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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 Gerzina¹

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 complicate the vision of the country’s past as homogeneous, and their recovery of black British history challenges the notion that the presence of black people in Britain is “an illegitimate intrusion into a vision of authentic British national

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 recording race, “scholarship has been forced to rely upon the observations and impressions of contemporaries, which inevitably contain some degree of bias and account for the diversity in the estimation of black numbers.”⁶ James Walvin explains how at the time of the famous Somerset case in 1772, which determined that slaves could not be deported to the colonies from British soil, no less than the Chief Justice himself accepted the figure of 15,000 as a reliable indication of the black population, and generations of historians have taken the figure to be accurate, although originally “it was based on pure speculation.”⁷ Folarin Shyllon, Peter Fryer and Norma Myers speak of a black population of around 10,000, while Vincent Carretta brings up the number to 14,000-20,000, most of them in the slave-trading ports of Bristol, Liverpool and

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 basilica. Many of them were sailors, bargemen, haulers, carters and stevedores; and some for a few pence boxed bare knuckle or played on drums and fifes to crowds in the streets and piazzas. The "blackbirds," then, were mostly poor, and were known for flitting in and out of trouble.⁹

Black men are much more conspicuous than black women in the culture of the time and there is agreement as to the significantly smaller numbers of females in the country—in Felicity Nussbaum's estimate as few as twenty per cent of the total.¹⁰ The images of blacks in contemporary art are most frequently males, and scholars agree that it is due to the reduced numbers of possible female models, although Nussbaum follows David Dabydeen in mentioning as alternative explanation the possibility that "artists were troubled about having such women in their studios."¹¹ Black pages appeared often in contemporary art since "painters loved them for the visual contrast and drama they lent to portraits, and the subjects loved what the inclusion of them in their portraits said about their own economic status."¹² Indeed in eighteenth-century urban life the liveried pageboy of African origin became a "sought-after possession" to signal social status and, as such, "a motif in contemporary paintings, textiles, prints, porcelain, and poetry."¹³ These boys were flaunted as prized ornaments of their masters and especially their mistresses and became highly valued status symbols for the few who could afford

them, fashionable exotic objects that were frequently associated in paintings with the consumption of foreign luxury goods such as sugar, tea, tobacco, and coffee.¹⁴

These domestic servants of the upper classes were only the top of the social scale of blacks in the country, and there were more significant numbers of deprived blacks in Britain at the end of the century. The situation of the black destitute in London was indeed so extreme that in 1786 the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor was created to provide health care, clothing and jobs to needy black people. The plight of the Black Poor was particularly dramatic because the Poor Law at the time only offered relief to indigents who returned to their parish of origin, “but the ‘parish’ of the Americans who had been slaves and sailors, powder monkeys and army drummers, carters and cooks was on the high seas or back in the plantations of the American South.”¹⁵ The Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor soon approved a plan to transport the black population of London to the coast of Africa, to a town to be founded on land bought from local African authorities in the then Serra Leona, which would be called Granville Town to honour the abolitionist Granville Sharp. As Schama explains, historians have interpreted this initiative differently, and to many it has seemed “more like social convenience than utopian idealism.”¹⁶

The time of the transportation to Sierra Leone coincides with the beginning of the abolition movement in the 1780s. In May 1783, Quakers in London presented a petition against the trade to the Houses of Parliament, and in 1787, with the aid of members from other dissenting groups, they founded the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, “possibly because many Quaker families had profited substantially from their involvement in the trade and considered their participation in the abolitionist campaign as means of alleviating their guilt.”¹⁷ From the beginning of the anti-slavery movement, the testimonies of the slaves themselves were crucial in

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 Cuoqano 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 *Cambridge* (1991) is in the voice of an educated slave on a Caribbean plantation who remembers the years when he lived as a free man in Britain right after Abolition: "London, the most enviable capital of the world, was destined to be my home for the greater part of the next decade.... I soon came to understand that English law had recently decreed trading in human flesh illegal."¹⁸ Caryl Phillips was born in the Caribbean (St. Kitts, 1958) but came to Britain when he was four months old and grew up in Leeds. In this novel he joins three narratives: a travelogue by a young Victorian woman, Emily Cartwright, who is visiting her father's plantation in the Caribbean some time between Abolition and Emancipation, a memoir by the old slave Cambridge, who is facing death for killing the plantation overseer, and a newspaper account of the murder. This novel has been analysed as a postmodern and postcolonial text that *de-scribes* empire, ironically sustains a polyphonic structure to interrogate truth, and by fictionalising historical writing questions its validity to show that there are no true discourses, only more or less powerful ones.¹⁹ *Cambridge* is a contribution to the exploration of Caribbean imaginative history and the role of slavery

