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*Literary Representations of Transatlantic Slavery in the British*

*Context:*

*from the Slave Narratives to the Neo-Slave Narratives*

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## *Riassunto*

Negli ultimi decenni, artisti e accademici hanno mostrato un crescente interesse nei confronti della schiavitù, come testimonia la pubblicazione di opere letterarie incentrate su tale tematica. Con l'obiettivo di prendere parte a questo nuovo dibattito e di contribuire alla rivalutazione dell'importanza storica della schiavitù, la mia tesi riflette sulla schiavitù transatlantica attraverso l'analisi di opere letterarie. In particolare, la tesi segue l'evoluzione delle Slave Narrative per dimostrare che questo genere letterario, che è stato a lungo considerato come esclusivamente afroamericano, ha invece un ruolo fondamentale nel contesto inglese. Inizialmente questi scritti erano utilizzati per sostenere la campagna abolizionista; infatti, diffondevano importanti informazioni sulla schiavitù e, presentando la prospettiva degli schiavi, li rendevano più umani agli occhi della popolazione bianca e creava empatia nei loro confronti. Oggi, l'evoluzione di questo genere è usata per ristabilire il valore storico delle prime Slave Narratives e per creare connessioni ideali tra la schiavitù e le attuali forme di discriminazione razziale.

Nel primo capitolo della tesi, il mio scopo è dimostrare che seppure il Regno Unito si presenti oggi come una realtà multiculturale, la diversità è ancora fortemente temuta e discriminata. Purtroppo, le tensioni e le contraddizioni che il Paese presenta oggi, sono l'eredità del passato coloniale e della schiavitù transatlantica: la schiavitù rappresenta, infatti, un fenomeno centrale nella storia inglese, eppure essa sembra essere stata rimossa dalla memoria collettiva. Pertanto, mi è sembrato necessario proporre una ricostruzione storica delle connessioni tra Regno Unito e schiavitù, per ristabilire l'importanza di quest'ultima nel contesto culturale e sociale inglese.

Nel secondo capitolo, poi, propongo le prospettive teoriche fornite dai

Trauma studies, infatti, nella mia ricerca, la schiavitù viene concepita come trauma individuale e collettivo che ha ancora necessità di essere affrontato e superato: le rappresentazioni artistiche della schiavitù possono essere lette come un metodo per affrontare tale trauma e ricontestualizzarlo nella memoria storica; così le rappresentazioni letterarie inglesi della schiavitù possono essere analizzate come tentativi di superare il trauma provocato dalla schiavitù. Queste rappresentazioni non sono interessanti solamente a livello letterario, quindi, la mia tesi mira a sottolineare l'importanza delle Slave Narratives e delle Neo-Slave Narratives nel contesto della riflessione contemporanea sul razzismo e sull'eredità dell'imperialismo.

Il terzo e il quarto capitolo sono interamente dedicate al genere delle Slave Narrative; infatti, dopo un inquadramento teorico del genere letterario, la tesi contiene un corpus di sei opere inglesi. L'analisi del genere letterario ne dimostra l'importanza nel contesto britannico, in quanto la pubblicazione di tali opere ha certamente sostenuto la campagna abolizionista. Il corpus che ho selezionato comprende le Slave Narratives di Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, David George, Mary Prince, e di Ashton Warner. Queste sei opere sono state scritte con l'obiettivo di colmare l'ignoranza della popolazione bianca riguardo l'istituzione della schiavitù. Attraverso la mia delle opere, cerco di sottolineare l'importanza del genere nel contesto britannico.

Il quinto capitolo contiene tre opere scritte da autori neri nello stesso periodo delle prime Slave Narratives, che affrontano il tema della schiavitù. Le opere selezionate sono la raccolta di poesie di Phillis Wheatley, la raccolta di lettere di Ignatius Sacho, e le riflessioni di Ottobah Cugoano. Ho deciso di includere anche queste opere poiché sono state chiaramente ispirate dal genere delle Slave Narrative e ne perseguono gli stessi obiettivi; perciò, hanno ugualmente contribuito al processo abolizionista.

Il sesto e il settimo capitolo contengono un'analisi del genere che si è originato dall'evoluzione delle Slave Narratives e che viene chiamato Neo-Slave Narrative. I capitoli includono un corpus formato da sei opere che rispecchiano le caratteristiche di questo nuovo genere; le opere che ho scelto sono *Cambridge* (1991) e *Crossing the River* (1993) di Caryl Phillips; *The Longest Memory* (1994) e *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) di Fred D'Aguiar; *The Long Song* (2010) di Andrea Levy e *Blonde Roots* (2008) di Bernardine Evaristo. Attraverso l'analisi letteraria delle Neo-Slave Narratives contemporanee, viene esplicitato l'intento degli autori di condannare il pregiudizio razziale. Le conseguenze dell'eredità del periodo coloniale sono più che mai evidenti e la popolazione nera chiede con forza di trovare posto nella storia, come dimostra il movimento Black Lives Matter.

Infine, le conclusioni della tesi portano ad una riflessione sul ruolo dell'arte e della letteratura nel rappresentare e ricordare il passato. Così come le prime Slave Narratives hanno contribuito alla campagna abolizionista che ha portato all'abolizione della schiavitù, anche la letteratura contemporanea potrebbe creare consapevolezza sulla connessione tra Regno Unito e schiavitù così da ispirare una riconsiderazione delle tensioni razziali.

## *Abstract*

By reflecting on the heritage of transatlantic slavery, my dissertation aims to participate in the recent academic debate over slavery and in the process of reevaluation of slavery's legacies in the contemporary period. My research aims at analyzing the literary representations of slavery, following the evolutions of the literary genre of the Slave Narrative, and my purpose is to demonstrate that this literary genre, which has long been considered as an exclusively African American genre, has played a key role for Britain; indeed, this literary genre was initially used to support the abolitionist campaign by raising awareness about slavery and creating empathy towards the slaves; however, it is now used to both reestablish the historical value of the early Slave Narratives, and to metaphorically create connections between transatlantic slavery and the present days racial discriminations.

In the first chapter, I argue that while Britain appears today as a multicultural nation, racial diversity is still problematic and feared; indeed, contemporary racial tensions and contradictions are the living legacy of the country's colonial past and involvement with slavery. However, slavery seems to have been largely forgotten by the collective British memory. Thus, I provide an historical reconstruction of the British slave trade, in order to retrieve the importance of slavery in the British context.

In the second chapter, I introduce the perspective provided by trauma studies, indeed, I conceive transatlantic slavery as both individual and collective trauma, for both the white and the black population, this trauma still needs to be tackled: artistic representations of slavery can be considered as a way to bring it to light, and find slavery's place in human history and memory; thus, the literary

representations of slavery produced in in Britain can be read as attempts to overcome the trauma of slavery. Not only the creation of literary representations of collective traumas such as the Slave Narrative, and its evolution are interesting on a literary level, but they are also considered to have the same therapeutic function as speaking about traumatic events, thus, my dissertation aims to highlight the slave and Neo-Slave Narratives importance in the context of contemporary reflections on racism and on the legacy of imperialism.

Both the third and the fourth chapters focus on the Slave Narrative. I provide an overview of the literary genre of the early Slave Narrative, and I put together a corpus of six British early Slave Narrative which witness the existence and the importance of the genre in the British context. The literary analysis of the genre suggests that the Slave Narratives played key in Britain, as these works contributed to support the abolitionist campaign. The corpus of writings I have selected includes the Slave Narratives of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, David George, Mary Prince, and Ashton Warner. These aimed to inform the white population, as they all claim for the white Britons' ignorance on the institution of slavery. With my analysis of the British Slave Narratives, I aim to shed new light on the key role of this literary genre in the British context.

The fifth chapter discusses three writings on slavery written by black authors in the context of British abolition process: Phillis Wheatley's collection of poems, Ignatius Sacho's collection of letters, and Ottobah Cugoano's long pamphlet on slavery. I decided to include in my dissertation these works as they have been inspired by the Slave Narratives and they have been written with the same aims, thus, they equally contributed to the abolitionist process.

The sixth and the seventh chapters contain both an introduction on the contemporary evolution of the Slave Narrative genre and a corpus of six British novels which display the characteristics of this genre. The writings I have selected

are Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993); Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997); Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010); and Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008). Through the analysis of contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives, this dissertation reveals the contemporary authors' aim to condemn both racial prejudice and structural inequalities which originates in the colonial period and is still present. The consequences of this amnesia are more than ever visible, and the black world population is asking for their repositioning in history, as the recent movement Black Lives Matter shows.

Finally, the conclusions lead to an afterthought about the role of art and literature in representing and remembering the past. As is the case of the early Slave Narratives which contributed to the abolitionist campaign and the abolition of slavery, contemporary literature might help to raise awareness on the British connections with slavery in order to rethink contemporary racial tensions.



## *Chapter 1. The British slave trade*

The present chapter aims to create an historical context for the literary genre which is the focus of my dissertation: the British Slave Narrative and its contemporary evolution as the Neo-Slave Narrative. An historical reconstruction seems to be essential for my analysis for different reasons: on the one hand, these narratives have been inevitably shaped by the country's colonial past, which represents their setting. On the other hand, British slavery set up the ground for the contemporary racial tensions and contradictions that we can observe in today's multicultural Britain, which pushed contemporary authors to create contemporary Slave Narratives:

We may no longer trade people but the shape of modern Britain would have been very different if England had not turned itself into the greatest slaving nation ever seen. (Phillips, T., in Martin, 1999: 1)

Thus, the imperial period, the overseas colonies, the new products imported from the colonies, the economic growth, and notably, the involvement with the slave trade have also contributed to the making of contemporary Britain as we know it today (Waldron in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: xi), not only at an economic and political level, but also at an anthropological and social one.

The next section will highlight the connections between British transatlantic slavery and the contemporary racial tensions that can be observed in the country. These can be defined as the consequence of colonialism and slavery itself. Thus, the

aim is to show the relevance of the investigation of the history of British slavery for contemporary Britain.

### **1.1. The relevance of slavery to contemporary racial tensions**

Even if *apparently* more tolerated and accepted now than in the past, racial diversity is still problematic and feared. The old, but unfortunately not 'old-fashioned', cultural ideology of 'being black' as a sign of 'inferiority', 'less rational', 'instinct-driven', still exists in white European and British ideology. Moreover, after the 9/11 attack, and the following terrorist attacks at Europe's heart, the fear of the 'other' has been brought to the extreme, also fueled by political forces. In this context, the nationalistic rhetoric is enhanced, and the concept of Englishness is argued to be at risk and threatened by 'the others'.

In order to better understand such a complex atmosphere, it is important to be aware of British history, indeed, as Stuart Hall states:

The very notion of Great Britain's 'greatness' is bound up with empire. Euro-skepticism and Little Englander nationalism could hardly survive if people understood whose sugar flowed through English blood and rotted English teeth. (Hall, 2014)

With this statement Hall questions the idea of cultural purity and points out the importance of the colonies and the colonial period for the UK's growth. Also, by using the word 'sugar' as a metonym for 'sweet things', which English people are well known for enjoying (Addyman, Wood, and Yiannitsaros, 2017: 191), he ironically reminds the reader that even something like sugar, which strongly characterizes the British food culture, is the result of the British colonial period: indeed, sugar comes from the sugar plantations in the New World, which were

grown thanks to the slaves' harsh work: 'sugar meant slavery' (Addyman, Wood, and Yiannitsaros, 2017: 191).

Clearly, slavery played a key role in British history, and yet it seems to have been largely forgotten by the collective British memory, therefore, awareness of British slavery is very limited. As interestingly stated by Andrea Levy in her essay 'Back to my home country' (Levy, 2014), the ignorance of British people about slavery is surprising, Levy herself remembers to have had only one lesson on the transatlantic slave trade when she attended school: she knew more about the abolitionist campaign rather than the life and conditions of the slaves. They received more information on American slavery rather than on the Caribbean one. She denounces this lack and states the need to integrate that part of history into the British memory:

My heritage is Britain's story too. It is time to put the Caribbean back where it belongs – in the narrative of British history. (Levy, 2014: 22)

More recently, in September 2022 Professor Graham wrote in *The Guardian* that 'the British public in general [is] ignorant about Britain's colonial past', and she argues her students 'know next to nothing about British colonial history' (2022).

This so-called British *amnesia* is indicted by numerous historians and academics such as James Walvin, Herbert S. Klein and William D. Phillips. They all denounce the under-representation of the British slave past; Phillips even states that 'if history is written by winners', the black slaves 'must have been the biggest losers in modern times' (Phillips, T., in Martin, 1999: 2), since no other history has been so underrepresented. It is interesting to notice that this amnesia is present both among the general public and the academics: as Klein notes, this phenomenon has been studied only in recent decades and it was a difficult topic to communicate to the

general public (Klein, 1999: xvii-xviii). Indeed, it represents a morally difficult issue to accept, it is definitely easier to deal with the abolitionist period and with other positive chapters of British history:

Britain the abolitionist, rather than Britain the Slave Trader, became the *leitmotif* for national self-congratulation and public memory. (Walvin, 2000: 135)

However, this situation is slowly changing, as recently, scholars' and artists' interest in slavery has grown. Thus, while the new literary genre of the Neo-Slave Narrative is emerging, scholars focus on black British literature as testified by the publication of works such as *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* edited in 2020 by Nasta and Stein, and *The Internationalization of English Literature* published in 2004 by King; and they analyse the representation of slavery through literature, as is the case of Dellarosa's *Slavery on Stage: Representations of Slavery in British Theatre, 1760s-1830s*. Also, the creation of online databases such as Transatlantic Slave Trade @ Pitt<sup>1</sup>; and the publication of books on the history of slavery such as *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Eltis, Richardson: 2010) among many others; and the production of films such as Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2015), Lars von Trier's *Manderley* (2005), and McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and *Harriet* (2019), relate a new interest in slavery. The UK finally appears to be ready to reconsider the impact of the transatlantic slave trade (Buonanno, 2009), especially following the 2007 commemoration of the end of the slave trade.

In the next paragraphs I am going to focus more closely on the institution of slavery, moving from a general definition to a more detailed analysis of the British

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<sup>1</sup> Transatlantic Slave Trade @ Pitt: <http://pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=12639&p=66887>

transatlantic slave trade and its peculiarities. On the one hand, I will focus on the economic aspects of the trade; and on the other hand, I will highlight the different stages the slaves went through: the Middle passage, slavery plantation in the British colonies. Also, I will relate the existence of slavery inside the British Isles. Finally, I will discuss the abolitionist campaign.

## **1.2. Defining slavery**

Slavery has played an important role in the whole human history across the world, and in different forms still exists nowadays; nevertheless, it seems impossible to set a starting point, an original moment from which slavery has emerged (Black, 2011: 12). Also, even though 'slavery' is a very common term, it is quite hard to find a clear definition of it. The term is generally used as 'a metaphor for extreme inequality, for subordination, deprivation and discrimination' (Miers, 2004: 715). Drawing on Lovejoy's definition (Lovejoy, 2012: 2-8), slavery could be generally described as a form of human oppression: a man (the slave) legally becomes a property of another man (the master). Therefore, the master can freely dispose of the slave, who becomes a chattel in the master's hands, whose power is strengthened by the use of extreme violence. The slave is deprived of her/his identity, she/he is usually renamed, and can't make and take any decisions: she/he cannot freely decide for her/his life, cannot dispose of her/his body that can be sexually abused by the master, she/he cannot decide to get married without the master's permission, and even the slave's children become the master's property. Slavery is usually inherited. The main purpose of the slaves is definitely as work force, the master gives orders to the slave who is forced to accomplish them. If she/he does not there will be a punishment. Slavery is therefore both a physical and physiological oppression.

In ancient times, slavery was extremely common, and it was supported by philosophers; both Plato and Aristoteles do not condemn slavery, on the contrary, they perceive slavery as a natural phenomenon:

whereas nature herself intimates that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker; and in many ways she shows, among men as well as among animals, and indeed among whole cities and races, that justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior. (Plato, 2010)

Plato argues that nature teaches us that the strongest nations have the right to rule over the weaker, as it happens for animals, as for instance in a wolves' pack, where the stronger / the leader rules over the others. Aristoteles moves forward and directly speaks about slavery, which he divides into two categories: slavery by law and slavery by nature. On the one hand, slavery by law describes the situation in which, during a period of war the defeated become prisoners and are enslaved by the winners. On the other hand, similarly to Plato, Aristoteles states there are people who 'from the hour of their birth, [...] are marked out for subjection, others for rule'. This is what can be defined as slavery by nature (Aristoteles, 2015).

Slavery existed long before the fifteenth century: there is evidence of slavery which dates back to 8000 BC: some graves in Lower Egypt show a tribe being enslaved by Libyan people, and the Egyptian Hammurabi code makes direct reference to slavery (Thomas, 1997). The existence of slave markets 'throughout the ancient and medieval worlds' (Morgan, 2007: 1) testifies to the importance of slaves throughout most of human history. Greeks definitely made use of slaves, both as household servants, and servants used for rural and public works; also, the presence of black slaves is testified by drawings on Greek vases. Later on, the Romans made great use of slave labour to build their enormous empire. Klein states that at the

height of the Empire, the slave population in Italy accounted for between 35 and 40 percent of the total population (Klein, 1999: 3-4). Romans needed the slave labour to supply for the lack of a male peasant work force, which was almost completely employed in the army (Klein, 1999: 3). Roman law defined slaves as property of the master, but some rights were left to the slaves as for instance property and personal security. This partial 'freedom' assured that loyalty and respect were given to the masters (Klein, 1999: 4). Roman thinkers, such as Cicero and Seneca also considered slavery to be acceptable, even though they asked for better conditions for the slaves (Thomas, 1997). Representations of black slaves are present in Pompeii's frescos, but the origin of the slaves was extremely mixed: the vast majority of slaves in Greece and Rome were war captives, thus the question of race, or race superiority was not present in ancient times:

the Greeks and the Romans were unprejudiced on grounds of race: they were quite insensible as to whether someone with black skin was superior to someone with white, or vice versa. (Thomas 1997)

Following Klein's reconstruction (Klein, 1999: 5), after the collapse of the Roman Empire, the situation dramatically changed: there was no longer a need for an agricultural work force, so the slaves were predominantly used as household slaves, and their number strongly decreased, but they never disappeared. Indeed, during the Middle Ages the 'serfs' system became a new form of slavery: the peasants gave away some of their freedom in order to be protected by the masters. The Muslim invasions of the Mediterranean brought back the use of slaves as an agricultural and industrial work force. At the end of the Middle Ages slavery still existed but 'the use of slave labor in agriculture and manufacturing on a large scale had long disappeared' (Klein, 1999: 7).

However, the institution of slavery continued to be accepted for a long a time.

Before the abolitionist campaign, the Christian Church was one of the first institutions which openly condemned slavery at the time of Pope Urban VIII, who in 1639 declared slavery to be unjustified; but until that moment even the Christian Church had an ambiguous relationship with slavery, which was then accepted (Thomas, 1997).

Similarly to Europe, Africa had been marked by slavery for a long time: indeed, slavery began much earlier than the transatlantic slave trade. It was an institution throughout the different African states, and the slave trade was both conducted among the African States, but also outside Africa with the European States. These trades, however, did not consistently affect Africa's economic system (Klein, 1999: 9).

### **1.3.The transatlantic slave trade: a peculiar form of slavery**

As described above, slavery existed long before the discovery of America in 1492 and the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. Nonetheless, transatlantic slavery in the collective imagination becomes the representation of slavery par excellence, and it represents a 'deep gash in the collective memory' (Sandhu, and Dabydeen in Kitson and Lee, 1999, vol.1: xi). Undoubtedly, transatlantic slavery differs from earlier forms of slavery for different reasons.

One of the most evident differences is the size of it, as Davis underlines:

the transatlantic slave trade, which persisted for 366 years and resulted in the forced deportation of 12.5 million Africans to the New World, ranks as one of history's greatest crimes against humanity. (Davis in Eltis, Richardson, 2010: xvii)

The number of Africans transported to the New World is astonishing, and the

number of the people who died during the so called 'Middle Passage' is extremely significant, too. Even if before there were already slave markets and slave trades, they could not be compared to the well organized and established transatlantic slave trade (Walvin in Farrell, Unwin, Walvin, 2007: 1). The importance of the trade is also mirrored in the great economic growth linked to the trade: if the pre-1500 slave system did not influence economic organization, the transatlantic slave trade definitely did (Klein, 1999: 9). The transatlantic slave trade supported colonial powers, because the European countries needed the slaves as work force in the colonies in order to grow sugar, tobacco, cotton, and the ports of all Europe made their fortune during this period, among others: Liverpool, Bristol, London, Nantes, Bordeaux, Seville, Cadiz, Lisbon...

The transatlantic slave trade was much more dehumanizing and brutal than previous forms of slavery. As mentioned above, Roman slaves kept some of their liberties, and in all likelihood Middle Ages serfs were not treated as brutally as the black slaves were. Moreover, as Sherwood points out, African slaves were not 'dehumanized or treated brutally' (Sherwood, 2007: 6). Also, the vast majority of previous slaves were captives of war, while the transatlantic slave trade affected all black Africans captured: the captives taken were kidnapped. Thus, the transatlantic trade also affected African countries, where violence grew proportionally to the trade growth (Eltis, Richardson, 2010: 87). Undoubtedly, this trade would not have the same success without the help of the Africans themselves: they were indeed willing to sell other Africans to the Europeans (Heuman, Burnard, 2011: 83), they kidnapped Africans from other villages and sold them to the Europeans. Thus, on the one hand, the Europeans promoted this trade, in order to have more work force, and on the other hand, Africans were eager to sell other African as slaves and consequently they both supported the flourishing of the trade (Davis in Eltis, Richardson, 2010: xx).

Nevertheless, the transatlantic slave trade ultimately and considerably differs from the previous examples of slavery for its *racial basis*. As mentioned above, previous forms of slavery were not linked to race discrimination; on the contrary, in the case of the transatlantic slave trade, the slaves were discriminated on the basis on the colour of their skin. Black people were feared, and they were perceived as savages (Morgan, 2007: 22). This idea sadly justified their treatment, which may also be considered as the reason for black slaves to be treated much more brutally than the slaves in other epochs. The supposed inferiority of black people 'lent an appearance of moral acceptability to the commerce' (Martin, 1999: 22). Disturbingly enough, racial inferiority was used for Europeans' 'greed' and desire to get a cheap work force for their colonies (Davis in Eltis, Richardson, 2010: xvii).

For all these reasons the transatlantic slave trade has no equal in human slave history. That is the reason why it needs to be well remembered and included in national histories, using Walvin's words:

The Atlantic Slave Trade was the largest single enforced movement of people in the pre-modern world. There had been other Slave Trades, notably in the world of Greek and Roman antiquity. But the shipping of Africans across the Atlantic has no parallel in numbers, or organized brutality, until the totalitarian regimes' transportations of people in the twentieth century (Walvin in Farrell, Unwin, Walvin, 2007: 1).

The racial basis of the British transatlantic slave trade has its origins in the colonial period; thus, the next paragraph aims to retrieve the connections between race and colonialism which have also influenced British contemporary racist ideologies.

### 1.3.1. Colonialism and racial theories

Modern colonialism, or the political system of 'conquest and control' of a foreign land (Fulford, and Kitson, 1998: 3), which spread during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, played an important role in British history, to such an extent that it continues to influence contemporary Britain. Indeed, the racist ideas which lay behind colonialism and brought to the slave trade, can be considered as the starting point of contemporary racial discriminatory ideologies.

Colonialism is linked to the discourse of race and the relationship among different races, namely the white Europeans and the black Africans. Therefore, to better understand the context of British colonialism, it is key to analyse the different meanings of the term 'race' in the Eighteenth century, as they differ from the contemporary understanding of the term. In his introduction to the 8<sup>th</sup> volume of *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, Kitson identifies three essential uses of this term: firstly, race has a diachronic meaning, which referred to the familial lineage of a human being, and thus this first meaning had no connection with physical features, or the meaning that race has today. Secondly, 'race' was also a synonym for 'species', which implied that different races would have different characteristics and, similarly to the different animal species, should not 'interbreed'; this second sense implies a 'biological determinism' which cannot be avoided, and according to it the differences between the human races is neatly defined. Finally, another usage of the term derived from a variety of classifications made by researchers: which divided the individuals according to their physical appearance. In this case 'race' became a synonym for 'variety', as a result of mistranslations from Latin of the term 'varietate' (Kitson in Kitson and Lee, 1999, vol. 8: viii-xi).

This last meaning of the term went through different phases: firstly, Linneaus postulated a gradation in nature and divided the species of *Homo Sapiens* in different

varieties, also suggesting the orangutan shares many of the human characteristics and positioning it close to black people. This system of gradation was certainly discriminatory as it creates a hierarchy inside the species of human beings, and by positioning black people at the bottom of it, close to orangutan, it implied both that black people are almost like animals, and that white people are by nature superior to them. Also in this case, biological determinism evident in the exterior characteristics of the different races was ineluctable. Linneaus' idea of gradation was shared and taken further by many other researchers such as Charles White, who assumed that different races of human beings were created by God and that the white man was to be considered the finest of them (Kitson in Kitson and Lee, 1999, vol. 8: xiii).

Therefore, the context created by these theories supported the institution of slavery, indeed, many other thinkers and philosophers, such as John Locke and David Hume produced pro-slavery writings. As an example, one can name the plantation owner Edward Long who wrote his *History of Jamaica*, in which he retrieved from Linneaus the idea of a gradation: here he argued that the black people had more in common with the orangutans than they had with the white man, and strongly supported the rightfulness of slavery (Fryer, 2018: 161). Drawing on these ideas, Buffon proposed his own classification of the human species based essentially on the skin colour, and he argued that the human races could 'degenerate into savagery' depending on the environment that surrounded them (Kitson in Kitson and Lee, 1999, vol. 8: xiv).

These theories were later on challenged by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in Germany, and William Laurence and James Cowles in Britain: they supported the idea of a unique species of humankind. According to them, racial diversity was a phenomenon due to environmental causes. Nevertheless, they still recognized the white superiority over the back race (Kitson in Kitson and Lee, 1999, vol. 8: xix).

The period of colonialism is certainly connected to these theories, and these theories were used to justify slavery, even if not all the researchers who postulated the inferiority of black people supported the institution of slavery, as is the case of William Laurence (Kitson in Kitson and Lee, 1999, vol. 8: xxiv). The institution of slavery has been essential for the economic growth of the European nations, which, through the slaves, had an extremely economical work force. Therefore, the ideas of the researchers, and the philosophers were only used to justify a traffic which was economically favourable for the Europeans (Fryer, 2018: 136). Fryer distinguishes between racial prejudice, which derives from fear of the unknown and can be defined as a cultural phenomenon, and racism which is politically and economically driven: racism is then at the basis of both European colonialism and the slave trade (2018: 135-155).

Together with the idea of racial inferiority, the rhetoric of the 'civilizing mission' of the white man became key to colonialism: according to it the aim of Europeans would be to educate 'savage' populations. Therefore, the idea that the civilized white man had the task to bring civilization to the savage black man came to life. This idea is known to the general public through the most famous and quoted of Kipling's poems: 'The White Man's Burden' (Kipling, 1899). In this poem, the author strongly spurs the then American president Theodor Roosevelt to 'take up the white man's burden' and 'wait in heavy harness, on fluttered folk and wild [...] half-devil and half-child.' Here, the black man is once again considered as being in a subordinate position compared to the white man. Black people are not even considered to actually belong to humankind, rather they are seen as figures unable to reason, and even being accompanied by evil intentions. This gives the black man a status of 'not entirely human being': this dehumanisation, which puts at the same level black people and animals makes it clearer, even if not less unforgivable, how the white men could have enslaved the Africans.

However, as Césaire states, the philosophical idea of 'bringing civilization' to 'savage populations' was only an excuse to cover the real motives behind colonization, which, in his opinion, was fueled only by economic interests (Césaire, 1972: 1-6). It is worth noticing that, according to Césaire, colonization transforms the colonizer into a brutal human being, which, ironically and in a twisted way, brings to mind Kipling's 'half-devil and half-child' figure (Kipling, 1899). Therefore, the description Kipling used to describe the 'colonized savage', would, in Césaire's argument fit, in a better way, the status that the colonizer reaches after the brutal reality of colonization. Around a century after the end of slavery, racism was still present, as Martin Luther King declares in his famous speech, *I have a Dream*:

But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. (King, 1963)

Nevertheless, even if discrimination continued to oppress black people, a small change had happened: they had the chance to study and be educated and they started to strongly ask for equality. World War I marked the end of imperial power over colonies, and saw a wide discussion over racism, which continued after the World War II. Thus, intellectual black movements started to arise. Fanon's work situated itself in this controversial period; he was influenced by the French movement, 'Négritude', taking place in the 1930s in France. This artistic movement was connected to authors and philosophers like Damas, Césaire and Sartre, who described the aim of the movement introducing Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle*

*poésie nègre et malgache de la langue française*, Senghor states that the oppressed black man is trying to take a position against the white artistic and non-artistic supremacy:

c'est quand il semble étouffé par les serpents de notre culture qu'il se montre le plus révolutionnaire, car il entreprend alors de ruiner systématiquement l'acquis européen et cette démolition en esprit symbolise la grande prise d'armes future par quoi les noirs détruiront leurs chaînes. (Sartre, 1948: XVII)

Starting from the 1920s in the US the artistic movement called The Harlem Renaissance emerged. As the name shows the movement began at the heart of the US in New York, however it spread itself throughout all the US (Gates, McKay, 2004: 953-955). Poets and thinkers like Du Bois, Cullen and Hughes claimed for equality and denounced racism. Racism is a difficult and current subject, it is interesting that in one of his most famous speeches the American president Obama, directly speaks about slavery and wishes for 'a more perfect union' (Obama, 2008), which means we are still struggling to achieve it.

In the next paragraphs I am going to focus on the British slave system, by investigating the reasons that lay behind it, and the consequent economic growth of the British Empire.

#### **1.4. The onset of the slave trade**

The initial interests of Europeans for Africa were linked to its resources, such as gold and ivory; thus, the trade in slaves was only an 'incidental' part of the trading system the European established with Africa (Klein, 1999: 10). Indeed, the interest in slaves only started to grow during the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the massive demand-driven expansion of the importation of the new American goods, namely, sugar and

tobacco.

Undoubtedly, there had been an initial attempt to use white people and Native Americans to work in the plantations which however failed for several reasons. Firstly, the high demand for the new goods from the Americas, which requested a huge number of workers and the number of both Native Americans and white workers was too low to keep up with the rhythm of this type of economy (Martin, 1999: 13). Secondly, the cultural gap between Native Americans and Europeans made their collaboration extremely challenging if not impossible: Native Americans had different ideas about cultivation, about the use of land, about the importance given to the land, and they also supported different methods of hunting and farming. Therefore, the cultural divergence gave rise to several rebellions on the part of the Native Americans (Morgan, 2007: 19-20). Lastly, several diseases hit the Native populations as a consequence of the arrival of the Europeans and their contact with them: indeed, Europeans brought to the New World new diseases, unknown to the natives, such as 'tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza, plague, measles, scarlet fever, smallpox, and malaria' (Morgan, 2007: 19). These illnesses, in the vast majority of the cases, were fatal to the natives, thus, the number of them rapidly decreased.

Therefore, the Europeans decided to look for a different kind of workforce. The Africans were considered as having strong and healthy bodies; this was the main reason why they seemed to be a very good work force for the New World plantations. Thus, the terrible trade started off, led by economic reasons, and based on the strong physique of the Africans. Therefore, the value of Africans as human beings had been underestimated twice: firstly, when the Europeans wanted to colonize Africa, and later through the slave trade. However, the Europeans used the same racist thought: the idea that black people were considered inferior, less than human, was the excuse that allowed Europeans to start the colonization of the

African nations, and similarly, the same idea allowed them to use them as a workforce, with no rights and no salary, as they could not be treated as human beings. In both cases, the very reason that lay behind is an economic one: to obtain the African goods for free, and use a very economic workforce in the colonies. The very beginning of the transatlantic slave trade is generally associated with the year 1501, when the Spaniards began to transport African slaves from Africa to the Americas (Eltis, Richardson, 2010: 21).

Following Eltis and Davis's outline, the transatlantic slave trade can be divided into three periods: the period preceding 1642, mainly run by the Iberian powers, Spain and Portugal; the second one, which started in the year 1642 and lasted until 1807-8, a period dominated by the northern European States, this period is marked by the strong participation of Britain; and finally, from 1808 to 1867, where the predominant presence of the Iberian States came back, in a background led by abolitionist thoughts (Eltis, Richardson, 2010: 21). Thus, the central and longest period of the transatlantic slave trade has seen the predominance of the British power.

As mentioned above, the UK did not start the transatlantic slave trade system, they began to trade in slaves on behalf of the Iberian States. The first trader ever known in British history was John Hawkins, who in 1562 captured around 300 Africans in Sierra Leone, brought them to New World and sold them to the Spanish (Walvin, 1992: 25). But the contribution of the UK in this early stage was quite limited. However,

though not the initiators or pioneers of Atlantic slavery, the British perfected it and honored it to a remarkable degree of commercial and maritime success. [...] By the eighteenth century, the British carried more Africans than any other Europeans (Walvin, 2000: 7).

The establishment of British colonies changed the British interest in the trade (Walvin, 1986: 28), after the settlement in the first British colonies such as St Kitts in 1624, Barbados in 1627, Nevis in 1628, and Montserrat in 1632, Britain built an extremely profitable and massive slave system. They established companies sustained by the king, who guaranteed royal protection, in particular the first British company was established by Charles II, who called it the Royal Adventures into Africa (Martin, 1999: 13-14). The Royal Adventures into Africa company kept the monopoly until 1672, when King Charles II changed it into the Royal African Company, whose monopoly lasted until 1689 (Morgan, 2007: 57). After this date, the trade was open to private British traders. Companies officially ended in 1821 as a consequence of a parliamentary act, more than ten years after the 1807 Act, which established the abolition of the slave trade (Morgan, 2007: 59).

### **1.5. The economic growth: the ports**

Clearly, the leading reason for the trade is an economic one: on the one hand, the need for cheap working force pushed the Europeans to look for Africans slaves, and on the other hand, the lure of money pushed the African merchants to get African captives for the Europeans. As Martin argues, this very efficient trade resembles a modern trading system: rich merchants transport a great number of 'goods', the more the number of 'goods' grows, the more the price decreases. There is a high amount of money at play and the market gets 'cut-throat' (Martin, 1999: 3-4).

The economic growth of the eighteenth century could not take place without the existence of the transatlantic slave trade. The British nation at large took advantage of this economic prosperity, nevertheless the great winners of this period were major port cities that sustained the trade, namely London, Bristol, and Liverpool. During the triangular slave trade these cities were the vibrant heart of

the nation: from there the slave ships departed, and there arrived the vessels coming from the colonies of the New World full of goods: sugar, tobacco, rum, coffee...

The slave trade system did intrinsically influence British life. These 'new' imported products completely changed British habits:

Fashionable ladies entertaining friends to tea, the sugar bowl a vital component in the table arrangements. Crowded coffee shops, especially in London but throughout urban society. Coffee – thick, black and naturally bitter in taste – was laced with sugar cultivated by black slaves in the British Caribbean and in all the coffee shops the atmosphere was thick with smoke from tobacco grown by imported Africans slaves and their descendants in Virginia and Maryland. (Walvin, 2000: 16).

British people started to make great use of these products, their life was completely pervaded by them: tobacco, coffee, chocolate, and particularly sugar, which became essential in everyday life, so much so that the British became famous for their 'sweet tooth' (Walvin, 2000: 16). The mass importation of these products made them affordable to the middle-class, they were not targeted only at the aristocracy (Martin, 1999: 6). Also, the middle-class had the opportunity to earn money through the trade, either by engaging directly with the trade, or by investing in estates in the colonies. Thus, as Martin argues the slave trade has certainly set the background for the industrial revolution (Martin, 1999: 5). Therefore, the general sentiments towards the trade was positive, and the trade were supported by the British population.

Among the major port cities of the UK, Liverpool became the leading port (Morgan in Richardson, Schwarz, Tibbles, 2007: 14-34). The city itself was reshaped during the trade and grew immensely. Two different paintings representing Liverpool in two different moments clearly outline the city expansion: 'A Prospect

of Liverpool' painted in 1725 by an unknown artist shows the new buildings that were built such as the dock built in 1715, the painting shows the initial growth of the city; but 'A View of Liverpool' painted in 1811 by Henry Freeman James displays a much enlarged and progressed city, as a consequence of the flourishing of the slave trade. Both the paintings are part of the exhibits of the International Slavery Museum of Liverpool.

### **1.6. The Middle Passage**

The transportation of Africans from African coasts to the New World is also known as the Middle Passage; as these passages were extremely reprehensive, they have been repeatedly described in both slave and Neo-Slave Narratives. The mortality rate was high during transportation which is significant at every stage of the slave system: during, before, and after the Middle Passage. However, the Middle Passage seems 'to capture the popular imagination and absorb the moral outrage directed at the whole slave experience' (Klein, 1999: 130-131). Indeed, many authors decide to include this terrible experience in their narratives.

As mentioned above, the period preceding the Middle Passage was already shocking for the captives: when the slaves were sold to the European merchants on the African coasts they arrived in bad condition: ill, and frightened, after having been captured and transported to the coasts by the African sellers (Walvin, 1992: 44). These Africans were terrified not knowing what could happen to them. The conditions on board of the slave ships were dreadful: the men were separated from the women and the children, they were squeezed below deck, the males were chained with handcuffs on their wrists and with leg irons on their ankles. They were put so close to one another that they could not move without crashing into other slaves, they could not even stand, since there was not enough space: they laid down

on the floor, they could not freely move, not even for their physical needs, there were some buckets, but only few of them had the chance to use them (Walvin, 1992: 46-48). As we can easily imagine, the smell of these places was disgusting and unhealthy. When the weather was good, the slaves were brought on deck, where they could breathe fresh air. Nevertheless, also on these occasions, they were humiliated: they were asked to dance to entertain the crew and the women were often abused. The voyage could last up to five or six weeks, depending on the destination, and the slaves had to live in these conditions for such a long period. Clearly, because of the unhealthy conditions in which they were kept, many of them got ill, and a great number died during the crossing. The slaves were fed with African food that was taken by the merchants once they arrived on African coasts, such as rice and yams (Morgan, 2007: 73). The portion of food and water destined to every slave was just enough to keep them alive: they usually ate with their hands from a communal bucket, which spread infections among the slaves (Walvin, 1992: 52).

Given these conditions, it is self-evident that the African captives, when they had the chance, tried to revolt. Most were acts of rebellion, and only few cases became real revolts. Indeed, it was extremely challenging or even impossible for the slaves to organize themselves, not only for the conditions in which they were kept (barely alive), but also because they all came from different parts of Africa, thus they did not share the same language. Thus, the merchants had to carry more weapons and more crew members. Also, as a consequence of quarrels among the merchants and the slave sellers on the African coasts, the ships were attacked after leaving Africa (Eltis, Richardson, 2010: 161). For all these reasons the number of slaves transported in each ship relatively decreased during the years.

The mortality rate decreased over the years because the merchants tried to perfect the transportation system, of course it was not due to a desire to help the

Africans, but rather this change was once again driven by an economic reason: the more slaves arrived alive in the New World, the more the merchants could earn by selling them. The Europeans decided to take only the strongest Africans, so that they had more opportunities to survive: therefore, they established 'obscene inspections' by doctors (Walvin, 1992: 55), before deciding which slaves to buy, and after the 1788 Dolben Act, a Regulation Act approved by the British Parliament, the British Government regulated the number of slaves that could be transported depending on the size of the ship.

The conditions of the slaves remained, however, equally terrible, as testified by the image of the slave ship *Brookes*, showing the arrangement of the slaves below deck according to the Dolben Act restrictions. In the slave ships, the slaves were kept below deck either on the floor or on the platforms the merchants put half-way between the floor and the ceiling, the construction of these platform is the reason why the slaves could not stand when they were below deck. The platforms were placed when the slave ships arrived in Africa, and they were removed once the slaves got out of the ships, so that there was more space for the goods the merchants brought from the New World to Europe: once again, the merchants responded to economic needs (Walvin, 1992: 45).

The Middle Passage was a terrible experience for the African captives. Many slaves preferred to die rather than endure the voyage: many of them refused to eat, and others committed suicide, by throwing themselves into the sea. Dying seemed indeed a better option, it was a way to find peace on that atrocious journey to an unknown destination. And for those who survived, the voyage, clearly endured in their memories, and nightmares. This experience was challenging on both a physical and a psychological level:

[...] slaves were deeply, often catatonically, depressed by life on slave ship.

We will never know to some extent of their mental suffering, but contemporaries were in broad agreement that many slaves became unhinged by their experiences (Walvin, 1992: 55).

The slaves saw and experienced terrible moments during the Middle Passage, which remained forever with them. However, the sufferings did not end with the arrival in the New World, there a new terrible life was waiting for them.

### **1.7. Slavery and the colonies**

The Middle Passage was indeed 'a foretaste of the misery which awaited the Africans in the New World' (Martin, 1999: 38). Life in the plantations was extremely harsh and approximately one out of three slaves did not survive the first three years in the New World (Walvin: 1992: 75). The slaves were taken to the markets where they could be bought by the plantations' owners. These markets took place even a day after their arrival in the New World. This wait was imposed to allow the buyers coming from the countryside to get to the port cities. The markets represented again a new 'stage of separation' for the slaves (Martin, 1999: 40): here, the families were permanently torn apart, and everyone was sold to a different buyer. The slaves were displayed and sold to the highest bidder, it was again clear that the slaves were considered as chattel, there was no respect for their feelings. The slaves came from different parts of Africa, they shared no common language, thus it is not surprising that, at least at the beginning, there was no homogeneous sense of Black ethnicity, which arises during the 1780s (Martin 1999: 42).

