced kinship links to the notion identified by Gilroy of 'cultural insiderism'.⁹⁹ Gilroy writes that its identifying feature is 'an absolute sense of ethnic difference. This is maximised so that it [...] acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of [people's] social and historical experience, cultures, and identities', and is utilised in order to 'construct the nation as an ethnically homogeneous object'.¹⁰⁰ The importance of ethnic difference as signifier of nationality, and twinned conception of the nation as 'an ethnically homogeneous object', in turn anticipates Phillips's comments in *Extravagant Strangers* about the 'mythology of homogeneity'. The persistent attempt to deny black Britons full participation in Britain's 'main narrative', as I have earlier argued, is one of the continuing legacies of slavery. The 'mythology of homogeneity' relies upon the false, but persistent, notion that the *Windrush* arrival was the primary moment of black arrival in Britain. This, in turn, depends upon the denial of an earlier, and continuous, history of black habitation within Britain – an important part of which, as I have claimed, is the suppression of Britain's role in the slave trade. Phillips's conclusion to a *New World Order* is correspondingly subtitled 'The "high anxiety" of belonging', and in this he writes:

I grew up in Leeds in the sixties and seventies, in a world in which everybody, from teachers to policemen, felt it appropriate to ask me [...] for an explanation of where I was from. The answer 'Leeds,' or 'Yorkshire,' was never going to satisfy them. Of course, as a result, it was never going to satisfy me either. (p. 303)

⁹⁸ Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9.

⁹⁹ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 3. A notion Gilroy, in turn, borrows from Werner Sollors; see Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

We see here Phillips's awareness of the complexity of diasporan identity. His sense of self and identity relies to a certain extent on how he is perceived by others; without an acceptance of his British citizenship from those he meets, it is also rendered unconvincing to him.

As I have suggested, essential to the formation of identity is the notion of home. Even dictionary definitions are confusing; 'home' is both 'the place where one lives' and 'the native land of a person or a person's ancestors', which allows for some considerable contradiction, especially for those of diasporas.¹⁰¹ The word is therefore ambiguous and something Phillips wrestles with throughout his works.¹⁰² We might, for instance, remember Greer's arrival at Joyce's house in *Crossing the River*, which could not, in any terms, be described as a return home. An understanding of what home means, and where it lies, is intimately connected to one's sense of identity, self and belonging and, in *The Atlantic Sound*, Phillips makes various suggestions as to the meaning of this word. One of the most significant, and characteristic of Phillips, is in connection to football: '[b]ack at the hotel I lie full-length on my bed and watch images of "home". Everton versus Manchester United.'¹⁰³ Here, football becomes emblematic of British identity; an idea that is also central to the essay in *A New World Order* accurately entitled, 'Leeds United, Life and Me'. In this essay, the racism that is interlaced in the game of football is evinced not only in the behaviour of hostile fans of opponent teams, who showered Phillips with 'torrents of abuse [and] sharpened pennies' (p. 299), but also in the utter duplicity of white Leeds football fans: '[t]he same people who would hug you when Leeds scored [...] would also shout "nigger" and "coon" should the opposing team have the temerity to field a player of the darker hue' (p. 299). In some ways, Phillips's uneasy relationship with football would seem to echo his relationship with Britain. Whilst he is, of course, entitled to go to matches, he is made uncomfortable by the number of racist fans that, in his experience, are in attendance; in a related way, his dissatisfaction with a British identity is in part due to the racism he has encountered over many years. Furthermore, football affiliations are, like a British

¹⁰¹ *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, ed. by Judy Pearsall and Bill Trumble (1995; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 676.

¹⁰² Leading him to erroneously claim that '[h]ome is a word I never, ever use'. See Harry Eyres, 'Home is Where the Art Is', *The Times*, 11 May 1998, p. 33.

¹⁰³ Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. 122-123. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

identity, also predicated on exclusions and are reinforced by maintaining a strong sense of the 'other'.

However, football provides Phillips with a temporary, and not uncomplicated, sense of belonging:

Leeds United reminds me of who I am. All together now, 'We are Leeds, We are Leeds, We are Leeds.' Somewhere, thirty-five years ago, a small black boy in the company of his white teenage babysitter stood on the terraces at Elland Road and muttered those words for the first time. And I say back to that child today, 'And you will always be Leeds, for they are a mirror in which you will see reflected the complexity that is your life.' (p. 301)

A momentary unity ('All together now') is created as the fans assume a collective identity, repeating their football chant mantra. Belonging, it seems, needs to be continually asserted in order to become believable. Like the difficult representation of slavery in Phillips's novels, his portrayal of the legacies of this past, such as belonging and identity for non-white Britons, is also complicated. Leeds United may remind Phillips of who he is but, as we shall see, this reminder is arguably of his difference; it is not an easy affiliation with the white football fans. I would contend that this quotation also demonstrates that identities are performative, suggesting Bhabha's notion of the pedagogical and performative.

In his essay 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation' (1990), Bhabha writes of the heterogeneity of the nation; the numerous histories and points of cultural difference that preclude the establishment of a homogeneous national identity. There occurs, he suggests, 'a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*.'¹⁰⁴ For Bhabha, therefore, the pedagogical is a continuous history, a linear movement through time, whereas the performative is continually repeating and non-progressive. In *A New World Order*, we can see that, by donning "a football shirt, the fans perform an identity as supporters of a certain team and, in so doing, also as British citizens. Against this performative, and repetitive, aspect of British identity runs the pedagogical. The belief in the uninterrupted

¹⁰⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 145-46.

continuity of British history is expressed in George Orwell's essay 'England Your England', explored by Phillips in *A New World Order*. Ignoring completely centuries of migration to Britain and, of course, the involuntary arrival of slaves from Africa, Orwell is confident in claiming that 'British people had no desire to view themselves as a nation of immigrants, and that a sense of continuity with the past was a crucial determinant of national identity' (p. 266).¹⁰⁵ This idea of the unbroken continuity of British history has also been used by Powell, and has a far-reaching historical basis. As Ian Baucom states, the 'strategy of disavowing blackness in order to negatively invoke a racially pure English identity draws on a long history of the reading of Englishness as primarily a racial category'.¹⁰⁶ We also saw Cambridge struggling with the problems of English identity; the persistent belief in the coalition of race and nationality, which prompts the exclusionary tactics deployed against Phillips by fans of opposing teams, is clearly not a late-twentieth- or early-twenty-first-century phenomenon.

Whilst a temporary solidarity may be introduced by assuming an identity as a Leeds United supporter, therefore, for fans like Phillips, this identity remains volatile and uneasy. The mirror in this case is provided by his football team; in Phillips's works, mirrors can be found in different, often unexpected things. A mirror is a crucial tool in terms of identity construction and, importantly, is not connected to how you are perceived by others but, rather, how you perceive yourself.¹⁰⁷ If, as Phillips argues, he is often perceived by other Britons as not belonging within Britain, his affiliation with Leeds United provides him with a mirror, in which he sees the confirmation that his identity is complex and that he does not, to use his terminology, easily 'belong'.

Phillips suggests, therefore, that moments of belonging are always temporary. When he travelled to France during the World Cup to watch England play against Colombia, he admits that he rose to sing the national anthem, 'with a vigour that shocked [him]' and

¹⁰⁵ Orwell's essay is entitled 'England Your England', but his focus is on Britain, rather than England; evidence, again, of the kind of slippage between England and Britain that I acknowledged in my reading of *Cambridge*.

¹⁰⁶ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 15. Again, whilst Baucom refers to England, his comments are fully applicable to Britain.

¹⁰⁷ Though, of course, the two versions of identity (self-identification and identification by others) are inextricably linked, as Phillips has stated: '[g]rowing up in England in [...] that heavy time of Enoch Powell and the Notting Hill riots, created an anxiety in me and others about how we fitted into Britain. When I looked in the mirror I saw someone who was told to go back where he came from' (Eyres, p. 33).

For a moment the cloud of ambivalence was lifted. I belonged. Why not, I wondered, submit to the moment and cease struggling? After all, what is wrong with a tee-shirt emblazoned with the Union Jack? The sixties and seventies are over [...] However, for me, the unequivocal answer to such private urgings is contained in the one word; 'vigilance'. History has taught me that for people such as myself the rules will change. The goalposts will be moved. A new nationality act will be passed. And another. (pp. 308-309)

For Phillips, British identity remains, it seems, locked into a position in which it works by exclusions, and the ever-moving goalposts of British legislation ensure that, for non-white citizens, a Union Jack tee-shirt will continue to be uncomfortably worn. Rather like Cambridge, who clothed himself in the robes of British identity, therefore, Phillips's support for his team provides him with an identity that is more than just an affiliation to Leeds United. It is worth stating here what may easily be overlooked: namely, that as a non-white citizen, belonging is so rare for Phillips that he has to attend a football match in order to experience it momentarily. This is also an instance of belonging based on assimilation; Phillips can briefly belong, but only if he wears the appropriate tee-shirt and chants the correct words. This is a complicated and anxious moment for Phillips, and if his affinity to a football team affords him a sense of belonging, it remains an impermanent condition – it is not long before the 'cloud of ambivalence' once more descends. In *After Empire*, Gilroy also discusses 'Britain's odd culture of sports *spectatorship* and its relationship to xenophobia, racism, and war', focusing on football in particular.¹⁰⁸ As Gilroy writes:

Those of us who have had to run for our lives from vicious drunken crowds intent on a different, bloodier sport than the one they paid to see on the terraces have always been able to know where nationalist sentiments were wired in to the raciological circuitry of the British nation and where Brit racisms and nationalisms were fused together as something like a single ethnic gestalt.¹⁰⁹

Gilroy emphasises the integration of race and nationality which, he suggests, we can see enacted in the drunken, racist behaviour of football supporters, especially. He reveals the dangers of, like Phillips, being lured into a temporary identification with white football fans. For Gilroy, football affiliations cannot be divorced from the wider and non-separable issues of nationality.

¹⁰⁸ Gilroy, *After Empire*, p. 116.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 121.

and race: '[t]he knot of ideas around sport demonstrates that we cannot sanction the luxury of believing that "race," nation, and ethnicity will be readily or easily disentangled from each other.'¹¹⁰ Like Phillips's urged 'vigilance', Gilroy suggests that the British coalition of race and nationality continues to exclude non-white people. Perhaps more emphatically than Phillips, however, Gilroy intimates that nowhere is this clearer than on the football terraces.

Any ambivalence surrounding a black British identity arguably stems not only from repressive postwar legislation, but also from the persistent denial of a history of black habitation in Britain that predates 1948. Instrumental in these attempts to deny black Britons a pre-*Windrush* history has been Britain's drive to 'forget' slavery. The city of Liverpool was for some time at the forefront of Britain's slaving industry – as Ramsay Muir has candidly written in *A History of Liverpool* (1907), '[b]eyond a doubt it was the slave trade which raised Liverpool from a struggling port to be one of the richest and most prosperous trading centres in the world'.¹¹¹ It was also in Liverpool in 1779 that the last sale of a slave on British soil took place.¹¹² Phillips opens the 'Leaving Home' section of *The Atlantic Sound* with a quotation about Liverpool from Richard Wright's *Black Power*: '[a]long the sidewalks men and women moved unhurriedly. Did they ever think of their city's history?' (p. 74). This question frames the section and, whilst Phillips comes face to face with ghosts of the past, Liverpool's history remains as silent as its river: 'I walk up to the Cunard building and can see that carved into its façade are the names of the major ports in the world that this huge shipping company has done business with over the years. The word "Africa" leaps out at me. Ships to Africa [...] Behind me the Mersey lies silent' (pp. 80-81). Reminders of Liverpool's role in the slave trade are, quite literally, carved into the city's buildings, yet the past is still extensively silenced and ignored: '[i]t is disquieting to be in a place where history is so physically present, yet so glaringly absent from people's consciousness. But where is it any different?' (p. 93).¹¹³

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Ramsay Muir, *A History of Liverpool* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1907), p. 195.

¹¹² Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870* (1997; London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Papermac, 1998), p. 483.

¹¹³ For a recent publication which still ignores the role of slavery in enabling the creation of Liverpool's buildings and sculptures, see Terry Cavanagh, *Public Sculpture of Liverpool* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).

If similarities can be detected between Naipaul's works and Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*, a more distinctly similar precursor to Phillips's text is Ferdinand Dennis's 'travelogue about black Britain', *Behind the Frontlines* (1988).¹¹⁴ Dennis also visits Liverpool and comments on the silence surrounding the slave trade: '[t]he city's museum has only a minor exhibition on the slave trade. Situated to the right of the entrance, it is easily overlooked by visitors. Its size and location hint at a desire to sanitise Liverpool's history, to purge the records.'¹¹⁵ Dennis implies that the exhibition, apparently created in order to remember the slave trade, may actually enable a wilful forgetting, or 'purging' of this past. In *Making the Black Atlantic* (2000), James Walvin similarly comments on the apparent ease with which slavery, as something that happened overseas, was conveniently forgotten in Britain's slaving ports:

What lay behind the rise of Bristol and Liverpool? [...] Despite periodic reminders – returning slave ships, planters coming 'home' awash with their slave-based wealth, the occasional black servant/slave in London or Bristol – the slave system was out of sight and, too often, out of mind.¹¹⁶

Again, we should note Walvin's caution in employing the term 'home', suggesting, like Phillips, that black people have not been the only ones liable to hesitate before referring to Britain as their home. Phillips also sees firsthand that Liverpool's wealth is quite literally 'out of sight'; on entering the Town Hall, for example, he encounters the utter excesses of its interior:

I discover the building to be a truly spectacular repository of marble, crystal, oil paintings and gilt. I pad my way from one room to the next, feeling increasingly glutted with the visual evidence of excess, until I finally succumb to a strange feeling of disgust. (p. 83)

This wealth is something Phillips had written about in *The European Tribe* (1987), declaring: '[y]our eyesight is defective. Europe is blinded by her past, and does not understand [sic] the high price of her churches, art galleries, and architecture' (p. 128). The necessity of understanding the past is arguably a key point for Phillips; in particular, comprehending how Britain's ostentatious architectural displays have been funded. As he states in *A New World*

¹¹⁴ Ferdinand Dennis, *Behind the Frontlines: Journey into Afro-Britain* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1988), p. ix.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹⁶ James Walvin, *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), p. x.

Order, '[h]istory is contained in buildings. Their names mean something. We have clues to our past, our present and even some idea of our future if we study buildings and their origins' (pp. 306-7). It would seem, however, that the dominant view encountered by Phillips in Liverpool is a drive to look away from evidence of the slaving past.

Stephen tells him that a Liverpool councillor wanted to rename one of the city's streets, 'The Goree', as 'Lottery Way' because he felt the name to be "embarrassing" because it referred to the infamous island off the coast of Senegal where a slave fort [...] was located' (p. 78).¹¹⁷ The attempt to erase, or rewrite Liverpool's 'embarrassing' slaving past links to the proposed 'renovation' of slave 'castles' in Ghana, which Phillips discusses with the 'renowned Ghanaian Pan-Africanist' Dr Mohammed Ben Abdallah. Phillips proffers that this may be 'seen as a process of literally and metaphorically whitewashing history' (p. 118), and also suggests that 'by calling them "castles" and equating them with kings and queens and the Eurocentric tradition, the African is not facing the reality of what these places really mean' (p. 121). In a related way, by proposing to rename 'The Goree', Liverpoolians can also be seen as not facing the reality of their city's history and the source of its prosperity. Again, connections are traced by Phillips in seemingly unlikely places, though in this case, Liverpool and Ghana are linked by their involvement at two separate, but connected, points of the triangular trade.

Whilst in Liverpool, Phillips also encounters reminders of Liverpool's connection through the slave trade to Charleston in the United States, which assumes its place at the third point of the triangle. Like Liverpool and Ghana, Charleston is a place that may try to ignore, but cannot entirely erase, the prominence of slavery in its past.¹¹⁸ Not far from Charleston is Sullivan's Island, 'an eerie and troubled place. [...] Having crossed the Atlantic in the belly of a ship. An arrival. Here, in America. Step ashore, out of sight of Charleston. To be fed, watered, scrubbed, prepared. To be sold' (p. 207). Phillips searches for the 'pest houses' which held

¹¹⁷ A similar debate has taken place recently about proposals to rename the infamous Penny Lane, named after James Penny, an eighteenth-century slave trader. See Lee Glendinning, 'Renaming Row Darkens Penny Lane's Blue Suburban Skies', *The Guardian*, 10 July 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1816669,00.html> [accessed 23 July 2006].

¹¹⁸ Liverpool and Charleston were also both pioneering towns; Liverpool was the first place in the world to have a passenger railway service (AS, p. 93) and Charleston was also the first place in the United States to have a train and a museum. Furthermore, Charleston was also the place of 'the first shot in the civil war' and the 'first place to fly the Union flag' (AS, p. 211). I would suggest that the money necessary to ensure the 'pioneering' status of these places was generated from the slave trade.

arriving slaves; where, he tells us, 'over 30 per cent of the African population first landed in the North American world' (p. 207). However, this proves a fruitless task: '[o]f the many people that I have asked, nobody seems to know exactly where the pest houses were located, and of course nobody has thought it necessary at least to speculate and mark a place with a monument or plaque' (p. 207). Phillips seems disappointed to find no fixed marker pinpointing the location of the pest houses; it would initially seem that in Charleston, as in Liverpool, the past of slavery is forgotten. However, although lacking a 'monument or plaque', Charleston perhaps provides a glimmer of hope, as Phillips finds that here there is an attempt to remember:

in this city which 'processed' nearly one-third of the African population who arrived in the United States, a population who were encouraged to forget Africa, to forget their language, to forget their families, to forget their culture, to forget their dances, five young black women try to remember [...] Their sinewy bodies weave invisible threads that connect them to the imagined old life. (p. 213)

As I have suggested, the past is unavailable, hence Phillips's care to mention that the 'old life' is an 'imagined' one, but this act of imaginative remembrance is clearly important in the face of enforced forgetting. Out of this act comes a vision of black and white people celebrating together: '[w]hite men and women dancing to the rhythms of Africa in the street behind the United States Customs House. History smiles. [...] Ghosts walking the streets of Charleston. Ghosts dancing in the streets of Charleston' (p. 213). The 'ghosts' that walk and dance in the streets suggest, again, the continuing legacy of slavery and, rather like the utopian diasporic chorus with which Phillips ends *Crossing the River*, here, too, we have a vision of a connection between black and white people, remembering and acknowledging a shared past. Perhaps Charleston, in its communal celebration, provides a tentative answer to the question posed earlier by Phillips. To recap, he commented that Liverpool's history is 'physically present, yet [...] glaringly absent from people's consciousness' and asked, '[b]ut where is it any different?'. Phillips may feel that the citizens of Sullivan's Island have been neglectful, in failing to mark the location of the 'pest houses', but Charleston's street celebration offers an alternative means of acknowledging this past.

Charleston, it would seem, has come a long way from the time of Judge Waring, who was ostracised by the white people of the town for his determination to secure the vote for black men and women. Waring was ultimately forced to leave, realising that '[i]t was simply too burdensome to be among those who openly hated you in a place you called "home"' (p. 205). It is, therefore, not only diasporan black people who experience alienation and unbelonging. In *A New World Order*, Phillips writes that his own 'continued sense of alienation in a British context is hardly original. The roots are racially charged, but others have felt similarly excluded on grounds of class, gender or religion' (p. 308). As Siddhartha Deb quite astutely states in his review of the book, therefore, Phillips 'is not interested in confining the experience of estrangement to just one racial group. [...] he makes the suggestion that the dialectic of familiarity and alienation has expanded to encompass all of humanity'.¹¹⁹ The Charleston section differs from those on Liverpool or Ghana, both of which concentrate on the black diasporan experience. In Charleston, Phillips examines alienation and the problematic term 'home' from a specifically white perspective; in so doing, he suggests that, just as slavery is a shared past, the complexities of the notions of 'home' and belonging are not confined to diasporan or non-white people.

Crossing the River cautioned us that 'there is no return'; similarly, in *The Atlantic Sound*, although Phillips retraces the journey his parents made from the Caribbean to Britain by boat when he was an infant, it is both the same and different: '[f]or me this will be no Atlantic crossing into the unknown. I fully understand the world that will greet me at the end of the journey' (p. 4). His years of habitation in Britain ensure that, for Phillips, the journey is to a familiar place:

Beyond the captain is Britain. On this bleak late winter's morning, I am happy to be home. As I look at the white cliffs of Dover I realize that I do not feel the sense of nervous anticipation that almost forty years ago characterized my parents' arrival, and that of their entire generation. (p. 16)

¹¹⁹ Siddhartha Deb, 'On Belonging', Review of *A New World Order*, *Financial Times*, 20/21 October 2001, section Weekend, p. 4. Phillips also has said of *A Distant Shore*, 'to my mind there's always been a great number of white British people who feel out of tune in as profound a way as any immigrant; who don't feel that their history has been explained to them adequately'; see Heawood, p. 17.

The time spent away from Britain seems to have created what is to be a rare moment in Phillips's writing; on returning to Britain he admits that he is 'happy to be home'. There is, in this unembellished phrase, none of the usual hesitancy surrounding the word 'home', normally signalled by his use of inverted commas. Whilst, physically, he takes the same journey as his parents, his understanding of Britain renders it utterly different.

The impossibility of returning to the past runs contrary, however, to the belief at the core of the Pan-African movement in the necessity of returning 'home' to an idyllic past:

Not long after the first slave ships set sail from the West African coast, the idea that those of Africa, and those of African origin 'overseas' somehow constituted a family – albeit a family with a broken history – took hold. The idea was seized upon with a particular enthusiasm by those 'overseas' [...] There was engendered in their souls a romantic yearning to return 'home'. (p. 113)

This conception that all black diasporan people are part of a family is a problematic notion for Phillips; I argued in my reading of *Crossing the River* that his dissatisfaction with family units was expressed in his replacement of filial relationships with affiliative bonds. Furthermore, the Pan-African 'family' is not available to all; Phillips is informed by Dr Abdallah that the responsibility for the slave forts is the diasporan's: '[f]or us, they do not mean the same thing as they do for you people.' As Phillips responds, '[s]o much for Pan-Africanism, I thought. "You people"?' (p. 118). Far from a family, therefore, there is a clear distinction made by Dr Abdallah between Africans who reside in Africa, and people of the African diaspora who live elsewhere. In calling this section of the book 'Homeward Bound', Phillips's pun on the word 'bound' suggests that a reliance on the notion of returning 'home' can be highly restrictive, or even enslaving.¹²⁰

The 'romantic yearning' for home may be thought of in relation to Avtar Brah, who claims in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1997) that home is always, for diasporans, a place of the imagination, rather than a real entity: '[o]n the one hand, "home" is a mythic place of desire in

¹²⁰ The 'Homeward Bound Foundation' is also the name of the Pan-Africanist group behind the middle passage monument, sunk 427 kilometres off New York harbour. See Johanna C. Kardux, 'Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery Memorials in the United States and the Netherlands', in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. by Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 87-105 (pp. 89-90).

the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of “origin”.¹²¹ Home, Brah suggests, may be desirable but, as an imaginary location, is forever inaccessible. Furthermore, in the attempt made by the Pan-Africans to ‘return home’, they appear to ‘forget’ slavery. For example, the Panafest guide ‘omits to point out the two female dungeons, each of which could accommodate up to one hundred and fifty slaves, or the male dungeon which often held upwards of a thousand slaves’ (p. 135). Gilroy writes about slavery as ‘the site of black victimage and thus of tradition’s intended erasure. When the emphasis shifts towards the elements of invariant tradition that heroically survive slavery, any desire to remember slavery itself becomes something of an obstacle’.¹²² Again, this would seem to correspond to Bhabha’s notion of the ‘continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical’, but Gilroy identifies a danger in this behaviour:

slavery becomes a cluster of negative associations that are best left behind. [...] Blacks are urged, if not to forget the slave experience which appears as an aberration from the story of greatness told in African history, then to replace it at the centre of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage.¹²³

Gilroy proposes then, that the ‘negative associations’ of slavery are often jettisoned, so that African history becomes arrested at the point of embarkation onto the slave ships. This tendency towards leaving slavery behind is evident at the Panafest but, as Phillips has suggested, there is a comparable desire in Liverpool to ‘forget’ its slaving past, provoking Stephen’s comment: ‘Liverpool people don’t want to acknowledge their own history. They don’t want you to know what built this town’ (p. 79). In writing about Liverpool and Ghana, Phillips draws some interesting, and perhaps surprising comparisons – most notably, between the British ‘mythology of homogeneity’ and the Pan-African movement’s aligned emphasis on historical continuity and racial separation. At a ceremony at the Panafest, Phillips records:

¹²¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 192.

¹²² Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 189.

¹²³ *ibid.*

Just in case the white people in the audience are not feeling alienated enough [the poet] states the 'fact' that this is not a place for white people. The blonde woman flushes red and slowly leads her confused Ghanaian husband and even more confused son away from the scene. (p. 177)

Once again, Phillips is tracing the 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories' generated and perpetuated by slavery and, in so doing, demonstrates that Said's 'crossings over' are not confined to people alone. Like Britain, it seems that identity in Ghana is predicated on exclusions; the white woman is made to feel uncomfortable, just as black people have been made to feel unwelcome in Britain though, due to slavery and colonialism, the histories of the countries are, as I have suggested, inextricably entwined. Phillips is, however, careful to make no judgements upon the people he encounters; re-examining slavery is for him, as I have previously argued, not only about blame or retribution. Nor is it about solely black history; slavery, he reminds us, has involved white and black people. The mixed-race son, like Greer, is the result of this intertwining of black and white people and histories. Where, Phillips seems to ask, do mixed-race people belong in a world that is based on rigid Manichean divisions? His non-fiction arguably aims to fragment a polarised vision of slavery as 'black history', in favour of a shared understanding which invites people of differing races to take responsibility for the past of slavery. In *A New World Order*, Phillips writes about his initial reaction to Elmira Castle: 'I was coming face to face with a part of my Atlantic history. It was disturbing, but I wished neither to look the other way, nor to romanticise the encounter. I wished simply to understand' (p. 307). Like the Britons and Pan-Africans who 'look the other way', Phillips refuses to ignore the slave past, or to turn it into something else by 'romanticising' it. Instead, as always, he cites the necessity of 'simply' understanding the slave past, though – as his multitudinous works testify – this task is anything but simple.

The necessity is, it would seem, for a delicate balance between remembering and forgetting; Phillips writes that, '[o]n coming face to face with our history the vexing questions of belonging and forgetting rise quickly to the surface. And near-cousin to the words

“belonging” and “forgetting” is the single word, “home” (p. 307).¹²⁴ In order for black Britons to feel ‘at home’ within the UK it is, he implies, essential to remember the past and to acknowledge the impact of slavery upon Britain. This notion of remembering runs contrary, however, to the British amnesia which denies the history of habitation of black people within Britain in order to construct a racially homogeneous national identity. Bhabha’s notion that forgetting is instrumental in ‘remembering the nation’ is also relevant in relation to the attempts made by Pan-Africans to ‘forget’ the reality of slavery.¹²⁵ For Pan-Africans, as for white Britons, forgetting, or distorting, the history of slavery and colonisation enables the construction of a national history and identity as continuous, unbroken and homogeneous.¹²⁶

Although the desire to return home to retrace one’s ‘roots’ is integral to the Pan-African movement, ultimately it is revealed by Phillips to be an inadequate metaphor when dealing with diasporan, and therefore plural and changing, identities. Gilroy has also claimed that the notion of roots is perhaps unfitted to people of the diaspora, and that ‘routes’ could be a more useful term:

Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.¹²⁷

This is arguably a central motif in Phillips’s writing – rather than embarking upon a quest for static ‘roots’, in *The Atlantic Sound* he instead traces diasporan identities by outlining the routes of the slave trade. In following these watery paths across the Atlantic, one cannot overlook the centrality of the sea in Phillips’s imaginings. Whilst Gilroy’s concept of the ‘Black Atlantic’ differs widely from Phillips’s ‘Atlantic Sound’, for reasons I shall explain in a moment, Gilroy remains useful here in examining the historical legacy of the Atlantic. He has written that the

¹²⁴ George also states that ‘[b]elonging in any one place requires a judicious balancing of remembrance and forgetting’ (p. 197).

¹²⁵ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 161. Bhabha draws upon Ernest Renan’s essay ‘What is a Nation?’, reprinted in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Bhabha, pp. 8-21.

¹²⁶ The Africentric movement relies on linearity, which colonialism and slavery interrupts; see Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 190.

¹²⁷ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 19. In *The European Tribe*, Phillips begins the section on Britain with a quote from Simone Weil: ‘[t]o be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul’, arguably suggesting a significant shift in his conceptualisation of diasporan identity. See Phillips, *The European Tribe* (1987; London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 119.

'history of the black Atlantic', which has been 'continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people – not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship – provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory'.¹²⁸ Gilroy makes an important point, in stressing that the Atlantic ocean should not only be thought of in relation to the middle passage. It also has positive connotations for black diasporan people in enabling critical thinking about identity, belonging and memory. Although Phillips differs from Gilroy, in that his 'countless millions' include white as well as black people, like Gilroy, he too utilises the ocean as a 'means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory', and it is ultimately the centre of the Atlantic Ocean that Phillips cites as the crossing point, or intersection, of these interconnected ideas.¹²⁹

In his play *Where There is Darkness* (1982), Phillips's protagonist, Albert, who, like Phillips, was born in the Caribbean, but migrated to Britain, asks: '[w]hy is it that the sea always sounds so fucking guilty? Whispering like it knows something but is not going say nothing.'¹³⁰ The guilt mentioned here could be seen as a testimony to the legacy of slavery; the silence attesting to the reluctance within Britain to acknowledge or discuss its slaving past. The significance of the sea in *The Atlantic Sound* is evident from its title but, if the sea sounds guilty to Albert, Phillips's 'Atlantic Sound' is, I would argue, no longer a guilty whispering, and nor is it the silence of the Mersey. Instead, in his exploration of a range of diasporan identities at key points across the Atlantic, the 'sound' Phillips hears, as he journeys across the water is, I would argue, the polyphonic voices of the diasporic 'many-tongued chorus of the common memory' heard at the close of *Crossing the River*.¹³¹

In *A New World Order*, Phillips takes the proposed significance of the Atlantic further in suggesting that, as an African/Caribbean/British diasporan subject, his true 'home', and the place where he wishes to have his ashes scattered, is in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean: 'this

¹²⁸ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 16.

¹²⁹ Hence, whilst Gilroy's book is called *The Black Atlantic*, Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound* has lost the racial specificity.

¹³⁰ Caryl Phillips, *Where There is Darkness* (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press, 1982), I. 23.

¹³¹ Bénédicte Ledent also suggests that 'sound' could mean to explore, or plumb the depths. See Ledent, 'Ambiguous Visions of Home: The Paradoxes of Diasporic Belonging in Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*', *EnterText*, 1 (2000) <<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/faculty/arts/EnterText/Ledent.pdf>> [accessed 10 April 2004], (para. 5 of 15).

watery crossroads lay at the centre of a place that had become my other “home”; a place that, over the years, I have come to refer to as my Atlantic home’ (p. 304).¹³² George begins her book with a quotation from bell hooks that seems appropriate at this point: ‘[a]t times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations.’¹³³ Phillips’s Atlantic home is also borne of a reconciliation to the idea that home is ‘no longer just one place’. Instead, he offers a plural version of home, which corresponds to his notion of diasporan identities as shifting and ever-changing: ‘[t]hese days we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid’ (*NWO*, p. 6). At the end of *A New World Order*, he pauses to contemplate his destiny:

Whenever I stand on the ramparts of Elmina Castle and gaze out at the Atlantic Ocean, I know exactly where I come from. I can look to the north and to the west and see the different directions in which I have subsequently journeyed. And, on a clear day, I can peer into the distance and see where I will ultimately reside. (p. 309)

Phillips stands quite literally on his past and, as one of Said’s ‘people who simply don’t belong in any culture’, also at the intersection or ‘crossings over’ of journeys and identities. However, on a clear day – that is, when the ‘cloud of ambivalence’ surrounding identity has temporarily lifted – it is the future, and not the past, towards which he gazes. It is also, less optimistically, towards death that he looks. To recap, unlike Hall’s positive celebration of the fluidity of diasporan identity, Phillips’s crossroads emanate from a discussion about where his ashes should be scattered. By citing the middle of the ocean as his ‘home’, his is not a practical solution to the problems of diasporan identity. Slavery, he suggests, has created the difficulties of identity and belonging experienced by non-white people in Britain in the early twenty-first century, but Phillips is unable to propose a practical or realistic alternative to British identity which might alleviate some of these difficulties. It would seem that identity for him is ever liminal and, ultimately, a perpetual unbelonging thwarts his attempts to resolve the ‘conundrum of “home”’.

¹³² In Phillips’s play, *Strange Fruit* (1981), his character Alvin also asks: ‘[w]hat we supposed to do? Live on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic at a point equidistant between Africa, the Caribbean and Britain?’ See Phillips, *Strange Fruit* (Ambergate: Amber Lane Press, 1981), III. i.

¹³³ George, p. 1.

Conclusion

The works I have looked at in this chapter suggest that Phillips is aware of the limitations of taking an entirely historical approach to the past of slavery. In my reading of *Cambridge*, I argued that his close reliance on historical sources enabled Phillips to demonstrate the problems of accepting the received version of slavery's history, or one account of this past. He illustrates in *Cambridge* that what is thought of as the official history of slavery often excludes many other divergent and conflicting histories, or counter-narratives, such as that of the slave, female or poor white. As we have seen, if these groups have been excluded from the main narrative of British history, and therefore identity, then one response is to develop alternative narratives or histories. Both *Cambridge* and *Emily* arguably turn to writing as a means of constructing differing and alternate identities. However, each character is complicated and problematic: as a slave narrator, we saw that *Cambridge* was no less biased or prejudiced than the slave-owner's daughter. By illustrating the necessity of reading their accounts contrapuntally, Phillips suggests the complexities of slavery; neither version can offer us the 'truth' of this past.

Through the metaphor of clothing as identity, we also saw the problems experienced by his protagonists with English identities. We can trace these anxieties into his non-fictional works *The Atlantic Sound* and *A New World Order*. I argued, with reference to Bhabha, that British national identity may be conceived of as homogeneous and unbroken, whilst being simultaneously performative and temporary for non-white citizens. Phillips ultimately proposes that, for him, the centre of the Atlantic Ocean may be the most appropriate place to call 'home'. This notion implies a suitably shifting, fluid identity, which also – though imperfect and impractical – becomes an imaginary means of rejecting the confinements of a fixed and binding national identity.

Another problem for Phillips with received or revisionary historical accounts of slavery is that they may be seen as having 'segregated' this past; as he narrates the majority of *Cambridge* from the point of view of a white slave-owner's daughter, in *Crossing the River*, the 'chorus of the common memory', vitally, includes black and white voices. In rejecting a rhetoric of blame and a racial exclusivity concerning the past of slavery, Phillips outlines connections

between centuries and between disparate people across the world, who are all in some way connected through this past and its continuing legacies. His non-fictional works *The Atlantic Sound* and *A New World Order* explore this inheritance; in particular, Phillips highlights the problems associated with not remembering slavery – in Liverpool and at the African Panafest he encountered black and white people desirous of forgetting this past. It was in the United States that he came closest to finding a suitable means of memorialising slavery, in the spontaneous street celebrations, which suggest a way of remembering that is perhaps more successful than a plaque or fixed monument to the trade.

Ultimately, in Phillips's works, the form of each text may be seen as instrumental in suggesting not only the fragmentation engendered by slavery, but also the creolisation and creativity arguably imperative in any sensitive exploration of this past. As Phillips has admitted:

I have something to say about the societies that I find myself living in. I want those bloody societies to change. Deeply political. But at the same time, I'm also deeply interested in aesthetics [...] aesthetics will feed the politics.¹³⁴

I believe we can see this interaction between politics and – particularly formal – aesthetics in his works; the fragmented, overlapping stories and histories of his novels, especially, suggesting that his creolised works openly acknowledge the inextricable relationship between black and white people. It is only by reading the accounts together, Phillips intimates, that the creolisation of the text is fully revealed and the past of slavery is exposed in all its complexity, contradiction and hybridity. In the creation of his contrapuntal, creolised works, he therefore fragments the fiction that slavery is 'black history'. Instead, Phillips indicates, it is a creolised, and creolising, past that has connected, and continues to connect, diverse people still grappling with its legacies.

¹³⁴ Aaron Ashby and Artress Bethany White, 'Interview with Caryl Phillips', *ARK/angel Review*, 9 (1994), 92-106 (p. 99), cited in Eckstein, p. 98.