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 so openly that some critics like Françoise Charras have expressed a certain unease about its appropriation of texts.²⁰ Intertextuality plays a crucial role in this novel, which integrates passages, words or echoes from at least twenty prior texts, to the extent that Lars Eckstein defines it as “a palimpsest which assembles specific passages from older texts in an artistic montage”²¹ and argues that there is a parallelism between the novel’s literary technique of montage and the key idea of displacement and uprooting at its centre, since “Phillips’s narrative technique also consists of ‘uprooting’ and ‘displacing’ the material of older texts about slavery and the slave trade.”²²

The fictional Cambridge feels that he belongs in the nation whose language and religion he has adopted, and Olaudah Equiano’s tentative phrase when he describes himself after four years in Britain as “almost an Englishman”²³ is echoed in Cambridge’s several references to himself as “a virtual Englishman” (156) or as “an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion!” (147). Like Equiano, who never used his African name in private or public documents (except in the title of his

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 eighteenth century, one of which is Ignatius Sancho’s marriage to his wife Anne.”²⁵

Cambridge’s description of his family’s harsh living conditions in different British locations draws extensively from the 1772 autobiographical narrative by Gronniosaw, who narrates his story from his capture in Africa, through slavery, to a life of poverty as a free man with his English wife in Colchester, Norwich and Kidderminster, an account taken from his own mouth and committed to paper, as the preface indicates, by a young lady of the town of Leominster. The fictional Cambridge

spends most of his time in London, and there he gets acquainted with the varied black population of the city:

Armed with an enhanced mastery of this blessed English language, I went forth into London society and soon discovered myself haunted by black men occupying all ranks of life. To my great surprise I found men of colour and women of complexion who walked the higher streets and occupied the gardens of the formal and distinguished squares...Lower down the ranks were the destitute blacks: harlots, entertainers, assorted vagabonds...The bustling narrow cobbled streets of London were indeed teeming with a variety of unfortunate negroes (142-43).

Among the destitute blacks that Cambridge gets to see he explicitly mentions a street entertainer who wears “a quite ludicrous hat” (143), a reference to the well-known London beggar Joseph Johnson, a former black seaman who had no means of sustenance and could not claim parish relief since he had been born abroad. Like many Africans in Britain at the time, Johnson was destitute and depended on the charity of others, but he was ingenious and resorted to entertaining for survival: he roamed the streets of London sporting a big hat in the shape of a vessel which moved graciously as he bowed to passers-by, wearing thus on his head a huge emblem of his former condition as a mariner but also of his situation as an outsider in British society. Like Olaudah Equiano before abolition, Cambridge devotes part of his time in post-abolition Britain to lecturing against the evils of slavery, a system that for many years after the trade became illegal still played an important role in the economy and daily life of the country, and we see him cringe every time he finds in local newspapers advertisements for slave auctions and runaway slaves. Cambridge’s description of his years in Britain takes up over a third of his memoir, which follows the common structure of slave narratives from childhood in Africa to arrival in the Americas, but unlike that of Equiano and others, Cambridge’s story ends not in freedom but in the renewal of bondage and a second transportation to the Caribbean.

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 cultural, political, religious, and social values that enable him to be accepted as British.”²⁶ His story, and that of other blacks who lived in Britain before the *Windrush* generation, is finding a more visible position in British history, for there has been in recent years a greater effort to retrieve the distant black past of the country, as demonstrated for instance by the publication in 1995 of Equiano’s autobiography in the Penguin Classics series. Caryl Phillips has expressed in private correspondence his hope that readers of his novel may be sufficiently moved to search the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century originals which document British involvement in the slave trade.²⁷ His novel speaks eloquently about the horrors of slavery, but as in his other fiction about the slave trade and its consequences, “there is no retaliatory recentring of the slave to compensate for his/her silencing in the master’s monological historiography... there is not a single truth... but several co-existing ones.”²⁸ This novel is part of a more general project to explore the interconnected history of Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, and the role of the Black Atlantic in the configuration of present identities. The space Phillips grants to the voice of a former slave to tell his life in Britain gives visibility to the presence of people of African origin in the country at the time of Abolition, and therefore Cambridge’s story serves to shape a vision of Britain as “participating in a centuries-old tradition of cultural exchange, of ethnic and linguistic plurality.”²⁹

A similar emphasis on the interconnected history of Europe, Africa and Europe and the role of Britain in the slave trade guides the writing of David Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), a novel that presents the life narrative of another old black man who has also undergone the Middle Passage and finds himself in Britain.

