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**SLAVERY REVISITED THROUGH VOCAL
KALEIDOSCOPIES: POLYPHONY IN NOVELS BY
FRED D'AGUIAR AND CARYL PHILLIPS**

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The dispersal of West Indian authors has made the writing of the literary history of the Anglophone Caribbean notoriously difficult, if only because it is getting harder and harder to decide whether one writer still writes in the literary tradition of his society of origin, or whether he or she should rather be placed in the tradition of the country where he or she now resides. Such an exercise may appear futile, pedestrian even, from an artistic or human perspective. From an academic point of view, however, placing writers may be justified by the necessity of guiding the reader through the maze of available writing. So, in a very near future, the literary historian may well soon be confronted with the impossible task of deciding whether younger novelists like Andrea Levy, Leone Ross or Zadie Smith are indeed British writ-

ers or if their Caribbean origin is a weightier argument. Luckily, the literary historian has other elements than these increasingly obsolete national or regional labels to hang on to. One of them is subject matter which can, in some cases, prove a helpful clue in delineating a literary tradition. So if one looks at the agenda of young novelists of Caribbean descent in the 1990s, one is struck by the centrality of slavery as a theme in their works, regardless of their place of residence. In Canada, Dionne Brand wrote *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), in the United States, Michelle Cliff wrote *Free Enterprise* (1993), while in Britain several novels addressed the "peculiar institution": Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993), and Lawrence Scott's *Aelred's Sin* (1998).

However, there is a strange paradox in using the theme of slavery as a taxonomic criterion that would replace the increasingly irrelevant national or regional labels, for the treatment of slavery in the works of fiction just mentioned seems to argue for an internationalisation of literature, a crossing of its traditional borders, national or otherwise. In other words, these novels endorse a radical cross-culturality rather than an allegiance to the narrowly local, which shows in their use of polyphony, as I will attempt to demonstrate. This essay will more particularly focus on the multi-voicedness in the slavery novels that D'Aguiar and Phillips, two writers who might be said to have pioneered the genre in Britain, wrote in the 1990s — *Cambridge*, *Crossing the River*, *The Longest Memory* and *Feeding the Ghosts*.¹

1. Phillips, Caryl, *Cambridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991); *Crossing the River* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993); D'Aguiar, Fred, *The Longest Memory* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994); *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997). Further references to these editions will be made in the text with the abbrevia-

In a paper written in 1995, I attempted to show how D'Aguiar's and Phillips's slavery novels, with the exception of *Feeding the Ghosts*, not yet published at the time, both echoed and differed from classic slave narratives in their themes, narrative techniques and ultimate objectives.¹ What I propose to do here is to concentrate on one feature, the multiplicity of voices, one striking difference between the earlier texts and their contemporary versions. Admittedly, the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are not strictly speaking monologic. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. has pointed out, they were not "merely an individual's autobiography", but had a communal dimension in so far as each responded to the other tales of bondage and liberation written before it.² In addition, even if the early slave narratives told the life story of one individual, written by him- or herself, as the expression went, they "simultaneously also wrote on behalf of the millions of silent slaves still held captive".³ One should further keep in mind that slave narratives often expressed the views of the abolitionists who are said to have edited or even written some of them. Nevertheless, the original slave narratives are formally monophonic and their narrator remains the only consciousness through which the events are sifted (even though, as in Olaudah Equiano's narrative, there is some interaction between his younger and older selves).

D'Aguiar's and Phillips's versions, by contrast, almost flaunt

tions C, CR, LM and FG.

1. Ledent, Bénédicte, "Remembering Slavery: History as Roots in the Fiction of Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar", in *The Contact and the Culmination: Essays in Honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek*, Marc Delrez and Bénédicte Ledent, eds. (Liège: L3, 1997): 271-280.

2. Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., "Introduction", in *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Mentor, 1987): x.

3. *Ibidem*.

their multi-voicedness. They do so in their ostentatiously fragmented structures framed by a prologue and an epilogue, even if the introductory and closing sections of their novels are not always presented as such. With the exception of *Cambridge*, whose prologue is deceptively monologic, focusing as it does on Emily's "truth" (C, 4), the vocal scope of these novels is announced from the start. The table of contents of *The Longest Memory* leaves little doubt as to its polyphonic intent; it lists thirteen chapters that bear the names of eleven different characters or groups of characters. As to *Crossing the River*, its opening pages, spoken from the point of view of an African father who sold his children into slavery, clearly heralds "the chorus of a common memory" (CR, 1) whose "restless voices" we are invited to listen to closely. A similar choric quality exists in the prologue of *Feeding the Ghosts*, though expressed more obliquely. Although defeated by the sea, the one hundred and thirty one bodies of the slaves thrown overboard the *Zong* "find breath in the wind skimming the surface of the sea and howl. [. . .] When the wind is heard, it is their breath, their speech" (FG, 4). The rest of the book is expected to contain the echoes of their ghostly voices.