Chapter Two

'Words are All I have Left of My Eyes': David Dabydeen and the Ethics of Representing Slavery

If Naipaul's work provided an interesting point of comparison for Phillips's non-fiction, then the importance of Naipaul – as an Indian Caribbean writer – is even greater to Dabydeen. Dabydeen has described the protagonist of his novel *Disappearance* (1993) as embodying 'a Naipaulian rationality, detachment and ironic manner'.¹ Indeed, this novel bears an uncanny resemblance to Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), both in its tone and subject matter, of a man arriving from overseas (Guyana, in *Disappearance*, and Trinidad in Naipaul's novel) to a Britain haunted by its imperial past. However, Naipaul's often negative views of the Caribbean and its people mean that he remains for Dabydeen, as for Phillips, a complex, and problematic, figure. Statements like, 'a combination of historical accidents and national temperament has turned the Trinidadian Indian into the complete colonial, even more philistine than the white',² have led Dabydeen to admit that '[t]he novels I've written so far are forms of wrestling with Naipaul, the revered and despised Indian, the revered and despised father figure.'³

Also significant for Dabydeen is Naipaul's apparent disinterest in the past of Indian indenture. Important Indo-Caribbean texts like Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) or Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1971) are inadequate for Dabydeen because neglectful of this history. Both novels are also set in twentieth-century Trinidad, unlike Dabydeen's novel *The Counting House* (1996), which takes place in Guyana in the preceding century. Dabydeen explores a historical period and geographical area not often represented by this earlier generation of authors; whilst there already exists an Indo-Caribbean literary tradition, he is acutely aware of what is missing from this literary precedent.⁴ Dabydeen addresses this absence

¹ Dabydeen, 'West Indian Writers in Britain', in *Voices of the Crossing: The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, The Caribbean and Africa*, ed. by Ferdinand Dennis and Naseem Khan (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000), pp. 59-75 (p. 61).

² V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies – British, French and Dutch – in the West Indies and South America* (1962; London: André Deutsch, 1978), p. 82.

³ Dabydeen, 'West Indian Writers in Britain', p. 60. He also admits that Vidia from *The Counting House* is both a version of Naipaul and of himself (p. 61).

⁴ Similarly, whilst Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) is set in Guyana, it too takes place in a later period to Dabydeen's novel.

by imaginatively returning to the site of Indian indentured labour in his poetry collections *Slave Song* (1984) and *Coolie Odyssey* (1988) as well as his aforementioned novel, *The Counting House*.

Kevin Grant writes in his introduction to *The Art of David Dabydeen* (1997) that 'Dabydeen is unique in being the only poet to employ Guyanese rural English in his work'.⁵ The ensuing essays in this collection, with few exceptions, engage with Dabydeen's use of creole in his poetry and novels – most frequently under scrutiny are *Slave Song* and *Coolie Odyssey*. Certainly, the essays by Mark McWatt, Sarah Lawson Welsh and Benita Parry are all deeply interested in the way in which Dabydeen uses creole language, tracing its potential for decolonisation or subversion.⁶ Whilst much has been written about his use of creole, little comment has been made concerning the contexts in which the language was developed; namely, in the melting pot of plantation life – the historical exchange between African, Indian and British cultural identities. I am, therefore, less interested in tracing Dabydeen's use of creole and more concerned with his imaginative representation of the particular historical moment of indentured labour in which this language was developed. I begin this chapter by examining Dabydeen's representation of Indian indentured experience in *The Counting House*, tracing his use and manipulation of the fragments of this neglected past. This section will usefully open up for exploration wider issues pertinent to my reading of Dabydeen's other texts concerning silenced and irretrievable pasts and the problems inherent in representations of Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean people in the history of slavery. At this point, explaining how these underrepresented migrants came to work in the Caribbean will be helpful.

Indentured labourers on British sugar plantations were brought from India to compensate for the substantial loss of African labour in the period following the emancipation of African slaves in the British Caribbean in 1834. The first labourers arrived in Guiana in May 1838⁷ and, as K. O. Laurence tells us, by the demise of this system, some '238,909 Indians had

⁵ *The Art of David Dabydeen*, ed. by Kevin Grant (Leeds: Peepal Tress Press, 1997), p. 10.

⁶ Lee M. Jenkins also examines Dabydeen's use of language in his essay 'On Not Being Tony Harrison: Tradition and the Individual Talent of David Dabydeen', *Ariel*, 32:2 (2001), 69-88.

⁷ Ronald Segal, *The Black Diaspora* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 186. From this moment on, when referring to the nineteenth century, and in accordance with the nomenclature in *The Counting House*, I shall refer to Guyana as Guiana, as it did not become 'Guyana' until 1966. See Alan H.

been brought to Guiana alone'.⁸ Yet, despite the vast numbers involved in this mass relocation, the past of the Indian indentured labourer is a curiously neglected one. Their history is largely absent from standard accounts of Caribbean, Indian and British histories, as well as from most revisionary accounts of the slave trade which, in tracing the role of the African slave, subsequently tend to eclipse the significant part played by Indian indentured labourers on the British plantations in the Caribbean.⁹

Although these indentured labourers were not, strictly speaking, slaves, they endured the same harsh conditions and punishments as plantation slaves and often toiled alongside their African counterparts in the fields. Indian indentured labour, as I will now show, was seen by many as a continuation of slavery under a different guise. Hugh Tinker writes in his aptly-titled book, *A New System of Slavery* (1974), that most abolitionists welcomed the demise of the slave trade because they believed that slavery would also end, unable to survive without African labour.¹⁰ Although many former slaves had little alternative but to continue working upon the plantations, the need for new labour was keenly felt.¹¹ Laurence has claimed that '[i]nitially the planters sought immigrants in Europe and the Portuguese Atlantic islands. Many believed that white immigrants might supply a middle class for the West Indies and set an example of industry to the Negroes'.¹² However, this white labour source proved unsuccessful, and planters and recruiters soon turned their gaze towards India.

Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838-1904* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 3.

⁸ K. O. Laurence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the 19th Century* (Barbados: Caribbean Universities Press, 1971), p. 26.

⁹ Indian indentured labourers do not feature, for example, in William Law Mathieson's *British Slavery and its Abolition 1823-1838* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926) or *Routes to Slavery: Direction, Ethnicity and Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, ed. by David Eltis and David Richardson (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997).

¹⁰ Kay Saunders writes that it was Chief Justice Beaumont who first publicly referred to the system as 'The New Slavery'. See *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, ed. by Saunders (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 52-53. See also David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially p. 6. Between 1808 and 1830, the slave population of the British Caribbean declined from around 800,000 to 650,000; see Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 1.

¹¹ Tinker, pp. 2-3. In contrast to the powerlessness of the freed slaves cited by Tinker, however, Segal argues that ex-slaves in Guiana had a strong economic bargaining power prior to the arrival of indentured labour in 1838 (p. 186). This makes all the more believable Miriam's defensive reaction to the arrival of the indentured Indians on the plantation in *The Counting House*, which I examine later.

¹² Laurence, p. 9.

Having survived the journey to the Caribbean, mortality rates were high for indentured labourers and, whenever able, immigrants fled the harsh life on the estates.¹³ As David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo state in *India in the Caribbean* (1987), '[t]he Indians occupied the old slave quarters and worked in the sugar plantations, inheriting many of the conditions of servitude of the previously enslaved Africans.'¹⁴ Although slavery had officially ended, Indian indentured labour can be viewed as its immediate legacy, and a continuation of enslavement. It was not until 1917 that Indian indenture stopped – a system of exploitation around which '[t]he taint of slavery would always linger'.¹⁵

If Britain's involvement in the slave trade has not been afforded the due amount of historical representation, the role played by Indian indentured labourers is especially overlooked. The insufficient historical information on these labourers and lack of literary precedent mean both historical and literary representations are inadequate for Dabydeen – his unease with representations of Indo-Caribbean and also Afro-Caribbean people is a major issue in his works. In order to think imaginatively about the past of slavery and Indian indenture, it is not to books that he turns for inspiration. Instead, Dabydeen looks at what he refers to in *The Counting House* as the discarded 'scraps' of this past; the remnants of lives found in the plantation counting houses and in eighteenth-century paintings and etchings.

This juncture brings me to the second important arena of Dabydeen's work: his interest in the interaction between literature, history and art – exploring through his literary works representations of black people in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by artists such as J. M. W. Turner and William Hogarth. In particular, Dabydeen has revealed his concern with 'the idea of whether or how you could aestheticize suffering', a dilemma most frequently encountered with reference to the Jewish holocaust.¹⁶ For this reason, my second section will explore Dabydeen's narrative poem 'Turner' (1994), where the focus shifts to J. M. W. Turner's infamous pictorial depiction of 'aestheticize[d] suffering' – the jettison of African

¹³ As Saunders writes, the 1851 Guiana census 'could account for only 7,670 East Indians although 11,437 had been introduced between 1845 and 1849' (p. 430).

¹⁴ *India in the Caribbean*, ed. by David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), p. 10.

¹⁵ Tinker, p. 334.

¹⁶ Lars Eckstein, 'Getting Back to the Idea of Art as Art – An Interview with David Dabydeen', *World Literature Written in English*, 39:1 (2001), 27-36 (p. 31).

slaves in the middle passage. Dabydeen's poem accentuates the exploitation inherent in visual depictions of this journey by reinterpreting the artist as both a paedophile and slave-ship captain. As I shall show in my final section on Dabydeen, criticism of literary audience and the appetite for the 'exotic' finds its strongest articulation in *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). In this novel he critiques the genre of the slave narrative, alongside which is suggested the continuing inadequacy of representations of black people within Britain, still largely typified by their reliance on stereotype and myth.

Dabydeen's style of writing is arguably much more combative than the cool collectedness of Phillips.¹⁷ This is twinned with a cynicism for both British literary audiences and prizes, as he has stated:

I really don't mind being a victim of any British appetite for the exotic, if it means that I can get some royalties here and there. As to the British guilt for the Empire which translates into book buying and prize giving, I'll gladly jostle in the queue for handouts and reparations. (I've even contemplated writing a sombre novel on slavery to cash in on White angst.)¹⁸

However much his comments are meant ironically, Dabydeen nevertheless seems quick to draw distinct racial lines, especially when referring to the apparent desire of his white readers to consume 'exotic' literature, leading to his denial of a 'genuine audience' for his works within Britain.¹⁹

In returning imaginatively to the history of slavery, Dabydeen writes from an especially troubled position: aware of the literary and historical gaps surrounding this past and peculiarly sensitive to the impossibility of such an act of representation; in particular, of the inappropriateness of attempting to 'speak for' either Indian indentured labourers or African slaves. He finds himself wrestling with this conundrum as much as with earlier, and inadequate, literary or historical precedents. As we shall see, the works of Dabydeen I explore in this chapter point to his compulsion to return to the history of slavery, yet are characterised by his

¹⁷ A typical example of this combativeness can be found in an interview from 1999 with Mark Stein: 'I get some severe lashings by these white people. Sometimes I just wish that they would just shut up and go away [...] Let's have a bloody fight now. Let us now engage in combat'. See Stein, 'David Dabydeen Talks to Mark Stein', *Wasafiri*, 29 (1999), 27-29 (p. 29).

¹⁸ Dabydeen, 'West Indian Writers in Britain', pp. 62-63.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Binder, 'Interview with David Dabydeen, 1989', in Grant, pp. 159-176 (p. 172). Again, this claim works on the assumption that to be British is to be white.

anxieties generated by the act of representing this past, illustrative of the crisis of representation at the heart of his writing.

The Counting House

Three airplanes boarded and many changes
 Of machines and landscapes like reincarnations
 To bring me to this library of graves,
 This small clearing of scrubland.
 There are no headstones, epitaphs, dates.
 The ancestors curl and dry to scrolls of parchment
 They lie like texts
 Waiting to be written by the children
 For whom they hacked and ploughed and saved
 To send to faraway schools. (David Dabydeen, 'Coolie Odyssey')²⁰

As a descendent of Indian indentured labourers, these Guyanese graves contain, for Dabydeen, the ancestors who 'lie like texts | Waiting to be written'. In his collections of poetry *Slave Song* and *Coolie Odyssey* and the novel *The Counting House*, Dabydeen assumes the onerous task of imaginatively recreating their stories, as theirs is a past underrepresented in both historical and literary accounts. The problems involved in trying to articulate the absence of the Indian indentured labourers render it a fraught and difficult attempt, and this is, of necessity, an undertaking assigned to the realms of the literary – within the 'library of graves' their bodies already lie 'like texts', or 'curled parchment'. The magnitude of the task of rewriting indentured history is complicated by the scarcity of historical evidence and the difficulty of representing the subaltern subject.²¹

As Spivak writes in her essay 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (1985), '[t]he radical intellectual in the West is either caught in a deliberate choice of subalterneity, granting to the oppressed either that very expressive subjectivity which s/he

²⁰ David Dabydeen, 'Coolie Odyssey', *Coolie Odyssey* (Coventry: Hansib Publishing and Dangaroo Press, 1988), I. 109.

²¹ In this reading of *The Counting House*, 'subaltern' refers to both Indian indentured labourer and ex-slave.

criticizes or, instead, a total unrepresentability.²² She suggests that the choice is between inadequate representation of the subaltern, or the silence of unrepresentability; the very language and means of articulation employed by the Western intellectual will always be incommensurate with subaltern experience. Dabydeen stands in this compromised position; educated – and currently residing – in Britain, he too can be viewed as a ‘radical intellectual in the West’ facing this dilemma. In ‘Coolie Odyssey’, the italicised ‘voice’ of his ancestors warns him:

*Is foolishness fill your head.
Me dead.
Dog-bone and dry-well
Got no story to tell.
Just how me born stupid is so me gone.
Still we persist before the grave
Seeking fables.*²³

The absence of historical information or markers like headstones leads to Dabydeen’s inability to trace the ‘truth’ of the Indian indentured labourer. Everything is ‘fable’ and nothing appears concrete or certain. Hence, he is compelled to imagine this past, aware that the history of the indentured labourer can neither be trusted nor recovered. Dabydeen’s work suggests that, rather than the absence of a story to tell, it is perhaps more accurate to posit the inadequate means of either accessing or expressing the stories of these Indian indentured ancestors, without falling into the trap of speaking for the subaltern subject. I will argue that *The Counting House* poses a way of articulating the problems of accessing the history of nineteenth-century Indian indentured labourers in the Caribbean. As we shall see, whilst Dabydeen draws on historical sources, he ultimately rejects, and therefore refuses to legitimise, a historical approach to the Indian indentured labourer. Instead, the inadequacy of historical representation and inaccessibility of this past necessitates a literary response.

In *The Counting House*, Dabydeen presents us with what history books cannot; he imaginatively recreates lives illustrative of what he calls ‘the madness of [the] existence’ of

²² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ (1985), in *In Other Worlds: Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 197-221 (p. 209).

²³ Dabydeen, ‘Coolie Odyssey’, I. 119.

indentured life.²⁴ Set in what was a highly volatile period of the nineteenth century, *The Counting House* is the tale of Rohini and Vidia, Indians of different castes who marry and, persuaded by the rhetoric of British recruiters, travel to Plantation Albion in Guiana as indentured labourers to escape the poverty of their village in India. Once there, however, they discover it is not the land of riches that they had been promised, and their relationship slowly unravels as Rohini, like the black ex-slave Miriam, becomes the mistress of the plantation owner, Gladstone, and soon falls pregnant by him. Miriam, in turn, faces continued resentment and anger from her partner, Kampta, for her sexual and physical abuse at the hands of Gladstone and, fearing that the offspring of Rohini and Gladstone would seek to inherit the plantation, Miriam – using money stolen from Vidia – has Rohini's child aborted. Whilst the fates of Miriam and Rohini remain undetermined at the close of the novel, Vidia, who chooses to return to India, dies undertaking this journey.

Plantation Albion, in fact, is based upon a real plantation in Guiana; as I have mentioned, Dabydeen mobilises historical facts in order to write his tale, though does not confine himself to fact alone. Indeed, the scant remains, especially, of the lives of the Indian labourers in Guiana suggest this would be a particularly difficult task. Dabydeen records in the prologue that, upon visiting the ruins of the counting house, just 'three small parcels of materials survive as the only evidence of the nineteenth-century Indian presence' (pp. xi-xii). Amongst these remains are wage details, letters and other fragments around which he structures his novel:

The contents of the third parcel are a cow-skin purse, a child's tooth, an ivory button, a drawing of the Hindu God, Rama, haloed by seven stars, a set of iron needles, some kumari seeds, and an empty tin marked 'Huntley's Dominion Biscuits', its cover depicting a scene of the Battle of Waterloo. (p. xii)

I shall debate the importance of objects beyond their practical function at a later point in my reading of Dabydeen's novel. In the prologue, alongside the inventory of surviving objects and historical 'facts' about Indian indentured labour, Dabydeen also quotes from plantation owners

²⁴ David Dabydeen, *The Counting House* (1996; London: Vintage, 1997), p. 179. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

Gladstone and Fielding, who are known only by their surnames. Gladstone states that '[n]o account of coolie experience can ever be complete for they are the scraps of history' (p. xi). Indeed, like the absent headstones of 'Coolie Odyssey', it is not from the historical archive that Dabydeen will take his inspiration, but from these 'scraps' or debris of the past. These are the otherwise discarded aspects of plantation slavery deemed of insufficient worth to chronicle; the subaltern history that cannot readily be reclaimed.

Fielding, on the other hand, on requesting to know the grievances of, presumably, his workers, comments:

a hundred Negro and Indian voices arose, vying against each other to tell a story, like crabs in a sack seeking escape by clambering over each other. I called upon them to speak in turn, assuring them that I would give each story equal weight and benign consideration, but my words fell on deaf ears. I mounted my horse and departed, leaving the loudest to bully the rest into silence. (p. xi)

Not only do the labourers' words fall upon deaf ears, but Fielding also leaves the scene, and so avoids taking responsibility for the situation. One might read his actions as indicative of the avoidance by some white Britons to be accountable for Britain's involvement in the slave trade by 'forgetting' the slave past. Furthermore, this quotation introduces the notion that, in the competition between the voices of African and Indian workers, only the 'loudest' have been heard. In some ways, therefore, the role played by African slaves in the Caribbean has, as I have mentioned, arguably eclipsed the part played by Indian indentured labourers. This notion has lead Morton Klass to claim that '[f]or many people the Caribbean is a study in black and white'.²⁵ In *India in the Caribbean*, Dabydeen also writes that '[s]cholarly research has been focussed overwhelmingly on the African dimension, and in the resulting Afro-centric view of the Caribbean, the Indo-Caribbean is relegated to a footnote'.²⁶ In *The Counting House*, via the

²⁵ Morton Klass, *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study of Cultural Persistence* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 1. Klass explains this statement: '[t]he descendants of Negro slaves brought from Africa are the "black," while colonial officials and the descendants of European plantation owners are the "white"' (p. 2). This definition, of course, also omits the 'poor white' class. Eric Williams has also noted that '[s]lavery in the Caribbean has been too narrowly identified with the Negro. A racial twist has thereby been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon'. See Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; London: André Deutsch, 1964), p. 7.

²⁶ Dabydeen and Samaroo, p. 10.

medium of the novel, he ensures that both African slave and Indian indentured labourer are given the chance to 'speak in turn'.

The epilogue provides a concluding confirmation that this novel is grounded in the precarious realm of fact. We learn that, whilst Miriam's grave 'cannot be found' and Kampta was fictional, Gladstone was real; he was the uncle of British Prime Minister William Gladstone though, as I shall demonstrate in a moment, even here Dabydeen does not confine himself to fact. Whilst Gladstone, as a white plantation owner, has been included in accounts of British history, he too has become a figure about which little is now known. As the epilogue informs us:

Two biographies appeared in the early twentieth century, both now out of print. An engraved portrait of him as the personification of Neptune, by the English marine artist Richard Campion, was once in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; it can no longer be traced. (p. 179)

I would suggest that this 'disappearance' of Gladstone is linked to the British denial of slavery, where little evidence remains of the role of white people in the history of this past (an exception to this claim, of course, can be found in the contribution made by British abolitionists, which stands relatively well-documented). Gladstone, as a sugar plantation owner is, I argue, a part of Britain's history that some Britons would rather forget.

There is, in addition, a twist in this tale; in his creation of the character of Gladstone, Dabydeen veers quite substantially from historical fact. Dabydeen has already told us that Gladstone was William Gladstone's uncle, and Kampta informs us that Gladstone was 'only orphan boy when they remove him from England and make him proprietor of the plantation' (p. 142). However, the Guyanese plantation owner John Gladstone was, in fact, William Gladstone's father, not his uncle. The plantation was not bequeathed to him as an orphan, but instead, as Madhavi Kale writes in *Fragments of Empire* (1998), in 1803, 'Gladstone took out his first mortgage on a sugar estate and slaves in Demerara'.²⁷ Further, he was the first plantation owner to use indentured labourers, having obtained permission from the President of the Board of Control for India and the Secretary of State for the Colonies to begin an Indian

²⁷ Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 14.

emigration scheme;²⁸ the first arrivals of Indian indentured workers were known as the 'Gladstone Coolies'.²⁹ History books would suggest, then, that John Gladstone was very much an active participant in both the sugar plantation trade and Indian indenture system, rather than, as Kampta suggests, an orphan who had no choice but to assume the role bequeathed to him. Further, whilst the book is set largely in 1860, Gladstone, in fact, had withdrawn completely from the sugar plantation business by 1845.³⁰

The reasons for this adaptation of historical facts I shall debate in a moment, for Dabydeen's poetic license does not end here. If he has altered the history of Gladstone, this is accentuated in the case of Fielding. Evidence would suggest that there was no plantation owner in Guiana by this name, and Dabydeen therefore goes further than just manipulating historical facts; he goes as far as to 'quote' from the fictional Fielding.³¹ Any intended pun on 'field' (plantation) aside, I would argue that this is a form of literary joke; Dabydeen's choice of a surname so associated with literature is no mere whim, and highlights the interconnected relationship between literature and Britain's overseas exploits, where money to fund Britain's artists and writers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was all too often generated by the slave trade.³² As we shall see, a similar motivation arguably lies behind Dabydeen's portrayal of the artist J. M. W. Turner in his poem 'Turner' as a paedophilic slave-ship captain,

²⁸ Tinker, p. 63.

²⁹ Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 53-54. This book is particularly interesting in its examination of the role played by Chinese indentured labourers – arguably an even more neglected area of the history of British imperialism.

³⁰ Kale, p. 32.

³¹ In addition to the historical texts already mentioned, I. M. Cumpston's *Indians Overseas in British Territories 1834-1854* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1953), C. Kondapi's *Indians Overseas 1838-1949* (New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and London: Oxford University Press, 1951), Jay R. Mandle's *The Plantation Economy: Population and Economic Change in Guyana 1838-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973), Dwarka Nath's *A History of Indians in British Guiana* (London, Edinburgh, Paris, Melbourne, Toronto and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1950), Arthur Niehoff's and Juanita Niehoff's, *East Indians in the West Indies* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum Publications in Anthropology, 1960), Raymond T. Smith's *British Guiana* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962) and J. R. Ward's *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) are further examples of books about Indian labourers overseas – with some specifically about Guiana – in which no mention is made of a plantation owner named Fielding, whereas Gladstone makes an appearance in almost all.

³² The link between literature and imperialism is suggested by Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. This kind of playfulness is also indicated by Dabydeen's translation and notes to his poems in *Slave Song*. Dabydeen's extensive research into William Hogarth would have, no doubt, uncovered evidence of the deep friendship – or, to quote Pat Rogers, 'lasting alliance' – between Fielding and Hogarth. See Rogers, *Henry Fielding: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), p. 62. See also M. P. Willcocks, *A True-Born Englishman: Being the Life of Henry Fielding* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1947), p. 99.

also suggesting there is something voyeuristic and underhand about how black people have been portrayed in visual art.³³ Furthermore, in his 'alteration' of historical 'facts', Dabydeen not only indicates that history is not to be trusted, but also dares to distort what has been previously taken as historical 'truth'. In so doing, he demonstrates a deliberate irreverence towards – almost vandalism of – received history, seemingly in part borne of the insubstantial portrayal of Indian indentured people in representations of this past. This disrespect can be seen as illustrative of his contempt for standard history and an attempt to refute its authority.

Dabydeen is quite clearly doing more than just getting his facts wrong. In *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), James Clifford writes about the difficulty of reading Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939): '[h]e makes readers confront the limit of their language, or of any single language. He forces them to construct readings from a debris of historical and future possibilities.'³⁴ Clifford suggests that one of the challenges of reading Césaire is of language, but this is not the only challenge. We can see in Dabydeen's bold defacing of historical fact a corresponding desire to force readers to confront the limits of historical knowledge: the past of the indentured labourer, he suggests, can only be accessed through the imagination. In presenting his readers with a collage of fragments – objects, historical details and fictional content – Dabydeen's novels are also playfully constructed out of his own irreverent readings from debris of the past of the Indian indentured labourer.

Spivak provides a useful example illustrating the interrelated nature of literature and history when she writes in 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern' (1988):

Those who read or write literature can claim as little of subaltern status as those who read or write history. The difference is that the subaltern as object is supposed to be imagined in one case and real in another. I am suggesting that it is a bit of both in both cases.³⁵

³³ In my reading of Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*, I shall explore the different, though sympathetic, portrayals of the black subject by both Hogarth and Dabydeen.

³⁴ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 175.

³⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern', in Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, pp. 241-268 (p. 244).

Raising the point that literature and history both rely on the imaginary – something especially pertinent to my reading of Dabydeen’s novel – there is a resemblance between history and literature as Spivak renders them. Her positing of the continuum between the subaltern as real – an object of representation – and as imagined – a product of representation – can be read as an articulation of the space where *The Counting House* exists between the real and the imaginary. The difficulty of being able to reconstruct the past of the Indian indentured labourer from the fragments found by Dabydeen is best illustrated in the novel by Kampta’s birth certificate: “‘Father’s name: Unknown, deceased.’ ‘Mother’s name: Unknown, deceased.’ [...] ‘Date of Birth: Unknown.’ ‘Distinguishing marks: None.’ Everything is none or unknown or deceased, except my name in big-big writing, K-A-M-P-T-A’ (p. 78). So little is known about the past of the Indian indentured labourer that the blanks can only be imaginatively filled, recalling ‘Coolie Odyssey’ and the indentured labourers’ lack of headstones or markers. The inconsequentiality of the indentured labourer is echoed throughout the novel in Rohini’s repeated complaint of ‘I want more’; to which finally Miriam provides an answer:

‘I want more, Miriam, than button and biscuit tin.’
 ‘That is all there is,’ I say. (p. 169)

Miriam’s firm response reminds us that, like Rohini, Dabydeen has to make do with what is available. Whilst he may utilise all the surviving evidence to provide a realistic basis for his novel, ultimately, imagination is the only means available to add cohesion to these fragments and create a story from the remains. At the same time, Dabydeen is all too aware of the impossibility of rebuilding such ruins – reflected in the novel’s oscillation between the real and the imaginary. He seems to struggle with the need to say more about the past of the Indian indentured labourer, but has to leave history in order to do so, turning instead to the imagination.

As Fielding’s quotation suggested, there is more than one force of oppression in the past of Indian indentured labour. This notion finds its strongest articulation towards the end of the novel, where Miriam tries to assert her authority over Rohini by portraying herself as a storyteller with the power to determine the outcome of their tale. She aligns this role with her

grandfather's position as an inscription carver for the Gladstone family's tombstones; a pertinent reminder that, unlike the Indian indentured labourer, for whom there are no headstones, epigraphs or dates, the members of the plantation-owning families have ornate markers validating and historicising their existence.

Miriam's grandfather, however, was specifically forbidden from using the Latin himself – it is a borrowed language only: '[s]he remembered her grandpa coming home with a bruised mouth because a big word he had acquired from some gravestone had slipped out in the presence of a whiteman who took his learning as a sign of arrogance' (p. 109). Unable to read the inscription on the gravestone of 'old Gladstone', Miriam's crude interpretation of its meaning renders it comic and negates its power as a symbol of both learning and authority. Her attempts to translate the words also serve as a reminder of what cannot be read. The past, like the Latin, can only be guessed at or reinterpreted:

Sunt is like scunt. Lachrimae sound like old Mrs Gladstone's name and Rerum is rear up, what preacherman does call resurrection. So the old scunt Lachrimae will break wind and break stone and walk the land when Kingdom come, and nigger once more will scatter at her footstep. (p. 108)

Miriam reads the Latin as a comic resurrection, and the bawdy register suggests a language not normally admissible to history. Her disrespect for members of the Gladstone family appears to reflect Dabydeen's irreverent engagement with historical figures and facts. Miriam's creativity when faced with the unreadable Latin can be seen as corresponding to Dabydeen's own imaginative persistence 'before the graves', when faced with the limitations of the historical.³⁶ Both are engaged in a process of creative and imaginative translation of fragmentary relics in order to create a 'future possibility' or space in which to imagine the past of the indentured labourer or African slave.

³⁶ 'Sunt lachrimae Rerum' is an abbreviation of a phrase by Virgil: 'sunt lachrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tanguant', which F. Kinchin Smith translates as: 'there are tears for things and mortal things touch the heart'. See Smith, *Teach Yourself Latin* (1938; London: English Universities Press, 1962), p. 253. However, in *The Counting House*, the inscription resides on the gravestone of a plantation owner, and I would suggest that it is also significant that 'rerum' can mean wealth or possessions. Further, Miriam's inability to see that the inscription refers to tears may indeed be linked to her inability to cry.

Like the indentured labourers on the plantation, Miriam is oppressed by her role as an ex-slave. She is also, however, involved in the process of silencing that Dabydeen is concerned about:

Albion is *we* land, *we* man and *we* story and *I* tell it how *I* want. I start the story and I kill it so *you*, Rohini, hush and listen, for you is only a freshly-come coolie. When *I* give you freedom to talk, then you talk, but I can wave my chisel any time and interrupt you and take over the story and keep it or throw it away. What right have you to make story? What right have you to make baby for Gladstone? Albion is a nigger, we slave and slaughter here, Albion is *we* story, and you coolie who only land this morning best keep quiet till you can deserve to claim a piece. (pp. 170-171)

For 'story', we can read 'history'; Miriam believes that she has some autonomy over the future, and can either write what she wishes or, in a move which makes baby and story analogous, 'throw it away'.³⁷ We could see this belief in her dominance as corresponding to the notion that histories of plantation slavery which focus on the African slave have tended to eclipse the indentured labourer – encapsulated by the idea that slavery is 'black history'. Miriam tells Rohini that the plantation, its history, and Gladstone belong to her. Yet, for all her victory over Rohini, and belief that Plantation Albion is her story, Miriam ultimately remains powerless. So, whilst she envisages speaking to defend Kampta in his trial for theft from Gladstone, she is all too aware of her lack of influence:

I raise my hand from the crowd to talk back. Magistrate take one look at my armpit as I raise my hand high above my head, and he sniff like magistrate them does sniff to show scorn [...] The tall and short and plain middle of the story is that he ignore me. (p. 159)

This moment exposes a particular problem of subaltern representation, with Miriam's well-founded concerns that she will not be heard. Elsewhere, she adds: 'I want to explain but who will listen?' (p. 159), 'if I did talk Creole sense, who will listen?' (p. 160). It is not only important who speaks, but how they are received or listened to. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Spivak has written of the disappearance of the 'figure of the woman', where

³⁷ Also, Dabydeen divides the novel into three parts, named Rohini, Kampta and Miriam. Miriam's is the only section to be narrated in the first person, so Dabydeen bestows upon her an authority not granted to his other characters.

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development.³⁸

Miriam finds herself also disappearing 'into a violent shuttling', caught in an unstable – and violent – period between slavery and freedom. Despite the end of slavery, Miriam is not yet free, and is all too aware that this will take time to achieve: 'wait till 1960, one hundred years, when I grow slim like Gladstone book and full of words like grandpa, and who will force me to scrub floor then, wash clothes, cook, take cock, when I have freedom?' (p. 124). As Miriam takes over the story, she reveals that she cannot, after all, determine the outcome, and Rohini's fate remains unresolved: 'I wipe the sleep from my eye but still can't see what will happen to Rohini' (p. 177).

By the end of the novel, therefore, we see Miriam's disappearance in her realisation of her powerlessness and continued enslavement (and the epilogue's stark information that her grave cannot be found). Yet, she does not vanish to the extent that Rohini does, in her rapid descent into madness, making 'mad-people parcels' for her unborn babies (p. 177). The last word of the 'story' belongs to Miriam (though the subject is Gladstone), reinforcing the notion that Indian indentured history has been overshadowed by the history of black people on the plantations.

Of the various fragments found by Dabydeen in the counting house, one in particular is invested with an importance that far exceeds its original function. The empty biscuit tin is now paradoxically full of meaning:

[Vidia] watched [the biscuit tin] sullenly, wishing she hadn't brought it to his home. It was as if Gladstone had visited unexpectedly and caught him in the midst of his poverty [...] All his intimate belongings would suddenly be exposed for what they were – meagre coolie goods. Gladstone's gaze would strip him of ambition, revealing him to be a coolie less than man. (p. 151)

We should note the power of the unspoken; it is Gladstone's imperial gaze (via the unusual medium of a biscuit tin) rather than his words that unsettle Vidia and leave him 'less than

³⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA and London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 304.

man'.³⁹ The biscuit tin, as both a possession of Gladstone and in its depiction of the Battle of Waterloo (in which the British were victorious), is arguably a sign of British imperialism. In her book *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994), Susan Pearce also examines an item linked to the Battle of Waterloo; this time, a military jacket worn by Lieutenant Henry Anderson. Pearce notes that Waterloo was seen at the time as 'embodying bravery, loyalty, worthy self-sacrifice and national pride, so that its events became proverbial and all contact with it [...] was lovingly cherished'.⁴⁰ It would seem, therefore, that – in its guise as 'national pride' – the battle came to represent British imperialism. To read the tin as being just a sign of Empire is, however, to only read part of its meaning. Rohini is wrong to suppose Vidia lacks the ability to understand the significance of the tin:

Vidia now attempted to compromise her, thrusting the tin-can at her as if it was a measure of her worth. The tin-can was for *him* to fill with his mean coins; she brought it for *him* to gape stupidly at its picture of war, knowing that he could never understand its meaning; the best he could do was to bury it from sight under the calabash tree. (p. 154)

Vidia's resentment of the item is increased by the fact that it was a token from Gladstone to Rohini, and its depiction of battle serves as a reminder of his hopeless contest with Gladstone for Rohini. He attempts to remove from view the picture, as a continued visual reminder of both imperialism and his failure to prevent Gladstone from 'winning' his wife: 'Vidia examined the biscuit tin that Rohini had brought home, then placed it back on the shelf, upside down so that the picture on its lid was hidden' (p. 148). Vidia's actions could also be read as a refusal to embrace the imperialist iconolatry of the tin; his removal of the object is a rejection of white imperial control.

The fact that the biscuit tin – marked 'Huntley's Dominion Biscuits', and clearly manufactured for a British market – is amongst those objects described by Dabydeen as 'the only evidence of the nineteenth-century Indian presence' emphasises that the histories of all

³⁹ Jean Baudrillard writes that: '[b]eyond their practical function, [...] objects] have a primordial function as vessels, a function that belongs to the register of the imaginary'. See Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. by James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 1996), p. 27. First published in French as *Le système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968). We can see this notion occurring with the effect of the tin on Vidia's imagination: it becomes a vessel for Gladstone's gaze.

⁴⁰ Susan M. Pearce, 'Objects as Meaning; or Narrating the Past', in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. by Pearce (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 19-29 (p. 23).

those involved in this past are inextricably entwined; the history of the Indian indentured labourer cannot be disassociated from that of the ex-slave or, in this case, the history of the plantation owner. We see again the problem facing Dabydeen of subaltern representation, where a British tin is included as evidence of Indian indentured experience. If the biscuit tin were only to be understood as a symbol of Empire, the Indian once more fails to leave a 'distinguishing mark' on history.