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. Mungo's memories are nevertheless fractured by the traumatic experiences he has gone through since he was taken from his African village, and his story does not share Cambridge's smoothness and conviction in the ability of language to represent reality. His narrative is a kaleidoscopic intermingling of varied versions of his past, so that the readers cannot be reassured that they are learning his one authentic story. After the Middle Passage and his time as a sexual slave of Captain Thistlewood, Mungo begins his life in Britain as Perseus, one among the domestic servants who were integrated into upper class households as elegantly dressed ornaments that conveyed their masters' longing for the exotic. After he runs away from the Montagues' mansion, however, Mungo-Perseus's situation deteriorates until we see him as he appears at the beginning of the novel, an old man forced to live on the charity of the Abolition Committee. He has then become one of the Africans that contemporaries would have identified as the Black Poor, the urban fringe groups that survived in misery and dejection and whose situation became so visible that the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor sponsored their transportation to Africa.

David Dabydeen was born in Guyana in 1955 and moved to Britain with his family when he was eleven. He has published academic work on the presence of blacks in eighteenth-century visual arts, and in *A Harlot's Progress* he changes the typical role

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 in the ornate parlour of a Jewish merchant with a monkey and black boy servant attending her.³² There is an explicit reference to this plate in the prologue that introduces the nine chapters of the novel. As a representative of the Abolition Committee, Mr Pringle has been trying to obtain a story from the destitute Mungo, and now on his third visit, he is impatiently waiting for him to begin his narration: “Something must be said.... A beginning, Mungo.”³³ The only information Mr Pringle has about the old man is that he was the boy-slave in Hogarth’s engraving of the harlot Molly Hackabout, and his attempt to write a record of the black man’s words is thwarted by Mungo’s relentless silence. Mungo seems ungrateful to the people who have been feeding and clothing him and he “will not return their benevolence with the gift of confession” (1). Mungo remains silent not for reasons of illness or old age but acts on his own free will in refusing him “a sober testimony that will appeal to the Christian charity of an enlightened citizenry who will, on perusing my tale of underserved woe, campaign in the Houses of Parliament” (5). Christian benevolence is the defining feature of Mr Pringle, who feels he is the humble instrument of God, and as such he will “purge the story of its imperfections, to reveal Mungo in his unfallen state”

(6). Mungo's silence is his revolt against Mr Pringle's patronizing view; it is his self-assertion as an independent human being who wants to tell his own story without the mediation of an editor.

Although Mungo's viewpoint dominates, Dabydeen's novel presents changing centres of enunciation, from third-person narrative to the focalisation through Mungo's perspective or briefly that of other characters, like the washerwoman Betty, Lord and Lady Montague, and even minor ones that appear momentarily, such as the Cardews' negro. There seems to be at some points a doubling of narratives in the text since we have on one level the story about Mungo that Mr Pringle has finally decided to write himself, a narration we cannot hear but to which Mungo occasionally refers. This is, we are given to understand, the "official" story that will get published following the usual slave narrative structure from bondage to freedom, from life in Africa through slavery in America to Christian and physical liberation.³⁴ On the other hand, we have Mungo's own story, which is not smooth and ordered, but confused and disconcerting. While the slave Cambridge in Phillips's novel makes an effort to maintain a sense of well-organised narrative with a clear linear structure that attests to his fully human identity as a civilized Christian (English)man, in his narration Mungo undercuts any sense of linearity by disrupting the spatial and temporal conventions of realism: he provides different beginnings to his story, mixes events from alternative versions of his past, and disturbs the reader's notions of cause and effect sequence. There are times when Mungo brings our attention to the doubling up of narratives, typically asking us to believe his story, not Mr Pringle's version, as when he commends Betty to us readers: "Recognize her by *my* testimony, and not by the descriptions of thief and sinner that Mr Pringle will furnish of her" (168; emphasis in the original). There is a crucial difference between these two narratives, since Mr Pringle's is motivated by the desire to provoke guilt in

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, so that African ghosts accuse him of having become “the whiteman’s wife” (59). On the other hand, Mungo also feels like a harlot at the end of his life, when he is paid to sell the body of his memories to Mr Pringle of the Abolition Committee (“He makes me feel like a strumpet whose performance is undeserving of his coin” [178]) and he senses Mr Pringle’s entrance into his life as a violation of memory that he associates with sexual penetration: “Mr Pringle will nail [Mungo] down with the nib of his pen and he will struggle to wriggle free from his page, as from Captain Thistlewood’s bed” (156). The third harlot in the novel is less tangible. At certain moments of the narrative there is the suggestion that the very centre of the great British Empire is also a kind of harlot: Britain herself is trading in her human dignity for the sake of profit in the slave trade. This is a connection that Dabydeen stresses in his volume *Hogarth’s Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth*

