

Neo-Slave Narratives in Contemporary Black British Fiction

Sofía Muñoz-Valdivieso

In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), Bernard Bell created the term “neoslave narratives” to refer to the fictions about slavery that began to appear in the US in the sixties and seventies and he defined them as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). The label has come to be used in a broad sense to describe all contemporary novels about slavery, but it alternatively has a more restrictive meaning introduced by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy in *The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999). In this more specific use, “neo-slave narratives” are a particular kind of slavery fiction, those that recreate the first-person narrator of the original texts written (or dictated) by the former slaves themselves.¹ In the present discussion, the label “neo-slave narratives” is used in Rushdy’s more specific sense to refer to fictional texts in the first person that bring to mind the original slave narratives, while those that deal with slavery in any other form will be referred to as slavery novels. The three works under discussion in the present article, Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge* (1991), David Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999) and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots* (2008), include a sustained first-person narrative that fits the more restrictive definition of neo-slave narrative provided by Rushdy. These novels can be seen as British developments within the tradition of the African-American novel of slavery, but they are also, crucially, contributions to the effort of bringing slavery and the slave trade to the mirror of public representations in Britain.

Although slavery novels, like the original slave narratives, are typically an African-American genre, several significant examples have been published in Britain in the last twenty years. *Cambridge*, *A Harlot’s Progress*, and *Blonde Roots* are part of this new tendency to deal with the experience of slavery in recent British fiction. Starting in the nineties, “[the]

emergence of a body of writing on slavery attests to its perceived relevance to Caribbean-British people coming of age in the 1970s and early 1980s” (Thieme 2). This trend in narrative parallels the growing scholarly interest in slavery in the British Empire and its role in shaping British history and present social formations. The movement to recover the slave past of Britain became particularly strong after the 2007 bicentennial commemorations of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. An attempt to integrate the legacy of slavery into the narrative of the British nation guided many of the commemoration activities, which highlighted traditionally hidden narratives of slavery and the role it played in the creation of wealth in the British Empire as well as the reverberations of the heritage of slavery in contemporary society.² The 2007 commemoration can be considered part of an effort to develop a more complex view of the nation that includes the concerns of the Afro-British and Caribbean-British communities in the twenty-first century.

Like the bicentennial commemoration, recent fictions of slavery in Britain can be seen in the context of contemporary discussions of the British past that help redefine what it means to be British in the present. The production of slavery novels in Britain is rather small in comparison with the proliferation of those texts in the US, and certainly they cannot claim the kind of cultural centrality they have in US society. Slavery novels published in Britain nevertheless play a role in the recent re-configurations of the past that are taking place in the country as part of a more general effort among historians, artists, and other social forces to make British involvement in the slave trade and slavery relevant to present ethnic and cultural identities. Novels about slavery published in Britain have been mostly written by authors of African and Caribbean origin. Among them we have Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and *The Longest Memory* (1994), Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* (1997), Laura Fish’s *Strange Music* (2008), Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* (2010), S. I. Martin’s *Incomparable World* (1996), and Caryl Phillips’ *Higher Ground* (1989) and *Crossing the River* (1993).³ These novels are typically polyphonic, so that by offering the perspectives of different characters involved in slavery, they “subvert the grand, master narrative of History . . . not through a mere reversal of the

centre and the margin, but by . . . replacing the original exclusiveness by a new inclusive approach" (Ledent 291). The polyphony in these novels is usually achieved by shifting the focalization of the third-person narration so that the full story in each text is told through different centres of enunciation.⁴

Among the slavery novels published in Britain in recent years, *Cambridge*, *A Harlot's Progress*, and *Blonde Roots* are the fictions that most clearly revisit the original slave narratives, that is, the first-person texts written or dictated by the former slaves themselves. Each novel includes a first-person narrative by the enslaved protagonist: in *A Harlot's Progress* and *Cambridge*, Mungo and Cambridge are old men who write their autobiographies in two different locations of the Black Atlantic, while in *Blonde Roots* the narrator is a woman in her thirties called Omerenomwara, who tells the story of her life, including her childhood prior to her enslavement and her experiences under different masters. In *Cambridge* and *Blonde Roots*, the first-person narrative by the enslaved protagonists appears side by side with the first-person narrative of his/her enslaver, while in *A Harlot's Progress*, Mungo's predominant first-person narrative is part of a more kaleidoscopic text that combines the perspectives of other characters.