As I have shown, the collection of objects found in the counting house can be read as the surviving fragments of a neglected and inaccessible past. These 'meagre coolie goods' come to represent the lives of those who did not count; those written out of history books, and those that were 'empty-handed'. The notion of being 'empty-handed' is a repeated phrase in the book; the most striking example arises in Miriam's admission that: '[f]or spite I scrape the gilt off the page edges of [Gladstone's] books with my fingernails until I come to see the folly of my hand, gloved in gold, yet empty' (p. 164). This phrase reveals the illusionary nature of riches (the proverbial notion that all that glistens is not gold), suggesting that what appears valuable may, in fact, be worthless. Arguably, for Dabydeen, the reverse of this proverb is also true. The pieces found in the counting house – epitomised by the empty biscuit tin – have, like the past of the indentured labourer, been overlooked by historians of slavery and deemed to be of little value. Instead, Dabydeen illustrates that these items are important traces of the indentured past, which he uses to reconstruct the lives of his Indian indentured ancestors. In counting the indentured labourer, therefore, he both counters received history and attends to a neglected and piecemeal part of Britain's past of slavery. As we have seen, by problematising – and ultimately rejecting – the historical, Dabydeen refuses to accept the authority of history. In so doing, he frees the Indian indentured labourer from the constraints of a historical representation which adamantly claims to be 'all there is' to say about this past.

'Turner'

Turner's monument to the slave trade is a monument without names, which at least inaugurates the act of mourning. Turner's memorial does not submerge the slaves beneath an unrelenting grandeur but combines the sublime and the ridiculous. He puts the elements in mourning yet his natural

world contains many elements, including gaiety and humour. (Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory*)⁴¹

J. M. W. Turner's painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon Coming On*, to which Marcus Wood refers, was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1840 [see figure 3.1, below].



[3.1] J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon Coming On* (oil on canvas, 1840)

Its representation of drowning slaves, thrown overboard a slave ship, has been the subject of much debate, both at the time of its first public display and in more recent years, featuring most notably in the work of Paul Gilroy, as well as in that of Marcus Wood. It is, for Hugh Honour, the 'only notable painting of the middle passage' and, indeed, the debate surrounding the picture has become, in many ways, as significant as the painting itself.⁴² John Ruskin's summary of the painting in *Modern Painters* (1843), for example, has become infamous:

⁴¹ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 46. Johanna C. Kardux explores the notion of the Atlantic Ocean as a suitable place for the memorialisation of slavery in her essay 'Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery Memorials in the United States and the Netherlands', in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. by Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 87-105.

⁴² Ladislav Bugner, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), IV, 1: *From the American Revolution to World War I: Slaves and Liberators*, ed. by Hugh Honour (1989), p. 20.

I believe, if I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this. Its daring conception, ideal in the highest sense of the word, is based on the purest truth, and wrought out with the concentrated knowledge of a life; its colour absolutely perfect, not one false or morbid hue in any part or line.⁴³

His account has become as well known, if not more so, than Turner's picture; as James Hamilton notes in his book, *Turner: A Life* (1997), Ruskin's comments became 'effectively, a surrogate for the painting for more than fifty years'.⁴⁴ Further, Ruskin's description, in which the slave is relegated to a footnote, was the apparent motivation for David Dabydeen's poem 'Turner' which, alongside *Slavers*, shall be the focus of my attention in this section.

Ruskin's footnote was an explanation for the epithet 'guilty' before mentioning the ship: '[s]he is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses'.⁴⁵ Yet, despite the drowning slaves, it is perhaps surprising that Ruskin should note no 'morbid hue' in the painting; instead, he suggests it is 'dedicated to the most sublime of subjects and impressions [...] – the power, majesty, and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable sea'.⁴⁶ It would seem that his comments have become characteristic of a tradition of reading Turner's painting which is unseeing of the jettisoned slaves. I intend to explore the mid-nineteenth-century reception of Turner's work before moving on to examine Dabydeen's own poetic reaction to, and representation of, the painting. It is important to examine some of these early contexts because Dabydeen's poem addresses not only Turner's painting, but the tradition of criticism surrounding this work. I shall argue that his characterisation of Turner as both a slave-ship captain and paedophile is, in fact, prompted by the artist's attempts to deny black people an active role in nineteenth-century Britain through his portrayal of the drowning slaves. As will become clear, Dabydeen's poetic response to the painting rejects not only *Slavers*, but questions more generally the way in which black people have been represented in visual art – a concern previously voiced in his books on William Hogarth. Instead of promoting a visual

⁴³ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 5 vols (Orpington and London: George Allen, 1843-1897), I: *Of General Principles, and of Truth* (1843), pp. 405-6.

⁴⁴ James Hamilton, *Turner: A Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), p. 285.

⁴⁵ Ruskin, p. 405.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 406. Dinah Birch also writes: '[w]hat matters to [Ruskin] is the sea. It is the ocean, not the slaver, that is described as "lurid", "ghastly", "sepulchral"'. See Birch, *Ruskin on Turner* (London: Cassell, 1990), p. 44.

representation of slavery, Dabydeen indicates in 'Turner' through the metaphor of blindness that a textual approach might be a more helpful way of thinking about this past. As I show, this move has important implications for Wood's suggestion of the suitability of Turner's painting as a monument to the slave trade

Even twentieth-century writing about Turner's painting has overlooked its involvement with slavery. Graham Reynolds, for example, writes in his book *Turner* (1969) that

There is no more majestic or terrifying instance of the wind and sea as elemental and destructive powers in all Turner's work. The red of the sunset reflected in the stormy waves becomes merged with and synthetized [*sic*] into the blood of the victims, and the ship itself, silhouetted against the storm, acquires something of the mythical quality of the ghost ships which haunt maritime imaginations.⁴⁷

Reynolds's brief description – eerie in its echo of Ruskin's – also sees the 'elemental' wind and sea as the painting's focus, rather than its 'victims', whose blood is so skilfully 'synthetized' with the sunset. The ghost ship is an interesting choice of image, with regard to the way in which ghosts, or reminders of slavery, continue to 'haunt' not only maritime imaginations. Also, if the ghost ship has a 'mythical quality', then so too – I would contend – has the slave ship. As Wood writes, the engraving *Description of a Slave Ship*, which featured in Ingrid Pollard's *Oceans Apart*, became 'one image in which [...] slave ships were to be memorialised through the centuries and across continents'.⁴⁸ In a related way, Turner's painting has also achieved a kind of a mythical status; not only in terms of being a 'monument' to the slave trade, as Wood argues, but also because of the sheer amount that has been written about it.

Although both Ruskin and Reynolds pay scant attention to the ship as a slave ship, and almost none to the slaves, James Hamilton writes in *Turner: The Late Seascapes* (2003) that '[o]ne of the compulsions on Turner to paint *Slavers* was the rise in public awareness in 1839 of the horrors of slavery'. He suggests that this rise was due to the publication in that year of the second edition of Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, along with Thomas Buxton's book *The African Slave Trade*,

⁴⁷ Graham Reynolds, *Turner* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 179.

⁴⁸ Wood, p. 17.

which was serialised in *The Times*.⁴⁹ It would appear that Turner has taken as his subject matter the jettison of one hundred and thirty-two ill or dying slaves aboard the *Zong* in 1781.⁵⁰ This incident also proved the inspiration for Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), which I shall explore in my following chapter – evidence to suggest that the events aboard the *Zong* have become, like the painting, 'mythical': critical to contemporary debates about how to remember the past of slavery almost two centuries since its abolition.

The *Zong*'s captain, Luke Collingwood, apparently acted in order to claim insurance for the slaves, which the insurers refused to pay. In the ensuing court case, he suggested that, in addition to the epidemic, there was also insufficient water aboard the vessel. As Thomas Clarkson records, however:

It was proved [...] that no one had been put upon short allowance; and that, as if Providence had determined to afford an unequivocal proof of the guilt, a shower of rain fell and continued for three days immediately after the second lot of slaves had been destroyed, by means of which they might have filled many of their vessels with water, and thus have preserved all necessity for the destruction of the third.⁵¹

Turner's subtitle for the painting of '*Typhon coming on*' would suggest that he accepted this claim of imminent rainfall. Yet Clarkson, unlike Turner, does not attempt to represent the middle passage: 'here I must observe at once, that, as far as this part of the evil is concerned, I am at a loss to describe it. [...] Indeed every part of this subject defies my powers'.⁵² Clarkson therefore acknowledges the inadequacy of language to convey the horror of the middle passage. In debating the inappropriateness of describing or representing this journey I shall, of necessity, borrow from the work of Holocaust theorists in order to explore an area which has, on the

⁴⁹ James Hamilton, *Turner: The Late Seascapes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2003), p. 47. Hamilton also notes that a biography of William Wilberforce was published that year. Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll concur with these sources in *The Paintings of J. M. W. Turner* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 237.

⁵⁰ Segal, p. 35. Some critics, however, dispute the claims that Turner's painting was based upon the *Zong*. See, for example, Barry Venning, *Turner* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2003), p. 246. Butlin and Joll have suggested that Turner's choice of subject matter was an attempt at securing royal patronage (p. 237).

⁵¹ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), I (1808), pp. 96-97.

⁵² Clarkson, p. 14, 15. Albert Boime agrees that the painting is based on the *Zong*; see Boime, 'Turner's Slave Ship: The Victims of Empire', *Turner Studies*, 10:1 (1990), 34-43 (p. 36).

whole, been neglected by those writing about Britain's involvement in slavery.⁵³ Whilst retaining an awareness of the considerable discrepancy between the Jewish experience and what writers like S. E. Anderson have, however uncomfortably, called the 'Black Holocaust', as outlined in my reading of *The Counting House* theorists of the Jewish Holocaust may offer a parallel in terms of the difficulty of remembering or memorialising a mass genocide.⁵⁴ Ziva Amishai-Maisels, in her book *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (1993), voices an important question concerning the execution of such a task: '[h]ow does one combine the artist's pleasure in the act of creation with the horrific subject matter which is the source of the creation?'.⁵⁵ This question also seems to be at the heart of much of the debate surrounding Turner's depiction of the middle passage. As Dabydeen writes in his preface to 'Turner': '[t]he intensity of Turner's painting is such that I believe the artist in private must have savoured the sadism he publicly denounced'.⁵⁶ For Dabydeen, then, it is certainly possible that Turner may have enjoyed creating his depiction of the jettison.

In one of the few essays tackling the subject of memorialising slavery in Britain, Alex Tyrrell and James Walvin have stated:

Britain's involvement in slavery was being remembered in and around the persons of the eminent abolitionists as they were depicted in what was literally a sacred site – one that the British Establishment had set aside for the veneration of the great and the good in the nation's history [...] The critical fact that Britain had been the key slave-trading nation prior to abolition had to be sought elsewhere if it was sought at all.⁵⁷

As I argued in my Introduction, the emphasis on British slavery abolitionists has not been confined to monuments alone; standard accounts of British slave history have also been keen to

⁵³ Exceptions to this rule are, of course, Marcus Wood, Alan Rice and James Walvin.

⁵⁴ S. E. Anderson, *The Black Holocaust for Beginners* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1995).

⁵⁵ Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford, New York, Seoul and Tokyo: Pergamon Press, 1993), p. xxxi. See Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 37.

⁵⁶ David Dabydeen, 'Turner', *Turner: New and Selected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p. x. All subsequent references will be to this edition. In his interview with Eckstein he has been even more candid about the matter: 'I just stated that Turner was getting a great deal of pleasure – pornographic pleasure almost – from the contemplation of that kind of suffering'. See Eckstein, p. 32.

⁵⁷ Alex Tyrrell and James Walvin, 'Whose History Is It? Memorialising Britain's Involvement in Slavery', in *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Postwar Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell (Aldershot, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 147-169 (p. 148).

play up the role of abolitionists as a means of detracting from Britain's heavy involvement in instigating and perpetuating the slave trade.⁵⁸ Wood has also claimed that '[t]here is no adequate monument or memorial to the slave trade in Britain' and therefore posits that Turner's painting performs this function, as my opening quotation demonstrates.⁵⁹

However, if *Slavers* is, for Wood, a memorial to the slave trade, then it is necessarily a retrospective depiction. As slavery ended in the British Caribbean in 1834, Turner finds his subject matter in the preceding century. In my Introduction, I discussed James Procter's caution against the dangers of looking at the past when it acts as a decoy for embracing the present or facing the future. To reiterate, Procter claims:

it needs to be considered to what extent the renewed focus on and manufacture of a black British past might also form part of an escape from or evasion of the black British present/future. How much easier is it to embrace the past [...] than to attend to the messy, unsettled politics of the 'here-and-nôw'?⁶⁰

I would contend that Turner's painting, created at a time when slavery had ended, also 'embrace[s] the past'. *Slavers* arguably points deliberately to the previous century in order to detract attention away from the then current position of black people within Britain. In so doing, Turner represents black people in a way that perpetuates an imagery of powerlessness and suffering, or what Paul Gilroy has called '[s]lavery [as] the site of black victimage'.⁶¹ In this reading of the painting, the chains that float somewhat unconvincingly on the surface of the water make explicit the enslaved status of the drowning and the hands reaching up from Turner's waves (an overlooked aspect of the work)⁶² can be seen as correlating to the imploring hands of slaves depicted in abolitionist images, reaching out for salvation to the white

⁵⁸ A recent example of this focus on abolitionists can be found in Alan Rice's book *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*. In this, he laments the lack of memorials to the slave trade in Liverpool, and writes that 'the city burghers have so far turned a deaf ear to calls for a small memorial garden in Mount Royal – an especially pertinent site, because it contains the remains of an anti-slave trade Liverpoolian, William Roscoe'. See Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London and New York: Continuum), p. 204.

⁵⁹ Wood, p. 93.

⁶⁰ Introduction to *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. by James Procter (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1-12 (pp. 1-2).

⁶¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p. 189.

⁶² Alexandra Haas, for instance, has claimed that 'the spectator sees nothing of the slaves except a leg coming out of the water in the bottom right corner. See Haas "The Sea is History" – The Atlantic as Mnemonic Site in Contemporary Novels on the Slave Trade', in *Xenophobic Memories: Otherness in Postcolonial Constructions of the Past*, ed. by Monika Gomille and Klaus Stierstorfer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003), pp. 101-114 (p. 110).

audience.⁶³ In order to explain my claim that his depiction of 'black victimage' was, in fact, painted in an attempt to evade the post-emancipation role of black people in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, some historical context is imperative.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century there was a steady stream of black people – mainly from America – into Britain, especially in the years following the American War of Independence. Despite the Sierra Leone project of black 'repatriation', a significant proportion of black people remained in London.⁶⁴ Ron Ramdin writes in *Reimagining Britain* that, whilst this population may have declined in the nineteenth century, the struggles of black people

now merged into a larger movement, with the black slave increasingly being used as an argument against 'white slavery' in Britain. It should therefore not surprise us that between 1800 and 1850 black leaders were accepted as playing an essential part in the vanguard of the radical movement.⁶⁵

Evidence of the role played by black people in this vanguard may be found in the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820, a response to the Peterloo massacre of 1819. One of the leaders of the group – who schemed to murder the members of the Cabinet – was William Davidson, ironically, a black cabinet-maker living in St. Marylebone.⁶⁶ Turner could therefore be seen to be directing attention away from the continuing alignment between working-class radicalism and a potentially dangerous notion of black radicalism by deliberately portraying black people as helpless and suffering victims.

Andreas Huyssen has written that, often, monuments 'stand simply as figures of forgetting, their meaning and original purpose eroded by the passage of time'.⁶⁷ Whilst it is certainly possible to argue that Turner's meaning and purpose in creating his 'monument' has

⁶³ Indeed, James Hamilton writes that 'one of the sources for the hands was the figure of a freed slave raising his arms in a gesture of hope on the medal struck in 1836 to commemorate the abolition of slavery in the British colonies'. See Hamilton, *Turner: The Late Seascapes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2003), p. 48.

⁶⁴ Peter Fryer estimates that, in 1792 at least 10,000 black people lived in London. See Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 203.

⁶⁵ Ron Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain: Five Hundred Years of Black and Asian History* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 30. Furthermore, Norma Myers claims that this 'decrease' in the nineteenth century is, in fact, a statistical mistake; see Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain 1780-1830* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 30.

⁶⁶ See Fryer, pp. 214-220.

⁶⁷ Andreas Huyssen, 'Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age', in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. by James E. Young (New York and Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1994), pp. 9-17 (p. 9).

indeed been 'eroded by the passage of time', I would suggest, rather, that Turner's painting is vastly different in its memorial function. Its initial conception, I argue, was as a monument to forgetting the black person's role in contemporary Britain by concentrating on the past, perhaps motioning Bhabha's claim that '[b]eing obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation'.⁶⁸ *Slavers* is arguably an attempt to 'forget' the presence of black people in Britain and their growing political consciousness – in order to maintain a racially homogeneous sense of nation – by portraying them as helpless victims, reliant on white benevolence.

Ruskin was all too aware of Turner's deliberately 'forgetful' portrayal. A 'rampant racist' in Ronald Segal's words, Ruskin's interest in a picture which was, it would seem, firmly in place (if anachronistic) within the imagery of slavery abolition has confused critics. His later role in supporting Governor Edward Eyre in the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica of 1865 is telling. Eyre ordered that more than 400 rebelling black Jamaicans were killed, another 600 were flogged, and that at least 1,000 homes were burnt.⁶⁹ The Eyre Defence Committee, which was supported by Ruskin, ensured the case against Eyre was dropped.⁷⁰ John Berger has argued that

Oil paintings often depict things [...] which in reality are buyable. To have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in your house. If you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents.⁷¹

The slave was, until seven years previous to Turner's painting, quite literally 'buyable', but what Ruskin seemingly gained in his acquisition of the picture in 1844 was 'the look of the thing it represent[ed]' – black people objectified in an image of powerlessness.⁷² Turner's

⁶⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 161. Dan Stone also writes that '[t]he compelling need to commemorate the Holocaust is problematized as one realizes that the form that the commemoration takes may actually contribute more to a process of forgetting than of meaningful remembrance'. See Stone, 'Memory, Memorials and Museums', in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. by Dan Stone (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 510.

⁶⁹ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 41.

⁷⁰ Segal, p. 270.

⁷¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 83.

⁷² Ruskin indicated to his father that he wished to own the painting, and it was duly bought him as a New Year's present in 1844 (Ruskin, p. 257). In her novel *Free Enterprise* (2004), Michelle Cliff's character Mary Ellen Pleasant is present at the unveiling of Turner's *Slavers* at its fictional new owner's house, Alice Hooper. Her critical tone regarding Ruskin's acquisition of the painting is evident: 'of course a

painting may seem to be comfortably located within a visual rhetoric of abolitionist work, but its date of composition is vital in challenging this positioning. Whilst taking on a familiar abolitionist subject matter, by composing his picture at a date not only seven years after the abolition of slavery, but almost sixty years after the events aboard the *Zong*, Turner's painting perpetuates the representation of black people as suffering victims at a time when they strove to rid themselves of that image.

There are different schools of thought on Turner, but whilst some are more benevolent towards him, others – including Dabydeen – believe that his painting 'in the sublime style' depicts the slaves as 'exotic and sublime victims' (p. xi, x). The meaning of 'sublime' has changed over centuries, but Andrew Wilton begins his book *Turner and the Sublime* (1980) with a quote from Ruskin, in which he defines it: '[a]nything which elevates the mind is sublime [...] Sublimity is, therefore, only another word for the effect of greatness upon the feelings – greatness, whether of matter, space, power, virtue, or beauty'.⁷³ It would seem that, for Ruskin, Turner's painting is a fine example of this; to recap, he ends his description in *Modern Painters*: 'the whole picture [is] dedicated to the most sublime of subjects and impressions [...] – the power, majesty, and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable sea'.⁷⁴ Once again, Ruskin sees in Turner's painting a depiction of the sea first and foremost, not the act of jettison.

Having outlined the debate surrounding Turner's *Slavers*, and some of the problems raised by slavery's memorialisation, I would like now to discuss in greater detail Dabydeen's poetic response to the painting, in order to demonstrate how his poem responds to this debate. It is perhaps fitting, if Turner's painting is, for Wood, 'paradoxical, abstract, difficult', that Dabydeen's poem should also be, in Karen McIntyre's words, a 'complex and elusive work'.⁷⁵ 'Turner' is a long poem of forty pages, divided into twenty-five sections. Its narrator – a slave drowned by the slave-captain Turner in the Atlantic – is joined by a stillborn child thrown

father would give the thing to the son to welcome the New Year. And the son would adorn the parlour or wherever with it'. See Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (New York: Plume, 1995), p. 73.

⁷³ Andrew Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime* (London: British Museum Publications, 1980), p. 8. A few pages later, Wilton makes the rather disturbing claim that: 'Turner [...], who is often thought of as a painter sublimely free (I use the phrase deliberately) of the fetters of eighteenth-century theory, was fully aware of the idea [of the sublime] and its implications, and indeed built his art upon a foundation, and in a philosophical context, established by the theorists of the sublime' (p. 11).

⁷⁴ Ruskin, p. 406.

⁷⁵ Wood, p. 45. Karen McIntyre, 'Necrophilia or Stillbirth? David Dabydeen's Turner as the Embodiment of Postcolonial Creative Decolonisation' in Grant, pp. 141-158 (p. 141).

overboard some time later, also by Turner. Descriptions of the underwater world are interspersed with 'memories' of a pre-slavery Africa in a blend of time past and present.⁷⁶

In writing 'Turner', Dabydeen is looking at much more than the subject of the canvas. He arguably returns to this past in order both to question Turner's depiction of the middle passage and to think about the continued invisibility of slavery in Britain's history. In 'Turner', Dabydeen raises the issue of the absence of a memorial to this past:

What sleep will leave me restless when I wake?
 What mindfulness that nothing has remained
 Original? There could have been some small
 And monumental faith. Even the leper
 Conserves each grain of skin, the aged
 Grin to display a tooth sensuously
 Preserved in gum, memorial to festivity
 And speech that mocks the present and the time
 To come. (X. 1)

This is a difficult passage which gestures towards a discussion of memorialisation. Whilst it suggests, firstly, the notion that nothing in art is original, with a slight syntactical alteration it becomes: 'nothing has remained [that is] original'; everything, therefore, has to be invented. This is an important point, which I shall return to in a moment. Whilst there are other things capable of acting as 'memorials' – Dabydeen chillingly cites skin and teeth – nothing remains as a visible monument to the history of slavery. He also foregrounds the contention that a monument is undeniably backwards-looking; it 'mocks the present and the time | To come'. James Young writes in *The Texture of Memory* (1993) that 'the aim of memorials is not to call attention to their own presence so much as to past events *because* they are no longer present. In this sense, Holocaust memorials attempt to point immediately beyond themselves'.⁷⁷ Turner's painting also points 'immediately beyond' itself; this is most clearly signalled by its anachronistic subject matter which, as I have already indicated, has attracted much attention in late twentieth-century criticism. As we shall see, Dabydeen questions the assumption that memorials might be helpful ways of thinking about the past of slavery; as well as 'mocking' the

⁷⁶ Dabydeen's narrator is androgynous: at times both male and female but, according to critical convention, I shall refer to the narrator as 'he'.

⁷⁷ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 12.

present, he suggests that an accurate monument to the slave trade may be irrevocably flawed by the morbidity of the subject matter.

As I have mentioned, part of Dabydeen's motivation for writing 'Turner' was Ruskin's footnote, which 'reads like an afterthought, something tossed overboard' (p. ix).⁷⁸ In the poem, the child too is '[t]ossed overboard', and the narrator writes that '[w]hat was deemed mere food for sharks will become | My fable' (l. 21). The subject of the poem is, therefore, the slaves. Rather than focus on the sea or slave ship, Dabydeen ensures the drowning slaves are the central concern; no longer merely a jettisoned footnote or afterthought.

Dabydeen logically starts his poem with a beginning – the birth of a child. The infant is, however, stillborn – providing the opening word. Turner's painting is also an act of creation upon the subject of death; Dabydeen arguably suggests the inappropriateness of trying either to redeem or compensate for slavery by means of a national memorial or through art by indicating that any attempt to memorialise this past will be thwarted, or stillborn. The past of slavery is characterised by death; even a creative response to it, like Dabydeen's poem, will still necessarily centre on this fact. Illustrating his belief in the macabre nature of art composed on the subject of death, in 'Turner' the underwater world is correspondingly transformed and decaying corpses become beautiful:

The sea prepares
Their festive masks, salt crystals like a myriad
Of sequins hemmed into their flesh through golden
Threads of hair. The sea decorates, violates.
Limbs break off, crabs roost between their breasts
Feeding. The sea strips them clean. (V. 7)

As I have indicated, the meaning of 'sublime' has altered with time, and I would suggest that Jean-François Lyotard's redefinition of the term is particularly apt with regard to Dabydeen's poem. In an essay entitled 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' (1984), Lyotard describes the

⁷⁸ We might also recall that part of Dabydeen's motivation for writing *The Counting House* came from his contention that, in the received history of slavery, 'the Indo-Caribbean is relegated to a footnote' (Dabydeen and Samaroo, p. 10).

sublime as alluding 'to something which can't be shown, or presented'.⁷⁹ He writes that, for Kant:

The aesthetics of the sublime is still more indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain. In the event of an absolutely large object – the desert, a mountain [...] or one that is absolutely powerful – a storm at sea, an erupting volcano [...] the faculty of presentation, the imagination, fails to provide a representation corresponding to this Idea. This failure of expression gives rise to pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented.⁸⁰

If we return to 'Turner', we can see in Dabydeen's quotation a corresponding combination of 'pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain' in its conflation of horror and beauty, as the sea 'decorates [and] violates' the corpses of the drowned. Recalling Clarkson's struggle with describing the middle passage, the 'failure of expression' of which Lyotard writes can be seen as the problem facing Dabydeen: how to represent a past that is arguably beyond representation? Furthermore, the sea assumes the role of Turner in decorating its subjects; elsewhere Dabydeen's narrator writes that it

has bleached me too of colour,
Painted me gaudy, dabs of ebony,
An arabesque of blues and vermilions,
Sea-quats cling to my body like gorgeous
Ornaments. I have become the sea's whore,
Yielding. (IX. 14)

The sea, like Turner, displays and exploits a powerless, fetishised body, or objectified 'other'. It paints and adorns the slaves, but it is in order to better sell and exploit them; the narrator is, after all, 'the sea's whore'. Dabydeen makes clear the link between the exploitation of slaves through slavery and through visual art – Turner's depiction of the 'beauty' involved in the drowning of slaves ensured the painting was saleable and, in so doing, sold not only a painting but also an image of slavery and black victimhood. In Dabydeen's poem, the relationship between Turner's depiction of the slaves and the narrator's position as an exploitable commodity or 'whore' is made explicit. Wood's opening comment that Turner's 'natural world contains many elements,

⁷⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avante-Garde', in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 196-211 (p. 196). First published in *Art Forum*, 22:8 (1984).

⁸⁰ Lyotard, 'The Sublime', p. 203.

including gaiety and humour' has its parallel in Dabydeen's sea world, which mixes elements of horror and humour: 'these depths, where terror is transformed into | Comedy' (XIV. 16). Dabydeen captures in these lines Turner's potentially comic rendering of what was a truly horrific subject matter. Earliest viewers of the work seemed unsure of how to respond to *Slavers*, not knowing whether the depiction was supposed to be comic or tragic.⁸¹

Unafraid of challenging representations of the most hallowed of English figures, Dabydeen rewrites the artist as not only a slaver, but also a paedophile:

that gentle face that so often kissed us,
His favoured boys, in quiet corners,
Unseen passages, and when cold night winds
Growled outside, curled us warmly to his bed. (VIII. 6)

By transforming Turner into a slave-ship captain, Dabydeen suggests that the artist has profited out of the slave trade by selling pictorial representations of it. In also portraying him as a paedophile, Dabydeen accentuates the exploitation involved in this process. Turner's power over the boys is evinced not only in his sexual abuse of them, but also in his linguistic control:

we repeated in a trance the words
That shuddered from him: *blessed, angelic,*
Sublime. (XXIV.17)

Like the artist Turner's 'sublime' picture (in Ruskin's sense of the word), which attempts to elevate the jettison of slaves into a sublime subject, this extract shows the slave captain's 'love for boys' being raised into a heavenly pursuit, rather than remaining a tale of slavery and child abuse. Turner's ejaculation of words makes a clear link between power, sex and language; all arguably part of what Dabydeen has called the 'pornography of Empire'.⁸² The sexual

⁸¹ See Butlin and Joll. Ruskin aside, critics have varied in their appraisal of his painting; Mark Twain summarised the painting as 'a tortoise-shell cat having a fit in a platter of tomatoes'; cited in Jerrold Ziff, 'Turner's "Slave Ship": "What a Red Rag is to a Bull"', *Turner Studies*, 3:2 (1984), 28.

⁸² See, for example, David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', in *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics*, ed. by Maggie Butcher (Sydney, Mundelstrup, Denmark and Coventry: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 121-135 (p. 121).

exploitation of the boys by Turner suggests that, for Dabydeen, the artist's representation of the slaves is also an act of sexual violation.⁸³

In suggesting that Turner's representation of slavery may be exploitative, the poem questions the ways of looking at the past of slavery. In addition to Turner's 'forgetful' portrayal, Dabydeen highlights the ineffectiveness of visual art as a medium for exploring this past. If visual art is a way of looking, then Dabydeen suggests in his poem that the past of slavery should not be gazed at. The narrator records:

simple deities of stone
And wattle, which Turner vandalised
With a great sweep of his sword in search
Of his own fables. (XIX. 19)

The artist Turner also 'vandalises' slavery in searching for his own fables of black powerlessness and victimhood. He is exposed as a scopophile, whose pleasure emanates from looking at, and painting – and hence exploiting – the slaves, or objectified 'other'.⁸⁴

The art on the slave-captain's walls implies a link between visual art and the debauched 'truth' that lies behind – or, in the case of Dabydeen's captain, in front of – the painting: 'we lay freely in his bed, gazed at | Pictures on his wall' (XVI. 7). Ironically, the enslaved narrator lies 'freely' in Turner's bed, studying landscape paintings, suggesting that such images are also not 'free' from the past of slavery. It should not be forgotten where the money used to fund Britain's art from the mid-sixteenth to early nineteenth century was generated, often from the slave trade. In the poem, an analogy can be found in Turner's position as slave-ship captain, which earned him the money to purchase the rural depictions of England with which he decorates his cabin walls. Dabydeen implies that people have been blinded to the money that funded art; behind the great works produced in Britain lies the money of the slave trade – the invisible past behind a visual medium. Turner's painting differs from many pictures created in this period, in actually depicting the slave past, yet it too hides a reality: the growing black presence in the radical movement of Britain. Whilst Turner's painting is, necessarily, centred

⁸³ Fredric Jameson has similarly written that 'the visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination'. See Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

⁸⁴ Laura Mulvey explores in detail Freud's concept of scopophilia in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16:3 (1975), 6-18.

around the voyeuristic act of looking, it is equally a painting that looks away; his waves of pigment attempt to veil, or submerge, the political role of black people in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. Dabydeen suggests in 'Turner' that, in order to critically examine slavery, it is first necessary to evaluate the ways in which this past has previously been looked at, remembered and forgotten.

Instead of a visual response to slavery, Dabydeen indicates the necessity of a textual creative exploration of this past. His turning away from J. M. W. Turner's kind of vision is one which leads him from seeing to imagining. Hence, in his poem, the blindness of the narrator also provides a space of darkness in which to create. Although the child jolts 'memories', these are imagined: '[t]wo sisters I will make in Manu's memory' (XXI. 1). The example of the broken jouti necklace illustrates the necessity of such invention; the separated beads are illustrative of the rupture of history, and of slaves from Africa. Like the beads, cultures, families and villages are torn apart:

in the future time each must learn to live
Beadless in a foreign land; or perish.
Or each must learn to make new jouti,
Arrange them by instinct, imagination, study
And arbitrary choice into a pattern
Pleasing to the self and to others
Of the scattered tribe; or perish. (XXI. 20)

The alternatives are, then, to live without culture, die, or learn to reinvent this culture and past by 'instinct, imagination, study | And arbitrary choice' (XXI. 23). There is no precedent in the arrangement of the beads, and they cannot be reassembled as they were before. Dabydeen's conviction in the inability of reconstruction contrasts with Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who has claimed in *Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica* (1981) that '[t]he slave ship became a kind of psycho-physical space capsule, carrying intact the carriers of [a] kind of invisible/atomic culture.'⁸⁵ Instead, Dabydeen does not, in the example of the jouti necklace, suggest this kind of 'intact' transference. Unlike Brathwaite's belief in the African person's 'potential of reconstruction', Dabydeen underscores the necessity of invention and the deployment of

⁸⁵ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica* (London: New Beacon Books, 1981), p. 13.

imagination in thinking about the history of the African slave.⁸⁶ The past, he indicates, cannot be reconstructed – the necklace is shattered. In ‘Turner’, there are repeated reminders of the impossibility of return; its ending a catalogue of what cannot be recovered. There is no access to this history, but there is the possibility of taking the seeds of this memory, represented by the beads, and creatively revising the past.

Dabydeen insists upon the importance of the role of imagination in naming; the child is called ‘Turner’ after his father, but the names of everything else are invented. The narrator cites the distinction between what can be ‘seen’ (remembered) and what has to be imagined:

I have made
Names for places dwelt in, people forgotten:
Words are all I have left of my eyes,
[...]
I float eyeless, indelibly,
My mind a garment of invention. (IX. 2)

In this example, we can see the importance of naming things that have been forgotten, when the narrator finds that ‘[w]ords are all [he has] left of [his] eyes’.⁸⁷ Although *Slavers* is reprinted at the start of ‘Turner’, Dabydeen’s poem – as a written, rather than visual, depiction of slavery – invites the reader to employ imagination in challenging the authority of the visual. In addition, in ‘Turner’, Dabydeen also uses ‘seeing’ to mean ‘remembering’; as he writes from a late-twentieth-century position, memories of the past of slavery are unavailable to him – all he has to hand, therefore, are words with which to imaginatively explore this past. Like Dabydeen, for whom actual remembrance of slavery is impossible, his eyeless narrator also cannot ‘see’ – or remember – the past, but he is able to imagine with careful use of words both a past and present. In privileging a textual expression of the past over a visual approach, ‘Turner’ offers a different kind of remembering which does not involve gazing at the past of slavery. In *Memoirs of the Blind* (1990), Jacques Derrida writes:

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ bell hooks also writes that ‘[a]n effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centred around white control of the black gaze. Black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality.’ See hooks, ‘Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination’, in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Laurence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 338-346 (p. 340).

Now if tears *come to the eyes*, if they *well up in them*, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience, [...] an essence of the eye [...] For the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye. And what they cause to surge up out of forgetfulness, there where the gaze or look looks after it, keeps it in reserve, would be nothing less than the *alētheia*, the *truth* of the eyes, whose ultimate destination they would thereby reveal.⁸⁸

Derrida suggests that tears are important precisely because they inhibit the eye from seeing, and it is from this blindness that the 'truth' of the eye originates, thereby enabling a different kind of vision. Critical of Turner's portrayal of the middle passage, Dabydeen raises the notion that a visual representation is not necessarily the most helpful, or sensitive, way of exploring the past of slavery. Instead, he offers a different kind of 'truth' which moves from a visual to an imaginary perception – a veiled, yet truthful, eye.

Wood has called *Slavers* a 'monument' to the slave trade, but Dabydeen offers a very different reading of the painting. In 'Turner' he presents an imaginative exploration of the past of slavery which not only rejects Turner's painting of the jettison of slaves, but also the tradition of visual depictions of this past. For Dabydeen, the Derridean 'ultimate destination' of the eye does not reside in voyeuristically gazing at the past of slavery. Instead, as I have suggested, he posits a desire to move away from vision towards an imaginative, textual, re-vision of the ways in which we think about the slave trade. 'Turner' ultimately offers a way of remembering which, if deliberately 'blind' to the past of slavery, is forward-facing towards a black British future.

A Harlot's Progress

Dabydeen's novel *A Harlot's Progress* takes its title from a series of prints of 1732 by William Hogarth, an important work in his career. As Innes and Gustav Herdan explain in *Lichtenberg's Commentaries on Hogarth's Engravings* (1966), it was 'mainly through these six Plates that Hogarth first laid the foundation of his widespread fame [...] They were received with

⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 126. First published in French as *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'auto-portrait et autres ruines* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1990).

indescribable applause'.⁸⁹ Dabydeen is not the only author to have been inspired to write by these pictures, as Frederick Antal notes in his book *Hogarth and His Place in European Art* (1962):

His cycles, deeply rooted in English middle-class thought and closely connected with its theatre, were immensely popular; they were continuously plagiarised, put into verse (authorised and unauthorised) and commented on; they inspired books and pamphlets and were, in their turn, adapted for the stage.⁹⁰

Their theatricality is immediately striking; each plate is a scene in the ironic 'progress' or, rather, decline of the harlot, beginning with her arrival in London and culminating in her death from venereal disease.⁹¹ Dabydeen accentuates his book's relationship to these images by providing details, or fragments, of the prints at the start of each of the nine sections of his book. Though this is a novel less directly preoccupied with art and artists than his poem 'Turner', he remains both fascinated and worried by the continued production and reception of representations of black people into the twentieth century. As Mungo, the eighteenth-century protagonist of *A Harlot's Progress*, predicts, '[c]enturies from now, when your descendants think of a Negro, they will think of a pimp, pickpocket, purveyor of filth'.⁹²

Hogarth's work has been a lasting subject of interest to Dabydeen – as its preface notes, his book *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain* (1987) 'started life as a doctoral dissertation'.⁹³ This had been preceded in 1985 by *Hogarth's Blacks* and, fourteen years after the publication of his first book on Hogarth, Dabydeen returns to the area in his novel *A Harlot's Progress*. Unlike other eighteenth-century artists who used black people as 'mere background figure[s]', Dabydeen claims that 'Hogarth's sympathy for the nobodies, for the lower orders of society, extends to a sympathy for black people. [...] This hitherto little-known

⁸⁹ *Lichtenberg's Commentaries on Hogarth's Engravings*, ed. and trans. by Innes Herdan and Gustav Herdan (London: Cresset Press, 1966), p. 3.