There are two sections in the rest of this paper. First I will examine the many ways in which polyphony is conveyed in the four novels in question. Then, in the second part, I will analyse the various meanings that can be ascribed to this narrative option. I am aware that there is danger in seeing these four novels through the same polyphonic lens, for it might give the erroneous impression that they are identical, that they promote the same philosophy. However, this risk of generalization is worth taking if only for the sake of investigating this body of literature from the point of view of the literary historian and of trying to delineate a tradi-

tion. This being said, one should keep in mind that each novel under study here has its own individual features which will be highlighted whenever possible.

Polyphony is rendered in *Cambridge*, *Crossing the River*, *The Longest Memory* and *Feeding the Ghosts* on many different levels. My argument is that their polyphony goes well beyond a mere multiplicity of narrative standpoints and manifests itself through a series of dialogic narrative techniques that I will attempt to outline.

As Bakhtin points out in relation to Dostoyevski, a polyphonic conception of the novel means that the characters do not exist as much through objective, pre-determined features, their social status or their race, for example, as through their singular view of themselves and of the world with which they interact.¹ The voices in D'Aguiar's and Phillips's slavery novels differ widely in terms of race, gender and class; they include blacks and whites, men and women, slaves and masters. They also represent a wide variety of styles and genres since they include diaries, letters, log-books, prose poems, inner monologues and extracts from the press. Yet for actual polyphony to take place it is not enough to have these diverging voices side by side, they need to interact with their other speaking selves and with one another to produce meaning(s). To understand the difference between what might be called "surface" polyphony and "deep" polyphony, it is enlightening to refer to the distinction Wilson Harris makes, in a recent interview with Fred D'Aguiar, between multi-culturality and cross-culturality:

1. Bakhtine, Mikhaïl, *La Poétique de Dostoïevski*, traduit par Isabelle Kolitcheff (Paris: Editions du Seuil, n.d): 83.

Cross-culturality differs radically from multi-culturality. There is no creative and re-creative sharing of dimensions in multi-culturality. The strongest culture in multiculturalism holds an umbrella over the rest, which have no alternative but to abide by the values that the strongest believe to be universal. Cross-culturality is an opening to a true and variant universality of a blend of parts we can never wholly encompass, though when we become aware of them we may ceaselessly strive for an open unity that they offer.¹

Now let us see how this dynamic of "(re)creative sharing of dimensions" operates within the compass of the four novels by D'Aguiar and Phillips, and how it informs their approach to polyphony.

The different voices heard in each novel are but some of the threads in what D'Aguiar describes in *The Longest Memory* as "a prodigious carpet that cannot be unwoven" (*LM*, 33), but "only understood" (*LM*, 137). Each of these voices has indeed multiple voices embedded within itself. This impossible "univocality" is illustrated in *Cambridge* which is, in appearance only, the least polyphonic of the four. In her narrative, Emily is the unwitting spokeswoman for Mr McDonald, the plantation physician, Mr Rogers, the clergyman, and Mr Brown, the unscrupulous overseer, whose narrow-minded views of slavery she at first internalizes and reproduces uncritically. It is only at the end of the novel, when Emily is socially disgraced and marginalized, that she acquires a seemingly more authentic voice. But even then she also speaks on behalf of all the others who, like herself, have been disenfranchised, and "whose only journeys were uprootings" (*C*,

1. D'Aguiar, Fred, "Interview with Wilson Harris", *Bomb* 82 (Winter 2002/2003): 75-80; 77.

180). It is surely no coincidence if Mr McDonald's patronizing injunction to Emily to "stop talking. Stop talking" (*C*, 178 & 183) comes at the point when her voice has distanced itself from the white, male establishment. At that stage she is closer to the black slave Stella, but also to her dead friend Isabella, "their words running and racing like rivers, locked together at one moment, the next parting into separate streams of consciousness, then coming together again in a great burst of happiness" (*C*, 182). The same inner dialogism occurs in *Feeding the Ghosts* through the voice of the slave Mintah whose embedded diversity stands in opposition to the sterile monologism of Captain Cunningham's ledger. Mintah's voice at first echoes the competing discourses of her Christianized mother and her pagan father which testify to her own in-betweenness. Then, after *The Middle Passage*, she becomes a witness not only for the sea, though her "old enemy" (*FG*, 225), but also for the victims of the slave trading greed, the ghosts of the title, whose "howls, moans, cries, calls and implorings in indecipherable tongues" (*FG*, 19) seem to get drowned with them in the sea.

