

Remembering Slavery: History as Roots in the Fiction of Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar

Bénédicte Ledent

History has always been a major concern in Caribbean literature, exerting, in Mark McWatt's words, "an almost obsessive influence upon the creative imagination of the West Indian writer."¹ The reassessment of the past is indeed a source of regeneration and identity for the rootless and dismembered peoples of former colonies, even though such (re)consideration—a process George Lamming called "the backward glance"—inevitably involves some suffering.

That some Caribbean writers of the younger generation, most of whom have settled outside the Caribbean area, should address slavery in their fiction seems therefore to be in line with that tradition. Like their literary predecessors, these "new voices" have turned to the past in an attempt to understand where they come from, the better to comprehend who they are and where they are going. Yet, this intergenerational continuity is not as smooth as it seems, for if the process of looking backward is broadly similar in the first and second generations of writers, the focus might be significantly different.

Without unduly generalizing, one can indeed say that slavery has rarely been tackled head-on by the older generation, though its pervasive presence may be felt throughout their writing. Significantly slavery is even noticeable through its absence, as in George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953), in which a teacher in the 1930s hides from his pupils their slave past. Up to the 1990s, then, the focus of major West Indian fiction was on the social, psychological, and ontological aftermath of what has been called "the peculiar institution" or on the historical events preceding it, such as the European conquest or the Middle Passage, rather than on the material conditions of plantation life or the slavery system proper. There might be exceptions to that admittedly generalizing statement, which also fails to account for the variety of approaches of individual writers. An atypical case

¹Mark McWatt, "The Preoccupation with the Past in West Indian Literature," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 28.1&2, 12-19 (p. 12).

worth mentioning is that of Edgar Mittelholzer, whose *Kaywana* trilogy, written in the 1950s and covering more than three centuries of Guyanese history, gives a somewhat sensationalist view of slavery.

Starting from this observation of "changing sameness," i.e. an ongoing but differently focused preoccupation with the past, this essay will centre on two writers of Caribbean heritage based in Britain whose recent novels, Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993) and Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994), are about slavery in the New World. These two novelists are by no means unique in contemporary Caribbean writing and I would venture to suggest that they are the emerging tip of a body of historical fiction to be published in the years to come.

My main concern in this paper is to outline the possible significance of Phillips's and D'Aguiar's choice of slavery as paradigm. Without denying the writers' imaginative license,² I would contend that such a choice, while clearly anchoring them to their cultures of origin, simultaneously reveals new cultural and literary affiliations and therefore partakes of what I would tentatively call their post-migratory or displaced Caribbeanness. By this I mean the essentially cross-cultural, diasporic, and "in-between" identity of Caribbean migrants living in the West though not of it. I also hope to show that the two novelists' original narrative techniques duplicate their thematic options and reinforce the revisionary project which underlies their fiction.

*

Phillips's and D'Aguiar's treatment of slavery is obviously not intended to reproduce it in its social or historical verisimilitude, but rather to bring out and exploit the multifarious symbolical and imaginative potentialities of "the woven complexity"³ which the enslavement of Africans by Europeans has produced:

There is simply too much history between us all [. . .]. What began as a single thread has, over the generations, woven itself into a prodigious carpet that cannot be unwoven. There is no good in pretending that a single thread of cause and effect exists now when in actual fact the carpet is before us with many beginnings and no end in sight. (*LM*, p. 33)

The dislocated, ternary topography of slavery, covering Africa, the Americas and Europe, provides one clue to these potentialities. These three continents are the spatial, imagined anchor points of "the web of diaspora

²See Fred D'Aguiar, "Against Black British Literature," in *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics*, ed. by Maggie Butcher (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 106-14 (p. 107).