Once the slaves arrived on the plantations their new life in servitude began: it is clear that 'slavery ultimately rested on physical coercion' as Morgan writes (Morgan, 2007: 111); even the kindest master used physical punishment and the fear

of it to maintain order in his plantations. Indeed, black people usually outnumbered the white presence in the New World, thus, the only way to control them was through the fear of the punishment. The punishments the masters used were copious starting from the branding on different parts of the body, to the lashing on the backs, or the flogging on bare skin (Morgan 2007: 111). Moreover, especially in the case of women, 'sexual abuse and rape were endemic' (Martin, 1999: 43).

The plantations were well organized, the slave dwellings were close to the fields, so they did not need to be relocated every day; the plantation owner's house was kept far enough from the slave quarters but still not too far from the plantations. The slaves themselves had specific duties, and they could generally be ranked as factory slaves, fields workers or domestic workers (Martin, 1999: 42). The vast majority of them worked on the plantations, each cultivation had a different organization: as for example, for the cultivation of canes three 'gangs' were established. In other words, the slaves were divided into three groups, based on the workers physical strength: the first gang was composed of the strongest, who had to accomplish the heaviest duties; the second gang was composed of slaves who could work but who could not bear the same sufferings as the slaves in the first gang, thus in the second gang it was possible to find mothers nursing their children. Eventually, the third gang was composed of the oldest and the youngest, who were not able to do hard work, so they carried the supplies, especially water, for the others (Walvin: 1992: 93).

### **1.8. Slavery in the UK**

The phenomenon of slavery inside the British borders is a thorny one: on the one hand, the colonial period and the consequent expansion of the slave trade corresponds to a period in which England develops and asserts some important

'political and human rights' (Walvin, 1986: 33), which clash with the basis of slavery; on the other hand, even the historians of slavery have mainly focused on colonial slavery, considering slavery 'as a distant, colonial or American phenomenon and therefore only of tangential interest to Britain itself' (Walvin, 2000: 8):

the paradox of a society that championed ideals of liberty while holding slaves in bondage. That paradox has been explained by the idea that Britons either did not care about African bondage or that they perceived it differently from white bondage (Molineaux, 2012: 20).

Thus, it is self-evident that the phenomenon of slavery inside the UK borders has been underestimated and kept out of sight. However, slavery in the UK plays an important role in British history, indeed, both the internal contradiction of being a land which promotes freedom, while tolerating slavery in its lands, and the writings of Black British slaves living in the UK contributed to the abolition of both the slave trade and later slavery.

It is almost impossible to estimate the precise number of black slaves in the UK. There are indeed no documents detailing race and even when there is an indication regarding the color of the skin, a black person could be of African origin, but also of Indian origin. Thus, historians draw their evaluations on different clues, such as the birthplace and an adult baptism: so a person born in the colonies who has received an adult baptism would probably be a black slave, but these data are not complete (Charter in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 67). It is estimated that there were around 10,000 to 20,000 black people in the UK during the period of the slave trade (Charter in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 67).

Not only is it difficult to estimate the number of black people in the UK, but it is also extremely complex to find records of slavery, as Kathy Charter asserts: 'it is extremely rare, however, to find anyone called a slave' in her database made of

parish records and other records (Charter in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 72). Slavery was never defined inside the UK borders, even the judges dealing with slave cases could not keep a consistent position: they were called to decide among

the defence of property rights (in this case the slave owners' property rights in their slaves) and the defence of personal liberties (the slaves' freedom) (Walvin, 1986: 33).

It is known however, that Black slaves in England did not usually come directly from Africa, but from the colonies: usually either they came with their masters on the vessels coming back to the UK as domestic servants, or they were used on the vessels as sailors, or even they were brought on the vessels and became property of the crew, as 'a bonus' for them (Walvin, 1986: 31). The vast majority of them were young men, mainly between 10 and 19 years of age; these young men were chosen because of their strength and their young age made them extremely malleable; a great deal of them lived in London (Charter in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 70). Soon, having a black servant/slave became a symbol of prestige and it was extremely fashionable in those years; as testified by the numerous family portraits which included the black servants, usually wearing the padlocked collar, sadly common for black slaves living in the UK, which marked them as a chattel of the master's family (Walvin, 1986: 31-33).

Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of slavery in the UK carries its own peculiarities and it differs therefore from West Indian slavery. The question of slave conversion and their consequent baptism seemed more common in the UK (Walvin, 1986: 38), for two main reasons: on the one hand, for a long period the slaves erroneously believed that their conversion would entail their freedom; and on the other hand, the fact that the black slaves in the UK were domestic servants living close to the family components, created the desire to 'transform them into Black

Englishmen' (Walvin, 1986: 39). On the basis of such desire, the servants were usually renamed with Christian names, and differently from the slaves of the colonies, they were usually literate and spoke fluent English: unlike their West Indian counterpart, they did not need patois to communicate with the other slaves (Walvin, 1986: 38-39).

Notwithstanding these privileges they had, their life was not easier, but rather only apparently embellished. The slaves were, indeed, considered as chattel: in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it became very common to find slave sale advertisement in local newspapers, although they were mainly present in the port cities, the 'fashion' of having slaves spread to the whole country: 'slaves were available in towns and cities far from the slave ports where they made their initial entry' (Walvin, 1986: 32) Again, it is important to remember that slavery affected Britain at least as much as it has affected the US.

As mentioned above, not only the existence of slavery inside UK's borders gave rise to internal contradictions, as the difficulties experienced by the judges in dealing with slave cases show, but also, the fact that the Englishmen-like black slaves were usually literate allowed them to describe their terrible existence, and to sustain the abolitionist campaign. These contradictions proved to be essential to the anti-slavery campaign.

The next section focuses on the abolitionist process in the UK; thus I am going to discuss the abolitionist thinking together with some trials which proved to be essential to prompt the public opinion to rethink slavery in light of the injustices the slaves had to go through.

## 1.9. Towards the end of slavery

The process towards the abolition of slavery is commonly recognized as the first 'peaceful mass political movement based on modern types of political propaganda in English history' (Klein, 1999: 183): indeed, the great abolitionist movement supported by the British abolitionists made use of modern means, namely, the great propaganda the abolitionists did throughout the whole Britain and the petitioning system through which they addressed the Parliament (Drescher in in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 42).

Nevertheless, the process was complex and long, as slavery was a long-lasting and well-established phenomenon; the abolitionists required a public commitment to obtain the parliamentary approval. Thus, in the next paragraphs I will suggest a reconstruction of the abolitionist process, which first led to the abolition of the slave trade, and later to the abolition of slavery itself.

### 1.9.1. Early anti-slavery thinking

At the end of the Eighteenth century, the institution of slavery seemed to clash with the general enlightened ideas which were spreading around Europe and reached the New World. Especially, the French Philosopher Montesquieu promoted anti-slavery ideas in his most known work *De L'Esprit des Lois*, which appeared in 1748. Here, he condemns different forms of slavery, among which 'l'esclavage des Negres', in the chapter he dedicated to black slavery he limits the reasons which lie behind the slavery system to economic reasons:

Si j'avois à soutenir le droit que nous avons eu de rendre les Negres esclaves, voici ce que je dirois: Les peuples d'Europe ayant exterminé ceux de

l'Amérique, ils ont dû mettre en esclavage ceux de l'Afrique, pour s'en servir à défricher tant de terres. Le sucre seroit trop cher, si l'on ne faisoit travailler la plante qui le produit par des esclaves. Ceux dont il s'agit sont noirs depuis les pieds jusqu'à la tête; et ils ont le nez si écrasé, qu'il est presque impossible de les plaindre. (Montesquieu, 2013)

As stands out also from this short extract, Montesquieu makes use of irony, showing how irrational the fundamental ideas on slavery were. However, as Fletcher points out (Fletcher, 1993), Montesquieu's explicit ironic 'defense of slavery' has been sometimes misinterpreted and considered as an authentic praise to slavery. Nevertheless, Montesquieu's ideas were taken up by other philosophers such as Hutcheson, Smith, and Rousseau; and also, for the abolitionists themselves, as a mean of example, the known abolitionist Granville Sharp in 1769 published *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery*, which is largely grounded on Montesquieu's ideas (Fletcher, 1993).

Together with the philosopher, the religious group called the Quakers openly condemned slavery, which was in opposition to their religious beliefs of benevolence, pacifism, and equality: 'they believed that all the people were equal in the eyes of God' (Morgan, 2007: 153). Indeed, they were both against slavery and the slave trade, which involved the use of violence.

Furthermore, the American War of Independence which took place between 1776 and 1783, placed attention on the slavery debate: the planters in the North America did not need the slave trade anymore, thanks to the natural growth of the black population (Walvin in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 4) and on an economic level, the war reduced drastically the interest and investments in the sugar plantations; together with Adam Smith's philosophical beliefs about the inefficiency of the slave labor (Richardson in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 129). Also, both the 1789 French Revolution and the 1791 Haitian Revolution carried with

them anti-slavery ideals and reinforced the contradictory nature of the institution of slavery for the European nations, which promoted freedom inside their borders. This general background led the British population to gradually perceive slavery as an unacceptable institution. Thus, during the eighteenth century an anti-slavery common sense started to develop; but still many people supported the trade for its economic importance: the Empire's wealth was indeed strictly linked to the trade system (Drescher in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 43).

Extremely important was also the role of black writers in the UK, who, in the context of the abolitionist campaign, were key to sensitizing the British population. Among the black slaves living in England literacy was quite customary, much more than it was in the colonies; indeed, the British society of the time assigned a great importance to religion, and the slaves' conversion was well accepted and often even sustained by the slave owners: this conversion entailed literacy, for the slaves needed to read directly from the Bible (Walvin 1986: 56-57). The works of these black writers had the role of displaying the atrocities of slavery through the eyes of the slaves themselves, making them finally appear as human people, which was extremely important because as Molineux writes:

Britons either did not care about African bondage or [...] they perceived it differently from white bondage' (Molineux, 2012: 20).

These works were used to fight against the concept of black people as chattel; the authors were also actively promoting anti-slavery thoughts in England, among them the most famous are doubtlessly Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho and Ottobah Cugoana. Their accounts are considered to belong to the literary genre of the *Slave Narrative*, which will be further analysed later on.

In the next three paragraphs I will present three key cases which contributed to the awareness campaign that took place in Britain. The Jonathan Strong Case, the James Sommerset Case, and the Zong Massacre have been key to change the public opinion on slavery, as they display the cruelty and the horrors of slavery.

### 1.9.2. *The Jonathan Strong Case (1765)*

During the eighteenth century the position of the slaves inside the borders of the UK was controversial: the black slaves, who had been brought to England by their masters, mainly worked as domestic servants. Therefore, the cruel plantation slavery was apparently a distant institution. This contradictory climate brought controversial court cases, one of the first examples was the *Jonathan Strong Case*: this case was taken to court by the known abolitionist Granville Sharp, he was a key figure in the abolition process, as he fought for the slaves' freedom (Walvin in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 3).

The black slave Jonathan Strong brought to England and owned by the lawyer David Lisle, appeared in front of Granville's brother doctor William Sharp in a very bad condition: his master had beaten him almost to death. Dr. William Sharp, like his brother had sympathies for the abolitionist cause, thus both him and his brother helped the poor slave to recover from his serious injuries. Once he had recovered, they also helped him find a respectful job. Two years after this sorrowful event, the slave master David Lisle accidentally met his former slave Jonathan Strong and was extremely surprised to see him still alive. Thus, he decided to reclaim his rights on Strong, with the wish to gain some money by selling him to a Jamaican planter (Smith, 2010: 33).

At that moment Granville Sharp decided to take this case to court, despite the low possibility of winning it. However, he managed to dismiss the early cases

that sanctioned the slaves by demonstrating the fact that there was no English law that officially sanctioned slavery (Smith, 2010: 33). This early victory on the part of the abolitionists was taken as an example for the later cases regarding slavery inside the UK.

### 1.9.3. *The James Somerset Case (1772)*

Many other cases were brought to court, one of the most known is the so-called *Somerset Case*: after Charles Stewart brought his slave James Somerset to England from Boston, Virginia, the slave managed to escape from his master; however, the runaway slave Somerset was rapidly located. Charles Stewart decided then to punish his slave by boarding Somerset on the *Anne and Mary* slave ship (Smith, 2010: 34), which would have taken him to Jamaica where he would have been working on a plantation for the rest of his life. However, Somerset received the help of his friend Granville Sharp, who presented his case to court.

The Somerset Case required eight hearings and went on from December 1771 until June 1772, Sharp and a group of humanitarians questioned and drew attention to the master's right to bring his baptized slave back to the colonies, after having been in England, a nation which promoted freedom, and where no official law recognized the existence of slavery inside its borders (Walvin, 1986: 41). This case profoundly affected public opinion, and it was used by numerous newspapers either to sustain slavery or to promote anti-slavery thinking. Nevertheless, the Lord Chief of Justice Mansfield took his final decision: the slave master Charles Stewart had no right to bring his slave Somerset back to the colonies against the slave's will. Somerset then gained his freedom thanks to the help of his friend Sharp.

Lord Mansfield's verdict was however strictly related to the specific case he was judging, he did not have the opportunity, or even maybe the will at that point,

to outlaw slavery inside the UK borders and to set all the slaves free; his sentence was wrongly 'quoted in historical studies' to claim that all the slaves inside England were from that moment on freed (Walvin, 1986: 41). However, this case was of a great importance as an example for other similar cases, among others a very similar situation took place in Scotland in 1778, and following the Somerset sentence the Scottish master named Wedderburn, was denied bringing his slave back to the colonies (Walvin, 1986: 42).

#### 1.9.4. *The Zong Massacre (1783)*

The Zong Massacre is probably the most infamous in British history, its tragic fame may be due to the sheer cruelty shown by the British crew involved in this process. This case is also known as an inspiration for Turner's 1840 famous and controversial painting *The Slave Ship*.

The Zong was indeed the name of a slave ship purchased by Richard Hanley from Liverpool, Hanley chose the surgeon Luke Collingwood as the captain of the Zong for the voyage the ship was about to conduct in 1781. On 18 August, the Zong left the African coast carrying 442 African slaves, while the ship was supposed to carry around 193 Africans (Walvin, 2011: 27). After three months of sailing, a loss in the water container was discovered, thus sadly the water supplies drastically decreased. This misfortune was worsened by a navigation error: around the 27-28<sup>th</sup> November Jamaica was in sight, but it was mistaken for the coasts of St Dominique, a French territory, and therefore a hostile area (Walvin, 2011: 92). Therefore, the Zong sailed unconsciously away from its destination; disastrously extending its voyage.

Since the voyage was lasting too long and there was not enough food, on the 29<sup>th</sup> November the crew was brought together to decide about the fate of the Zong

(Walvin, 2011: 96-97). The dreadful decision was made of throwing part of the number of the slaves overboard, in order to have enough water for the crew and the other slaves. Thus, on the same day the crew chose forty-four sick slaves, they chained them together and forced the slaves to jump overboard condemning them to death. The scene was so terrible that some of the crew members 'were too horrified to repeat the practice twice more over the next two days' (Smith, 2010: 35). However, still two groups of slaves were thrown overboard, a first block composed of forty-two men and the second composed of thirty-eight slaves (Walvin, 2011: 97). The Zong finally arrived at the Jamaican coasts on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1782, where the 200 surviving slaves were sold to the plantation owners (Walvin, 2011: 99). More than one hundred slaves had been killed, and the others died or threw themselves overboard.

After this disastrous voyage, the ship owner claimed the insurance for the lost slaves, they were indeed considered as 'chattel' (Smith, 2010: 35). Not only did Hanley invoke his right to receive an insurance for the men that his crew had deliberately thrown overboard, but what was worse was the fact that the idea of using the insurance was proposed before the crew threw the slaves overboard (Walvin, 2011: 99). During the trial, Granville Sharp claimed the crew was responsible for the voluntary killing of the black slaves; however, the court backed up Collingwood and his crew, thus Lord Chief of Justice Mansfield had to close the case (Smith, 2010: 35-36). The trial ended with a defeat for the abolitionist movement; nevertheless, the case became extremely famous, and it influenced the public opinion: the deliberate killing of people was against British principles and appeared extremely atrocious and barbaric. This case raised awareness in the public about the atrocities and injustices of the slave trade.

The Zong Massacre became a symbol of the slave trade atrocities, which were still perpetrated by the British. It intensified the anti-slavery discourse and

highlighted the great contradiction of the British Empire which was based both on a 'successful slave based-commerce' and at the same time promoted the 'traditional English liberties' (Walvin, 2011: 214).

#### *1.9.5. The abolition debate in the UK*

The process which led to the abolition of slavery was certainly complex, and historians have provided several readings of it throughout the years. Initially, at the end of the nineteenth century a celebratory reading of the abolition process, which presented it as the 'triumph of Christian humanitarian ethos', spread thanks to the work of historians such as W. E. H. Lecky. However, this self-celebratory position seemed unrealistic, thus, modern historians such as Eric Williams, argued that slavery was not profitable enough at the time of abolition. Nevertheless, even this position has been dismantled, as the slave trade and the commerce with the colonies was still at its peak at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Carey, 2005: 10). Therefore, Davis suggests a more complex reading, and he argued anti-slavery thinking was the result of 'the ideological needs of various groups and classes' (1999:42).

Undoubtedly, the long process that led to abolition was carried out thanks to all the different forces which came into play at the time: the religious thought, the political anti-slavery campaign, the literary contribution, and the public support. Carey identifies four different stages in the evolution of the abolitionist debate: it firstly began at a local level with oratory meetings and readings by abolitionists; secondly, priests and judges reflected on the ethic of the trade through religious sermons and through the court cases already mentioned; thirdly, the abolitionist campaign got to Parliament; and finally, the issue was discussed in the House of Commons (2005: 144).

The general uneasiness regarding the British slave trade was firstly

witnessed by two sects: the Millennialist and the Perfectionist, whose principles clashed with slavery (Davis, 1999: 43). Then, the religious group, the Quakers, who took inspiration from the Millennialist and the Perfectionist, were the very first to actively fight against slavery in the USA through the creation of anti-slavery societies. Following the example of the American Quakers, an executive committee of Quakers was funded in London too: the London Meeting for Sufferings Committee and together with their American counterpart, the British Quakers introduced the first petition to the British Parliament against the slave trade in 1783, which was politely rejected: the prime minister, North was convinced that all the European nations still needed the trade to support their colonies (Drescher in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 44). In the same year the British Quakers created another committee, with the unique aim of supporting the abolition of the slave trade, which printed a great variety of antislavery literature (Davis, 1999: 218). The Quakers introduced a new petition the following year to the new Prime Minister William Pitt, however, once again they received negative feedback: they were told that it was not yet the right time to discuss the slave trade (Drescher in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 44).

The Quakers were later joined by other abolitionists such as William Wilberforce, who supported the cause from 1787, and he became the key figure still well-known and celebrated today. Wilberforce knew the Prime Minister William Pitt, who pushed the young abolitionist to petition again the question of slavery in front of Parliament. The year 1787 also marked the birth of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, also known as the London Committee, created in order to sensitize the population and to present new effective petitions to the parliament. With the very same aims the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson left London and traveled around England (Drescher in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 47).

Therefore, the anti-slavery campaign's initial aim was to sensitize the

population by making them aware of the horrors of slavery, thus, the abolitionists counted on the power of empathy. They pursued their aims through the public debates, but also through the literary production of the Slave Narratives and other writings supporting the abolitionist cause. In doing so, the abolitionists made great use of what Carey defines as the 'rhetoric of sensibility', which

consists of a number of loosely connected rhetorical tropes and arguments, available for the rhetorician to choose from when attempting to persuade an audience that a person or a group of people are suffering and that suffering should be diminished or relieved entirely (2005: 2).

According to this strategy, the slaves became 'sentimental heroes' (Carey, 2005: 50), whose sufferings were depicted and condemned both on the political scene by anti-slavery supporters and on a literary level. Even before the appearance of the early Slave Narratives, some abolitionists had already produced literary compositions in which they discussed slavery. Sarah Scott's fictional biography *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766) tells the story of a British man who manages to create a more compassionate plantation work system and to treat the slaves as human beings (Carey, 2005: 51). The abolitionists also wrote abolitionist poetry, including the verses of John Bicknell, Thomas Day, Hanna More, William Cowper, and James Ramsay, among others; together with pamphlets and essays on slavery, among which James Ramsay's *Essay On the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (1784) and Thomas Clarkson's *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human species* (1786). However, the key literary production at the time were the Slave Narratives, which as first-hand accounts of the former slaves were particularly effective in creating empathy.

Thanks to the public and literary campaign against slavery, the abolitionists immediately obtained a positive response by the general public, which supported

the numerous of petitions the abolitionists presented to the Parliament. By 1788 slavery was a central issue in the public sphere and it was formally discussed in the House of Commons (Drescher in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 50). The first result of the petitions was the already mentioned 1788 *Dolben Act*, which was further ameliorated in 1789; this act was primarily meant to improve the slaves' conditions on board of the slave ships (Klein, 1999: 186). In the same year, William Wilberforce gave his most famous speech in front of the House of Common supporting anti-slavery ideas, however, these first attempts were not successful and in 1792 the abolitionists had to suggest a 'gradual' Abolition Bill, which set off a gradual abolition of the slave trade to be completed by 1796, this new Bill passed by 230 to 85 votes (Carey, 2005: 186).

However, the outbreak of the French Revolution, which resulted in the 1793 execution of the King, and the consequent war between France and Britain, abruptly shifted the interest of the government away from slavery. Only after the victory of Britain, a new and stronger anti-slavery wave developed in Britain (Carey, 2005: 190). In 1805 the British Parliament prohibited the importation of slaves into the new colonies of British Guiana and Trinidad (Klein, 1999: 186). Moreover, in May 1806 *the Foreign Slave Trade Bill* was approved, which outlawed the import of slaves by British traders in foreign colonies (Drescher in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 61). Finally, in March 1807 the slave trade was abolished by the British Parliament, and all the trades were asked to end by the end of 1807 (Klein, 1999: 186).

Therefore, the British Government gradually began to support the abolitionist ideas. This shift took place in a complex historical period defined by the title of Davis's book as the 'Age of Revolution'; indeed the world was struck by wars and economic and political change which led to the rise of the capitalist system. In such context of social instability, by supporting abolitionist thought, the government leaders could meet the requests of the population, which was by then

already sensitized by the abolitionist campaign and so gain their support (Davis, 1999: 348-349).

#### *1.9.6. Mobilization in the Caribbean*

During the Eighteenth-century anti-slavery ideals took hold on both sides of the Atlantic and a great number of slave rebellions occurred not only in the British colonies, but also in the colonies of the other European nations (Carey, 2005: 187). Both the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and the Rebellion of Saint Dominique (1770s) differ from the previous ones, as the rebels fought for their freedom as slaves, and demanded to extend the citizenship to the former slaves who were already free (Blackburn, 2011: 173). Indeed, in the period of Revolution, the number of freemen was rapidly growing (Davis, 2015: 63).

On the one hand, these rebellions could be read as the living evidence of the diffusion of the anti-slavery thought and supported the campaign; but on the other hand, the pro-slavery supporters used the reports that detailed the atrocities and the killings perpetrated by the rebels, to prove their savage nature. The rebellion which took place in the 1790s in the French colony of St Dominique inspired by the French Revolution led by the former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, inspired, and encouraged black people's anti-slavery sentiments in the Caribbean; but at the same time, it was extremely cruel and gave room to scary stories on the rebels (Carey, 2005: 189).

However, the so-called 'slave resistance' and the rebellions increased, indeed, the gradual success of the British parliamentary abolitionist campaign inspired the Caribbean anti-slavery movement: even if the vast majority of the slaves in the colonies were not literate and were very far from England, the accounts of what was happening in the UK created a cultural background which

strengthened anti-slavery sentiments (Beckles in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 111-116). Therefore, the abolitionists argued that the situation in the colonies urged intervention (Beckles in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 116). And on the other side of the Atlantic, the figure of Wilberforce, together with other abolitionists hated by the plantation owners, became heroic symbols of the fight against slavery; so much that a song was created for him:

Oh me Good friend, Mr. Wilberforce, make we free!  
God Almighty thank ye! God Almighty thank ye!  
God Almighty, make we free!  
Buckra in this country no make we free:  
What Negro for to do? What Negro for to do?  
Take force by force! Take force by force (Ogborn, 2019: 189)

This song shows the slaves' view of Wilberforce, they saw him as a 'friend', but the song denounces the slave owners, here called 'Buckra' in Igbo language, but more importantly the slave underlines the importance of taking up arms to fight for freedom (Beckles in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, 2007: 118).

### 1.9.7. *Emancipation*

After the 1807 abolition of the slave trade, the abolitionists did not immediately fight for the slaves' emancipation but supported a gradual process of emancipation, Wilberforce himself in *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1807) supported this thesis (Morgan, 2007: 173). They were persuaded that with the ending of the trade the slave owners would change their attitude towards the slaves, assuring them better life conditions, education, and better working conditions. Nevertheless, the condition of the slaves did not change, if possible, it became even harsher and the

mortality rate in the colony did not reduce; however, the fact that the slaves kept on dying and the plantations kept on working, the abolitionists assumed that slaves were still traded (Lee in Kitson and Lee, 1999, vol. 3: x). Therefore, abolitionists wanted a registration system to keep track of the slaves, so Wilberforce supported the Registry Bill in 1815 in front of the Parliament. Only in 1817 the Slave Registration Act was approved, thus, all the slaves were to be registered every year; the registration brought many advantages, as Morgan highlights: it prevented new illegal slave importations; it gave an insight into the slaves' conditions; by controlling the mortality rate it also witnessed the planters' attitudes towards the slaves (Morgan, 2007: 177).

In 1819 a central slave registry was set up in London: here every plantation owner had to register his slaves and signal every sale and purchase of slaves (Walvin, 1986: 128). The physical recording of slaves was used to show the magnitude of the slave system. The abolitionists tried again to sensitize the population, and in 1823 they created the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery, the choice of the word 'gradual' mirrors the initial hopes of the abolitionists, who wished the abolition of Trade could change the treatment of the slaves (Davis, 2015: 263). Also, the abolitionists shared their ideas through the publication of newspapers such as *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, which was first issued in 1825; through public meetings and speech; and again, they presented a great number of petitions to the parliament (Morgan, 2007: 182).

By the 1830s the abolitionists strongly demanded for the 'immediate' emancipation of the British slaves (Davis, 2015: 263). As a consequence of this new abolitionist wave, on the 27<sup>th</sup> December 1831 a massive rebellion took place in Jamaica, known with the name of Baptist War. Probably the missionaries who supported abolitionism played a key role in the beginning of the rebellion, and once they returned to Britain, they detailed the horrors of slavery and argued that

Christian slaves tried to save their masters, depicting them as compassionate; thus, these accounts had an important role in influencing the British public opinion (Davis, 2015:266).

Finally, on 14 May 1833 Edward Stanley, the English Colonial Secretary, introduced the process of emancipation: every child aged under 6 was to be considered as free, for the adult slaves, the procedure was gradual, they had indeed to take a period of apprenticeship, before gaining their freedom. Also, the government refunded £15 million to the slave owners for their loss. Before the Act passed a few changes were made: the compensation given to the slave owners was raised to £20 million, and the apprenticeship was better defined: a period of six years was asked to the field slaves, while to the domestic slaves it was required a period of four years; the slaves had to work for free for about 40/45 hours a week, and the extra hours were to be paid. *The Emancipation Bill* which was officially approved on 31 July 1833, became officially law on 31 July 1834, marking the end of slavery in the British Empire (Morgan, 2007: 190-191).

## *Chapter 2. Slavery and trauma*

Not only has transatlantic slavery inevitably left an ineradicable scar in the slaves' minds, but also its consequences, are still present today in black people's lives. As I have mentioned earlier on, British historical amnesia has helped to shape an idea of Britain as an abolitionist nation rather than a slave-trading one (Walvin 2000: 135). The very existence of this phenomenon of amnesia mirrors the British people and politicians' desire to avoid the extremely painful and shameful memory of the slave trade. Transatlantic slavery represents a traumatic event in British history and it can be considered as both a collective trauma in British history for the black population, and as well as one of the major traumas in the whole human history.

Therefore, the present chapter focuses on slavery as a traumatic experience. My considerations on the trauma of slavery will draw on the perspectives provided by the academic field of trauma studies, aiming at defining the central terms and categories usually related to this field, such as: trauma, memory, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)... In particular, the trauma of slavery will be investigated both as an individual and collective trauma, I will focus on recent studies on the aftermath of slavery for black people living today, through the introduction of what has recently been recognized as the Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS).

I argue that the analysis of slavery through the lens of trauma theory will be useful to better understand and define slavery itself, but also the memory of it. Moreover, trauma theory represents a substantial framework for the analysis of artistic and literary representations of slavery, such as the slave and Neo-Slave Narratives, which are the main focus of the present dissertation.

In the next sections, I will firstly try to define the concept of 'trauma', and

then I will present the very early studies on this subject, which originated the field of trauma studies.

### **2.1. A psychological wound: trauma**

The complexity of the phenomenon called traumas made the definition of the term itself -trauma- extremely controversial and discussed since the late nineteenth century; up until that time its meaning was associated with physical wounds, and the cure of them. This early definition echoes the Greek roots of the term:

Trauma (a wound), a term borrowed from ancient Greek, was at first used in surgery to denote a violent injury from an external cause that breached the body's integrity. (Traumatism is used occasionally as a synonym, and occasionally to refer to any condition resulting from trauma.) The term eventually made its way into common usage, its psychological sense coming to the fore as its employment spread from medicine to psychoanalysis. (De Mijolla, 2005: 1800)

Thus, for the first time during the nineteenth century the initial meaning of the term was 'extended to include mental injury' (Young, 1995: 146): indeed, while earlier on a 'trauma' was a physical cut, a deep lesion in the human body, nowadays, trauma is associated with a psychological injury, which takes place into the subject's mind (Craps, 2013: 30).

Using Caruth's words: 'trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind' (Caruth, 1996: 3). However, even if physical wound is self-evident, a psychological wound is invisible to the naked eye; nevertheless, it can be extremely painful, possibly even more uncomfortable than a physical trauma: indeed, it can completely destabilize the traumatized person's life. A

trauma can be produced by a great variety of experiences, such as accidents, sexual aggressions, or even any other event apparently harmless, which is however perceived as overwhelming, unexpected, and shocking by the subject, who experiences it. The experience of a traumatic event is so overwhelming and intense for the subject that it becomes impossible for her/him to overcome it, as Leys puts it, the subject misses the 'specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what had happened' (2000: 9). When experiencing a traumatic event, the subject feels the impossibility of accepting, internalizing and finally overcoming that specific event (Caruth, 1996: 10). A contemporary definition of trauma can be found in the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*:

In its psychoanalytical sense, trauma denotes an event of such violence and suddenness that it occasions an inflow of excitation sufficiently strong to defeat normally successful defense mechanisms; as a general rule trauma stuns the subject and, sooner or later, brings about a disorganization of the psychic economy. (De Mijolla, 2005: 1800)

The experience of a trauma is not an isolated moment, which ends when the traumatic situation resolves itself; the memory of it unconsciously persists in the subject's mind, and it brings several consequences for her/his life: it may manifest itself through different symptoms ranging from tics, to nightmares, amnesia, unexplainable and uncontrollable fear, and different forms of anxiety. The subject is so overwhelmed by the traumatizing experience that she/he may not even be completely aware of the reason for her/his malaise, and, commonly, her/his memory of the traumatic event is either erased, or misleading since the memory of a traumatic event is so deeply imbued with the subject's strong feelings and emotions.

Even the will to wipe out the traumatic memory, whether conscious or not, is common among the traumatized subjects and it is recognizable in the British attitude towards slavery. This desire to forget and the mechanisms happening in the subject's mind after the traumatic experience are analysed by the Italian author

Primo Levi in his long essay *I Sommersi e i Salvati*. Here, the author refers to the Holocaust and he points out that the simple act of remembering what has been perceived as a traumatizing experience becomes traumatic in itself; therefore, the traumatized subject restlessly tries to avoid remembering these experiences. Levi argues that both the Jews and the German soldiers that have experienced the Holocaust try to erase its memory: on the one hand, the victims avoid these memories in order not to experience the pain once again; and on the other hand, the oppressors usually remove the memory to eliminate their feelings of shame and guilt (Levi, 2007).

In the following paragraph I propose an overview of the very early studies on trauma, which later on inspired the birth of the academic field of trauma studies.

## **2.2. Early studies on trauma**

As mentioned earlier on, the contemporary definition of trauma together with the earliest studies on trauma date back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the first publication containing a description of traumatic events, entitled *On a Railway and Other injuries of the Nervous System*, which first appears in 1866 was published by the Professor of Surgery, John Eichen (Young, 1995: 13). However, the first scientific and systematic study of trauma was carried out at the end of the 1880s at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris and was conducted by Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot's studies on trauma were a consequence of his psychological studies on hysteria and the onset of nervous shock; indeed, he was the first to realize that hysteria could be a consequence for the subject's dissociation caused by a traumatic and unbearable event (Buonauro, 2014: 21-22). Moreover, during his studies on hysteria, Charcot observed that a sense of profound fear could lead the subject to a 'self-induced hypnotic state', in which the subject would not be completely aware, thus, she/he could easily be manipulated to create misleading and unrealistic memories (Young,

1995: 15-20). Charcot's initial intuitions created the ground for other studies, and they have been further expanded, notably by two well-known psychoanalysts: Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud.

### 2.2.1. *Pierre Janet: trauma and memory*

Starting from Charcot's intuitions, his student, Pierre Janet took on his studies on trauma and decided to focus on the process of creation of human memories. As Young later clarified, the term 'memory' is used to convey three different concepts: firstly, the human ability to collect and retrieve information; secondly, the content of human afterthought; and thirdly, the actual site where the memories are stored (1995: 13). But Janet was especially interested in understanding the process undergone by the human mind when categorizing and then assimilating everyday experiences creating memories: he argued that human beings have a complex memory system, which can assimilate memories through two different processes, defined as 'habit memory' and 'narrative memory' (Onega, Ganteau, 2014: 2).

The process defined as 'habit memory' is in common with all the animals, indeed, thanks to this ability, all animals produce memories of a situation they experience multiple times, which gives birth to unconscious and automatic responses to specific external stimuli. Thanks to a trial-and-error system, the subject has the ability to identify and store the suitable response to a given situation. If the subject finds her/himself in the same situation more than once, the subject stores a pre-determinate response to the situation, and then she/he will unconsciously be able to remember and reproduce that pre-determined response when a similar situation takes place.

However, unlike other animals, human beings also have the ability to read through and analyse their experiences to make sense out of them, through a 'narrative memory' (Onega, Ganteau, 2014: 2). In Janet's opinion, human beings have mental schemes to classify and process their experiences, according to him,

thanks to the humans' ability to process experiences, every new experience should immediately be stored, integrated, and interpreted in the light of previous experiences and following the corresponding mental schemas present in the mind. Thus, this process of making sense creates logical and coherent links between all the subject's experiences (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart, 1989: 1531-1532): establishing causal relations, a sense of past and present and integrating similar situations.

In the case of traumatic experiences, Janet pointed out the difficulty, or even impossibility, for the traumatized subject to fit the traumatic experience into the subject's pre-existing categories, thus it generates a trauma: in other words, an internal fracture in the subject's logical narration. Therefore, the memories of these events slip away from the subject's awareness, and they are not integrated into the logical and coherent narration of the subject's experiences (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart, 1989: 1532). These memories remain 'fixed' out of time and place, they cannot coherently flow with the other pre-existing memories into the subject's internal narration: 'the unassimilated memory endures as a split-off element of consciousness' (Young, 1995: 37-42). Such 'fixed' memories are defined by Janet as 'traumatic memories' (Leys, 2000: 105).

A traumatized person has difficulties in framing the traumatic event in a logical and coherent narrative, therefore, the event remains unconsciously present in the subject's mind (Buonauro, 2014: 23). Since the latent trauma cannot fit in the subject's internal coherent narrative, it cannot even be expressed through words by the traumatized subject (Onega, Ganteau, 2014: 2). The unexpressed trauma, then, only comes to light through unconscious fears, apparently useless obsessions, anxiety, and scary nightmares. Janet also suggested that there may be a latency period between the experience of the traumatic event and the manifestation of the subject's upsetting behaviour (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart, 1989: 1532).

What is more, Janet's studies revealed what he defined as the subject's 'attachment' to the experienced trauma. In other words, he noticed that, having found it impossible to categorize the traumatic event, the traumatized person lost

his ability to categorize any other experience she/he lived after that specific event (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart, 1989: 1533); hence, the whole subject's life results to be deeply damaged: 'un homme dont la conduite est dérangée est un homme qui ne vit correctement, ni complètement' (Janet, 2002: 45).

### 2.2.2. *Sigmund Freud: the desire to forget*

Sigmund Freud was extremely committed to the subject of trauma and memory, as he worked and revised his theories on trauma throughout his whole life. In an early period, his studies followed Janet's steps and drew on the idea of traumatic memories displaced from the subject's mind (Buonauro, 2014: 25-26). However, Freud decided to focus on the traumatized subject's desire to forget: he believed traumatized subjects put considerable effort in avoiding traumatic memories, thanks to the system of 'concealing memories' (Freud, 2012). To investigate this topic, he compared adults' 'concealing memories' to childhood memories. In the case of childhood memories, only few and apparently randomly chosen memories are retained, indeed, only few people can remember important events of their childhood, such as their grandparents' deaths, their brother or sister's birth, almost all early memories seem to be useless fragments of everyday life. Freud's studies showed that these apparently worthless memories work as 'concealing memories': their function is to replace an erased meaningful event. Therefore, their importance does not lie in their content, rather they are associated with a meaningful event, and in the very same way, adults tend to create 'concealing memories' when it comes to traumatic experiences.

Freud argued that traumatic events are doubtlessly important, thus, it would seem unreasonable to erase them. Nevertheless, two opposing feelings come into play: on the one hand, the event needs to be remembered because of its significance for the subject, but, on the other hand, the subject tries hard to erase the painful memory from his mind. The result of this internal fight is a compromise situation:

the subject will not retain the traumatic memory itself, nevertheless, a connected and apparently painless memory will be stored in his mind. As a result, the created memory will appear to be meaningless and ordinary, while the traumatic elements will be forgotten: therefore, he defines them 'concealing memories' ('Ricordi di copertura' in Freud, 1984).

Also, Freud agreed with Janet in thinking that traumatized subjects can develop a 'traumatic fixation' (what Janet had previously called 'attachment' to trauma). The consequence is that traumatized subjects are not able to assimilate any other event they experienced after the traumatic event: in Freud's opinion the mind of a traumatized subject is profoundly wounded and as it cannot make sense out of the traumatic event, it cannot be able to process the experiences she/he lives after the trauma.

Later, Freud's studies focused on the causes of hysteria, and in particular he analysed a specific kind of trauma: the one which originates from disturbing sexual impulses arisen during an early age (Buonauro, 2014: 27). Therefore, the kind of trauma he decided to focus on, takes place entirely inside the subject's mind; notably, it would develop inside the child's mind, and there is no external event which could be considered as responsible for the traumatic experience: the child has intolerable and disturbing sexual thoughts towards his parents. Because of these unbearable thoughts, the child experiences an internal conflict, which leads to the onset of traumatic effects.

However, as Freud experienced the horrors caused by the First World War, he felt the need to focus on the traumas provoked by the war. Differently from the traumas he had previously analysed, war proved that hysteria could be provoked by external traumatic events, as the soldiers carried with them the irrefutable proof of it. Indeed, similarly to the traumatized soldiers of the second world war, the strong experience of trench warfare compromised the soldiers' minds, and Freud studies their behaviour.

Finally, the psychoanalyst brought together his two previous contrasting

theories, revalidating, at the same time, Janet's studies. Freud believed trauma to be a fracture of the subject's mind, which can be both the consequence of an external experience, or the consequence of an internal fracture, taking place inside the subject's mind (Buonauro, 2014: 29).

Following Janet, Freud postulates what he called 'the latency period', which can be considered as a pause between the occurrence of the traumatic event and the appearance of the symptoms leading to the victim's strange behaviour. An example of it, may be the case of a person who survives a train accident: this individual may even walk away from the accident apparently unharmed; however, after a certain amount of time has passed, that person may suffer from anxiety, or other disorders derived from the traumatic experience. That period is what Freud called the 'latency period', indeed, at the moment of the occurrence of the traumatic event, the subject is so overwhelmed that she/he continues to act as normal, however, the recurrence of the traumatic experience will unconsciously reappear. To explain that, Freud further expands Janet's ideas by arguing that the traumatized person appears to be not completely conscious during the occurrence of trauma itself. Actually, a traumatic event is, by definition, problematic, precisely because it cannot be fully understood and may be considered to possess an 'inherent latency' (Caruth, 1996: 17). In other words, traumatic events tend to create an initial dissociation in the subject, who, right from the first moment, cannot make sense out of what he/she is living.

Thus, Freud believed human memory to be selective: the human memory system is believed to store and collect only the events that can be borne by the subject and to erase the painful and incomprehensible ones, namely those that cannot be put into a logical narration (Buonauro, 2014: 32). This concept of memory aligns itself to Janet's considerations on 'narrative memory', which is supposed to exclude from the narrative events that cannot be incorporated coherently. Moreover, this idea gives credit to Freud's early intuitions on 'concealing memories': since human memory is selective, it avoids storing traumatic memories

in the subject's brain, substituting them with ordinary and painless memories.

### 2.2.3. *Overcoming trauma*

As Freud's studies have shown, overcoming a traumatic experience is extremely difficult and painful for a traumatized subject, indeed, even the memory of a traumatic event becomes traumatic itself. Therefore, the traumatized subject unconsciously avoids remembering the traumatic experience. In addition, the traumatized subject feels it impossible to put into words the traumatized experience he/she has lived: thus, the trauma is perceived as 'unspeakable'. For the traumatized subject words seem inadequate to describe a traumatic experience (Balaev, 2014: 20). However, at the same time a contrasting force, which we have mentioned as Freud and Janet's idea of 'traumatic fixation' or 'attachment to trauma', forces the subject to experience over and over again his/her trauma through nightmares, unconscious fears, anxiety.