The role of the novelist here is thus to orchestrate all the individual voices, close and distant, that his novel contains, into a concert of voices which is quite audibly heard in the last, jazzy pages of *Crossing the River* where the children of the African diaspora are given a chance to take part in the "many-tongued chorus of the common memory" (*CR*, 235). Interestingly, the rest of this novel is built on the call and response pattern that informs all African-American musical genres, with the voice of the guilty father reaching out to his children dispersed in time and space and the swelling chorus of voices singing in return. This symphonic quality is not absent from the other three novels either, even though

expressed in a less dramatic way. In an article entitled "Three Words toward Creolization", the Cuban critic and writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo underlines the rhythmic nature of Phillips's and D'Aguiar's narrative discourses. After demonstrating that "the performance of [Phillips's] literary language . . . is dictated by the writer's interior rhythms",¹ he says this of *The Longest Memory*: "in his attempt to describe the plantation, D'Aguiar wrote a text for a symphony for percussion, in which each character interprets a different rhythm; that is, a work of polyrhythmic density that gathers rhythms from the whole world".²

By joining the characters into a kaleidoscope of ever shifting, diverging, but nonetheless harmonious voices, this musicality partakes of what I would call these novels' inner dialogism. But there is also a form of "outer" dialogism at work in the four novels whereby their narrative voices are made to interact with voices from other texts, whether explicitly or not. This intertextuality, taken here in the broadest sense, since it also includes music and painting, constitutes, it seems to me, yet another form of polyphony, which was already present in some earlier slave narratives, like the recently published *Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts which contains more or less direct allusions to Dickens's *Bleak House* and other nineteenth century novels.³ D'Aguiar's and Phillips's intertextuality is impressively wide-ranging. *Cambridge*, as Evelyn O'Callaghan has argued, relies

1. Benitez-Rojo, Antonio, "Three Words toward Creolization", in *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature and Identity*, Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnes Sourieau, eds. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998): 51-61; 57.

2. *Ibidem*, 59.

3. Crafts, Hannah, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (London: Virago, 2002).

heavily and openly on earlier confessional literature, in particular Monk Lewis's and Lady Nugent's Journals on the one hand and Equiano's Narrative on the other.¹ There are echoes of Joseph Conrad and Toni Morrison in *Crossing the River*, but also allusions to black musicians, in particular to Jimmy Cliff whose "Many Rivers to Cross" may have been an inspiration for the title. Through Chapel and Lydia's love story *The Longest Memory* writes back to *Romeo and Juliet*, and also contains allusions to John Donne and William Blake. Significantly, Chapel expresses his experience of reading with Lydia in words that refer to the voice: "She opened the rose / She called a book and moved my finger over / The words as she sang them: *I heard a choir*" (*LM*, 59, italics mine). Finally, *Feeding the Ghosts* cannot but be associated with Turner's painting of the *Zong*, entitled "The Slave Ship, Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhon Coming On" which has inspired other Caribbean writers, among whom David Dabydeen and Michelle Cliff. But in that novel D'Aguiar's also draws upon Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea is History", and may even allude to the traditional nursery rhyme "Simple Simon" as well.

Now, for these two forms of dialogism — which I have called inner and outer dialogism — to operate, it is essential for the reader to be active and add his or her voice to the chain of voices, literary or otherwise, already woven into the novels. In a piece entitled "The Last Essay About Slavery", Fred D'Aguiar explains the role adopted by the reader of contemporary slavery novels as follows:

Whereas in the slave narrative the life of the slave is the subject

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

of the story that the reader is privileged to overhear, in the slave novel that life is rendered in such a way that the reader becomes the subject, no longer able to sit outside it as witness but put in its place. The reader becomes both the "thing" doing the talking and the "thing" talked about in slave novels: not a single entity but splintered; not in one fixed location or vantage-point but shifting.¹

Phillips suggests a similar participation of the reader in his novels when he says:

The gaps are there . . . to allow you the latitude to insert your own understanding, and your own meanings, and your own linkages, and your own bridges. I don't want to lead people by the hand or worse by the nose across from this bit to that bit. I want them to find their own meaning and discover their own pain and their own pleasure in putting the puzzle together for themselves.²

In a way, then, the participation of the reader may be said to partake of the deeply polyphonic nature of D'Aguiar's and Phillips's novels, and of the "sharing of dimensions" which, for Harris, informs cross-culturality.