³Fred D'Aguiar, *The Longest Memory* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 33. Further references to this edition are given in the text with the abbreviation *LM*.

identities and concerns"⁴ which the musicologist and cultural critic Paul Gilroy has called the black Atlantic, in his words "a rhizomorphic, fractal structure."⁵ In his attempts at theorizing what it means to be both black and British, Gilroy has also isolated slavery as a meaningful and fecund site for black Atlantic memory. Such remembering suits the diasporic in-betweenness of Caribbean artists living in the West all the more appropriately, he argues, because uncovering the often erased intricacies of slavery enables them to escape the sterile fixity and Manichean logic of both Eurocentrism and Africentrism.⁶

Besides, engaging with slavery is a way of writing back to Britain's three-century-long amnesia concerning a practice which, Caryl Phillips reminds us, also belongs to British history.⁷ As the editors of a critical collection entitled *The Discourse of Slavery* assert:

In Britain the subject of racial oppression has been examined primarily in relation to colonialism, postcolonialism and imperialism but much less fully with regard to the problematic of slavery.⁸

If slavery has often been obliterated from the critical debate in Britain, it has also been markedly absent from imaginative writing. However, as many post-colonial critics have shown, slavery has always lurked in the literary background, all the more conspicuously so for being left out of the master narratives of empire. *Mansfield Park* is an example of this.

A painting by Turner called "Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On," also known as "The Slave Ship," can be seen as an allegory of this ultimately imperfect erasure by Britain of one of the most atrocious episodes in world history in which it played a, if not *the*, leading role. Moreover, according to Gilroy, this work of art, by relocating a "racial" theme "at the heart of national self-understanding," could help lead Britain towards "a new more pluralistic conceptualization" of itself.⁹ The sea, the sky and the ship occupy most of the canvas of "The Slave Ship," yet the observing eye can perceive in the foreground, actually the "margins" in a post-colonial perspective, the fettered limbs of slaves drowning after

⁴Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 218.

⁵Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 4.

⁶Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, especially Chapter 6 entitled "'Not a Story to Pass On': Living Memory and the Slave Sublime," pp. 187–223 (pp. 189–90).

⁷Maya Jaggi, "Crossing the River: Caryl Phillips Talks to Maya Jaggi," *Wasafiri*, 20 (Autumn 1994), 25–29 (pp. 26–27).

⁸"Introduction," in *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, ed. by Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring (London: Routledge, 1994), p. xiv.

⁹Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), pp. 81–84 (p. 81). Also discussed in *The Black Atlantic*, pp. 13–14. From this perspective, then, Phillips's and D'Aguiar's fiction might also be said to define today's "post-migratory" Britishness.

being thrown overboard, a habit among traders also evoked in *Crossing the River*.¹⁰ It is this marginalization and reification of the slave, both as economic commodity and subject of an ambiguous artistic representation, which many contemporary Caribbean writers explore. David Dabydeen has been most active in dragging the slavery skeleton out of the British historical cupboard.¹¹ In a recent long poem entitled "Turner," his intention is unambiguous: "My poem focuses on the submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner's painting. It has been drowned in Turner's (and other artists') sea for centuries."¹² The same painting also haunts the Jamaican-born Michelle Cliff, who now lives in California. In her latest novel, *Free Enterprise* (1993),¹³ it indeed serves to highlight the detachment and lack of compassion of late-nineteenth-century liberal Bostonians in regard to slavery. For them art is to be enjoyed regardless of the human suffering it depicts. For the victims of slavery and their descendants, however, aesthetics and politics are not so glibly kept apart, as the fiction examined in this paper testifies.

Yet the renewed literary interest in slavery on the part of the Caribbean "new wave" is not only to be perceived in relation to Britain. It is also part of a broader movement which can be traced back to Afro-American literature, a link providing yet another indication of the cross-cultural configurations of what I called earlier "displaced Caribbeanness." As Phillips and D'Aguiar have recently acknowledged,¹⁴ Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* seems to have been particularly influential. Dedicated to the "Sixty Million and more" victims of the Middle Passage, *Beloved* "rememories" their "unspeakable thoughts, [remained] unspoken."¹⁵ Like D'Aguiar in *The Longest Memory*, Morrison articulates the tension between the desire to forget slavery and the impossibility of doing so, even if memory causes terrible pain. It is this dilemma with which D'Aguiar closes his novel: "memory is pain trying to resurrect itself" (*LM*, p. 138).

¹⁰ Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (1993; London: Picador, 1994), pp. 113 and 116. Further references to this edition are given in the text with the abbreviation CR.

¹¹ *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth-Century Art* (1985; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) is but one example. He has also edited a collection of essays, *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), in addition to producing a TV programme in the late 1980s in which he explained how heavily British economic and cultural life had relied on West Indian slavery for its prosperity. The Tate Gallery in London is one of the most striking examples.