⁹⁰ Frederick Antal, *Hogarth and His Place in European Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) p. 12. Also, as M. Dorothy George states, they were highly realistic depictions; see George, *London Life in the XVIIIth Century* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.), p. 113.

⁹¹ Whilst there can be detected a link to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the idea of a soul journeying towards salvation, the title of Hogarth's work is heavily ironic – as Dabydeen expresses in *Hogarth's Blacks*, progress is 'in reality degradation, physical and moral, and eventual death' (Mundelstrup, Denmark and Kingston-upon-Thames: Dangaroo, 1985), p. 101.

⁹² David Dabydeen, *A Harlot's Progress* (1999; London: Vintage, 2000), p. 273. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

⁹³ David Dabydeen, *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain* (London: Hansib, 1987), p. 12.

sympathy of Hogarth's greatly increases our appreciation of the radicalism and deep humanity of the artist.'⁹⁴



[3.2] William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress*, Plate 2 (etching and engraving, 1732)

In Hogarth's series, the black servant appears in just one of the six plates [see figure 3.2, above], but is bestowed a narrative centrality by Dabydeen. *A Harlot's Progress* is the tale of Mungo (also named Noah and Perseus), an African captured into slavery by the notorious Thomas Thistlewood, at the hands of whom he suffers both physical and sexual abuse, and is brought to Britain. He is prepared for sale by a washerwoman named Betty, and sold at a coffee shop auction to Lord Montague. Following Lady Montague's illness – and her husband's uneasiness at having him in the house – Mungo runs away to assist a Jewish quack doctor, Mr Gideon, and ends his days 'treating' – in reality, poisoning – diseased prostitutes. There, he meets the dying Moll Hackabout, the central character of Hogarth's study. The text, mainly narrated by Mungo, begins some thirty years after the publication of Hogarth's prints. Now an old man, Mungo is reluctantly speaking his tale to Mr Pringle from the Abolition Society, in return for basic necessities.

⁹⁴ David Dabydeen, 'Hogarth – The Savage and the Civilised', *History Today*, 31 (1981), 48-51 (p. 48, 51). Myers similarly concurs that Hogarth seemed to be 'expressing sympathy for the black lower classes or utilizing them in order to make criticisms of white society'. She notes, however, that '[f]ollowing Hogarth, caricaturists of blacks tended towards a more overt form of racism, especially as the abolitionist campaign gained momentum' (p. 48).

Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee have claimed that, '[b]ecause the real work of slaves took place on plantations in the Americas and Caribbean, far from European shores, Europeans – and Britons in particular – become obsessed with writing about it.'⁹⁵ Part of this British 'obsession' with the textuality of slavery involved slave narratives, and such testimonies were instrumental to the abolitionist movement. As Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen write in *Black Writers in Britain 1760-1890* (1991):

Personal survival and advancement apart, the literate black contributed directly to the liberation of his fellow Africans. Black autobiographies and testimonies formed an essential weapon in the arsenal of the Abolitionists who were mobilising public opinion against the slave trade [...] Black people had moved from being packed 'like books upon a shelf' aboard the slave ship, to being authors.⁹⁶

This quotation also indicates, however, the way in which slaves were, like books, read and consumed by an audience. As Kitson and Lee write, '[w]hile British people consumed slave products, they also consumed written accounts of slavery. The anti-slavery movement in Britain, in fact, coincided with the rise of print culture and a middle-class reading public.'⁹⁷ Slave narratives may have been instrumental in the abolitionist cause, but they were part of a process of representing black people which was not devoid of exploitation. As I shall demonstrate, Mungo also struggles with the ethics of narrating his story and, in so doing, arguably trades places with the harlot of the title.

Dabydeen also suggests in *A Harlot's Progress* that the 'essential weapon' mentioned above may include economic power; it is disclosed that Mungo's narrative would bring, alongside personal glory for Mr Pringle, 'great dividends for the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery' (p. 3). As Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace writes in her essay 'Telling Untold Stories: Philippa Gregory's *A Respectable Trade* and David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*' (2000), '[l]ike other characters in the novel, Pringle appears to refer to an historical person, without actually being that person', adding that Thomas Pringle (1789-1834) had edited the memoirs of

⁹⁵ Peter J. Kitson and Debbie Lee, introduction to *Slaves, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, 8 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), I: *Black Writers*, ed. by Sukdev Sandhu and David Dabydeen (1999), pp. ix-xxix (p. xiii).

⁹⁶ Introduction to *Black Writers in Britain 1760-1890*, ed. by Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp. ix-xv (p. xi).

⁹⁷ Kitson and Lee, p. 6.

Mary Prince.⁹⁸ Dabydeen's deployment, yet distortion, of history indicate that he refuses to be confined by historical verisimilitude; instead, his characters are borrowed from the historical archive but also creatively transformed.

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, upon completion of his narrative *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), feared that his words would soon be forgotten – 'to some what I have said may appear as the rattling leaves of autumn, that may soon be blown away and whirled in a vortex where few can hear and know'.⁹⁹ It would seem that there is, however, an increasing relevance of the stories of these early 'black Britons' to contemporary society, where slave narratives have played an important role in claims of black people's legitimacy of habitation in Britain. As James Walvin writes in *An African's Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, 1745-1797* (2000):

Equiano is more popular today than ever before. Pictures of Equiano festoon any number of dust-jackets, his face is used on posters to promote exhibitions and TV programmes. He has his own postcard issued by an English museum [...] It is worth reminding ourselves that, a mere thirty years ago, very few people knew who Equiano was. In the course of a generation, he has gone from anonymity to international fame: a best seller in Africa, North America and Britain.¹⁰⁰

As he points out, Equiano has not always been seen as a significant figure to black people within Britain – it is particularly in the last thirty years that his relevance has been felt. Walvin's book, published in 1998, comes exactly thirty years after Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech. I would contend that Equiano's burgeoning relevance in the thirty years following Powell's speech arises from a need to understand the historical precedence for black habitation in Britain, in order to counter racist claims of the newness of the country's black presence. This need to understand the history of the black presence in the UK runs alongside an increasingly widespread identification in both Britain and North America with Equiano's articulation of the complexities of a diasporan identity. Also indicative of this late-twentieth-century interest in early black Britons was the exhibition in 1997 dedicated to Sancho at the National Portrait

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, 'Telling Untold Stories: Phillippa Gregory's *A Respectable Trade* and David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*', *Novel*, 33: 2 (2000), 235-252 (p. 238).

⁹⁹ Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery: And Other Writings*, ed. by Vincent Carretta (New York, London, Victoria, Toronto and New Delhi: Penguin, 1999), p. 110.

¹⁰⁰ James Walvin, *An African's Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, 1745-1797* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 194.

Gallery. As Raimi Gbadmosi writes, this exhibition ‘forced a revision of the debate on the existence and visibility of British “black” artists by placing this historical figure among the elements that helped make London what it is’.¹⁰¹ This attempt to reposition black figures firmly within the history of Britain can similarly be seen in the news that Mary Seacole, dubbed the ‘black’ rival of Florence Nightingale, was voted in 2004 to be the top black Briton of all time.¹⁰² The renewed interest in these historical figures inevitably poses a long-overdue corrective to the largely white history books of Britain and acts as a clear challenge to the amnesia typified by the speeches of Powell and Thatcher, which ‘forgets’ that these black figures ever existed.

Whilst it would seem that there is a growing, and important, movement towards remembering the early black British presence, Dabydeen suggests – in his concerns about the reception of slave narratives – that such figures need to be remembered sensitively. The experiences of his narrator Mungo bear witness to the exploitation ingrained in the slave narrative genre, whether at the hands of the abolitionist editor or voyeuristic reader. Dabydeen suggests in *A Harlot’s Progress* that interest in these texts may be in part due to a morbid fascination or voyeuristic titillation at reading stories of bondage and cruelty exercised against black people. These concerns regarding the reception of slave narratives are central to the novel and something I shall return to in greater detail in a moment when we encounter the character of Lady Montague.

Although Dabydeen has called *A Harlot’s Progress* ‘a novel by Equiano [...] A novel about arriving at the state of writing. In the way that Equiano had to in the eighteenth century’, this is not a canonical engagement with the eighteenth century.¹⁰³ In narrating Mungo’s story, Dabydeen chooses not to ventriloquise the voices of slaves like Sancho or Equiano, but rather writes the story of an unvoiced black presence. Mungo, at the same time, is a stereotyped figure, or as Jack Gratus writes in *The Great White Lie: Slavery, Emancipation and Changing Racial*

¹⁰¹ Raimi Gbadmosi, ‘Ignatius Sancho: An African Man of Letters’, *Third Text*, 40 (1997), 103-105 (p. 104).

¹⁰² Kathryn Hughes, ‘The Creole with the Teacup’, *Guardian*, 15 January 2005, Reviews section, p. 12. As Hughes notes, the epithet ‘black’ would ‘have puzzled and even hurt her [...] The most she would admit to was being “yellow”, which came the closest to describing a complexion that was a blend of Creole and “Scotch”’.

¹⁰³ See Stein, p. 29. There are also elements of other slave authors in Dabydeen’s creation of Mungo; Ignatius Sancho, for example, was a butler to the duke and duchess of Montagu; see Bugner, IV, 2: *From the American Revolution to World War I: Black Models and White Myths*, p. 30.

Attitudes (1973), 'the black man as a figure of fun [...] Had names by which he could easily be identified and placed like Sambo and Mungo'.¹⁰⁴ Whilst perhaps alluding to a particular 'type' of black man, Dabydeen refuses to be drawn into 'speaking for', or ventriloquising, the voices of actual slaves like Equiano or Sancho – figures already heavily over-represented. His comment that Equiano 'had to' write in the manner he did is especially pertinent; as I shall show, Dabydeen suggests through his character Mungo the ways in which slave narrators have, in 'speaking' their stories, also been spoken for. Wood writes that in abolitionist propaganda, '[t]he slave had to be presented in a certain way if his/her cause were to stimulate notions of guilt and culpability on the part of an educated English audience, while at the same time not frightening such an audience off through fear or disgust'.¹⁰⁵ There are constant reminders in the novel of what Mungo's readers will or will not tolerate, and he has economical reasons for his adherence to matters of audience – as he informs Ellar, '[t]hey can refuse to buy my book, and I'll starve' (p. 256).

Mungo is, therefore, uneasy with his British readership, all too aware of the constrictive form of the slave narrative and fearful of 'alienating his readers' (p. 256). His exasperation with the silenced and servile role expected of him is illustrated in his encounter with another black servant, named Saba, whom he strikes. Saba concludes that Mungo is 'devoid of any semblance of civility': '[i]n spite of his rich suit, Perseus is obviously a maladjusted Negro, one perhaps best left in the bush, in the company of other bare savages' (p. 220). Despite his apparently anglicised stance – intimated by his position as a slave narrator – Mungo is not willing to be comfortably 'assimilated' within Britain, whereas Saba 'was a Reynolds' [*sic*] black, and behaved accordingly' (p. 220).¹⁰⁶ Here, Mungo suggests that the black servants featured in portraits by Reynolds were not only afforded considerable status by their depictions, but also rather scathingly hints that such servants were accordingly mild-mannered or servile. In his poem 'Dependence, or the Ballad of the Little Black Boy (On Francis Wheatley's *Family Group*

¹⁰⁴ Jack Gratus, *The Great White Lie: Slavery, Emancipation and Changing Racial Attitudes* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), p. 178. Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* also used the term in a derogatory way, referring to himself as having been 'dressed in the spiritual and physical guise of *Mungo*'. See Phillips, *Cambridge* (1991; New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ Wood, p. 23.

¹⁰⁶ A twentieth-century version of this notion of assimilation can be found in the Conservative Party election poster of 1983. See Paul Gilroy, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987; London: Routledge, 2000), p. 59.

and *Negro Boy* painted in the 1770s)', Dabydeen also writes about the positioning on the margins of the black servant in Francis Wheatley's painting *Family Group in a Landscape* [see figure 3.3, below]:

Whilst painterman splash, drip, dip, rearrange
And produce picture marvellously strange
How fair they seem and full of grace
Benevolence and love spread upon each face
And me at the edge typical of my race
Holding back the urine the hurt and disgrace.¹⁰⁷

In paintings such as these, which featured a black servant alongside their white owner, often the black figure functioned not only as a status symbol, but also in contrast to the whiteness of the master or mistress; as Dabydeen's narrator wonders, '[h]ow fair they seem and full of grace'.¹⁰⁸



[3.3] Francis Wheatley, *Family Group in a Landscape* (oil on canvas, c. 1775)

¹⁰⁷ David Dabydeen, 'Dependence, or the Ballad of the Little Black Boy (On Francis Wheatley's *Family Group and Negro Boy* painted in the 1770s)', *Coolie Odyssey*, I. 31.

¹⁰⁸ See Bugner, IV, 2, p. 148. A particularly famous example of this use of black subjects for contrast can be found in Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1865); see Bugner, IV, 2, p. 159. Simon Gikandi has similarly remarked that the white 'sustained contemplation of blackness is also an act of self-reflexivity: it is through the black figure that Englishness acquires the metaphorical structure that enables it to gaze at its self in crises'. See Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 69. In *Hogarth's Blacks*, Dabydeen also writes of these marginalised figures: '[w]hat emerges from such paintings is a sense of the loneliness and humiliation of blacks in white aristocratic company. The black existed merely to reflect upon the superiority of the white' (p. 30).

Unlike Wheatley, Sir Joshua Reynolds was, in fact, listed as a subscriber to Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), indicating that he was sympathetic to the abolitionist cause.¹⁰⁹ Dabydeen's attack on Reynolds is therefore part of a wider questioning of the reception of representations of black people in art and literature. His suggestion that Reynolds expected black people to be servile is in keeping with the particular type of representation found not only in the works of artists like Wheatley or Reynolds, but also in slave narratives.¹¹⁰ As Walvin remarks, slave narrators had very carefully constructed identities: 'Equiano took the opportunity afforded by writing a book to reinvent himself, in literary form, for a reading public whose appetite for literature about Africa, the slave trade and slavery, had been whetted'.¹¹¹ Walvin notes that part of this reinvention included a visual depiction of the author 'in European clothing, finely-dressed in contemporary western attire [...] It was an image carefully chosen by Equiano himself'.¹¹² We can see here the way in which Equiano had consciously fashioned himself as an Englishman, replete with a Bible – a symbol of his conversion to Christianity:

The message was simple but unavoidable: the author was African, he was devout and he was refined. [...] Equiano] strikes the reader immediately as a civilized, religious man: recognizable, congenial and, in fact, at ease and at home with his British readership.¹¹³

As I shall show, Mungo – by contrast, ill-at-ease with his British readership – also wrestles with the problems and complexities of reinvention, both of his own identity and past and that of his African tribe.

¹⁰⁹ Cugoano, p. 149. Jonathan Jones traces the fallen reputation of Reynolds and suggests that he 'portrays a British history we are less eager to own up to. [Reynolds] portrays the rulers of an empire'. See Jones, 'How the Mighty Fall', *Guardian*, 21 May 2005, section Weekend, pp. 31-32.

¹¹⁰ As Bruce King notes in his review of *A Harlot's Progress*, Mungo's life 'is the other side of Sir Joshua Reynolds' inclusion of the dignified, trusted, obedient, black family servant in his painting of the Cardews'. See King, Review of *A Harlot's Progress*, *Wasafiri*, 30 (1999), 64-66 (p. 64).

¹¹¹ Walvin, *An African's Life*, p. 173.

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 175.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 175-176. An obvious comparison can be made here with Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*, with regard to anglicisation and self-fashioning. As mentioned in my first chapter, Phillips drew heavily on Equiano's narrative in creating his slave narrator's account.

In his continued critical reappraisal of the genre, Dabydeen also proposes that the authors of slave narratives may not be who they purport to be – we see the heavy-handed role of abolitionists, as ‘editors’, in shaping the narrative:

the book Mr Pringle intends to write will be Mungo’s portrait in the first person narrative. A book purporting to be a record of the Negro’s own words (understandably corrected in terms of grammar, the erasure of indelicate or infelicitous expressions, and so forth). (p. 3)

The use of ‘portrait’ reinforces the novel’s connection to art and to visual representation, as befits a book based on a series of pictures. In indicating the artistry behind Pringle’s representation of Mungo, Dabydeen also suggests a certain way of looking at his slave narrator. Like J. M. W. Turner’s heavily loaded representation of black people in *Slavers*, Pringle constructs a particular type of representation of Mungo: ‘[h]e wants a sober testimony that will appeal to the Christian charity of an enlightened citizenry who will, on perusing my tale of undeserved woe, campaign in the Houses of Parliament for my emancipation and that of millions of my brethren’ (p. 5). Pringle’s role in the narrative is, therefore, that of an artist, ‘resolv[ing] to colour and people a landscape out of his own imagination’ (p. 3). Also like Turner, this process, as I have already indicated, is not devoid of voyeurism or exploitation – a point I shall return to in due course.

The ‘ghost writing’ of Mungo’s narrative has a historical precedent; it has been suggested that Cugoano, for example, was not the actual author of his book. Paul Edwards writes in *Equiano’s Travels* (1967) that ‘it seems likely either that Cugoano did not write *Thoughts and Sentiments*, or that it was largely revised for him, for a letter exists in his own handwriting that reveals his style to lack the literary flourish displayed in his book’.¹¹⁴ Edwards also notes that concerns have been voiced over the ‘authenticity’ of Equiano’s narrative, which ‘might have been “improved” by another hand’.¹¹⁵ Pringle’s proposed rôle in shaping Mungo’s tale serves as a reminder that it is unwise to assume that slave narratives were actually

¹¹⁴ Introduction to *Equiano’s Travels: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Oxford: Heinemann, 1996), pp. xv-xxvii (p. xv). Paul Edwards and James Walvin suggest that the reviser of Cugoano’s book may well have been Olaudah Equiano. See *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. by Edwards and Walvin (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), p. 57.

¹¹⁵ Edwards, *Equiano’s Travels*, p. xv.

representative of slaves – the slaves ‘writing’ their tales were inevitably anglicised, and often had much assistance in constructing their stories. This context is necessary when thinking about Walvin’s claim that Equiano was ‘the first spokesperson for the Afro-British community’, and also recalls Spivak’s articulation of the problematics of subaltern representation.¹¹⁶ Dabydeen is aware of the insufficient means of articulating this past, yet is compelled to try to do so; to reiterate Spivak’s words, he is arguably caught between ‘granting to the oppressed either that very expressive subjectivity which s/he criticizes or, instead, a total unrepresentability’.¹¹⁷

The heavy-handed ‘editorial’ presence in the narratives of slaves is, then, another indication of the ways in which these authors have been spoken for, or represented. The importance of rhetoric, or ‘literary flourish’, to slave narratives in their role as grist for the abolitionist’s wheel is all too clear to Mungo: ‘the King James Bible is at hand to furnish me with such expressions as could set your soul aglow with compassion for the plight of the Negro. Bah! I could sting you for a bounty of reparations’ (p. 5). Whilst Mungo’s considerable rhetorical abilities would negate the need for Pringle’s corrections ‘in terms of grammar, the erasure of indelicate or infelicitous expressions, and so forth’, Mungo is equally aware of the expected register of a slave – ‘nigger does munch and crunch the English’ (p. 5) – and so conceals his linguistic and rhetorical skills from him, a reminder that ‘peasantry’ was then, as of now, ‘in vogue’.¹¹⁸ In depicting the methods by which Mungo is prevented from fully narrating his own story – bound by conventions of form and readership – Dabydeen reveals the problematic nature of the slave narrative genre; his figure is silenced even as he struggles to represent himself. One might make a comparison between Mungo’s struggle for self-representation and the ways in which Equiano and Sancho have been represented – for example, as figureheads for black Britain – to recall Walvin’s words: ‘[p]ictures of Equiano festoon any number of dust-jackets, his face is used on posters to promote exhibitions and TV programmes’.

Whilst there may be a tendency to view slave narrators as being representative of black people in the eighteenth century, as Walvin has suggested, he has also been clear to point out

¹¹⁶ Walvin, *An African’s Life*, p. 194.

¹¹⁷ Spivak, ‘Subaltern Studies’, p. 209.

¹¹⁸ Dabydeen, ‘Coolie Odyssey’, I. 1. This notion can be linked to what Graham Huggan has called the ‘global commodification of cultural difference’. See Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. vii.

that Equiano and Sancho 'were not *typical* of other blacks in London; both were well known, had caught the imagination, and both were literate'.¹¹⁹ Although these men have come to be seen as representative of the eighteenth-century black presence in London, it is important to remember that their very literacy which brought them fame also differentiated them from other black people in Britain at this time. Mungo is presented by Dabydeen as being similarly problematic because – like Phillips's Cambridge, or Equiano and Sancho – he is an anglicised black, commenting on his fellow slaves: '[a]fter a while I ceased feeling pity at their distress, my original mood giving way to an acceptance of the nature of things. Being heathen, it was inevitable that they would perish in irrelevant numbers' (p. 49). We can compare this quotation to the letter written by Sancho on 18 July 1772:

I thank you for your kindness to my poor black bretheren – I flatter myself you will find them not ungrateful – they act commonly from their feelings: – I have observed a dog will love those who use him kindly – and surely, if so, negroes, in their state of ignorance and bondage, will not act less generously.¹²⁰

Sancho's comparison of his 'poor black bretheren' to dogs is not dissimilar to Mungo's comments about 'heathen' slaves.¹²¹ In both cases, the narrator makes explicit his difference from those he describes and, in so doing, internalises eighteenth-century assumptions about the supposed inferiority of black people. By exposing the constructed and performative nature of identity and anglicised manner of slave narrators, Dabydeen questions the degree of authority invested in them as representatives for black Britain. In their book *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* (1999), Sukdev Sandhu and David Dabydeen note that Equiano came from a slave-owning family and, once free, 'purchased slaves whose back-breaking work he oversaw

¹¹⁹ Walvin, *An African's Life*, p. 160.

¹²⁰ Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho: An African*, ed. by Paul Edwards (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968), p. 30.

¹²¹ Cugoano also tends to refer to black people in a distanced manner; for example: '[t]hose who have endeavoured to restore to their fellow-creatures the common rights of nature, of which especially the unfortunate Black People have been so unjustly deprived, cannot fail in meeting with the applause of all good men.' See Cugoano, p. 9.

on a Central American plantation'.¹²² Like Phillips's Cambridge or Dabydeen's Mungo, it appears that actual slave narrators were often deeply problematic figures.¹²³

The reference in the earlier quotation by Edwards and Dabydeen to the diary of the infamous slave owner turned abolitionist, John Newton – with slaves packed 'like books upon a shelf' – has further resonance in *A Harlot's Progress*, when Dabydeen compares both Thistlewood and, obliquely, Pringle to Newton:

do not doubt that Captain Thistlewood even after seasons of abuse – being a veteran of a dozen slave voyages – is capable of redemption, for you have at hand, respected reader, many accounts of such conversions. Was not Revd. John Newton whose hymns honey your throat each Sunday once a slaver? (p. 73)¹²⁴

In drawing a comparison between Newton and Pringle, Dabydeen interrogates the virtue of abolitionists, suggesting that the move from slavery to abolition is a process of 'conversion' that can work either way:

Perhaps I should not make such a trial of his Christian soul and convert him to the ways of slavery. I watch his fingers bunch into a secret fist, as if he would cuff me for my rebelliousness [...] The pen is in [his hand] as if waiting to sign a warrant for my arrest, or my sale. (p. 7)

Pringle is, it would seem, as capable of being a slave owner as an abolitionist, the pen able to sign Mungo's sale as much as write his tale – or, indeed, that in writing his tale, Pringle is also 'selling' Mungo:

[Mr Pringle] draws his breath nervously like a virgin waiting to be laid bare and rested on white sheets. He takes up pen with unsteady hand, but has to blot a drop of ink that drips involuntarily from the nib [...] He pants across the page as I dictate. (p. 177)

¹²² Kitson and Lee, p. li.

¹²³ Sandhu and Dabydeen also write of Sancho's 'lazily anti-Jewish comments, his would-be flirtatious badinage with young noblewomen [...] and his suffocatingly tedious excursions on morality'. See Kitson and Lee (p. li).

¹²⁴ As Carl Plasa writes, Newton's 'simile works to reduce the black subject to the status of a silent object to be read and construed as its interpreter might wish'. See Plasa, *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postmodernism: Race and Identification* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 4. For further information on John Newton, see Keith A. Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1988), especially p. 55.

Pringle's dripping pen(is) suggests his voyeuristic excitement at hearing Mungo's tale; his sexual exploitation of the slave narrator leads Mungo to conclude, '[h]e makes me feel like a strumpet whose performance is undeserving of his coin' (p. 178). As I have indicated, Mungo's literal and metaphoric 'whoring', alongside his centrality in the novel, intimates he is the 'harlot' of the novel's title. In comparing Thistlewood's literal whoring of Mungo to Pringle's metaphorical prostitution of him, Dabydeen proposes there may be reason to worry about the enslaving and exploiting nature of the slave narrative genre and the indulgence of pornography lurking within such tales. Furthermore, this is not the only moment suggesting the saleability of Mungo; elsewhere he remarks: 'let Mr Pringle tell it as he wants to, of Lord and Lady Montague, and I will shut my rambling mouth whilst he properize and give them pedigree, and make me present, and make of me a present to you, grateful reader' (p. 186). Mungo, once purchased by Lord Montague, is again a saleable good; a 'present' to be consumed by the 'grateful' British reader, and a suggestion that exploitation was a continual presence in relationships between black and white people during the eighteenth century. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Mungo also feels exploited by Hogarth's portrayal: '[o]nce I was affordable only to the very rich, a slave worth countless guineas, but because of Mr Hogarth I was possessed, in penny image, by several thousands' (p. 274). Mungo is thus whored by Hogarth, as well as by Pringle, indicating that eighteenth-century representations of black people in Britain may well have been fatally compromised by their form. As I shall illustrate shortly, the 'consumption' of black figures arguably has not ceased with the end of the slave trade.

In addition to Pringle's heavy-handed control of the narrative, much of Mungo's tale is fabricated, indicating a continuing resistance to narrating his story: '[m]emory don't bother me, that's why I don't tell Mr Pringle anything. I can change memory' (p. 2).¹²⁵ Mungo refers to his 'mind's inventiveness' (p. 41) – his memory is 'invented' both necessarily (to compensate for

¹²⁵ It is also a story with a strongly cyclical element. Mr Gideon, for example, decides to become a slave ship captain only after Mungo has joined him in treating the prostitutes, yet he is also the doctor aboard the slave-ship which carried Mungo to Britain. This once again indicates Mungo's resistance to narrating – this time to the linearity of the slave narrative.

what he has forgotten) and wilfully (to ensure Mr Pringle hears the story he wants).¹²⁶ Cathy Caruth writes in the preface to her edited book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) that, for people who have experienced a traumatic series of events, '[t]o cure oneself – whether by drugs or the telling of one's story or both – seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth'.¹²⁷ It is possible to view Mungo's resistance to telling his story to Pringle as a similar reluctance to relinquish an 'important reality' – a desire to 'hoard the past and squirrel on it through miserable seasons' (p. 2).¹²⁸ For Mungo, however, the construction of the book also entails a more deathly outcome:

In Mr Pringle's society, expression is vaunted, and a book is deemed the highest achievement of man. But, for me, the book is no more than a splendidly adorned memorial and grave. To speak is to scoop out substance, to hollow out yourself, to make space within for your own burial, so I have kept in things as bulwarks against death. I have kept silence before the nib and gravedigger's spade of Mr Pringle. (pp. 34-35)

In this quotation, Mungo – as an 'outsider' within 'Mr Pringle's society' – portrays writing as a preparation for death. Silence is shown to be far from passive, but a survival tactic, or 'bulwark against death', which simultaneously signals Mungo's defiance at Pringle's expectations of him.¹²⁹ Without physical memorials to slavery, Mungo appears to propose that books about this past may act as monuments to the trade. However, he suggests that the slave is destroyed in narrating his tale, which raises the important question: what is lost in the act of narration? I would suggest, borrowing Spivak's terminology, that in narrating his story, Mungo is subsequently killing the subaltern figure.

¹²⁶ Toni Morrison also writes about authors of American slave narratives: '[i]n shaping experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they "forgot" many other things'. See Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. by William Zinsser (Boston and New York: Mariner Books), pp. 185-200 (p. 191).

¹²⁷ *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. vii-ix (p. vii).

¹²⁸ In 'Coolie Odyssey', Dabydeen similarly writes of the indulgence of memories: '[i]n a winter of England's scorn | We huddle together memories, hoard them from | The opulence of our masters' (l. 19).

¹²⁹ Another example of a literary representation of eighteenth-century London through the eyes of a black man is S. I. Martin's *Incomparable World* (London: Quartet Books, 1996). In this novel, the protagonist Buckram expresses his concern at the anglicised nature of the wealthier black people he encounters: '[w]ho were these people? It was as if the memory of slavery had passed them by. As if they'd never known bondage' (p. 111).

Mungo's inventiveness leads to a contradictory tale. The mark of 'TT' on his forehead, for example, is, variously, a sign of evil made by the Headman of his tribe (p. 19), a sign traditionally used to brand women's hands for failure to produce children (p. 30), representative of the bush (p. 31), a sign present at birth (p. 33), a coming-of-age sign (p. 65), and Captain Thistlewood's brand (p. 66). 'Truth' is unavailable in this text – what matters is the way in which the past is invented, manipulated and bought – for as Lord Montague comes to realise, '[t]ruth itself was hostage to the designs of stockjobbers, another commodity changing hands at a price' (p. 199).

Much like *The Counting House* and 'Turner', Dabydeen has once again drawn on existing historical sources to shape this novel. The sign 'TT', for example, was indeed the brand of Thomas Thistlewood, a slave owner who came to Jamaica in 1750. On 3 January 1758, he wrote in his journal that he had acquired from Savanna la Mar a silver brand 'TT', which he soon made use of.¹³⁰ Thistlewood was a notoriously cruel and sadistic punisher of slaves, and in *A Harlot's Progress*, Dabydeen also makes him responsible for the jettison of slaves aboard the *Zong*, the subject matter of his poem 'Turner'. Thistlewood therefore becomes representative of the worst atrocities of slave owners or captains and also, like Turner, has a predilection for young African boys. In 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today' (1989), Dabydeen, writing of *Slave Song*, refers to the 'perverse eroticism of black labour and the fantasy of domination, bondage and sadomasochism. The British Empire, as the Thistlewood Diaries show, was as much a pornographic as an economic project.'¹³¹ Yet, and as I shall illustrate, in *A Harlot's Progress* the reaches of the 'pornography of Empire' extend far beyond the character of Thistlewood.

Mungo's rebellion against the form of the slave narrative encompasses his refusal to demonise Thistlewood or create the kind of representation Mr Pringle wants to hear about: 'Mr Pringle's version of Captain Thomas Thistlewood is untroubled. Captain Thistlewood is a demon and I his catamite' (p. 75). As Wallace writes, in this novel Thistlewood is marginally more than just a 'pederast taking masochistic pleasure from the body of a boy slave'; he is

¹³⁰ Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86* (1989; London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 82, 150.

¹³¹ Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton', p. 121.

provided with 'a complex, if perverted, psychology. In particular, Thistlewood reverently worships a mythical lost Albion'.¹³² He is, indeed, especially sensitive to the changes to England, largely ushered in by the flourishing slave trade – he tells Mungo to 'forget the land' (p.69), but strives to take his own advice.¹³³ England in the mid-eighteenth century is not the homeland he wishes to remember, barely recognisable due to the effects of slavery and early industrialisation, in which Thistlewood, of course, played a vital part: '[y]ou peopled it with urchins playing in gutters, or with clerks who tallied its worth. You made merchants and factories and ships of death and slaves and whores. You dug its belly for metals. You lusted. You sinned' (p. 71). The art on his cabin walls is, therefore, an escape from an increasingly polluted and corrupt England to an idyllic pre-industrial pastoral vision of the country – also depicted in the paintings on Turner's walls:

images
Of hedgerows that stalked the edge of fields,
Briars, vines, gouts of wild flowers: England's
Robe unfurled, prodigal of ornament. ('Turner', XVI. 10)

In 'Turner' the importance of the countryside to notions of national identity is made evident, in comprising the robes of England – as Graham Coster has simply stated, '[w]e even use the same word to mean both countryside and nation'.¹³⁴ In *A Harlot's Progress*, Mungo similarly describes the landscape cherished by Thistlewood, and discloses: '*I am sad for him, sad for the land he so loves but is far from, and for all the birds and beasts who are dead in the land. Set in paint, they do not stir nor crow nor sing. That is all they are, dreams of blue*' (p. 69). Arguably, in Thistlewood's nostalgia for a lost England, however, we also find the idea of a deliberately forgetful past and a refusal to take responsibility for the slave trade which has altered and shaped England beyond recognition. We have seen in my reading of 'Turner' that Dabydeen suggests that the money behind Britain's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art was often connected to the slave trade. The pastoral images favoured by Thistlewood are also intimately

¹³² Wallace, p. 245.

¹³³ As 'Britain' was a relatively new concept created by the Act of Union of 1707, the land Thistlewood yearns for is a nostalgic older England.

¹³⁴ Graham Coster, 'Another Country', *Guardian*, Section Weekend, 1/2 June 1991, 4-6 (p. 5).

connected to this past, and bear witness to the 'pornography' of slavery that is enacted in front of them.

To Thistlewood, slaves are ultimately animals, and the slave ship is a deathly ark: '[h]e tended to them not as soulful beings but as sick animals [...] He was deeply affected by the loss of his creatures' (p. 50).¹³⁵ Mungo ironically compares this to Hogarth's prints of animals being mistreated:

You, English, inhabitants of a country distinguished for its adoration of pets and charity to the lesser breed, will know the tempest of emotions that overcame my Captain. You have the nightmare of Mr Hogarth's genius, in his series of prints, *Scenes of Cruelty*, to stir you to patriotic rage. (p. 50)

Again, like his questioning of the motivation behind Turner's representation of the slave-ship jettison, Dabydeen questions why Hogarth would want to paint – and people would want to own – these images: 'the fatal beating of a horse, the tormented dog, the blinding of a dove – that you have purchased [...] in their thousands to adorn your mantelpiece and conscience' (p. 50). Whilst Hogarth apparently created these pictures 'with the hope of in some degree correcting that barbarous treatment of animals, the very sight of which renders the streets of our Metropolis so distressing to every feeling mind', Dabydeen suggests a more sinister reason for their acquisition.¹³⁶

It is intimated in *A Harlot's Progress* that Hogarth's audience takes a sadistic pleasure from looking at images of cruelty, and also from being chastised for their transgressions – by extension, the motivations of the reader of slave narratives are also brought into question. As Ellar asks: '[w]hat are these people made of, that they sleep with the dead?' (p. 256), a comment ostensibly uttered about the crew of the slave ship, but one which finds a parallel in Dabydeen's continuing critique of the readership of slave narratives. Mungo notes that, 'to ensure that his book sells, he will not repel his readers by calling them necrophiles' (p. 257), articulating once more the notion that there is something voyeuristic and underhand about the reader's

¹³⁵ Wood writes that the slave ship is 'a precise parody of the ark; to use a term of Jean Baudrillard's it constitutes an "anti-ark"', p. 31. However, this is a very abstract use of Baudrillard's term, coined in his book *America*, in which he actually used the term to refer to New York. See Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 18-19. First published in French as *Amérique*, (Paris: Grasset, 1986). Also significant is the fact that Mungo is re-named Noah.