To describe this subject, Primo Levi presents a common nightmare among the prisoners of the Nazi camps: they dreamt of telling their story to a listener that would not pay attention to them (Levi, 2007). On the one hand, this nightmare reveals the subject's internal and unconscious need to retell the atrocities she/he has experienced, and on the other hand, her/his fear of not being listened to. In other words, the traumatized subject is trapped between two contrasting forces: the desire to bear witness, and the will to bury the traumatic event forever. What happens then, as Stampfl points out (Balaev, 2014: 21-25), is that the witnessing of a trauma composes itself of two distinguished phases: being first the subject's statement of the impossibility for a narration of the event through words; followed by the attempt of achieving what had just been considered as impossible: a narration of the traumatic experience.

The two pioneers of trauma studies agreed on the possibility of overcoming trauma through the narration of it; indeed, for both Janet and Freud, the narration

of the traumatic experience was conceived as the only possible therapy for the traumatized subject. According to them the role of therapy was to bring to consciousness the subject's 'fixed' memory:

The traumatized psyche was conceptualized as an apparatus for registering the blows to the psyche outside the domain of ordinary awareness, and hypnotism was used as a psychotherapeutic method for retrieving the forgotten, dissociated, or repressed recollections by bringing them into consciousness and language. (Leys, 2000: 4)

Even today in psychoanalysis, the traumatized patient is asked to try hard to retrieve her/his memories on the traumatic experience and tell his/her story. Even if in all likelihood, at the beginning, the traumatized narration will be extremely fragmentary and incomplete, only through therapy, the patient is gradually helped by the analyst to put all the pieces together, and to recollect the erased memory.

Thus, the traumatized subject presents her/his narrative not being sure about her/his memories, which are not a '*statement of*, but rather [...] a mode of *access to that truth*' (Felman, Laub, 1992: 15). Therefore, the role of the psychoanalyst is that of an active listener, who not only is interested in the narrative of the subject, but she/he also takes part in the reconstruction and reordering of the traumatic event, she/he 'comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflicts that the trauma victim feels' (Felman, Laub, 1992: 57). In Laub's opinion, the listener becomes a double witness to the trauma: on the one hand, the witness of the victim's trauma; and on the other hand, the witness of his indirect traumatic experience (Felman, Laub, 1992: 58).

In the following section I am going to investigate the evolution of trauma studies, and to introduce the perspective that this academic field has promoted in order to provide a more complete reading of traumatic phenomena, such as slavery.

### 2.3. Trauma Studies

In the early 1990s the discipline of trauma studies became an academic discipline as a part of the so-called 'ethical turn' in the field of Humanities (Craps in Buelens, Durrant, Egelstone, 2014: 45). The emergence of this new discipline mirrors the growing interest in the study of trauma as a response to the difficult historical context influenced by the two devastating World Wars, which left indelible consequences in people's minds and in their memories.

The seminal works in the burgeoning field of Trauma Studies started to appear in the 1990s: in 1992 the literary expert Shoshana Felman together with the psychoanalyst Dori Laub published: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. Shortly after, in 1995, Cathy Caruth edited the collection of essays entitled: *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*; and in 1996 she published her well known work: *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Radstone, 2007: 9). The first appearance of the term 'trauma theory' dates back to 1996, and can be found in Caruth's monograph; here, the term is used to include 'work around the experience of survivors of [...] catastrophic personal and collective experiences', and later on, it entailed the 'theoretical and methodological innovations [...] derived from this work and applied to film and literary studies' (Radstone, 2007: 10-11). Since its first appearance, the term has been used to define both the psychoanalytical studies on trauma, and the artistic representations of it.

As mentioned above, the historical period that framed the genesis of trauma studies was an extremely complex one; nevertheless, it was a period marked by multiple scientific discoveries. These new discoveries lead to the end of anthropocentrism, as Freud points out in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*: firstly, Copernicus's discovery demonstrated that the earth was not at the centre of the universe, as it was believed; secondly, the development of the theory of human evolution from monkeys dismantled the certainty of the superiority of humankind over the other animals; and, finally, the discovery of the unconscious, which

aroused the field of psychoanalysis. This newly acquired awareness contributed to the creation of a new perspective, which decentralizes humankind's importance in guiding history (Buonauro, 2014: 45). Not only the centrality of humankind was questioned in the hard sciences, but also in the literary context contributed to the change. In literature, the unity and static meaning of works of art was called into question: a new literary perspective brought to light the contradictions, and the inherent plurality of literary works, that could no longer be considered as consistent wholes (Buonauro, 2014: 46-47). Following the same perspective, the question of referentiality between representation and reality was reconceived as an indirect and mediated relationship (Radstone, 2007: 11).

In this difficult context, trauma studies could provide a new perspective with a different idea of referentiality, which could respond to the newly acquired needs. Indeed, the definition of trauma itself entailed the impossibility of a chronological and sequential narration of the traumatic event, since the traumatized mind cannot make sense of the traumatic event; thus, the representation of that kind of experience should entail the same indeterminateness. In this case, then, the referentiality did not underline the link to a determinate time or a place, rather it focuses the attention on the traumatic event in itself, which becomes the referential starting point for everything else (Radstone, 2007: 11-13). This very concept mirrors Freud's and Janet's idea of 'traumatic fixation' or 'attachment to trauma', since the subject's focus is only on the traumatic moment that makes it impossible for them to conceive time and events detached from it.

This type of referentiality suggested by Caruth encourages for an innovative understanding of history: indeed, similarly to traumatic events, history 'is not fully perceived as it occurs; [...] history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence'. Therefore, while experiencing the occurrence of history, people are immersed in it to such an extent that they cannot manage to provide what Leys defines as the 'cognitive knowledge of what happened' (2000: 9), exactly as is the case for traumatic events. As consequence, history could be defined as a 'history of

trauma' (Caruth, 1996: 17).

Traumatic collective events leave lasting marks on the collective memory and reproduce on a large scale the consequences that traumatic events have on individuals. Similar to the traumatized subjects' desire to erase the traumatic memory, historical events tend to be buried under sand and willingly forgotten by the collectivity, since they are too painful (Caruth, 1996: 17-18). On the one hand, the black British people's desire to remove the memory of the transatlantic slave trade from their memory is an example of such process. On the other hand, the white British people, who represent the descendants of the perpetrators of the slave trade have tried to bury that part of history. However, collective traumatic memories would need to be retrieved in order to be overcome, precisely as individual traumas, thus, they need to be talked about and to be passed on to the future generations. Therefore, the whole British population needs to be fully aware of the past of their nation.

The idea of retrieving and discussing collective traumas can help the collectivities to overcome them, but it may have even another function: indeed, both collective and individual trauma are present in all national histories, they belong to human history. Thus, Caruth goes even further by arguing that the act of listening to each other's traumas transcends national and cultural boundaries: 'trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures' (Caruth, 1995: 11). Therefore, by listening or even by reading about other people's traumas can raise awareness and 'contribute to cross-cultural solidarity' (Craps in Buelens, Durrant, Egelstone, 2014: 45). In this perspective, the publication of both slave and Neo-Slave Narratives pursues both aims: these narratives raise awareness about slavery, but also can be read all over the world and through the description of human emotions and feelings can promote cross-cultural understanding.

In the next paragraph, I am going to focus on the question of the traumatized subject's sovereignty inside the field of trauma studies: two different theories have

been put forward; therefore, they need to be discussed in order to better understand the perspectives proposed by this field.

### 2.3.1. *Subject's sovereignty: mimetic and antimimetic theory*

In the field of trauma studies, the question of the traumatized subject's awareness while experiencing a traumatic is extremely problematic. According to the early studies on trauma, its consequences can be associated to a 'posthypnotic forgetting', these early studies even argued the traumatized subject to be in a hypnotic state when experiencing a traumatic event. Thus, if in a hypnotic state, the subject's mind could not be aware at the moment of the traumatic experience: the subject would be dissociated from him/herself, as a consequence for not being in control of the situation she/he is living (Leys, 2000: 298).

Nevertheless, this initial hypothesis, also defined as the mimetic theory, entails disturbing consequences: on the one hand, if the subject's mind is considered to be absent, the subject would have no sovereignty over her/himself (Radstone, 2007: 14). On the other hand, if the subject is believed to be in a hypnotic state, she/he could be easily impressed, thus, her/his memories would not be trustful at all (Leys, 2000: 298), but rather a fictitious representation of the event.

Therefore, the idea of an unconscious traumatized subject at the moment of the traumatizing event is undoubtedly disturbing, as it also calls into question the sovereignty of the individual over him/herself (Radstone, 2007: 8); this is the reason why a different perspective aroused: the anti-mimetic theory. This second theory does not envisage a dissociation from the traumatized self, but rather a dissociation of the traumatic memory itself. Therefore, according to this theory, the subject consciously experiences the traumatic event, the memory of it cannot be produced by her/him, as a consequence of the fact that the traumatic experience can be neither mediated, nor understood by the subject. Therefore, that memory is confined to a hidden spot of the subject's mind, from where it cannot be restored. Thus, in this

scenario, the subject results to be completely in control and aware of him/herself; while creating a distance from the traumatic event, which is considered, as a consequence, external to the subject (Leys, 2000: 299).

These two apparently contrasting theories still coexist in the field of trauma studies, and since they describe a complex mechanism of the human mind it is extremely difficult to create a clear line dividing the two perspectives, or even to prove the truthfulness of one of them; rather they seem to intersect each other's, and both seem destined to mutually coexist and to be present at different stages of the traumatic experience.

Next section focuses on a specific disorder discovered in the field of trauma studies, the so-called the post-traumatic stress disorder, which strikes the subjects who live extremely traumatic experiences.

### 2.3.2. *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*

The field of trauma studies has its origin in the Humanities, as already mentioned, nevertheless the field has also been informed by medical studies (Radstone, 2007: 10), which have been necessary after the two World Wars. Because of the mental disorders left by the wars, many neurological studies were conducted to better understand the soldiers' mutated behaviour when they came back from war. These studies ultimately led to the formal and medical recognition of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The first formal definition of this disorder dates back to 1980, when it was included in the third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart, 1989: 1531):

The essential feature of posttraumatic stress disorder is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity [...]. The traumatic event can be re-experienced in various ways. Commonly the person has recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event or recurrent distressing dreams during which the event is replayed. [...] stimuli associated with the trauma are persistently avoided. The person commonly makes deliberate efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations about the traumatic event and to avoid activities, situations, or people who arouse recollections of it. This avoidance may include amnesia for an important aspect of the traumatic event. (American Psychiatric Association, 1994: 424-425)

As already mentioned, the disorder was initially studied because the soldiers who came back from war presented a mutated behaviour, however, it does not affect only soldiers, it also affects all the people who experience intense traumas, and that show the long-lasting effects of them. The very existence of this disorder confirms Janet's and Freud's initial intuitions: indeed, both had already noticed that a traumatic experience could reemerge through nightmares, amnesia, and anxiety, and these are precisely the symptoms of the post-traumatic stress disorder as it has been defined by the American Psychiatric Association.

Moreover, more recently, Leys has also identified the four criteria keys to the diagnosis of the disorder: first, the subject need to experience a traumatic event; and the experience of it becomes a terrifying event for the subject, who then is almost paralyzed as she/he cannot completely overcome the traumatic experience, and finally the insurgence of different symptoms, such as amnesia and nightmares (2000: 232). As Caruth puts it, the PTSD is an 'enigma of survival', the subject that survives an encounter with death must live on, but she/he is forced to experience again this feeling through unconscious re-emergence of traumatic feelings (Caruth, 1996: 58). Unfortunately, this disorder is extremely common and approximatively one subject out of 10 people suffers from it (Torres, 2020).

In the next section of this chapter, I am focusing on slavery as a trauma both at the individual and collective level. Moreover, I am going to introduce the recently coined concept of Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome.

#### **2.4. Slavery: an individual and cultural trauma**

The institution of slavery is inherently linked with the notion of trauma; it has produced countless traumatic experiences, both at individual level, provoking traumatic memories in the minds of the people living at that time; and collective level as a cultural trauma, haunting the collective memory, and creating long-lasting consequences still visible nowadays:

Slavery's legacies are apparent in the more than four thousand African Americans lynched in the U.S. and today in unwarranted police violence against Black people. Slavery's central legacy is racism – Whites' belief in their racial superiority. (Bowser, Charles-Nicolas, 2021: 30)

Unquestionably, when the white man first arrived to colonize the black 'savages' and their lands, black people went through an ongoing traumatic process. In his book, the black psychiatrist and philosopher Fanon, argues that colonization ended up provoking psychopathological problems to the black men, both at an individual and at a collective level: the dehumanization of the black people established by the colonizer resulted in what Fanon defined as the 'colonized inferiority complex' (Fanon, 2008). The discriminatory attitude of the white man imposed the idea that the black man was inferior, inadequate, and even less human than the white man. This idea was reflected by the institution of slavery, indeed, the black slaves were regarded as properties, such as animals, and they could be physically abused; thus, 'subjugation' was the key principle of slavery (Gump, 2017:

162-166).

As a consequence, the enduring trauma of slavery, unwillingly changed the black slaves' self-perception, which still lives on today: the black man gradually come to perceive her/himself to be inferior to the white and 'civilized' man, believing her/his status derived from 'his own inherent defectiveness, his irreparable badness. This can be a source of lifelong and intense shame' (Gump, 2017: 164). The division between inferiors and superiors recalls Aristotle's masters and slaves' partition. Nevertheless, as Aristotle himself considered the creation of slaves through human laws to be against nature, in the same way Fanon argues that the creation of 'inferiors' is an artificial one imposed by the white man. This phenomenon of an artificial and forced creation of a 'racial inferior' is extremely dangerous, and it has been described by Sartre in his essay *Anti-Semite and Jew* where the French philosopher argues that the Anti-Semites created their racial inferior, the Jews, 'The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew' (Sartre, 1948: 49).

However, slavery did not only produce countless individual traumas, but it also can be conceived as a collective and cultural trauma, which is an essential part of human history. Slavery has, indeed, shaped the minds of both white and black population and represents a painful memory for the whole humankind. When considering collective trauma such as slavery, as is the case for individual traumas, the collective memory tries to avoid them and struggles to deal with them: traumatic events tend to be erased from the history which is passed on. Therefore, such collective traumas need to be mediated through public representations, such as newspapers, tv programs, and radio; in doing so, the memory of these traumas can be accepted by the whole society (Eyerman, 2001: 55-81).

Differently from individual traumas, cultural traumas do not imply a 'direct experience' of the traumatizing event or situation, 'it is through time-delayed and negotiated recollection that cultural trauma is experienced, a process which places representation in a key role' (Eyerman, 2001: 209). Indeed, slavery as a collective trauma still needs to be represented and accepted by the public; thus, through new

accounts of slavery in the form of the Neo-Slave Narrative, the contemporary writers are trying to integrate slavery in the public awareness in order to deal with contemporary racism.

The need to raise awareness about the history of slavery is evident, as black people keeps on being discriminated and in the vast majority of cases the discriminated subject does not undergo a major traumatic moment of racism, rather he/she experiences day after day many minor discriminating situations. In addition to that, nowadays, racial discrimination tends to be less direct than it was in the past; nevertheless, it survives by taking different forms, ranging from discrimination in the workplace, being a target for police checks, or being the scapegoat when something happens (Craps, 2013: 26). All these events happening to the same person tend to produce a traumatic response in the subject's mind. Significantly, the very first encounter with discrimination is the most traumatizing one: this kind of discrimination is particularly shocking for the traumatized subject, who, as a human being, rightly does not perceive him/herself as different from the others. But when the others clearly discriminate him/her by making him/her feel different, he/she experiences a traumatic event: he/she realises to be considered as not belonging the main group. He/she undergoes then, an internal fight: the antagonist perception of his/her own perception of him/herself, opposed to the society's point of view.

The contradiction regarding the black people's identity has been described in literature and it entails a great number of difficulties for black people who need to define their own identity. It is precisely this feeling what Du Bois describes as 'double consciousness':

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged

strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 2016: 3)

The next section focuses on a recently described syndrome, which mirrors the more known post-traumatic stress disorder, as is defined as the post-traumatic slave syndrome. Such syndrome is key to describe the situation of black people living today and still coexist with the memory of slavery and its consequences.

#### *2.4.1. Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS)*

Using Gump's words, 'it is difficult to imagine descendants [of slaves] not haunted, in varying degrees, by the matters discussed' (2017: 161), and indeed, the trauma of slavery still reveals its consequences in the behaviors and beliefs of the black people living today in the UK. The experience of living in a racialized environment, still affected by the legacy of slavery and the illusion of white superiority, is traumatizing. Nevertheless, their trauma is difficult to define, indeed, black people do not show precisely the symptoms of PTSS; however, their condition needs to be described and taken under consideration, this is why Degruy in 2005 defines what she calls the Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) as follows:

Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome is a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues the experience of oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to this condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of the society in which they live are not accessible to them. This, then, is Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome (105).

This newly defined syndrome is characterized by three patterns of behaviour identified by Degruy: vacant esteem, ever-present anger, and racial socialization.

Firstly, black people living today can ‘internalize white racial stereotypes’ (Degry in Bowser, Aimè, 2021: 142), therefore, they start to believe they are racially inferior, even today, black people usually feel they could not long for important positions in the society; secondly, Degury argues for a state of ever-present anger caused by many years of oppression and discrimination, this underling anger has also led to the present days demonstrations against racism; and lastly, black people constantly face a racialized socialization, indeed, their everyday interactions are all based on the implicit, and sometimes explicit, belief of ‘whites as the ideal’ (Degry in Bowser, Aimè, 2021: 143): similarly to the desire to be white that Fanon had described in the colonial period, Degruy argues that even in the contemporary situation, black people long for a white appearance.

The final section of this chapter focuses on the role of artistic and literary representations of traumas. In particular, I will suggest Rothberg’s idea of a new construction of history based on multidirectional memory, rather than on a unique perspective, creates the theoretical background for the contemporary production of literary accounts of slavery. Thus, I will argue they are as attempts to rethink and to overcome the trauma of slavery.

## **2.5. Trauma and art**

The intrinsic aim of art is to represent and reflect on a society, or even on an historical period, and when it comes to atrocities such as transatlantic slavery, it is extremely difficult for artists to approach the subject. Along with slavery, the Nazi persecution of the Jews during World War II has been a complex and controversial subject to deal with, indeed, the German thinker Theodor Adorno (Adorno, 1983) was the first to reflect on the impact of the traumatic events of the Holocaust on poetry, and more broadly on art, and ever since his reflection, the topic has been widely debated. The unbearable atrocities committed in the Nazi internment camps

seem to be unbearable to process for the human mind, however, they have happened, therefore, it is legitimate to wonder, on the one hand, if art should represent this reality; and on the other hand, if the humankind would still be able to produce something as beautiful as art after those atrocities.

Adorno's well-known statement was extremely harsh, he argued: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno, 1983:34). It sounds extremely hard; however, the philosopher did not argue for the impossibility of art after the Holocaust. As Rothberg points out, Adorno's essay suggests that art needs to carry on, but there needs to be a rupture from modern culture and what had been produced until Auschwitz. Especially the narration of traumatic events seems to be particularly important for the humankind, Adorno himself affirms that the aim of art is to console those who suffer and be honest to them (Leys, 2000). Hence, we need to represent collective traumas through art, in order to deal with them, to try to create coherent memories of them and definitely to learn from the mistakes committed in human history in order to create a better future.

### *2.5.1. Multidirectional memory and history*

Remembering and overcoming traumatic past events is necessary to understand the present situation, however, history has been conceived as 'a competitive memory - as a zero-sum struggle', where only a perspective can pass on (Rothberg, 2009: 3). As Trouillot underlines, the narrative of history is the result of a competition among different groups, thus, only the strongest get to pass on their version of history; indeed, the word 'history' means both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened':

The vernacular use of the word history thus offers us a semantic ambiguity: an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap between what happened

and that which is said to have happened. Yet it suggests also the importance of context: the overlap and the distance between the two sides of historicity may not be susceptible to a general formula. The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical (2015).

This unitary idea of history results in an incomplete account, where multiple perspectives and experiences are necessarily left out, as is the case for the experiences and lives of black British people both during the period of the slave trade and after the abolition of it, and their request to be heard is to be found also in their artistic productions, such as the Slave Narratives in the past, and the Neo-Slave Narratives today. The idea of a 'competitive memory' is rejected by Rothberg, who suggests a new construction of history based on multidirectional memory, 'as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing' (2009: 3). This new process would allow for a more productive construction of history including multiple perspectives.

Moreover, Rothberg underlines memory connections with the present, indeed, memory is a phenomenon taking place in the present time and need a 'working through' on the part of the subject (2009: 3). Therefore, memory is both influenced, and it influences the present, as is the case of collective memories such as slavery and colonialism that are mediated by social medias, newspapers, institutions, and social groups (Rothberg, 2009: 15). However, the memory of these collective traumas through the medias should include the different perspective of all the social groups composing the society as a whole. Through a more inclusive production of memories and by extension of history, it could become more exhaustive by including the voices of the people, or of the social groups that so far have been forgotten by history.

The field of trauma studies itself can benefit from this multidirectional perspective, especially in the case of the study of collective traumas. They are perceived as traumatizing experiences for a group of people, for both the

perpetrators and the victims; hence, Caruth takes as an example of trauma Freud's reading of Clorinda and Tancred's story in Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*: here, Tancred unwillingly kills his beloved Clorinda; in this case Tancred is guilty of murder, while the real victim is Clorinda, however, the person who is hunted by the memory of the killing is Tancred. Leys argues that reading Tancred as a victim would 'turn other perpetrators into victims too – for example, it would turn the executioners of the Jews into victims' (Leys, 2000: 297). Nevertheless, as Rothberg argues, the victim of a killing cannot go through a trauma which lives on, and the concept of 'moral victim' and 'traumatized subject' are not related, the perpetrator of a violence is guilty and responsible for it, but it can suffer from a trauma (Rothberg, 2009: 90).

### 2.5.2. *Representing trauma through literature*

The literary representation of personal or collective traumas can be extremely problematic since it would require a description of the traumatic event, which, however, is usually inaccessible and impossible to be understood by the traumatized subjects. Indeed, in order to sensitize the reader, and to create realistic representations of trauma the writer tries to reproduce the same confusing feelings belonging to traumatized subjects. Commonly, reproducing the traumatized subject memory of the traumatic event, trauma representations display difficulties in the narration, through disrupted accounts, full of silences, pauses, repression, resistance, and pain. In this way, writers tend to recreate a disrupted evolution through 'unconscious associations', which create a non-linear plot (Vickroy, 2002: 3).

This is why artistic creativity has frequently aimed at the representation of trauma, and writers have found countless way to bear witness to traumatic events, using different strategies and techniques. Their communal aim is to convey the same feeling of dissociation, despair, and pain that a traumatized person would feel. Writers use a variety of new literary techniques and strategies, which are

particularly evident in the case of the contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives. What is more, the contemporary writers of Neo-Slave Narratives try to reproduce the traumatized subjects' contrasting attitudes: while they underline the unspeakable nature of the traumatic event (Balaev 2014: 20). They appear to feel the need to witness their traumatizing experience.

However, the literary representations of collective traumas are also considered to have the same therapeutic function as Janet and Freud's therapy through words. Onega and Ganteau (2014) suggest a parallel between art works and trauma therapy through words: creating artistic representations of trauma may have the same therapeutic function as speaking about traumatic events. Thus, the contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives can be read as attempts to overcome the trauma of slavery; they emerge in the contemporary context, when Britain finally appears to be ready to reconsider the impact of the transatlantic slave trade especially after the 2007 commemoration of the end of the slave trade (Buonanno, 2009).

### *Chapter 3. The Slave Narrative in the context of Black British literature*

The present chapter examines the literary context in which the Slave Narrative as a genre is part of, namely Black British literature. However before investigating this literary context, it seems necessary to further clarify this controversial definition. The term 'Black British literature' was first coined and used in the late 1960s by the Caribbean Arts Movement (Stein, 2004: 12), and it initially referred to the works produced by West Indian writers, who, despite their differences, tended to be grouped together as a consequence of their migration and settlement in Britain; thus, the label initially came to identify the artistic productions of the new migrant writers, who arrived in Britain after World War II following the 1948 British Nationality Act.

Even today, the definition is sometimes still used to refer to post-1948 writing, nevertheless, this restricted time frame would necessarily exclude a great number of literary works by Black British artists that were produced long before the Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury Dock. The early Slave Narratives undeniably represent an earlier phase of Black British writing, and what is more, West Indian writers are not the only black writers coming from former colonies. These include countries located in Africa and the Indian subcontinent, as well, along with their citizens, who all share the common experience of being unwelcome in Britain.

Even the adjective 'Black' included in the label 'Black British literature' is controversial and can be used in a fairly inclusive way, as Gupta tried to clarify in 1986:

Being 'black' is a matter of visibility, with social and political consequences [...] In my view, therefore, 'black Britons' are those people of non-European origin who are now, or were in the past, entitled to hold a British passport

and displayed a substantial commitment to Britain (Guptara, 1986: 14).

Therefore, the critic groups together all the people of non-European origin who are British citizens; in doing so, the adjective 'Black' becomes a metonym for their origins: and its meaning is separated from the racial discourse (Mercer, 1994: 291). In his essay, 'New Ethnicities', Stuart Hall further defines the term 'Black' as the 'organizing category' which groups together people with different histories, different backgrounds, different origins but share a common experience of racism (Hall, 1988: 441). As a consequence, Black British literature, with its heterogeneous nature, has the same unifying function.

Fred D'Aguiar's provocative essay 'Against Black British Literature' (1996) questions the need to create a label such as 'Black British Literature'. However, I would suggest Black British literature could be considered a category within 'British literature', that has been created with the aim of grouping together works which deal with common topics, since the works produced by people belonging to a discriminated minority share common features and specific subjects, such as race, identity, and marginalization (JanMohamed, and Lloyd: 1987); nevertheless, the label is not meant to limit the works produced by black writers, therefore, their works should not be uniquely analysed from the perspective of race.

Furthermore, the concept of Britishness, also referred to in the label, needs to be conceived as inclusive: black history played an important role in British history long before 1948, and it has influenced Britishness itself (Cattani in Albertazzi, 2013: 172): as Andrea Levy writes 'My heritage is Britain's story too' (2014: 18). Underlining the existence of a Black and British literature is also a way to claim black people's space in the notion of Britishness (Stein, 2004 17): it expands beyond national borders and retraces links with the former colonies, and it reminds the reader of Britain's colonial past, as well as of its post-colonial present (Nasta, Stein, 2020: 8).

Black British literature, as Black British history itself, became the subject of

scholarly inquiry only starting from the 1990s (Nasta, Stein, 2020: 11), as testified by the publications of works such as Lyn Innes' *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain* (2002), or *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature* (2016), edited by Deidre Osborne.

More recently, Susheila Nasta and Mark Stein, propose the more inclusive term Black and Asian British literature, in order to relate the complexity and heterogeneity of these writers (Nasta, Stein, 2020: 9), this definition may be useful to overcome the complexity of the term 'black', but still tends to identify a very heterogeneous group of artists: ranging from the eighteenth century former slaves, to Indian writers, Windrush-generation writers, and second or third generation migrant writers.

Since the early Black British literature has played a minor role in the study of British literature, in the next section I am going to focus on the period before 1945, to investigate both the representation of black people through British literature and the works of early black British writers.

### **3.1. Black British writing before 1945**

The very early writings in British literature produced by black people appeared during the eighteenth century; however, long before that date black people held a place in British literature; black characters have been present in British writings since at least the sixteenth century, Ben Jonson was one of the first to introduce black figures in his court drama *The Masque of blackness*, which dates back to 1605 and Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko* was published in 1688; these early black characters were controversial and still offered largely stereotyped ideas of black people: in *The Masque of blackness*, Niger's daughters in *Masque of blackness* desire to be white in order to be considered beautiful, and in *Oroonoko*, the writer describes the black character as a beautiful, intelligent and cultivated man, nevertheless, the

apparently positive description seems to imply that Oroonoko's characteristics are much remarkable 'for a black man'. Also, William Shakespeare introduced black characters in his plays, such as the villain Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* composed at the end of the sixteenth century, and the complex character of the Moor Othello in his 1603 eponymous tragedy. The presence of black characters in British literature testifies the actual presence of black people in Britain, which, starting from the seventeenth, becomes more visible as a result of the slave trade. However, not only black people have been represented through British literature, but they have also contributed to the development of literature itself, long before the emergence of distinct post-colonial black voices.

In 1986 Prahbu Guptara denounced the British society's scarce knowledge of writings produced by Black British writers coming from the former colonies: as he states, no bibliography of Black British literature had been produced up until then, and he adds that black people were not conceived as artists, rather, immigrants in the 1950s were commonly stereotyped as unskilled people taking menial jobs (1986: 9-14). Since then, the academic turn which originated in the 1960s with the 'representation of difference in literature' (Jay, 2010: 20), has advanced both post-colonial studies and has prompted the internationalization of literary academic curricula (2010: 22). In recent decades, an important number of publications have highlighted the achievements of post-colonial immigrants in Britain (Innes, 2008: 2), some publications such as *The Internationalization of English Literature* published in 2004 by King, and *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* edited in 2020 by Nasta and Stein show a new and more inclusive face of British literature. Nevertheless, still little has been written on Black British authors that preceded the post-colonial period (Innes, 2008: 2). While contemporary writings on the experience of being black in Britain are extremely important to reflect on the present situation, also writings by black Britons from the past are equally important 'to reclaiming a sense of history and tradition that allows for positive identities in the present' (Weedon in Arana, Ramey, 2004: 81).

During the imperial period the black presence in Britain grew considerably, and it became a 'visible minority', finally the black population got the possibility to become literate as the black people living in Britain were mainly the slaves brought from the colonies to become domestic servants. These slaves later published the first works by black authors in Britain thanks to the support of the British abolitionists (Innes, 2008: 11-12).

The black population of Britain at the time of the slave trade was almost entirely composed by slaves brought as servants from the colonies, and some of them became literate in Britain, thus they could participate in the abolitionist campaign, and expose the atrocities of slavery. Indeed, the historic period urged for black people to intervene in the public debate and make themselves heard by themselves to the white population: the accounts of black slaves gave an insight into the white population, thus, the production of writings by black authors in Britain arose at the time of the abolitionist movement (Innes, 2008: 12). These autobiographical writings mainly compose the genre of the Slave Narrative, but also other literary genres. Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, David George, Mary Prince, Ashton Warner, Phillis Wheatley, Ignatius Sancho and Ottobah Cugoano are some of the first black British writers, who not only contributed to the abolitionist process, but they also set the ground and created a tradition for contemporary post-colonial writers.

A re-evaluation of the early Slave Narratives seems urgent as contemporary black British writers ask for both an historical awareness of British slavery, and a literary recognition of their predecessors. The scholarly recovery of writings by black people in Britain only points out what many black Britons have long known: that black people have made crucial contributions to the long and interesting evolution of Britain (Bryan in Arana, Ramey, 2004: 70)

Now that the literary context of the literary genre of the Slave Narratives has been outlined, the next part will introduce the characteristics of this important

genre, focusing on the genre's aims, the narrators, the audience, its connection to religion and the genre's structure.

### 3.2. The literary genre of the Slave Narratives

The literary genre of the Slave Narrative emerged in the 1770s and 1780s in Britain at the time of the abolitionist campaign. The early Slave Narratives can be defined as the former slaves' literary accounts of their experiences of enslavement, in other words, of the harshness of slavery, the difficulties they faced, and their paths towards freedom (Foster, 1994: 3); thus, these works become 'visible proof[s] of Africans' enslavement' (Gates, 2002: xi), since they are first-hand accounts of 'the peculiar institution'. Despite their thematic importance, these works also need to be considered as artistic productions from a relatively small group of 'exceptionally gifted group of men and women' (Gates, 2002: xi) who managed to document the atrocities of slavery and to break the silence by 'represent[ing] the unrepresentable' (Kachun in Ernest, 2014: 4).

The term 'Slave Narrative' is straightforward in its meaning: these works represent the accounts of the former slaves; but the definition also refers to and is inspired by the common title given to these works, which usually included the term 'narrative', as is the case for Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. The genre's denomination was coined during the twentieth century, and it was used to group together the works produced by former slaves on their lives, indeed, both W. E. B. DuBois in 1913 and John Locke in 1928 make reference to the literary genre of the Slave Narrative. Nowadays, the definition is commonly used to refer to the early works produced by the former slaves.

These writings were written after the slaves obtained their freedom, which usually happened either in Britain or in North America, this is the reason why these accounts have been mainly written and published in Britain and in North America (Gates, 2002: xi). Therefore, this genre developed simultaneously on both sides of

the Atlantic even though the academic world has predominantly considered the American context: undoubtedly, American works on slavery abound and there have been several academic studies devoted to this genre, also many digital collections group together a great number of American Slave Narratives, such as the 'Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, which gathers together more than 2.300 first-person accounts of slavery as part of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). Furthermore, in the US the presence of thinkers and movements dealing with slavery is stronger, whereas in the UK not much scholarly work has been produced on slavery, even though Britain was a major agent in the slave trade, and slavery has had a long-lasting legacy in the UK, with increased racial tensions and fractures in the country (Blevins, 2016).

Thus, Slave Narratives have been almost uniquely studied and conceived as part of African American literature: however, throughout my dissertation, I will suggest them to be an essential part of British literature as well. As a matter of fact, early Slave Narratives were published in Britain, and as Walkovitz states: the 'geography of production' and the 'places of making' of the works (Walkovitz, 2006: 539) play an important role in the writing process. Following on this idea, the writer Caryl Phillips published his anthology with the title *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*. With this project, Phillips decides to group together 'extravagant' British writers, who have their origins elsewhere, as is the case of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, and Ignatius Sancho. By using the classical form of the anthology, he tries to include the writers of early Slave Narratives and in general minor writers in the British literary tradition; in his preface, Phillips argues: 'English literature has, for at least 200 years, been shaped and influenced by outsiders' (Phillips, 1987: x).

As with slavery itself, the Slave Narrative, long remained an ignored subject, in 1987 Sekora affirms that the Slave Narratives, were the most important and most neglected body of early American writing' (Sekora, 1987: 482). Only in recent decades, the academic interest in the Slave Narratives has grown, notably increased

by the publication of contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives. As a result, in 2014, Kachun affirms that while the academics have now made progresses in the study of the Slave Narratives, a lot still remains to be discovered (Kachun in Ernest, 2004: 36). He also argues that the study of these works has played a crucial role to understand American history (Kachun in Ernest, 2004: 54); similarly, I suggest they are essential to understand and integrate British colonial history too.

In the next sections, I am going to point out the aims pursued by the early Slave Narratives' writers, I will then focus on the question of authorship of these early writings and on the intended audience, but also on the use of religion in these works conclude with an outline of the essential elements which compose the Slave Narratives' structure.

### 3.2.1. *Slave Narratives' aim*

The former slaves' decision to narrate and publish works on their experiences was not only driven by a personal need on the part of the author, but it also had the precise political aim to achieve 'the end of slavery' (Fisch, 2007: 6). Thus, the subjects, the style and the form of the Slave Narratives were conceived in order to achieve this goal. As Butterfield has pointed out, the writers' preference for long descriptions shows their will to fulfil their political role and 'to supply first-hand information about slavery' (Butterfield, 1972: 72).

The cultural and philosophical ideas of the late eighteenth century prepared the ground for the anti-slavery movements (Gould in Fisch, 2007: 17), and in this context the need of the slaves to be heard was encouraged by the abolitionists, who supported the publication of the Slave Narratives to such an extent that these works became the 'most essential texts' of the anti-slavery movements (Dickson and Bruce in Fisch, 2007: 28). The freed slaves' first-hand accounts of the cruelties perpetrated in the context of slavery from their perspectives played a key role in the debate over

slavery, and they helped to convey abolitionist ideas to the white population (Dickson and Bruce in Fisch, 2007: 33).

Therefore, the Slave Narratives' fundamental aim is to show the inhumanity of slavery. However, they do so not only through the account of the cruel treatment the slaves received, which testifies the 'need to go against slavery' (Foster, 1994: 4), but, most importantly, these writings try to create empathy towards black people. The slaves, the protagonists of the slaves narratives, were finally represented as human beings, as human as the white Americans and the white British people who read the narratives; for the first time, the slaves were depicted as people with feelings and emotions, who were deprived of all their rights with no actual reason, people who were forced to do extremely hard and cruel works, and were exposed to unbearable punishments. The slave protagonists became what Carey defines as 'sentimental hero' who obtains the support of the readers against as her/his sufferings are depicted as unjustified (2005: 50).

As described by Keen, empathy 'can be provoked by witnessing another person emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading' (Keen, 2006: 208). Thus, through literature the white population has the chance to identify with the black slaves, even if their lives have little in common, empathy creates links through 'minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling' (Keen, 2006: 214). Thanks to the character identification, the reader can change her/his mind in real life, thus the former slaves and the abolitionists hoped that the Slave Narratives could induce the reader to slowly change her/his attitude towards the slaves and embrace the abolitionist cause:

Novelists themselves often vouch for the centrality of empathy to novel reading and writing and express belief in narrative empathy's power to change the minds and lives of readers. This belief mirrors their experiences as ready empathizers (Keen, 2006: 215).

### 3.2.2. *Literacy: the narrator's burden*

Clearly the slaves' literacy was not the masters' priority, therefore, only a small part of slaves and former slaves had the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Being both free and literate put the former slaves in an exceptional position at the time, as Gates puts it: 'in literacy lay a peculiar kind of freedom – or burden' (Gates, 2002: xii).

However, this extraordinary role as writers of their experiences of enslavement, was extremely important and difficult at the same time: the need to speak up for all the slaves was certainly a heavy burden to carry; their autobiographies could not simply be considered as isolated works, when reading them, the reader would immediately associate the experiences of the protagonist to those of all the slaves, and the audience's feelings and thoughts could possibly influence the readers' attitudes towards slavery in real life. Therefore, the writer was aware that her/his work should represent her/his own journey towards salvation, but it should also illustrate the lives of all the slaves that were suffering across the Black Atlantic. Gates argues that the writers had 'to satisfy the dual expectations' of both a compelling story of their lives 'while making the narrative of their odyssey from slavery to freedom an emblem of every black person's potential for higher education and the right to be free' (2002: xiii-xiv).

Thus, the Slave Narratives were much more than simple autobiographies of the slaves' lives, rather they came to represent a 'collective tale' of slavery: 'each slave author [...] simultaneously wrote on behalf of the millions of silent slaves still held captive' (Gates, 2002: xiii). The writers were aware that their characters should become the symbols which represent every enslaved person, thus, these characters should encourage acceptance and sympathy to raise a positive attitude towards the slaves in real life.

Therefore, when describing and representing a group of people that are discriminated, the writer feels the burden of presenting them correctly to the readers

who can eventually change their minds in real life. In this respect, they seem to carry the same burden borne as post-colonial writers when they write about their experiences in post-colonial Britain.

Slave Narratives aim to be accurate and real accounts of the slaves' peculiar experiences, in other words, they could be conceived as slaves' autobiographies, following Olney's definition for whom an autobiography is

a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life – the present –, looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how the past history has led to this present state of being (Olney, 1984: 47).

In the Slave Narratives authors retrieve the memories of their sufferings and retrace the path that led them to the present state of freedom: in doing so the writer presents slavery as objectively as possible to the white population. Nonetheless, the act of remembering is a creative act, and it cannot be completely objective. Kachun defines autobiographies as the narration of the 'imaginative remembering' of someone's life' (Kachun in Ernest, 2004: 21). Through memory the human mind creates connections and meaning, similarly the writer of autobiographies actively shapes her/his narration, creating connections, meanings, and moving freely in time and space (Olney, 1984: 47). In the case of the Slave Narratives and the memory of traumatic experiences it is even more difficult for the writer to report objectively her/his memories. The stories represent fragmented and painful lives, stories of violence, experiences of 'intimate violation' (Ernest, 2004: 8), for which the feelings of the writers come into play: thus, the writer can sometimes be ashamed of some deeply dehumanizing events and can occasionally avoid detailing her/his experiences and omit others. However, through these accounts the reader can certainly grasp the hardship of slavery and relate with the writer. Notwithstanding, the question of the narrator's truthfulness has been questioned also in the light of the Slave Narratives' abolitionist agenda (Kachun in Ernest, 2004: 23), since these

works were created to support abolitionist ideas, and may have been influenced by this purpose. Therefore, as fictional texts they cannot be conceived as an objective narration of the facts since the narrator inevitably actively intervenes while narrating the story. However, it is important to stress that they represent the only first-hand recollection of slavery from the slaves' perspective, thus, they perform an extremely important role, and they deserve to be considered as a fundamental part of the British literary and cultural background.

The presence of the author's portrait, which usually appeared in the frontispiece of the published texts, was not merely ornamental, rather it was extremely meaningful. Firstly, the portrait supported the truthfulness of the narration, since it proved the former slave writer was an actual person, and not a fictitious one. Secondly, the black writer represented in the portrait was also the protagonist of the narration, thus the image gave a reference for the audience, which was then prompted to imagine that black person living all the terrible experiences narrated in the text: not only does the protagonist have a name, he/she also has a specific appearance, a specific face, this would definitely create an empathic bond between the reader and the slave protagonist. Thus, the portrait made it much more difficult for the reader to move on and forget this narrative of enslavement

Moreover, the protagonist's portrait commonly represents the former slave neatly dressed following the British fashion and, usually, the subject is portrayed with a book in his/her hands: this elegant image vividly contrasts with the protagonists' African names, thus, the stereotype of African people as uneducated savages similar to animals clearly could not fit the figure in the portrait. Therefore, already from their frame, the Slave Narrative represents the slave's path: from the slave's African origins, which are evident from his/her African name; to his/her educated and 'European' self, represented in the portrait. Also, the portraits testify the slaves' 'membership among the literate elite of western culture at the same time that they illustrate the contradiction of the writing slave' (Casmier-Paz, 2003: 93).

Moreover, the image of a former slave with a book together with the title of

the narratives which commonly used the sentence 'written by himself', lead the readers' attention to the former slaves' literary skills: again, this shows the contrast with the colonialist prejudices over black people, if black people were used as slaves because they were considered to be 'less human' than the white people, the portrait and their literary skills prove the opposite.