¹² David Dabydeen, *Turner: New & Selected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 1994), p. ix.

¹³ Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (1993; London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 71-74.

¹⁴ Carol Margaret Davison, "Crisscrossing the River: An Interview with Caryl Phillips," *Ariel* 25.4 (October 1994), 91-99 (p. 94). Christina Koning, "The Past, Another Country," *Independent on Sunday*, 23 July 1995, pp. 32-33.

¹⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; London: Picador, 1988), p. 199.

Because slavery changed the world, marking the beginning of modernity, Morrison contends, it cannot be forgotten. She further sees the Afro-American imaginative retrieval of slavery in terms of responsibility, a point also dear to Phillips.¹⁶ Asked why "she and other Afro-American novelists made this decisive turn to history," Morrison replies:

"It's got to be because we are responsible. I am very gratified by the fact that black writers are learning to grow in that area. We have abandoned a lot of valuable material. We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. That memory is much more in danger now than it was thirty years ago."¹⁷

In spite of its specificities, then, the American erasure of slavery is as real as that practised by the British and therefore as much in need of revision.

*

In keeping with their compassionate approach, which hands the narrative over to the various actors in the drama of slavery, *Cambridge*, *Crossing the River* and *The Longest Memory* are more authentically presented in terms of their multiple characters than of their fragmentary plots. Phillips's *Cambridge* is about the eponymous nineteenth-century slave who, after being educated, converted to Christianity and manumitted, is recaptured and sent to a West Indian plantation. There also lives Emily, the daughter of the English absentee owner, whose unreliable narrative tells of her meeting with what she sees as a "dark tropical unknown."¹⁸ *Crossing the River*, Phillips's latest novel, is framed by the voice of a guilty African father who, in the eighteenth century, sold his three children into slavery, thereby precipitating their dispersal in time and space. The novel focuses on their voices among "the many-tongued chorus of the common memory" (CR, p. 235): Nash, a liberated slave who becomes a missionary in nineteenth-century Liberia; Martha, a runaway slave who, after being separated from her daughter and husband, roams the US and finally heads for the mythic West; and Joyce, an English woman who during WW II meets Travis, the last of the family, a black GI posted in Europe. D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* is built around the figure of Whitechapel, an old, obedient slave on a Virginia plantation who unwittingly

¹⁶Jaggi, "Crossing the River," 29.

¹⁷Gilroy, *Small Acts*, p. 179. Also quoted in *The Black Atlantic*, p. 222.

¹⁸Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (1991; London: Picador, 1992), p. 22. Further references to this edition are given in the text with the abbreviation C.

tingly causes the death of his runaway son, Chapel, by reporting to the master the direction he has taken. The father's "Remembering" and attempts at "Forgetting" frame several narratives woven around this event.

Each novel is made up of several, mostly first-person narratives. This openly autobiographical and subjective perspective is in a sense reminiscent of the slave narratives written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sources upon which Phillips, if not D'Aguiar, has obviously drawn.¹⁹ According to Anthony Appiah, these *loci classici* of early black British and Afro-American writing "made a case against slavery more powerful than a thousand appeals to abstract principle."²⁰ In the same vein, Phillips's and D'Aguiar's fictionalized accounts of slavery cogently indict the metaphysical system, paradoxically both inspired and refuted by the Enlightenment and Christianity, which justified the enslavement of millions of men and women. They bring to light the inherent inconsistencies of an institution set up, in Emily's euphemistic terms, "to help ease our labour problem" (C, p. 24). Moreover their black characters, like the ex-slaves in the early narratives, write themselves into being²¹ and thereby escape the mould into which the pseudo-scientific impulses of whites, founded on sacrosanct reason, would like to cast them. Cambridge, for example, by telling his own story and becoming the master of his own narrative, resists Emily's taxonomical drive and is restored to the human individuality her reason denies him, for Emily sees the world as divided into "rational humanity" (C, p. 77) and the reckless, irrational and savage others. She discards from her simplistic worldview all the elements which undermine her dual perception, be they the "degenerate breed" (C, p. 76) of slave children fathered by whites, the free blacks (C, p. 104), or the poor whites (C, p. 108).