¹³⁶ Cited in Antal, p. 10. Antal notes that this work 'probably came more directly from Hogarth's heart than any other cycle [and] was designed to appeal to the widest possible public' (p. 166).

expectations of what lies within the narratives. Rather unsettling, then, is Michele Roberts's review, in which she refers to the 'seduction' of the storytelling and the 'provocative' nature of the novel; her review resonates with what could be perceived as a similarly sexual language, suggesting that Dabydeen has reason to be concerned about the continued reception of these kind of narratives.¹³⁷ Even a novel like *A Harlot's Progress* – deliberately written to highlight the 'pornography' of the slave narrative genre – can be read by some critics as an inappropriately titillating or provocative text.

As if to clinch this suggestion of the potentially improper reception of these texts, Dabydeen includes in his novel a depiction of the voyeuristic reader in the character of Lady Montague. Whilst Dabydeen's *Thistlewood* amply demonstrates the 'pornographic' reaches of Empire, therefore, he is not the only white Briton in *A Harlot's Progress* to harbour sadistic desires towards Mungo. Alongside the violence of servants Jane and Lizzie towards Mungo ('Ma, look, water comes from the nigger's face', p. 206), Mungo's action in striking Saba has a profound effect on Lady Montague, making her 'tremble inwardly not with fear but with perverse pleasure. [...] It is the same peculiar emotion that had overcome her when she first read the account of Captain Thistlewood's killings' (p. 221). This 'peculiar emotion', generated by the jettison of slaves, is duly elaborated upon:

There was no denying the pleasure – an inexact word, but she could think of no better – in following the news of the massacre, like the sharks (so it was sensationally reported) scenting blood and swarming to the tragic spot. Her imagination, so bounded by her surroundings, found sudden release in the descriptions of sharks feasting on men's flesh; men bound and chained, unable to resist or to retaliate with the violence glimpsed in Perseus, [*sic*] violent utterance, violent act. (p. 222)

Restricted by her position as a wealthy woman in eighteenth-century Britain, Lady Montague yearns for the sadomasochistic violence she reads in the sensational descriptions printed in the newspaper reports. This is a clear articulation of her 'fantasy of domination, bondage and sadomasochism' and can be aligned with what Kobena Mercer has referred to in *Welcome to the Jungle* (1994) as the 'certain ways in which white people "look" at black people and how in this

¹³⁷ Michele Roberts, 'A Plunge into the Underworld', *The Times*, 13 May 1999, Features section, p. 48.

way of looking, black male sexuality is perceived as something different, excessive, Other'.¹³⁸ However, whilst Wallace has referred to the 'stultifying domesticity that imprisons women like Lady Montagu [sic] and leads to their profound despair, even madness',¹³⁹ and Hugo Barnacle has similarly claimed that 'Lady Montague is going quietly mad with the humiliation of her "paid role" as wife',¹⁴⁰ neither pay attention to the means by which she achieves a temporary 'release', in perusing descriptions of bondage and violence specifically directed towards black people.

Lady Montague meticulously cuts out and keeps these descriptions, which she imparts to her husband, though he finds her file is 'humourless, consisting of a dozen clippings on the Thistlewood affair, each contradicting the other' (p. 196). It is immediately following this that he decides to purchase Mungo: '[w]hat better way to mark the beginning of the third decade of their marriage than by such a gift' (p. 199). For Lady Montague, Mungo is introduced into her home as both an anniversary gift and a 'pet', but he performs yet another role as a living manifestation of the newspaper articles and also, therefore, as an object of Lady Montague's sadistic desire: we can see at this moment that Mungo embodies the relationship between slavery and print culture cited by Kitson and Lee. Lady Montague's 'release' will remain, however, a short-lived freedom; the sadism will be once more restricted, or 'bound', in being edited from Mr Pringle's narrative. As Mungo complains: '*[h]e don't want no dirt of woman but Moll's kind so I cannot tell more of Lady Montague's madness [...] To him, a Lady is not ever improper, and if she is, it can never be in print. Life and print: two different things*' (pp. 225-26).

In contrast, Mungo is all too aware of what Mr Pringle *does* want to hear about – '[h]e wishes me to tell him that I was ripped from my mother's breast by the evil slayer Captain Thistlewood, taken to his ship and so molested that I became a willing disciple to the ways of animals' (p. 70). Like Lady Montague, Pringle also craves the sensational or pornographic,

¹³⁸ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 173. Mercer's particular focus here is on the work of Robert Mapplethorpe – most notably *Black Males*. As Mercer notes, '[i]t is as if, according to Mapplethorpe's line of sight: Black + Male = Erotic/Aesthetic Object [...] The "essence" of black male identity lies in the domain of sexuality' (p. 173).

¹³⁹ Wallace, p. 248.

¹⁴⁰ Hugo Barnacle, 'The Secret History', *Sunday Times*, 16 May 1999, Features section, p. 13.

pandering to his abolitionist readers' desire to hear of 'evil' slavers and innocent slaves. However, whilst '[a]ll or part of Mr Pringle's conception of [Mungo's] Progress is, or may be, true,' Mungo writes,

I will not move you to customary guilt, gentle reader, even though you may crave that I hold up a mirror to the sins of your race. You will reward me with laurels and fat purses for flagellating you thus, especially should I, with impoverished imagination, evoke for you the horror of the slaveship's hold, the chained Negroes, their slobbering, their suffocation, their sentimental condition. (p. 70)

Again, there is a sadomasochistic element in the inversion of the dynamics of slavery, with slave narrators 'flagellating' the white readership. The detail of 'impoverished imagination' is particularly telling; Dabydeen provides us with descriptions of the slave-ship hold, but these are some way from portraying a 'sentimental condition'. For example, we learn that '[w]hen the ship pitched in a sudden rough sea, the chains tightened and cracked their ankles, spines and elbow joints. Sometimes arms and legs and heads were wrenched clean off, and their torsos rolled freely about the ship' (p. 48). Declining to censor his narrative, Mungo provides us not with a sentimental description, but a gruesome one, refusing to edit or gloss it, as part of his continuing resistance to the slave narrative genre.

Like Thistlewood, who becomes representative of all slave-ship captains, Mungo is also at one level representative of all slaves, due to the very nature of slave narratives – their rarity ensures that they are taken to represent millions unable to voice their own stories:

In the faraway plantations of the West Indies, in the barracoons of the African coast, I have rebelled, stabbed, poisoned, raped, absconded, and sought escape by killing myself and my offsprings. In return I have been strangled, flogged to death, roasted alive, blown away and lynched. (p. 244)

In a narrower sense, Mungo is bestowed the task of speaking for his village, a burdensome enough responsibility – he records that he 'grew melancholy with the realization of how they had burdened me to utter for them. Only my voice survived the general hum of pain' (pp. 59-60). I would suggest that there may be a comparison to be made between Mungo's struggle with his identity as a black spokesperson and Dabydeen's burden of how to represent the past of

slavery. Mercer writes about what he calls the 'burden of representation' experienced by black artists:

When artists are positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production, they are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as 'representatives,' in that they are widely expected to 'speak for' the marginalized communities from which they come.¹⁴¹

We can see in Mercer's argument the unfair expectation that a marginalised black artist or writer should be a representative or spokesperson for their race. As Equiano has become a spokesperson for black Britain, it would seem Mungo is also a reluctant representative of his village. Dabydeen perhaps indicates the danger of loading the eighteenth- or twentieth-century writer with these onerous expectations.

Mungo's burden is augmented by the knowledge that he must remember the villagers 'in the best light' (p. 60), a responsibility with which he particularly struggles:

Kaka's sores still gleamed. He was the same, accompanied by the same flies. His head was as comically big. He was the same stinking nigger as when I pelted him with stones. Nor did Ellar's limbs straighten, howsoever I willed them to elegance. (p. 62)

In thinking about Mungo's attempts to beautify the other villagers, it is perhaps useful to recall Dabydeen's poem 'Turner'. Like Dabydeen's suggestion that J. M. W. Turner has beautified the middle passage journey in order to sell his painting, Mungo ironically attempts to transform the violence of slavery into a 'sublime' depiction (using Ruskin's sense of the word) in order to appeal to his voyeuristic readers: 'Kaka's head is a palette of colours. [...] Rubies of congealed blood hang from his ears. Here and there, glimpses of clean white bone exposed by the Captain's cuff subdue the viewer's eye, necessary foil to the decorative richness which threatens to overwhelm' (p. 97). If we recall Wood's comment that slave narrators had to be wary of 'not frightening such an audience off through fear or disgust', Mungo's over-aestheticised description, with the 'rubies' of blood and 'decorative richness' of bone, can be understood to be a heavily ironic comment on this need to 'decorate' the truth, and an additional sign of his continuing reluctance to conform to the limits of the slave narrative.

¹⁴¹ Mercer, p. 235.

Ellar, however, cuts through this attempt at a sublime portrayal. When Mungo tells her: 'I was praising you, I was saying that in spite of all you remained beautiful within', Ellar succinctly replies: '[b]ut I didn't [...] Outside I was covered in my own shit, and inside too' (p. 256), reiterating that there was nothing sentimental about slavery. Her words fall at the other end of the spectrum, suggesting a refusal to embellish the truth. Her lack of concern for matters of audience poses an equally stubborn challenge to the slave narrative form. In this section of the book, Ellar has been dead for some time and is now a ghostly part of Mungo's psyche as he wrestles with the different approaches to the representation of his, and his village's, past. Her words recall those of the ancestor in 'Coolie Odyssey':

*Is foolishness fill your head.
Me dead.
Dog-done and dry-well
Got no story to tell.
Just how me born stupid is so me gone.
Still we persist before the grave
Seeking fables.¹⁴²*

The historical basis of the works of Dabydeen I have examined in this chapter suggest his own compulsion to 'persist before the grave'. The kind of fictional re-imagining of the past of slavery undertaken by both Mungo and Dabydeen may be both 'fable' and burdensome, but is nonetheless necessary when faced with an absence of historical accounts concerning either indentured labourers or African slaves. Dabydeen recognises the compulsion to look at this history, despite the problems inherent in his attempt to imaginatively explore this past.

Mungo soon realises that, ultimately, if he is to survive, he must overcome the guilt of both having survived thus far and of having done so by submitting to exploitation: 'I sensed their envy and their hatred of me, for I had survived' (pp. 58-59). *A Harlot's Progress* explores the necessity of learning to survive guilt; Mungo tells Betty of the untainted countryside's ability to do just this,

telling her stories suckled from Captain Thistlewood, of Sparrowhawk and Owl, of Thistle and Cowslip and Pennyroyal, their ancient fame and magical properties which survive the guilt that makes men murder men, and build their shining governments of the damned. (p. 150)

¹⁴² Dabydeen, 'Coolie Odyssey', I. 119.

Whilst we might think of the burden of guilt surrounding Thistlewood's pastoral images in his cabin, the end of this passage paraphrases Guyanese poet Martin Carter's words in his poem 'After One Year': '[m]en murder men, as men must murder men, | to build their shining governments of the damned.'¹⁴³ In the same year that Dabydeen published *A Harlot's Progress* he also edited a new edition of Carter's *Selected Poems* – poems largely written to signal his discontent with the colonial government of mid-twentieth century Guyana. In Gemma Robinson's words, Carter 'was among a dissatisfied generation of colonial people who would resist the life that had been mapped out for them by the British Empire', but despite the apparent differences in subject matter between the two works, connections can be traced, culminating in Dabydeen's paraphrasing of the last two lines of Carter's poem within the text of his novel.¹⁴⁴ This intertextuality draws *A Harlot's Progress* not only firmly into the twentieth century, but also into a connection with Guyanese politics and the struggle for freedom, suggesting a wider application of notions of enslavement and liberation.¹⁴⁵ Men, of course, were quite literally murdering men in the course of slavery – the jettison of slaves by Collingwood, or 'Thistlewood', is a particularly blatant and brutal example. The money from the trade was benefiting not only the merchants but also the government, enabling the construction of Britain's sixteenth- to nineteenth-century 'shining governments of the damned'. Also Carter's poems are, as Robinson succinctly notes, first and foremost about resistance; one of his most well-known collections is *Poems of Resistance from British Guiana* (1954). So, too, I have argued that in *A Harlot's Progress* we see Mungo's repeated resistance to the life and genre 'mapped out for [him] by the British Empire', in his refusal to conform to Mr Pringle's desired narrative and to his white readers' pornographic demands – indicating that resistance is an essential component in the continuing survival and struggles of black people in both Britain and her former colonies.

The link to Carter's work is not, however, the only twentieth-century connection in the novel. Dabydeen has commented in an interview with Mark Stein that *A Harlot's Progress* 'has

¹⁴³ Martin Carter, 'After One Year', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by David Dabydeen (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1999), I. 15.

¹⁴⁴ Gemma Robinson, 'Introduction to Selected Poems of Martin Carter', Carter, p. 17.

¹⁴⁵ Another connection was, of course, Britain's establishment of the colony of British Guiana in 1831.

a black character as the narrator, so it's England from eighteenth century [sic] black eyes. But of course it has resonances of today; it's eighteenth century only in form'.¹⁴⁶ Published just over fifty years after the arrival of the *Windrush*, Dabydeen's novel dwells in the eighteenth century, but also points to a more recent mid-twentieth-century British past. Amongst these resonances can be included Thistlewood's forgetful England, which can be aligned with the historical forgetfulness of those white Britons who view the *Windrush* as the first black British arrival. However, arguably the most important resonance for Dabydeen concerns the ongoing reception of representations of black people within Britain.

Whilst Dabydeen's novel serves as a necessary reminder of the eighteenth-century black presence in London, it also illuminates the problems and complexities behind slave narratives. It cautions us that such works have to be taken in context as products of the abolitionist movement and that the slaves 'writing' these tales were severely restricted by issues of form, readership and editors. It also reveals the perversion behind such tales, and the danger of a pornographic response to their publication. His book imaginatively adds the motivation and thoughts behind the slave narrative – the irritation at problems of editing, register and tone, for example, all suggest the complexity of Dabydeen's slave narrator. Mungo's frustration at the limits or checks forced upon him by the genre also indicate the ways in which slave narrators have simultaneously been 'spoken for' in narrating their stories, as Sancho has lamented, '[f]rom Othello to Sancho the big – we are either foolish – or mulish – all – all without a single exception'.¹⁴⁷ Here, Sancho complains that he is unable to escape the eighteenth-century homogenous representation of black people as fools, which jars with his self-portrayal as an educated, scholarly figure.

In the genre of the slave narrative, the 'pornography of Empire' had found a form that simultaneously bound the narrator whilst flagellating the reader; writing at a time when slavery was still legal, slave narrators found that these chains had yet to be loosened. I have suggested, then, that black people were exploited by more than just slavery in the eighteenth century – slave narrators were appropriated for different causes; used to advertise and promote museums

¹⁴⁶ Stein, p. 29.

¹⁴⁷ Sancho, p. 218.

or books, overtly constructed and over-represented. However, the twentieth-century casting of slave narrators as icons may be seen as another form of enslavement, in stripping these early black Britons of their complicated humanity. As Sukdev and Dabydeen write, it is vital to recognise the flaws of slave narrators in order to 'move beyond an uncritical celebration of the books which the likes of Cugoana and Sancho – both of them caustically perceptive literary critics – would themselves deride'.¹⁴⁸ Whilst recognising the continuing importance of these figures to twentieth-century Britain, Dabydeen suggests in *A Harlot's Progress* that it is imperative to acknowledge their complexities in order to begin lightening their burden of representation.

Conclusion

The changing locales of the works of Dabydeen I have examined – voyaging from the underworld of eighteenth-century London, through the middle passage, to nineteenth-century Guyana – testify to the extensive historical and geographical reach of Britain's slave trade. The impossibility of returning to, or easily narrating, the history of the Indian indentured labourer or African slave from the remaining 'scraps' of this past are central concerns in Dabydeen's writing.

His works testify to his dilemma in exploring the roles played by the Indian indentured labourer and African slave, whilst mindful of the problems inherent in any attempt to represent this past. In *The Counting House*, Dabydeen exposes the inadequacy of a historical approach to slavery; history books and graveyards are unable to provide us with evidence of the Indian indentured past, in particular. Instead, he cites the importance of the overlooked pieces found in the counting house which inspire his story of plantation life. In 'Turner', Dabydeen repudiates J. M. W. Turner's vision of the middle passage which, I indicated, is a particularly unsuitable form of memorial. Dabydeen reveals the problems of taking a visual approach to the past of slavery and, in his poetic depiction of the middle passage, indicates his belief in the need for a new, non-visual, or textual, way of conceptualising this past. Finally, in *A Harlot's Progress*,

¹⁴⁸ Kitson and Lee, p. li.

concerns about subaltern representation re-surface with the problematised role of the slave narrator – severally spoken for and over-represented. Dabydeen’s protagonist Mungo is deliberately a previously ‘unvoiced’ and slippery narrator, with conflicting versions of events, lies and differing registers – all elements characteristic of Dabydeen’s refusal to speak in any unproblematic way for an eighteenth-century slave. His self-conscious novel interrogates the genre of the slave narrative; in revealing the narrator’s complexities, Dabydeen simultaneously exposes the inadequacies of the form.

In the texts I have examined, Dabydeen’s writing is strained and difficult: he demonstrates in all three works that, in returning to the history of indenture or slavery, there can be no straightforward narration. Borrowing from the historical archive, yet mistrustful of this past, his characters are creatively reinvented and irreverently distorted – illustrative of his refusal to both trust, and invest further credibility to, this archive. For Dabydeen, of greater importance than received history are the fragments of the past about which no accounts have been written. These remnants are deemed of little worth yet, by inclusion in his works, each neglected fragment potentially becomes, in Mungo’s words, ‘a splendidly adorned memorial and grave’. In the absence of either suitable memorials to, or – often – gravestones for, the Indian indentured labourer and African slave, Dabydeen’s works may be seen as providing a point from which to commence remembering this past.

Chapter Three

‘Memory is Pain Trying to Resurrect Itself’: Fred D’Aguiar, Remembering and Postmemorialisation

Fred D’Aguiar’s most recent work, *Bethany Bettany* (2003), examines the plight of a young girl, born of Guyanese parents in London. Following the dissolution of her parents’ marriage and suicide of her father, she is taken, aged five, to live with her father’s family in Guyana. Racial incidents remembered in the book include not only graffiti in the toilets of her father’s work place, but also marches in 1960s London denouncing Caribbean immigration. As Bethany’s mother recalls: ‘[l]ong before they came into view I could hear the order from the megaphone, *Niggers! Niggers! Niggers!* And the crowd’s response of, *Out! Out! Out!* I hauled you in the opposite direction. But there was nowhere to go.’¹ Captured in the last sentence of this quotation is not only a parent’s terror at being unable to escape the pervading racism of 1960s London, but also D’Aguiar’s ongoing interest in racism as an inescapable legacy of slavery. This issue can be traced in his works concerning the time of slavery, *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), through the mid-twentieth-century period of Caribbean immigration in *Bethany Bettany* into the twenty-first century of *Bloodlines* (2000).

Like Phillips, D’Aguiar explores in his works his uneasiness with a British identity. In his essay ‘Further Adventures in the Skin Trade’ (2000), he writes of his identity as being divided:

Born in London but not of London, writing in English but not of the English, British but under the rubric of a racial and cultural difference, my tongue forked, my skin bristled with the scales of my unlikeliness. I became Hydra-headed, speaking from multiple selves to multiple constituencies. Each poem staged my insider-outsider stance.²

The phrase ‘[b]orn in London but not of London’, in particular, recalls Phillips’s syntax in *A New World Order*, in which he writes of being ‘of, and not of, this place’.³ The notion of being

¹ Fred D’Aguiar, *Bethany Bettany* (2003; London: Vintage, 2004), p. 261.

² Fred D’Aguiar, ‘Further Adventures in the Skin Trade’, in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000), pp. 270-273 (p. 271).

³ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), p. 1.

‘unlike’ or different is a central concern in many of D’Aguiar’s poems – especially those from *British Subjects* which explore the concept of a black British identity. In poems such as ‘A Gift of a Rose’ the speaker describes an incident of police brutality accompanied by ‘epithets | sworn by the police in praise of [his] black skin and mother’.⁴ Despite its sustained metaphor of roses for bruises, this poem deals explicitly with racial violence against a black person. In ‘Home’ D’Aguiar writes of an airport customs official at Heathrow airport informing him

with Surrey loam caked
on the tongue, home is always elsewhere.
I take it like an English middleweight
with a questionable chin, knowing

my passport photo’s too open-faced,
haircut wrong (an afro) for the decade;
the stamp, British Citizen, not bold enough
for my liking and too much for theirs.⁵

We can see in this passage the anxiety that an afro is the ‘wrong’ haircut for the time and one which functions as a clear racial identifier, marking him specifically as black British. The stamp of ‘British Citizen’ acts like a protective armour, but is not bold enough to reassure D’Aguiar of the legitimacy of his habitation in the UK. The airport is portrayed here as a space where identity is even more keenly felt and questioned than usual – a place of suspicion and interrogation where he can never be ‘too British’.

D’Aguiar repeatedly addresses in his works the legacy of belonging, or what Alison Donnell has called ‘questions of national identities and bona fide “Britishness” for those on the borders of belonging’.⁶ Helpful as is Donnell’s phrase in articulating the complicated sense of identity suggested by D’Aguiar’s texts, the concept of ‘borders’ of identity is arguably rejected in his works in favour of an exploration of overlapping areas of identification. This notion is particularly evident in his creation of mixed-race characters; Chapel from *The Longest Memory*

⁴ Fred D’Aguiar, ‘A Gift of a Rose’, *British Subjects* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), I. 9.

⁵ D’Aguiar, ‘Home’, *British Subjects*, I. 9.

⁶ Alison Donnell, ‘Reviews’, *Wasafiri*, 22 (1995), 85-88 (p. 85). D’Aguiar has also commented in an interview: ‘I’m interested in my own mixed heritage and in a space opened by the amalgamation of two different traditions’. See Christina Patterson, ‘In Search of a Place in the Sun’, *Independent*, 2 September 2000, Reviews section, p. 9.

struggles with an identity as 'half a slave, half [a] master'⁷ and the narrator of *Bloodlines* is similarly both 'slave and overseer'.⁸ Simple positions of insider or outsider are complicated in D'Aguiar's texts, as his earlier reference to his own 'insider-outsider' status indicates, suggesting instead a pivoting identity. As we shall see, his portrayal of mixed-race characters at the time of slavery complicates opposing moral and racial positions of black slave and white master, suggesting a need to think about slavery in a way that is sensitive to the absence of historical representation for those of mixed races.

Nothing is easily labelled in D'Aguiar's works; as the narrator of *Feeding the Ghosts* comes to realise, although the *Zong* still rides upon the waves, and spectral 'jettisons' continue, it is uncertain where blame lies, or whether it should be attributed at all:

Men, women and children are thrown overboard by the captain and his crew. One of them is me. One of them is you. One of them is doing the throwing, the other is being thrown. I'm not sure who is who, you or I.⁹

Rejecting a retributive view of the past of slavery, D'Aguiar often struggles with the problems of representing this past. He writes about the issues involved in examining accounts of received history when returning to the past of slavery:

My first awareness of history was of my place in it as the descendant of slaves. In history, stories of blackness always limited the humanity of blacks to something less than whiteness. Slavery and poetry pulled in opposite directions since poetry could never be enslaved and a slave could never really remain a slave and be a poet, not if poetry meant liberation or at least a freedom of thought unhindered by any material circumstance even if born out of it.¹⁰

D'Aguiar seems particularly aware of his slave ancestry and chooses not to adopt a historical approach to this past, due to the 'limited humanity' offered to black people by this method. Instead, poetry – and perhaps literary creativity in general – can be seen as an appropriate mode with which to try to achieve a new understanding of the past of slavery. As I argue in *The*

⁷ Fred D'Aguiar, *The Longest Memory* (1994; London: Vintage, 1995), p. 135. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

⁸ Fred D'Aguiar, *Bloodlines* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p. 152. All subsequent references will be to this edition. As *Bloodlines* is a long and chaptered (rather than sectional) poem, I shall use page references instead of line numbers for ease of referencing.

⁹ Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997; London: Vintage, 1998), pp. 229-30. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

¹⁰ D'Aguiar, 'Further Adventures in the Skin Trade', pp. 271-272.

Longest Memory, Chapel's interest in poetry also permits him a limited freedom and relief from his daily existence as a slave, although his dreams of becoming a poet are unfulfilled by the novel's close. History provides D'Aguiar with a starting point – the events of the *Zong*, for example, as mentioned, offer him a place from which to begin exploring this past. However, as I illustrate in my reading of *Feeding the Ghosts*, he refuses to allow history to curtail his imaginative response to slavery and it seems, finally, that poetry is, for him, the most appropriate way of exploring this past, as my reading of *Bloodlines* reveals. But, as we shall see, this approach does not lead to a retributive view of slavery – his unusual, and tiring, poetic form indicates his desire to make this past difficult for the reader.

I propose in my readings of *The Longest Memory*, *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Bloodlines* that, ultimately, D'Aguiar is deeply troubled by the act of writing about the memory of slavery, and asks how we are to remember this past almost two centuries after its abolition and in the absence of witnesses. In my work on *The Longest Memory*, I will interrogate, via Jacques Derrida's essay 'Plato's Pharmacy' (1968), the distinction between memory (*mnēmē*) and remembering (*hypomnēsis*).¹¹ D'Aguiar proposes two alternatives for the representation of counter- and collective remembrance of slavery; firstly, a literary *hypomnēsis*, or imagined remembrance of this past, and, secondly, the body as a receptacle for remembering. As I demonstrate, neither offers an uncomplicated form of remembrance, and he is unable to offer a third, and perhaps less troubling, way of remembering the past of slavery.

D'Aguiar can be seen to share Dabydeen's concerns about the ethics of representing slavery. In my examination of *Feeding the Ghosts* I discuss the ethics of representing this past with reference to the writings of Jean-François Lyotard and Theodor Adorno. As mentioned in my introduction, in choosing theorists more commonly associated with writing about the Holocaust, I do not wish to minimise the differences between this more recent past and that of slavery. However, those who write about the Holocaust usefully provide a vocabulary with which to explore notions of trauma, memory and forgetting, which are also, as D'Aguiar shows, important issues to address in terms of the legacies of the slave trade. As I explore in my

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (1981; London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 69-186 (p. 111). First published in French as 'La pharmacie de Platon' in *Tel Quel*, 32/33 (1968).

reading of *Feeding the Ghosts*, he struggles with the difficulty of representing slavery – specifically, in how to phrase the trauma of this past. D’Aguiar is particularly interested in the recursive nature of trauma and can be seen as searching for new idioms in which to express the integral painfulness of slavery. As we shall see, his texts expose his profound struggle to suggest ways of remembering slavery which do not either beautify or re-traumatise the past through recollection.

Bloodlines is, in some ways, D’Aguiar’s most challenging text, especially in relation to the portrayal of available roles for women. *Bloodlines* also demonstrates his continuing concern with the problem of the *pharmakon* and a deliberate attempt to avoid augmenting the continuum of neo-slave narratives.¹² D’Aguiar’s awareness of the popularity of novels about slavery in the late twentieth century is reflected in his candid comment: ‘[m]y poetry sells a little, the fiction sells a bit more.’¹³ As I illustrate, *Bloodlines* can be seen as enacting a postmemorialisation of the past of slavery. In D’Aguiar’s texts, postmemory arguably extends the scope of *hypomnēsis* to include those exiled from the concept of the body as a receptacle of remembering. The postmemorialisation of slavery, however, is ultimately revealed to be a dispiriting state which precludes a redemptive text or any affirmative conclusions in works addressing this past.

In my approach to D’Aguiar’s work I challenge dominant readings that propose a redemptive or celebratory style in his writing about slavery. This is the kind of reading that sees *Bloodlines*, in David Vincent’s words, ‘strid[ing] through predicament and woe to place love as the only motivational energy for salvation’.¹⁴ The vocabulary chosen by Vincent is telling, indicating his belief that slavery can be ‘saved’ by romantic relationships between black and white people – a notion ultimately revealed as flawed by the text, as I demonstrate. Andrew Biswell has similarly suggested of *Bloodlines*: ‘the novel [*sic*], displaying a flash of optimism, is prepared to imagine a distant future in which different races will live peacefully together’.¹⁵ D’Aguiar’s works, however, seem to propose a much gloomier outlook on the transformative

¹² Derrida, p. 75.

¹³ Ted Slade, ‘The Poetry Kit Interviews Fred D’Aguiar’, *The Poetry Kit* <<http://www.poetrykit.org/iv/daguia.htm>> [accessed 1 March 2006], (para. 8 of 21).

¹⁴ David Vincent, ‘Paperbacks’, *Observer*, 21 October 2001 in *NewsBank* <<http://Oinfoweb.newsbank.com>> [accessed 29 August 2005], (para. 5 of 13).

¹⁵ Andrew Biswell, ‘Don Juan in a Lost America’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 December 2000 in *Lexis-Nexis* <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/professional>> [accessed 29 August 2005], (para. 3 of 5).

potential of writing about slavery. He offers a sombre view of this past and its continuing legacies and, as I demonstrate, arguably cannot yet foresee the future possibility of different races living 'peacefully together', as Biswell envisages. Instead, his works suggest a much bleaker picture of British and American societies, as unalterably based on racial distinctions which ensure the perpetuation of 'insider-outsider' positions. Such racial polarisation, he contends, feeds the continuity of what he refers to as '*this past, this present, this future, this slavery*', or slavery's longevity.¹⁶ As I shall now show, it is his unfaltering belief in the unending nature of slavery that leads to the apparent pessimism of his works.

The Longest Memory

The boundary (between inside and outside, living and nonliving) separates not only speech from writing but also memory as an unveiling (re-) producing a presence from re-memoration as the mere repetition of a monument. [...] The 'outside' [begins...] at the point where the *mnēmē*, instead of being present to itself in its life as a movement of truth, is supplanted by the archive, evicted by a sign of re-memoration or of commemoration. The space of writing, space *as* writing, is opened up in the violent movement of the surrogation, in the difference between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*. (Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy')¹⁷

In his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida outlines the transformative moment of writing in which memory (*mnēmē*) is supplanted by 'reminding' or remembering (*hypomnēsis*).¹⁸ Although 'writing is *given* as the sensible, visible, spatial surrogate of the *mnēmē*', Derrida argues, like speech, memory is immediately lost to writing by the archival act of remembering.¹⁹ Memory is 'supplanted by the archive' of writing, and hence exchanged for what he terms 're-memoration' and 'com-memoration'; once written, the text stands as an inconstant monument to the memory. The notion of writing as 'com-memoration' is important, therefore, in signifying something that has passed; the no longer 'living' memory is memorialised in writing. As I explore in a moment,

¹⁶ Fred D'Aguiar, 'The Last Essay About Slavery', in *The Age of Anxiety*, ed. by Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter (London: Virago, 1996), pp. 125-147 (p. 131).

¹⁷ Derrida, p. 111.

¹⁸ The translation of *hypomnēsis* is provided elsewhere in 'Plato's Pharmacy' as 're-memoration, recollection, consignment'; for clarity of argument, I shall refer to it as remembering or remembrance (Derrida, p. 95).

¹⁹ Derrida, p. 130.

Derrida's thoughts on the memorialisation of memory through writing have provocative implications for the challenge of remembering slavery, especially for black British writers who – writing almost 200 years since slavery was abolished in Britain – are also 'outside' of slavery and therefore have only *hypomnēsis*, or a monumentalised form of remembrance, available to them.

It is important to note that Derrida describes memory as being unveiled. Memory is – to be accurate – 'an unveiling (re-)producing a presence'. The veil might be thought of as signifying the threshold between the moment once passed, to which the memory corresponds, and the present moment of remembering. Derrida's cautious phrase, '(re-)producing a presence' indicates that memory is the repeated production of the past. Remembering or 're-memoration', on the other hand, is the 'mere repetition of a monument' – that is, the act of remembering points to the memory that has passed, but it is the monument, or replica, that repeats; remembering is unable to directly access (or re-produce) the memory. There can, of course, be no access to the past, so memory and remembering are, importantly, both reproductions; one of an event, one of its monument. The notion of a veil between the moment and memory may also be helpful in suggesting the diaphanous border between the past and the present, where the past is partitioned from the present and therefore inaccessible, but tantalisingly visible.

In my summary of Derrida's essay I am trying to stabilise for a moment some very unwieldy and complex terms, without denying their complexity. It is important to note that the distinction between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis* is not inflexible or concrete; the notion of a veil may be useful in thinking about the permeability of the border here, too. Let us move now to explore how the notions of *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis* might be productive in reading D'Aguiar's works. To anticipate momentarily *Feeding the Ghosts*, we shall see through the main character Mintah that memories can be involuntarily triggered. In the following extract, D'Aguiar suggests that traumatic memory can be prompted by the most unlikely of things:

a savannah will start to tumble bundles of bracken across its flat face and suddenly, through some trick of the light and heat, it will tremble into a seascape and that bracken will become tossed into a sea current and this one-hundred-and thirty-second body will have to be a witness again. (pp. 4-5)

Mintah, a traumatised survivor of the slave-ship *Zong*, was not deliberately remembering the past aboard the ship; in fact, she consciously tries *not* to remember. In the above quotation, she is experiencing *mnēmē*, or the re-production of a memory – the *Zong* is re-produced in front of her as she gazes at the savannah. The involuntary nature of memory thus differs from *hypomnēsis*, or the remembering of the past, which does not open ready access to memory but rather supplants memory with an act of remembering. Her journal, as an example of *hypomnēsis*, is a monument to, rather than a re-experiencing of, the traumatic past. It is through writing her journal, or ‘remembering’ the past of the *Zong*, in fact, that Mintah, paradoxically, hopes to forget. She writes as an attempt to purge herself of recollections of the *Zong* and so forget the traumatic past, but her act of *hypomnēsis* fails to exorcise the trauma and she is unable to forget. D’Aguiar seems to suggest that although it is painful for Mintah to recall the events aboard the ship, it is morally necessary to remember the jettisons. Her counter-remembrance of the events aboard the *Zong*, however traumatic for Mintah, is important in challenging the received historical remembrance of this past, represented in *Feeding the Ghosts* by Collingwood’s version of events. Mintah wants to forget but, D’Aguiar suggests, we need to remember. As I will explore, this problem would seem to be the crux of D’Aguiar’s work – whether we can remember without trauma, or if there can be transformative remembrance of the past of slavery.

This example from *Feeding the Ghosts* is especially helpful in clarifying the difficult relationship between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis* but, as I illustrate, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ is of even greater use to my reading of *The Longest Memory*. In particular, it will be crucial in examining the ways in which Whitechapel attempts to forget the traumatic past but, like Mintah, fails to escape both the trauma of *mnēmē* and that of remembering or *hypomnēsis*. D’Aguiar ultimately suggests that remembering may be agonising, but it is vital; as we shall see in the character of Chapel, not remembering slavery has deathly consequences.

Derrida’s essay can appear highly obtuse, but I wish to extrapolate his distinction between *mnēmē* (memory) and *hypomnēsis* (remembering), though as I have indicated, these are not opposing states. As we have seen in the works of Phillips and Dabydeen, exploring imaginatively the past of slavery arguably enables a perspective with which to evaluate the

present (and the continuing legacies of slavery) and envisage the future.²⁰ For D'Aguiar, exploring the past of slavery is primarily an issue of memory and remembrance, and *The Longest Memory* can be seen as interrogating the space of the 'violent movement' between the two states. As I show, D'Aguiar struggles with the problem of how to remember the past of slavery in a way that does not reproduce official remembrance; his text gathers a range of imagined responses to the slave past – some representing received remembrance, others portraying counter-remembrance. Whilst he and Derrida are both interested in the modes of memory and remembering, therefore, D'Aguiar's concerns are with the literary, rather than philosophical, contexts for remembrance.

Derrida's distinction between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis* also has particular relevance with regard to the title of D'Aguiar's novel. Whilst *The Longest Memory* is about the vagaries of memory and 'the longest memory' of slavery – that is, a collective recalling of this past – it does not pertain to be 'a memory' of this past, or a singular imagined slave narrative. We have already seen that memory, in Derrida's terms, was 'an unveiling reproducing a presence', whereas remembering or 're-memoration' is best thought of as the 'mere repetition of a monument'. Writing, he argues, 'does not answer the needs of memory, it aims to the side, does not reinforce the *mnēmē*, but only *hypomnēsis*'.²¹ Those who write sell 'the signs and insignia of science: not memory itself (*mnēmē*), only monuments (*hypomnēmata*), inventories, archives, citations, copies, accounts, tales, lists, notes, duplicates, chronicles, genealogies, references. Not memory but memorials'; *hypomnēsis* rather than *mnēmē*.²² Writers, therefore, offer written documents which may claim to record memories, but these are 'not memory, but memorials'. Writing as memorialisation is helpful when thinking about how to remember or commemorate the past of slavery. D'Aguiar's novel is, one could argue, therefore mis-named; its story is not

²⁰ Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar are not alone in their belief in the importance of the past to the present and future. Barbara T. Christian has written: '[i]t is the resonance of history that lets us know we are here. Memory not only reproduces the past, it gives us guides by which to evaluate the present, and helps to create the future'. Christian's claims suggest a transatlantic concern with the usefulness of memory in responding to the present and envisaging the future and are helpful when considering the relevance of remembering slavery in the present. See Christian, *From the Inside Out: Afro-American Women's Literary Tradition and the State* (Minneapolis: Centre for Humanistic Studies, University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 4.

