Africans in Britain at the Time of Abolition: Fictional Recreations

> "Once the lens through which we view the eighteenth century is refocused, the London of Johnson, Reynolds, Hogarth and Pope—that elegant, feisty, intellectual and earthly place of neo-classicism and chaos—becomes occupied by a parallel world of Africans and their descendants working and living alongside the English" – Gretchen Gerzina[1]

The present paper analyses two recent British novels that recreate the presence of Africans in Britain around the time of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire in 1807. Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999) recapture the voices of the silenced slaves and bring to readers a neglected aspect of British history through their imaginative reconstruction of black life in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. Fictions such as these have played a role in recent years in exploding a prevalent myth about the history of the country, the belief that the first black settlers were the people who arrived on the *SS Empire Windrush* in 1948 and started a wave of immigration from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. These novels

life that, prior to their arrival, was as stable and peaceful as it was ethnically undifferentiated."[2] These two particular novels can be read as a contribution to "the rescue of black eighteenth-century England from the formerly neglected margins of social and cultural history"[3] as they serve to correct what Bénédicte Ledent calls the long amnesia regarding the practice of slavery in critical and fictional writings in Britain.[4]

There are records of small numbers of blacks in Britain since at least the sixteenth century, but it was with the Empire that their numbers began to grow rapidly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially after 1783, when loyalist blacks who had been granted freedom by joining the British forces against the American rebels emigrated to Canada and London.[5] There is no agreement as to the actual black population in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and due to the scarcity of reliable data and the constant state of flux of this population, what Norma Myers calls the black numbers conundrum will probably never be solved. Given the unreliability of census statistics at the time and the inexistence of a uniform policy for r

especially London.[8] One of the more vivid accounts of the varied population of blacks in London at the end of the eighteenth century is given by Simon Schama:

> It was not unusual to see blacks on London streets. There were at least five thousand and perhaps as many as seven thousand scattered over the metropolis, some living in fine town houses where, suitably got up in embroidered coats, powdered wigs and silk breeches, they served, ornamentally, as footmen or body servants to the quality. Some, like Dr Johnson's Francis Barber, were minor celebrities, sketched and painted as charming "sable" curiosities. The less fortunate made a living as musicians and waiters in the taverns and brothels of Covent Garden, and went home to a bare, verminous room in neighbouring St Giles, where they were called "blackbirds". More congregated on the dockland parish of St George in the East, in the filthy streets that led from Nicholas Hawksmoor's eccentric

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exposing the cruelty of the slave system. British readers began to encounter in print the voices of former slaves and their first-person accounts of the harsh realities of slavery greatly contributed to the abolition campaign that was taking hold of the country. These were the narratives of Africans now living as free men in Britain: Ukawsaw Gronniosaw in *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African prince, written by himself* (1772), Ottobah Cuogano in *Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of the slavery and commerce of the human species* (1787), and, foremost, Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789).

Part of Caryl Phillips's novel .

in the making of British history, but it is also, and crucially, a story about individual loss and uprooting—as is always the case in Phillips's novels, a personal history within the huge tide of history.

Emily's diary is modelled closely on historical documents, the travelogues of women such as Lady Nugent or Mrs Carmichael who travelled to the West Indies in the early nineteenth century, with passages taken almost verbatim from these accounts and others, including Matthew Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (1833). The slave's personal narrative is inspired among other texts by the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745-1797), a book that greatly contributed to the abolition debate. For readers familiar with eighteenth-century slave narratives and nineteenth-century women's travel writing, the novel flaunts its connections with historical texts(r)3(a)4(ve)4(l)mith l

autobiography) but identified himself as Gustavus Vassa, Cambridge closes his narrative reasserting the English name that he has used during his years in Britain, David Henderson, and also like Equiano, who was enslaved around age eleven and taken to the metropolis after a month in Virginia,[24] Cambridge is captured at age fifteen in the same region of West Africa that he refers to as Guinea, and after undergoing the Middle Passage to Barbados and then Florida, he sails to Britain to serve as domestic servant to a retired captain, a man who leads a simple life and whose "only marks of distinction [are] his black servants" (142).