Publishing in the early nineties, Caryl Phillips was the pioneer in creating fiction about slavery in Britain, while David Dabydeen continued the tradition in the British context, and Bernardine Evaristo writes at a later time and feels freer to explore the topic in a comic vein. The three authors were born (or raised) and based in Britain when they wrote the novels, and the enslaved protagonists of their fictions spend a good portion of their lives in Britain. Phillips, Dabydeen and Evaristo are linked to Africa and the Caribbean through their family or personal histories: Phillips was born of African ancestry on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts in 1958 and came to Britain when he was four months old; Dabydeen was born of Indian ancestry in Guyana in 1955 and arrived in the country when he was fourteen; Evaristo was born in London in 1959 to an English mother and a Nigerian father whose ancestors had lived as slaves in the Brazilian cane fields. Phillips has frequently insisted on the significance of slavery and the slave trade in his writing:

I suspect that the vast majority of what I have so far written has been an attempt to understand not just the actual details of the “institution” of slavery but, more importantly, the continued, corrosive, troubling and inescapable legacy of what happened on the coast of Africa, on the plantations in the Americas, and on the high and low streets of Europe. (“Our Modern World” 520)

As an academic, Dabydeen has written extensively about the representation of Africans in Britain in the eighteenth century, in particular in *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (1987), and as a creative writer, he has reflected on slavery in his volumes of poetry *Slave Song* (1984) and *Turner* (1994). Evaristo grew up as a mixed-race child in the east London suburb of Woolwich, which in the seventies was mostly white, so that her family “of eight mixed-race kids stood out and were targets” (Evaristo, “CSI” 2). Her earlier novel-in-verse, *Lara* (1997), traced the protagonist’s paternal ancestors to the Brazilian plantations, and *Blonde Roots*, dedicated to “the 10 to 12 million Africans taken to Europe and the Americas as slaves . . . and their descendants,” is an attempt to force her readers to look at the past in a new light and reconsider their assumptions about history and race.

In Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge*, the neo-slave narrative is a brief memoir that an old African hastily puts together as he waits for his execution for killing the plantation overseer. He has lived as a slave on an unidentified island of the Caribbean for a long time, but from his narrative we learn that he had been born in Africa. After undergoing the Middle Passage he sailed back to Europe, where he spent some years as a free man in Britain before being enslaved again and sent to the Caribbean. *Cambridge*’s autobiographical text, which takes up about one fifth of the novel and describes his life before and during his days in the Caribbean, is set side by side with two other descriptions of the realities of plantation life, since it is preceded by the travelogue of his master’s daughter, a young English woman visiting her family’s plantation sometime between abolition and emancipation and followed by a four-page sensational account of the killing. Over one third of the African’s narrative is devoted to

his experience in Britain, where he becomes acquainted with the varied black population of London as he finds himself “haunted by black men occupying all ranks of life” (142). The story of Cambridge, like *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) of Olaudah Equiano that inspires it, shapes a vision of Britain, to use Phillips’ words in *Extravagant Strangers* (1997), as “participating in a centuries-old tradition of cultural exchange, of ethnic and linguistic plurality” (xvi).

Cambridge is written in a pastiche of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century language, and it integrates passages, words and echoes from at least twenty earlier texts, to the extent that it has been described as “a palimpsest which assembles specific passages from older texts in an artistic montage” (Eckstein 69). The narrative of Cambridge draws from the writings of eighteenth-century blacks who lived in Britain, such as Ottobah Cugoana, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Ignatius Sancho, but primarily from the autobiography of Equiano, which provides many of the recorded incidents in Cambridge’s memoir.⁵ Cambridge’s opening description of Africans’ “unsullied state [as] a simple and unwarlike people” (133), as well as their corruption by European greed, is clearly inspired by similar accounts in the letters of Ignatius Sancho and the story of his harsh living conditions echoes the autobiographical narrative by Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. The stronger earlier presence, however, is that of Equiano, who is not only the source of incidents but also the inspiration for his language and style. Unlike the American antebellum slave narratives, which are “democratic, businesslike, plainspoken, and self-assertive,” (Mulvey 18) Cambridge’s narrative is, like that of Equiano, “aristocratic, genteel, Augustan and deferential” (Mulvey 18).⁶