²¹ Derrida, p. 102.

²² Derrida, p. 109. Derrida's spleen is vented at the sophist, in particular, as '[t]he man who relies on writing, who brags about the knowledge and powers it assures him' (p. 108).

the memory of a moment of slavery but an imagined remembering of, or repeating monument to, the slave past.

In my reading of *The Longest Memory* I engage with two possible alternatives offered by D'Aguiar in response to what he shows to be the inadequacy of historical approaches to slavery. The first is a literary *hypomnēsis* (posing as imagined counter-remembering); the second alternative is the role of the body as a receptacle for remembrance, or *hypomnēsis* (also a form of counter-remembrance). Neither approach, D'Aguiar seems to contend, is without its limitations, indicating the quandary at the heart of his attempts to remember slavery.

I will begin by explaining what I mean by counter-remembrance of slavery, with reference to George Lipsitz's *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (1990). In the absence of witnesses to slavery bearing *mnēmē* (living memory), an imagined *hypomnētic* counter-remembrance becomes a possible form of remembrance for D'Aguiar. It is important that this remembrance is counter-remembrance and not the official remembrance of slavery, or received history, which, I have indicated, D'Aguiar suggests is an inadequate and problematic way of remembering this past. Plato's notion of the *pharmakon* – as remedy and poison – shall, however, be useful when challenging the apparent straightforwardness of a literary response to the conundrum of the ethical representation of slavery. The articulation of *hypomnēsis* on the body also does not offer D'Aguiar an unproblematic form of remembrance, due to the constrictions of genealogical inheritance. As I suggest, at the core of *The Longest Memory* is D'Aguiar's struggle with the problem of creating art from this past: this is his first novel to wrestle inconclusively with how to represent counter- or collective remembrance of slavery.

In *Time Passages* Lipsitz writes that 'counter-memory' is

a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence [...], counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. [...] Counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.²³

²³ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 213.

Of course, what Lipsitz refers to as 'counter-memory' would, in Derridean parlance, be better called counter-remembrance; it concerns remembering the past, rather than the moment of memory. Counter-remembrance, as I shall call it, may be thought of as remembrance which runs contrary to the standard account of history, or received remembrance. In the novel, the counter-remembrance projected by Whitechapel, Chapel, Cook or Lydia suggests an alternative to the version of received history, represented by *The Virginian*, which claims that slaves are 'quite literally, not like us. They do not feel what we feel' (p. 106). The plurality of narrative viewpoints by people normally excluded from the historical archive of slavery (for example, illiterate slaves and women) indicates D'Aguiar's imagined 'new perspectives of this past'. The absence of living witnesses to slavery necessitates an imaginative approach to counter-remembrance of this past.

D'Aguiar's novel is a fabricated collection of memories concerning a slave plantation in Virginia, and does not attempt to sound 'historical' by replicating nineteenth-century linguistic registers.²⁴ Unlike *Feeding the Ghosts*, it is not closely inspired by historical records; instead, in this book, D'Aguiar turns towards an imagined 'archive' of remembering. In 'The Last Essay About Slavery', he writes that

Each generation inherits an anxiety about slavery, but the more problematic the present, the higher the anxiety and the more urgent their need to attend to the past. What the anxiety says is quite simply that the past is our only hope for getting through this present. So we return to memory, imagined and real, fanciful and mythical, psychological and genetic.²⁵

D'Aguiar not only addresses the need of each generation of black British writers to return in their works to the past of slavery in the face of troubled present times, but also suggests that 'memory' is a viable entry point into that past and may take different forms – ranging from 'imagined' memory of the kind experienced by Mintah, to 'genetic', or inherited, collective

²⁴ D'Aguiar's novel – whether consciously or not – also reflects an earlier and important text which recounts slavery in America, namely *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* by Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame. In this, they explain that their choice of title was selected to symbolise their 'rejection of the view of Afro-Americans as an atomized, rootless people who begin each generation without any sense of what preceded them'. Like D'Aguiar's novel, therefore, their text suggests that collective and 'long' memories of slavery may be thought of as synonymous. See Berry and Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. x.

²⁵ D'Aguiar, 'Last Essay', p. 132.

remembrance.²⁶ Again – although he uses ‘memory’ as a kind of all-encompassing term in his example above, he refers chiefly to remembering, or *hypomnēsis*, rather than *mnēmē*. Whilst he can create imagined memories for his characters, ‘real’ *mnēmē* pertaining to the past of slavery is not available to him and, arguably, is involuntary triggered – not something to which we can, in D’Aguiar’s words, ‘return’. Psychological ‘memory’ in this context is probably most familiarly thought of as trauma – once again, direct trauma from slavery is unavailable to D’Aguiar. Instead, D’Aguiar explores the means of attempting to remember the past of slavery, but his particular anguish originates from the difficulty of how to remember this past without effecting retraumatisation.

To read this novel in any literal way is to misread the text; a point overlooked by several critics in their reviews of *The Longest Memory*. D’Aguiar’s disregard for strict historical accuracy and linguistic registers of the time has provoked criticism from Sarah Maguire, for example, who argues that ‘D’Aguiar’s characters speak with a high degree of abstraction, floating free from the constraints of history and society. This is fine if the point of their discourse is to explore the patterns of consciousness itself. But it won’t quite do when their aim is to thicken the plot and flesh out characters.’²⁷ Francis Spufford similarly argues that D’Aguiar’s interest in current concerns overshadows the narrative: ‘characterisations of the owner, the overseer and the others, are almost entirely constructed from contemporary truisms about slavery. They read like a projection of present concerns on to the past’.²⁸ Yet, D’Aguiar has not written the longest *history* of slavery; his title indicates his focus on exploring the remembrance of this past. If we expect his novel to be historically accurate or a simulated slave narrative, we may misunderstand the designs of the text.

²⁶ D’Aguiar has admitted he had current concerns in mind when writing *The Longest Memory*, stating in an interview that the book was inspired by both a photograph of a former slave, taken in 1963, and his arrival in the United States in 1992 in the aftermath of the riots in Los Angeles: ‘America was licking its wounds, trying to come to terms with what had happened. It occurred to me that the book might be a way of talking about contemporary issues in terms of a past event.’ See Christina Koning, ‘The Past, Another Country’, *Independent*, 23 July 1995, Reviews section, p. 32. Returning to the past through the frame of the present can be helpful when examining the legacies of slavery; ‘memory’ is, of course, like the racism which sparked the riots of 1992, another legacy of this past.

²⁷ Sarah Maguire, ‘Colourblind Love on the Underground Railroad’, *Independent*, 20 August 1994, section Weekend, p. 27.

²⁸ Francis Spufford, ‘Get a New Man or Master’, *Guardian*, 26 July 1994, section Guardian 2, p. 9.

The Longest Memory differs from the works I have so far examined in its specific focus on American plantation slavery. It is a challenging text which defies any straightforward attempt at a plot summary – the story is revealed gradually and non-chronologically – or an easily-drawn conclusion. These concerns notwithstanding, it is largely the story of Whitechapel, an old slave on the Whitechapel plantation in Virginia, with twelve daughters borne by his first wife and a son borne of his second – also named Whitechapel. Not immediately known to the reader, Whitechapel Junior, or Chapel, is actually the biological son of the plantation overseer, Mr Sanders – or Sanders Senior – who raped Whitechapel's wife, known only as 'Cook'.²⁹ Following his mother's death, Chapel runs away and is brought back to the plantation by information provided by Whitechapel as to his whereabouts. Chapel is punished with 200 lashes, dealt by his half-brother, Sanders Junior, which prove fatal. After we have learnt of Chapel's death, we discover that he has been conducting a relationship with the plantation owner's daughter, Lydia, and we realise their mutual love of literature and plans to run away together to the North – presumably the primary reason for his escape.³⁰

D'Aguiar's polyphonic novel acts as a reminder of the many voices of slavery.³¹ Chapters are narrated by Whitechapel, Chapel, Lydia, Cook, and Mr Whitechapel, the plantation owner, with diary extracts by Sanders Senior and editorials from *The Virginian* newspaper. The opening prologue of *The Longest Memory*, narrated by Whitechapel, is entitled 'Remembering' and the epilogue, 'Forgetting'; suggesting the delicate balance required in negotiating the two positions. It is morally necessary for the twentieth-century reader to remember slavery but, in

²⁹ The namelessness of Cook is indicative of the scarcity of evidence or historical documentation concerning black female slaves in the United States in the nineteenth century. As Martha Hodes has noted, 'black women's voices are the faintest in the antebellum historical record'. See Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 7-8.

³⁰ For an account of the participation of white women in the campaigns against slavery in both Britain and the United States, see Clare Midgley's *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). See also Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale* for an examination of the role of literature produced by women in the British abolitionist movement. In addition, the character of Lydia finds a precedent in Miss Campbell, Robert Wedderburn's 'slaveowning half-sister'. Wedderburn was the son of a slave, who came to Britain from Jamaica in 1778 and became heavily involved in the nineteenth-century British working-class radical movement. See Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery: And Other Writings*, ed. by Iain McCalman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), especially p. 18.

³¹ D'Aguiar has claimed that 'polyphony maximizes the number of readings inherent in any return; more "stuff" is recovered'; though, as my conclusion shall indicate, I would contend that what is actually 'recovered' from D'Aguiar's text is an interrogation of the difficulty of remembering the past of slavery. See Maria Frias, "'Building Bridges Back to the Past": An Interview with Fred D'Aguiar', *Callaloo*, 25:2 (2002), 418-425 (p. 423).

order to survive day-to-day living, it is also for Whitechapel, necessary to forget. The last page suggests that only with death can forgetting come: 'I must sit down. No, lie down. Rest these eyes, tired of trying not to see. Rest this mouth. Stop tasting the sourness there. Forget. Memory is pain trying to resurrect itself' (p. 138). The past, for Whitechapel, is too painful to remember: '[d]on't make me remember. I forget as hard as I can' (p. 2). In these quotations, Whitechapel refers to both memory and remembering as being traumatic. *Mnēmē*, as Mintah also found, can be thought of as 'pain trying to resurrect itself', but the pain involved in acts of remembrance also leads Whitechapel towards the attempt to forget. *Hypomnētic* remembrance is not a painless form of remembrance, and such remembrance is dangerous, not only because of its potential for retraumatisation, but also because monuments of *hypomnēsis* may unproductively pave the way to forgetting. By 'fixing' remembrance in a monument, living memory is evicted, and stasis – the repeated production of the monument – begins, recalling Andreas Huyssen's claims that monuments may 'stand simply as figures of forgetting, their meaning and original purpose eroded by the passage of time'.³² Like the diaphanous distinction between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*, remembering and forgetting should not be viewed simply as opposites. Remembering slavery may be important, but it is not, D'Aguiar suggests, easily conducted; an act of remembrance can erode, rather than expose, its existence.

Yet, in *The Longest Memory*, remembering is shown to be vital, not just to the courtship of Lydia and Chapel, which I will explore in a moment, but also in relation to Sanders Junior, who kills Chapel because the recent past concerning his father and Cook was not known or remembered by all:

You see, no one was to talk about it. And with time it sank to the bottom of everyone's minds. My father died, your father, Whitechapel's wife. It seemed all the people who were directly involved to whom it was important and painful were dead along with the shame, with the exception of Whitechapel. (p. 34)

Living memory (or *mnēmē*) is only available until the last witness dies – D'Aguiar therefore suggests that there exists a compelling need to pass on the stories of the past as counter-

³² Andreas Huyssen, 'Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age', in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. by James E. Young (New York and Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1994), pp. 9-17 (p. 9).

remembrance (*hypomnēsis*). The above comment that 'no one was to talk about it. And with time it sank to the bottom of everyone's minds' can be seen as being applicable to Britain's past of slavery, though slavery does not, of course, like any other trauma, necessarily stay 'dead' because not discussed.

D'Aguiar indicates the need to write about, and hence confront, the past of slavery in order to avoid the fulfilment of Whitechapel's claim that '[t]he future is just more of the past waiting to happen' (p. 1). With Whitechapel's death, the 'living memory' of slavery also dies, but the section narrated by 'Great Grandmother' suggests that the collective counter-remembrance of this story continues. This chapter is narrated by one of Whitechapel's great granddaughters and recalls the ways in which he was ostracised by the slave community following his son's death: '[w]hat form of reasoning could have convinced Grandfather his son would be safe? I have wanted to ask him every day since, imagining I could defy the ban to speak to him' (p. 128). This section appears to be narrated at some distance in the future; the great granddaughter of Whitechapel is now a great grandmother herself. D'Aguiar seems to suggest that acts of remembering are perpetuated or passed on through stories told about the past of slavery. In including this chapter within the novel, he reveals the modes of survival of counter-remembrance. *Mnēmē*, or living memory, ends with the last survivor of an event, but can be superseded by collective counter-remembering or *hypomnēsis*. As I have already intimated, the challenge, of course, is how to ensure that these remembrances are truly acts of counter-remembrance. Acts of remembrance can be exploitative; D'Aguiar's apparent desire to create an imaged counter-remembrance of slavery stems from this problem of received remembering.

At this point, it may be helpful to explain how D'Aguiar's opposition to received remembering can be illustrated by *The Longest Memory*. The issue of trying to understand the slave past is vital in this novel. As Mr Whitechapel tells Sanders Junior and his Deputy: '[m]y fury will not result in revenge. You must understand' (p. 31), a notion reiterated by Whitechapel: '[i]t cannot now be undone, only understood' (p. 137). Mr Whitechapel, talking to Sanders Junior about the death of Chapel, tells him that '[t]here is simply too much history between us all to justify what you did last night. Too much. What began as a single thread has,

over the generations, woven itself into a prodigious carpet that cannot be unwoven' (p. 33). Here, history does not mean a recorded chronicle of the past, but suggests an interwoven connection of lives; like the woven carpet, slavery has led to the inextricable intermingling of black and white people. This notion is reaffirmed by Whitechapel's statement that 'I would need another life. No, several lives. Another hundred years. No, more, to unravel this knotted mess' (pp. 136-137). Whitechapel's 'knotted mess' is, however, arguably a more suitable analogy than that of a woven carpet. The latter suggests not only a coherent pattern, but also neatly minimises the violence typically engendered in the 'weaving' or sexual relationships between black and white people in the United States in the early to mid-nineteenth century. As the 'history' to which Mr Whitechapel refers was actually the rape of Cook by Sanders Senior, 'history', as suggested here, becomes a euphemism for rape and exploitation. This metaphor can be read in two ways; firstly, and more literally, D'Aguiar appears to propose that an accurate history of slavery in the United States must record acts of rape and exploitation. Secondly, and perhaps more provocatively, in the absence of such a 'truthful' examination of this past, history can be seen as metaphorically 'raping' black people through their continual exploitation and (mis)representation. The received history of slavery (whether in Britain or the United States) is, for D'Aguiar, exploiting in its inadequate portrayal of black people. The unsuitability of the official remembrance of slavery indicates the necessity of counter-remembrance, as proposed by D'Aguiar. For these reasons, we can see that he, like Dabydeen and Phillips, is deeply concerned about the process of representing slavery and is unwilling to join in the complicity of received history in narrating this past.

The notion of 'too much' history is, then, vital. In *Feeding the Ghosts* the narrator confides: '[a]ll the knowledge has done is to burden me' (p. 229); in *The Longest Memory*, D'Aguiar also raises the unsettling problem of what to do with the historical legacies of slavery; how to respond to knowing 'too much' about this past.³³ As history, for him, is exploiting, he

³³ Whilst also, of course, knowing too little. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau and Steven F. Miller write about the unreliable nature of slave narratives, where scholars of the 1960s onwards 'remained skeptical of the narratives' value [...] worrying] that the narratives would foster [...] a view of a kindly institution. They observed that the interviewers – nearly all of whom were white Southerners – had tended to select the most obsequious informants, "good Negroes" in the euphemism of the day'. See *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom*, ed. by Berlin,

probes the issue of how else to remember the past of slavery. In *The Longest Memory* D'Aguiar attempts to posit an imagined counter-remembrance of this past, which avoids adding to the received remembrance of slavery. In addition, in *Feeding the Ghosts* and *The Longest Memory* he is all too aware of the traumatic nature of remembrance. D'Aguiar seems to struggle with the conundrum of how to escape the legacies of slavery and free those concerned from the trauma and anxieties of remembering this past through the act of writing, whilst ensuring it is not a past that is conveniently forgotten or recalled as received remembrance.

D'Aguiar is uneasy, then, about the way in which slavery is written about and remembered. A clear examination of Chapel's relationship with books in *The Longest Memory* will be helpful in further illustrating his concerns, as Chapel's troubled relationship with literature may be seen as indexing D'Aguiar's anxieties about writing. Literature may be, for D'Aguiar, the most appropriate medium with which to explore the past of slavery but, given his reservations about received forms of narrative, it is perhaps unsurprising that he portrays Chapel as experiencing a troubled relationship with written texts. Alternately delighted and tormented by the books he discovers, Chapel's unease with literature finds a striking resonance in 'Plato's Pharmacy'. Derrida writes about Plato's portrayal of Socrates as being entranced by the '*pharmakon*', which he defines as 'the drug: the medicine and/or poison'.³⁴ The *pharmakon* therefore interestingly pivots in its meanings and its particular attraction as a 'drug' for Socrates is all too evident, as Derrida ventriloquises:

you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out [...] A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books (*en biblios*) I don't doubt you can cart me all round Attica, and anywhere else you please.³⁵

The changing meaning of '*pharmakon*' is also significant in suggesting the danger of his addiction, as Derrida explains: 'this "medicine," this philter, which acts as both remedy and

Favreau and Miller (New York: New Press, 1998), p. xviii. James Oakes raises the difficulty of examining even the role of white slave owners, claiming that 'we now know more about the daily experience of the typical slave than we do about the typical slaveholder'. However, he also mentions the 'hundreds of collections of slaveholders' papers', which suggests a more readily accessible, and perhaps reliable, source than the coerced slave testimony. See Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (London and New York: Norton, 1998), p. xv, pp. xi-xii.

³⁴ Derrida, p. 75.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 76.

poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent.³⁶ Socrates finds the *pharmakon*/text to be both beneficial and damaging; spellbinding but dangerous.

We can see a similar oscillation in Chapel's relationship with books – on the one hand, they entrance him, and it is through literature that he begins to love Lydia. Chapel, having watched Lydia reading on several occasions, is taught to read by her. His reaction to her reading aloud to him indicates the sense of literature being addictive:

she opened the rose

She called a book and moved my finger over
The words as she sang them: I heard a choir. (p. 59)

As she reads to him, Chapel experiences a moment of epiphany, suggesting the significant powers of the *pharmakon*/text. Its powerful attraction is part of the danger of writing. In addition, the description of the *pharmakon* as a philtre – implying its potency as an aphrodisiac – is appropriate to Chapel's conflation of illicit sex with Lydia and literature. D'Aguiar also seems to comment about the potentially improper reception of books about slavery – Chapel's seduction by the written text arguably finds a parallel in the improper reception by some readers of literature on the slave trade.

Yet, writing as a *pharmakon* also brings him sorrow through his self-awareness of the racially-based limitations placed upon him during the time of slavery:

I asked her to what use I could put reading and writing.
She said I was the son of slaves and it was forbidden

For a slave to know how to write and read.
I said it was a mighty waste of a good head.

She reminded me that I took a pledge
Not to tell a soul. I watched her and felt grudge. (p. 60)

Paradoxically, later Chapel is silenced the moment he finds, in learning to read and write, a voice. Not content with reading the books from the library, his aspirations are to be a poet. His

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 75.

section of the novel is therefore the only non-prose part, largely narrated in rhyming couplets, which corresponds to his love of classical verse. Alongside Chapel's resentment towards Lydia comes his chastisement from Mr Whitechapel, when he happens upon Chapel and Lydia reading together:

He drew his belt, signalled me to bend and shout

At my peril. As he lashed, he spoke. Do not,
I repeat, do not let me ever catch you reading

Again. (p. 61)

Chapel immediately 'disguises' his voice; his couplets markedly contrast with the 'slave' register he adopts when chastised:

Yes master.
I am sorry.
[...]
I am ungrateful;
A wretch,
Who deserves
To be a slave. (p. 62)

For Chapel, as for Socrates, then, the *pharmakon* is the text – both remedy and poison. Books provide the means of temporary escape from and transformation of his reality as a slave, yet, to return to D'Aguiar's earlier metaphor, like the transient beauty of a rose, his literacy soon provokes the maleficent reprimand from Mr Whitechapel. His chastisement acts as a stark reminder of Chapel's slave status and of the danger of the *pharmakon*. I outline Chapel's difficult relationship with literature in order to suggest that D'Aguiar makes a greater point about the problem of writing about the past of slavery – like Chapel, he is compelled to write, yet is aware of the problems of doing so. Writing about slavery is compelling – it is important to address this past and remember, but the danger is not only one might read received books about slavery in a problematic way, but that writing may imitate received remembrance which has little to do with the experiences and voices of slaves. It is, I would contend, vital that Chapel chooses to write in a standard verse form and that he aspires to write poetry like his literary heroes, Shakespeare and Milton; this kind of replication of received forms of expression or

remembrance is precisely what D'Aguiar wants to avoid in writing his texts. Instead, he aims for a counter-remembrance which does not aim to replicate official *hypomnēsis*, hence his novel comprises plural, conflicting narratives and non-chronological sections, more on which I shall say in a moment.

Derrida outlines another role of the *pharmakon* helpful to my reading of D'Aguiar's novel; namely, in the beautification of the dead:

The *Republic* also calls the painter's colors *pharmaka* [...]. The magic of writing and painting is like a cosmetic concealing the dead under the appearance of the living. The *pharmakon* introduces and harbors death. It makes the corpse presentable, masks it, makes it up, perfumes it with its essence.³⁷

The *pharmakon*/text here functions as a kind of mortician – preparing and masking the corpse for presentation. There are certain comparisons to be made with books which write about the dead, in the way that any novel which returns to the site of slavery must. Arguably, the attempt to represent the past of slavery will always be unsavoury – its primary concern (as Dabydeen's Mungo found) is with making the dead palatable to an audience. When applied to *The Longest Memory*, this concern with the *pharmakon* can be seen as part of the larger issue of the ethics of representation – raising the question of how exactly to write about the 'dead' past of slavery. D'Aguiar's novel exposes his anxiety about his role as a writer engaging in the past of slavery; the problem of how to write about slavery without beautifying this deathly past. Derrida argues that all writing exists or 'plays' within the simulacrum: 'writing *has* no essence or value of its own, whether positive or negative. It plays within the simulacrum. It is in its type the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth, etc.'³⁸ Writing, as remembering, can only therefore mimic memory – it is, we recall, a monument to the moment of memory. D'Aguiar refuses, however, to produce a *pharmakon* of slavery by attempting to 'conceal the dead under the appearance of the living'. His text may be a kind of simulacrum of remembering, but it is self-consciously so, and it is categorically *not* a simulacrum of a slave narrative.³⁹ Instead, his different and

³⁷ Derrida, p. 142.

³⁸ Derrida, p. 108.

³⁹ I contend that D'Aguiar's text is therefore in opposition to what Ashraf H. A. Rushdy has called 'neo-slave narratives'; that is, 'contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on

conflicting narrative viewpoints, genres, disinterest in replicating slave registers, non-chronological sections and newspaper editorials all suggest not only a 'hydra-headed' polyphony but a conscious desire to reveal the artificiality of the text. In *The Longest Memory* D'Aguiar gathers together imaginary received and counter-remembrances of slavery, which are often conflicting and necessarily biased. The newspaper editorials from *The Virginian*, I have claimed, arguably represent received remembrance. The suitability of this version as the official, colonial, remembrance of the past of slavery is challenged by the accounts of those normally excluded from received history, and whose stories can therefore be thought of as counter-remembrance, such as those by Whitechapel or Lydia. D'Aguiar's use of form resists the beautifying confection of officious remembrance.

The other form of *hypomnēsis* suggested by D'Aguiar's text is a counter-remembrance articulated on the body. Like literature, this form of *hypomnēsis* is also, as I will now show, a problematic means of counter-remembrance due to the exclusivity of inherited remembrance. In 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971), Michel Foucault provides us with a terminology for the physical inheritance of past experience. Writing about Nietzsche's term *Herkunft* (defined by Foucault as 'stock or descent'), he notes that '[t]he body – and everything that touches it [...] is the domain of the *Herkunft*. The body manifests the stigmata of past experience'.⁴⁰ In *Herkunft*, 'past experience' is inscribed onto the body as visible stigmata. Furthermore, for Foucault, effects of experience are such that the body is 'a volume in perpetual disintegration'.⁴¹ If we look at *The Longest Memory*, the human body as a disintegrating text is most convincingly suggested by the way in which Whitechapel's body 'wears' his experiences in the form of a transformed counter-remembrance: '[m]emory rises to the skin then I can't be touched. I hurt all over, my bones ache, my teeth loosen in their gums, my nose bleeds' (p. 2). He uses 'memory' rather than 'remembrance' here – I shall explain in a moment why his use of memory at this moment is appropriate. As a slave, he is largely excluded from the history of slavery and, unlike

the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative'. See Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (1977; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 139-164 (p. 145, 148). This essay first appeared in French in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, ed. by Suzanne Bachelard, and others (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971).

⁴¹ Foucault, p. 148.

his literate son, is also denied the means of writing his own past or story. Without more usual means of narrating, his counter-remembrance is imprinted onto his body: '[t]he bags under my eyes are sacks of worries, witnesses of dreams, nightmares and sleep' (p. 3). This alteration of terms from memory to remembrance requires explanation, as *mnēmē* is transformed into *hypomnēsis* on Whitechapel's body. Derrida's notion of memory as living is helpful here; '[m]emory and truth cannot be separated. The movement of *alētheia* is a deployment of *mnēmē* through and through. A deployment of living memory'.⁴² Derrida suggests that *alētheia*, or 'truth', can only exist in living memory; it cannot, therefore, be subsequently narrated. Due to Whitechapel's significant age and years of witnessing events on the plantation, he can be seen as embodying living memory of slave experience. As Mr Whitechapel tells Sanders Junior, living memory is a vital tool in countering amnesia; to be precise, 'Whitechapel's longevity and living memory' prevent the 'whole mess' of slavery from being forgotten (p. 35). However, in the process of memory being inscribed, or 'written', upon his body – as wrinkles, lines and bags – the living memory, or *mnēmē*, is transformed into *hypomnēsis*. To recall Derrida's terms; in writing, memory or *mnēmē* is 'supplanted by the archive, evicted by a sign of re-memoration or of com-memoration'. In *The Longest Memory*, counter-remembrance becomes articulated as a discourse of the body. I would take the significance of this correlation further, in positing that D'Aguiar conceives of the body as being in opposition to books. Counter-remembrance of slavery is passed on through the collective remembering of generations – physically captured on the body and passed on through genealogy (as I shall indicate in a moment, this has provocative implications in terms of Chapel's biological parentage). This kind of remembering cannot be accurately reproduced or commemorated in books, linking to the problematic nature of the *pharmakon* or written text and its apparent potential for enslavement. The articulation of remembrance on Whitechapel's body has to be counter-remembrance; it is not consciously transcribed (unlike received remembrance), and cannot imitate official forms of remembrance. Like moments of *mnēmē*, this kind of involuntary *hypomnēsis* cannot be affected or voluntarily created and, as an expression of a slave's experience, it is necessarily at odds with received remembrance. Whitechapel, like Mintah, tries to forget what he has witnessed, but trauma is

⁴² Derrida, p. 108.

inscribed onto his body – it ‘rises to the surface’ of his skin. Like Mintah’s journal, Whitechapel’s body can be seen as a repeating monument to slavery (and an exteriorisation of the mental trauma of this past) which bears witness to the ‘longest memory’ or – more accurately, the ‘longest remembering’ of slavery.

The role of Whitechapel’s body as a receptacle of remembering is contrasted by D’Aguiar with that of Chapel. Whereas the former slave’s body functions as a physical manifestation of counter-remembering, Chapel’s body moves from being initially a site of pleasure to a symbol of the danger of not remembering the slave past, a claim which necessitates explanation. His character is connected to transgression – both in terms of his exploration of literature and his mapping of the white slave-owning woman’s body. As Lydia reports: ‘[o]ur hands explore each other’s bodies in the dark. We carry on with our talk, memorizing each other’s lines throughout’ (p. 93). The interconnection between literature and illicit sex is convincingly illustrated with the pun on memorising lines of poetry alongside the lines of the body, although, unlike his father, Chapel of course does not have the crucial lines of experience – the wrinkles that carry *hypomnēsis*. As the ownership of a slave’s body resided with the master, Chapel’s pleasurable use of his body suggests that it was already the site of rebellion long before he ran away. The removal of his body, and hence his labour, is a further rebellion or ‘grand theft’ from the plantation (p. 107). Once recaptured, his body then becomes a spectacle of punishment, as Sanders Junior adamantly states: ‘[t]here is no way this nigger is not going to face the usual punishment for his crime. An example must be set’ (p. 24). If Whitechapel’s body can be seen as bearing witness to the traumatic remembrance of slavery, Chapel’s body is, correspondingly, the site of not remembering this past. As Whitechapel comes to realise, Chapel seems to lack this remembered past (or, to borrow Foucault’s earlier term, he is revealed by *Herkunft*) because he is not, biologically, his son:

I tell you everything I know, everything I see and hear and work out for myself, as a slave. [...] It should suit a son of mine, born a total slave. But not with your blood. What I say can never be enough for you. (p. 135)

Only Whitechapel sees Chapel’s identity as being problematised by his biological parentage. In the eyes of Sanders Senior and Junior, Chapel is, without doubt, a ‘total slave’. Rejecting any

filial ties, Sanders Junior confesses to the deceased Whitechapel, 'I am sorry about your son. Not my brother. I knew him only as the son of a slave' (p. 130). The punishment administered to him by Sanders Junior upon his recapture can be seen as an attempt at reminding him of his 'place' as a slave. The whip reaffirms the notion that Chapel's body is owned by another, as Whitechapel recalls: 'I literally saw the boy surrender to that whip, those blows, the whole rhythm of lash, pause, lash and tense, breathe, tense. I saw it in his eyes. They looked at me, at us all, for one last time' (p. 5). Finally submitting to the rhythm of slavery, as Chapel looks at his father and the surrounding slaves, his eyes reflect his sudden identification with them. In suggesting that Chapel's death has been caused by his lack of remembrance of the slave past, D'Aguiar indicates the problem of genealogical remembrance or *hypomnēsis* on the body. It is not available to all, and not remembering, as Chapel found, can be endangering.

As I have shown via Derrida's essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', *The Longest Memory* can be seen as exploring the diaphanous distinction between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*, as well as highlighting the *hypomnētic* roles of counter- and collective remembrance in challenging historical accounts of the past of slavery and ensuring the past is not forgotten. If memory, as *mnēmē*, cannot be uncoupled from trauma and is, in any case, directly inaccessible or 'veiled' from the present, *hypomnēsis* perhaps offers a way of remembering this past. I have suggested that *The Longest Memory* offers two means of possible *hypomnēsis*, though D'Aguiar articulates the problems associated with both forms of remembering. Unashamedly artificial, the imagined counter-remembering offered by *The Longest Memory* infers that the novel can perhaps also be thought of as a kind of monument for remembering the past of slavery. However, this monument is irrevocably flawed. The notion that literature can unproblematically perform a *hypomnētic* function has been challenged with reference to the *pharmakon*, which revealed it to be an inadequate and potentially dangerous form of remembrance. At the same time, as the remembrance of slavery through genealogy and the body is unavailable to many, this vehicle for *hypomnēsis* can be seen an equally troubled method of remembrance. This impasse renders *The Longest Memory* a deliberately perplexing text. Whilst indicating the necessity of remembering the past of slavery, it is unable to offer a means of attaining a state of *hypomnēsis* without either enslaving or exiling those that hope to remember.

Feeding the Ghosts

This is a fact of my heritage. So how can it be over? How can it ever be conferred to a condition of non-being when it lived, still lives, in me? And not just in me. In the names of streets, in the graveyards, in the literature of public and private libraries, in the very architecture that stores these books, my records (at least of when I was born) are reminders of this past, this present, this future, this slavery. (Fred D'Aguiar, 'The Last Essay About Slavery')⁴³

In 'The Last Essay About Slavery', D'Aguiar struggles with the notion that slavery is a spectral 'condition of non-being'; instead, he claims that this is a past which 'still lives' within him. I would suggest, however, that it is precisely the wraithlike nature of slavery that, paradoxically, enables it to be simultaneously over and yet continuous. The public reminders of the ghostly legacies of this past in Britain's architecture and written records also testify to slavery's continuation into the present and envisaged future. As I explore, both in my reading of *Feeding the Ghosts* and, later, in *Bloodlines*, slavery may well have ended, but its legacies, such as racism, exist still as spectral mementos of this past.

D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* examines one such ghostly legacy, recounting the tale of the slave-ship *Zong*, where 132 slaves were jettisoned – the subject for J. M. W. Turner's painting and Dabydeen's poem 'Turner', which I examined in my last chapter. Alongside the ill slaves jettisoned by the crew, in D'Aguiar's version, a healthy female slave called Mintah is thrown overboard on the orders not of the captain, but of his first mate, James Kelsal.⁴⁴ The motivation behind this order is her apparent 'insubordination' in questioning the act of jettison of sick slaves; another reason for Kelsal's reaction is revealed later on in the novel, when we learn that he had previously been shipwrecked and nursed to health at an African mission by Mintah. She manages to climb up a trailing rope back on board, and hides in the store cupboard, assisted by the sympathetic cook's assistant, Simon. Following a failed insurrection, instigated by Mintah, she is recaptured. The second part of the book details the ensuing court case, where

⁴³ D'Aguiar, 'Last Essay', p. 131.

⁴⁴ In fact, it was a male slave who managed to climb back into the ship. Gail Low explores the implications of D'Aguiar's gendering of the slave as female in her essay 'The Memory of Slavery in Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*', in *Post-Colonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon*, ed. by Deborah L. Madsen (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1999), pp. 104-119, (pp. 108-109).

the insurers refused to pay for the jettisoned slaves. Mintah's account of the voyage, written aboard the ship, is submitted by Simon as evidence of the crew's barbarity in throwing overboard slaves less ill than suggested by the captain, but is soon dismissed as an improbable 'ghost story'. The final part of the novel, set in 1833, sees Mintah living in Kingston, Jamaica, watching an emancipation parade. Now an old woman, surrounded by wooden carvings she has made of the slaves that were drowned, she – deliberately or accidentally – sets fire to herself and her house.

In my reading of *Feeding the Ghosts* I will explore the intertextual relationships between D'Aguiar's novel, earlier Caribbean writing by Walcott and Brathwaite, and the peculiar case of the *Zong*, which has had an unusually prominent role in the received history of abolition. This approach enables me to examine some of the problems D'Aguiar may have with how this past has previously been represented. As we shall see, his novel is particularly unique in its focus on the spectral nature of trauma and to explore what might be seen as the ghostliness of D'Aguiar's text with reference to Jean-François Lyotard and Theodor Adorno. The intertextuality of *Feeding the Ghosts* may be seen as initiating the novel's ghostliness, as each retelling of the *Zong* arguably enacts a spectral visitation from this past. It is, however, ultimately the recurring and haunting nature of trauma that is the particular crux of this novel.