### 3.2.3. *The audience*

Early writings by former slaves were primarily addressed to the whole white population of Britain, and therefore they tend to have a direct and simple style in order to be easily read by a large readership, and to send a straightforward message to the readers (Foster, 1994: 3). Since they were primarily conceived to convince the white audience of the iniquity of slavery, and of the black people's humanity, the authors needed to demonstrate the fact that if properly educated, they could belong to the British literary culture, thus, they had to show their fluency in English and their knowledge; therefore, both the writers and the white abolitionists who published the narratives paid particular attention to the form and the accuracy of the language used in the texts. As was the case of the writer's portrait, also the correctness of the written language was one of the elements that could contribute to change the white people's opinion on the black slave and to prompt them in supporting the abolitionist campaign.

Not only did the authors have to focus on the language they used, but they also had to consider that they wrote for an audience that had nothing in common with them, did not share their 'cultural or moral concerns' (Foster, 1994: 3), and was influenced by colonial prejudices. At the time of the early Slave Narrative, the vast majority of the white population was still influenced by the colonial racial ideology which believed in the racial inferiority of black people, and they considered slavery as extremely important for the economy of both Europe and America, indeed, the peculiar institution ensured significant profits for the nation on the whole, and for

a great deal of people involved in the trade.

However, since the publication of the first Slave Narrative in Britain, these works received the audience's praise. Therefore, they widely circulated after their publication, the most famous narratives came out in several editions (Gould in Fisch, 2007: 20), and some of them were translated into other languages. Their popularity is confirmed by Nichols when quoting from the Reverend Ephraim Peabody, he states that the audience had found particularly interesting the Slave Narratives and that they could be placed among 'the most remarkable productions of the age' since they present slavery from a new perspective (quote in Nichols, 1958:149). Thus, the narratives' impact on the readers is undeniable.

#### 3.2.4. *The Slave Narratives and religion*

Religion can be considered as a key element in the Slave Narratives, and it was used to create a link between the reader and the protagonist of the narratives. The authors of the Slave Narratives conventionally made reference to Christian religion, indeed, 'they portray themselves as Christians' (Foster, 1994: 83), sometimes they even decide to quote verses from the Bible, and they usually include in their narration their path towards conversion (Gould in Fisch, 2007: 15). The slaves' faith certainly created connections with the white audience, while showing the contrast between the Christian teaching of benevolence and the evident brutality perpetrated against human beings and legitimized by slavery. Also, throughout the narratives, the narration of the masters' harshness against the slaves strongly contradicts their professed Christianity, showing their hypocrisy (Foster, 1994: 83).

Especially in the case of the narratives produced in the British context, the works tend to focus on the authors' spiritual accounts; Sinan defines British narratives as 'spiritual autobiographies': authors such as Ukawsaw Gronniosaw decide not to use harsh and direct terms to condemn slavery, rather he consciously narrates his spiritual and internal growth in his path from slavery to freedom (Sinan

in Fisch, 2007: 62-63). The spiritual perspective enhanced by the British Slave Narratives, aims to display, once again, the slaves' humanity in order to elicit the audience's empathy, and to prompt them to see the black slaves as victims of the slave trade. Moreover, by making reference to the well-known literary genre of the spiritual autobiography, the slaves' accounts have the possibility to 'enter the western literary tradition' contrasting the Christian pro-slavery arguments (Sinan in Fisch, 2007: 62). As in the case of the portrait, and of the writers' proficiency in English, through the profession of the Christian faith the slaves manage to make evident the similarities with the white people and their natural right to have the same opportunities as the white people.

### 3.2.5. *The Slave Narratives' structure*

The early Slave Narratives established a new literary genre, since they all share common features. When reading a series of Slave Narratives, the similarities among them are easily recognizable in the story line, the structure, and the repetition of some set sentences appears evident to the reader (Olney, 1984: 46). These similarities create unity and connect all the Slave Narratives creating a shared history of slavery from the slaves' perspective. The first academic work which defines the Slave Narratives structure is Olney's 1984 publication, in which the author lists all the basic elements of the genre starting from the outline of the narratives: the vast majority of the slaves narratives were introduced by the author's portrait printed on the first page; followed by a title page claiming that the narrative was written by the slave himself/herself ('written by himself'), or written by a friend as it was related by the slave ('as related by himself'); the narratives usually contain a dedication and they commonly preceded a preface, or introduction, either written by the slave himself/herself, or prepared by a white abolitionist who usually claims the narration's authenticity; typically followed by an epigraph, either poetic or religious (Olney, 1984: 50).

Then, the actual narrative is normally presented from the perspective of the first-person narrator, and the narration almost always begins with the protagonist's birth which commonly took place in the African continent: 'I was born...', also, the narrator includes a brief description of her/his family history. Later, the author narrates how she/he became a slave after she/he was captured, and his/her experiences as a slave: the Middle Passage, the slave market, the master's punishments, the experience of being sold to a new master, the slave's duties... The narratives either describe in detail the horrors of slavery, or only mention them and leave the audience the liberty to imagine them. The narrator then reveals how she/he became literate, and her/his conversion, which are extremely important for her/his path towards freedom. The Slave Narratives also contain the description of the slave's escape, or her/his way of gaining her/his freedom. Once free, the slaves could take a new name to start a new free life (Olney, 1984: 51). Moreover, the Slave Narrative contains reflections on the slave's reflections on the institution of slavery, and his/her hopes for the end of slavery and of the slave trade. Sometimes the narratives include appendixes such as real documents, bills, newspaper articles, anti-slavery speeches or further thoughts on slavery (Olney, 1984: 51).

Thus, the plots of all the Slave Narratives show the iniquity of slavery, portraying the physical punishments and humiliations endured by the slaves; nevertheless, the protagonists do not appear as inert objects in the hands of the masters, rather the authors focus on the protagonist feelings and through the narrations they show the "protagonist's journey of transformation from object to subject" (Bell, 2004: 10); the very act of writing a Slave Narratives represents an active way to oppose slavery.

After having detailed the context and the elements of the Slave Narratives, chapter 4 will provide a close analysis of five early slave British narratives which are representative of the literary genre here described.

## Chapter 4. *The early Slave Narratives*

Starting from the 1770s narratives containing the essential features of the Slave Narratives have been published both in North America and Britain. Some of these early Slave Narratives went through multiple editions and have survived until today; however, in all likelihood, more Slave Narratives than we know have been written by black authors in Britain, but have been lost. The present chapter presents and discusses five Slave Narratives published in Britain: Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince. As related by Himself* (1772); Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789); David George's *An Account of the Life of Mr. David George, from Sierra Leone* (1793); Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, as Related by Herself* (1831); and Ashton Warner's *Negro Slavery described by a Negro: being the Narrative of Ashton Warner, a Native of St. Vincent's. With an Appendix containing the testimony of four Christian ministers, Recently Returned from the Colonies, on the System of Slavery as it now exists* (1831).

These five narratives have been chosen because they were all published in Britain in the context of the abolitionist movement. Therefore, they can be considered as part of the abolitionist process in Britain, since they were crucial in supporting the campaign by raising awareness on the subject of slavery in eighteenth century Britain. All these narratives share the common aim of denouncing the institution of slavery and are intended to be read by the white British people. However, even though they feature common elements and share the same aim, they differ from one another because of the period in which they were written: the earlier narrative I will present is Gronniosaw's one, and at the time of writing he could not harshly condemn slavery, so he presents a more mitigated reality. While Gronniosaw affirms his masters have always been kind to him, the

others narrate harsh experiences. Nonetheless, all of them describe their lives in enslavement, and they all can be read as early Slave Narratives, which together manage to give a complex and more complete perspective on British slavery.

The early Slave Narratives are the concrete evidence of the triangular trade, indeed, they display their 'triangular' movement on different levels: both on the publication level and on the cultural level. The publication process was clearly influenced by the 'tripartite dynamic between slave writers, abolitionists, and the public' (Sinan in Fisch, 2007: 62), as the analysis that follows will show, the narratives had to respond to the readers' expectations, but they also had to meet their abolitionist aim, and finally they needed to respond to the slave writer/narrator's need to tell her/his story through the narration. However, as Sinan underlines, the triangular nature of the Slave Narratives is also represented in the 'cultural exchanges' that come into play in the plots. The narratives portray the geography of the Black Atlantic: Africa is always present, as the homeland the slaves were forced to leave; the Americas, where the slaves were first brought after the Middle Passage; and England, where the slaves usually arrived with their masters or as free men (Sinan in Fisch, 2007: 62).

In the following sections, I am going to introduce each of the five Slave Narratives I have selected, providing for each of them the context of publication and presenting their narrators. Both the context of publication and the story of the narrator are essential features to better understand the nature of these texts. Also, I will retrieve the characteristics of the genre in each of the text and I will give my close reading of the narratives, highlighting the slaves' descriptions of 'the peculiar institution', and where it is necessary, I will include the analysis of the appendixes proposed by the narratives. Moreover, I will provide an intertextual analysis, by creating connections among the narratives.

#### 4.1. Ukawsaw Gronniosaw

The very first literary work published by a black author in Britain is *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince. As related by Himself*. This account was first published in Bath in December 1772, immediately after the conclusion of the Somerset Case (Hanley, 2019: 13). In the following years the narrative counted twelve editions in Britain and three in North America: as argued by Sinan, these numbers show ‘the effectiveness and popularity of the slave’s spiritual narrative’ (Sinan in Fisch, 2007: 62). However, this early narrative still evokes the genre of the spiritual autobiography, focusing on the spiritual growth of the protagonist, rather than directly addressing the question of slavery (Sinan in Fisch, 2007: 63). It is also important to consider the fact that the period in which Gronniosaw wrote was still an early phase of the abolitionist movement.

The narrative’s outline reproduces the Slave Narrative’s structure, however it is not preceded by Gronniosaw’s portrait; the narrative’s title underlines the authenticity of the story which is narrated ‘as related by himself’ to Hanna More, an abolitionist and a writer. Thus, even if Gronniosaw did not write the narrative himself, the story is written in the first-person narrator by Hanna More. The literary device of the first-person narrator reproduces the authenticity of Gronniosaw’s oral account, and it indirectly proves the authenticity of the story, creating the idea that Hannah More had just transcribed Gronniosaw’s words. Clearly the reader cannot know if and to what extent she manipulated the former slave’s words.

The narrative title contains both the protagonist African name ‘Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’ and his English name ‘James Albert’, thus it makes reference to his former life in Africa and his life as a British slave. Nevertheless, it also makes reference to Gronniosaw’s royal origins, which show the influence of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave* (Innes, 2008: 20). Such long and complex title is immediately followed by the slave’s dedication of his narrative to the Countess of

Huntingdon, both a Methodist and the patron of various Afro-Britons such as Gronniosaw himself, Wheatley and Equiano. After that, an epigraph taken from Isaiah is included in the narrative; the epigraph is directly linked to Gronniosaw's path of redemption, as he states:

I will bring the Blind by a Way that they know not, I will lead them in Paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them and crooked things straight (Carretta, 1996: 32).

And then, the reader finds the amanuensis's preface to the narrative. The amanuensis was Walter Shirley, who was a clergyman and the cousin of the Countess of Huntingdon.

Therefore, in the next section I will analyse the preface to the narrative as it provides already a guided reading for the narrative itself.

#### 4.1.1. *The preface*

Shirley's preface introduces the narrative and provides the reader with an interpretation of it. Indeed, by revealing the narrative's general content, he states the account will focus on 'the life and spiritual experience of James Albert' (Carretta, 1996: 32); also, the writer goes further by suggesting the account is worth the 'notice and attention of every Christian reader' (Carretta, 1996: 32). By directly mentioning the Christian readers, Shirley makes reference to the pro-slavery Christian arguments, which Gronniosaw's narrative aims to contrast. Thus, already in the preface, Shirley demands the reader to focus on the protagonist's spiritual path from his African religion to his conversion to Christianity.

Moreover, he makes reference to the epigraph which mentions God's Providence that does not abandon the 'blind', a common metaphor to refer to those

people who do not believe in God, and God's power to bring light to these people; similarly, Shirley argues that Gronniosaw is born in a land where 'darkness and ignorance' lie and where 'the gospel of Jesus Christ hath never reached' (Carretta, 1996: 32). However, the narrative protagonist can be considered as a positive example that should be followed by his fellows Africans, and praised by the white Christian audience, since God has led him 'out of darkness into light' (Carretta, 1996: 33).

In the final part of his preface, Shirley already provides the reader with the very first description of Gronniosaw, which is represented at the time of the publication of the narrative:

He now appears to be turn'd of Sixty; has a good natural Understanding; is well acquainted with the Scriptures, and the Things of God, has an amiable and tender Disposition, and his Character can be well attested not only at Kidderminster, the Place of his Residence but likewise by many creditable Persons in London and other Places. Reader, recommending this Narrative to your perusal, and him who is the Subject of it to your charitable Regard (Carretta, 1996: 33)

Here, the writer of the preface focuses once more on the protagonist's strong faith in God and his good attitude. These characteristics introduce him to the reader as both a remarkable person and a remarkable Christian. Gronniosaw appears to be a concrete example of the black people capacities, if they have the chance to be educated to be introduced to the Christian religion. Thus, Shirley prompts the reader to read the narrative.

#### 4.1.2. *From enslavement to freedom*

The actual narrative begins with a long description of the protagonist's past in Africa, and it opens with the protagonist's birth: Ukawsaw Gronniosaw was born

in Bournou (Borno), which is situated in present-day Nigeria; the first-person narrator also introduces Gronniosaw's family background: his mother was the eldest daughter of the king, and he was the youngest of six children. He retraces his youth and, in particular, his peculiar investigative attitude, which made him different from his siblings: already when he was really young in Africa, he believed that there was a 'great man of power which resided above the sun' (Carretta, 1996: 33); the Bible and religious influence is extremely evident in the use of these words; this significant decision taken by either Gronniosaw himself, or the writer Hanna More, aims to highlight the protagonist innate predisposition towards Christianity, and his surprising intuitions; further on, he even asks his mother: 'who made the First Man? and who made the first Cow, and the first Lyon, and where does the fly come from, as no one can make him?' (Carretta, 1996: 35).

Around the age of fifteen, he was taken away by a merchant from the Gold Coast: in Gronniosaw's account, there was no kidnapping, he accepted to go with the merchant, who promised to help him to find answers to his questions. However, the reader, as the protagonist himself, soon realizes that he is considered as a slave: he was first sold to a Dutch captain, then to an American. Once he arrived in the new world, he was brought to New York and sold to a master who parted him with 'a very gracious, good Minister' (Carretta, 1996: 39), who taught him to pray. There, he was also sent to school and learn how to read. The Christian teachings he received finally answered to Gronniosaw's questions: 'I was exceedingly pleas'd with this information of my master's, because it corresponded so well with my own opinion' (Carretta, 1996: 39).

Gronniosaw's did not fight for his freedom, since when his master died, he gave Gronniosaw his freedom:

I held his hand in mine when he departed: he told me he had given me my freedom. I was at liberty to go where I would – he added that he had always pray'd for me and hop'd I should be kept unto the end. My master left me by

his will, ten pounds and my freedom. (Carretta, 1996: 42)

However, Gronniosaw was grateful to his master, and he decided to stay with his mistress and even after her death he remained with her sons. Through the narration all his masters are presented as kind, benevolent and compassionate: 'he [...] was very good to me', 'my dear kind master', 'my mistress who was as good to me as if she had been my mother', 'my kind indulgent mistress'... (Carretta, 1996: 38-40-43). Moreover, Gronniosaw does not mention harsh punishments or abuses perpetrated against him.

After all the members of his master's family died, he was left friendless: he worked as a cook and as servant to a wine-merchant, then enlisted in the British army with the desire of finally going to England:

I had for a great while entertain'd a desire to come to ENGLAND.—I imagined that all the Inhabitants of this Island were Holy; because all those who had visited my Master from thence were good (Carretta, 1996: 43-44).

The protagonist moved to London where he married a weaver called Betty, the two moved around the country to find jobs, but their life proved to be extremely harsh.

#### 4.1.3. *England and Africa*

The dualism represented by England and Africa plays a key role in the narrative, indeed, on the one hand, the two places symbolize the slave's present and past, and on the other hand they represent Gronniosaw's dual identity, which is also made evident in the two names introduced by the narrative title. Moreover throughout the narrative, the narrator constantly refers to England; at the beginning, when the protagonist's life in Nigeria is described, England is always mentioned as a touchstone of African customs, and as a reference for the description: the African

structures are 'higher than the steeples in England' (Carretta, 1996: 37); the king was seated at the top of a court 'as wide and spacious as a large field in England' (Carretta, 1996: 37). These references define the target audience, the book is clearly intended to be read by British readers, who are guided by the narrator and helped to create links to their everyday life.

If in the first part of the narrative Gronniosaw considers Africa as his home, when he is finally free, England becomes the idealized place where he would like to go and live. Believing in what he had been told about England, Gronniosaw imagined it to be a holy land filled with God's love. However, when he finally managed to land in England, he was soon let down: he was initially 'welcomed' by the cursing of the citizens of Portsmouth, and he was soon robbed of 19 guineas by the landlady he gave his money to be kept safe. Together with the protagonist, the reader is deceived by England's cold welcome to Gronniosaw; the description of the protagonist's arrival in England is used to open the readers' eyes and to prompt a reflection on the real situation in England: the narrative shows that corruption did not only exist in the colonies; and that also slavery was still present in England. Even as a freeman, Gronniosaw together with his wife had to work as hard as if they were slaves and they obtained no fair pay for it; thus, discrimination and the exploitation of the black people was extremely common in the country.

The lonely and sad ending of the narrative is an example of the discrimination experienced by black people in Britain: indeed, the protagonist and his wife do not live in a 'holy' and welcoming land, rather they are portrayed still suffering, and struggling hard to survive. Nevertheless, the narrator underlines the fact that their faith in God remains very strong:

Such is our situation at present. – My wife, by hard labour at the loom, does every thing that can be expected from her, towards the maintenance of our family [...] As Pilgrims, and very poor Pilgrims, we are travelling through many difficulties towards our HEAVENLY HOME, and waiting patiently for his gracious call, when the LORD shall deliver us out of the evils of this

present world and bring us to the EVERLASTING GLORIES of the world to come. (Carretta, 1996: 53).

#### 4.1.4. *Conclusions*

To conclude, it is key to underline that this early narrative does not directly condemn slavery, probably because as one of the first Slave Narrative – the earlier that survived until today – intended to mitigate the abolitionist stance. Moreover, since all the people involved in the writing process and the publication, namely Gronniosaw himself, Hanna More and Shirley, worked under the sponsorship of the Countess of Huntington, a religious woman, whose beliefs did not connect physical freedom to spiritual salvation (Hanley, 2019: 7-8), Gronniosaw's narrative had certainly to relate her approval, and this is in all likelihood the reason why the attack to slavery could not be harsh and direct in this early narrative.

Nevertheless, to support the abolitionist ideas, it focuses on displaying Gronniosaw's humanity, his positive attitude, his generosity and his extraordinary path from sin to redemption. Both Shirley's preface and the narrative itself present the protagonist as an exceptionally good man, who never complains about his harsh situation despite the difficulties he had to go through. From Shirley description and from the words used by the narrator it is evident that his faith in God is so deep that he completely trusts in God's providence, and he feels to have been blessed by it since, even though the difficulties he experienced, he was introduced to the Christian religion: 'I blessed God for my poverty, that I had no worldly riches or grandeur to draw my heart from Him' (Carretta, 1996: 42). Indeed, throughout the whole narration, Gronniosaw seems to feel the presence of his benevolent God and he affirms that he 'received light still thro' the thickest darkness' (Carretta, 1996: 50), making once again reference to the initial epigraph.

Therefore, Gronniosaw's account represents an early attempt for the literary genre of the Slave Narrative, and it already contains many features of the genre;

nevertheless, the sponsorship of the Countess of Huntington and the adjustments probably made by Hanna More differentiate it from the other narratives.

In the next section I will focus on the most known among the early Slave Narratives: Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. This narrative was extremely famous at the time of its writing and arrived is still quite known today by the general public; indeed, it went through readaptations such as children's books and comic strips.

#### **4.2.Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa**

The most famous among the early Slave Narratives on both sides of the Atlantic is Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. The narrative was first published in 1789 in London and went through nine editions before Equiano's death and sixteen editions by the year 1837, among which are included translations in Dutch, German and Russian (Fordham, 2015: 3), it also became 'an influential model for Slave Narratives to follow' (Richardson, and Lee, 2004: 111) that soon became a best seller at the time. Equiano's text represents a step forward from Gronniosaw's narrative inspired by the spiritual autobiographies, this well-known narrative has a clear political aim; using Innes' definition of it, it could be considered as a combination of Gronniosaw's spiritual autobiography and Cugoano's anti-slavery publication (Innes, 2008: 23).

It is possible to argue that even if Equiano died ten years before the abolition of the slave trade, he greatly contributed to it with his narrative (Fordham, 2015: 3); indeed, through his narrative he directly addressed the British Parliament and his constant commitment in supporting anti-slavery ideas are evident, he personally promoted the sales of his work thanks to his book tours. On these occasions, he introduced his narrative, and he gave public readings across England and Ireland, in order to raise awareness about the horrors of the slave trade (Fordham, 2015: 25).

The complete title of Equiano's narrative claims the former slave wrote it himself and, as is the case with Gronniosaw's narrative, it already displays the writer's double identity: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by himself*. The writer decides to define himself with both his African and English name, and he will use both names throughout the narrative, this voluntary choice mirrors the author's complex identity. The statement of the writer's African origins contained in the title, strongly contrasts with his British portrait, which represents a neatly dressed English man, holding a Bible (Gilroy in Richardson and Lee, 2004: 372). As Paul claims: 'His skin remains Black, but everything else in the picture is White' (Paul, 2009: 858). Equiano's complex identity supports and promotes abolitionist arguments, on the one hand, his African origins authenticate his accounts of Africa and of his experiences as a slave, and on the other hand, his British name proves him to be a Christian and civilized man (Fordham, 2015: 11).

Though contemporary academics have been trying to reconstruct his life, however, the figure of Equiano is a complex one, and has raised some doubts about the truthfulness of his account, indeed, Vincent Carretta has expressed his doubts about the reliability of Equiano's account of his birth and of his early years in Africa and argued that Equiano was actually born in South Carolina in 1747 (Carretta in Fisch 2007: 45-46). According to his argument, Equiano invented his early years in Africa in order to support the abolitionist. As Paul Gilroy suggests:

No doubt, the rendering of Equiano's life story was tailored to the expectations and conventions of an abolitionist reading public (Gilroy in Richardson and Lee, 2004: 372).

However fictional or real, Equiano's account represents a former slave's first-hand account of slavery, and trustfully relates the experiences lived by the slaves.

The *Interesting Narrative* had an evident abolitionist aim, indeed, Equiano has been considered as a 'politically visible African in London' (Hofkosh in Richardson

and Lee, 2004: 400) and Equiano himself defines it as a narrative to satisfy the request of 'numerous friends' for the 'interests of humanity' (Carretta, 1996: 187). Moreover, Equiano harshly condemn the institution of slavery by describing how the slaves lived; nevertheless, Equiano's writing also reveals his literary genius, as in the narrative are introduced several digressions, which have nothing to do with the abolitionist cause, though such digressions the narrator displays his sense of humor and makes the reading of the text 'more entertaining and more convincing' (Richardson, and Lee, 2004: 113).

In the following paragraphs I am going to introduce and analyse Equiano's narrative, by focusing on its structure, its themes, and Equiano's fight against slavery through the writing.

#### *4.2.1. Dedication letter*

In the case of Equiano's narrative, there is no editor who writes the introduction for the reader, Equiano himself decides to open his testimony with a dedication letter to the British Parliament. This part contains a summary of Equiano's anti-slavery arguments, here the writer states his 'genuine narrative' has the aim 'to excite [...] a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave Trade has entailed' (Carretta, 1996: 186). Differently from Gronniosaw's narrative, Equiano is free to express his anti-slavery aim, and directly addresses the question of the slave trade. This letter mirrors the narrative's content, in which the narrator will address the British reader and will express his thoughts and reflections on the peculiar institution.

Similarly to Gronniosaw, Equiano mentions his Christian faith in the dedication letter, and states that even if he had long suffered because of slavery, he was compensated 'by the introduction [...] to the knowledge of the Christian religion' (Carretta, 1996: 186). Together with his gratefulness for the religion teachings he received in England, he also mentions his appreciation for the British:

a nation which, by its liberal sentiments, its humanity, the glorious freedom of its government, and its proficiency in arts and sciences, has altered the dignity of human nature (Carretta, 1996: 186- 187).

Through these praising words the narrator confirms his double identity, he does not simply appear as an African, but as one with 'British loyalties', who admires Britain (Weis, 2000: 25): using Fordham's words, Equiano 'saw himself as African by birth and biology, but English by choice' (Fordham, 2015: 12).

Equiano's dedication letter ends with Equiano's passionate call on the Parliament's 'benevolence' when the time to discuss 'the question of abolition' will come (Carretta, 1996: 187). Also, the letter was accompanied by a list of signatures, which was handed to the parliament as a petition that supported Equiano's words (Fordham, 2015: 25).

#### 4.2.2. *Enslavement in Africa*

At the beginning of *The Interesting Narrative* the writer provides a description of the part of Africa (today Nigeria) in which he was born in 1745. When describing his home culture, Equiano creates links with the European customs to make the readers relate to his account and to raise their empathy (Weis, 2000: 22), as Gonniosaw had tried to do in his narrative. Equiano details his descriptions making reference to religion, to the customs and manners of the Africans, and already mentions the institution of slavery. At that time, slavery in Africa was a common institution, and Equiano recalls his father, as an elder of an African district, had slaves too. However, their slaves' conditions indubitably differed 'from that of the slaves in the West-Indies (Carretta, 1996: 193): in this respect, he affirms there was almost no difference among free men and slaves in Africa, the only one was based on the 'superior degree of importance' that the free men had compared to the slaves (Carretta, 1996: 193). Nevertheless, they had respectable lives, were well fed, had good clothes, places to

live in, and a right amount of works to accomplish. Also, he mentions that some traders kidnapped Africans to sell them to the Europeans.

Then Equiano moves back to the account of his experiences, and he describes his kidnapping: once, when he was about eleven, his parents left him and his only sister alone to take care of the house. On that occasion they were kidnapped by slave-traders. Soon after, the siblings were separated and Equiano continued his long journey to the coast with the traders: they passed through different nations with foreign languages, some of which he learned. Once he reached the coast, he saw the ships and got very scared, he decided to ask the traders if he was not 'to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks' (Carretta, 1996: 202). The young Equiano's fear represents the fear of the unknown: he had never seen ships, and so many white men, he had no idea of what they would do to him.

#### 4.2.3. *The Middle Passage and slavery*

What awaited him was the Middle Passage, an extremely horrible experience; he describes this journey on the slave ship, during which death seemed preferable to the slaves' condition:

I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me.  
(Carretta, 1996: 203)

He wished he could jump overboard to die, but he was chained, and the crew controlled the slaves very closely, he was brutally flogged for not eating and experienced many horrors, for which he claims the white men acted in a 'savage manner' that he had 'never seen among any people such instances of brutality' (Carretta, 1996: 203). The detailed narration of the horrors occurring during the Middle Passage, which lacked in Gronniosaw's account, shock the reader who

witness the crew's unjustified cruelty, and the terrible conditions in which the slaves were held.

The ship arrived in Barbados where the slaves had to be examined and Equiano was shipped to Virginia and put to work, and here he was renamed Jacob. He was then bought by the captain of a merchant ship called Michael Pascal, with whom he left for England very soon, and during this journey Equiano's new master renamed him Gustavus Vassa (or Vasa). This voyage became very important for Equiano met Richard Baker, a white fifteen-year-old American, who became his first white friend:

Such a friendship was cemented between us as we cherished till his death [...] I lost at once a kind interpreter, an agreeable companion, and a faithful friend; who, at the age of fifteen, discovered a mind superior to prejudice; and who was not ashamed to notice, to associate with, and to be the friend and instructor of one who was ignorant, a stranger, of a different complexion, and a slave! (Carretta, 1996: 208-209).

Richard appears to approach Equiano without any prejudice regarding his complexion, and they managed to become inseparable friends, until Richard's death for which Equiano suffered.

At the age of twelve, Equiano arrived in London, where he learned how to read, and he was baptized. There, he was happy, he found new friends, however, after having served faithfully his master for some years he was sold to Captain James Doran, who forcefully brought him back to the Caribbean. Equiano's disappointment in his new master's decision is evident in his description of the Caribbean as the 'land of bondage'; he feels discouraged, and his mind brought him back to his early experiences as a slave after he left the slave ship: 'My former slavery now rose in dreadful review to my mind, and displayed nothing but misery, stripes, and chains'; as he did on the slave ship, he deeply wishes to die rather than be a slave in the Caribbean, and to be sold from master to master, indeed, this time he

prays to God and asks him 'to direct the stroke of death' to him, (Carretta, 1996: 218). Equiano depicts the Caribbean as the land of his nightmares, and indeed, once he arrives in Monserrat, he is sold to a new master called Robert.

At this point, Equiano interrupts the narration of his life, and decides to describe all the cruelties he witnessed in Monserrat: differently from Gronniosaw's narrative, Equiano gives the reader brutal descriptions of the slaves' punishments and of the white men's terrible actions: the slaves were brutally beaten, branded with the initial of their masters' names, mutilated and very young female slaves were raped. These powerful events shock the readers and prompt a reaction against slavery. Throughout the narration, Equiano directly addresses and questions the reader by reflecting on slavery. He uses a provocative and direct style when engaging with the reader:

Let the polished and haughty European recollect that his ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Did Nature make them inferior to their sons? and should they too have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No. (Carretta, 1996: 196)

Equiano compares the African not to savages but to the ancestors of the Europeans, who were once uncivilized and asks the reader if they can be considered as inferior to his contemporaries 'civilized' Europeans; the only rational answer that can be given to this rhetorical question is no. Therefore, Equiano seems to suggest that the ancestors of the Europeans just had to evolve and become the educated and civilized Europeans they affirm to be; hence, the Africans should not be regarded as less human, they would need to be educated to become similar to the white Europeans. Equiano wittingly presents the anti-slavery arguments as the only possible rational answer to his questions.

Using the same strategy, Equiano also makes reference to the contradictory nature of slavery in the context of the Europeans' Christians beliefs. He refers to the Christians who perpetrate slavery as 'nominal Christians', and reminds the reader

of God's commandment 'Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you', how can Christian benevolence coexist with slavery (Carretta, 1996: 206)? The treatment of the slaves is inhumane, and cannot coexist with Christian benevolence, the slaves are taken from their country and friends only for the white men's toil for 'luxury and lust of gain', and even more cruelly the slaves' families are separated: 'Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives?'; again Equiano's rhetorical questions guide the reader to anti-slavery ideas; he defines the separation of the families as 'a new refinement in cruelty' (Carretta, 1996: 207). Such cruel actions clash with the Christians beliefs and demand the readers' reflection.

#### 4.2.4. *Freedom*

In 1766, at the age of twenty-one, Equiano bought his freedom from his master for £40, and since his master had been good to him, he decided to keep working for him for some time as a free man. At this stage of his life, similarly to Gronniosaw, Equiano wishes to come back to England, where he hopes to live happily as a freeman: 'I determined to make every exertion to obtain my freedom, and to return to Old England' (Carretta, 1996: 234); 'if it pleased God, I would see Old England once more' (Carretta, 1996: 242).

He managed to buy a passage to England, once there he widely travelled for some years on board ships, since he became an expert in navigation. Finally, Equiano was involved in the Sierra Leone project: Sierra Leone became a British colony in 1786, thus, a great number of former slaves living in Britain were sent to the free province of Freetown (Kup, 1972: 203) and in November 1786 he became the commissary of provisions and stores for the black poor going to Sierra Leone. He continued to fight against slavery. He ends his narratives reasserting his anti-slavery arguments and invites both the reader and the British parliament to reflect on the peculiar institution.

#### 4.2.5. *Conclusions*

In conclusion, in his narration, Equiano displays his humanity through his feelings: he describes his own sufferings; he details his feelings when he witnesses other slaves' punishments and hardships; he also shares with the readers his happy moments, and his feelings towards his friends. These descriptions allow the reader to sympathize with Equiano, suffer and rejoice with him; moreover, the former slave's portrait and the fact that Equiano directly addresses the reader when reflecting on slavery creates a direct bond between the reader and Equiano, through the narrative a dialogue with the writer is established. Equiano presents himself as a common human being to which is easy to relate, he makes mistakes, but he is nonetheless a valuable person as anyone of his readers, using his words his story displays 'neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant' (Carretta, 1996: 187). With the title he claims its story is 'interesting', but at the same time he claims that

'there are a few events in [his] life which have not happened to many' making reference to all the other slaves, and, once again displaying his double identity, he continues by saying that if he did consider himself an European his sufferings may be considered great but, when he compares his situations to the one of the other slaves, he regards himself 'as a particular favourite of Heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of [his] life'. (Carretta, 1996: 187)

Through his writing, Equiano shows that 'all humanity steams from common ancestry' (Szpeth, 2011: 6) and claims that there are only cultural differences among nations and continents, which can be overcome. Moreover, Equiano proves to the reader he has accomplished an enormous path from his early years in Africa to his adulthood as a British freed man: he became literate, he learned God's teachings and became familiar with British customs. At the end of the narrative, he continues to be 'the African' of the title, but he is also part of the British culture and of the

British nation. With his writing, he has largely influenced the debate on slavery, he even manages to go beyond the national borders, and he reaches a great number of readers: the success of his narrative testifies the truthfulness of his ideas on a shared humanity, if readers all around the world can relate to his story, then all the humankind is linked by the same feelings and emotions and the complexion and the different cultures cannot change it. His success ultimately reflects and accomplishes the meaning of his African name:

I was named Olaudah, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude, or fortunate also; one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken.  
(Carretta, 1996: 194)

Despite his sufferings, Equiano buys his freedom and makes his fortune with his narrative, which gives him the chance to speak in a 'loud voice' to the whole of humankind and to express his opinions on slavery. He has deeply influenced British and American literary tradition, and he is now considered as the father of the literary genre of the Slave Narrative and has become one of the leading figures of the anti-slavery movement in Britain (Weis, 2000: 26).

In the next section I will introduce David George's Slave Narrative. This narrative wasn't written by the slave himself, nevertheless, it displays the main characteristics of the literary genre of the Slave Narrative. This narrative is particularly harsh in the descriptions of the slaves' punishments, and so it represents an evolution of the previous ones.

### **4.3. David George**

*An Account of the Life of Mr. David George, from Sierra Leone* was published in the new periodical *The Baptist Annual Register* in 1793. Because of its peculiar context of

publication, it has no epigraph neither a preface, however the narrative itself reproduces the characteristics of the literary genre of the Slave Narrative. As in the case of Gronniosaw's narrative, David's work is not directly written by the former slave, rather it is told to have been 'given by himself in a conversation with brother Rippon [...] and brother Pearce' (Carretta, 1996: 333) and then transcribed, thus, the narration is in the first-person narrator. The nature of this work and the religious context of publication I make this work more similar to Gronniosaw's spiritual autobiography than to Equiano's bold narrative, indeed, even if not explicitly stated, this narration follows the slave's spiritual conversion, and it focuses on his religious life by highlighting his good attitude.

#### *4.3.1. American slavery*

The narration begins with David George's birth in Virginia, he introduces his family and immediately asserts he was born under the institution of slavery, and he was owned by his cruel master Chapel. Thus, David has no direct connection to Africa, he did not experience the Middle Passage and was born in bondage. In his master's plantation, he was first employed fetching water and carding cotton, and later he worked in the fields of corn and tobacco. Compared to Gronniosaw, the slave gives a completely different description of slavery, indeed, he states that Chapel was 'a very bad man to the Negroes' (Carretta, 1996: 333) and as Equiano, he vividly details the punishments that were inflicted on the slaves: this is the reason why he decided to run away: 'Master's rough and cruel usage was the reason of my running-away' (Carretta, 1996: 333).

After some years of running from the master's son, a white man purchased him, and he started working at his estate at Silver Bluff. Soon afterwards, he married another slave, and they started a family together. There, he was introduced to the Christian religion, and he felt the need to learn more about it, in order to be saved from his sins:

I saw myself a mass of sin. I could not read, and had no scriptures. I did not think of Adam and Eve's sin, but I was sin. I felt my own plague; and I was so overcome that I could not wait upon my master. I told him I was ill. (Carretta, 1996: 334-335)

Thanks to his conversion he learned how to read, in order to read the Scripture; he also actively participated in the organization of the Silver Bluff Baptist Church, and he became one of the elders. During the 1775 revolution his antiroyalist master retired and 'left the slaves behind' (Carretta, 1996: 336), thus, David became a free man. He then moved to Nova Scotia where he continued to preach. Here, acts of discrimination still accompany the black former slave, and finally he gets involved in the British Sierra Leone project:

The next fall, Agent (afterwards Governor) Clarkson came to Halifax, about settling the new colony at Sierra Leone. The White people in Nova Scotia were very unwilling that we should go, though they had been very cruel to us, and treated many of us as bad as though we had been slaves. They attempted to persuade us that if we went away, we should be made slaves again. (Carretta, 1996: 339)

David appears very enthusiastic about the Sierra Leone Project and actively supports it. However, he is soon deceived by it, when he realizes that, even there, the black people were once again discriminated, and sometimes they were exploited as slaves.

#### 4.3.2. *Appendixes*

The narrative is integrated with appendixes, notably, seven letters: the first three letters praising the character of David George, and four letters written by the former slave himself from Sierra Leone, and sent to his friends in England, to whom he asks for their help for the difficult situation there. The letters on David George's

character had probably the aim to introduce the former slave in the protectorate of Sierra Leone; these, according to the writer of the narrative are only a 'few, from numerous, testimonials' that the former slave received, in order to support his positive description (Carretta, 1996: 340). These testimonials present him as 'a good Christian', 'a very industrious citizen', he has 'a good character, is charitable, sober, honest, and industrious', and he is 'a sincere Christian' (Carretta, 1996: 340-41); these words echo the ones used in Gronniosaw's descriptions, indeed, as in that case, this narrative clearly aims to show the positive traits of the black slave in order to provide a counter-narrative to the dehumanizing perspective supported by pro-slavery discourse and to sensitize the white population. Also, David George's path towards salvation appears harsh, but effective. Differently from Gronniosaw he had no natural inclination to investigate the mysteries of creation, indeed, his conversion is radical: in his early life, like his parents, he did not know the Christian teachings, and lived in sin; and then, all of a sudden, he was shocked by a friend's words:

Silver Bluff, told me one day in the woods, that if I lived so, I should never see the face of God in glory (Whether he himself was a converted man or not, I do not know). This was the first thing that disturbed me, and gave me much concern (Carretta, 1996: 334).

From that moment he begins his path from darkness to light. His conversion and his love for God make him appear as a good man and Christian one, the readers praise his change and appreciate his pious life.

#### 4.3.3. *Conclusions*

To conclude, even if David's narrative certainly resembles Gronniosaw's one, it displays a different attitude towards slavery, as it directly and harshly condemns it. Instead of describing good and loving masters, David gives an extremely rough and

vivid description of the slave masters' attitudes towards the slaves; indeed, the masters are not idealized and do not appear as good and benevolent fathers. In the very first part of the narrative, he describes the punishment inflicted on the slaves, in particular he relates his brother's merciless punishment after he was caught running away from the plantation: his brother's legs were tied together, and a pole was put among them, 'at one end of which one of the owner's sons sat, to keep him down, and another son at the other', after that he received 500 lashes, they washed him with salt water, and then directly sent him back to work (Carretta, 1996: 333). David himself was whipped many times, then he describes his mother's punishments and her laments which caused him 'the greatest grief' (Carretta, 1996: 333).

These descriptions directly strike and horrify the reader, these were indeed meant to provoke the white readers and open their eyes to the brutal institution of slavery. The cruelty of the masters goes beyond the limits, they invent new terrible tortures to make the slaves suffer more, and echoing Equiano's words, these new forms of cruelty 'aggravate [...] distress and add [...] fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery' (Carretta, 1996: 207).

The next narrative I will introduce is Mary Prince's narrative, the story of a slave woman. In her narrative, Prince stresses on the need to inform the English readers on the conditions of the slaves.

#### **4.4. Mary Prince**

*The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, as Related by Herself*, was first published in 1831 in London and Edinburgh and it is the first narrative about the life of a black woman to be published in England (Salih in Prince, 2000: 2). Similarly to Gronniosaw's and to David George's narratives, the former slave did not directly write her story herself: as Thomas Pringle writes in the preface of the narrative, the

story was taken from 'Mary's own lips by a lady' (Prince, 2000: 3), namely, by Susanna Strickland. The epigraph which precedes the preface is taken from William Cowper's poem *The Negro's Complaint*, this poem first appeared in 1793 in *The Gentleman's Magazine*: Cowper supported anti-slavery thinking and through this poem he denounced the iniquity of slavery.

In the poem he fictionally speaks from the perspective of a black enslaved man who shares his sufferings, he urges the white men to stop abusing Africa and the Africans. He also asks the white men if there are worthy reasons behind their discriminatory attitudes towards black people other than the colour of their skin: 'Deem our nation brutes no longer, / Till some reason ye shall find / Worthier of regard, and stronger / Than the colour of our kind (Cowper in Prince, 2000:2).

#### 4.4.1. *Thomas Pringle's preface*

Mary Prince's Slave Narrative was published and supported by the members of the Anti-slavery Association in London, as a matter of fact, the editor Thomas Pringle, the secretary of the Antislavery Society, wrote the preface to this narrative. Following the typical trend of the Slave Narrative the editor claims the narrative's truthfulness, since Susanna Strickland reported Mary's words without any change, and also kept 'Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology' (Prince, 2000: 3), without adding any sentiment, judgment, or reflection has been added to the narrative. This would allow the reader to get to know Mary Prince's story from her perspective and directly listening to her voice.