Unsurprisingly, it is in their differences from rather than their likeness to the almost canonical slave narratives that *Cambridge*, *Crossing the River* and *The Longest Memory* best succeed in their corrective tasks. By departing from the formal conventions associated with the genre and the other constraints under which ex-slaves had to write, often imposed by abolitionists themselves,²² Phillips and D'Aguiar have been able to go much further in undermining the foundations of a monstrous system which made human bondage and servitude a possibility. For example, while literacy is usually

¹⁹ See Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 29.2 (1993), 34-47.

²⁰ "Introduction," in *Early African-American Classics*, ed. by Anthony Appiah (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. xiii.

²¹ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²² See *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, especially Chapters 6 and 7.

conflated with freedom in traditional slave narratives, that link is much less clear in Phillips's and D'Aguiar's novels. The position of the literate slave, like that of Chapel, significantly "half-in, half-out" (*LM*, p. 79) the master's library, is an ambiguous one, potentially a source of freedom and awareness but also of alienation and even death as it is for both Cambridge and Nash in *Crossing the River*.

But the writers' most original innovation lies in the polyphonic and dialogic structures of their novels, though I can only suggest here some of their many implications. Phillips and D'Aguiar's revision does not involve a retaliatory recentering of the slave to compensate for his/her silencing in the master's monological historiography. They thus steer clear of the sclerosis of which Walcott warns the New World writer in "The Muse of History":

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos.²³

Far from opting for a simplistic refocussing on the slave, then, the two novelists have multiplied the narrative viewpoints which complete and contradict each other in a crisscrossing dialogue, thereby providing a kaleidoscopic and complex picture of their entangled past. This disseminative approach allows both writers to display an impressive imaginative scope, which reminds us firstly that "the creative imagination knows no boundaries"²⁴ and secondly that while writing about slavery, Phillips and D'Aguiar also write about the human condition.²⁵

In *The Longest Memory*, the most widely polyphonic novel of the three, there are as many as ten narrative viewpoints, including those of the master and the overseer. In *Crossing the River*, the narrative space is divided between the children of the African diaspora and the slave trader who bought them from their father. White official records are included as well, in the form of a sensationalist if official account in *Cambridge* and as editorials from a local newspaper in *The Longest Memory*. While reading like objective renderings of reality, such formal accounts turn out to be much more biased than the individual testimonies. Yet, as Paul Sharrad has pointed out about

²³Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History," in *Carifesta Forum: An Anthology of 20 Caribbean Voices*, ed. by John Hearne (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica and Jamaica Journal, 1976), pp. 111–28 (p. 112).

²⁴D'Aguiar, "Against Black British Literature," p. 109.

²⁵Caryl Phillips, "The Other Voice: A Dialogue between Anita Desai, Caryl Phillips, and Ilan Stavans," *Transition*, 64 (1994), 77–89 (p. 88).

Cambridge, they were the "most likely to survive in real life"²⁶ while the voices of most other witnesses fell into historical silence.

Even if they differ in length, intensity, and importance, each of these parts contributes meaningfully to the whole by shedding a distinct light on the slavery system. I therefore cannot agree with Abdulrazak Gurnah who, in his review of *The Longest Memory*, writes that Chapter 6, entitled "Plantation Owners," "go[es] over events that we already know about without adding anything."²⁷ To me the role of this chapter is at least two-fold. Not only does it give us insight into the inner divisions of the liberal-minded master, but, by offering a glimpse of the conversations at Mr Whitechapel's Gentleman's club, it also shows, as does a similar scene in Phillips's *Crossing the River* (CR, pp. 54-57), that slavery and colonialism were sustained by a white, mostly male, *esprit de corps* all the stronger for being informal and unspoken.

These narrative options, coupled with an assortment of literary genres,²⁸ signal respect for the various sensibilities they represent, for they reveal a refusal to impose upon them a totalizing model, in the very way slavery did. Thus, by foregrounding plurivocal relativity rather than reassuring binary or even monological certitude, these texts raise issues of particular importance in the post-colonial context. One of their messages seems to be that although one cannot forget who the victims of slavery were nor what degradation and suffering they endured, there is not a single truth, "the truth" (C, p. 4, italics mine), as Emily writes, but several co-existing ones. For the "either/or" epistemology which sustained the institution of slavery, they substitute the accumulative logic of "both/and," an appropriate echo of their diasporic ethos.