The real Equiano bought his freedom after years serving a Royal Navy officer on various vessels and later working in commerce in the West Indies; as a free man in Britain he contributed with his writings to the antislavery movement. His fictional counterpart, on the other hand, falls prey to white greed when he is travelling as a free missionary to Africa and ends his days as a slave in the Caribbean. Before that, however, Cambridge spends ten years as a free man in Britain and starts a family with a white woman, a situation that was the rule among men of African origin at the time, given the unbalanced ratio of black men to women. Nussbaum indeed points out that "only two black-black unions were recorded in the whole of the eightee0(i)-2Ah c4(e)4(d(i)-2Au)-11(y)20

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Olaudah Equiano has been considered the first writer of African origin to assert his identity as a Briton: "he is British by acculturation and choice… he adopts the

Dabydeen himself has recognised the crucial role of Equiano's voice in the writing of this novel:

> The writer who has really influenced me emotionally has been Equiano. Equiano is somebody who has definitely entered into my writing, almost like a posthumous presence. So it's a novel by Equiano, of course. A novel about writing, a novel about arriving at the state of writing. In the way that Equiano had to in the eighteenth century.[30]

While Phillips combines three discrete narratives with very different styles, the main focalisation for the events in Dabydeen's novel is the old man's mind

of the African servant in eighteenth-century portraits as a *ficelle*, a minor character that sets off the major subject of the painting, typically in individual or family portraits. As Dabydeen himself indicates in his study of eighteenth-century representations of blacks in Britain, "the wealthy were accustomed to having themselves and their families painted with their black servants, the black presence being a ready means of indicating their affluence…and in some cases their colonial connections."[31] The novel turns the black servant into the protagonist who focalises most of the narrative, and the choice of title stresses the novel's dialogue with the work of William Hogarth, in particular the six-plate series called *A Harlot Progress* (1732) which shows in Plate 2 the young woman protagonist

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the reader, while Mungo fights this and his main purpose is to make himself into a full human being that we can learn to love: "It is your love that I greed for, not the coinage of your guilt" (71).[35]

The stories of at least three harlots are intertwined in the novel. We have first Moll Hackabout herself, who appears only at the end of Mungo's narration when she is terminally ill after a life that we imagine has followed a pattern similar to that of Hogarth's character.[36] Secondly, we see the black slave Mungo-Perseus as a harlot in a double sense. On the one hand, Mungo has been sexually, physically and psychologically abused by Captain Thistlewood, a slaver well-known for his breaking of young boys for sexual pleasure, whose very name suggests cruelty, inspired as it is by that of the infamous Jamaican planter who kept a diary of life on his plantation, including a detailed account of his sexual encounters with female slaves. Mungo has been forced to be the captain's "harlot" for years and his sexual identity is complicated by his early violent involvement with him

reproduce the conventions of the slave narrative in Cambridge's story as he sets it side by side with two other accounts of the realities of plantation life; the voice of Dabydeen's protagonist undermines the power of the slave narrative as a reliable means of self-expression and a vehicle to capture the horrors of slavery. Intertextuality with written and visual texts of the late eighteenth century plays a crucial role in both novels, and highlights the intricate social and cultural condition of Africans who lived in Britain at the time and their uneasiness at being perceived and represented as outsiders. These novels can contribute to the reconfiguration of British history and the understanding of its involvement in the slave trade, and they can play a part in the redefining and rewriting of Britain from within as they reconstruct the country's past to include the previously erased experience of black Britons.

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[1] Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995), 2.
[2] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 7.
[3] Bruce King, *The Internationalization of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 163.
[4] Bénédicte Ledent, "Remembering Slavery: History as Roots in the Fiction of Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar" in Marc Delrez and Bénédicte Ledent, eds., *The Contact and the Culmination* (Liège: University of Liège, 1996), 273.
[5] For an excellent account of the role of black loyalists in the American Revolution see Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (London: BBC Books, 2005).
[6] Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain 1780-1830* (London: Routledge, 2003, 1996), 18. Myers insists in her opening chapter that her study is concerned with "the anonymous mass of the black populace and not the more prominent individuals of the era" (6). A key element in her research is the analysis of parish registers and criminal records.
[7] James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society 1555-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), 46. Significantly, Walvin devotes to the eighteenth century over half of his volume on four hundred years of black history.
[8] Folarin Shyllon, *Black People in Britain, 1555-1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 102. Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto), 72. Norma Myers, *Reconstructing*, 35. Vincent Carretta, "Explanatory and Textual Notes" in Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 283.
[9] Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 31.
[10] Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 167.
[11] Ibid., 163.
[12] Gerzina, *Black England*, 17.
[13] Catherine Molineux, "Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London" (*English Literary History*, 72, 2005), 498.
[14] Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 27.
[15] Schama, *Rough Crossing*, 180.