Feeding the Ghosts is framed by a prologue and epilogue which attest to the continuation of legacies of the slave trade: '[t]here is only the fact of the *Zong* and its unending voyage and those deaths that cannot be undone. Where death has begun but remains unfinished because it recurs' (p. 230).⁴⁵ D'Aguiar seems to suggest in this quotation both the repetitive nature of trauma and that, by ignoring this past, we perpetuate the legacy of deaths aboard the *Zong*; a reminder that '[t]he *Zong* is on the high seas. Men, women and children are thrown overboard by the captain and his crew. One of them is me. One of them is you' (p. 229). This notion is reinforced if we look at the way in which D'Aguiar responds to the epigraphs he

⁴⁵ As Dori Laub writes, '[t]rauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect'. See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 69.

chooses to preface his novel. One is taken from Kamau Brathwaite's poem 'Calypso', which I shall return to shortly, and the other is from Derek Walcott's poem 'The Sea is History':

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is history.⁴⁶

This historicisation of the ocean is transformed in D'Aguiar's prologue to a more obvious statement explicitly linking the Atlantic ocean with slavery: '[t]he sea is slavery' (p. 3). The substitution of the word 'history' for 'slavery' reiterates the importance for D'Aguiar of slavery to the history of the Caribbean, though slavery is also a central concern of Walcott's poem:

Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.
Bone soldered by coral to bone,
mosaics
mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow.⁴⁷

Following on from Walcott, in his association of history with slavery, D'Aguiar also arguably suggests that history is a form of enslavement. By excluding the voices of slaves, Britain's received historical remembrance of this past ensures slaves retain a subaltern and ghostly presence, represented in the novel by Mintah. Similarly, in the prologue of *Feeding the Ghosts*, D'Aguiar writes: '[o]ver three days 131 such bodies, no, 132, are flung at this sea. Each lands with a sound that the sea absorbs and silences. Each opens a wound in the sea that heals over each body without the evidence of a scar' (p. 3). If, as he indicates, the sea 'is history', then history is guilty of concealing the past of slavery – it is precisely this kind of historical amnesia concerning British slavery that D'Aguiar writes against, choosing instead to represent this past through literature. In addition to answering received history's inadequate representation of slavery, there is also a need to counter the silence surrounding this past by expressing its trauma

⁴⁶ Derek Walcott, 'The Sea Is History', *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), I. 1.

⁴⁷ Walcott, I. 10.

– as Mintah finds, silence can be painful. D’Aguiar suggests the pressing demands of slavery to be communicated, though he struggles, as I show, to do so.

Several critics have spent time exploring the relationship between D’Aguiar’s novel and Walcott’s poem, but the link to Brathwaite’s poem has been neglected.⁴⁸ As mentioned, D’Aguiar has also chosen as an epigraph the opening line from ‘Calypso’: ‘[t]he stone had skidded arc’d and bloomed into islands’.⁴⁹ This poem of Caribbean island life is one in which plantation slavery is central:

The islands roared into green plantations
ruled by silver sugar cane
sweat and profit
cutlass profit
islands ruled by sugar cane.⁵⁰

We are ironically told by the narrator that ‘it was a wonderful time | a profitable hospitable well-worth-your-time’.⁵¹ In addition to the ‘cutlass profit’ gained from the plantations, the captains carry :

[...] receipts for rices
letters spices wigs
opera glasses swaggering asses
debtors vices pigs.⁵²

Although his poem alludes to slavery, conspicuous in their absence from this list are the slaves.⁵³ D’Aguiar, in contrast, is explicit about the cargo carried by the *Zong*. Brathwaite’s poem explores Caribbean history before and during the slave trade, and into the twentieth century, alluding to postwar migration away from the region. In so doing, he traces the legacies of slavery into the present: this is also something, as I have indicated, with which D’Aguiar is

⁴⁸ One of the most successful of these projects is Gail Low’s previously mentioned essay, in which she carefully unravels the novel’s relationship not only to ‘The Sea is History’, but also the poems ‘Names’ and ‘The Schooner *Flight*’.

⁴⁹ Edward Brathwaite, ‘Calypso’, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), I. 1.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, II. 1.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, II. 6.

⁵² *ibid.*, II. 8.

⁵³ One could see this as illustrative of Brathwaite’s desire to avoid cataloguing slaves as ‘stock’, commonly listed alongside inanimate objects aboard the ships. John Newton, for example, records in his journal entry of 9th March 1751: ‘[t]he boat returned, brought 6 casks of water and 6 slaves from Mr Tucker’s, 2 men, 1 woman, 1 boy, 2 undersized girls.’ See Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, ed. by Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: Epworth Press, 1962), p. 39.

fascinated. Whilst his focus in *Feeding the Ghosts* is specifically on Britain's involvement in slavery, as I shall show, he shares with Brathwaite the desire to expose the continuation of slavery's legacies into the twentieth century; for D'Aguiar, these are particularly evident in the perpetual evolution of racism.

The literary legacies of Walcott and Brathwaite are not, as I have mentioned, the only intertextual connections in the novel. The way in which the story of the *Zong* has been retold is crucial in D'Aguiar's response to this past; this was an exceptionally publicised story in a history largely concealed from the eyes of the general public. Although Wood has described the middle passage as 'initially the primary site for the depiction of the trauma of slavery in terms of the problems it posed for the art and collective consciences of European and American societies', outside the perimeters of abolitionist discourse, there have been few literary attempts to represent the middle passage.⁵⁴ I indicated in my reading of 'Turner' that there is something morally necessary, but aesthetically troubling, about creating art from the past of slavery. The works of the authors I have looked at which, with some frequency, return to the site of the middle passage, engage with the inherent problems of this quandary.⁵⁵ If contemporary authors are compelled, through the continuation of legacies of slavery, to return to this past, then the particular story of the *Zong* has had an unprecedented importance. As has been illustrated by my work on 'Turner' and *A Harlot's Progress*, the case of the *Zong* has become infamous – a true 'ghost ship' of mythic proportions.⁵⁶ The way the story of this ship has been used is important, as the myth surrounding the *Zong* can arguably be seen as having played a vital role in the mystification of Britain's involvement in the slave trade. Ian Baucom writes in his aptly-titled essay 'Specters of the Atlantic' (2001) that the story of the *Zong*

acquired a good deal of notoriety in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The massacre, recorded in the trial documents, the pages of the *Morning Chronicle*, and in one letter after another in Granville Sharp's set of transatlantic correspondences, was soon recounted once again by John Newton, Ottobah Cuguano [sic], and Thomas Clarkson.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 14.

⁵⁵ The *Zong* has, however, as we have seen, provoked some visual and poetic depictions. Wedderburn recounts the jettison of 'cargo' in his poem 'The Desponding Negro' (1824); see Wedderburn, p. 91.

⁵⁶ Michelle Cliff has also returned to the past of the *Zong* in her novel *Abeng* (1984).

⁵⁷ Ian Baucom, 'Specters of the Atlantic', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100:1 (2001), 61-82 (p. 64).

The names of prominent abolitionists – Newton, Cugoana and Clarkson – indicate that the *Zong* had a significant effect on the course of slavery abolition. As Hugh Thomas writes, the case proved to be of importance for the future treatment of slaves: '[s]uch events as the massacre on the *Zong* had occurred before, but now there was much more concern about the question of slavery and there were now methods whereby protest could be articulated'.⁵⁸

The many ways in which the story of the *Zong* has been recounted and represented suggests that D'Aguiar's imaginative re-telling adds to a long history of narrating this past. The case of the *Zong* was, it seems, uncommonly shocking; as James Walvin writes, the captain's order was, 'even in the age of the slave trade, a grotesque suggestion'.⁵⁹ It is, however, important to note that the court case was concerned with assessing whether or not the captain was correct to jettison his property – it was not a murder trial, as slaves were considered to be cargo.⁶⁰ It was not until 1796 that a ruling was made that slaves could not be viewed purely as merchandise, when a Liverpool slave merchant claimed insurance money for 128 slaves who had starved to death on an unusually long voyage.⁶¹ The case of the *Zong* became notorious in the nineteenth century, then, because of its significant role in the cause of abolition. However, as I have suggested in my introduction, the success of this campaign has meant that Britain's involvement in the slave trade is primarily remembered (if at all) along these lines. Building on D'Aguiar's claim that 'the sea [...] heals over each body without the evidence of a scar', is the notion that, by emphasising its prominence in slavery's abolition, the history of the *Zong* ironically may well have become complicit in concealing Britain's role in the early stages of the transatlantic slave trade. Such are the mechanics of official forms of remembrance – something

⁵⁸ Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870* (1997; London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Papermac, 1998), p. 489. James Walvin has also claimed that '[t]he line of dissent from the *Zong* to the successful campaign for abolition was direct and unbroken, however protracted and uneven.' See Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: Fontana, 1993), p. 19.

⁵⁹ Walvin, *Black Ivory*, p. 16. Robert Weisbord similarly concurs: 'eighteenth-century England [was] a notably calloused age. [...] Nevertheless, by the standards of that or almost any era the case of the slave-ship *Zong* is incredibly shocking'. See Weisbord, 'The Case of the Slave-Ship "*Zong*", 1783', in *History Today*, 19:8 (1969), 561-567 (p. 561).

⁶⁰ As Walvin writes in *Black Ivory*: '[t]he slave system hinged on the concept of the slave as a thing: a chattel, a piece of property. It was a concept which from the first contained an obvious contradiction: how could a human being be a thing?' (p. 19).

⁶¹ As Peter Fryer wryly notes, '[a]t one point Lord Chief Justice Kenyon pointedly asked whether the captain of the ship had starved to death, and was told that he had not. The merchant lost his case'. See Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 130.

D'Aguiar attempts to avoid. The suggestion that mythologising the *Zong* enables its legend to obscure the early years of slavery can be seen as adding to D'Aguiar's difficulty of responding to this past. The (mis)use of the history of slavery in order to construct a fallacy that Britain ended, rather than instigated, the slave trade indicates another way in which the history of this past has been enslaving. As we saw in *The Longest Memory*, it is this dissatisfaction with received remembrance that leads D'Aguiar towards forms of counter-remembrance: arguably represented in *Feeding the Ghosts* by Mintah's carving.

The inadequacy of historical accounts of Britain's slave trade means that although he may have based his novel on factual events, D'Aguiar does not limit his story by conforming to historical accuracy, an act which has provoked Barry Unsworth's severest criticism of the novel. Unsworth writes that, unlike D'Aguiar's bored magistrate presiding over the court case who is unable to think far beyond his awaiting lunch of a 'pleasant pheasant' (p. 171), the real Judge Mansfield 'was not really like this at all. He was scrupulous, deeply divided [...] Can he be thus traduced to serve authorial purposes?'.⁶² Yet, Unsworth had already earlier conceded in his review that '[t]his is not just a particular vessel, not just a particular instance of terrible cruelty. The whole of the African slave-trade is summed up in it.'⁶³ D'Aguiar is not writing history, though his tale is inspired by historical facts – his alteration of the captain's name from Collingwood to Cunningham is illustrative of his refusal to conform to historical factuality. Instead, he problematises received history, not wishing to add to received remembrance, or a way of writing about this past which distorts Britain's involvement in the slave trade. *Feeding the Ghosts* raises the particular question of what is to be done with the historical legacy of the *Zong*; as the narrator reveals in the epilogue, '[a]ll the knowledge has done is to burden me' (p. 229).

In the case of the *Zong*, therefore, the moment the slaves were thrown overboard, they entered into history – used as propaganda in the war against the slave trade. D'Aguiar vividly suggests, in his continuing aquatic metaphor, that history has manipulated the past of slavery. When history *does* look at this past, he seems to argue, it violates the slaves in so doing:

⁶² Barry Unsworth, 'Murder on the High Seas', *Sunday Times*, 7 September 1997 in *NewsBank* <<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com>> [accessed 24 February 2005], (para. 6 of 7).

⁶³ Unsworth, (para. 4 of 7).

Sea refuses to grant that body the quiet of a grave in the ground. Instead it rolls that body across its terrain, sends that body down into its depths, its stellar dark, swells the body to bursting point, tumbles it beyond the reach of horizons and gradually breaks fragments from that body with its nibbling, dissecting current. (p. 4)

The drowned slaves are consigned to the murky depths and rendered anonymous and untraceable by the devouring current. Unlike the *Zong*'s captain, whose existence was recorded in court proceedings and newspapers, and so remains a visible and verifiable presence in historical accounts, details about the slaves are scant – the number of slaves jettisoned is the extent of the information.⁶⁴ At the same time, the case of the *Zong* was poured over by abolitionists and historians – indicating in the above quotation a lack of respect for, and even violation of, the dead. D'Aguiar implies that the slaves jettisoned from the *Zong* have been used by these people in a way that prevents them reaching a 'quiet grave'. As we shall see, he is all too aware that his novel adds to the catalogue of retellings of this past and, whilst raising the problem that history may abuse the past of slavery, the slaves of *Feeding the Ghosts* are equally unable to rest peacefully by the novel's close.

If the *Zong* had become a well-known case by the early nineteenth century, by the twentieth century, it had largely been forgotten. British twentieth-century ignorance concerning slavery is central to D'Aguiar's poem 'At the Grave of the Unknown African' (1993), in which he writes of the graveyard vandal: '[i]f he knew not so much my name but what happened to Africans, | he'd maybe put in an hour or two collecting his Heinekens'.⁶⁵ The continued lack of awareness of, and refusal to recognise, the significant part played by Britain in the transatlantic slave trade amounts to a vandalism of the past of African slaves. In *Feeding the Ghosts* D'Aguiar's imaginative recounting of the slave ship *Zong* works against this ignorance of the slave trade – specifically raising the profile of the events of 1781. In order to further explore this missing and ghostly past of Britain's history of slavery, let us turn to D'Aguiar's poem 'Feeding the Ghosts', taken from *Mama Dot* (1985):

⁶⁴ Except for the assertion, already indicated, that the slave that managed to climb back on board was male.

⁶⁵ Fred D'Aguiar, 'At The Grave of the Unknown African', *An English Sampler: New and Selected Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), II. 5.

A solid absence, picturing the lost gold
Of El Dorado; the ruins of Great Zimbabwe.

A sudden shudder like the dive of mercury
Escaping a thermometer through minus.

The legs are the grassy brink of a precipice;
the kerosene-wick of a lamp kindles a volcano.

A tropical night, yet windows open wide
Cannot draw any of a thousand insects in.

Generations of dust, in floorboard creases, stir.⁶⁶

This brief and overlooked poem's articulation of the existence of ancestral 'ghosts' that haunt the present suggests not only the continuation, or legacies, of the past, but also indicates a much earlier link between Africa and Guyana – widely believed to be the location of El Dorado – than that forged by the transatlantic slave trade.⁶⁷ D'Aguiar intimates that thinking about and remembering the past is important in terms of challenging received remembrance. In his novel *Feeding the Ghosts*, he suggests that Britain's silenced slave-trading past is also a, perhaps ghostly, 'solid absence' against which he writes. By returning to the subject of slavery, he rouses and reanimates the ghosts, which can be seen as functioning as a metaphor for a traumatic past. D'Aguiar seems unable to offer a suggestion of how to examine slavery without enacting a recurring and traumatic haunting of this past; as I show in a moment, this is also precisely Mintah's predicament.

The novel's title immediately foregrounds the importance of ghosts, as remnants of the past, to the present, and the demands of the past to be remembered. The rhetoric of slavery's ghostliness can be provocatively read alongside the work of Theodor Adorno. In an essay entitled 'Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz' (1966), Adorno claims that, for holocaust trauma victims, '[t]hinking men and artists have not infrequently described a sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a

⁶⁶ D'Aguiar, 'Feeding the Ghosts', *An English Sampler*, I. 1.

⁶⁷ Supported, for example, by V. S. Naipaul's book *The Loss of El Dorado* (London: André Deutsch, 1969) and D. Graham Burnett's book *Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

kind of spectator'.⁶⁸ The etymological closeness of the words 'spectator' and 'spectre' also evokes an otherworldliness or sense of 'otherness' within society. In addition, he asserts:

it is not wrong to raise the [...] question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who has escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. [...] By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.⁶⁹

Whilst Adorno's articulation of the repetition of traumatic experience in the survivors of Auschwitz finds an unlikely resonance in *Feeding the Ghosts*, its emphasis on the recurring and haunting nature of trauma is particularly relevant to D'Aguiar's novel. In *Feeding the Ghosts*, the ghosts of the title are not only the slaves jettisoned by Collingwood and his men, but also slaves like Mintah who 'by rights should have been killed', but escaped death and are forever 'plagued by dreams' – held by the force and horror of their memories. This approach to Mintah may well explain why, as each slave is thrown into the water, she hears her name, not theirs: 'I asked the sick their names and heard mine instead. "Mintah," they seemed to say. Death' (p. 213). This equation of her name with death signals not only her guilt for having survived, but her inability to forget the fate that should have befallen her. Furthermore, as the narrator of her book, Mintah is described with some frequency as a ghost – a kind of spectator/spectre – her book being 'penned by a ghost, it seems, since the hand has not been produced here today in this court to prove its authorship' (p. 169). D'Aguiar seems to suggest through his spectral figures that he is haunted by the legacy of the *Zong*; the absence of slave testimonies or narratives about this past ensures its slaves remain, like Mintah, ghostly presences. The demands of the past to be remembered in the present compel D'Aguiar to retell this story. The intention is, for him, for the past to be 'laid to rest' when told (p. 230) but, as we shall see, the novel proves this to be an unrealistic aim: once again, the problems of remembering slavery come to preoccupy the novel.

⁶⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz', in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O' Connor (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 85-88 (p. 87). First published in German in *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966).

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

Ultimately, Mintah's account is dismissed, outweighed by the authority and presence of the captain's slave ledger: '[w]hich are we to believe? The captain's account or the ghost-written musings' (p. 170). Her status as 'ghost' renders her not quite real or believable – the court, unable to conceive that a slave could create this text, assumes it has been 'ghost-written'. Adorno has similarly written:

The only trouble with self-preservation is that we cannot help suspecting the life to which it attaches us of turning into something that makes us shudder: into a specter, a piece of the world of ghosts, which our working consciousness perceives to be nonexistent. The guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life [...] – this guilt is irreconcilable with living.⁷⁰

As Adorno argues, the survivors of an event that killed many others discover their lives transformed into something unreal; they find themselves at odds with reality – a 'piece of the world of ghosts'. Borrowing this phrase, we can see that Mintah, as a spectre, also resides in 'the world of ghosts'; an in-between place, caught between past and present, present and future: 'I live in the past and dream in the future. The present time is nothing to me [...] The sea keeps me *between* my life. Time runs on the spot, neither backwards nor forwards' (p. 199).⁷¹ We can see in this suspension of time the corresponding notion – seemingly paradoxical – that slavery has ended, yet its effects continue – a reminder of '*this past, this present, this future, this slavery*'.⁷² Arguably, Mintah's guilt also becomes 'irreconcilable with living', despite her various attempts to deal with it: '[g]hosts needed to be fed. She carved and wrote to assuage their hunger' (p. 222). These attempts include, alongside carving, planting trees ('[o]ne tree for each soul lost on the *Zong*', p. 219). Further, in Maryland, she helps slaves escape north to freedom: '[f]or every one thrown to the sea I multiplied by two in Maryland when I acted as guide' (p. 209).

Initially, writing her book is also part of Mintah's attempt to ease the guilt of having survived the middle passage, unlike so many of her fellow slaves, and becomes a form of

⁷⁰ Adorno, 'Meditations', pp. 87-88.

⁷¹ Dori Laub similarly writes that '[t]he traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of "otherness"'. See Felman and Laub, p. 69.

⁷² D'Aguiar, 'Last Essay', p. 131.

testimony. Optimistically, she views this outpouring as an initial 'release' from witnessing and a means of forgetting:

How much can anyone remember? The head cannot retain everything. [...] Most of what I do is not worthy of being stored in my head. Or it hurts too much to store it. So I let it go. I wrap it up like the respected dead and release it with a prayer or fling it unceremoniously like the disrespected living into a sea of forgetting. Writing can contain the worst things. So I forget on paper. (p. 196)

The pain of remembrance suggests the necessity of forgetting – something Mintah attempts to achieve through writing. She is desperate for memorial, or *hypomnēsis* rather than *mnēmē*. We can see the way in which all her memories are linked to events aboard the *Zong*; she is unable to uncouple remembering from trauma. When her written account is dismissed as a 'ghost-book' (p. 173), it becomes an unheard testimony which leaves her unable to forget or 'jettison' what she has seen. As Dori Laub writes in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), 'if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma – a *re-experiencing of the event itself*'.⁷³ We also learn that, in Kingston, '[n]o one knew her story, because she had not bothered to tell it' (p. 222). Mintah therefore suffers a traumatic re-experiencing of events:

The one-hundred-and-thirty-second lives far inland: can never set foot on water again, never look at an expanse of water wider than a river bridgeable with a pelted stone [...] Sometimes a savannah will start to tumble bundles of bracken across its flat face and suddenly, through some trick of the light and heat, it will tremble into a seascape and that bracken will become tossed into a sea current and this one-hundred-and-thirty-second body will have to be a witness again. (pp. 4-5)

This moment illustrates the repetitive aspect of trauma or, borrowing Derrida's term, *mnēmē*, where memories repeatedly hold Mintah witness to the past of the *Zong*. The permeating nature of what she has experienced is such that her mind re-creates the events aboard the *Zong* even in the antithetical geographical location of a grassy plain.

⁷³ Felman and Laub, p. 67. Further, Laub notes that '[t]he absence of an empathic listener, or [...] addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story. And it is, precisely, this ultimate annihilation of a narrative that, fundamentally, *cannot be heard* and of a story that *cannot be witnessed*, which constitutes the mortal eighty-first blow' (p. 68).

The issues raised by the inexpressibility of Mintah's past and the dismissal of her account from the court proceedings can also be understood with reference to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983). In this, Lyotard writes that '[t]he differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence'.⁷⁴ On board the *Zong*, with the realisation that Mintah cannot end the deaths of her fellow slaves, and following an unanswerable question from a fellow slave, she is silent:

'Why are they throwing us away?' Mintah was being shaken. The imploring voice echoed in her with the same question but a little louder with each repetition and echo. A hand was attempting to untie her gag. Mintah moved her head away and shook off the hand. (p. 41)

Illustrated by Mintah's refusal to allow her gag to be removed is the notion that silence is a typical response to horror of this magnitude; such a hitherto unthinkable act renders her unable to phrase a response.⁷⁵ To quote Lyotard again:

In the differend, something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence [...] that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist.⁷⁶

Lyotard identifies the need to voice experience but also cites the troubling realisation that words can be incommensurate with traumatic encounters. He proposes that silence is painful – it is physically necessary to talk about trauma – though he posits the immense chasm between what needs to be expressed and what can be comfortably accommodated within the existing limits of language. Phrases which exceed or transcend those limits necessitate the development of new modes of expression. Mintah is all too aware that what 'remains to be phrased' exceeds what can, in fact, be phrased. Because her previous attempt at writing her story was discounted, rather

⁷⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 13. First published in French as *Le différend* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983).

⁷⁵ For a study on the trope of muteness in Holocaust fiction, see Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

⁷⁶ Lyotard, p. 13.

than narrate her story again in conventional ways, she instead 'institutes idioms which do not yet exist' by carving figures of those that were jettisoned: '[t]here are 131 of them. A veritable army' (p. 209). Thinking back to Derrida's terminology, for Mintah, the figures act as a kind of *hypomnēsis*, or form of remembering the past of the *Zong* which is a repeated monument to the memory of this past, rather than the flashes of memory that characterise *mnēmē*. Mintah wants to forget the traumatic past, but her *hypomnētic* carvings, which act as a counter-remembrance to the received remembrance (or history) of the *Zong*, fail to arrest the pain. This may be because the repeating monument to the past enacted by *hypomnēsis* implies a sense of fixity. For Mintah, the trauma is frozen and endlessly repeating, held in motion by the memorialising form of *hypomnēsis*.

In his book on Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan, *Remnants of Song* (2000), Ulrich Baer notes that

Celan's unenviable and devastating task is to testify to a horrendous reality that no one ever wanted to experience or know. He had to find an adequate frame for representing what seems to exceed all known forms of comprehension and representation. Celan's historical burden of writing poetry after Auschwitz consists in the unprecedented challenge of representing an event *as* unrepresentable and *as* irremediably other.⁷⁷

The above quotation recognises the paradox of trying to represent an event which is 'unrepresentable'. Baer indicates that an inability to express what has been witnessed necessitates going beyond normal 'frame[s] for representing'. Part of Celan's approach therefore is to represent the event honestly as unrepresentable or 'other', pushing beyond the limits of representation. In a similar way, Mintah's sculptures also testify to the unrepresentable nature of the past of slavery, and are indisputably 'other' – illustrated by the unease with which they are regarded: '[t]he shape of each piece is pulled from the sea of my mind and has been shaped by water, with water's contours. People say they see a figure of some kind, man, woman or child reaching up out of the depths' (pp. 208-9). The uncertain reception of her carvings suggests that, as Mintah is going beyond limits of representation, her figures are difficult, ambivalent and complicated. As she notes, while people may appreciate what she does, they

⁷⁷ Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity on Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.

'cannot keep such a shape in their homes. Such shapes do not quench a thirst. They unsettle a stomach. Fill the eyes with unease' (p. 209).

Mintah is compelled, then, to try to carve the past, yet unable to exorcise the ghosts of the *Zong*. Carving is, for her, arguably a new medium for remembering what has happened, though it is important to note that this medium of carving is both successful and unsuccessful. The creation of her ghostly army permits Mintah to remember the events of the *Zong*, but ultimately fails in allowing her to forget. Instead, her carvings may be seen as enacting a retraumatisation; this seems to be the crux of her pain – she is unable successfully to transform *mnēmē* into memorial, or *hypomnēsis* by the acts of writing or carving. D'Aguiar's conviction that this is not, ultimately, a successful means of forgetting the trauma of the *Zong* is illustrated by the pessimistic ending of his story. As Mintah dies, she watches the 'dancing, leaping figures' as they are animated by the flames (p. 226). The reanimated ghosts of the *Zong* suggest that the trauma of this past overcomes her attempts to 'forget'. The veil between memory and remembering is permeable; the trauma of *mnēmē* pervades her *hypomnētic* figures. Instead of permitting Mintah to forget the past of the *Zong*, her carving arguably feeds the trauma.

D'Aguiar's reasons for re-examining the past of slavery are clearly enunciated in 'The Last Essay About Slavery':

I have tried to imagine without success a last poem, a last play, a last novel, a last song, about slavery: final acts of creativity in this given area that would somehow disqualify any future need to return to it in these forms. The will to write such a thing is itself a call for slavery to be confined to the past once and for all; for slavery's relevance to present anxieties about race to come to an end; to kill slavery off.⁷⁸

It is important to note that D'Aguiar's imaginings are 'without success' – we may also think of the way in which Mintah is ultimately unsuccessful with her carvings. Both succeed in creating representations of slavery but are unsuccessful in carving or narrating definitive versions of this past, or 'exorcising' the ghosts of slavery, which would negate the need for successive renderings. *Feeding the Ghosts* cannot, therefore, be the last novel about slavery. The past of slavery requires, it would seem, continual revisiting in order to acknowledge its ghosts and so

⁷⁸ D'Aguiar, 'Last Essay', p. 125.

lay the past 'to rest'. D'Aguiar suggests that slavery cannot be 'over' whilst the spectre of this past lives on in him and other descendants of slaves and the force of its legacies continues to be keenly felt in current racial 'anxieties'. *Feeding the Ghosts* sees D'Aguiar attempt to engage with the spectres of the *Zong* in order to free its slaves, and him, from being defined by these historical legacies.

It remains, however, a contradictory novel which suggests that the past is 'laid to rest when told', yet acknowledges that the *Zong* is also 'on the high seas'. Whilst D'Aguiar's novel raises the difficulty of what to do with the historical legacies of slavery, his ghosts feed not on history but on 'stories of themselves'. *Feeding the Ghosts* indicates the moral necessity of retelling the past of the *Zong* and, in the aftermath of history's failure, attempts to instigate new idioms in which to phrase the trauma of slavery. D'Aguiar is, however, also aware that his text is caught in an impossible position; there is a need to express the painful past of slavery, but returning to this past arguably 'feeds' the ghosts and reawakens the trauma of slavery, illustrating the impossibility of 'forget[ting] on paper'. D'Aguiar seems painfully aware in this text that he cannot formulate a solution to this problem, when each *hypomnētic* retelling can also retraumatise. Slavery is not dead – partly because of ongoing racism, but also because remembering, though important, sees the perpetuity of the traumatic past in the repeating monument of *hypomnēsis*.

Bloodlines

We joke about associating only with other couples [...] with an equal distribution of the two races between them. Our children. We stop. The words hang in the air. Two stars that have dropped from the heavens to a point just above our heads and as bright as two suns. Our children. Yes. Our children. Several of them. (Fred D'Aguiar, *The Longest Memory*, p. 103)

Like the narrator figures of *Feeding the Ghosts* and Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*, the life of the central narrator of D'Aguiar's long poem *Bloodlines* has spanned centuries. In the course of the poem, he traces the evolving relationship between his parents. Faith, a black slave, was raped by Christy, a white son of a slave-owner, but they gradually fall in love. The couple run

away together, and are aided in their plan to move north by Tom and Stella, two ex-slaves in the Underground Railroad movement. Unfortunately, as Tom steers their boat across the river, they are ambushed and Christy and Faith become separated from Tom, whom they presume dead. They eventually find refuge in a barn, but a gang of white men happen upon them and, after repeatedly raping Faith and humiliating Christy, Faith is sold back into slavery to Mr and Mrs Mason. Christy, captured for indenture, becomes a boxer. Faith dies shortly after giving birth to the narrator and Christy, unable to locate either Faith or his son, is buried a pauper. Meanwhile, Tom and Stella survive through the years of the American Civil War and enjoy the book's only happiness. The narrator records his journeys to find his father and laments his inability to die, rendered animate by the continuing of legacies of slavery.⁷⁹ Alongside the central narrator, chapters are also narrated by Faith, Christy, Mrs Mason, Stella and Tom. D'Aguiar deploys the ottava rima form throughout his text, a style appropriate to the nineteenth-century 'beginning' of the tale.⁸⁰ As I will indicate, his choice of form is no mere whim, but has important implications for his concerns about the apparent 'vogue' of texts written about slavery.

Bloodlines, arguably, is a much more problematic and morally-challenging text than *The Longest Memory* or *Feeding the Ghosts*, particularly in relation to the portrayal of female roles. My opening quotation from *The Longest Memory* introduces the notion of the transformative power of sexual relations between black and white people; a premise devastatingly challenged in *Bloodlines*. Published six years after *The Longest Memory*, *Bloodlines* is characterised by a pervading cynicism regarding the potential of relationships between mixed-race couples. The optimism of my opening quotation, which shapes the stellar imagery of Chapel and Lydia's future hopes for children, is contrasted in *Bloodlines* with the mixed-race narrator, who is the child of Faith and Christy. As I will show, he is orphaned and alone, fruitlessly searching for a place to 'belong' and subject to continuing racism and violence. My intention initially is to examine the most difficult, or problematic aspects of this text, beginning with the relationship between Christy and Faith and moving on to explore the

⁷⁹ The narrator is named after his father, but in order to avoid confusion, I shall continue to refer to him as 'the narrator'.

⁸⁰ The ottava rima, introduced by Wyatt, was most famously the form employed by Byron in *Don Juan* (1819-24).

form of the poem. I shall then consider why I believe *Bloodlines* is not merely, as several critics suggest, one of D'Aguiar's weaker texts, but makes an important contribution to his continuing concerns with the ethics of representing slavery and the remembrance of this past. As I demonstrate, *Bloodlines* can provocatively be seen as an example of what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory'.⁸¹ The text arguably enacts a postmemorialisation of slavery which is gloomily resigned to the impossibility of ending the legacies of this trade.

Towards the start of the poem, there occurs the rape at knifepoint of a female slave, Faith – a moment arguably handled by D'Aguiar without due sensitivity or gravitas. In order that I may explain the difficulties created by the way in which he handles the moment of rape, it is necessary to quote from his text at length:

He knew what to do to make her scared –
he made the deep impression of a scar

by pressing the knife on her face. She turned rigid,
wooden, and he mounted her and he rode
flat out as she shut her mind down to get rid
of him in her and made herself a lifeless board
under his weight, his teeth biting, his rancid
breath, his hips, its thrust, its sudden load,
the knife threatening to break her skin,
so she had to, she had to, let him in (p. 6).

D'Aguiar suggests in this passage the level of trauma experienced by Faith as she 'shut[s] her mind down' to her violation. She does not, it is clear from the above passage, yield willingly to Christy's assault. Yet, as Christy rapes Faith, D'Aguiar writes of 'her hate burning to love' (p. 6). In the midst of being raped, therefore, he suggests that Faith falls in love with her rapist. This seemingly untroubled shift of Christy's category from rapist to suitor arguably perpetuates the myth that women essentially enjoy the masochism of violent relationships.⁸² Following Faith's rape by the group of men, it is significant that he dreams of her 'in an orgy instead of her

⁸¹ M. Hirsch, 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 2-23 (p. 8).

⁸² Carole Vance writes that '[w]omen are encouraged to assent that all male sexuality done to them is pleasurable and liberatory: women really enjoy being raped but can't admit it'. See Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality' (1984) in *Feminisms*, ed. by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 327-335 (p. 329). For more on the way in which raped women have been portrayed as the instigators of the assault, see Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981). A contrary argument is posed by Camille Paglia in her books *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays* (1992) and *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays* (1994).

trials' (p. 73). The worrying suggestion that Faith 'chooses' Christy precisely because he uses force to subdue her seems to correlate to the notion of 'hate burning to love' and a deliberate confusion by D'Aguiar of the two states.

If the act of rape is not already dealt with in a contentious-enough way in *Bloodlines*, it is further problematised by race; it is, specifically, the rape of a black woman by a white man. This adds a further, difficult, layer to the already problematic aspect of rape. The racist view of the apparently 'harlot' or sexualised nature of black women has been explored by a range of scholars. Berry and Blassingame, for example, have written that, until the last decades of the twentieth century, white men were 'fascinated' by black people. They note that black women featured in the majority of their fantasies, writing that: '[t]he image of the black woman was that she was the most sensuous, exotic, mysterious, and voluptuous female in the world – the embodiment of passion'.⁸³ The apparent abundance of passion and subsequent dehumanisation of black women has also been examined by bell hooks, who writes in *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) that:

The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system. White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped.⁸⁴

In *Bloodlines*, the sexual exploitation of black women is shown to be institutionalised within the slave trade; as Christy's father tells him, Christy was expected to 'fuck as many as [he] liked' (p. 17). It is perhaps logical, then, that he at first apparently shares this view of Faith, imaging her to be initiating the 'relationship':

when she locked eyes with his
all he could think of was that she was there
because she wanted him, making easy this
thing he was always doing with a slave;
the polar opposite of her motive. (p. 4)

⁸³ Berry and Blassingame, p. 115. They add that '[g]iven the belief in the ungovernable passion of blacks, the rape of a black woman by a white man was a legal *non sequiter*. She stood defenseless before the bar of justice because it was always assumed that she had been the seducer' (p. 115).

⁸⁴ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 52.

Christy assumes that Faith is, in hooks's terminology, a 'sexual savage', despite her intention of ceasing his unwanted attention. D'Aguiar's handling of the scene differs markedly from Phillips's sensitivity of writing about women or Dabydeen's bawdy, eighteenth-century tone. D'Aguiar seems in this text to write carelessly about his female protagonist and, as is to be expected, some reviewers have picked up on the book's apparent misogyny. Bruce King, for example, has noted in his review of *Bloodlines* that, '[w]e are to believe that a black slave raped at knifepoint by a lusty young white man will fall in love with him and he with her. It seems more like de Sade than the romantic tale that follows.'⁸⁵

From the start of this text, then, important issues are raised, via D'Aguiar's portrayal of the rape of a slave, surrounding the ethics of writing about slavery; the most pressing being whether his writing ought to be categorised as exposing the 'pornography of Empire' or an act of de Sadean titillation, as King infers. The narrator reports that, as a child, he was informed by other children:

My mother was raped and I came along,
that was the truth and I should confess
and drop this love-match, love-child crap. (p. 50)

In this quotation, D'Aguiar not only challenges the concept of 'truth' but illustrates he is aware how the relationship could be viewed, arguably forestalling his reader's thoughts to desist in calling rape, 'love'.

I would suggest, contrary to King, that D'Aguiar's portrayal of rape serves an important and threefold metaphorical purpose and is not merely insensitive writing. Firstly, D'Aguiar indicates through his long-suffering female protagonist – the aptly-named Faith – the inherent misogyny of slavery in nineteenth-century America. As mentioned, black women were persistently abused by white men on the plantations. *The Longest Memory*, of course, also included the violent rape of Cook by Sanders Senior, although, and less controversially, she failed to love Sanders Senior despite, or because of, her violation.