Moreover, Pringle asserts that "the idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself" so that "good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered" (Prince, 2000: 3): here, as in the case of Equiano's narrative, Prince's anti-slavery aim is straightforward from the very beginning. While Gronniosaw's and David's narratives focus primarily on the slaves' spiritual journeys and growth, Prince's narrative draws on Equiano's example and details

the atrocities of slavery in the West Indies, to such an extent that Pringle has to avoid mentioning the names of some of Prince's masters: Captain I- and his wife, and Mr D., 'to whom conduct of peculiar atrocity is ascribed' (Prince, 2000: 3). Pringle also mentions that, at the time of the publication, the two were going to 'answer at a far more awful tribunal than that of public opinion, for the deeds of which their former bondwoman accuses them', thus, he decided not to mention their names for if he had added them 'that might deeply lacerate the feelings of their surviving and perhaps innocent relatives, without any commensurate public advantage' (Prince, 2000: 3).

#### 4.4.2. *The narrative of Louis Asa-Asa*

In his preface, Pringle announces to the reader that while Mary's history was in the press, he was given by his friend Mr. George Stephen 'the interesting narrative of Asa-Asa, a captured African now under his protection' that he found suitable as an appendix to Prince's narrative (Prince, 2000: 3). Therefore, the narrative is followed by Asa-Asa's story, which takes the form of a very short Slave Narrative. Pringle resumes the story of the young African in the appendix named *The Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa, A Captured African*, which is written in the third person narrator. It is then followed by *The Negro Boy's Narrative* narrated in the first- person from the young boy's perspective. Also in this case, Pringle claims the story is given 'as nearly as possible in the narrator's words' (Prince, 2000: 56).

This narrative integrates Prince's account: since she was born in the West Indies, she could not describe a life preceding slavery in Africa and the terrible experience of the Middle Passage. Thus, as Pringle writes, 'while Mary's narrative shows the disgusting character of colonial slavery, this little tale explains with equal force the horrors in which it originates' (Prince, 2000: 56). If Carretta is right when affirming that Equiano's real place of birth is South Carolina (Carretta in Fisch 2007: 45-46), Equiano's artificial past in Africa would acquire the same function as Asa-

Asa's narrative for Mary Prince's account.

Asa-Asa's first-person narration initially focuses on his capture: he lived his early life in an African village, where he was captured and was conducted on a slave ship. During the journey he witnessed the horrors of slavery and describes the slaves' condition and affirms that they 'were flogged very cruelly' sometimes to death, and they were kept below deck in a place 'hot' and 'nasty', thus many of them became ill, 'but they were not attended to'. He also adds that he was harshly flogged too (Prince, 2000: 59). Despite his sufferings Asa-Asa has faith in God, which connects him to the other protagonists of the Slave Narratives, he affirms to be glad to have come to England where he could not be taken as a slave anymore.

Asa-Asa's narration ends with a call to the king of England, thus, his attitude towards slavery appears very similar to Prince's. Also, Asa-Asa wishes his story could get to the king of England, so that he could be aware of how black people are treated, because he has heard 'he is good', and 'if he is, he will stop it if he can' (Prince, 2000: 59). His narrative fulfils the double burden every narrator of a Slave Narrative has: firstly, he wants to share his story, however, he is 'well taken care of, and has good bed and good clothes', so his objective is to use his narrative to represent the sufferings of all his fellow slaves to sensitize the British people and the king of England, since he wishes his 'own people to be as comfortable' as himself (Prince, 2000: 59).

#### 4.4.3. *Mary Prince's narrative: slavery in the Caribbean*

Following the Slave Narrative tradition Mary Prince's account begins with the slave's birth in 1788 in Brackish Pond, Bermuda. As with David George, she was born a slave, since her mother was one of Charles Myners' slaves, and her father, from whom she took the name Prince, was a sawyer belonging to Mr Trimmingham. When Mary was very young Charles Myners had both her and her mother sold to Darrel Williams, and the young Mary became his granddaughter's companion until

the age of twelve. She will later affirm that that moment 'was the happiest period' of her life, since she was too young to understand her condition as a slave. However, she was 'quite a pet of Miss Betsey', Mr William's granddaughter: Mary was 'led [...] about by the hand' and she was called 'little nigger' (Prince, 2000: 3). Even if this period brings no sufferings to Mary at the time, when she recollects her memory in her adulthood, she realizes that even the young Betsey had a discriminatory attitude towards her; indeed, she does not describe their relationship as a friendship as the one established between Equiano and Richard Baker, rather she defines herself as her mistress's pet.

Throughout the whole narrative the writer uses multiple images coming from the animal world to describe the slaves' condition, thus, she compares the slaves to animals: in doing so she takes the white man's perspective, as they treat the black people as nothing more than animals. Interestingly, Mary often uses the image of the butchers to describe the white men: 'I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase' (Prince, 2000: 8).

When Williams' wife dies, the master decides to sell Mary. Before being sold she needs to be examined by the buyers, and that moment appears extremely inhuman, this description is reminiscent of Equiano's words about the slave markets, similarly, Mary reflects on slavery and the white men's cruel attitudes towards the slaves:

They were not all bad, I dare say, but slavery hardens white people's hearts towards the black people; and many of them were not slow to make their remarks upon us aloud, without regard to our grief – though their light words fell like cayenne on the fresh wounds of our hearts. Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves. (Prince, 2000: 8)

Here, she claims that even if not all white men are bad, slavery makes them hard, and they tend to forget the black people's humanity, by evaluating them and

by referring to them as if they were goods to buy: Mary's statement reminds of Césaire argument of the transformation the colonizer goes through during colonization becoming a brutal human being (Césaire, 1972: 1-6).

Mary arrives then in Captain I-'s house, her new master, where the stones were not 'so hard as the hearts of the owners' (Prince, 2000: 9). From her words the reader can already imagine that she will have a hard time in that place. Here, she has terrible experiences and she details the punishments that were inflicted to the slaves: to quote her words, master used 'To strip me naked – to hang me up by the wrists and lay [her] flesh open with the cow-skin' that 'was an ordinary punishment' (Prince, 2000: 11); also, 'He tied me up upon a ladder, and gave me a hundred lashes with his own hand, and master Benjy stood by to count them for him' (Prince, 2000: 13). The details she gives allow the reader to imagine those moments and to feel her sufferings, as both David and Equiano did, she is not afraid of directly speak about the slaves' punishments.

Only after five years of sufferings, she was sold to Mr D-, unfortunately, she would soon find out that she moved 'from one butcher to another' (Prince, 2000: 15): her miseries continue in her new home. She affirms that the only difference between the two masters was that her 'former master used to beat [her] while raging and foaming with passion' while her new master 'was usually quite calm' and preferred to ask others to punish her rather than doing it himself (Prince, 2000: 16). Mr. D- is described as an extremely cold man and he did not care about the slaves' sufferings, he was never touched by anything 'neither sighs, nor tears, nor prayers, nor streaming blood; he was deaf to [their] cries, and careless of [their] sufferings' (Prince, 2000: 16). Sometimes he decided to punish the slaves himself, Mary claims that he 'has often stripped [her] naked, hung [her] up by the wrists, and beat [her] with the cowskin, with his own hand, till [her] body was raw with gashes (Prince, 2000: 16). Nevertheless, her masters' treatment of their slaves was not exceptional, but rather 'it might serve as a sample of the common usage of the slaves on that horrible island' (Prince, 2000: 16). Mary Prince's words echoes Equiano's description

of Monserrat the 'land of bondage' (Carretta, 1996: 218), all these narratives echo one another, as the slaves' experiences, their similarities prove their truthfulness and they fulfil the aim of representing not only the slave's personal experience, but also the collective experiences of the slaves.

Mary was then sold to John Wood of Antigua for \$300. When she was at his service, she was introduced to a Methodist meeting, that had 'a great impression of her' (Prince, 2000: 23), similarly to David George she 'felt sorry for [her] sins', so she wished to be forgiven and to do so, she decided to join the local Monrovia Church (Prince, 2000: 23). There, she met and married Daniel James, a free man. When their new masters, the Woods, decided to go to England in 1828, Mary was extremely happy to go with them, hoping that her master would free her once they got there. At that time, slavery had been abolished in England, thus, they should have freed her. Nevertheless, even in England she was forced to work for the Woods, in very harsh conditions. This situation triggers in her the decision of leaving the Woods' house and asking for help from the Antislavery Society. With the help of the Antislavery Society, she petitioned the Parliament against the Woods, who refused to give her freedom. She needed to become free in order to go back to Antigua, to her family without being re-enslaved, since, if in England the masters could not legally enslave her, in Antigua they could have done so. Unluckily, the Woods decided to leave England before their cause was brought to a public hearing. Thus, Mary was forced to remain in England, without her family. There, she started working for Thomas Pringle as a free domestic servant: she was well treated, and she read the word of God with her dear mistress; however, she remained sorrowful, since she could not go back to her husband.

#### *4.4.4. Conclusions*

In conclusion, throughout the narrative, Mary expresses her anti-slavery ideas, and she claims the enlightening aim of her narrative. She wishes to inform the white

Britons since 'the people in England [...] have never found out what is carried on there', in the colonies (Prince, 2000: 17). Therefore, she argues that 'the truth ought to be told', and from her position she feels it is her 'duty to relate' what she knows about slavery, (Prince, 2000: 17). This need can represent what has been defined as the black literate author's burden. Mary perceives the burden of her knowledge, she has to speak up for all the slaves that are still suffering, indeed, when thinking about her sorrows she 'cannot pass by those of [her] fellows' (Prince, 2000: 18), in the hope that 'the good people in England' can 'break [their] chains and set [them] free' (Prince, 2000: 17).

Mary's account ends with a reflection on slavery and freedom, she strongly asserts that every slave wishes to be freed, contesting the idea 'that the slaves do not need better usage, and do not want to be free' (Prince, 2000: 32), she suffers from these statements since slavery is an inhuman institution and she asks the reader: 'How can slaves be happy when they have the halter round their neck and the whip upon their back?' (Prince, 2000: 32). Once again, she takes the white people's perspective and describes the slaves through images linked to the animal world: the slaves are 'though no more of than beasts' (Prince, 2000: 32), and they are separated from their families and 'just as cattle are sold and separated' (Prince, 2000: 32). She also gives a harsh description of the English people, who are good people, but once they arrive in the West Indies, they seem to forget it and act in a 'bestly manner', it seems that there 'they forget God and all feeling of shame, I think, since they can see and do such things' (Prince, 2000: 32). She claims:

All slaves want to be free – to be free is very sweet. I will say the truth to English people who may read this history that my good friend, Miss S—, is now writing down for me. (Prince, 2000: 32)

Therefore, she is writing to open English people's eyes and to tell them the truth about slavery, and to give a voice to the enslaved, who passionately wish to be freed. She wants to demonstrate that no slave is happy about his/her condition, thus, once

they have been informed about that, the British people have no more excuse to perpetrate the institution of slavery.

After Mary's narrative, together with Asa-Asa's narrative, Thomas Pringle, the editor, includes a supplement, where he details her ongoing case, also including some of Mr. Woods' letters, and documents from the Parliament.

In the next section I will introduce Ashton Warner's narrative. This narrative displays a different initial situation as Ashton was raised with Christian teachings, and therefore does not detail his path to conversion, moreover, the appendixes he adds support the truthfulness of his account.

#### **4.5. Ashton Warner**

Ashton Warner's narrative is less known to the contemporary public than the other Slave Narratives, however it seems particularly interesting also for its connections with Mary Prince's narrative: indeed, Susanna Strickland, who transcribed Mary Prince's narrative, and was very active in the anti-slavery moment, also transcribed Ashton Warner's narrative, both narratives were published in 1831. The two works appear to be connected and to deal with the same issues; the complete title of the narrative is: *Negro Slavery described by a Negro: being the Narrative of Ashton Warner, a Native of St. Vincent's. With an Appendix containing the testimony of four Christian ministers, Recently Returned from the Colonies, on the System of Slavery as it now exists.*

##### *4.5.1. Thomas Pringle's the Bechuana Boy*

The epigraph which precedes the narrative, is one of Thomas Pringle's poems: *The Bechuana Boy*. Besides being the secretary of the anti-slavery association, Pringle had lived for six years in the Cape Colony in South Africa, and after that experience he

decided to write poems on the life in the colonies, but he also dealt with other subjects, notably, the poem used as an epigraph in Ashton's narrative deals with the theme of slavery (Shum, 2009: 293). The poem presents the story of a young slave boy; through this poem, Pringle aims to reflect on slavery and to create empathy towards the slaves, exactly as the Slave Narratives do.

The quoted stanza in Ashton's narrative expresses the slave's feelings: 'And tears and toil have been my lot / Since I the white man's thrall became' (Warner, 1831:2): since he became a captive (thrall), the slave's life is made only of sufferings (tears), hard work (toil). Then he states: 'And sorer griefs I wish forgot / Harsh blows and burning shame!' (Warner, 1831:2), as a traumatized person, the young slave tries hard to forget the painful sorrows of his condition (sorer griefs); moreover, he mentions the physical punishments he receives from the white men (harsh blows), and also his feeling of shame (burning shame), the master can decide over the slave's life and body: a slave, as in the case of Mary Prince, could be undressed, humiliated and then punished, these experiences profoundly mark the slave and are almost unbearable.

The following lines, do not uniquely refer to the Bechana boy's story, rather they claim the inaccessibility of the slaves' experiences to the white people: the voice speaks directly to the English people and says, 'Oh, Englishman! thou ne'er canst know / The injured bondman's bitter woe' (Warner, 1831:2); these two lines reveal the traumatized person's fear of not being understood by the others (thou ne'er canst know), it echoes Levi's prisoners' recurrent dream (Levi, 2007). Nevertheless, exactly as it happens for the victims of a traumatic experience, in the final lines of the stanza, the writer attempts to describe the slave's feelings (Shum, 2009: 308), so that the Englishman can at least imagine these feelings: 'When round his heart, like scorpions, cling / Black thoughts that madden while they sting!' (Warner, 1831:2), the terrible thoughts (Black thoughts) produced by the horrors of slavery are so intense that the writer compares them to the feeling of having scorpions assaulting him and piercing one's heart, these thoughts hurt (they sting) and can lead to

madness (that madden). Therefore, even if the white audience may never fully understand the trauma of slavery, it is important for them to grasp the sufferings provoked by slavery, in order to be aware of the consequences of it.

#### 4.5.2. *Susanna Strickland's advertisement and introduction*

Ashton's narrative is preceded by Susanna Strickland's advertisement, that was added during the publication of the first edition of the narrative, since with it, she informs the reader that, unfortunately, Ashton died while the narrative was in press, thus, the benefits resulting from the sales would be given to his family and to the Antislavery Society.

Susanna Strickland also wrote the introduction to the narrative, which is typical of the Slave Narratives. There, she expresses her abolitionist thoughts: firstly, she denounces the 'well-educated' English people 'criminal ignorance' of the subject of colonial slavery (Warner, 1831:5). Once again, she underlines that British people are ignorant of the horrors of slavery, which she considers as 'a great devil' which 'could not be defended upon Christian principles, being contrary to the rights of nature and the spirit of the gospel' (Warner, 1831:8). As Equiano did, she claims that the Christian principles of the British people could not be reconciled with slavery. Together with her religious argument, she wonders about the right of any nation to 'make one man the property of another', especially if the enslaved men live in another country, in which British claims are lawless; then, if slavery is not based on law, it can be considered as an act of robbery (Warner, 1831:8). Also, Cugoano in his 1787 work defined the slaves' owners as robbers of men (Carretta, 1996: 146).

Throughout her introduction Susanna Strickland writes in an extremely provoking style, and she also follows Equiano's style when listing a series of questions which should prompt the reader's thoughts: such as 'Can any enactments of human legislators lawfully make one man the property of another?' (Warner, 1831:8) or 'Does the African mother feel less love to her offspring than the white

woman?' (Warner, 1831:9). As in the case of Equiano, these questions can only provoke an answer, which leads the reader to reflect on slavery's lawfulness.

Moreover, she presents the narrator Ashton Warner as a man with 'admirable disposition and natural intelligence' (Warner, 1831:12), mirroring Shirley's description of Gronniosaw. His natural disposition is presented as a proof of what the 'African is capable of' when he/she is allowed to develop 'under the genial influences of civilization and Christianity' (Warner, 1831:12). Ashton, as the other protagonists of the Slave Narratives, is thus seen by the abolitionist as an example of the Africans intelligence and skills if they were allowed to be educated. Here, Susanna Strickland makes explicit one of the Slave Narratives' aims. Furthermore, Ashton's language is described as 'remarkably expressive and appropriate' (Warner, 1831:15), indeed, the writer claims she transcribed almost directly Ashton's words, in order to prove the truthfulness of the story narrated.

#### *4.5.3. Early life as a slave*

Following the Slave Narrative's structure, Ashton Warner's narrative begins with the account of his background: he was born on the Island of St. Vincent in the West Indies, both his parents were slaves on Cane Grove estate: like both David George and Mary Prince he was born a slave, and had no direct connection with Africa. Soon after Ashton's birth, the master, Mr. Ottley died, so both the plantation and all the slaves were sold; however, Ashton's aunt and a former slave, Daphne Crosbie, purchased him and his mother in order to free them. Unfortunately, after some years, Ashton was claimed as a slave again by Mr. Wilson, the new plantation owner. Ashton affirms that in the island of St. Vincent the young children were sold with their mothers, and they were considered as a separate property only starting from the age five, thus he states that 'Mr. Wilson's claim was very unjust and oppressive' (Warner, 1831:21). Thus, Ashton's aunt asked for the Governor of St. Vincent's help, who agreed with her, but still they received no actual help from him.

However, it is interesting to notice that at this point Susanna Strickland adds a footnote to the text to clarify that

this is poor Ashton's own statement. Whether the Colonial Slave Law will support his claim for freedom on this ground, is a question which remains to be determined (Warner, 1831:21).

Here, she informs the reader that at the time of publication, Ashton was still waiting for his status as a free man to be recognized by the British Parliament. Her decision to interact with the reader in Ashton's text is novelty which does not take place in the case of Mary Prince's narrative.

The status of slave was extremely difficult for Ashton since he was living as a freeman and was happy to be the apprentice of a cooper. However, he was taken away by Mr. Wilson to be his slave. Ashton 'could not bear the thought of being a slave' and he 'was very restless and unhappy' (Warner, 1831:25). He was employed under the guide of John, another black slave, who was however 'very cruel to those of his own colour who were placed under him' (Warner, 1831:25). Thus, Ashton details his punishments: a few days after he arrived John punished him for not having worked hard enough,

he took a piece of wood from the bundle, and struck me over the head again and again, till I was quite stunned with the pain, and the blood flowed from the wound (Warner, 1831:27).

For this treatment Ashton complained to the manager, who told John that he had exaggerated, for Mr. Wilson did not want treat Ashton so severely. The slaveholder was probably afraid of Ashton's escape, since he knew he had no legal right on him.

#### 4.5.4. *Reflections on slavery*

Ashton describes the harsh punishments he received as a slave, but he also details the condition of the field slaves. Like Mary Prince, he feels the need to bear witness to the other slaves' stories and not only present his own experience. Indeed, he claims he wants 'to relate not only my own case, but also all that I knew of slavery' to show to the English people 'and stir them up to do away with slavery altogether' (Warner, 1831:63). In particular, he reports the working conditions of the field slaves, which were the worse among the slaves, so much so that Ashton himself 'would far rather die than submit to it' (Warner, 1831:32). He goes into details in describing their tasks, and the quality of their lives; he witnesses many instances of extremely harsh punishments: the field negroes 'when flogged with the whip, they are stripped and held down upon the ground, and exposed in the most shameful manner' (Warner, 1831:34); there was no time to rest for them, he saw very sick people 'dragged out of the sick-house, and tied up to a tree, and flogged in a shocking manner' (Warner, 1831:39). Ashton affirms:

People so hardly, so harshly, treated, and so destitute of every comfort, cannot be supposed to work with a willing mind. They have no home which they can well call their own. They are worked beyond their strength, and live in perpetual fear of the whip. They are insulted, tormented, and indecently exposed and degraded. (Warner, 1831:43)

Ashton also raises the reader's empathy when narrating his wife's conditions as a field slave, the master seems to have no respect for her not even when she was pregnant or after her childbirth: the young field slave could not nurse the baby, or she would have been flogged for not coming sooner, since the slaveholders 'had no feeling for the mother or for her child, they cared only for the work' (Warner, 1831:46). Such a description certainly shocks the reader and creates a sense of empathy towards the young mother.

Ashton reflects on the conditions of the slaves who are treated as objects and who have no human rights: their lives are described to the readers as being terrible and unbearable. This description asks for the reader's reflections and demands him/her to take a position about this inhuman institution. It is self-evident that nobody would like to be a slave, and still 'Some have even said that they are happy' (Warner, 1831:43), these words very closely resemble Mary Prince's as she states that people 'say slaves are happy' (Prince, 2000: 32); since they are repeated both in Mary's and Ashton's narratives, they might represent Susanna Strickland's thoughts. Ashton goes further and provokes the white people who claim slaves are happy, by suggesting them to 'place themselves for a few minutes under the same yoke and see if they could bear it' (Warner, 1831:43). Then, he claims that slavery is ruining both the slaves' bodies and their souls, these words almost evoke the words of the young slave in Thomas Pringle's poem.

Finally, Ashton cannot handle anymore his master's abuses over him, his fellows and his new family, and decides to escape and after having received his papers he first goes to Grenada as a free man and then to Trinidad. From there he sailed to England in 1830 to find his master, and to enquire him for his freedom. Once there he found out his master was dead, but his executors agreed in further investigating Ashton case. Unfortunately, as Susanna Strickland bitterly adds, 'poor Ashton's enfranchisement has been suddenly accomplished by the great Emancipator-DEATH' before he could obtain his freedom (Warner, 1831: 65).

#### 4.5.5. *Appendixes*

Ashton's narrative is followed by several appendixes: firstly, the document attesting Daphne Crosbie had bought Ashton and his mother and set them free; and then, four testimonies on colonial slavery, as anticipated in the narrative's title. *The Deed of Manumission* attached, demonstrates that Daphne Cosbie did 'enfranchise, and for ever set free from slavery and servitude, [...] Plassey, John Baptiste, Ashton,

Margaret, and Archibald' (Warner, 1831: 66); this document was signed by Daphne in the presence of the Chief of Justice. However legal, this document had never been useful when Mr. Wilson reclaimed Ashton; it is evident that it was extremely difficult for black people, even if they were free, to be listened too, and as Ashton affirms white people 'always forget their promises to slaves' (Warner, 1831: 22).

Then the four testimonies are attached to the narrative, they contain the experiences and reflections of four reverends who have been in the colonies. When introducing them the editor highlights their achievements and the respectable positions they have reached, thus, when doing so, they all appear as respectable and trusty men. These short texts are used in order to validate Ashton's narrative and his description of slavery. The first testimony is provided by Reverend Orton, who was in Jamaica for six years, and had been imprisoned for having preached 'to those outcasts from the pale of humanity - the despised and degraded Negro Slaves' (Warner, 1831: 69). He had witnessed the harsh punishments of the slaves and 'with feelings of the highest indignation, the sale of human beings in the public market' (Warner, 1831: 74), and, as in Ashton's account, they are detailed in the reverend's account. Moreover, the reverend describes the experiences of field slaves which, as the editor suggests, should be compared to Ashton's statements:

Let the reader now compare the account given by this conscientious Missionary, of the condition of the slaves on the sugar plantations of Jamaica, with that of Ashton Warner, relative to the field negroes of St. Vincent's, and judge whether the system be one that ought to be any longer tolerated by a civilized or Christian country. (Warner, 1831: 70)

The editor also intervenes with footnotes to underline the correspondences between the two descriptions. The editor's need to add proofs that Ashton's narration is truthful by comparing it to the descriptions given by trustworthy reverends, suggests that the English readers may have prejudices against the black slaves, thus they needed to be accompanied by proofs or by narrations made by white people

who could confirm their accounts. This is the reason why the Slave Narratives were usually introduced by the editor's preface and were accompanied by appendixes.

The second testimony is Reverend John Thorpe's one, he had been the curate in St. Thomas in the East, in Jamaica for three years. He goes into detail when describing the punishments received by the slaves and he also reports in detail the functioning of the 'cart-whip' (Warner, 1831: 84) a particularly cruel instrument used to punish the slaves. Moreover, he talks about the working conditions of the field slaves and once again the editor intervenes with a footnote to direct the readers' attention to the correspondences with Ashton's description.

Then, the third testimony added to the narrative is the one by Reverend J. M. Trew, who was rector of St. Thomas in Jamaica for eleven years. He had published a pamphlet called *Nine Letters to the Duke of Wellington, on Colonial Slavery*, from which the editor chose some extracts to use as the Reverend's testimony. There, he reports the abuses perpetrated against the slaves. To conclude, the Reverend W. Right's testimony closes the appendixes; he was a missionary of the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign parts" in Cape of Good Hope for ten years. In his testimony, he is interested in understanding the consequences of the slave system on both the masters and the slaves themselves. In that regard, he concludes that while slavery certainly 'debases and degrades its victims', it also 'destroy[s] the moral feeling of the master, and that it carries cruelty, and perjury, and almost every other vice, in its train (Warner, 1831: 144). Thus, by observing and analyzing the masters and the slaves he gives arguments similar to Césaire's ideas on colonization (Césaire, 1972: 1-6); indeed, both slavery and colonization are based on the same racial principle, which conceives the negroes as 'non-human' beings and allows the white people to treat them as a property, or as animals.

#### 4.5.6. *Conclusions*

Differently from the other Slave Narratives, Ashton's does not make many

references to religion, probably because Ashton was baptized when he was an infant and he had grown up with Christian teachings, thus his narration cannot contain an account of conversion. However, he makes reference to God and God's Providence throughout his narration and asks the English people to 'daily pray to God, that the yoke of slavery may soon be broken (Warner, 1831:43).

Also, Ashton's narrative is supplemented by a sizeable number of appendixes which further prove the slave's account authenticity, they also pursue the aim of showing the reader colonial slavery. The context provided by the appendixes together with the editor interventions which also recount the slave's death, convey a sense of authenticity which prompts the reader to feel empathy towards the slave's misfortunes, and to feel sorry for his death.

In the next section my aim will be to compare all the Slave Narratives I have already introduced and provide some final thoughts on the genre itself.

#### **4.6. Final remarks**

The analysis of the five early British Slave Narratives I took into consideration, has highlighted a number of interesting points. Groniosaw's and Equiano's narratives represent a first-hand account of the Middle Passage, indeed they detail the stories of two slaves who survived the trauma of the Middle Passage (Gilroy in Richardson and Lee, 2004: 371). In all the narratives representations of slavery are central, but the narrators find different ways to describe it. Ukawsaw Gronnoiosaw's narrative originates in the literary genre of the spiritual autobiography, focusing mainly on the protagonist's spiritual growth, and he decides not to make use of harsh terms and to not detail the horrible experiences linked to slavery, rather he describes his masters as fatherly figures. In comparison, Olaudah Equiano's text presents an evolution from the previous ones, as he freely shares his thoughts on slavery and describes the injustices he witnessed. David George's account is influenced by both

the narratives here above mentioned, while his narrative focus is on his spiritual journey, he also harshly condemns the institution of slavery through the account of his experiences. Then, Mary Prince's narrative openly asserts her abolitionist aim; thus, her account of slavery presents the abused life of the slave girl. This analysis concludes with Ashton Warner's writing which introduces the injustices perpetrated by the white masters towards the black slaves, whose rights are denied.

All the narratives indict the white Britons' scarce knowledge of the institution of slavery, which was perceived as a distant phenomenon. Nevertheless, this institution was central to the British economy, and needed to be known. Thus, the authors invoke the British people's conceptual beliefs about humanity, Christian principles, and sense of justice to fight against the horrors of slavery. Through their texts the former slaves introduce themselves to the white people as human beings, and they display their emotions and sufferings.

All the works but Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, are introduced by a preface written by a white abolitionist which create the context for the text and is used to accredit the black narrator's value. The only narrative directly written by a former slave is Equiano's one, and it is doubtlessly the most well-known among these five texts, as it is considered as the work that originated the literary genre on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, I suggest focusing the attention on the context of writing and publication of this early narrative, namely Britain. The fact that the pioneer Slave Narrative which became the most famous worldwide is British testifies the important role of British literature in the evolution of the Slave Narrative genre. Therefore, my dissertation aims to situate this literary genre in the British tradition, where it belongs.

In conclusion, the analysis of the British Slave Narratives contributes to shedding new light on both the key role of this literary genre in the British context, and the institution of British slavery. Therefore, the five Slave Narratives, whose titles echo one another, manage to create a coherent narrative of slavery in Britain and in the British colonies, which is lacking in the main narrative of history. They

are essential as examples of the literary genre here analysed, and they contributed to the process of the abolition of slavery at the time, but they also are extremely useful for contemporary writers to become aware of the reality of colonial slavery. Moreover, they set the ground for contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives.

In the chapter five, I will introduce other writings on slavery which were written by black authors in the context of British abolition process. These works do not belong to the Slave Narrative genre; however, they share the same aims and present a great number of similarities with the Slave Narratives.

## Chapter 5. *Other writings in the context of abolition*

The early Slave Narratives, as part of the abolitionist cause, were not the only form of writing concerning slavery. Both black and white abolitionists contributed to the cause through different works, both in prose and in verse. As is the case for the early Slave Narratives, the vast majority of the other literary writings on slavery were produced in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, some anti-slavery thoughts had already been included in works published around the 1750s: such as Jonathan Swift's, Samuel Johnson's, Joseph Warton's and Richard Savage's writings (Dabydeen, 1985: 38). Later on, as the poets Wordsworth and Blake also expressed their anti-slavery ideas, as is the case of Blake's poem 'The Little Black Boy', whose black skin 'is but a cloud, and like a shady grove' that 'will vanish' before God (Blake, 2013: 239).

Therefore, a great number of works ranging from sermons to poems, to articles, and to essays were published to sensitize the British population to the horrors of slavery. The well-known abolitionist Thomas Clarkson published *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* in 1786, in which, he discusses the history of slavery, the slave trade, and the conditions of the slaves in the European colonies. In his essay he claims that slavery is contrary 'to reason, justice, nature, the principle of law and government, the whole doctrine, in short of natural religion, and the revealed voice of God' (Clarkson, 2018: 91).

Black writers also took part in the abolitionist propaganda through their writings and this chapter intends to introduce three works produced by black authors and published in Britain in the context of the abolitionist propaganda. Three different examples of writings on slavery are analysed in this chapter: firstly, Phillis Wheatley's collection of poems, published as *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and*

*Moral and a Memoir of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave*; Ignatius Sancho's collection of letters entitled *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African. To which are prefixed, Memoirs of his Life*; and Ottobah Cugoano's long prose work, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*. The three text I have chosen to analyse became all extremely famous after their publication, thus, they contributed to the abolitionist campaign. As is the case of the five Slave Narratives I analysed in the previous chapter, these works were published in Britain thanks to the help of white abolitionist. Thus, the British context at the time, created the ground for them and they were read by a British audience. The decision to include Phillis Wheatley's collection of poems is based on the geography of publication, and the exceptionality of her text: even though the young slave lived her whole life in the US, she did not manage to publish her work there, but found support in Britain, where she published her book. Her extraordinary literary talent was then recognized on both sides of the Atlantic.

Some features of these works are typical of Slave Narratives. Indeed, interestingly, the titles given to these publications directly echo the Slave Narratives. Indeed, in all of them, the African origins of the writers are declared: Phillis Wheatley is described as a 'Native African', Ignatius Sancho is 'an African', and Ottobah Cugoano is defined as 'a Native of Africa'. Moreover, they all fought against the 'peculiar institution' denouncing the conditions of slaves and demonstrating the unfounded nature of slavery. Even if they did not use the form of the Slave Narrative, these texts are all accompanied by a short account of the former slaves' lives, as is the case of the narrative genre analysed in this thesis, the short accounts aim on the one hand, to show the harsh conditions of the slaves, which shock the reader, and on the other hand, they proved that black people, if allowed to be educated, can produce as good literary works as white people.

In the following sections I will briefly introduce the context of publication

and the authors' lives; the textual analysis that follows will provide comparisons to the early Slave Narrative. The first writer I am going to introduce is Phillis Wheatley's collection of poems, which contains a complaint on slavery, but it also shows the former slave's artistic talent.

## 5.1. Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley's collection of essays *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral and a Memoir of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave* was published in London in 1773 and was the first book ever published in Britain by a black woman, and one of the few books published while the author was still enslaved (O'Neale, 1986:144). Her book was reprinted several times, and in 1786, some poems taken from this collection appeared in Thomas Clarkson's *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human species* (Seeber, 1939: 261). The literary work of the talented African was generally well accepted by the white society and highly praised, however, pro-slavery supporters criticized her poems with no reason other than her race (Jamison, 1974: 410). The young writer was only nineteen years old and lived as a slave with her mistress from whom she took her name, in Boston, Massachusetts, but at the time of the publication she was in London for few months. Clearly, she had no connections with the British context, nevertheless, the fact that her work was published in Britain, thanks to the help of the abolitionists, included her work in the British debate on slavery. The collection is composed of 39 poems dealing with different subjects, her main concern was not slavery, but the peculiar institution is an important part of her poems.

### 5.1.1. *Wheatley's life*

The 1834 edition of Wheatley's poems published in Boston contains a *Memoir of*

*Phillis Wheatley: A Native of Africa and a Slave* written by Benjamin Bussey Thatcher. The decision to add the account of Wheatley's life associates it to the other writings on slavery and to the Slave Narratives themselves; moreover, it provides the reader with a more complete overview of the writer's life and gives the context of her writing. Thatcher introduces the narrative by claiming that slavery was a phenomenon that was neither debated enough nor known, thus, since the experiences of the slaves 'were quite too interesting to be passed over by the historians in utter silence' he felt the need to relate Wheatley's story (Wheatley, 2020: 85).

Wheatley was seized from West Africa and arrived in Boston on a slave ship in 1761, when she was about seven years old, and as she was very young, she had no memory of her African name. Then, she was bought by Susanna Wheatley, probably as a way of marking the anniversary of the death of her seven-year-old daughter (Carretta, 2014: 13). This is probably why she was a privileged slave who was allowed to have a good education.

Also, she grew with Christian teachings, and she was able to read from the Bible extremely quickly. She was also sent to London in 1773 with Susanna Wheatley's son in order to recover from her chronic asthma, and to look for a publisher for her poems. When she was there, she made the acquaintance of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, who introduced her to important members of the London Antislavery Society; also, she was the key figure in supporting the publication of Wheatley's poems (Fryer, 2018: 93). Thus, until her journey to England she lived as a slave with a peculiar status. However, after the publication of her poems, her fortune changed as she had to return to Boston since her mistress died in 1774. Some years later, she married John Peters, a free black man, with whom she had a very difficult life and who brought her to poverty, and she died in 1784, at about the age of 30.

As Collins suggests, Wheatley performed a particular role in the American society: while, she was not well accepted by the other slaves of the Wheatley family,

since she had a preferential treatment compared to theirs, she was neither part of the dominant culture who accepted them only as 'an exception, as a guest, a showpiece novelty' nor as an effective member of the white majority; thus, she lived in an liminal space neither black nor white (Collins, 1975: 80).

### 5.1.2. *The abolitionist cause*

Differently from the authors of the Slave Narratives, when Wheatley started writing her poems, she was not fully aware of the abolitionist cause, as she started writing very young to cultivate her talent. Moreover, as she was still in bondage at the time of the publication of her collection of essays, she clearly was not allowed to openly support the abolitionists or to become an abolitionist herself (Fryer, 2018: 93). However, it was not a coincidence that she arrived in England for the anniversary of the Somerset Case, which shook the public opinion, and she looked for abolitionists' support to publish her writings. If the abolitionists helped her during the publication process, she revealed to be extremely important for them, since she became the living proof of black people's artistic and mental abilities (Fryer, 2018: 93), contributing to the Slave Narratives' aim to contrast the idea of the savage and unskilled black people and to show the white audience of the black peoples' capacities if they are allowed to be educated.

While Jamison claims that through her poems Wheatley shows her lack of 'pride in her heritage' (Jamison, 1974: 409); Levernier argues that her private writings such as letters and other documents, show her interest in the slaves' situation, and she tried hard to protest against it, by cultivating her friendship with the abolitionists and by including in her poems subtle attacks at the institution of slavery (Levernier, 1993: 172). While in her correspondence she could freely speak, in the poems intended to be published and read by a white audience she had to cover her protest. Also, Fryer confirms her concerns for her fellow slaves as, despite Wheatly's young age, 'she was well aware of the part black people played in

American and European society, and in the popular mind' (Fryer, 2018: 94).

### 5.1.3. *Wheatley's poetry*

Because of Phillis Wheatley's education, her poetry was inspired by the Euro-American tradition and took after the work of English poets such as John Milton, Thomas Gray and in particular Alexander Pope. Therefore, she wrote for the white audience (Jamison, 1974: 408). As her preferred poetic form, she used Pope's iambic and heroic couplet (Jamison, 1974: 409). In her collection of poems, she tackles a great variety of themes such as death, morality, Christian teachings, but also, she represents classical heroes and abstract concepts, thus her poetry reflects the white society's interests (Jamison, 1974: 409). However, she also uses her education and her Christian faith to reflect on the institution of slavery. Even if her life in Boston as a slave could be considered as privileged, her experience as a slave journeying from Africa to America deeply traumatized and changed her, while she never mentions her Middle Passage, she had probably seen one out of four of the other Africans on the ship die, the contact with so much death at an early age certainly influenced her later writing, as testified by her interest in representing death in her poems (Carretta, 2014: 9).

Wheatley was accustomed to the Christian religion, as she read the Bible with her kind mistress, indeed, Christian piety is one the subjects she writes about in her poems. Like other black writers, she feels blessed to have arrived in a Christian land in which she had the chance to learn God's teachings, as she writes in her poem 'On Being Brought from Africa to America', in which she claims:

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train (Wheatley, 2020: 18)

Here, she defines her native country as a 'Pagan land', in which she did not know about the existence of neither God, nor redemption; she then refers to the period before her conversion (O'Neale, 1986: 147), in which she did not even desire her own salvation, exactly like David George before knowing about the Christian teachings. Her soul was ignorant, 'benighted', before she was taken to America. Therefore, in this poem she also makes reference to the institution of slavery, as it is clear in the poem's title. While she subtly condemns the white people's discriminatory attitude towards black people, who perceived the dark race's colour as a 'diabolic die', she reminds the Christian readers that the African can be educated to be part of the Christian stream, so that God, 'the Saviour' can allow them to paradise.

However, her comparison between her fellow Africans and Cain's blackness led to contrasting readings, since she seems to embrace the idea that the black skin in the Christian symbology would represent evil, as the contrast between darkness and brightness. Still, she states that black people will be saved and 'join th' angelic train' if they learn God's commandments and receive the gospel, thus, she is neither denying her African heritage nor is she affirming black people's inferiority (O'Neale, 1986: 148).

Wheatley dedicates a poem to the King of England, which she entitles, 'To the King's Most Excellent Majesty'. There, she praises the king as she hopes 'the crown upon' his head 'may flourish long' (Wheatley, 2020: 17), and then she refers to the slaves:

Midst the remembrance of thy favours past,  
The meanest peasants most admire the last

May George, beloved by all the nations round,  
Live with heav'ns choicest constant blessings crown'd!  
Great God, direct, and guard him from on high,  
And from his head let ev'ry evil fly!  
And may each clime with equal gladness see  
A monarch's smile can set his subjects free! (Wheatley, 2020: 17)

Here, the writer refers to God, whose benevolence will guide and bless the ruler who cares about all his compatriots, even the humblest ones, while she mentions 'the meanest peasants', she clearly implies also the slaves who belong to the king's nation. Thus, following the Christian principle, a just king should show concern for every group of people he dominates; by saying so, Wheatley is asking to take responsibility for the condition of the slaves in the British territories, to whom he should grant the human rights they were denied. To make her point clearer, the poem ends with the assertion of the king's limitless powers, indeed, she uses the image of the king who smiles and makes his 'subjects free': which suggests the king would have the power to set the slaves free.

#### 5.1.4. *Conclusions*

In conclusion, through the reading of Wheatley's poems, her anti-slavery position stands out. Moreover, her concern for her fellows African's condition both on a physical level and a spiritual one is evident: she argues slaves should be set free and allowed to learn the gospel in order to save their souls. Her critique, however veiled remains effective for the reader, and together with her literary skills as a poet, she demonstrates that the Africans are equal to the white people if they are allowed to be educated. Thus, she is a key figure in supporting the British abolitionist cause. She contributes to the process of leading the white Britons to become aware of the iniquity of slavery and the consequent discriminatory attitude towards black people.

In the following section I am going to discuss both Ignatius Sancho's life and his literary production. The former slave's letters were collected and published as they contained his thoughts, through them he condemned the institution of slavery and managed to tell his personal experiences, as is the case of the early Slave Narratives.

## 5.2. Ignatius Sancho

Ignatius Sancho is the first African prose writer to be published in Britain (Fryer, 2018: 95); indeed, in 1782, the first edition of his letters was published posthumously in London. Sancho's letters revealed to be extremely successful: the book secured over 1200 subscribers before publication and the first edition went sold out quickly, to such an extent that the Monthly Review could not obtain a review copy, so the second edition was published the following year, moreover, Sancho's wife received over £500 from the sales (Fryer, 2018: 98). The publication of his letters took place two years after his death, thus, it was not Sancho's own decision to collect them in a book, as a matter of fact, they had not been written with the aim to be published in the first place.

The book *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African. To which are prefixed, Memoirs of his Life* is a collection the letters Sancho wrote to a variety of his friends and correspondents during his life; as a consequence, the letters dealt with different topics and revealed several concerns; most of them simply focus on Sancho's everyday concerns, however, in many of the letters he also feels the need to 'comment upon both political and literary life in Britain, and he does so with a deep love of the country and a thwarted desire to belong' (Phillips in King, Sandhu, Walvin, Girdham, 1997: 12), in doing so, Sancho discusses themes which influenced his life such as discrimination and slavery. Therefore, even if his work does not entirely focus on slavery as the Slave Narratives do, his opinion on the peculiar

institution come to light in his letters. Like other black writers, he claims the importance of making the white Europeans aware of the horrors of slavery.

