

Review of *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar: Representations of Slavery*,
by Abigail Ward

Described in Fred D'Aguiar's novel *The Longest Memory* as a "knotted mess" that "cannot now be undone, only understood",¹ slavery has been haunting the production of writers of the Caribbean diaspora in England since the end of the twentieth century. Quite understandably so, as the exploration of this painful, yet often silenced, episode of British history is fertile ground for a reflection on today's multicultural societies and the numerous issues that they have had to face, including racism, social inequalities and various other forms of exclusion. Focusing on three major representatives of this literary trend, Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar, and on their specific takes on what has been euphemistically called the "peculiar institution", Abigail Ward's study not only sheds light on the writing of these individual artists but also brings home the role that literature can play in helping us to apprehend the world and to appreciate how much of it has been shaped by the past. In the case of the selected works discussed here, Ward demonstrates, literature can compensate for the problematic handling of slavery by traditional historiography, which for a long time minimized the role of Britain in this large-scale human trafficking and tended to only focus on the white abolitionists that were celebrated for putting an end to it. This was done at the expense of the actual actors of this historical drama -- slaves, slave traders and planters -- who are now finally brought to life under the pen of contemporary writers.

Following the format of the Manchester University Press's World Writers Series, so far only devoted to the study of individual authors, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar: Representations of Slavery* is sensibly structured and provides a wealth of background information (for example on the history of the *Zong* or JMW Turner's depiction of it), two features which would make it a particularly useful tool in the context of teaching. After a chronological survey of the career of the three writers in question, the volume opens with a section where their work is contextualized,

both from a historical and a theoretical perspective, and closes with an overview of the main criticism that their writing has given rise to. The body of the book comprises three chapters, one on each of the three chosen authors, convincingly bringing to the fore both what they have in common and what distinguishes them from each other. Clearly, the diasporic authors at the heart of this study share a desire to rescue slavery from pre-determined and simplistic representations as well as a resolve to show how much the slave trade and the ensuing enslavement of millions have over the centuries crucially fashioned the societies on both sides of the Atlantic, with a particular emphasis on Britain. So, while all three writers focus on the complex legacies inherited from the slavery past, their singular perception and rendering of such history differ, bearing the mark of their unique sensibility and their own complex background. St Kitts-born Caryl Phillips's fiction and non-fiction exhibit a special interest in the voices from the past obliterated in the received versions of history, and often centre on unusual characters whose life experiences challenge traditional racial, social and gender categorizations. Unsurprisingly, therefore, while Phillips's fragmented narratives and his engagement with the historical archive repeatedly highlight the constructedness of history, he also delves with subtlety and from different angles into the identity issues that have plagued mankind for centuries but which were made particularly acute in the wake of the Transatlantic slave trade and the interracial relationships that followed. David Dabydeen too concentrates on the aftermath of slavery, which, in the novel *The Counting House* (1996), he brings side by side with Indian indentureship, an often neglected chapter of the history of slavery in the Caribbean. The specific concern of this Guyana-born writer revolves around the ethics of the artistic representation and consumption of the slave past, which he examines with a form of irreverence and playfulness that often confers a visibly provocative flavour to his writing. Also of Guyanese origin, Fred D'Aguiar has more specifically addressed in his work questions of memorialization, focusing on divided characters who are torn between the compulsion to remember the suffering of the past and the simultaneous need to forget it. D'Aguiar offers no way out of this painful tension, and for this reason is presented by Abigail Ward as the most pessimistic writer of the three, even if none of them displays utopian tendencies.

One of the strengths of this volume is that it persuasively connects Phillips, Dabydeen and D'Aguiar to the context from which they write, demonstrating in well-documented pages how much of these writers' work about slavery is a creative response to "the way in which this past is understood and remembered" (2), in particular to the "eclipsing of a pre-*Windrush*" (2) black presence in the UK. Reading this book leaves no doubt about the continuing legacy of slavery in the field of identity politics and about its relevance to any understanding of the present state of British society. *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar* is written in a jargon free, if sometimes repetitive language, and makes its references to theoreticians (Edward Said or Marianne Hirsch, among several others) easily accessible to the general reader. A notable exception to this pedagogical concern nevertheless occurs in the fourth chapter where slightly laboured yet careful comments on Derrida's reflections on the memorialisation of memory do not always contribute to illuminating D'Aguiar's fiction. The book is at its best in the passages devoted to close reading, where the study's most original contributions can be found. This is the case, for example, when Ward discusses the use of the clothing metaphor in Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991), when she comments on the ambiguous figure of Thomas Thistlewood in Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999) or when she analyses the formal features of D'Aguiar's controversial narrative poem, *Bloodlines* (2000).

Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar covers a lot of ground. One could nevertheless deplore the quasi-absence of an analysis of Phillips's *Higher Ground* (1989), a novel whose first section, 'Heartland', provides an ambiguous anatomy of the slave trade and controversially touches upon the African involvement in it.ⁱⁱ But exhaustivity is impossible, and in spite of a few possible blind spots, this volume should be recommended for a fruitful and competent tackling of its subject and for providing us with food for thought on a historical episode that has changed Africa and the Western world for ever.

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ⁱ Fred D'Aguiar, *The Longest Memory* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 137.

ⁱⁱ *Higher Ground* has been recently analysed through the lens of trauma by several commentators, among them Stef Craps, who has also adopted this approach in his reading of David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar's work. See Stef Craps. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).