Cambridge feels that he belongs in the nation whose language and religion he has adopted and sees his immersion in English culture as a salvation from the savagery of his fellow Africans in the dark continent. He describes himself as “an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion!” (147)—in his autobiography Equiano uses the phrase “almost an Englishman” (77)—and begins his story thanking God for granting him the power of self-expression in English, the language of “my dear England” (133). As he proceeds with his narrative he comes across as rather inflexible in his beliefs: he is convinced that Christianity

and English culture have granted him the exclusive right to truth and placed him above all other Africans. He exclaims when he is re-enslaved, “That I, a virtual Englishman, was to be treated as base African cargo, caused me such hurtful pain as I was barely able to endure” (156). In his views of Africans and fellow slaves on the plantation, he appears sometimes as a mouthpiece for European prejudices and tainted perceptions of humanity. Cambridge’s narrative is marked by his absorption of the masters’ values, his sense that as a Christian and an Englishman, he has “a superior English mind” (155). Despite his refinement and claims of legitimacy, he ends his life in a double enslavement: physically bound as a plantation slave and spiritually enslaved by what a contemporary poetic voice would have called his “mind-forged manacles” (Blake 143). Like the authors of the original slave narratives, Cambridge ostensibly writes his text to gain the sympathy of prospective readers for the plight of enslaved Africans, but he does not fully engage the sympathy of contemporary readers because of his blind acceptance of the racial stereotyping in the English system of beliefs. The irony of his situation is all too poignant, since for all his protestations as to his English identity through his assimilation of cultural and religious values, his destiny will be determined by his colour.

With his frequent integration of passages and echoes from the original texts written by free blacks in Britain in the eighteenth century, Phillips pays homage to them.⁷ Their autobiographical texts brought these Africans into public existence and made them visible and involved in the cultural life of their times. Unlike them, however, Cambridge is not a free man when he writes: after having had access to Western education and values, he is re-enslaved on a missionary voyage to Africa, and he ends his days as a slave on a Caribbean plantation. For all his assimilation of European values, his fate is sealed by the fact that he is African, since his learning and his Christian values are no defence against the greed of the Europeans, who simply see him as human cargo and sell him back into slavery. Cambridge’s character and story present a dubious example of empowerment through writing: unlike the writers of the original antebellum slave narratives in America or the Africans based in Britain in the eighteenth century, Cambridge is re-enslaved and dies

as a slave despite having been granted access to English language and culture; he produces a text that will most likely be lost in the fissures of historical writing and superseded by other texts written by those in power. By making Cambridge's autobiographical narrative only a small section of the novel, Phillips highlights the limited impact his voice may have had: his view of reality is shown as only one among different narratives of plantation life, and certainly the one with the least repercussion.

Cambridge believes firmly in the power of language to capture and convey reality, and his narrative is an effort to do so in the style and form that would have been appreciated by early nineteenth-century readers. While Cambridge makes an effort to maintain a well-organized narrative with a clear linear structure that can attest to his fully human identity as a civilized Christian (English)man, the narrative by the African protagonist in Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* shows the limitations of language and narrative to represent reality, in particular the horrifying experience of the enslaved individual. Mungo's story does not share Cambridge's smooth surface and assured tone but sounds confused and disconcerted. The novel opens when Mungo, now an old man, is visited by Mr Pringle, a member of the abolition committee. Mr Pringle is trying to record Mungo's experiences so as to write a narrative that can further the cause of abolition—Mr Prince's name is meant to bring to mind the editor of *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), whose editorial intervention in her narrative has been much discussed. Mr Pringle is impatiently waiting for the destitute African to begin his narration: "Something must be said. . . . A beginning, Mungo" (1). Mungo's opening silence is a sign of his self-assertion as an independent human being who wants to control the narrative of his life since he seems to be "uneasy with his British readership, all too aware of the constrictive form of the slave narrative" (Ward 34). When he later describes his experience of the Middle Passage, he is surrounded by the ghosts of many of his fellow passengers, so that his story becomes the embodiment of a collective past of horrors—like the story of Beloved in Toni Morrison's eponymous novel. *A Harlot's Progress* is like *Beloved* an example of A. Timothy Spalding's "fantastic postmodern slave narratives," texts that demonstrate the limitations of realism to deal with the issues of slavery