Century English Art (1987), in which he analyses how the harlot at times was made to stand in Hogarth's work for the excessive greed of the nation: "[T]he harlot was a prominent figure in eighteenth-century literature for she was an appropriate symbol for the commercial ethos of the time" (1987 101).³⁷

It is difficult to overlook the fact that the revenues from slavery were a key source of patronage for art in general in the eighteenth century. The link between painting and slavery is a particularly poignant one since, as Dabydeen himself indicates in *Hogarth's Blacks*, many contemporary dealers in the paintings of the old masters were also dealers in slaves, and both commodities were sorted out into lots and auctioned off in coffee-houses: "[S]ome of the outstanding connoisseurs and collectors of the age were heavily involved in the slave trade."³⁸ Contemporary visual representations of blacks have key intertextual relationships with the novel, centrally those of Hogarth's engravings: *A Harlot's Progress* includes in the action several historical characters who supposedly appeared in them, like Magistrate Gonson or the Jew, Sampson Gideon, and even William Hogarth himself, who meets the real Molly Hackabout but later lies about her story. Mungo's narrative also captures daily facts of the slaves' lives in Britain, as well as crucial events of the British involvement in the slave trade at the time, such as for instance the 1783 case of the slaver *Zong*, an incident that was central in the growth of the abolition movement and which has featured in Dabydeen's poetry. What in the novel is called the "Thistlewood case" (the captain's name containing an echo of the *Zong*'s actual captain Collingwood, as Eckstein observes³⁹) clearly resembles the forced drowning at sea of 133 slaves in 1783, which through an insurance court procedure brought to public view the common practice of throwing live slaves overboard for commercial interests (insurable losses included slaves who died on the voyage but not those who died, or whose value was reduced

through illness, on arrival). Mungo's confused story is more than an individual tale of suffering, and there are moments when he senses that his memories capture the plight of many more like him, as in his description of his archive of newspaper clippings:

The headings made years ago remain like stubborn stains: "Slave Revolts," "Mutinies," "Runaways," "Suicides," "Infanticides," "Executions by Hanging," "Executions by Gunshot," "Executions by Burning," "Executions by Hand." In the faraway plantations of the West Indies, in the barracoons of the African coast, I have rebelled, stabbed, poisoned, raped, absconded, and sought escape by killing myself and my offsprings. In return I have been strangled, flogged to death, roasted alive, blown away and lynched. Truly I have made havoc in the hearts and minds of whitepeople, compromising their civility, sharpening their Christian principles to breaking-point (244).

Dabydeen's black slave, now in his old age in late eighteenth-century London, writes himself into existence by writing against contemporary representations of blacks at the time, both in the written media (from newspaper advertisements and news, to the texts of abolitionists and even of blacks themselves) and in the visual media of portraits, paintings and engravings that captured their presence in Britain. Mungo's insistence that he does not want the editorial interference of the well-meaning Mr Pringle shows his need to tell his own unmediated story. The trauma of his past experiences does not allow him to produce the smooth narrative typical of slave narratives that allay the consciences of readers with a story of bondage followed by liberation, and thus Mungo's narration highlights the difficulties of approaching "texts proffered by those whose very identity has been erased, linguistically, legally and ideologically from the social order."⁴⁰

Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* and David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* are two significant examples of recent novels that reclaim (hi)stories of a pre-*Windrush* Britain that includes black people. They recreate the life of Africans in Britain at a time when the country was struggling to outlaw a practice that had created huge fortunes, and they help us remember the silenced voices of the Africans themselves. Philips chooses to

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.

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*: Ironic (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 to this edition and are given in the text.

³⁴ Moira Fergusson highlights the possible editorial influence of Thomas Pringle in certain sections of Mary Prince’s autobiographical narrative. See Moira Fergusson, “Preface” to Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, ed. Moira Fergusson (London: Pandora, 1997).

³⁵ The language of guilt crucially impregnated the first motion for the abolition of the slave trade that William Wilberforce presented in Parliament in May 1789: “We are guilty... we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others.... When we reflect it is we ourselves that have degraded them [the Africans] to that wretched brutishness and barbarity which we now plead as the justification of our guilt.... What a mortification must we feel at having so long neglected to think of guilt, or to attempt any reparation” (quoted in Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 36).

³⁶ The text mentions other young women who end up as harlots after coming into London as innocent young maids from the countryside. The stories of Betty and Mary in the novel have echoes of Plate 1 of the series: “*She came to town in a York wagon, with other country girls, looking for work. She was*

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.