If this pervasive attention to multiple voices, both within and without the novel, is not surprising on the part of novelists who are also playwrights, one needs to explore its deeper significances. Chief among them is that it provides the writers with the ambiguity they need to engage with the many tensions — between past and present, between the individual and the community, between

1. D'Aguiar, Fred, "The Last Essay About Slavery", in *The Age of Anxiety*, Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter, eds. (London: Virago, 1996): 125-147; 141.

2. Phillips, Caryl, "Disrupting the Master Narrative: An Interview with Caryl Phillips", interview by Renée Schattelman, *Commonwealth* 23.2 (Spring 2001): 93-106; 104.

belonging and unbelonging — that are at the heart of the human condition, but have been felt more tragically in the wake of the slave trade and are still with us, perhaps more than ever, at the beginning of the twenty first century.

Thanks to a complex polyphonic apparatus D'Aguiar and Phillips manage to rewrite a history that was simplified, if not falsified, in the official records. By giving a voice to the different parties involved in slavery — not only the slaves and their descendants, but also their masters or traders — they obviously subvert the grand, master narrative of History. But they do so not through a mere reversal of the centre and the margin, but by individualizing the speakers and replacing the original exclusiveness by a new inclusive approach which involves as many standpoints as possible. This subversive quality is all the stronger because the novelists tend to foreground the speech of the most marginalized or vulnerable characters, especially women, like Emily in *Cambridge*, whose voice "unspooled in silence" (C, 4) or Mintah, in *Feeding the Ghosts*, whose account of the crossing is dismissed as the "ramblings" (FG, 164) of an insane black female. If polyphony does indeed promote individuals, their feelings and their emotions, the group is still very much present but instead of being seen as "one miserable, tangled mass of humanity" (FG, 19), as it is viewed by one of the traders in *Feeding the Ghosts*, it becomes a chorus whose communal voice expresses a community of suffering that, as Phillips puts it, "ineluctably binds us together, one to the other".¹

What needs to be pointed out forcefully, or shall I say vocally, now that readers are familiar with these rewritings of slave

1. Phillips, Caryl, "Water", *Agni* 39 (1994), 28-30; 30.

narratives and are able to decode their significance, is the link that these polyphonic slavery novels entertain with the present. Although the four novels in questions all open with the notion of memory, then refer to events taking place in the past, it is important to emphasize that they are not historical but contemporary novels. This present relevance is directly touched upon in the last section of *Crossing the River* where Phillips alludes to the current social problems, such as poverty, drug-addiction and prostitution, that still affect the children of the African diaspora, while *Feeding the Ghosts* closes with a voice addressing the reader in words that clearly relate to the present and its continuing inequalities: "I am in your community, in a cottage or apartment or cardboard box" (FG, 229). These novels' complex polyphony may therefore be seen as an element meant to reproduce the heterogeneity of our post-colonial societies that have been changed for ever by slavery and its aftermath, thus as a form of representation of reality, paradoxically absent from so-called realistic novels which are based on a unitary perspective and a linear narrative. To that extent, then, D'Aguiar's and Phillips's slavery novels reflect the world we live in, the New World Order described by Phillips in his latest collection of essays as a world in which "there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none".¹

By way of concluding this paper and at the same time repeating that slavery is not past, I would like to mention briefly D'Aguiar's and Phillips's latest novels, *Bethany Bettany* and *A Distant Shore*.² Both take place in the present and are not specifically about

1. Phillips, Caryl, *A New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001): 5.

2. D'Aguiar, Fred, *Bethany Bettany* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003); Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003).

transatlantic slavery. However, they could be read as slavery novels of sorts because they deal with human beings — abused children, asylum seekers, and others — whose lives have been sacrificed on the altar of greed or bigotry, and who fight to preserve their dignity. Once again the novelists resort to voices to weave stories of suffering whose variegated echoes, at once harrowing and hopeful, leave a lasting imprint on our mind's ears. To borrow the words of Dorothy Jones, one of the main characters in *A Distant Shore*, one can hear "a choral accompaniment of voices. . . its disparate pieces . . . secured by grief. They would never again become unstitched". (266)