and that “critique traditional history’s reliance on objectivity, authenticity and realism as a means of representing the past” (Spalding 2). As a story about slavery, “Dabydeen’s novel suggests the difficulty of telling the untold” (Wallace 108).

Mungo’s insistence that he must tell his own story speaks to the power of self-fashioning through narration. In his extreme poverty he claims ownership to his life story as his only possession, an attitude that Ishmael Reed poignantly captures in his novel *Flight to Canada* (1976), when his protagonist refers to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s stealing Josiah Henson’s life for her novel: “It was all he had. His story. A man’s story is his gris-gris. Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. The thing that is himself” (Reed 8). Dabydeen has recognised the crucial role of Equiano in the writing of *A Harlot’s Progress* because it is a novel about writing and the ability to write oneself into existence through texts, just as Equiano had to do in the eighteenth century. In the novel, however, Mungo’s confused memories do not conform to the conventions of slave narratives: “I envy Mr Pringle’s tidiness, but the truth is otherwise” (111). The title of the novel suggests its dialogue with William Hogarth’s six-plate series *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732), which shows in Plate 2 the young harlot in the ornate parlour of a Jewish merchant. Mungo was the black boy servant attending her in this engraving, and his narrative in the novel captures the lives of African slaves in Britain at the time, with references for example to the auctions in London coffee-houses and the scattered presence of blacks in newspapers and art. His narrative also brings in some well-known historical facts, such as the 1783 case of the slaver *Zong*, and real contemporary people like Magistrate Gonson, the Jewish banker Sampson Gideon, and even William Hogarth himself. *A Harlot’s Progress* presents thus “a comprehensive picture of British society in the eighteenth century [including] the dispossession of a former slave, who is yet granted the power and freedom of saying and unsaying, of knitting and knotting memories” (Pagnouille 200).

Like *Cambridge*, *A Harlot’s Progress* writes back to the original slave narratives. Dabydeen’s approach is, however, different from that of Phillips. Despite his double consciousness as black and English, Phillips’ protagonist struggles to act as a writer in the traditional humanist

sense—that is, as a whole seamless human being who has a coherent life story to tell and the linguistic and narrative means to do so. Mungo, on the other hand, is more the postmodern writer, the author as the repository of the interaction of different discourses of his time and the crucible of perceptions of reality he cannot quite comprehend. In Mungo’s voice the conflicting forces of the master’s language and the slave’s silence converge, and as they crash upon each other, they can produce only a disjointed narrative that flouts the expectations of realism and causes a storm upon the smooth surfaces of conventional slave narratives such as that of Cambridge in Phillips’ novel. In the tradition of the eighteenth-century classic *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), Mungo is a self-conscious narrator who seems to be aware of the difficulties of containing life in texts. While Phillips writes back to the original texts by placing Cambridge in a position of re-enslavement and his version of reality side by side with other accounts of the same facts, Dabydeen stresses the failure of language and narrative to capture the unspeakable realities of slavery. Mungo’s insistence that he does not want the editorial interference of Mr Pringle shows his need to tell his own unmediated story, and thus Mungo’s narration highlights a problem in the study of the original slave narratives, the difficulty of approaching “texts proffered by those whose very identity has been erased, linguistically, legally and ideologically from the social order” (Thomas 177). The novel gives a sense of the obstacles faced by the original writers of slave narratives to write themselves into existence, since their “truth” had to be presented in a stylized manner that would fit white readers’ expectations of what constituted “authentic” slave experience.