[16] Schama mentions as examples of this negative assessment of the initiative Folarin Shyllon, who speaks of its motivation as "a patriotic enthusiasm to preserve the purity of the English bloodstream" (*Black People in Britain*, 128), and Mary Beth Norton in "The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution" (*Journal of Negro History*, LXVIII, 4, October 1973). As an example of a more balanced evaluation of the situation he mentions 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).
[17] Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 33.
[18] Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 141. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.
[19] For the novel as a postmodern and postcolonial text that *de-scribes* empire see Paul Sharrad, "Speaking the Unspeakable: London, *Cambridge* and the Caribbean" in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, eds., *De-scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality* (London: Routledge, 1994), 201-17. For its polyphonic structure that interrogates truth see Sylvie Chavanelle, "Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*: Ironical (Dis)empowerment" (*International Fiction Review* 25.1/2, 1998), 79-88, and Gail Low, "'A Chorus of Common Memory': Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*" (*Research in African Literatures* 29.4, 1998), 122-40. For the novel's questioning of historical validity through its fictionalising of history see Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*" *(Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 29.2, 1993), 34-47.
[20] Françoise Charras, "De-Centering the Center: George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* (1972) and Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991)" in Maria Diedrich, Carl Pedersen and Justine Tally, eds., *Mapping African America: History, Narrative Form and the Production of Knowledge* (Hamburg: LIT, 1999), 61-78.
[21] Lars Eckstein's *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Cultural Memory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 69.
[22] Ibid., 104.
[23] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 77.
[24] In recent years there has been some speculation as to the truthful nature of the early part of Equiano's narrative. Vincent Carretta has argued that there is evidence to prove that he did not undergo the Middle Passage but was born in South Carolina. See Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005). Against Carretta's argumentation see Paul E. Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African" (*Slavery and Abolition* , 27.3, 2006), 317-47.
[25] Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human*, 167.
[26] Vincent Carretta, "Introduction" to Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, xvii.
[27] Eckstein, *Re-Membering*, 107.
[28] Ledent, "Remembering Slavery," 277-78.
[29] Caryl Phillips, "Introduction" to *Extravagant Strangers*, ed. Caryl Phillips (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), xvi.
[30] Mark Stein, "David Dabydeen talks to Mark Stein" (*Wasafiri* 20.1, 1998), 29.
[31] David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 85.
[32] For a careful analysis of the novel's dialogue with contemporary painting, see Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering*, 133-44.
[33] David Dabydeen, *A Harlot's Progress* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 1. All subsequent references are

innocent. I tried to look after her. I found her wondering the streets, hungry, and before pimps could get hold of her I took her in. I introduced her to Lady Montague's laundry-room" (128-29; italics in the original).

[37] Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks*, 101. In the novel Lady Montague is occasionally envisioned as a Britannia figure whose sickness is linked to the commercial ethos of the land enriched by the colonies, as in this portrait that Mungo's memories paint of her: "I can tally too the nature of her body. Imagine skin of bleached sugar, bales of cotton her breasts, veins of gold tinning along her arms, her lap a mine of inexhaustible ores, and yet all the cargoes of Empire but a trifle compared to the effort that went into her creation, the centuries and centuries of constant progress, the harbouring of the seed to ensure purity of race and lineage, the gradual accumulation of riches and reputation, like a stately ship starts from rude forest, a mansion from rude stone" (184-85).

[38] Ibid., 88. Dabydeen mentions two significant examples: the Duke of Chandos and William Beckford.

[39] Eckstein, *Re-Membering*, 132.

[40] Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 177.