The title of the collection echoes the title of the Slave Narratives, in which the African name of the former slave was reported, and its origins stated. Also here, the editor makes clear that Sancho is an African, but still, as it will be stated in the preface, an admirable, educated, and intelligent black man. Since the letters were published posthumously, it was not Sancho who edited and prefaced them. It was Frances Crew the wife of the surgeon of the household of the Prince of Wales (Carretta, 1996: 78) and one of the receivers of Sancho's letters, who decided to collect them and to edit the book. She also wrote the advertisement that precedes the whole work. Here, the editor declares that the letters were not intended to be published and were later collected from the receivers. Moreover, the aim of the editor Frances Crew are made explicit: on the one hand, she wishes to demonstrate that 'an untutored African may possess abilities equal to a European', and on the other hand, she wants to serve Sancho's 'worthy family' (Sancho, 1784: iii). The first aim of the editor clearly reminds of the Slave Narratives objective to prove the real worth and humanity of black people; thus, even if under a different form, Sancho's letters pursue the same goals as Slave Narratives. Indeed, Frances Crew's words echo the words contained in the Slave Narratives' prefaces, such as Susanna Strickland's description of Ashton 'His amiable disposition and natural intelligence are striking proofs of what the African is capable' (Warner, 1831:12).

### 5.2.1. *The life of Ignatius Sancho*

In order to better frame Sancho's letters, the editor decides to provide the readers with a brief account of his life. The brief text entitled *The Life of Ignatius Sancho* mirrors the style of the Slave Narratives and it is preceded by a Latin epigraph taken from Virgil's *Ecloques* which states: 'Quamvis ille niger, quamvis tu candidus esses' (Sancho, 1784: v). In Virgil's original poem, the quoted sentence ends with a

question mark which has not been reported in Sancho's book; the complete sentence in its original version would mean 'would it not have been better for you to tolerate him even if he is black and you are white?'. However, the choice to quote only a small part of the sentence and ending it with a full stop, slightly changes the meaning of the sentence, this new version would then mean: 'he is black, and you are white'. Both meanings would fit in with Sancho's life account, as is the case of the Slave Narratives, the collection of letters is meant to be read by a white audience. Thus, the initial epigraph states the evident difference between Sancho and the intended readers.

Then, Frances Crew begins the account of Sancho's life by defining him as an 'extraordinary Negro' (Sancho, 1784: v). Being faithful to the Slave Narratives' structure, the editor starts her narration with Sancho's birth: the former slave was born in 1729 on board a slave ship travelling to the West-Indies and, when in Cartagena, on the coast of Colombia, he was baptized with the name Ignatius. Thus, Sancho was born a slave and experienced the horrors of the Middle Passage, when he was just an infant, having not memory of it and of Africa. Unfortunately, both his parents died during the Middle Passage: a disease killed his mother, and his father killed himself preferring death to a life as a slave. At the age of two he was brought to England by his owner, and given to three maiden sisters, resident in Greenwich, who surnamed him Sancho 'from a fancied resemblance to the 'Squire of Don Quixote' (Sancho, 1784: vi). Thus, the three sisters' decision to rename him was only due to a playful whim they had, even from this simple example, it is clear that Sancho was not considered as a person rather as a pet, exactly as Mary Prince, when she was given to Mr. William's granddaughter (Prince, 2000: 3).

The three ladies were not keen to teach the young Sancho how to read and write since they believed 'that African ignorance was the only security for his obedience' (Sancho, 1784: vi). however, Sancho had the chance to make the acquaintance of the Duke of Montagu, whose anti-slavery ideas were well-known at the time (Phillips, 1997: 6); indeed, he much appreciated the slave, 'a genius of

such apparent fertility' (Sancho, 1784: vii) and, besides recommending his mistress to cultivate his skills, he also lent Sancho some books. Through these books, he was able to autonomously educate himself. When the Duke died, Sancho would not live with the three sisters anymore, thus, he escaped them and asked the duchess for help. She decided to hire him as a butler and after her death she left a large amount of money to him.

At this point of his life, Sancho had the chance to dedicate himself to his passions, in particular reading, writing, and music, thus, he wrote some poetry, two plays and three collections of songs; his talent allowed him to enter the London literary circles and to get acquainted with important British artists: he knew the painter Gainsborough, who also portrayed him; he was a friend of David Garrick, John Hamilton Mortimer, Joseph Nollekens, Samuel Johnson and Laurence Sterne (Phillips, 1997: 6). However, he also indulged in gambling and women, precisely because of these bad habits he lost all his money, and had to return to service for the Montagu family. Finally, he met Anne Osborne, a West Indian woman; the two got married and they had six children. With his wife, Sancho opened a grocery business in London's Mayfair.

### 5.2.2. *'An extraordinary negro' in London*

As is evident from his biography, Sancho may be considered as an 'extraordinary negro' (Sancho, 1784: v), whose abilities and friendships allowed him to have a unique experience in Britain. Therefore, he played a 'unique role in London society' (Phillips in King, Sandhu, Walvin, Girdham, 1997: 13), Sancho, differently from his contemporaries Gronniosaw, Equiano and Cugoano, did not experience Caribbean slavery. He had no memory of his travels across the Atlantic, and he probably did not witness the terrible punishments and the horrors of slavery (Phillips, 1997: 6). Sancho grew up in Britain and became well integrated into London artistic life, he had British cultural and literary models, he had white friends, indeed, Caryl Phillips

describes Sancho as 'the most urbane and mannered of those of African descent who were writing in Britain in the eighteenth century' (Phillips, 1997: 6- 7).

Nevertheless, it was evident, even to Sancho himself, that he would never be considered an Englishman by the society in which he lived in. He was used to receive discriminatory attitudes, and regardless of his knowledge, or his wealth he was always seen as inferior to the white Britons. In his letters he details his situation as a foreigner in Britain, in the letter he wrote on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1779, he states: 'I am only a lodger here, and hardly that' (Sancho, 1784: 270). Here he accounts of his condition of inbetweenness, he grew up in Britain and had no connections with Africa, but still, the society around him made him feel as a guest there, and sometimes even an undesired guest. He was aware of the prejudices against black people in England, sometimes later he also writes 'from Othello to Sancho the big, we are either foolish, or mulish – all, all without a single exception' (Sancho, 1784: 275). Here he displays his knowledge of the English classics, mentioning Shakespeare's Othello, a character who thinks to be accepted in the Venetian society, which however always consider him as an outsider, who in the end loses his mind killing his innocent wife Desdemona and finally committing suicide. Thus, Sancho draws a parallelism between Othello and himself to represent all the black people living in Britain: they are all underestimated and considered either 'foolish' like Othello, or probably 'mulish' like himself.

Also, in Sancho's letters there many instances where he is discriminated only on the basis of the colour of his skin: in 1777, he writes that a man refused his help since it was 'from the hands of a poor negroe' and he reports the man's rude words, 'pooh, I do not care for your prancings, I can see you at this distance' (Sancho, 1784: 154). Therefore, in his letters, Sancho is not afraid of directly addressing difficult issues such as discrimination, yet he always makes use of irony and writes in a playful way. He refers to himself as 'Sancho the big', he never loses his spirit not even when describing the racist insults received by his family. In 1777 he writes: 'We went by water – had a coach home – were gazed at – followed &c. &c. – but not

much abused' (Sancho, 1784: 129), and again in 1779 he reports how people stopped them 'and most generously insulted' them and kept them 'half an hour in sweet converse of the – of the blasting kind' (Sancho, 1784: 264). Û

It is clear from Sancho's words that for a black man living in the 1770s in Britain it was normal to be verbally abused, indeed, when describing such situations, he handles them with an ironic sense of detachment (Phillips, 1997: 7), as he does not go into details with the white people's attitudes, he says he and his family were stared at, followed '&c. &c.'. He also adds they were 'not much abused', however when saying so he implies they were actually abused; also, he is clearly ironic when defining the white people insults 'gentle' and their conversation 'sweet'. His ironic and apparently detached response to discrimination may also be considered as an act of rebellion, of a person who does not want to surrender himself to the discriminations he has to endure everyday with no reason.

### 5.2.3. *Sancho, the African*

Notwithstanding Sancho's evident connections to England, Sancho is also an African, as the title of his letters reminds to the readers. However, the title was chosen by the editor of the collection and not by Sancho himself, still, throughout his letters he proudly mentions his African origins; as he signs three of his letters with the nickname 'Africanus' (Sancho, 1784: 104-164-337). Moreover, he refers to his complexion various times, as he ironically refers to himself as 'a poor Blacky grocer' (Sancho, 1784: 291), and as 'a man of a convexity of belly exceeding Falstaff – and a black face into the bargain' (Sancho, 1784: 301). Sancho uses irony when mentioning the traits for which he was probably seen as 'different'; however, with irony Sancho also demonstrates the awareness of his peculiar situation in Britain and the acceptance of it (Sandhu in King, Sandhu, Walvin, Girdham, 1997: 50).

Sancho is both English in culture, language, and education, but part of him is also African. According to Phillips's description, he occupies a role both 'central'

and peripheral' (Phillips in King, Sandhu, Walvin, Girdham, 1997: 14):

While the British nation was still mired in a guilt-free sense of itself as strictly white, and there was an absence of cultural or political pressure to encourage the nation to adapt its image of itself, and while there was precious little reflected evidence of diaspora success beyond the shores of Britain, S. still persisted in ploughing his own unique 'doubly-conscious' furrow with a courageous dignity (Phillips in King, Sandhu, Walvin, Girdham, 1997: 14).

Sancho seems to anticipate the position of the contemporary black Britons, who now live an in-between experience; as Phillips states, while in the period in which Sancho was living, nobody imagined considering black people as British, he already represented a more inclusive idea of national identity. Sancho already appeared as tangible evidence of the nation's connections with slavery and consequently with the Black diaspora. Sancho, an African free and educated man, an artist, grown up in the British context and belonging to the British culture demonstrates the impossibility of excluding transatlantic slavery from British history and national identity.

#### *5.2.4. Sancho against the institution of slavery*

Along with his everyday concerns, Sancho deals with the theme of slavery, the institution, which is responsible, for both his parents' death and for his arrival in England. The most significant letter regarding the subject of slavery is represented by the one which Sancho writes to Sterne, which dates back July 1776. Through this letter Sancho expresses his admiration for Sterne and he praises his decision to publicly condemn the peculiar institution in one of his sermons, entitled 'Job's Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life' (1760). Already in the very beginning of the letter Sancho highlights and praises Sterne's humanity, and his thoughts on the equality between black and white people:

It would be an insult on your humanity (or perhaps look like it) to apologize for the liberty I am taking--I am one of those people whom the vulgar and illiberal call "Negrus." (Sancho, 1784: 89)

Therefore, he demonstrates his brilliant ability in playing with the English language. Actually, while suggesting the formal sentence 'pardon the liberty I am taking', usually used to kindly introduce a letter, a request, or a comment, he also takes the literal meaning of it, and implies that it would probably be an insult to Sterne's equalitarian ideals to ask for his pardon his liberty in writing him; rather, he is certain that Sterne would be willing to listen to him as to any other white people, since he would not derogatorily consider him a 'Negrus', as the 'vulgar' and 'illiberal people do. Thus, with these few lines, Sancho manages to both praise Sterne and to condemn the people who have prejudices against black people.

Later on in the letter, Sancho makes reference to a sermon Sterne gave on the iniquity of slavery. Thus, Sancho claims the importance to inform the public about the injustices of slavery, so that 'that subject, handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many' (Sancho, 1784: 90). Sancho strongly believes that as Sterne is 'universally read, and universally admired' he would get to the white people's hearts and effectively fight against slavery to help his fellow slaves (Sancho, 1784: 91). Therefore, Sancho prompts Sterne to deal with this subject again; when doing so, he also indirectly highlights the importance of both the work of his contemporaries who wrote the early Slave Narratives and his own letters which would much later contribute to the diffusion of knowledge on slavery.

Not only did Sancho admire Sterne's writing, but he also took inspiration from his style for his own writing: as Sandhu argues, Sancho's use of dashes as the predominant punctuation in his letters is taken from Sterne. Sancho's decision to reproduce Sterne's style, can on the one hand show his esteem for him, and on the other hand, the use of the dashes is functional in order to force his reader to focus on the fragments of writing between the dashes belong' (Sandhu in King, Sandhu,

Walvin, Girdham, 1997: 50). This gives relevance to the sentences which are enclosed between the dashes, through which the reader can hear Sancho's voice as if he was directly speaking to him/her; since, they often report as asides, Sancho's thoughts and his exclamations, such as: ' – you could not fail-' ; and – Alas! –' (Sancho, 1784: 91). Sancho's style creates extremely vivid letters which manage to involve the reader in the narration he is doing.

#### 5.2.5. Conclusions

Ignatius Sancho's letter relate the black former slave's everyday life in Britain with his family, thus, they show its humanity, and the audience can identify with his accounts. More than that, through his ironic representation of discrimination he fights against it and does not allow the perpetrators of discrimination to interfere with his life; this attitude raises the audience sympathy, and it is the key to his letters' success. Also, he supports the abolitionist cause by prompting Sterne to take a stand against slavery.

In the next section I am going to introduce Ottobah Cugoano's long essay, in this case the writer's aim to witness and condemn slavery is even more evident as his essay explicit aim was to explain the abolitionist thought against the 'evil and wicked traffic of the slavery'.

### 5.3. Ottobah Cugoano

In 1787 Quobna Ottobah Cugoano published his anti-slavery work in London: *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*. This text was published by subscription, and it became

so popular that went through various editions and it has also been translated into French by Antonie Diannyère (Hoyles, 2015: 107). Even if the publication title only mentions the writer's African name, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, in his everyday life, the writer kept both his names, thus he also used his English name, John Stuart. This double naming clearly reflects his double and complex identity, as both British and African: indeed, throughout his book his African heritage is made evident as long as his British acquired identity. Cugoano's text represents a powerful condemnation not only of the slave trade, but also of slavery itself (Hoyles, 2015: 107), as it 'provided perhaps the most radical assault on the African slave trade and West Indian slavery by any writer, white or black, during this era' (Gould in Fisch, 2007: 17). Even if this work includes Cugoano's personal experiences, it differs from the early Slave Narratives, as it integrates them with his long and articulated reflections on slavery (Sinnan in Fisch, 2007: 63).

### 5.3.1. *Christianity against slavery*

Cugoano presents himself as a religious and cultivated man, indeed, in his work, he uses his Christian beliefs to support his abolitionist cause. Cugoano supports the idea of a 'shared humanity' (Wheeler in Carretta and Gould, 2001: 18), mentioning the common heritage of the whole humankind that was originated from Adam and Eve. Therefore, according to him, the humankind would share a common 'nature, blood and form', while the external differences which are evident, such as the complexion, would be a consequence of the climatic variations of the locations around globe which require for different physical characteristics on the part of humankind (Wheeler in Carretta and Gould, 2001: 29). Thus, the black complexion of the African would be a consequence of the hot temperatures in which they live, and to their continual exposure to the sunlight; this argument would prove the black people to be equal to white ones, and therefore, slavery would be baseless. Thus, following the idea of the shared humanity, Cugoano affirms 'it could never be

lawful and just for any nation, or people, to oppress and enslave another' (Cugoano, 1999: 29), and he firmly fights against the misinterpretation of the complexion: to justify slavery through religion, the variations in the human complexion in the past had been linked to a divine curse for the heirs of Ham (Hoyles, 2015: 115) or Cain's heirs condemnation as Wheatley has mentioned it, and the supporters of pro-slavery ideas claimed that slavery was never directly condemned in the Bible:

that they find that it was admitted under the Divine institution by Moses, as well as the long-continued practice of different nations for ages; and that the Africans are peculiarly marked out by some signal prediction in nature and complexion for that purpose. (Cugoano, 1999: 28)

Nevertheless, he affirms that these arguments are simple 'exuse[s]' and misinterpretations of the Bible, used to support the lucrative trade. Unfortunately, while Cugoano relies on the Bible to support his arguments, also the pro-slavery supporters found justifications for slavery in biblical authority: since the Bible is composed of various books written by various authors in a context in which slavery was an accepted institution, thus, the Bible contains a great deal of episodes in which slavery is mentioned, so, each of them can be interpreted differently, and 'it can be used to justify many positions' (Hoyles, 2015: 114).

Moreover, he tackles the metaphorical commonly used association often present in the Bible of whiteness and purity, and blackness as evil. Once again, these metaphors were literarily a connection between white skin and morality, while the black skin would entail immorality and savagery. Cugoano himself when referring to metaphorical brightness and blackness, he juxtaposes black complexion to sin (Wheeler in Carretta and Gould, 2001: 30). Nevertheless, he also compares the black skin to everyman's sinning condition linked to the original sin, and God has the power to wash away all the sins, and to do so he

has opened a fountain through the blood of Jesus, for sins and for uncleanness,

wherein all the stains and blackest dyes of sin and pollution can be washed away forever, and the darkest sinner be made to shine as the brightest angel in heaven. (Cugoano, 1999: 39-40)

Through these words, Cugouano seems to imply that black skin is something which people are born with, and for which they have no fault, thus, if they live following the God's commandments they can 'shine' and become metaphorically bright.

Throughout the whole text, Cugoano's words and thoughts appear extremely modern and direct for his time, differently from Gronniosaw, he directly condemns slavery and the perpetrators with very harsh words: he even affirms that it is a 'great shame and scandal' that the slaveholders consider themselves as Christian while 'the destroyers and enslavers of men can be no Christians', for Christians 'are devoted to honesty, justice, humanity, meekness, peace and good-will to all men' (Cugoano, 1999: 166).

### 5.3.2. *Cugoano's writing*

The focus of Cugoano's narrative is not based on his life, as is the case of the Slave Narratives, rather on his 'thoughts and sentiments', as stated by the title. For his writing, Cugoano makes use of different literary styles such as the autobiography, the biblical commentary, and the argumentation (Hoyles, 2015: 151), presented as a whole. Despite the formal nature of his text, some similarities with the Slave Narrative are evident, starting from the title, which, following the Slave Narratives tradition, states that the text is 'written by himself', as it mentions the writer's origins 'a native of Africa'; also, the text is directly addressed to the 'inhabitants of Great Britain' in the front page (Cugoano, 1999: 3). Then the title is followed by an epigraph taken from the Bible:

One law, and one manner shall be for you, and for the stranger that sojourned

with you; and therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. Numb[ers] xv.16. —Matthew vii.12.1 (Cugoano, 1999: 3)

The quote refers to one of the most important commandments of the Christian religion, according to which, a Christian should behave towards the other people as she/he wishes the others would behave towards her/himself. This very concept explicitly contrasts with the institution of slavery.

Cugoano opens his text praising the people who 'have written various essays against that infamous traffic of the African Slave Trade' (Cugoano, 1999: 9) However, he affirms that it 'is evident that something else ought yet to be done' (Cugoano, 1999: 10), and it is the natural duty of every person who has any 'affinity to the name of Christian' to actively fight against slavery (Cugoano, 1999: 10). Therefore, as a Christian his aim is to present his 'thoughts and sentiments' which occur to him, and which, he claims, are consequences of the teachings from the 'Scriptures of Divine Truth' (Cugoano, 1999: 10). Therefore, his claim is that there may be no reasonable excuse for a man to rob another, for he describes slave holders as robbers of men; since they steal other men's rights in order to enrich themselves. Further on in the text, Cugoano uses again the image of the slaveholders as robbers, who exploit other man without any right, indeed everything they do for the slaves, as feeding them is done to keep them alive so that they can exploit them even more. These people doubtlessly go against the principles of the Divine Law, which teaches that 'all men should love their neighbors as themselves' and 'that they should do unto others, as they would that men should do to them' (Cugoano, 1999: 11). There, with the Bible's quote, he echoes the epigraph of the publication. Cugoano admits the comparison between the slaveholders and the robber may appear as too harsh, 'but the parallel is so coincident' that it is the only he who could think of (Cugoano, 1999: 11). Also, he traces back his impossibility to find other expression to his lack of a better education, which was impossible for people of his complexion, for a great

number of white people believed every black people was 'fitted only to be a slave' (Cugoano, 1999: 11).

### 5.3.3. *Cugoano's narrative*

After his introduction, Cugoano feels the need to provide the reader with some information about himself, thus, he indulges in the narration of his kidnapping and his voyage as a slave: he was born in 1757 in the city of Agimaque, in what today is Ghana. At the age of 13 he was kidnapped together with about eighteen of twenty boys and girls. Differently from the other writers, Cugoano did not mention the complexion of his kidnappers, since, as he states, both black and white men can be evil and good:

A good man will neither speak nor do as bad man will; but if a man is bad, it makes no difference whether he be a black or a white devil. (Cugoano, 1999: 11)

This extremely modern concept presents white and black people as equal and makes them neither forcefully good nor bad. Later on, Cugoano will affirm, that he was first kidnapped by some of his complexion, 'who were the first cause of [his] exile and slavery', however, the Europeans pushed these people to kidnap the children, since 'if there were no buyers there would be no sellers' (Cugoano, 1999: 16).

The kidnapped children, among whom Cugoano, were conducted to a town full of white people that he was afraid they would eat him: the image of the white man as a cannibal towards the black man was then used by Equiano in his narrative; if the Africans were usually conceived as savages and cannibals by the Europeans, these images used from the perspectives of the black authors show that ungrounded fear always arise from the unknown. Thus, as the Africans appear savages, because they have habits and customs unknown to the Europeans, the latter seem to be

cannibals for the very same reason. However, the Europeans finally prove to be 'men of the brutish and depraved nature' for they established and carried on 'that most dishonest, unjust and diabolic traffic' which is so horrendous 'that the very idea of it is shocking, and the whole nature of it is horrible and infernal' (Cugoano, 1999: 61).

Then, the narration focuses on the moment in which the children reached the ship and discovered that it was supposed to conduct them away. On the ship the situation is extremely harsh, the Middle Passage represents a terrible moment in Cugoano's account: 'there was nothing to be heard but rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellow-men' (Cugoano, 1999: 15), on the ship death seemed preferable to life, as the other authors also mentioned. Cugoano recalls his condition by claiming he was 'brought from a state of innocence and freedom, and, in a barbarous and cruel manner, conveyed to a state of horror and slavery' (Cugoano, 1999: 15). Finally, the ship landed in Grenada, where he saw to 'the most dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty': the slave market (Cugoano, 1999: 16). Together with the experience of the Middle Passage, the slave markets, are described as extremely inhuman moments in the slaves' lives, there, families were torn apart, and the slaves were treated as objects, who have to be examined and evaluated.

After some time, he was brought to England by his owner, there, he had the strong desire to learn how to read, so his master sent him to a proper school. As Gronniosaw affirmed, also Cugoano is thankful towards God's Providence:

although I have been brought away from my native country, in that torrent of robbery and wickedness, thanks be to God for his good providence towards me; I have both obtained liberty, and acquired the great advantages of some little learning, in being able to read and write, and, what is still infinitely of greater advantage, I trust, to know something of HIM who is that God whose providence rules over all, and who is the only Potent One that rules in the nations over the children of men. It is unto Him, who is the Prince of the

Kings of the earth, that I would give all thanks. (Carretta, 1996: 150)

Thus, in spite of his horrible experiences with slavery, Cugoano is thankful to God for having sent him to England, the place in which he obtained freedom and where he was educated. Thus, Cugoano gives a great importance to his Christian beliefs, which should present him as being close to the white reader.

#### 5.3.4. *The slaves' harsh conditions*

Cugoano denounces the slaves' harsh conditions: they can be bought and sold like animals, they are tortured by their owners, even to death, for which, the slave owners would only have to pay a small amount of money. Therefore, the slaves are not considered as human beings for the Africans are conceived as ignorant and as savages, and the Europeans affirm they would live a better life and have better opportunities as slave, rather than remaining in their native land.

But the argument is false; there can be no ignorance, dispersion, or unsociableness so found among them, which can be made better by bringing them away to a state of a degree equal to that of a cow or a horse. (Cugoano, 1999: 23)

Cugoano claims that their apparent ignorance derives from their difficult condition, and they are provided with no opportunities of educating themselves, as they are kept in a state similar to a cow or a horse. The comparison with the animals reminds of Mary Prince's use of images taken from the animal world. Cugoano affirms the only way in which the slaves' situation could be brightened, would entail the elimination of slavery and they would need to have the opportunity to be educated and to know Goodwill. There, he also refers to Ukawsaw Gronniosaw as an example of a former slave who managed to acquire some knowledge of the Christian religion.

### 5.3.5. *The question of responsibility*

Cugoano identifies the people who are responsible for the 'horrible business' (Cugoano, 1999: 79): firstly, every man in Great Britain and in its colonies who is aware of the trade and who is not actively fighting it, is responsible for it. Secondly, he affirms that the 'men of eminence and power' business' (Cugoano, 1999: 79), should be considered guilty of the iniquity of slavery, and they have both to carry the burden of having oppressed the Africans, and the burden to have ruined their country. Thirdly, even if Cugoano has a strong Christian faith, he is not afraid of directly reporting the clergy's faults in not opposing the slave trade, since they should praise peace and the good-will of all men.

In order to fight against the white people indifference towards the slave trade, in the latter part of the text Cugoano directly addresses both the British readers, and he also appeals for the European kings' wisdom for them to abolish the 'infernal invention' (Cugoano, 1999: 82). Therefore, Cugoano sent copies of his text to King George III, the Prince of Wales, and the politician Edmund Burke, however, it is not clear if they have ever read it (Fryer, 2018: 103). Moreover, Cugoano suggests practical reformations against slavery: first, he proposes to establish days of mourning dedicated to slavery; sadly, only many years later this suggestion became a reality, an example of that can be the 2007 commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade, however, still today Cugoano's idea could be useful to reflect on the peculiar institution. Secondly, he wishes for a 'total abolition of slavery' and 'an universal emancipation of slaves' (Cugoano, 1999: 91), as we know texts such as Cugoano's one and the abolitionist movement shaped the public opinion and led to the abolition of the slave trade first and of slavery later, however, the path towards a complete emancipation of the slaves was still long and difficult. Thirdly, he suggests that a fleet of ships would be sent to Africa to avoid Africans to be carried away against their will. Cugoano's thoughts and proposals appear extremely modern, they probably prompted British people to reflect on slavery and created a

breeding ground for abolitionist thoughts.

#### 5.3.6. *Conclusions*

Ottobah Cugoano's text ends with a direct plea to the British white people to whom the text was originally dedicated:

O ye inhabitants of Great-Britain! to whom I owe the greatest respect; to your king! to yourselves! and to your government! And tho' many things which I have written may seem harsh, it cannot be otherwise evaded when such horrible iniquity is transacted: and tho' to some what I have said may appear as the rattling leaves of autumn, that may soon be blown away and whirled in a vortex where few can hear and know: I must yet say, although it is not for me to determine the manner, that the voice of our complaint implies a vengeance. (Cugoano, 1999: 114)

Cugoano warns the British people that the situation will eventually change, and he advises them to reflect on the evil actions they are perpetrating against the black people.

His whole text is a clear petition against the institution of slavery, indeed, it differentiates from both Wheatley's and Sancho's text, for he made explicit his abolitionist aim already from the title. Here, slavery is the leitmotiv of the writing which focuses on nothing else but it. Similarly to Olaudah Equiano's narrative, Cugoano's text marks an innovative turn in the writings against slavery as a black author.

#### 5.4. **Final Remarks**

The critical analysis of the three literary works on slavery has shown that the publication of both Slave Narratives and other writing on slavery in the eighteenth-

century Britain, represented a key element for the abolitionist movement. These works and their authors became famous and are now remembered among the early black British writers. They cannot be considered as Slave Narratives; however, I consider them as evolutions and new interpretations of this literary genre. They pursue the same objectives as the Slave Narratives and present the former slaves' perspective. Together with the Slave Narratives, these texts participate in the abolitionist process, and manage to testify the horrors perpetrated through the institution of slavery.

Now that the literary production on slavery in the context of eighteenth-century Britain has been framed, the next chapter will provide the context in which the contemporary evolution of the literary genre of the Slave Narrative, which has been defined as the Neo-Slave Narrative, and I will outline the characteristics of this new genre.

## *Chapter 6. The Neo-Slave Narratives in the context of postcolonial Britain*

The present chapter aims to frame the literary genre of the Neo-Slave Narrative in the context of contemporary postcolonial Britain: similarly to the early Slave Narratives which testify the presence of the black population in eighteenth-century Britain; their contemporary literary evolution brings into the open the racial issues of the contemporary period, which are the legacy of the colonial past. Therefore, in the next paragraphs, I am going to define the post Imperial historical context and the postcolonial literature that deal with racial issues.

The Imperial period undoubtedly shaped the multicultural contemporary outlook of Britain, and even more profoundly it influenced the lives of the inhabitants of the former colonies, as Said defines it:

At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others (1994: 25).

During the colonial period, the British colonizers imposed their language, their culture, their history to the colonized, erasing the traditions and the culture of the native populations of the colonies. When the process of the colonies' independence came to an end and the colonies were finally free, the influence of Britain persisted through the creation of the British Commonwealth, and thanks to the 'open door policy' that led to the 1948 British Nationality Act, which extended the British citizenship to all the inhabitants of the former colonies, migration from the colonies to Britain took place.

Decolonization is an extremely long and complex process of which we can still observe the aftermaths: indeed, it means much more than the physical

decolonization of lands; it also implies to free the colonized cultures and of the people's minds from the colonizer's culture. The persistent effects of colonialism and the consequences of the colonial ideology are represented through postcolonial literature.

The term 'postcolonial' appeared during the 1970s and it has been defined in different ways, it can be perceived in a general sense as Ashcroft defines it:

We use the term 'post-colonial', however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression (1989: 1).

Following this definition, the postcolonial period would also include the colonial years, by extension, the works produced during the colonial era would be ascribed to Postcolonial Literature, indeed, works produced during the colonial period share the core subjects of works produced after independence. However, since colonialism is not the central element of postcolonial literature, 'postcolonial' is commonly used, and will be hereafter used in this dissertation, with its literal meaning: it refers to the period that comes after the independence of the colonies. Thus, postcolonial literature encompasses the works produced in the postcolonial period (Walder, 1998: 2).

Such period is an extended period which lasts until the present day; the works that belong to postcolonial literature share common themes such as identity, race, hybridity, displacement, and resilience. On the one hand, postcolonial literature is a way to retrieve the national histories of the colonies and to re-establish the colonized identity; and on the other hand, it shows the consequences of the colonial period, thus, it comprises the experiences of the people coming from the former colonies that emigrated after the independence. In the case of Britain, a great number of works have been produced in the context of postcolonial literature.

After having briefly provided a context for the Neo-Slave Narratives, the following part will include a reflection on both the contemporary multicultural outlook of Britain, and of the concept of identity for the people that are both black and British.

### **6.1. Black and British**

Since the arrival of the SS Windrush at Tilbury Dock in 1948, Britain's multicultural outlook has changed, the number of black people coming from the former colonies in Britain rapidly increased, and together with it, the British people's intolerance towards them grew too. The 1948 'open door policy' was rapidly abandoned and was replaced by the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act: the immigrants became 'second-class' citizens. These immigrants felt displaced, their history, their education, their former life in the colonies was strictly connected to Britain:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself. Because they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identity - I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon - Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history (Hall, 1991: 48-49).

As Hall suggests, British customs and British identity are strictly connected to British colonial past, which is however constantly denied.

Not only, is British colonial past denied, but also, racism and intolerance

towards black Britons have lingered in British society up until today. Both the first and second-generation migrants have faced the question of belonging and identity: on the one hand, British society constantly reminds them they are unwelcomed foreigners, and on the other hand, they have 'nowhere to go back to' (Phillips in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 18). First generation migrants initially believed they could come 'back home', probably because, as Hall suggests, everybody in Britain kept on asking them when they going back and leaving the UK (1991: 52); nevertheless, 'migration is a one way trip' (Hall, 1987:44): while living in Britain they have physically and mentally distanced themselves from their homelands and they have idealized their homelands as a means to run away from the pain they were living in Britain, thus they ended up creating 'imaginary homelands' (Rushdie: 1992: 10).

In a similar way the second-generation migrants conceive the distant 'back home' as an imaginary homeland where they have never been to, and they feel no strong attachment to. This in-between position felt by migrants is comparable to what DuBois calls 'two-ness' (DuBois, 1905: 3): their identity is scattered in-between different cultures and places. However, identity cannot be a fixed concept, as Phillips claims resuming Hall's idea: 'Our identities are fluid' (Phillips, 2001: 4), they constantly evolve and can be extremely complex (all, 1991: 47). Black Britons are both black AND British, their identity is a complex construction which retrieves the black British history.

Black Britons have been excluded from the narrative of the British nation (Williams, 1999) and they are constantly reminded that they do not belong, the old idea of a 'pure' Englishness excludes them: the idea that people who share the English identity should 'look the same', 'feel the same' and 'call themselves the same' (Hall 1991: 49). A concept which was rejected in Defoe's poem 'The True-born Englishman' (1703), which shows that the British identity is the result of the gathering of different ethnic groups, thus it is grounded on hybridity (Phillips, 1997: x-xi). Moreover, the colonies, the black slaves, the black immigrants have necessarily contributed to shaping contemporary Britain. The national identity itself

needs to be 're-invented' including hybridity (Arana in Arana, Ramey, 2004: 21), as Andrea Levy puts it: 'It is time to put the Caribbean back where it belongs – in the main narrative of British history' (2014: 18). Literature contributes to reshape British identity, making it more inclusive and hybrid (Lima in Arana, Ramey, 2004: 49).

In this difficult context, the need to integrate the history of the colonies and of the British slave past emerges from the writings of contemporary writers who retrieve the literary genre of the Slave Narrative and contribute to its contemporary evolution: the Neo-Slave Narrative. The following section will introduce the aims and the characteristics of this contemporary genre.

## 6.2. The British Neo-Slave Narratives

At the end of the twentieth century, there was a surge of new narratives about slavery that reproduce features of the early Slave Narratives, as highlighted by many academics such as Judith Misrahi-Barak, Abigail Ward, Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima. The early examples of these works were labeled as Neo-Slave Narratives for the first time by Ishmael Reed when referring to his 1976 work *Flight to Canada* (Bekers, 2018: 25). However, the earliest definition for the new genre was provided by Bernard W. Bell when analyzing Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971): in his 1987 discussion, Bell considered the Neo-Slave Narratives as 'residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom' (Bell 1987: 289).

Other attempts to define the genre have followed: particularly influential is Ashraf Rushdy's definition of Neo-Slave Narratives as

contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum Slave Narrative (Rushdy, 1999: 3).

According to Rushdy's definition, the Neo-Slave narratives directly reproduce the features of the early Slave Narratives, while Bell's definition focuses only on the narratives' subject, namely slavery. Therefore, even now it is difficult to provide a clear definition of the genre, as academics still provide controversial interpretations: while Sofia Muñoz -Valdivieso has distinguished between slavery novels, which deal with the subject of slavery, and Neo-Slave Narratives, which reproduce the features of the Slave Narratives (Muñoz -Valdivieso, 2012: 43); the two editors of the *Callaloo Special Issue* on the Neo-Slave Narratives, Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima seem to primarily focus on the content of the narratives, as they argue literary genres evolve to represent the different cultures in which they are created. As a consequence, the *Special Issue* also includes poetry, theatre and art to create a more polyphonic representation of slavery:

(neo-)Slave Narratives are still being written to expose systemic inequality and the unjust treatment of (black) peoples everywhere (Anim-Addo, Lima, 2017: 6-7).

In the present thesis, I followed Muñoz-Valdivieso's definition of the genre, and I chose to include only novels which reproduce the features of the early Slave Narratives; however, I support Anim-Addo and Lima's interpretation as other literary forms have been inspired by the early Slave Narratives, and can be read as further evolutions of the genre.

The contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives are inspired by the Slave Narratives, but they differentiate from their eighteenth-century counterparts primarily for their 'fictional nature' (Bekers, 2018: 25): while the former Slave Narratives were based on real lives accounts, the contemporary authors create fictional narratives to represent the slaves' experiences. As the famous Neo-Slave Narrative writer Toni Morrison affirms, her task is based on an 'imaginative act' influenced by her own recollections and by the recollections of the others to imagine

and narrate the interior life of the slaves (Morrison, 1998: 191-192). The fictional recreation of the slave past passed on through the writer's mediation becomes a way to include these stories in the national narrative of history (Anim-Addo, Lima, 2017: 4).

In the following paragraph I will focus on the main aim of the Neo-Slave Narratives, indeed, similarly to their counterpart, the Slave Narratives, these contemporary works have an extremely concrete aim, and try to raise the readers' awareness on the subject of racial prejudice.

#### *6.2.1. The Neo-Slave Narratives' aim*

As the early Slave Narratives were created with the purpose of showing the slaves' terrible life conditions, in order to raise awareness in the white population and encourage them to support the abolition process, this genre should have died with the end of slavery. Nevertheless, manifold reasons lay behind the contemporary writers' need to further explore the subject of slavery; indeed, as Fred D'Aguiar provocatory text 'The Last Essay About Slavery' (1996) states, before slavery 'can finally be laid to rest', 'slavery's relevance to present anxieties about race' need 'to come to an end' (D'Aguiar, 1996: 125).

The fictional nature of the Neo-Slave Narratives does not contrast with the political aim of these works (Bekers, 2018: 25). Firstly, the Neo-Slave Narratives have an historical and restorative role because they are written 'to fill in the blanks that Slave Narratives left' (Morrison 1998: 193). Therefore, Neo-Slave Narratives play a key role in reappraising of slavery in the context of British history, reminding the British population of that forgotten part history, representing the perspectives of the slaves rather than focusing on the abolitionist role of Britain (Ward, 2011: 1). On an historical level, as Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima suggest, the contemporary authors approaching this renewed form of Slave Narratives aim to

reestablish the historical value of the early Slave Narrative, prompting academics and readers to retrieve the early narratives, but they also take on the Slave Narratives' aim and strongly reaffirm the slaves' humanity (Anim-Addo, Lima, 2017: 3).

Secondly, the Neo-Slave Narratives have a metaphorical aim, what Rushdy defines as a 'bitemporal perspective' (Rushdy, 1999: 5), since these narratives introduce the past institution of slavery while showing their legacy in the present. The Neo-Slave Narrative genre has a pragmatic aim connected to the historical period in which it develops: the authors wish to raise awareness about the British colonial and slavery history, in order to create a 'responsible postcolonialism' through a 'narrative, structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the liberatory promise of the future' (Durrant, 2004: 1-3). The production of Neo-Slave Narratives shows the need to be aware of the past to fully understand the present tensions, and to possibly create a better future.

The following section aims to demonstrate that the Neo-Slave Narratives, as the early Slave Narratives, is also a British genre and plays a concrete role in the British context.

### 6.2.2. *A British genre*

The genre of the Neo-Slave Narrative developed simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic even though the academic world has predominantly considered the American context: undoubtedly, American works on slavery are numerous and along with key fictional works such as *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison and *Jubilee* (1966) by Margaret Walker, there have been several academic studies devoted to this genre, such as Bernard W. Bell's study published in 1987, or Ashraf Rushdy's in 1999. Furthermore, in the US the presence of thinkers and movements dealing with slavery is stronger. Nevertheless, Britain was a major agent in the slave trade,

and slavery has had a long-lasting legacy in Britain, and, as Sofia Muñoz-Valdivieso underlined in her 2012 essay, the publication of British Neo-Slave Narratives in the last thirty years has been remarkable (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2012: 43). In addition, she argues that both British authors' and academics' interest in recovering Great Britain's slave past grew since the celebration of the 2007 bicentenary from the abolition of the slave trade (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2012: 44).

Black British authors such as Caryl Phillips, Fred D'Aguiar, Andrea Levy, and Bernardine Evaristo, whose works will be further analysed in the next chapter, have felt the need to write rewrite the early Slave Narratives: these authors are all black and British, thus, during their lives, the British society has faced them with the question of belonging. The world around them would consider them to be foreigners in Britain, but they 'had nowhere to go back to' (Phillips in Ledent - Tunca 2012: 18), thus their feeling of non-belonging pushes them to investigate the British slave history, in order to re-establish their position as both black and British citizens; as D'Aguiar's claims:

My experience as a black person in a white-majority system predisposed me towards an interest in race since my skin carried this high negative premium whose history I was keen to find out about (Frías 2002: 418).

The British Neo-Slave Narratives highlight the British involvement in the slave trade and are set either in the West Indian colonies, or in the British island itself (Bekers, 2018: 26). Therefore, even if the British literary production on slavery is relatively small compared to the American production, it is relevant as part of the general trend to create a more inclusive narrative of history from the part of historians and artists. This context will hopefully create the ground to accept the contemporary multicultural outlook of Britain as a consequence of the slave trade and slavery, which need to be considered as 'relevant to present ethnic and cultural identities' (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2012: 44).

Differently from the writers of the early slave narratives, contemporary writers have the chance to produce more complex texts that play with style and literary patterns: the following paragraph is an attempt to summarize the Neo-slave Narratives' complexity.

### **6.3. The Neo-Slave Narratives' complexity**

While in the early Slave Narratives the abolitionist aim was essential, thus they tended to be extremely simple narratives which could be easily read in order to facilitate their diffusion; in the case of the Neo-Slave Narratives the style has become more complex. As these narratives draw on the themes of the early narratives, such as the kidnappings of Africans, the Middle Passage, the slaves' lives in the plantations, and the slaves' path towards freedom (Bekers, 2018: 26). Their authors' attitude towards the narratives' style has changed, and they represent the complexity of the subjects' traumatic experiences under the institution of slavery with complex literary patterns: they commonly use temporal juxtapositions, as none of the contemporary narratives follow the chronological order, and the authors also use a great variety of styles:

from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes (Smith in Fisch, 2007: 168).