Published after the bicentennial but showing a similar awareness of the need to recast memory, *Blonde Roots* presents the first-person narrative of enslavement and freedom of a white woman called Omerenomwara. Born Doris Scagglethorpe in Europa, she opens her tale as the house slave of Chief Kaga Konata Katamba in Londolo. Her story takes place at an unspecified time and in imaginary Atlantic locations south of the Equator—Evaristo includes a map of her re-imagined geography of the Atlantic world, since visualising this new cartography of slavery is crucial for readers to follow her narrative. On the Equator lies the continent of

Aphrika, with the United Kingdom of Ambossa an island immediately to its west; south of the equator we find the cold lands of Europa, which include England. Across the Atlantic Ocean to the west we find the continent of Amarika and the West Japanese Islands, where the plantations employ the slaves captured in Europa. The action of the novel thus unfolds in an alien geography in which north is south (the Grey Continent of Europa is south of Aphrika) and the UK (of Great Ambossa) is next to the continent of Aphrika. In this new cartography of the slave trade, Aphrikans move human cargo west from Whyte Europa to Amarika. *Blonde Roots* produces not only a dislocation of the readers' categorizations of space but also a disconcerting collusion of temporal frames and a constant disruption of the known facts of history. The factual basis of Atlantic slavery (Europeans enslaved and transported Africans) is turned on its head, since in the novel it is the *Aphrikans* who trade in *whyte* flesh. The time frame in the novel is an unspecified age that disorderly mingles the Middle Ages (suggested, for instance, by the clothing habits and customs of the Europeane tribes encountered by Kaga Konata Katamba), the nineteenth century (recreated in the references to the underground railroad or Chief Katanga's Victorian-sounding classification of humanity according to the "exact science of Craniofaecia Anthropometry" [18]), and the twenty-first century, which is made present through frequent references to contemporary popular culture.

Like *Cambridge*, *Blonde Roots* presents the first person narrative of the slave side by side with a text by the master, in this case Chief Kaga Konata Katamba. In his brief pamphlet *The Flame*, which occupies the middle section of the novel, Chief Katamba sounds like an eighteenth-century slaver as he records his thoughts and reflections on the true nature of the slave trade, as well as some remarks on the character and customs of the Europeanes, who seem to him close to "their four-legged compatriots in the animal kingdom" (125). The title of the novel echoes the American classic *Roots* (1976), the story of an African-American family from its origins in Africa in the eighteenth century. The use of the adjective "blonde" evokes the image of hair, a physical feature that has played an important role in racialized conceptions of beauty. The word "roots" in the title is thus related both to hair and to issues of origins and

history. In its reversal of expectations (dark roots are the more common problem of coloured hair), the title announces the reversal of realities in its story of *whyte* slaves and *blak* masters. Evaristo is aware of the symbolic value of an important aspect of female bodily appearance, an issue that is present in a variety of black women's writing from Una Marson's "Kinky Hair Blues" (1937) to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000)—in *Lara* she had already explored through hair issues the damaged self-image of black women in British society. In *Blonde Roots*, Western body images are reversed, so that the assumptions about beauty that have become naturalised in predominantly white societies are turned around, and thus *whyte* women long for *Aphrikan* flat noses, round bottoms, and hairstyles: "They wore the perms, twists and braids of Ambossan women, although Aphros were most in demand. . . . It took up to ten hours and when the blonde, red, brown, or straight roots came through it looked just plain tacky, apparently" (29–30).

As epigraph for her novel, Evaristo uses a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche that speaks to the role of power in shaping reality: "All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth." In recording the history of slavery and the slave trade, white views have traditionally shaped what constitutes truth, and the original slave narratives were the first attempts to tell about those realities from the perspective of the enslaved. Those writers were granted the power of self-expression, but as present studies increasingly have come to analyse, their texts were constricted by their being embedded in a culture in which the black minority voices still had to conform to the conceptions of truth and validity held by the white majority. In *Blonde Roots* the constructed nature of values is brought to the fore in its comic inversion of common assumptions about beauty, history, and reality, from the body image issues represented by hair styles to the assertion that certain groups of humans are inherently superior to others.