If the novels' structure contributes towards complexifying the slavery issue, so does their characterization. On the one hand there is the eccentricity of many characters—surrogate parents, homosexuals, enslaved poets, or black pioneers. This might be part of what J. Michael Dash has called the "ex-centric thrust" in Caribbean imagination, for him a legacy of the plantation world.²⁹ On the other, there is the ambivalence of most of the characters, one that also subverts the readers' expectations by challenging stereotypes. White women, both on the victims' and the oppressors' side,

²⁶ See Paul Sharrad, "Speaking the Unspeakable: London, Cambridge and the Caribbean," in *Describing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, ed. by Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 201-17 (p. 214).

²⁷ Abdulrazak Gurnah, "Resisting Ignorance," *TLS*, 15 July 1994.

²⁸ Including diaries, epistolary narratives, stream-of-consciousness accounts and even poems.

²⁹ J. Michael Dash, "Excentric Spaces: Marronage and Métissage..." *Bim*, 19.74 (December 1992), 67-74 (p. 70).

are but one example. The large narrative space they occupy contrasts with the historical documents from which they have been silenced. Some slave figures are similarly equivocal. Cambridge wants to convert his "heathen brethren" (C, p. 147) to the white man's religion and thus contributes to their colonization, a perverted "civilizing mission" in which Nash actually takes part in *Crossing the River*. Old Whitechapel in *The Longest Memory* also arouses conflicting reactions to his responsibility in the death of his son. His mental enslavement, of a more subtle kind than that induced by the fear of the whip, makes him "master," i.e. accomplice, "of his own slavery" (LM, p. 27). Yet the novels' fragmentation, their subtle ironies and their significant silences prevent the reader from passing too facile a judgment on these rather unsettling forms of marginality.

Swaying public opinion against slavery, the main impetus behind ex-slaves' narratives, is not a matter of concern for Phillips and D'Aguiar: their aim, rather, is to fathom and expose its complex mechanisms and so fight the racism it has given rise to. "The future is just more of the past waiting to happen" (LM, p. 1), the pessimistic and almost prophetic sentence opening *The Longest Memory*, indeed speaks volumes about the novel's implications in the present and future. Paraphrasing D'Aguiar himself in his introduction to an anthology of Black British poetry, one might add that "even if the [novel] is ostensibly preoccupied with some other place, it is often instructive as allegory about life in Britain."³⁰

A similar allegorical intent exists in Phillips's fiction but is presented differently. Of course the relationships between his black and white characters can be viewed in the light of today's race relations. The condescending attitude of Edward to his ex-slave and lover Nash, in *Crossing the River*, is clearly indicative of this. "I don't have that much sympathy with [Edward]," Phillips says, "I see him every day [. . .], I see him if I go in the Arts Council, if I was ever to go near parliament, in every university: the professional patron."³¹ However, it is mainly by juxtaposing and interconnecting the slave past and a more recent past that Phillips demonstrates the perpetuation of the appropriative and discriminating practices initiated during slavery. In *Crossing the River*, for instance, the ostracism Joyce and Travis encounter as a mixed couple in Britain during WWII is very much a bequest of a system which regarded, as in *Cambridge*, the union of black and white as "an unnatural connection" (C, p. 145) because it was a threat to its dichotomous logic. It is probably in *Higher Ground*, an earlier three-part novel, which implies a link between the suffering experienced by a

³⁰In *The New British Poetry: 1968-88*, ed. by Gillian Allnutt, Fred D'Aguiar, Ken Edwards and Eric Mottram (London: Paladin, 1988), p. 3.

³¹Jaggi, "Crossing the River," 28.

slave, a black American prisoner and a victim of Nazism, that Phillips shows most clearly that we inherit in the present the burden of the past.³²

For both writers, then, slavery is an unstable complex almost impossible to pin down. Very much like "displaced Caribbeanness" it has ramifications that cannot be fully unravelled. It is a "knotted mess," D'Aguiar writes, that "cannot now be undone, only understood" (*LM*, p. 137).

³²Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground* (London: Penguin, 1990).