⁸⁵ Bruce King, 'Bloodlines', *World Literature Today*, 75:1 (2001) in *Literature Online* <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 22 February 2005], (para. 4 of 5).

Secondly, bell hooks provides another possible explanation for his handling of the scene in her comments about the 'devaluation of black womanhood'. She cites this devaluation as stemming from the aforementioned sexual exploitation of black women during the slave trade and suggests that it has been perpetuated into the twentieth century.⁸⁶ Referring to Susan Brownmiller's book about rape, *Against Our Will* (1975), hooks notes:

While Brownmiller successfully impresses upon readers the fact that white men brutally assaulted black women during slavery, she minimizes the impact that oppression has had on all black women in America by placing it solely in the limited historical context of an 'institutionalized crime' during slavery.⁸⁷

By confining the rape of, and violence towards, black women by white men to the past of slavery, hooks argues, writers like Brownmiller fail to address the continuing problem of violence against black women in the twentieth century.⁸⁸ Like the continued devaluation of black womanhood, D'Aguiar's novel offers intimations of the things that extend from the time of slavery into the present day – such as racism, violence and sexism – the act of rape of black women by white men conflating all three elements.⁸⁹ D'Aguiar's narrator is unable to die until the 'conditions of slavery' end, reiterating D'Aguiar's argument in 'The Last Essay About Slavery' that there cannot be a last text about this past because slavery is not yet dead: '[t]his is a fact of my heritage. So how can it be over? How can it ever be conferred to a condition of non-being when it lived, still lives, in me?'.⁹⁰ The *Zong* is perpetually on the high seas: it is, D'Aguiar reminds us, 'the present, not slavery, [that] refuses to allow slavery to go away'.⁹¹

⁸⁶ hooks, p. 53.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 52.

⁸⁸ hooks's argument is a comparable precursor to the aforementioned claims by James Procter that, by focusing on the *Windrush* period of black British arrival, some white Britons seek to minimise the role of black Britons in contemporary Britain. See introduction to *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. by James Procter (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1-12 (pp. 1-2).

⁸⁹ Although hooks also notes that white men (rather than black men) continued to be identified in the late twentieth century as potential rapists for black women: '[t]he emphasis on the white male as sexual exploiter in black communities often deflects attention away from black male sexual exploitation of black women', indicating another persistent legacy of slavery (p. 68).

⁹⁰ D'Aguiar, 'Last Essay', p. 131.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 126.

Bloodlines therefore sees a renewal of D'Aguiar's concerns with the continuation of slavery and, in particular, with the ongoing problem of racism in the twenty-first century as a legacy of this past. The narrator's existence captures this concern:

So history greeted me. I am condemned
to live an eternity, unless all the conditions
that brought me into being somehow mend:
I mean Slavery and all its ramifications
marching unfazed into the new millennium.
Everything that I see in countries and nations
tells me this is true: Slavery may be buried,
but it's not dead, its offspring, Racism, still breeds. (p. 150)

The conditions that brought him into being were, of course, slavery but also rape. Christy's rape of Faith therefore stands as a metaphor for slavery and an example of what D'Aguiar suggests was the prevailing engagement between black women and white men during the first half of the nineteenth century. He can therefore be seen as intimating that the violation of women has been perpetuated, like racism, into the twenty-first century:

it has always
been and will always be the white man's way:

to take what he wants when he wants,
how he wants, to go where he pleases
when he wishes. (p. 5)

By indicating the continuation of this abuse via his 'timeless' narrator, D'Aguiar arguably avoids hooks's charges of confining this kind of violation of women to the historical past.

Thirdly, I want to suggest that much of the motivation behind the violent opening section of *Bloodlines* is derived from D'Aguiar's attempt to persuade his reader of the difficult nature of relationships between black and white people during the time of slavery and the ultimate failure of inter-racial love as a vehicle for transforming the legacies of this past. In *The Longest Memory*, the love and hopes of Chapel and Lydia for children as a method of healing the damage done by slavery were thwarted by Chapel's death. In *Bloodlines*, the relationship between black and white people is also ended through separation and provided with finality by the death of Faith. As I illustrate in a moment, *Feeding the Ghosts* is no more optimistic about mixed-race relationships, suggesting that D'Aguiar feels these relations were impossible at this

time. Evident from *Feeding the Ghosts*, *The Longest Memory* and *Bloodlines*, he is interested in mixed-race relationships, or those that defied the norms of nineteenth-century America and Britain. D'Aguiar makes clear, however, that these relationships are especially problematic and, in *Bloodlines*, uses rape as a way of suggesting their perpetually uneven footing. He infers the relationship between Faith and Christy is compromised by a fundamental inequality, inviting us to '[p]icture those two if you can, arm-in-arm, | master and slave' (p. 18). They are therefore ultimately unable to move beyond their historically-prescribed roles in this text. The unsteadiness of their relationship is in direct comparison to that of Tom and Stella, who are portrayed as starting off on a more even level; both are ex-slaves and are able to find happiness, despite hardship.

As my opening quotation suggested, utopian hopes for an harmonious future for black and white people are dashed in *Bloodlines*. D'Aguiar declines to provide a happy ending; the bond of love between Christy and Faith is unconvincing and, following their separation, Faith soon dies. I would contend that D'Aguiar is refusing to transcend a relationship that began in violence; in so doing, he does not minimise the psychological damage enacted by rape, or make it (returning to the earlier metaphor, like slavery) something easily dismissed. Bruce King therefore seems to miss the irony of *Bloodlines*; this text deliberately withholds a happy conclusion, even if their son believes that 'Christy and Faith's love survives their deaths. | They go hand-in-hand into the black and blue' (p. 144). Faith pays the ultimate price for Christy's rape: it effectively kills her with the birth of her son, suggesting that although the central characters make an attempt to forge a relationship together, ultimately, the violence and trauma (which D'Aguiar implies inevitable in relationships between white men and black women at this time) cannot be transcended. We can see in this failure to provide positive conclusions to his texts the fatally dispiriting way in which D'Aguiar indicates the futility of attempts to transcend slavery via the idealisation of mixed-race relationships. He offers no hope that this is, or even should be, possible; we should not forget or minimise the damage perpetrated at the start of *Bloodlines*. As I shall indicate in a moment, the poem can be seen as being caught in a state of anguished postmemory, where postmemories of this past and the continuing legacies of slavery forestall a transformative counter-remembrance.

From such sordid beginnings, D'Aguiar proposes, only sadness can follow. The narrator is correspondingly troubled and leads a wandering, unfulfilled life: 'I am the singer and the song – | lest you forget – wrong-doer and wronged' (p. 153). He is informed by Mr Mason:

You don't know who you are because, young
man, you're nobody, neither black nor white!
You occupy a no-man's-land! You belong
nowhere! (p. 48)

The narrator's itinerant sense of unbelonging can be attributed to his mixed-race origins, like Chapel in *The Longest Memory*, who also struggled with his role as a slave – unknowingly because of his dual racial parentage. D'Aguiar's narrator in *Bloodlines* is a fitting emblem of the legacies of slavery because he embodies both 'sides' of slavery and is accordingly riddled with contradictions. He has inherited the plantation from Mrs Mason, yet, as partly born of a slave, feels he should work upon it. Slavery has left, it seems, difficult legacies:

Surrounded by my inheritance, immersed,
daily telling myself I am a dog-eared mule
to be laden, beaten, ridden, harnessed,
my immortal side bends all the rules
that keep my slave side well versed
in hard work, hoping to kill the soul
by wrecking the body. I am master,
slave and overseer bringing disaster. (p. 152)

The narrator's troubled position as 'master, slave and overseer' indicates the complexity of the legacies of slavery. D'Aguiar is questioning the simplicity and idealism of the transformative potential of love. From rapist to knight, slaver to abolitionist, later actions cannot, he implies in this text, be permitted to overshadow earlier ones. As I indicate in a moment, he also does not pander to the vogue for an affirmative story about slaves overcoming their oppression.

If *Bloodlines* is troubled at times by its author's use of rape as a means of suggesting the misogynistic and continuing nature of slavery, it is, at others, made increasingly difficult by its ottava rima form which requires a patient reading. Consequently, D'Aguiar's poetic talent has been questioned in reviews of this book. Bruce King has noted, for example, that 'D'Aguiar shows daring in using such a stanza and the resulting tones to describe the violence of slavery,

but it does not work. The tone feels wrong.’⁹² Robert Nye has similarly claimed that the ottava rima form ‘hardly lends itself to D’Aguiar’s seriousness. [...] The form constricts the content and works against it’.⁹³ Richard King’s even more damning review suggests that ‘[t]he poem fails in its mission [... because] it is just so awful to read’. He continues, adding that

So determined is D’Aguiar to stick with the eight-line stanza that, overall, the poem probably has about twice as many words as it needs. The lines [...] all but stagger to their painful ends, or rather their conclusions, an unremitting stream of pointless explication pervading the whole mess.⁹⁴

At the time of the publication of *Bloodlines*, D’Aguiar had published three novels and four editions of poetry; it seems unlikely, therefore, that it is just an uncharacteristically poor text or the ‘unremitting stream of pointless explication’ King believes it to be. If we turn for a moment to one of the more indelicate moments in *Bloodlines*:

‘Not you only, Faith, the two of us.
Whatever you do, I do; when you fall
pregnant we’ll bear our children simultaneous-
ly.’ ‘Yes! Christy, let’s turn with you still
in me.’ (p. 59)

The unsophisticated rhymes and painful rhythm are typical of the poem. The writing is so unwieldy, in fact, that towards the beginning, the narrator apologises for his anachronistic vocabulary: ‘[h]e would never have said hood, but wait, | he doesn’t have to rhyme every other line’ (p.17). The deliberately ungraceful writing exhibited by the narrator of *Bloodlines* can be compared with the eloquence of D’Aguiar’s writing in poems such as ‘Shadow Play’ (2001):

There isn’t enough light in the world.
Too many shadows define what I’ve become
Forcing me to register only those shapes
Shaded from the light and shadowed
By the shade; amorphous, pellucid and cold.⁹⁵

⁹² Bruce King, (para. 3 of 5).

⁹³ Robert Nye, ‘No Rhythm in the Heart of Darkness’, *The Times*, 2 August 2000, section Times 2, p. 18.

⁹⁴ Richard King, ‘I Fell “Lurve”’, *PN Review*, 27:4 (2001) in *Literature Online* <<http://0-lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 22 February 2005], (para. 4 of 8).

⁹⁵ Fred D’Aguiar, ‘Shadow Play’, *An English Sampler*, I. 1,

Nor can the clumsy rhymes of *Bloodlines* be entirely a product of his unfamiliarity with older verse forms such as the ottava rima. He is much more successful in earlier attempts at adopting the sonnet form in his poem 'The Last Sonnet About Slavery' (1996):

*Put your hand on my shoulder, dear mistress.
Hands as delicate should not hang in the air
But find ample places to pose and rest.
And since my shoulders, my head, the hair
On it, all belong to you, let those hands
Settle anywhere on me but do not let them float
Aimlessly, nor be idle, nor stand
Out as if they had no greater goal.*⁹⁶

As we can see here, an intimacy with metre and style creates a flowing and poised verse which carefully depicts the unequal relationship between servant and mistress in eighteenth-century Britain. D'Aguiar's deployment of a verse form most commonly associated with love poetry also infers a closer relationship between the portrait sitters.

D'Aguiar does not, on the whole, write 'bad' poetry, therefore, even when adhering to inflexible verse forms. Rather – as Richard King suggests – the unwieldy form of *Bloodlines* perhaps contains an implication for the way in which form and content can interact in examining the past of slavery. King proposes: '[i]t may be said that the narrator of *Bloodlines* is purposefully drawn as incompetent'; indeed, the failure of rhyme could be a 'strategic failure, the slavish nature of the rhyming work at one with the lives of the black protagonists'.⁹⁷ He suggests, then, that D'Aguiar has chosen the confining and difficult ottava rima form in order to comment on the oppression of slavery. However, although I would agree that the form of *Bloodlines* should not be ignored, King's claims about its oppressiveness seem rather unconvincing. D'Aguiar has chosen a particularly unusual and difficult form in which to narrate his story – one which distorts and fragments his sentences and words. Depictions of rape, violence, racism and the poem's obtuse verse and faltering rhythm arguably collude to prevent an easy or enjoyable exploration of the past of slavery. D'Aguiar ensures, in his ungainly text, that it is not going to be comfortable for the reader; this will not be a slave narrative to appease those readers who wish for a redemptive conclusion.

⁹⁶ D'Aguiar, 'Last Essay', p. 144.

⁹⁷ Richard King, (para. 7 of 8).

There is an earlier precedent for poetic sequences about slavery in a Caribbean context set by the epics of Brathwaite, and Dabydeen's long poem 'Turner' also examined the past of slavery – this time focusing on Britain's role in the trade. The American setting and focus on plantation slavery makes *Bloodlines* different again, and a poetic form is particularly helpful to D'Aguiar in allowing his narrator to move through centuries in a more condensed way. After writing about the involvement of Britain and America in the slave trade in his novels *Feeding the Ghosts* and *The Longest Memory*, turning to poetry arguably dissociates further D'Aguiar from the simulacrum of the slave narrative. In my reading of *The Longest Memory*, I explored Chapel's oscillating relationship with literature; equally bewitched and ensnared by the text which, I also suggested, indicated D'Aguiar's own reservations about prose forms. I have argued that *The Longest Memory* is adamantly not slave narrative simulacrum and his choice of poetry for the genre of *Bloodlines* could be seen as an even more radical attempt to avoid the dangers of the slave narrative *pharmakon*.⁹⁸ The number of novels about slavery published in the last decade of the twentieth century reinforces Dabydeen's claims about 'peasantry' being 'in vogue'. Writing about slavery in prose is a popular choice and, by writing in poetry, D'Aguiar therefore seeks to avoid the normalising propensity of prose or its ability to 'conceal the dead under the appearance of the living'.⁹⁹ The contemporary, self-conscious references of *Bloodlines* ensure it also does not attempt to imitate nineteenth-century poetry by slaves such as Phillis Wheatley.¹⁰⁰ As in *The Longest Memory*, in this text D'Aguiar does not attempt to offer a beautifying or transformative work about slavery.

The title of *Bloodlines* alludes not only to the act of writing, but also to the genealogical lines in the veins: the myth of collective memory, or remembering, carried by blood. In my reading of *The Longest Memory* I suggested that Chapel lacked a collective memory of slavery,

⁹⁸ Writing about rape also distances *Bloodlines* from simulating slave narratives, as Cynthia S. Hamilton notes, rape was 'the often alluded to, but 'unspeakable subject' of nineteenth-century American slave narratives. See Hamilton, 'Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative', *Journal of American Studies*, 30 (1996), 429-445 (p. 435).

⁹⁹ Derrida, p. 142.

¹⁰⁰ D'Aguiar opens his essay 'Have You Been Here Long? Black Poetry in Britain' with an exploration of the work of Phillis Wheatley. See D'Aguiar, in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 51-71.

which was soon brutally inscribed on his body by the whip. D'Aguiar also explores this notion of inherited collective memory in *Bloodlines*:

I am the lives of slaves. Every move
I make obeys orders from an overseer.
First he is a whip, a kick, a rude
mouth, a fist and spit, yes sir, no sir. (p. 150)

The narrator, although not a slave, carries the 'lives of slaves' within him – indicating the perpetuation of experiences of slavery for those born of slaves; though, once again, this is, to be accurate, remembering rather than memory. Marianne Hirsch explains the term 'postmemory' in an essay entitled 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy' (1999), which I wish to borrow for my reading of *Bloodlines*.¹⁰¹ Postmemory is defined by Hirsch as the relationship between the experiences of those who have undergone trauma and their children, who 'remember' their parents' experiences as stories or images, though these 'are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right'.¹⁰² Postmemory, as Hirsch uses it, is applicable to what she calls the 'second generation' of trauma witnesses; that is, the children of Holocaust survivors. As Hirsch adds, this is not, therefore, a term referring to *mnēmē*, or living memories; the name 'postmemory' is intended to indicate its 'its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its belatedness'.¹⁰³ Given the temporal distance between slavery and the present, postmemories of this past can only ever be belated. Ultimately, for Hirsch,

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of their previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create.¹⁰⁴

The life of D'Aguiar's narrator is dominated by the narratives of Christy and Faith and, as a result, he devotes his time to tracing his father and trying to come to terms with his ancestry as well as the larger past of slavery. The narrator appears to struggle with postmemories of slavery;

¹⁰¹ Hirsch introduced the term in her essay 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile', in *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, ed. by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 418-446.

¹⁰² Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', p. 8.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴ Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', p. 8.

this is also, I would contend, the challenge facing D'Aguiar. He is aware, in his disinterest in simulating slave narratives or poetry, that the past of slavery cannot be 're-created'. Rather than try to do this, therefore, D'Aguiar attempts to understand slavery through *new* creation. However, the paralysing narratives of postmemories of slavery arguably dominate *Bloodlines*, as D'Aguiar and his narrator are unable to relinquish the fundamentally incomprehensible and unsettling memories of this past.

Bloodlines seems, therefore, caught in what can be viewed as a sombre condition of postmemorialisation. Although conceptualised in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch is adamant that she does not wish 'to restrict the notion of postmemory to the remembrance of the Holocaust', and is clear in suggesting the wider scope offered by the term.¹⁰⁵ As Hirsch adds,

It is a question of conceiving oneself as multiply interconnected with others of the same, of previous, and of subsequent generations, of the same and of other – proximate or distant – cultures and subcultures. It is a question, more specifically, of an *ethical* relation to the oppressed or persecuted other for which postmemory can serve as a model.¹⁰⁶

Unlike *hypomnēsis* via the body, postmemory, as conceptualised by Hirsch, is not restricted to actual descendants of trauma but is expanded to include the 'ethical' and multiple connections between twentieth- or twenty-first-century readers and the past of slavery. The postmemorialisation of slavery can be seen as a central concern in the work of my authors who grapple with the earlier 'narratives' and 'traumatic events' pertaining to the slave trade. Hirsch notes in 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile' (1998):

Holocaust postmemory [...] attempts to bridge more than just a temporal divide. The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora. 'Home' is always elsewhere.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14:1 (2001), 5-37 (p. 11).

¹⁰⁶ Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', p. 9.

¹⁰⁷ Hirsch, 'Past Lives', p. 420.

This is, of course, the same conclusion D'Aguiar had reached in his poem entitled 'Home' from *British Subjects* (1993), in which he writes of the airport official 'telling [him] with Surrey loam caked | on the tongue, home is always elsewhere'.¹⁰⁸ The extended scope for postmemory suggested by Hirsch therefore has interesting implications for black writers within Britain who, as I have shown – particularly in my chapter on Phillips – often struggle with the notion of 'home'.

As Hirsch continues, the 'condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is characteristic of postmemory'.¹⁰⁹ The exiled diasporic experience is arguably reflected within *Bloodlines* in the articulation of the narrator's condition of unbelonging:

I have no one left on earth to speak of.
No flesh and scent I can follow away
from harm. No names to drop, or trip off
my tongue. No 'mother' or 'father' to say
without thinking. Only a gap big enough
for me to spend the rest of my days
between earth and sky, my cloudy head
humming full of Slavery's towering dead. (p. 146)

We can see in this extract the difficulty of examining the past of slavery for D'Aguiar, with no living witnesses – just a 'gap' between present and past. Slavery cannot be ignored, however; the narrator's head 'hums' with the dead of this past. Hirsch signals that possibly the most taxing issue for those exploring art forms of postmemorialisation concerns the appropriateness of identification:

The challenge for the postmemorial artist is precisely to find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster, but that disallows an overappropriative identification that makes the distances disappear, creating too available, too easy an access to this particular past.¹¹⁰

D'Aguiar employs various distancing effects in *Bloodlines* – rape, deliberately 'poor' poetry, twenty-first-century references – as I have already suggested, many of the most perturbing features of the poem can be seen as methods of distancing the reader from the slave past. The

¹⁰⁸ D'Aguiar, 'Home', I. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Hirsch, 'Past Lives', p. 421.

¹¹⁰ Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', p. 10.

twenty-first-century references enhance the text's eschewal of slave narrative simulacrum, and the conspiring violent content and troublesome form further alienate the reader and point to D'Aguiar's intention to avoid an 'overappropriative' identification with this past. In refusing to provide an uplifting story about the potential of love between races as a means of overcoming slavery, *Bloodlines* does not, as I have indicated, offer an easy access into this past.

It is also vitally important to be sensitive to the distance between the lives of slaves and the writers under examination in this thesis, in their admitted twenty-first-century positions of privilege. As Dabydeen has candidly commented in an interview with Lars Eckstein: '[Caryl] Phillips is a wealthy man who drives a big limousine up and down in New York. What f***ing scars has he got?'.¹¹¹ He concludes that 'we have to be honest with the subject and say, "Really, it happened a long time ago to our ancestors"'.¹¹² Slavery ended more than one hundred and fifty years ago, -yet it is not a too-distant past and is one which, for my authors, requires continual revisiting and exploration. Hirsch identifies a similar desire to work through trauma in the work of Dominick LaCapra:

He has distinguished between two memorial positions: acting out (melancholia) and working through (mourning). Acting out is based on tragic identification and the constitution of one's self as a surrogate victim. It is based on overidentification and repetition. Keeping the wounds open, it results in retraumatization. Working through, on the other hand, involves self-reflexivity, a determination of responsibility, some amount of distance.¹¹³

Melancholia, where the writer enacts a 'tragic identification' is the kind of position Dabydeen hopes to avoid in his call for honesty in writing about slavery.¹¹⁴ This concern is clearly shared by D'Aguiar and the notion of retraumatization is also particularly crucial to his work. As I have suggested, characters like Mintah and Whitechapel are unable to escape retraumatization by their memories of slavery. For the narrator of *Bloodlines*, retraumatization occurs through the postmemory of his parents' past. The distancing effects utilised in *Bloodlines* create a necessary

¹¹¹ Lars Eckstein, 'Getting Back to the Idea of Art as Art – An Interview with David Dabydeen', *World Literature Written in English*, 39:1 (2001), 27-36 (p. 30).

¹¹² Eckstein, p. 30. Dabydeen adds: 'by and large we writers who write about slavery live f***ing privileged lives in the West. [...] I'm a Professor at Cambridge, I'm a fellow of the Royal Society' (p. 30).

¹¹³ Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', p. 16.

¹¹⁴ In the abovementioned interview with Eckstein, Dabydeen adds: 'you can't write about slavery in a flat, flattened way with a [...] parade of grievances or with a display of "look how hurt I am, look at my scars"'. See Eckstein, p. 30.

gap which indicates D'Aguiar's desire to elucidate the difference between his texts, which examine the slave past in an imaginative way, and slave testimony. This space enables him, in Hirsch's words, to attempt to 'work through' the past of slavery. As Dabydeen reminds us, we have perhaps moved on from this past. However, while the material position of black people in Britain and the United States has undoubtedly improved since the demise of the slave trade, we are left with malingering racial prejudices from this period which have not been entirely banished and continue to affect trauma. Correspondingly, in *Bloodlines* D'Aguiar's narrator encounters the living legacy of twentieth-century racism when using a public standpipe:

A crowd gathers and one of them empties
paraffin on me. Either I am too stubborn
to catch alight or the famous humidity
softens their matches. I start to run,
they give chase. My crime? I only
failed to read the sign, Whites Only. (p. 156)

It would seem that D'Aguiar is unable to offer hope for this particular legacy of slavery ending. His poem attempts to work through the past of slavery, but he finds this is not entirely possible – there can be, he affirms, no final text yet about this past because slavery has not truly ended.

Such pessimism would seem to be contrary to received readings of texts about slavery that seek to identify messages of hope from the struggles of protagonists. In her essay "'Where Else to Row, but Backward?'" Addressing Caribbean Futures through Re-visions of the Past' (1999), Paula Burnett examines six Caribbean texts which explore the past of slavery, including *Feeding The Ghosts*. She claims that the texts 'produc[e] art which devises subtle strategies of resistance and survival – and celebration'.¹¹⁵ Given D'Aguiar's apparent pessimism regarding the continuation of damaging legacies of slavery, I would question the extent to which his texts can be seen as a celebratory. Towards the end of *Feeding the Ghosts*, he provides the reader with a glimpse into the kind of happy ending he *could* have written, as Mintah describes the effects of Simon's embrace:

¹¹⁵ Paula Burnett, "'Where Else to Row, but Backward?'" Addressing Caribbean Futures through Re-visions of the Past', *Ariel*, 30:1 (1999), 11-37 (p. 34). The texts under discussion in her essay are: 'Turner', *Feeding the Ghosts*, *A Way in the World*, *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, *Palace of the Peacock* and *The Bounty*.

I am unburdened. [...] The lives of the men, women and children in the hold must benefit from this lightness, this bodiless in my body. Their chains must fall from them and they too must float like me [...] With such lightness I can take the wheel of the *Zong* and swing it until the *Zong* turns around. (p. 202)

This quotation indicates her belief in the beneficial potential of her relationship with Simon – she imagines it possible to turn the slave ship around, and thus halt slavery. Yet this moment quickly passes and the novel's close rejects a reunion between Mintah and Simon: '[s]he awoke from dozing by her front door. Shade had succeeded sun. Simon had not come' (p. 222). The *Zong* has not, D'Aguiar suggests, been anchored once and for all by the transformative relations between black and white people. In each of his texts that I have examined relationships between mixed-race couples have ended in the death of one of the lovers. Borrowing Walcott's trope of the rower, however, Burnett suggests in her essay that D'Aguiar, Dabydeen, V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott and Paula Melville, 'share an awareness that while history still hurts, the timeless zone of myth, if imaginatively read, can provide landmarks to progress, so that the mytheopoeic artist may row the people's boat steadily towards a more benign future'.¹¹⁶ To continue the watery trope, in my reading the *Zong* does not progress to a benign future, however, but drifts on the high seas in a perpetual mode of postmemorial anguish. This is a state reinforced by *The Longest Memory* and *Bloodlines*; the narrator of the latter text finally realises the impossibility of healing through love the rift between races generated by slavery:

I ask myself if I am ready
to die and leave Slavery and feel no regret
that white remains white and black is black. (p. 159)

The Longest Memory, *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Bloodlines* may all present the possibility, however fleeting, of a 'benign future' enabled by a transforming relationship between black and white men and women, but ultimately reject the utopian potential of such meetings.

D'Aguiar, perhaps even more pessimistically, indicates in *Bloodlines* that the trauma of slavery can never be entirely 'worked through'. Slavery, he repeatedly tells us, persists in the racism of today. Even twenty-first-century generations of black and white people cannot alter

¹¹⁶ Burnett, p. 35.

the conditions of how they first met historically, in the violent period of slavery. There is no way of forgetting or assuaging the fact of slavery. As with Christy's unconvincing metamorphosis from rapist to knight, later actions (abolition, twentieth-century migration, anti-discriminatory laws and so on) cannot neatly appease the past.

In this respect, *Bloodlines* challenges the notion proposed by Cynthia S. Hamilton that a text about slavery should be one that offers hope of a positive message of overcoming oppression. Hamilton, writing of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), suggests that '[t]he basic problem of the novel concerns the need to transform facts of unspeakable horror into a life-giving story, for the individual, for the black community, and for the nation.'¹¹⁷ This comment implies there should be some kind of affirmative message that can be taken from the 'unspeakable horror' of slavery, or indeed, that a traumatic past can be interpreted into a hopeful fictional text. This notion of transformation arguably runs contrary to the work of D'Aguiar, who finds the notion that the past of slavery can be translated in such a way difficult or even impossible to achieve. Adamant that slavery is not over, he is unable to offer a positive message for 'the individual, for the black community, [or] for the nation'. Nor can this pessimism be entirely seen as indicative of a peculiarly British approach to writing about the past of slavery; as I have posited, in novels like *Crossing the River*, Phillips – quoting Martin Luther King – offers the possibility 'that the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood' (p. 237). D'Aguiar, however, does not share his optimism about the possibility of harmony between races.

Instead, *Bloodlines* arguably offers a form of postmemorial mourning described by Hirsch, who writes that

postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall. I mourns a loss that cannot be repaired. And, because even the act of mourning is secondary, the lost object can never be incorporated and mourning can never be overcome.¹¹⁸

D'Aguiar's works also suggest that in the absence of living witnesses or accounts from-slaves, and where history fails him in returning to the past of slavery, he is compelled creatively to

¹¹⁷ Hamilton, p. 429.

¹¹⁸ Hirsch, 'Past Lives', p. 422.

imagine this past. But he, too, cannot overcome mourning; just as his narrator's head 'hum[s] full of Slavery's towering dead', D'Aguiar reveals in his texts that slavery cannot be forgotten or easily dismissed. *Bloodlines*, like *The Longest Memory* and *Feeding the Ghosts*, is not a hopeful text. It can perhaps be read as a postmemorial to slavery, though it does not mark the demise of the trade, but rather mourns the continuation of aspects of this past in the racism of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The texts explored in this chapter indicate that D'Aguiar's main concern in examining slavery is with the memory of this past. He explores different means of remembrance including, in *The Longest Memory*, the possibilities offered by counter- and collective remembrance as forms of *hypomnēsis*. As we saw, the idea of remembering being documented on the body was shown to be flawed by its genetic exclusiveness, while a literary remembrance was open to the dangers of the *pharmakon* and the 'vogue' for writing novels about slavery or beautifying this past through literature.

Feeding the Ghosts reinforced the integral nature of trauma in remembrance of slavery – a notion first articulated in Whitechapel's struggles with remembering his past. As each method of remembrance was explored, problematised and finally rejected by D'Aguiar, he seems ultimately unable to propose a satisfactory means of remembering the past of slavery. As I have indicated in my reading of *Bloodlines*, however, postmemory is possibly the most helpful notion in explaining the relationship of works by contemporary authors to this past. As an additional form of *hypomnēsis*, or remembering, postmemory is available to a wider range of people in its rejection of genetic ties to former slaves in favour of ethical relations to this past. In her essay 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', Hirsch contends that 'the postmemorial generation [...] has been able to make repetition not an instrument of fixity or paralysis or simple retraumatization (as it often is for survivors of

trauma), but a *mostly* helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past'.¹¹⁹ Crucially, then, she suggests that postmemorial repetition enables a 'mostly helpful' means of working through traumatic pasts. In the texts of D'Aguiar I have explored in this chapter we can see that postmemorialisation of slavery also offers him a possible way of trying to work through the traumatic past of slavery. However, Hirsch's careful use of the word 'mostly' is important in signalling the existence of unhelpful aspects of postmemorial repetition and, in D'Aguiar's works, it is also suggested that the repetition of traumatic pasts may problematically enact the fixity of traumatic positions. In *Feeding the Ghosts*, this is best illustrated in the continual sailing of the slave-ship *Zong* and, in *Bloodlines*, we have seen the narrator trapped in an unending existence by the actions of previous generations, unable to alter the outcome or end the painful legacies of slavery. D'Aguiar seems, despite trying, ultimately unable to go beyond the trauma of slavery's remembrance – his work often occupies a position unhappily poised between the two states outlined by Hirsch above: working through and paralysis.

If not completely paralysed by postmemories of slavery, *The Longest Memory*, *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Bloodlines* occupy certainly limited positions – unable to cease traumatic repetitions, they are caught in an ongoing condition of postmemorial anguish which does not allow D'Aguiar entirely to work through the past of slavery. His belief in the unending existence of this past suggests that, for D'Aguiar, this is not something that *can* be worked through. This tendency towards despair ensures his outlook on slavery is very different from the positions of Phillips and Dabydeen, as my conclusion shall now consider.

¹¹⁹ Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 9.

Conclusion

In her recent book *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Anne Whitehead remarks upon the propensity of novels by contemporary authors that figure ghosts:

In contemporary fiction, there has been an abundance of novels which explore haunted histories. The traces of unresolved past events, or the ghosts of those who died too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned, possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living.¹

As we can see, Whitehead suggests such hauntings do not occur indiscriminately, but arise specifically from the failure of past events to be resolved, or the living to adequately mourn 'those who died too suddenly and violently'. Such ghosts 'possess' those that are alive, and prevent them from continuing 'the task of living'. Whitehead's comments about the persistency of unresolved pasts to trouble the living may be seen to be of particular resonance with regard to the works of Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar that I have explored in this thesis.

Although each author has different motivations for, and concerns with, returning to the past of slavery, which I shall explore in a moment, the trope of ghostly visitations runs through their works. Such hauntings assume different forms, including manifestations of survivor guilt for those who lived through the middle passage, the guilt of parents that have betrayed their children, and the faint presence of slaves in historical records. As these examples testify, ghosts are figured in different ways, but for Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar, such spectres collectively signify their shared conviction that legacies of slavery extend into the twenty-first century, as well as indicating that this past continues to haunt their imaginations.

I began this study by noting that slavery has been overlooked in received historical narratives of Britain. The texts I have explored by the above writers attempt to readdress this silence surrounding slavery and illustrate why it is important that this past is not forgotten. I have demonstrated that each author has had a particular struggle with creating literature about slavery. We saw that Phillips's works are involved with exploring the pasts absent from

¹ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 6.

received British history; the exclusion of certain groups from this narrative, he proposes, is an instrumental factor in twentieth- and twenty-first-century problems with British national identity. Overlooking the slave past arguably enables the persistent coalition of race and nationality which leaves some Britons feeling excluded or marginalised. On the other hand, Dabydeen appears troubled by the act of representing slavery without exploiting this past or inadvertently contributing to the ongoing 'pornography of empire'. Whilst deeply concerned with matters of audience and the reception of works on slavery, he paradoxically produces poems and novels complicit in the very process of representation that he problematises. In contrast, the works of D'Aguiar, I intimated, may be thought of as held in a static position of postmemorial repetition: there is a need to remember the slave trade, but D'Aguiar wrestles with the means of doing so without re-traumatising or adding to the wealth of received remembrance. Remembering the past of slavery is essential, D'Aguiar suggests, but equally crucial is the means of remembrance.

The varying problems and difficulties experienced by all three writers imply that there can be no straightforward representation or remembrance of slavery. Each insists, however, that awareness of this past is vital; D'Aguiar perhaps takes this notion farthest, in suggesting slavery's perpetuity in the present. Such a belief, as I have argued, makes trauma impossible to work through, hence perhaps his greater pessimism than the others. Phillips is arguably most optimistic; his works cautiously motioning the possibility of a future meeting, and understanding, between black and white people, though any utopianism is tempered by realism: this meeting is yet to be staged. Dabydeen seems poised in a contradictory position somewhere between the two states outlined above: sceptical about the consumption of works on slavery, his frustration at being unable to control how such texts are received may be seen as leading to a deliberately belligerent approach to issues of audience.

I have suggested that one of the problems consistently cited by writers like Marcus Wood, James Walvin and Alan Rice in thinking about the past of slavery is its lack of appropriate monuments. Perhaps like ghosts, monuments signify something that no longer exists; located in the present, they nevertheless face backwards to the past. Caught between past and present, therefore, they are arguably equally spectral; as Robert Musil has claimed, 'there is

nothing in this world as invisible as a monument'.² Memorials cannot provide access to the past but signify the prior existence of something which no longer exists, yet needs to be remembered. In a similar way, without physical monuments to the past of slavery, the works of Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar may indicate a possible means of beginning to remember this past which, its ghosts imply, also clamours to be heard. However, unlike monuments, which are necessarily backwards-looking, their texts, whilst exploring the past of slavery, simultaneously point towards the future. The problems, through, lie in how to create this future. Phillips's liminal diasporan characters search for, but do not find, a place in which they might be accommodated. Using neglected fragments, Dabydeen, we saw, was attempting to create a 'future possibility', or space, for imagining the African slave or Indian indentured labourer, but he remains confounded by form. D'Aguiar's postmemorial anguish would seem to undermine the likelihood of ever reaching a benevolent morrow. This is not, then, a simple, utopian shared belief in the prospect of creating through literature a just future.

One of the things this thesis has tried to achieve is to demonstrate that Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar adopt very different approaches to imagining the past of slavery. Yet, each is acutely aware of the compelling need to explore this past, frustrated by the enduring racial anxieties which threaten twenty-first-century claims to Britain's multiculturalism. It is, it seems, necessary to look at slavery in order that they might trace the root of these antagonisms. These authors may initially seem, to borrow Whitehead's terminology, 'possessed' by the ghosts of slavery – returning to this past repeatedly in their works. Yet, all are doing so precisely in order that they might confront the challenge of 'get[ting] on with the task of living'. Ultimately, their works suggest that it is only by understanding, and accepting, the past of slavery that the future may begin to be envisaged. This may be a difficult process, but one which is absolutely necessary.

² Robert Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (Hygiene, CO: Eridanos Press, 1987), p. 64.

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