While *Cambridge* and *A Harlot's Progress* follow in the main tradition of the slavery novel of high seriousness, *Blonde Roots* is a comic novel in the line of a small subgroup of African American slavery novels. In its use of humour and anachronisms to depict slavery, *Blonde Roots* breaks

expectations of seriousness just as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) do, novels that, as Valerie Smith observes "use techniques such as humor, hyperbole and anachronism to underscore the absurdity of the institution itself and its representations, as well as its links to contemporary practices that commodify black bodies and cultural forms" (172). *Blonde Roots* does not quite reach the farcical humour of Reed's text and is far from the philosophical depth of *Oxherding Tale*, a novel that explores through its mixed-race protagonist the mongrel nature of American culture and "inhabits most confidently the space where fiction and philosophy meet" (Johnson xviii), but Evaristo's work strives for "[a] combination of levity and gravitas [which serves] as a powerful tool to convey the utter atrociousness of the trade and its awful impact on human lives" (Collins 1201–02). *Blonde Roots* shares the apparent lightness in the treatment of a serious topic of Levy's recent novel of Caribbean slavery, *The Long Song* (2010). While the voice of Cambridge is self-assured and elegant and that of Mungo a disconcerting mixture of standard (even scholarly) English and Caribbean patois, *Blonde Roots* is a conversational novel, and Omerenomwara's voice sounds like that of a twenty-first century woman, with a penchant for exclamations and British slang. It is an appropriate voice for the anachronistic recreation of Britain as a place of the past and the present, a strange yet familiar location in which we find, for instance, familiar London locations like Mayfah, Paddinto Station, Brixtane or Baka Street in a carnivalesque city inhabited by Aphrikans who hold Europanes as slaves.

The refrain in the last section of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), "This is not a story to pass on" (274), encapsulates the essence of slavery novels: in the ambivalence of its verb, the sentence articulates both the difficulty of capturing and sharing the lost experience of enslaved human beings and the imperative need not to forget their existence. In "The Site of Memory," Morrison notes that the narrators of the original slave narratives "were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things" (110), so that her task as a novelist is to reconstruct those terrible events. All slavery novels attempt to imagine the experiences that were not captured in the original slave narratives, and they

implicitly produce a reconsideration and re-evaluation of slavery and its legacy. Among slavery novels, the neo-slave narratives that reproduce the first-person speaker of the original texts by former slaves probe more explicitly into the powers and limitations of self-representation through the written word. *Cambridge, A Harlot's Progress*, and *Blonde Roots* revisit this tradition of the slave narratives, the autobiographical texts written by (mostly) African Americans once they attained freedom, and they write back to them in diverse manners: in Phillips' novel, we find a very close intertextual appropriation of Equiano's voice (and others) in Cambridge's autobiographical story, which resonates with phrases and expressions from the original texts themselves; in *A Harlot's Progress*, the complex narrative posits the suspect authenticity of slave narratives and the inadequacy of language to record the slaves' experience; in *Blonde Roots*, the neo-slave narrative of Omerenomwara is embedded in a comic recreation of an ugly reality of our collective past, with a subversion of the cartographies of slavery that attempts to challenge readers' notions of racial identity. What Valerie Smith has stated in relation to African American slavery novels in the context of US history can be applied to recent fictions about slavery in Britain, since they also "approach the institution of slavery from a myriad perspectives and embrace a variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes" (168). Phillips' and Dabydeen's novels are clear efforts to write back to the tradition by questioning the assumptions about freedom and self-representation sustaining the original slave narrative. Evaristo's text does not openly question issues of self-representation and empowerment through writing, but her remaking of the original slave narrative is in a sense even more radical, since the foundations of the history of the Black Atlantic are obliterated and the reality of slavery is turned on its head.⁸ These three slavery novels published in Britain share a first person narrator that brings them together as attempts to write back to the original slave narrative, but they do it in the diverse manners mentioned by Smith: Phillips' text mainly as a novel grounded in historical research, Dabydeen's as a postmodern experiment, and Evaristo's as speculative fiction.