Thus, each author approaches the representation of traumatic memories differently, creating complex Neo-Slave Narratives, ranging from Phillips's and D'Aguiar's polyphonic novels, to Evaristo's reversed narrative.

The contemporary authors make use of multiple literary techniques to create realist Slave Narratives. On the one hand, some of them reproduce a fictional

editorial background: indeed, as the present dissertation has highlighted, the early Slave Narratives made use of paratextual information, by including editorial notes, prefaces, acknowledgements or even appendixes, usually written by the white abolitionists who supported the publication of the narrative. On the other hand, while the narratives contained in the early examples were described uniquely from the former slave's perspective, in the contemporary context the narratives usually display various perspectives by presenting 'white and black figures' (Smith in Fisch, 2007: 180) to allow for a more inclusive memorialization of the history of slavery. In other words, contemporary writers tend to create a more inclusive narrative, in which different characters both black and white can pass on their perspectives; in doing so, they fight 'the master narrative History' not only by listening to the black victims, but also by eliminating the concept of an exclusive and unique narrative. A collective narrative of history allows for a more inclusive approach (Muñoz-Valdivieso, 2012: 44-45).

In Chapter 7 I will closely analyse the six British Neo-Slave Narratives I have selected. I will also provide a background for the four writers I am dealing with, in order to better understand the context of writing of the narratives.

## Chapter 7. *The British Neo-Slave Narratives*

Following the rapid growth of the number of British Neo-Slave Narratives, academics and critics have provided studies on British Neo-Slave Narratives, recognizing in each of them the characteristics of this literary genre; however, as Elisabeth Bekers wrote in 2018, there are few comparative studies which include all of them (2018: 24). Thus, aiming to create a comprehensive corpus of British Neo-Slave Narratives, and to provide a deeper definition of the genre in this final part of my dissertation, I will bring together six Neo-Slave Narratives written by four black and British authors I have selected.

Therefore, the present chapter is divided into four parts, each of them is dedicated to one of the four contemporary authors I have selected: Caryl Phillips, Fred D'Aguiar, Andrea Levy and Bernardine Evaristo. They all grew up in the British context, however, because of their race and families' stories, they are all involved in the vexed history and legacy of slavery, and they have experienced racial discrimination. For each of them, I shall firstly provide biographical and bibliographical information to frame their Neo-Slave Narratives; as their personal experiences pushed them to deal with slavery. Then, I will propose my analysis of their Neo-Slave Narratives, I will focus on: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993); D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997); Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010); and finally on Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008). I will introduce the texts following a chronological order, however, I chose to leave Evaristo's novel last, as, with its reversed narrative, it distances itself from the others and it represents the most extreme rewriting of the early Slave Narratives.

In my analysis of the six Neo-Slave Narratives, I will stress the differences

with, and I will look for the elements that have been inspired by the early Slave Narratives, creating parallelisms among texts; using an 'intertextual' method (Rushdy, 1999: 14): by establishing connections within texts and among texts that can be considered as predecessors. Moreover, I shall underline the narrative techniques of the different authors and try to understand the reasons behind their different narrative and stylistic choices. In addition, I intend to find the connections among all the Neo-Slave Narratives I selected; as I will argue that, despite their formal differences, they all share the same agenda in contributing to create a new memorialization of slavery and to link the history of slavery and the present day's racism.

The first author I am going to introduce is Caryl Phillips, whose writing questions the ideas of identity and belonging. I am going to analyse two of his works, which include the features of the Neo-Slave Narrative.

### **7.1. Caryl Phillips**

Among the many migrants coming from the former colonies after the Second World War, Lilian and Malcom Phillips arrived in England in 1958 after they left St. Paul, a small town in the then British Island of St. Kitts. They travelled on a banana boat carrying with them just few of their belongings, and, as Phillips defines himself, a three months old 'hand luggage' ('Northern Souls', in Phillips, 2011: 116), in other words, their new-born child Caryl. Even though this difficult migration does not hold a place in Phillips's memories, it has profoundly influenced his whole life, both as a writer and as a person, as he states:

The fact that I was born in the Caribbean and journeyed to Britain in the late 1950s as an infant has had an incalculable effect upon who I am (Phillips, 2002: 129)

The West Indian family settled in Leeds, where, at that time, the number of black people living there was uninfluent, indeed, they happened to be the only black family in the neighbourhood. As the author has many times mentioned, growing up in the sixties in a city like Leeds was a tough experience for a black boy of West Indian origins like him: while he was chased by other boys, he was trying hard to build up his own sense of identity in the balance between his distant motherland and his present British life (Schatteman, 'Conversations with Caryl Phillips's, in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 47-48). Caryl's growth was also complicated by his parents' divorce, and his mother's physical illness. As a consequence, Caryl and his brothers were fostered for a while, and from the age of fourteen to the age of eighteen he had to live with his father (Jaggi, in Schatteman, 2009: 79).

When Phillips won a place at the prestigious Queen's College in Oxford University, he left Leeds, and became an active and well-known student in the academic life. However, no matter how brilliant he was, racism was still part of his life even in Oxford (Schatteman, in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 49). After he finished university, Phillips moved to Edinburgh, where he wrote theatre plays. Then, he moved to London where his career as a writer took off. In 1980 he finally decided to visit his birthplace and travelled with his mother to St. Kitts. He travelled extensively since then through US, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe.

Because of his success, he was invited at Amherst College in Massachusetts as a visiting writer, and in 1992 he became a writer-in-residence and co-director of Creative Writing in Amherst (Schatteman, 2009: XX). Currently, he is Professor of English at Yale University, and he is one of the most significant contemporary writers. In addition, he has written an impressive body of works: he has written for television, radio, theatre, and cinema and is the author of eleven novels, five works of non-fiction and he is the editor of two anthologies. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, an Honorary Fellow of The Queens College, and he has won several literary prizes such as the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, among many

others.

Caryl Phillips's non-fiction body of work is rich and complex, and through it he managed to reflect on topics which are key to both his life and the lives of the second-generation migrants in Britain. Thus, the next sections will provide a frame for its literary production, I will first question Phillips's notions of identity and belonging, which led him to investigate the topic of colonial slavery; then I will discuss the reasons that lay behind his decision to represent slavery, and I will argue he conceives slavery as a collective trauma which needs to be overcome through literature; and finally, I will investigate the ways in which he manages to create traumatized characters, whose disrupted memories are represented through fragmented narrative structures.

#### *7.1.1. Identity and belonging*

Caryl Phillips's writing focuses on the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and its consequences for the African diaspora. He tackles subjects such as identity, belonging, the legacy of history, and racial discrimination. These subjects seem particularly important for him, as he stated in 2011 at the occasion of a public reading at the Brooklyn public library, when, quoting from Eudora Welty, he affirmed that a writer is somebody who dares 'to do with one's bag of fears', and he added: 'the question of identity is deeply part of my DNA'<sup>2</sup>. During his life, being both black and British, Phillips experienced racism, inequalities, and discrimination, thus, he reflected on questions of belonging and identity: as a second-generation migrant, he grew up in England having no memories of the Caribbean Island where he was born, nevertheless, he had to deal with a harsh reality, in which the world around him would consider him to be a foreigner in Britain.

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<sup>2</sup> Phillips: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kELzEJji4YY>

As a child, and as a young adult, he experienced the endless trauma of racism, and his desire to belong to the white group was enormous: 'I just wanted to fit in, and I believed that colour was the issue' (Phillips in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 15). The provocative title of his non-fiction work *Colour me English* (2011), evokes the desire of fitting in: thus, the wish is to be 'coloured' of the same colour as English people, which is ironical as it shows a desire of having no skin colour. This wish for integration through a white skin, mirrors the colonized people's desire to be white, in order to gain a higher social status (Fanon, 2008: 73). As a second-generation migrant Phillips felt to be in an in-between, what DuBois calls 'two-ness' (DuBois, 1905: 3):

I felt kind of lost between two places, if you like. I knew that I'd come from St. Kitts. Every time I had to write down "place of birth," I wrote down St. Paul's Village, St. Kitts. But at the same time, I also knew that part of me was British. But then British society was trying to tell me in some subtle ways, that I didn't belong there. So I think, in common with most kids of West Indian parents growing up in the sixties and seventies in England, I felt sort of lost between two places. (Wilkin, in Schatteman, 2009: 120)

Therefore, the writer has developed a complex sense of the self, which makes the individual unique and different from the others thus, complexity is a richness to be praised, rather than condemned. It is precisely his plural identity that gives Phillips a unique insight into British and Caribbean society, making him able to catch sight of linking 'bridges' and differences among them (Phillips, 1991: 46). The quintessential representation of this idea of a blurred definition of home is depicted by Phillips's wish to have his ashes scattered in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean (Phillips, 2002: 304). He wants to be in the middle point between Britain, Africa, and North America: the places that have in different ways influenced his life and his identity. Indeed, water is what links together the different points creating Phillips's journey: Africa, America and Britain are joint together by the Atlantic Ocean.

As a matter of fact, several journeys across water have deeply influenced Phillips' life, both directly and indirectly: while his ancestors, who were part of the slave trade, departed from Africa, and though the Middle Passage reached the Caribbean; his parents migrated from the Caribbean to England, and finally, he himself crossed again the Atlantic to visit Africa, the Caribbean, and finally moved to America. This image of water putting together different geography, may be considered as a physical representation of Caryl's idea of fluid identity: as the 'ribbons of water' (Phillips, 2011: 166) connecting different shores having divergent cultures, people's identities are fluid, and equally they manage to put together different cultures and traditions.

### 7.1.2. *Slavery*

Slavery is an open wound in Phillips's legacy, thus, in his writing he often refers to it, and he creates various characters who have experienced this condition. Discussing slavery is usually difficult, as both the victims and the perpetrators are reluctant to talk about it: because of its dramatic nature, while the victims are suffering from the memory of it, the perpetrators feel ashamed of their guilt (Levi, 1986).

For their traumatic nature, Phillips tends to put slavery and the Holocaust together in his works as he sees 'so many links and so many points of cross reference' between the Jewish and the black community, which have been discriminated and oppressed (Schatteman, in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 63). These similarities are the reasons why the young Phillips could see himself mirrored in the sufferings lived by the Jews in Europe (Schatteman, in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 47-48). Indeed, if Phillips's initial aim was to represent the experiences of his own generation, in his works, he goes further and voices also all the people who have been kept silent in the main narrative of history. History has been told from the strongest people's perspective, and exactly as in the case of early Slave Narratives,

Phillips wants to create a narrative from the perspective of the people that official history has made 'invisible'. Therefore, Phillips's narratives 'bring to light the personal face of history' (Okazaki, 1994: 88), as they focus on individuals, and their complexity rather than a sequence of facts.

The subjects Phillips deals with are all connected to traumas: either due to displacement, slavery, or Jewish persecution. He deliberately juxtaposes different traumatic histories in his novels, urging the reader to seek for a unity, and connections among them (Craps in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 160). Trauma is the linking leitmotiv along with the traumatic nature of the characters' existences, and it is used as a 'strong unifying transhistorical feature' among these histories (Boutros in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 176). Hence, what arises from this peculiar narrative form is an interconnected 'post-traumatic community' (Craps in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 158), inhabited by Phillips's characters.

The idea of traumas bearing a relational power echoes Caruth's arguments (Caruth, 1995: 11), since everyone can relate one's own trauma to traumas experienced by others; trauma not only gives us a chance to mirror our own sufferings into other people, but also, it allows to better understand others. Phillips decides to place together different histories of trauma so that they recall one another, indeed, in Phillips's Neo-Slave Narratives histories of slavery, and discrimination recall one another creating meaningful meaning across spatial and temporal boundaries. Thus, Phillips's narratives based on trauma have a 'bidirectional revision[al]' power: allowing for new perspectives on the past, and by reflecting on the present, they prompt new attitudes towards the future (Boutros, 'Bidirectional Revision', in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 176). As the studies in the field of psychoanalysis have shown, in order to overcome trauma, the subject needs to put into a logical order what happened to her/him (Onega, Ganteau, 2014: 2); therefore, the 'revisionary power' of Phillips's works is precisely the action of putting together the pieces that have been lost by the main narrative of history, allowing the whole chorus of 'invisible' (Okazaki, 1994: 90) to have a voice. Moreover, we, as readers,

are witnessing the characters' traumatic accounts, and entering Phillips's artistic representation of his 'bag of fears': Phillips himself underlines the therapeutic power of writing, through which he seeks for the answers to his lifelong questions (Goldman, in Schatteman, 2009: 87). This seems to support the theory of artistic expression as a therapy to overcome trauma (Onega, Ganteau, 2014: 3- 4). What is more, the 'revisionary power' of the future cannot be underestimated, as Phillips hopes for his public to become more empathic after reading his books. By bridging the gap between the inside world of the individuals and the outside reality, Phillips breaks the isolation which typically arises from trauma, and creates an empathic 'cross-cultural engagement' (Craps, 2008: 201), which inevitably links the reader and Phillips's fragmented characters.

Thus, Phillips engages with the question of history, giving voice to the people who have been forgotten by the main narrative of history. Slavery is one of the leitmotifs of Phillips's works, and it is central to the works I will analyse. *Cambridge* (1991) is entirely set in a slave plantation. And as far as *Crossing the River* (1993) is concerned, slavery is the connection between all the stories.

### 7.1.3. Characters

The primary focus in Phillips's novels is on the characters: he may be largely ambiguous about time and space, but he goes deep into the protagonists' minds in order to depict them in a very accurate way. Even when he uses a third-person narrator, frequently he takes the perspective of one of his characters, as is the case for the section 'West' in *Crossing the River*, where the external narrator speaks from Martha's perspective. Phillips conceives his characters as 'real individuals', who, as such, have the power to surprise him and, ideally, act beyond his control (Schatteman, 'Conversations with Caryl Phillips's', in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 51). Thus, the reader has the impression of getting in contact with a real person and enter into this person's thoughts. Moreover, the fact that Phillips lets the characters completely

free to act also means that they are likely to do it in an unpredictable way, taking roads which go against the author's principles; for instance, characters who are in favor of slavery certainly have very different opinions and values from Phillips's. His approach towards his characters is shaped by:

[...] a deep desire to understand them, a deep desire to get to know them. They're not always characters you'd like either. And certainly not always characters with whom I would like to have a drink, but certainly people I do want to understand. (Griggs, in Schatteman, 2009: 37)

By not judging the perpetrators, Phillips shows a deep understanding attitude than the perpetrators; he tries to respect everyone no matter their skin colour or their opinions. By doing so, he is having the attitude he would have desired for British people to have towards him.

What makes Phillips's way of writing unique is his fragmented narrative: his novels depict the stories of different people separated by time and places, and even the way in which his characters speak, or tell their stories is a fragmented one. Indeed, they break the linearity of narration, to go back and forward through their experiences, and memories. The choice of such a fragmented narrative form is inspired and determined by the contents of the narration itself (Schatteman, 2000: 14). Phillips writes about people with a disrupted and fragmented life, as a consequence, he feels compelled to reflect in the form their fractures and ruptures. Thus, even if he tries hard to write 'a novel with a beginning, a middle, and an end, roughly in that order' (Schatteman, in Schatteman, 2009: 56), he can never succeed, since he has the need to do justice to his characters' lives: the people he talks about live without a 'clear narrative continuity', and his books cannot have it either (Clingman, 'Other Voices', in Schatteman, 2009: 108).

The reading of Phillips's works is undoubtedly complex, the reader has the feeling of having entered the narrator's confused mind, which freely moves from past to present. Still, we are not always sure about the plot and the events and not

even about the speaking voice. As a matter of fact, with such a fragmented structure Phillips is not just being faithful to his characters, but he is also doing something deeper for the readers: he is making them feel the same discomfoting situation the characters are experiencing: the readers' experience of a disrupted narration is exactly what a traumatized person has in his/her mind. For this disrupted perception to be realistic, we are only allowed to see through a traumatized person's eyes, whose memory of events is very confused.

One of Phillips's peculiarities is the fact that he depicts realistic characters whose ideas and action may not easily be appreciated by either the reader or Phillips himself. But his will to understand people imposes him to be as realistic as possible. He depicts them without any judgement, allowing them to freely express and tell their stories. Clearly ambiguous characters may be white characters such as the slave trader James Hamilton in *Crossing the River* whose interiority is briefly sketched, or Emily in *Cambridge* whose character is more defined and deeply analysed, but also black characters such as the African translator in the first section of *Higher Ground*, in this case, Phillips even decides to give voice to the African translator who helps the white man in putting into being the slave trade of his own countrymen. The speaking voice of *Higher Ground* is working in a fort on the African coast held by the white man, the translator's task is to facilitate the communication between the slave traders and the Africans. This is the reason why his African countrymen do not trust him, rather they look at him with disgust: 'neither fully trusts me, that neither wants to be close to me' (Phillips, 1989: 22). Even if the translator would appear to the reader as a hateful character, who betrays his own people; through his narrative the reader realizes he is constantly full of fear, and he strongly feels his loneliness, and he lives a tormented life. Entering his thoughts, and touching his tormented status, makes the reader feel empathy for him, also because we understand his decision to become a translator was not a desired of his own, rather it was his only possibility to stay alive.

Not only does Phillips create ambiguous characters, but also, even in

depicting more positive characters, he tries to create credible characters, who, as a consequence, make mistakes and commit unsuitable acts; these weaknesses make Phillips's characters' human, rather than perfect idealizations. Thus, there is no judgement in Phillips's works: he loses his voice to let the story and his characters speak for themselves, becoming almost invisible (Schatteman in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 45). Every character, as well as every situation remains ambiguous, and open to contrasting interpretations. As a consequence, the meanings, the interconnections, and the teachings to take from the novels are up 'to the individual to subjectively piece together their own version of the world' (Schatteman in Schatteman, 2009: 64). As Phillips states, 'literature is plurality in action; it relishes ambiguity, and it deeply respects the place where everybody has the right to be understood' (2011: 16).

Even without leading the reader's steps through a determined path, what really matters to Phillips is for nobody to remain exactly the same after having read one of his novels. The aim is to influence in some way the people, in order for them to feel different. Entering somebody else's life, the reader should be more tolerant, and sympathetic about difference. The way in which he writes his novels make the reader empathize with the characters, no matter what nationality or thoughts they have. Phillips's literary aims mirror the intention of breaking the 'barrier of race' ('The Barrier', in McKay, 2004: 157). Without a doubt, this can be considered as a means for the white world to see through the eyes of a discriminated minority: experiencing and witnessing the sufferings and the discriminations endured by the others creates empathy. This perspective would then bridge the gap between the two worlds, and the minority would gain the status of 'worthy victim': 'we sink into character and plot and suspend our disbelief: for a moment 'they' are 'us'' (Phillips, 2011: 16).

After having framed the work of Caryl Phillips, the next sections will provide my readings of both *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993). Firstly, I will

argue *Cambridge* (1991) is inspired by the early Slave Narratives, by retrieving their features in Phillips's novel; then, I shall focus on the novelties introduced by Phillips through a polyphonic structure, which juxtaposes white and black voices. Through this polyphonic structure, the novel challenges the binary simplistic distinction among black victims and white perpetrators.

#### 7.1.4. *Black and white victims in Cambridge (1991)*

Caryl Phillips's 1991 *Cambridge* is a polyphonic Neo-Slave Narrative set in a plantation in the British West Indies. The prologue is a third-person portrayal of Emily, an Englishwoman ready to leave England to supervise her father's plantation in the West Indies, followed by her first-person account, in the form of a travel journal. Emily's first-person account covers the longest part of the novel and contains the narrative of her stay in her father's plantation. Throughout her account she reveals contrasting feelings towards slavery; on the one hand, she supports abolitionists ideas:

Perhaps my adventuring will encourage Father to accept the increasingly common, though abstract, English belief in the iniquity of slavery (Phillips, 2008: 7-8);

on the other hand, she also displays racial prejudices:

The white man's unfitness for long toil under the rays of the sun would appear to go some way to justify his employment of negro slaves, whose bodies are better suited to labour in tropical heat. (Phillips, 2008: 86).

When describing the slaves she uses a negatively connoted language: their way of celebrating is a 'rude excess' (Phillips, 2008: 71), their skin complexion is 'too dark' (Phillips, 2008: 101), even their music appears to her as a 'corrupted version of

an old Welsh song' (Phillips, 2008: 105); by deliberately using the term 'corrupted', she suggests a distorted or wrong version of something pure. As it appears to her, the slaves have, at this point, accepted their 'self-evident inferiority' (Phillips, 2008: 35), except for one, whose wit intrigues Emily: Cambridge, the old slave, who apparently differs from the others, he is lettered, having studied English when he first arrived in the UK, and his character appears to be strong and determined. Cambridge appears for the first time when Mr. Brown, the master, is beating him.

Then, the reader witnesses Cambridge's trial for having stolen some meat, and finally, we see him put to death as punishment for having killed his master: the old slave is described as 'hanging from a tree' (Phillips, 2008: 128), an image reminding of Abel Meeropol's *Bitter Fruit*:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
(Blood on the leaves and blood at the root),  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
(Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.)  
(Meeropol, 1973)

A poem which inspired Billie Holiday's song, which in turn was the inspiration for Phillips's first play *Strange Fruit*.

Later on, Phillips introduces Cambridge's first-person narrative, which relates his experiences as a slave; he begins with his deportation from African shores to England, then his life after his master's death in England, and finally the years he spent in the West Indian plantation. This last part converges with Emily's narrative; therefore, the reader is given the opportunity to see the same story twice from different perspectives. We get to know that the first time the master had beaten him in front of Emily there was no real reason, just a 'weak pretext to inflict upon [him] a severe beating' (Phillips, 2008: 162). Moreover, he narrates his relationship with Christiana, who had been taken away by Mr. Brown. Cambridge kills the plantation administrator, Mr. Brown, and he is condemned to death. A brief third person

chronicle of Mr. Brown's murder, and Cambridge's death sentence follows. What is interesting is that every detail of space and time is kept hidden from the reader: 'in the year 18\_\_ [...] upon an estate called \_\_\_' (Phillips, 2008: 171). As is typical of Phillips he does not like 'to get too specific; it might flatten the energy' (Yelin, 'Plural Selves', in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 51). This element of ambiguity increases the reader's disorientation.

Finally, the epilogue is a third-person narration about Emily's life in the West Indies after Cambridge and Mr. Brown's deaths. The chapter is not straightforward, as it mirrors Emily's confusion, resembling and representing a fever-like narration. Emily is suffering, both from physical pain, but mostly from a psychological suffering: she does not know where she belongs, she cannot go back to England, but she does not know if she belongs to the Caribbean: she finds herself displaced, and alone surrounded by black slaves, which she had previously dispraised. What she wishes for is death: 'Quick, come quick, death' (Phillips, 2008: 183-184). The narrative form used by Phillips gives the reader the impression of living in the character's confused mind, with the frequent use of points, which divide the sentences, as fragmented thoughts:

Ah, thought Emily. Ship? Useless thoughts fell quietly like over-ripe fruit into freshly lain snow. Snow-white face, unseen snow, never again. Emily. Miss Emily. Emily Cartwright. Emily. Emily. (Phillips, 2008: 183)

#### 7.1.4.1. Naming

Names appear to be extremely important in this novel, and through their absence or presence, Phillips manages to create meanings. The novel is meaningfully entitled after the slave's name; however, the longest narrative is Emily's. Throughout the first chapter in which Emily recounts her experience, the reader does not know her name until the very last page of her account, where she refers to

herself as 'Poor Emily' (Phillips, 2008: 129). Therefore, even if she narrates in the first-person, her account does not follow the structure of a Slave Narrative, Emily indeed, belongs to the white majority and she does not need to assert her identity through her name.

In Cambridge's account, the narrator begins his story informing the reader his African real name was Olumide. Then, as was common among the slaves, he was forced to change his name many times in his life, like Equiano, Gronniosaw and others. He was taken from Africa and brought to England where he became Thomas; then David Henderson; and finally, Cambridge. However, at the end of his story, he claims to be Olumide: 'I, Olumide, who had become black Tom, then David Henderson, and now Cambridge, had broken one of God's commandments.' (Phillips, 2008: 167). By coming back to his original African name Cambridge reasserts his African heritage and fights against the tyranny of the slave holders.

#### *7.1.4.2. Cambridge's narrative*

Undoubtedly, Cambridge's life is profoundly marked by slavery: he was deprived of both his freedom and his name at a very early age. The first lines of his narrative are particularly interesting, as he is taking the 'liberty' to 'unburden' himself by telling somebody his 'extraordinary circumstances', before being 'dispatched' for the very last time (Phillips, 2008: 133). Writing is what allows Cambridge to regain his freedom and to tell his story, this attitude mirrors the real slaves' personal need to witness their experiences through the early Slave Narratives. Indeed, Cambridge's account by echoing the early Slave Narratives, fulfills the same double function; on the one hand, Cambridge as a traumatized person feels the need to reveal his experiences, in order to accept them and move on; and, on the other hand, his account displays his humanity and the injustices of his sufferings, in order to fictionally support abolition, while actually prompting the contemporary reader to reflect on racial discrimination.

Reproducing the early Slave Narratives structure, Cambridge begins his account with his early memories about his Africa; however, he cannot recollect clear memories, he only has faded images of his family and the certainty that they loved him. The link with his family has been metaphorically broken when the white man took away from him the jewels given to him by his parents: he has been deprived of his identity, his past, his happy memories, and he was chained. His deportation is the first traumatic moment of his life, and the focal moment of his existence: Freud's 'traumatic fixation' works here also on the period before the traumatic event, in other words, everything happening before or after the traumatic event shows little importance compared to the traumatic event itself. Indeed, even if Cambridge would like to tell something about his life in Africa, the only thing he can focus on is the slave trade, and the white man's attitude: he can only write eight lines before speaking about the 'diabolical arts by English navigators' who have corrupted and profoundly changed his countrymen's lives like a 'storm' (Phillips, 2008: 133-134).

Cambridge was also deprived of his native language, which he could not even speak with the other captives: he lost everything. He was transported to the African coasts, where an African translator explained to him, he was to go to the white man's land to serve his new master. He tries to describe his pain, but it seems almost unexplainable: 'none but those who have been truly desperate in mind and body can judge' (Phillips, 2008: 138). This feeling of impossibility to put into words his experience recalls Stampfl's words when he identifies a first phase in traumatized persons' reactions, in which they feel but cannot put into words cannot express what they have lived (Balaev, 2014: 21-25). Even the memory of the 'hateful sea-passage [...] still introduces trembling into [his] person' (Phillips, 2008: 138), to such an extent that he avoids going too much into detail when narrating this experience; the character's attitude confirms Levi's that the act of remembering of a traumatic event becomes painful and traumatizing (Levi, 1986), thus, Cambridge tries hard to forget his sufferings.

Olumide's painful voyage leads him to England, where he lives as a slave

serving his new master; here, he had to completely breach with his past, indeed once he arrived, his master gave him a new name, and the 'new-born' Olumide becomes Thomas. In addition, he has to learn the English language. Echoing the eighteenth-century spiritual autobiographies such as Gronniosaw's narrative, Phillips includes in his narrative the topic of religion. Therefore, Cambridge finds comfort in the Christian religion, to such an extent that after the death of his master he, and his new wife Anna, would like to start a Christian mission in Africa. But fate seems to punish him again, during the period in which Thomas and Anna are travelling in England, they endure financial difficulties, and Anna and a new-born baby die before they can find a safe shelter. At this point, being alone again, Thomas decides to travel to Guinea to educate 'his' people, and also to support the idea of eliminating slavery from America, since no one 'would willingly exchange [his/her] status for the life of a West Indian slave' (Phillips, 2008: 150). However, what happens to him is that he got robbed on the ship and he accuses another man, for this Thomas is taken 'in irons in a condition of captivity all too familiar' (Phillips, 2008: 153), starting 'another passage of loss' (Phillips, 2008: 156). As a traumatized person, Cambridge sometimes omits excruciating moments of his life such as the second ship journey he is forced to take: 'the horrors of this second illegal journey I have chosen to forget' (Phillips, 2008: 156); he has 'chosen' to erase these horrors in order to survive and, at the same time, Phillips gives the chance to the reader to imagine what has happened.

Cambridge continues to fight for his life, even when is held as a slave working in a plantation in the West Indies. Here, he does not blend with the other slaves, he does not want to get used to the place 'for [he] intended [his] residence on this plantation to be brief' (Phillips, 2008: 158). However, he finds a new wife, until the master takes her and abuses her, and their life is once again torn to pieces. The slave is unfairly accused to have stolen, and this is the moment when he cannot take anymore and kills his master. At this point he repeats the same words that have introduced his story, with his wish, the same every victim has, to tell his story. He

has moved a step forward, and as Stampfl says, this second step consists in the need to put into words what seemed impossible to express: one's own traumatic life (Balaev, 2014: 21-25).

At the end of his narration, echoing his initial words, Cambridge finds peace: 'Pardon the liberty I take in unburdening myself with these hasty lines [it] is all that I have sought to convey' (2008: 167).

#### 7.1.4.3. *The white victim: Emily*

Despite the title of the novel, Emily is indeed the main character of the novel. However, if she starts off as a positive character, during the narrative, her attitude towards the slave makes her an ambiguous character. The things she says are hateful, and extremely offensive in black people's regards:

I ordered her to retire from the table, for I am not accustomed to eating my meal in the company of slaves. Further, I informed this coal-black ape-woman that I desired her to put on a serving gown and take up a role among my attendants, male and female, who properly circled the table to wait upon their mistress (Phillips, 2008: 73).

Because of these attitudes she becomes a negative character. Nevertheless, as is the case of the African translator in *Higher Ground* (1981), the reader can read through her confused mind, and see how frail she is: like the Othello-like figure, she is blinded and cannot see that the slaves' discriminated life resembles her English life 'sacrificed to the prejudices which despise [her] sex' (Phillips, 2008: 113). However disagreeable she may appear, the reader can see her naivety in falling in love with Mr. Brown, and the fact that she is constantly told about the black man's inferiority pushes her to a racist attitude. Her behaviour is not less regrettable, but the reader can glimpse the reasons and the circumstances which lead her to be racist. Moreover, her good heart emerges when she fears Mr. Brown will impulsively

condemn Cambridge for having stolen some meat, so she asks him to take some time. Indeed, she has a different attitude towards Cambridge, whom she perceives different from the other slaves.

By including Emily in the narration, and assigning her a key role, Phillips gives a more complex and complete outlook on slavery. Not only does Phillips include both the black and the white perspectives, but he also portrays Emily as a victim of the system: she is a displaced person, who tries hard to find her place in the world; while she cannot go back to England where she has no one after her father's death, she is getting accustomed to the Caribbean way of life: 'England. Emily smiled to herself. [...] Did he not understand that people grow and change?' (Phillips, 2008: 177). If the second-generation black migrants living in Britain live in an in-between situation, also Emily finds herself in a reversed condition in the Caribbean: similarly to what Ward defines as a life in 'a liminal world between identities' (Ward, 2011: 44). Her despair is such that in the end she is in a hallucinatory state, where she cannot distinguish reality from dreams. Emily is another victim of the complex and cruel system of colonial slavery.

#### 7.1.4.4. *Conclusions*

In *Cambridge*, Phillips makes use of different sources, as both Eckstein (Eckstein, 2006: 70-75) and Ward (Ward, 2011: 31-34) state: the author creates a 'montage of slightly modified fragments of older texts' adding new passages entirely invented by him (Eckstein 2006: 73). Ward also suggests that by creating this 'patchwork' of different texts, Phillips shows the importance of reading history through different perspectives (Ward, 2011: 33). Moreover, the fact that Emily is the main character of the book underlines Phillips's will to represent different perspectives. Emily's centrality differentiates Phillips's Neo-Slave Narrative from the ones where the slave's perspective is at the centre of the narration (Ward 2011: 35). Also, while apparently drawing attention to the male character by choosing Cambridge as the

title, Phillips focuses on a specific moment in the slave's life: 'Cambridge' is the name given to him in the West Indies at the time of his encounter with Emily. Phillips clarifies that his aim was always to write a novel about an English woman; nevertheless, Cambridge was conceived of as a character whose presence in the book would be constant. As Phillips himself affirms:

He does not appear often in her narrative, in terms of time, but he is always in the background of what she's doing, what she is saying, and what she's thinking (Swift in Schatteman 2009: 13).

As Ward has highlighted, Phillips reveals the similarities of the two characters in being excluded and discriminated, moreover, by giving Emily a central role in the novel, he reminds the reader that slavery is a shared history which equally involved the black slaves and the white Britons (Ward, 2011: 30). Both Emily and Cambridge do not fit the reader's expectations, 'they are more complicated than allegorical figures of black slave and white owner' (Ward, 2011: 29).

As I pointed out during the analysis, Phillips's novel *Cambridge* (1991) should be read as a Neo-Slave Narrative, which retrieve the essential features of the early Slave Narratives, by displaying Cambridge's narrative, which includes the character's account of his life before he was captured, his Middle Passage and his life as a slave. However, by including Emily's perspective as a central element in the novel, he manages to fill the gaps the early narratives left, as the black slaves were not the only victims of the trade system. In doing so, Phillips contributes to a more inclusive memorialization of the history of slavery from the perspective of the marginalized, both black and white.

In the next section I will focus on Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), a novel that features a more complex structure compared to *Cambridge* (1991); indeed, it displays the voices of six characters: the African father, Edward, Nash, Martha,

James Hamilton, and Joyce. The communal chorus of their voices represents the complex history of slavery. In my analysis I will argue this novel can be considered as a complex rewriting of the early Slave Narratives, and I shall focus on the connections that Phillips provides among different times, characters, and places, creating a complex and inclusive representation of slavery and its legacy.

#### 7.1.5. *Separations and crossing borders in Crossing the River (1993)*

*Crossing The River*, first published in 1993, is not commonly considered as a Neo-Slave Narrative as it is extremely fragmented, however I argue its complex structure hides the essential features of the genre. Therefore, I would suggest considering the whole novel as a Neo-Slave Narrative which aims to be inclusive, by portraying the perspectives of all the people involved in the slave trade. Moreover, I argue Martha's narrative is directly inspired by the Slave Narratives, as it relates her traumatic experiences as a slave, for which Phillips has used an extremely fragmented style. Thus, in *Crossing the River*, not only does Phillips juxtapose different narratives, but also each narrative is fragmented and narrated by different narrators. However, slavery remains central to the narrative, as each section shows connections with it, as I will point out later.

The novel is composed of four parts, each representing different stories set in distant places, and extremely distant times: the first part displays the complex relationship between Edward and his former slave Nash who after the abolition of slavery has moved back to Africa; the second part contains the former slave Martha's account, and it is set in Colorado; the third part contains the slave trader James Hamilton's narrative of his experiences as a captain of a slave ship between 1752 and 1753; and the last part is narrated from Joyce's perspective, representing the voice of a white woman living at the time of the Second World War, who falls in love with a black American soldier. However distant these stories may seem; they are kept together by the prologue and the epilogue narrated by the unnamed

African father.

#### 7.1.5.1. *The African father*

Both the prologue and the epilogue give voice to the unnamed African father, who is hopelessly suffering because he has sold his three children. Through his words Phillips represents the lament of Africa for having lost its people in the slave trade; the father is guilty of having himself sold his children. This can be read as a reminder of the involvement of Africans themselves in the trade. The father admits having brought his children to 'the fort, above which flew a foreign flag', from which they could see 'the ship into whose keep [he] would soon condemn them', as the African traders he preferred 'cold goods' to his children's 'warm flesh', and since that moment 'the chorus of a common memory began to hunt [him]' (Phillips, 2006: 1). From that moment the father's voice becomes Africa's, as for 'two hundred and fifty years' the father-figure has listened to the stories of displaced people, among which he recognized his children's (Phillips, 2006: 1). He was consumed with guilt, he can only blame himself, thus, Phillips recognizes the Africans' role in the slave trade, and he avoids introducing them as only victims, as always, his characters are unpredictable and complex. Once he sold his children there was no coming back, they got lost, his only relief is listening to their stories.

In the epilogue, the African father once again expresses his lament, he briefly mentions the stories of the former slaves who are now all round the world, and among these voices he can sometimes metaphorically hear his children's voices, the protagonists of the sections of the novel: 'My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. My Daughter. Joyce.' (Phillips, 2006: 237). Despite being a white character, Joyce is mentioned together with the African's father lost children, however, the father does not directly define her as 'his', indeed he avoids using the possessive 'my', but he considers her his 'daughter', so she is one of the voices to which he listens to: once again Phillips, as is the case of Emily in *Cambridge* (1991), brings together the people

who are marginalized and who has suffered; moreover, Joyce has successfully 'crossed the river' as she has gone beyond racial diversity by falling in love with Travis.

The father's words are sometimes repeated making both the prologue and the epilogue sound almost like a desperate prayer. The title itself is recalled in the words of the father, as he affirms 'But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved.' (Phillips, 2006: 237) after they 'crossed the river'.

#### *7.1.5.2. The Pagan Coast*

The first part, which is entitled 'The Pagan Coast', includes the story of Edward and Nash William, the master, and his former slave. In the 1830s, Nash is freed and has moved to Liberia with the American Colonization Society to spread Christian preaching. The narrative focuses on Edward's voyage to Africa to find Nash who has disappeared. Phillips uses a polyphonic narrative for this part: a third person-narrator offers the reader the background information and gives an account of Edward's journey; an extract of a letter the master wrote to the former slave is included, and then Nash's letters to his master relate the slave's story.

The section opens with Edward reading a letter which informs him of Nash's disappearance. Then the unknown narrator introduces the two characters: on the one hand, the former slave 'was a teacher of remarkable gifts' whose missionary school had a 'legendary' reputation (Phillips, 2006: 7). This description closely reminds of description of the former slaves in the early Slave Narratives, and Nash's mission reminds both Olaudah Equiano's and David George's stories. On the other hand, the narrator also describes the master, Edward, this description was lacking in the early Slave Narratives, which only accounted for the slaves' perspective. Edward was the son of a wealthy merchant and because of his 'aversion for the system' he encouraged 'his slaves to acquire the generally forbidden arts of reading and writing' (Phillips, 2006: 13). Already from the beginning, it is clear that Nash

and his master were quite close and their relationship worried Edward's wife Amelia, who

had subsequently chosen to flee his home, then her mind, then this mortal world at the instigation of her own hand, was a tragedy the responsibility for which could not reside at Edward's doorstep (Phillips, 2006: 56).

Therefore, she hid the letters Nash wrote from Africa, therefore misunderstandings from both sides ensued.

Then, the third person-narration is interrupted, and some of Nash's first affectionate letters to his master are inserted in the narrative. Nash addresses his master as 'Dear Benevolent Benefactor', 'My Dear Father', and 'Dear Father' (Phillips, 2006: 17, 23, 38), indeed, as Gronniosaw he is grateful to both his master and to God, thus, Nash is similar to the slaves described in the early Slave Narratives. At the beginning, the former slave is optimistic about the new settlement in Liberia, and he defines it as 'the home for our race' (Phillips, 2006: 18), however, throughout his letter the reader can perceive that life in Liberia is quite difficult, as it was the case for the accounts in David George's letters. Therefore, Nash is deceived by his new condition and also, he feels his beloved master has abandoned him. The section ends with the third-person narrator who goes back to Edward's journey who finally discovers Nash's death and is deeply saddened by it. The former master feels the guilt of having abandoned his 'son' Nash, this sense of guilt reminds the African father's one.

The title of the section is taken from Edward's words, who describes Liberia as 'the pagan coast' where hopefully all the freed slaves will one day reside (Phillips, 2006: 10). By using this title Phillips draws attention to the former slaves' Christianising mission in Africa. Indeed, through this section Phillips manages to give a more complex narrative of freedom compared to the Slave Narratives: he does not focus on the experiences of the slave under the institution of slavery, rather

he highlights his life after freedom, and he details his feelings. The section does not contain many events, it is more an internal narrative, which deals with the slave's and the master's thoughts and feelings. Edward certainly metaphorically 'crosses the river' as he revolts against the conventions of slavery: he cares about his former slave, and he physically 'crosses the river', as he journeys to Africa, completing a reverse Middle Passage, indeed, his journey to Liberia is extremely difficult and he almost perishes during it. Moreover, by detailing Edward's story, Phillips gives a more complex and polyphonic reading of slavery, as both Edward and Nash, like Emily and Cambridge, are victims of it.

#### 7.1.5.3. *West*

The second section 'West' portrays the last moments of life of the former slave Martha, as she is going 'west' where [she] could be a part of this country' (Phillips, 2006: 74), thus, where former slaves and black people are accepted. Once again Phillips decides to focus on a precise moment in the former slave's life and give room to her internal thoughts. Martha's narration is fragmented, it moves from the third-person narrator, which contains many instances of Martha's free indirect speech, to Martha's first-person narrator. The reader is introduced to the old Martha, Phillips describes her journey to California, however, because of her old age, she is extremely fatigued and the people with whom she was travelling, had to leave her in Colorado. In that moment, Martha remembers the journeys she took during her life:

Through some atavistic mist, Martha peered back east, beyond Kansas, back beyond her motherhood, her teen years in Virginia, to a smooth white beach where a trembling girl waited with two boys and a man. standing off, a ship. Her journey had been a long one (Phillips, 2006: 73).

Through these few lines, Phillips recounts Martha's life under slavery, through them the reader can perceive her exhaustion, and by making reference to slavery, the narrator gives room to reader's imagination. The early Slave Narratives clearly influenced Martha's narrative; however, Phillips uses an extremely fragmented narrative to make her story more truthful, and to create a direct connection with the reader, who can access her thoughts. Martha's indirect speech makes reference to the African father's prologue '*Father, why hast thou forsaken me?*' (Phillips, 2006: 73), as she is metaphorically one of his sold children. After the others abandoned her, she has lost her strength, she falls on the ground, and a woman tries to help her stand up, the old Martha does not speak to the woman, as far as we know, but through indirect free speech we read her thoughts:

The woman felt neither warm nor cold. 'Can you stand by yourself?' Inside of herself, Martha laughed. Can this woman not see that they abandoned me? At least they had shown some charity and not discarded her upon the plains (Phillips, 2006: 75).