Like many of the 2007 events, the novels about slavery published in Britain in recent years have brought the evil institution to the mirror of public representations. They are part of the present negotiations about Britishness and the ownership of narratives of the nation that the memorialisation of abolition brought to the fore. Among the body of slavery novels published in Britain in recent years, *Cambridge*, *A Harlot's Progress*, and *Blonde Roots* are the texts that most clearly revisit slave narratives. In their very different ways, they show the involvement of Britain in the slave trade—in the case of *Blonde Roots* highlighted by the inversion of the country's role from slaver to victim—by means of a first-person story that brings to mind the original slave narratives. Despite its surreal mixing of times and reversal of facts, *Blonde Roots* is, like *Cambridge* and *A Harlot's Progress*, a novel profoundly grounded in British reality, since Omerenomwara's story creates an alternative world which mirrors in reverse the place of Britain in the history of the Atlantic slave trade. Narratives of the British nation have traditionally managed to shift the focus away from the participation of Britain in the institution of slavery to highlight its role as a European leader in the movement to do away with the slave trade, so that for a long time "Britons—and Britain's colonial subjects—were taught to view transatlantic slavery through the moral triumph of abolition, therefore substituting for the horrors of slavery and the slave trade a 'culture of abolitionism'" (Oldfield 2). In present-day Britain, a society that braids the cultural formations of different groups, including those of African and Afro-Caribbean origin, this view is no longer possible. By presenting the experience of slavery through the first-person perspective of enslaved individuals who lived in Britain, these novels contribute to the rewriting of the British past as they highlight the involvement of the country in slavery and the slave trade, so that narratives of slavery can become integrated into the memory of the British nation, and thus play a role in the public discourse that constructs the identities of British people.

Notes

- 1 In Bell's original use, the label was introduced without a hyphen as "neoslave narratives." In Rushdy's more restrictive use, "neo-slave narratives" are defined as

- “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person of the antebellum slave narrative” (3).
- 2 For an assessment of the commemorations, see Cubitt and Muñoz-Valdivieso.
 - 3 Poetry has also addressed the topic, as for example in David Dabydeen’s *Slave Song* (1984) and *Turner* (1994), Fred D’Aguiar’s *Bloodlines* (2000), or Dorothea Smartt’s *Ship Shape* (2008). Writers of non-Caribbean or African origin have also occasionally written highly visible novels on the slave trade and slavery, such as Philippa Gregory’s *A Respectable Trade* (1992) and Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger* (1992).
 - 4 A first-person narrator is occasionally used. *Lara*, for instance, includes brief first-person sketches by several enslaved characters, but it creates a chorus of enslaved voices, not the sustained first-person narrative of one protagonist.
 - 5 Equiano’s story and those of other blacks who lived in Britain before the *Windrush* generation are finding in recent years a more visible position in the narratives of the British nation, as demonstrated by the publication of texts by Equiano (1995), Sancho (1998) and Cugoano (1999) in the Penguin Classics series.
 - 6 Carretta has described Equiano as the first writer of African origin who asserted his identity as a Briton: “[H]e is British by acculturation and choice. . . . [H]e adopts the cultural, political, religious, and social values that enable him to be accepted as British” (xvii).
 - 7 As Eckstein indicates, in private correspondence Phillips has expressed his hope that the novel may prompt readers’ curiosity about the original eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts that document British involvement in the slave trade (Eckstein 107).
 - 8 In its focus on the story of a female slave that is told as an act of female empowerment, the novel follows the tradition of African American novels of slavery like Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Lorene Cary’s *The Price of a Child* (1995), in which the protagonists not only reach freedom but break boundaries by gaining the power to tell their own stories, in Williams’ novel orally to her descendants and in Cary’s novel publicly in the form of open lectures in the American abolitionist circles of the 1850s.

Works Cited

- Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: The U of Massachusetts P, 1987. Print.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Alicia Ostriker. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- Cary, Lorene. *The Price of a Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. Print.
- Carretta, Vincent. “Introduction.” Olaudah Equiano. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. Ed. Vincent Carretta. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995. ix-xxvii. Print.

- Collins, Michael. "My Preoccupations Are in My DNA: An Interview with Bernardine Evaristo." *Callaloo* 31.4 (Fall 2008): 1199–1203. Print.
- Cubitt, Geoffrey. "Bringing It Home: Making Local Meaning in 2007 Bicentenary Exhibitions." *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 30.2 (June 2009): 259–75. Print.
- Cugoano, Quobna Ottobah. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery*. Ed. Vincent Carretta. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- Dabydeen, David. *A Harlot's Progress*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- . *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987. Print
- . *Slave Song*. 1984. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2005. Print.
- . *Turner*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1994. Print.
- D'Aguiar, Fred. *Bloodlines*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2000. Print.
- . *Feeding the Ghosts*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1997. Print.
- . *The Longest Memory*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1994. Print.
- Eckstein, Lars. *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006. Print.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. Ed. Vincent Carretta. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Evaristo, Bernardine. *Blonde Roots*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008. Print.
- . "CSI Europe: African Trace Elements. Fragments. Reconstruction. Case Histories. Motive. Personal." *Wasafiri* 23.4 (December 2008): 2. Print.
- . *Lara*. Tunbridge Wells: Angela Royal Publishing, 1997. Print.
- Fish, Laura. *Strange Music*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2008. Print.
- Gregory, Philippa. *A Respectable Trade*. 1992. London: Harper Collins, 1995. Print.
- Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw. *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*. Bath: W. Gye, 1770. Print.
- Haley, Alex. *Roots*. New York: Doubleday, 1976. Print.
- Johnson, Charles. "Introduction." *Oxherding Tale*. 1982. New York: Scribner, 1995. Print.
- Ledent, Bénédicte. "Slavery Revisited through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips." *Misrahi-Barak*. 281–293.
- Levy, Andrea. *The Long Song*. London: Headline Review, 2010. Print.
- Marson, Una. "Kinky Hair Blues." *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. Eds. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsch. London: Routledge, 1996. 137. Print.
- Martin, S. I. *Incomparable World*. London: Quartet Books, 1996. Print.
- Misrahi-Barak, Judith, ed. *Revisiting Slave Narratives / Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*. Montpellier: Université Montpellier III, 2005. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Print.
- . "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton, 1987. 103–124. Print.

- Mulvey, Christopher. "Freeing the Voice, Creating the Self: The Novel and Slavery." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*. Ed. Maryemma Graham. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 17–33. Print.
- Muñoz-Valdivieso, Sofia. "The Abolition of the British Slave Trade." *The European English Messenger* 16.1 (Spring 2007): 41–9. Print.
- Oldfield, J. R. *"Chords of Freedom": Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007. Print.
- Pagnoulle, Christine. "A Harlot's Progress: Memories in Knots and Stays." *No Land, No Mother: Essays on David Dabydeen*. Eds. Lynne Macedo and Kampta Karran. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2007. 181–203. Print.
- Phillips, Caryl. *Cambridge*. 1991. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print.
- . *Crossing the River*. 1993. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- . *Higher Ground*. New York: Viking, 1989. Print.
- . "Introduction." *Extravagant Strangers*. Ed. Caryl Phillips. London: Faber and Faber, 1997. xiii–xvi. Print.
- . "Our Modern World." *Revisiting Slave Narratives / Les avatars contemporains des récits d'esclaves*. Misrahi-Barak 519–525.
- Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. 1976. New York: Scribner, 1998. Print.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Sancho, Ignatius. *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*. Ed. Vincent Carretta. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998. Print.
- Smartt, Dorothea. *Ship Shape*. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2008. Print.
- Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000. Print.
- Smith, Valerie. "Neo-Slave Narratives." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Audrey Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 168–185. Print.
- Spalding, A. Timothy. *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2005. Print.
- Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. 1759–1766. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1978.
- Thieme, John. "Editorial." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42.1 (March 2007): 2. Print.
- Thomas, Helen. *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.
- Wallace, Barry. *Sacred Hunger*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992. Print.
- Wallace, Elizabeth Kowaleski. *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. Print.
- Ward, Abigail. "David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*: Re-Presenting the Slave Narrative Genre." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 43.1 (April 2007): 32–44. Print.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. New York: Harper Collins, 1986. Print.