Then, Martha's first-person narration moves back to the moment when her husband, she, and their daughter are sold as slaves and separated. The reader's perception is to enter into Martha's mind, witnessing her thoughts, while she is almost unconscious. While Cambridge's account is intended to be a sort of truth revealing testament, Martha's section in *Crossing the River* (1993), is an insight into the character's mind. When she first begins to tell her story, as Cambridge did, she recalls the most traumatizing moment of her life involving slavery. She remembers when she, her husband, and her little child Eliza Mae were sold as slaves to different masters. Her description of this moment is fragmented into small sentences, we feel the confusion and the tension of the moment. Her description clearly recalls early Slave Narratives, as is the case of both Mary Prince's and Ashton's narratives. The separation from both her husband and especially from her little daughter, profoundly mark her:

'Moma.' Eliza Mae whispers the word over and over again, as though this were the only words she possessed. This one word. This word only. (Phillips, 2006: 77)

She is obsessed with this moment and Eliza's words; she keeps on recalling them: 'Moma. Moma.' (Phillips, 2006: 74). Unlike Cambridge, who tries to forget the horrors of his past, she cannot stop remembering her past. She also remembers when her second master had to sell her, and she escaped, she refuses to be sold again, to change her name. She remembers her new life with her friend Lucy, and how she could not speak about what happened to her, it was too painful, until she surprises Lucy by saying she had a daughter. She keeps on thinking about Eliza, every moment of her life she recollects has something to do with her lost child. Also, in this case Freud's 'trauma fixation' is present, since everything she can think of in her last moments is the traumatic event of separation, everything else seems to have no importance.

In the very last part of the story, Martha is probably dreaming, as it is usual for Phillips's narrations, there is no clear explanation of the situation. In her imagination she frees herself from reality, and reunites with her daughter, she imagines her actual life. She 'had found its natural-born home in the bosom of her daughter' (Phillips, 2006: 94): Martha is finally happy. But the truth is she is dying, alone, without seeing her daughter one last time. Her death seems to be a release from her slave condition, she won't have to work anymore: 'Martha won't be taking any washing today. No tubs, no ironing. No cooking, either.' Martha's death is seen as a revenge against the years of slavery she had lived, she 'will simply sleep through the day' as she could have never done before (Phillips, 2006: 94). However, it is in reality a bitter ending: she is dying alone, and the woman who is helping her does not know anything about her, not even her name. Therefore, somebody will need to give the dead Martha a name to permit her to have a Christian burial, thus her decision not to 'be renamed (Never)' (Phillips, 2006: 80) fails, she is once again

in the white man's hand who will decide for her.

Martha's narrative can be considered a rewriting of the early Slave Narratives, as the former slave somehow manages to narrate her experiences as a slave, her path towards freedom, and her life as a free woman. However, Phillips's style is extremely articulate as Martha's memories are not described in detail, as is the case of the early Slave Narratives, only the moment in which she is separated from her family is detailed. Moreover, her life as a free woman is lonely and extremely sad, indeed, as contemporary readers should know, difficulties and discrimination against the black people did not end with the abolition of slavery. Differently from the early Slave Narratives which aimed to end the institution of slavery, the contemporary evolutions of this genre do not only wish to condemn slavery, rather, they also want to highlight the legacy of slavery and the persistence of discrimination after the end of it.

#### 7.1.5.4. *Crossing the river*

The third part is narrated from the unique perspective of the slave trader James Hamilton captain on the slave ship *Duke of York*, between 1752 and 1753. The narrative is composed of pieces of his journal of the voyage and some letters he wrote to his wife: through the dual narrative style, Phillips represents the complexity of this character, who while being involved in the slave trade, writes love letters to his wife. The letters give an insight into the complexity of human life, making the captain appear more human to the reader. The trader details the issues on the slave ship, such as the slaves' insurrections, the high rate of illness on board, and the killing of the slaves. By introducing this part, Phillips create an inclusive memorialization of history, which was denied by both the early Slave Narratives, which provided only the slaves' perspective, and the main narrative of history, which on the contrary displayed the white nations' perspective. It is interesting to notice that this section is named after the novel's title itself, thus, despite being quite

short, it becomes extremely relevant to the novel as a whole: I would suggest that this section may represent Phillips's own attempt to 'cross the river' and represent the perspective of the perpetrators without describing them as stereotyped villains, both rather as human beings with feelings and emotions.

In this section, similarly to a detective novel, an attentive reader will notice that some of Hamilton's words were first anticipated in the African father's prologue. Connecting the two stories together it becomes clear that Hamilton is the trader to which the African father has sold his children (Bakkenberg, 2011: 17). Thus, even if the perspective of the slaves is not explicitly exposed, the voice of the African father in the prologue gives another perspective on the story, as well as the voices of the three 'children' sold who are metaphorically represented by Nash, Martha, and Travis.

#### *7.1.5.5. Somewhere in England*

The fourth part 'Somewhere in England' is entirely told from Joyce's perspective in the form of a disrupted diary: she is an English woman living at the time of the Second World War. Her piece of writing does not follow a chronological order; thus, Joyce's present and past cross one another. Joyce was married to Len, an alcoholic who beat her. However, while her husband is in jail, she met an American Black soldier Travis, who was sent to England. Travis is an evocation of one of the children sold by their father. The two unexpectedly blend together: on the one hand, Travis is discriminated because of his complexion and his history is linked to slavery; on the other hand, Joyce's marriage can be seen as a form of slavery in which she suffered a lot (Bakkenberg, 2011: 18). Therefore, the two mutually recognized their sufferings and manage to understand each other, their encounter represents Phillips's idea of an interconnected 'post-traumatic community' (Craps in Ledent, Tunca, 2012: 158). Joyce has no prejudice towards Travis, indeed, when describing their first encounter she does not even mention the colour of his skin. However, the

villagers see Travis's difference and their discriminatory attitude is expressed through Len's words:

Before he left he told me that I'm a traitor to my own kind. That as far as he's concerned I'm no better than a common slut. And everybody in the village agrees with him (Phillips, 2006: 217)

Like Edward in 'the pagan coast', Joyce fights against the injustices, and exactly as Edward she will suffer for it. Joyce and Travis relationship is destined to come to an end: the soldier had to leave for Italy, and they had to foster the child they had together, Greer. The same child that almost twenty years later would come to look for his mother. The section ends with Greer and Joyce's meeting, the notes end with the child's arrival, thus, the reader will not know if the meeting will have a positive ending or not. Nevertheless, even Joyce feels ashamed for having abandoned his child, reminding once again the African father's prologue.

#### *7.1.5.6. Conclusions*

The title of the novel links together all the sections, as the act of crossing the river recalls the actual journey of the children, and in general of the slaves, who had to travel across the Ocean. But the title also alludes to the ideological crossing of one's own barriers, that makes possible to understand the others. Therefore, each one of the four sections of the novels deals with physical and ideological crossings: in 'The pagan coast' Edward physically crosses the Ocean, covering a reversed Middle Passage, but he also crosses the borders of conventions by caring about his former slave; in 'West' the Missouri river divides an America where slavery still existed, to an America free from slavery, and Martha's recollections remind her physical crossing on a slave ship; in 'Crossing the river' whose title meaningfully repeats the whole novel's title, the trader physically crosses the ocean on the slave ship,

mirroring Edward's journey; but more importantly, Phillips creates connections to the African father's prologue, thus, he makes reference to the different perspectives that can be linked to the slave trade, inviting all the readers to cross his/her own limits and to expand his/her mind; and, in the last section 'Somewhere in England' the line to be crossed is the one of the prejudices of the peoples of the village, only Joyce bares no prejudices at all towards Travis, thus she has successfully crossed the river. However, like the African father, she abandoned her child, who himself crosses the river by making a step forward to meet his mother. Moreover, as Ledent underlines, by using the gerund 'crossing', the author puts emphasis on the fact that knowing oneself or the others is an endless discovery (2002: 110-111).

The leitmotif and connecting subject joining the stories is the idea of the father abandoning his children: the prologue and the epilogue clearly suggest this theme; in the first section, Nash considers Edward as his father, and he feels to have been abandoned by him, not receiving any of his letters; in the second part, Martha implores the Lord and she feels she has been forgotten '*Father, why hast you forsaken me?*' (Phillips, 2006: 73), and in a different way she was forced to abandon her child; captain Hamilton, from his part feels to be alone and has difficulty in his trade; finally, in Travis and Joyce's story there is an actual abandoned child.

In the epilogue, Phillips integrates some lines in italic which are all taken from the four chapters. The words Captain Hamilton uses to describe a punishment inflicted are used by the father; as Nash grateful words towards his master and Christ; also, Martha's last dream is included in the epilogue; as far as Joyce and Travis hug before he left for Italy. However, both in the epilogue and the prologue, the father repeats Hamilton's words after he bought the African father's children: '*Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl*' (Phillips, 2006: 1-237). This repetition becomes almost like a reframing, which is represented through the novel as Nash, Travis, and Martha are to be metaphorically considered the three sold children.

As Ward suggests, *Crossing the River* (1993) represents a whole unity, and the sections needs to be linked 'in any attempt to come to terms with the complex

history of slavery' (Ward, 2011: 56). The different stories represent different aspects and different perspectives on slavery, in different times and places, thus, I suggest the whole novel represents a Neo-Slave Narrative which includes the experience of all the slaves across the black Atlantic, and which links together past and present.

The following section will focus on the second author I have selected: Fred D'Aguiar: two of his novels take inspiration to the early Slave Narratives; nevertheless, similarly to Phillips, he creates complex structures which introduce multiple perspectives on slavery.

## 7.2. Fred D'Aguiar

Fred D'Aguiar was born in London in 1960; his parents, Malcom Frederick D'Aguiar and Kathleen Agatha Messiah, both Guyanese, migrated to London from the then British colony, Guyana. Only two years after his birth, both him and his older brother moved back to Guyana to live with his grandmother, close to the capital Georgetown, as his parents had financial issues. In 1972 D'Aguiar, at the age of twelve, came back to England, where his parents had divorced. There, he passed his A-level school exams, then he trained and worked as a psychiatric nurse. While in school he already wrote some early poems, and he realized his passion was literature, so he started reading African and Caribbean literature:

I had heard about the University of Kent's course in African and Caribbean literature—it was quite new then—and I went for that instead. There was nothing else to do but read and write while I was nursing. I knew by then that I'd be a poet of some kind (Birbalsingh, 1993: 134).

He graduated with honors in 1985 and applied for a PhD with a project based on the work of Wilson Harris, a Guyanese author. In the same year he published his first collection of poems *Mama Dot* (1985), in which he recreates the time he spent in Guyana, with his grandmothers to whom the title of the collection refers. Thanks to his success as a writer, he decided to leave his PhD studies and focus entirely on his creative writing. D'Aguiar has written extensively as a poet, playwright and a writer of novels, obtaining several prizes, among which the Malcolm X Prize for poetry and the Whitbread First Novel Award. Many of his plays were broadcast for radio and television, also winning the Commission for Racial Equality Race in the Media Award.

Along with his literary career, he is also an academic professor, as he held the Judith E. Wilson Fellowship at Cambridge University from 1989 to 1990 and, from 1990-92, he became the Northern Arts Literary Fellow at the University of

Newcastle-upon-Tyne. After he moved to the US in 1992, he became Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Miami, and then held the same position at UCLA.

In the following sections I am going to provide a framework for D'Aguiar's Neo-Slave Narratives. Firstly, I will concentrate on the writer's feeling of not-belonging, thus, he expresses his insider-outsider perspective in his writing; also, I will focus on D'Aguiar's statements on what he defines as the British 'historical amnesia' on the subject of slavery (Frias, 2002: 425), which is a key element in his Neo-Slave Narratives. Moreover, a section will be dedicated to D'Aguiar's complex representation of slavery through multiple viewpoints to support inclusiveness in memorialization of slavery.

#### *7.2.1. An insider-outsider perspective*

Like Phillips, D'Aguiar belongs to the second-generation of migrants living in Britain, and shares the same feeling of non-belonging in his works. Differently from Phillips, however, since he went to live in Guyana, he experienced the postcolonial period in the colonies, and the racial partitioning. When talking about his return to England, D'Aguiar affirms:

My parents' marriage had dissolved, and we [children] came back to a house with one parent. It wasn't as distressing as it might have been, partly because of the newness of England. Our Guyanese relatives had always made us feel that we were English children waiting to be sent home to England. We enjoyed all the novelties of England, although we missed relatives back in Guyana (Birbalsingh, 1993: 134).

Through these few lines D'Aguiar expresses his sense of non-belonging: indeed, on the one hand, his Guyanese relatives considered both him and his brother as

'English children'; on the other hand, while in Britain he experienced racial discrimination, since he was not considered English by the English people, as testified by many instances in D'Aguiar's works. As a means of example, in the poem 'A Gift of a Rose' included in the collection *British Subjects* published in 1993, the poet metaphorically relates a racist-based assault he received from the police: while the title of the poem misleads the reader, as it would immediately suggest a positive context, almost a romantic poem in which the subject focuses on a beautiful gift composed of roses; however, D'Aguiar describes the policemen giving the subject of the poem 'a bunch of red, red roses', which he nursed with 'ice and water mixed with soluble aspirin', it becomes clear to the reader that through the rose he alludes to the bruises he got from a beating. When the people argue that he 'must have done something to procure them' he claims that he did nothing to cause them and 'the roses/ liberally spread over [his] face and body to epithets / sworn by the police in praise of [his] black skin and mother'. In the poem, D'Aguiar uses irony when he describes the insult the policemen address to him both because of his complexion and to his mother<sup>3</sup>.

The endlessly repeating trauma of racism affects the lives of both D'Aguiar and Phillips, together with the feeling of non-belonging which creates confusion regarding one's own identity. This is the reason why, in his works D'Aguiar addresses the question of a complex identity in which he tries to combine together both his life in Guyana and his experiences in Britain, indeed, if in *Mama Dot* (1985) he focuses on Guyana, with his second collection of poems *Airy Hall* (1989), which is named after the town he lived in Guyana, he mixes Guyanese vernacular and the British English, and in *British Subjects* (1993) he analyses what it means to be both black and British, dealing with racial discrimination. In his essay 'Home Is Always Elsewhere' (2010) he states:

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<sup>3</sup> D'Aguiar: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v12/n20/fred-d-aguiar/a-gift-of-a-rose>

Born in London but not of London, writing in English but not of the English, British but under the rubric of a racial and cultural difference, my tongue forked, my skin bristled with the scales of my unlikeness. I became Hydra-headed, speaking from multiple selves to multiple constituencies. Each poem staged my insider-outsider stance (D'Aguiar, 2020).

These lines summarize the contrasting feelings of both belonging and non-belonging of a lifetime. Thus, he is both 'of and not of' London, these words echo Caryl Phillips's repeated refrain 'I recognize the place, I feel at home here, but I don't belong. I am of, and not of, this place' (Phillips, 2002), which he constantly repeats every time he visits a place that means something for him in his collection of essays *A New World Order* (2001). For the second-generation migrants, both the colonies and England are part of their identities, still they are neither completely British, nor they can completely be considered as Guyanese in the case of D'Aguiar, or Kittitians in the case of Phillips. Indeed, D'Aguiar describes himself as a person with his 'tongue forked', since he is divided among two different languages, and his skin shows his difference. Nevertheless, like Phillips, his plural perspectives, allow him to describe reality in a more complex way, as his writing simultaneously displays his 'insider-outsider' position.

Therefore, his writing springs from his double position as both black and British, which provides him with a set of experiences to be inspired by; however, as he states in his essay 'Home Is Always Elsewhere' (2010) his decision to become a writer goes beyond the colour of his skin, thus

[his] poetic sensibility may not be predicated on the colour of [his] skin, but the colour of [his] skin certainly generates [his] poetry' (D'Aguiar, 2020).

In this essay D'Aguiar follows up from his provocative essay 'Against Black British Literature' (1996), where he claimed, creativity is not linked to either race or sex or age, thus, blackness is not sufficient to define a person's creativity, however:

A black writer's memory coupled with his/her experience affects his/her vision, but so does a white writer's (D'Aguiar, 1996: 110).

### 7.2.2. *Remembering slavery against historical amnesia*

Many of D'Aguiar's works deal with the history of slavery, as it is a key element in the colonial history which has influenced his personal life. As a writer he feels the need to investigate his complex postcolonial past which links together the history of Guyana and Britain (Pinchler, 2007: 5), and to explore Caribbean cultural belonging it seems necessary for him to tackle the subject of slavery, as it strongly influenced the contemporary cultural background of the former British colonies. For instance, D'Aguiar himself considers the habit of beating young people in the Caribbean to educate them, as it has happened to himself, as an evident legacy of the slave plantation system, where the slaves were publicly beaten as a way to show the others they needed to conform as no rebellion was admitted<sup>4</sup>. Thus, in order to better understand the present, he claims that it is necessary to go through the memory of slavery in the Caribbean, and he feels his history is deeply rooted in slavery:

My first awareness of history was of my place in it as the descendant of slaves. In history, stories of blackness always limited the humanity of black people to something less than whiteness (D'Aguiar, 2020).

Thus, D'Aguiar is extremely conscious about his family's links to slavery, however, as the conventional narrative of history has always attributed limits to black people's humanity, through poetry, and literary creativity in general he finds a new way to retrace the past and give a more complex representation of slavery (Ward, 2011:132).

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<sup>4</sup> D'Aguiar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yWYa8uuiG0>

The writer connects his need to know more about the past to an empathetic identification, indeed, when he heard a reggae song in the seventies about Africa and slavery, he could identify with the people the song was talking about; he claims trauma can erase the time distance; indeed, when he listened to that reggae song he could feel the pain of slaves and he felt the need to know more about the peculiar institution<sup>5</sup>. His words mirror Cathy Caruth's ideas, as she argued that 'history, like the trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma' (Caruth, 1991: 192). Therefore, on the one hand, D'Aguiar's writing aims to make the reader feel the same displaced sense his characters have, through an empathetic bond to their suffering; and, on the other hand, to arouse interest in the reader, so that he/she will feel the need to get more information on the history of slavery, as D'Aguiar himself did<sup>6</sup>.

D'Aguiar decides to extensively deal with the subject of slavery, through two of his novels, *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) as well as his verse novel *Bloodlines* (2000). Thanks to memory, that he defines as a 'bridge with the past'<sup>7</sup>, and to his creativity he depicts the past; his portrayal does not aim to be objective, rather it prompts the reader to rethink the past, by showing the terrible effects slavery had on people. 'Racism is not over by any means' D'Aguiar states; thus, people need to know more about the history that originated racism to understand that 'the idea of one race as superior to another [is] strange and unacceptable' (Frías, 2002: 424). Slavery is a 400-year-old institution, as D'Aguiar writes in his 'The Last Essay About Slavery' (1996), and until humanity will live with the consequences of slavery, we will need to talk and write about it; thus, the early Slave Narratives alone are not enough to record slavery: 'the more stories there are the more stories there has to be' (Frías, 2002: 419). D'Aguiar becomes a 'man of digging' who patiently discovers each layer in history (Pinchler, 2007: 5-6).

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> D'Aguiar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yWYa8uuiG0>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, both the reader and D'Aguiar himself play an active and important role in investigating the past and in discovering its legacies for the present time by becoming a 'witness after the fact', since very few testimonies survived slavery (Pinchler, 2007: 6).

### 7.2.3. *Multiple viewpoints in D'Aguiar's novels*

Therefore, D'Aguiar aims 'to fill in the gaps' that the main narrative of history has left, by displaying the experience of slavery 'through personality, through people and their experiences rather than by a rehearsal of dates and events' (Frías, 2002: 418). Like Phillips, he chooses to focus on his characters' feelings and thoughts, accounting for as many perspectives as possible of all involved in the slave trade. As a consequence, D'Aguiar also decides to include the perspectives of both white and black people, as

a single consciousness which tries to order a liner narrative about the complex past is too exclusive and exclusionary. Ambiguity and contradiction are aspects of any return to the past (Frías, 2002: 422).

He fights against the oversimplification of history narrated from a unique perspective, which by definition cannot be inclusive. D'Aguiar's Neo-Slave Narratives depict the contradictions and the ambiguity of slavery through different characters as they all seem to be in-between to represent the cosmopolitan societies in which we live, where cultural boundaries are fading and we are all connected (Heyeres, 2012: 88). This idea echoes Phillips's words in *A New World Order* (2001), where he states: 'we are all being dealt an ambiguous hand' (Phillips, 2002: 6).

Similarly to Phillips, D'Aguiar does not portray stereotyped characters: white characters are not simply evil oppressors of the black pitiful slaves, instead they have good and bad sides, as is the case of the sailors in *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997),

but also of Mr. Whitechapel and other white characters in *The Longest Memory* (1994). On the one hand, their ambiguity makes them more human, but on the other hand, their humanity makes their merciless decisions even more difficult to understand (Heyeres, 2012: 92). D'Aguiar also depicts characters with a mixed heritage, who have also been underrepresented in the main narrative of history, as they held an in-between position. Thus, he includes characters such as Chapel in *The Longest Memory* (1994) to prompt the reader to reflect on these figures (Ward, 2011: 23).

By creating blurred borders, D'Aguiar shows a history where it is not clear 'where blame lies, or whether it should be attributed at all' (Ward, 2011: 131). Therefore, for D'Aguiar it is not useful to provide the reader a narrative of slavery, which condemns the perpetrators, rather his aim is to display its fragmented nature, to recognize the wounds that have been left open in order to heal them (Pinchler, 2007: 6). To do so, he believes it is necessary for the reader to feel empathy for those who have suffered, and through their mutual pain healing can take place, as 'fiction is about healing too, about cure and about love' (Frias, 2002: 424).

After having provided a general introduction to D'Aguiar's writing, the next section is dedicated to my reading of *The Longest Memory* (1994), which will focus on D'Aguiar's representation of the traumatized narrative of the main narrative voice, the old slave Whitechapel. The character's internal fight displays the two contrasting forces that come into play in the case of a trauma: the traumatized subject's feeling of impossibility to convey his/her trauma, and the necessity to remember it. Also, I will propose an analysis of the different voices both white and black from which the novel is narrated to expose their complexity.

#### 7.2.4. *The necessary pain of remembering in The Longest Memory (1994)*

*The Longest Memory* (1994) represents D'Aguiar's first attempt to write a novel; he has defined it as a narrative that displays a chorus of voices which expresses their

perspectives through each chapter that the writer conceived almost as long poems (Hyppolite, 2004: 3). The novel is set on a Virginia slave plantation, and it features eleven different voices, belonging to both the black slave population and to the white society (Boutros 2015: 59). The starting point of the novel is the young slave Chapel's whipping to death after he had tried to escape the plantation. Through the characters' narratives, D'Aguiar displays either the causes or the consequences of an extremely traumatic event: Chapel's death (Heyeres, 2012: 68), and provides the reader with an insight into the life at the Whitechapel plantation. Like Phillips, D'Aguiar includes different perspectives and different voices in *The Longest Memory* (1994), however, differently from *Cambridge* (1991), D'Aguiar includes a greater number of voices, which, differently from *Crossing the River* (1993), that are all related to a single event. Therefore, his polyphonic Neo-Slave Narrative attempts to bring 'into play multiple viewpoints about slavery' (Frias 2002: 421), as Ledent underlines: these voices are not just juxtaposed, rather they are interrelated, and their connections create meaning (Ledent, 2005: 285).

Therefore, the novel's key event allows D'Aguiar to investigate the relationships that were established in the plantation, revealing what had happened before the death, and to let the characters free to express their feelings and their thoughts on slavery. Polyphony allows D'Aguiar to use different literary genres to better represent each character, notably, Sanders Senior's chapter is written in the form of a diary, and Chapel's one is a couplet poem, while the dialogues among the plantations owners recall theatre play, moreover, the writer includes extracts from the local newspaper which contribute to the complex structure of the novel (Heyeres, 2012: 72). Readers have the opportunity to experience a more inclusive and complex reading of the events that led to the slave's death; they even have more information than the characters themselves. Thus, through polyphony D'Aguiar highlights the 'communication failures between the characters' (Heyeres, 2012: 72), which led to terrible consequences.

#### 7.2.4.1. *Whitechapel*

The central character of the novel is the old slave Whitechapel who unwittingly causes his son Chapel's death. Both the prologue and the epilogue, which frame the novel, are written from his perspective: his voice is that of a guilty father who is suffering for his son. This leitmotiv links this novel to Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), indeed, the voice of the African father who claims, 'I remember' (Phillips, 2006: 1), mirrors the title of the D'Aguiar's novel prologue 'Remembering'. Like the African father, who is 'consumed with guilt' (Phillips, 2006: 2), Whitechapel suffers for his decision, and it is clear that for both of them 'memory hurts' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 1).

In the prologue, the old slave introduces himself as a man with no identity:

you do not want to know my past, nor do you want to know my name for the simple reason I have none and would have to make it up to please you  
(D'Aguiar, 1995: 1).

Differently from the structure of the early Slave Narratives, D'Aguiar does not present the slave's origins neither his African name. In this way he foregrounds the consequences of the trauma of slavery on him and makes him a representative of all the black slaves. For Whitechapel the act of remembering is painful to such an extent that he feels a physical pain; thus, exactly like Phillips's Cambridge, Whitechapel tries hard to forget. The traumatized mind of the old slave fights to forget those memories which hurt him too much, and he comes to represent the lost identity of the slaves who were deprived of their African names and were named after their masters, as if they were nothing more than objects (Heyeres, 2012: 95). Whitechapel states: 'I was just a boy, mule, nigger, slave or whatever else anyone chose to call me' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 1), in keeping with early Slave Narratives.

The epilogue 'Forgetting' echoes the title of the prologue: the two opposed

titles refer to the importance for the readers to remember the slave history, even against the will to forget it. The British society's desire to forget its connections to the slave trade is mirrored in Whitechapel's words as he states: 'I forget as hard as I can' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 1). Nevertheless, the impossibility of forgetting is claimed by the very last sentence of both the epilogue and of the novel: 'Memory is pain trying to resurrect itself' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 138); even though traumatized subjects wish to erase their painful memories, these memories always manage to come back.

The first chapter in which the central event of Chapel's killing is narrated, is once again written from the old Whitechapel's perspective. There, he reveals how he informed the plantation owner about his son's plan to escape from the plantation; Chapel is therefore punished by Sanders Junior, and eventually dies. The old slave is a victim of the slave system and feels the need to denounce his son that has escaped, and he is also worried for his son's life that was at risk when he ran away. While his son tries to fight against the injustices of slavery, Whitechapel cannot see a way out and gives up to the system, believing that the better option for his son would be to come back to the plantation, hoping the master would not punish him too harshly.

#### 7.2.4.2. *Lydia*

Both Phillips and D'Aguiar 'manage to rewrite a history that was simplified' (Ledent 2005: 291), indeed, also in *The Longest Memory* (1994) the slaves are not the only victims of the slave system. Lydia, the plantation owner's daughter, to whom three chapters are dedicated, is a victim of the slave system too. She is an in-between character, as she is the master's daughter, and at the same time she falls in love with Chapel, the young slave. Their relationship began when she decided to read some books for Chapel, who was interested in literature, and then she taught him how to read and write. Thus, she belongs to both worlds, meaningfully she lives the door half open for Chapel, who is physically and metaphorically 'half-in, half-out'

(D'Aguiar, 1995: 79). Like Joyce in *Crossing the River* (1993), Lydia fell in love with somebody who was perceived by the society as 'the other'.

However, the happy moments the two spent together abruptly came to an end, when they were discovered by Lydia's father, who forbids them to meet again. Lydia complains both against the slave system and against her liminal position as a woman, who cannot take decisions on her own without her father's permission. She suffers and she wishes Chapel 'could waltz into [her] house and hold forth in [her] company before [her] father, mother and brothers, the way you do with [her]', she even wishes him to be white, or that she was black, so that they could be together (D'Aguiar, 1995: 95).

When Lydia's brother tells her that in the North mixed couples were accepted, she dreams of being with Chapel, and by sharing this information with Chapel, the two imagine how their lives could be if they were together: they imagine their children, and Chapel's work as a poet. Lydia's chapters end with the image of their happy life together, leaving the readers with a bitter feeling, as they know their dream will never come true: 'Chapel, you will write verses and make our lives and the lives of our children rich' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 103).

#### 7.2.4.3. *The white characters*

Not only is Lydia an in-between character, but also all the other white characters are presented as such. In the first place, the slave master Mr. Whitechapel is a contradictory character: indeed, while he forbids Lydia to spend time with Chapel and endures the slave system with his plantation, he also has abolitionist thoughts. He is torn between the slave system and his growing objection to it. As a result, in the plantation owners' chapter he is mocked by the others who consider him an 'abolitionist' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 70). He represents a threat to the plantation system, and they worry for his mild attitude towards the slave, as 'they'll start to think they are [their] equals and should be free' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 71). In the slave owners'

chapter, Mr. Whitechapel supports his ideas and claims his slave Whitechapel

is noble, honorable, true. He has been tested in ways that would break most men. He is living proof that slaves are our equals in every way (D'Aguiar, 1995: 75).

He shows his respect for his old slave in many instances; indeed, when he is informed of Sanders' punishment towards Chapel, when he whips to death the poor Chapel: at this occasion, Mr. Whitechapel shows again is ambiguous attitude, while he admits 'Africans may be our inferiors', he claims that white people should behave differently to avoid the 'trade to turn [them] into savages' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 71).

Sanders Senior's diary is also central in the narrative, indeed, it informs the reader that the former overseer is both the father of Sanders Junior and Chapel, who was born following the rape of Cook, of which the two young brothers are unaware. Thus, Sanders senior's diary expresses his frustration for being attracted to a slave, Cook: after five years after his wife's death, he feels attracted towards the young slave Cook, who then will become the slave Whitechapel's wife. Sanders Senior's words reveal his internal fight:

Am I wrong to look at a slave girl and feel like a man for the first time in 5 years? I must be desperate (D'Aguiar, 1995: 40).

In his words he expresses his confusion, as he believes the black slaves are inferior to the whites. According to him, black slaves and white people belong to two different worlds, whose borders cannot be crossed: he cannot reconcile his attraction and his believes, and that situation results in the young slave's rape (Heyeres, 2012: 97).

Finally, Sanders Junior can also be considered a victim: like his father, he is trapped in the plantation ideology, and he unconsciously punishes his half-brother

Chapel to death, before being aware of their kinship. The truth is revealed to him by Mr. Whitechapel after Chapel's death. However, he refuses to be associated with his slave brother:

I am sorry about your son. Not my brother. I knew him only as the son of a slave. He was trouble from the day he talked. He not only asked questions but when you gave him an answer he was never satisfied. He always asked: Why this? Why that? (D'Aguiar, 1995: 130)

As Heyeres highlights, by describing Chapel, Sanders Junior unconsciously proves their kinship (Heyeres, 2012: 98), as, similarly to Chapel, when Sanders Junior was a child, he asked 'too many hows and whys' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 44).

Also, he cannot fully express his respect to the old Whitechapel, as he is a slave and should be treated as inferior, but he stated: 'If you were white, I would have wanted you as my father' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 134). Thus, while rejecting his connections with his half-brother, he creates a connection with the old slave, leaving the reader with a contrasting feeling.

#### 7.2.4.4. *Chapel*

Particularly important is the round and complex character of Chapel, who represents the complex condition of slaves with a mixed heritage. His chapter is written in verse, so as to underline his creativity and love for literature. Through his words, he describes his life, his love for Lydia and his reasons to run away from the plantation after his mother's death:

'[...] We cried  
But made no sound and made no moves  
Except to wipe our eyes and blow our noses.  
With her gone nothing could keep me there.

Father, I am running. I feel joy; not fear' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 64)

These lines are addressed to his father Whitechapel, who will eventually betray him. Chapel dreams of being free in the north with his beloved Lydia, and in his words the reader can perceive his hopes for the future that waits for him. While Chapel tries to escape the slave system, his father, Whitechapel, is completely absorbed in it and as a result of his loyalty to his master, he even betrays his son for his loyalty to his master (Boutros 2015: 57).

Through him, the writer manages to portray the dehumanization the slaves went through, as D'Aguiar himself affirms: 'every move by Chapel to assert his humanity results in a transgression' (Frias 2002: 419). Indeed, his desire to be literate, the desire to freely love, and to be free are all denied to Chapel and will eventually bring him to death: he is harshly punished for his attempt to pursue his happiness.

#### 7.2.4.5. *Conclusions*

The longest memory to which the title makes reference is Whitechapel's, not only he is represented as the 'living memory' of the plantation for his 'longevity' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 35), but, through his story, the reader can retrieve the necessary memory of slavery. However painful that may be, the act of remembering is necessary, and the history of slavery should become a 'source of knowledge' rather than a source of 'blame' or a 'defeat' (Frias 2002: 424). Remembering is a way to learn from the past and to avoid making the same mistakes again: the failed transmission of information about the past can lead to terrible consequences, such as the fratricide represented in *The Longest Memory* (1994): as Ward suggests, nobody passed on the story to the two half-brothers and their unawareness of their history brings one of them to death (Ward, 2011: 140). The importance of remembering is claimed by Whitechapel's warning contained in the very first lines of the prologue:

'the future is just more of the past waiting to happen' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 1): if British people today are not aware of the past, the future will only be an endless repetition of it; this statement appears troublingly true and in line with the set of problems raised by the Black Lives Matter Movement.

D'Aguiar's first novel clearly represents an evolution of the early Slave Narratives. However, while the protagonists of the early Slave Narratives wanted to pass their story, the old slave Whitechapel does not want to remember his story on, as it is too painful. Therefore, D'Aguiar introduces this strategy and avoids giving the readers too many details on the slave's past, to represent any slave, and to make the reader feel the same anguish the character feels. In the novel, Chapel's escape contrasts with the narratives of runaways who manage to gain their freedom as David George did, his hopes for a happy ending only remain dreams, for both him and Lydia. Therefore, through this novel, D'Aguiar attempts to display the consequences of slavery for all the people involved both whites and black people.

The next section contains my reading of *Feeding the Ghosts* (1977) and focuses on D'Aguiar's strategies in rewriting a Slave Narrative, through a truthful representation of a traumatized person's account. Also, I intend to focus on the two antagonistic characters, Mintah and Kelsal, to identify both their differences and their similarities. Finally, through a close reading of Mintah's account, I will propose a reflection on the importance of passing on the past, as it demands to be remembered.

#### 7.2.5. *The legacy of slavery in Feeding the Ghosts* (1997)

For the writing of *Feeding the Ghosts* (1977), D'Aguiar was inspired by an exhibit at the Slave Gallery in the Maritime Museum of Liverpool. The exhibit was dedicated to the Zong Case; there it was stated that one of the slaves that were thrown overboard managed to climb back. That whole story left him with a feeling of

suffering, and he wanted to know more about it, thus, he decided to create 'a piece of history that then grew out of an absence of facts about it' (Hyppolite, 2004: 4). Since there was no further information about the slave who survived, his/her voice was lost; in order to avoid that, D'Aguiar decided to imagine the slave's origins, and his/her life as if he/she had survived the Middle Passage, inventing the character of Mintah. By filling the gaps of memory, D'Aguiar is once again demonstrating the healing nature of fiction, as he asserts: 'Fiction is working in a psychotherapeutic way' (Hyppolite, 2004: 4).

D'Aguiar has denounced 'historical amnesia' on the subject of slavery (Frias, 2002: 425) through his works, and in his essay 'The Last Essay about Slavery' he writes:

In the names of streets, in the graveyards, in the literature of public and private libraries, in the very architecture that stores these books, my records (at least of when I was born) are reminders of this past, this present, this future, this slavery. [...] What a terrible past. But it shaped me. What a phoney present to pretend that past did not exist or is somehow over and therefore irrelevant to it. By ignoring the past, I am being ignored (D'Aguiar, 1996: 131).

In these lines D'Aguiar suggests that the present tries to ignore the past, however, the existence of people like D'Aguiar himself is the evidence that that painful past had existed, and, as he has shown through memory in *The Longest Memory* (1994), the past manages to come back as a ghostly legacy. Therefore, with *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), as the title itself suggests, he tries to shed light on the ghostly legacy of slavery which haunts our contemporary world. Thus, while *The Longest Memory* (1994) deals with the slaves' conditions in the plantations, *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) focuses on the Middle Passage, a key moment in every slave's life. D'Aguiar decided to depict the terrible voyage on board the *Zong*, that became sadly famous in the eighteenth century and helped to fuel the abolitionist campaign. By focusing on this

case, not only does the writer bring that episode back to communal memory, but he also points the attention to the people's feelings, as he 'retrieves individual voices and probes into the characters' minds and thoughts' (Pinchler, 2007: 7).

D'Aguiar includes the fictional character of Mintah, an outstanding slave who can read and write. Even if she was not ill on the *Zong*, she was thrown overboard by the captain's first mate Kelsal. The two had met in Africa, where Mintah was living with some Dutch missionaries; they had helped Kelsal after a shipwreck, at that time, the young slave took care of him. Despite being thrown overboard, Mintah manages to climb back onboard, where she is helped by the cook's assistant Simon. Mintah survives the *Zong* and she is later sold to slavery in Maryland, then she buys her freedom and, after having helped many slaves to escape to the North, she finally moves to Jamaica, where she witnesses the 1833 celebrations of the abolition of slavery.

The novel is divided into three parts framed by a prologue and an epilogue; each part uses a different style and has a different narrator. The first and longest part is narrated by an omniscient narrator who details the events on the *Zong*, accounting for the sailors' dialogues, through which the readers can grasp their thoughts, but also witness the terrible punishments of the slaves and the throwing of the slaves overboard. The second part, again narrated by a third-person narrator, displays the trial case based on what happened on the *Zong*, taking place in a London courtroom, in which the insurers and the investors were present; at this occasion, a diary written by Mintah on board of the *Zong* was submitted as evidence by Simon, which however would not be considered in court. Finally, the third part is Mintah's first-person account written at the time of the abolition of slavery, when she was in Jamaica, but it is a dream-like narrative which moves back and forward in time as she is haunted by the memories of the *Zong*.

### 7.2.5.1. Prologue and epilogue: 'the Zong is on the high seas'<sup>8</sup>

The prologue, narrated from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, begins by mentioning the sea: 'The sea is slavery' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 3), echoing the title of Derek Walcott's poem 'The Sea is History' (1980), which is used by D'Aguiar as an epigraph for his novel. He decides to make reference to the close connection between slavery and the Atlantic Ocean (Ward, 2011: 152), which has witnessed countless Middle Passages, and that became the graveyard of thousands of slaves.

D'Aguiar describes the 131 (or 132 as I will argue later) bodies that are floating after they have been thrown overboard the *Zong*, by mentioning exactly the number of bodies in the sea and counting the 264 arms and legs that lie there, D'Aguiar tries to restore the slaves' humanity by remembering each of them. Through this description he recalls Turner's painting *The Slave Ship*<sup>9</sup>, where the slaves' arms, legs, feet, hands, stand out of the sea, showing their terror and despair, provoking a sense of despair in the observer. Similarly, D'Aguiar's prologue create a sense of anguish and pain for the reader.

Similarly, in the epilogue, written in the first-person narrator from Mintah's perspective, she metaphorically comes back to the *Zong* massacre as if it was an ongoing event which perpetually repeats itself, indeed she uses the present tense 'the *Zong* is on the high seas' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229). The victims of the slave trade appear as ghostly figures that cannot rest in peace, as both the history and the sea have erased their existence from the communal memory. Therefore, the sea, which plays a key role in the whole novel, metaphorically heals the wounds created by the 131 bodies; however, the healing takes place 'without the evidence of a scar' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229): as history the sea 'accommodate[s]' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229) the deaths, however it also melts them down to bones, hiding the proof of their existence. Thus, as Ward states, the sea, like history, has failed to remember the dead

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<sup>8</sup> D'Aguiar, 1998: 229

<sup>9</sup> Turner, J., M., W. *The Slave Ship* (1840). Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

slaves (Ward, 2011: 153).

Since this story has been largely forgotten, Mintah herself has never overcome it, and even if she tried her whole life to 'feed the ghosts' by keeping them alive and witnessing their story through the diary she wrote, her knowledge has made no 'difference to history or to the sea' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229). Her account was considered in the court as 'penned by a ghost' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 168), and her knowledge has only made her suffer for her whole life, until she died. However, even after her death the Zong is on the high seas' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229): the story of slavery keeps on haunting us and D'Aguiar is suggesting, we should not pretend it did not exist, however terrible it was, it influenced our reality.

The Zong massacre is always taking place:

Men, women and children are thrown overboard by the captain and his crew.  
One of them is me. One of them is you. One of them is doing the throwing,  
the other is being thrown. I'm not sure who is who, you or I (D'Aguiar, 1998:  
229).

To remember the story of slavery does not mean to blame the perpetrators, as 'there is no fear, nor shame in this piece of information' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229), but the Zong as slavery is a fact that cannot be undone; its memory is haunting our present as 'it recurs' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229): 'racism is not over by any means' (Frias, 2002: 424). The only way the ghosts of our past can be laid to rest is through the narration of their stories, as the final words of the novel claim: 'the past is laid to rest when it is told' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 229). By remembering we can 'good [our] mistake', as Mintah explained to Simon, when he first forgot and then remembered he had to lock the room where Mintah was hiding: doing mistakes is part of our lives, but they remain mistakes only if we forget them, while 'that's good' if we 'remember[...] and [...] correct[...] [our] mistake' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 201).

### 7.2.5.2. *Kelsal and Mintah's dichotomy*

In *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) D'Aguiar portrays complex white characters, in particular the sailors on the *Zong*, who, throughout the novel, beat and throw the slaves overboard. However, at the same time they 'feel that it is bad to throw the helpless sick overboard' as 'this dumping is cruel and endless and more than the men can bear' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 98). They have crossed the line, and, using Mr. Whitechapel's words, the trade has turned them 'into savages' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 35); nevertheless, they persist in following the Captain's instructions. Among them, the first mate Kelsal is a key figure in the novel, as his past connects him with Mintah, and their experiences mirror each other's making them two 'antagonistic characters' (Heyeres, 2012: 94).

The meeting of the two characters in Africa is linked to a painful moment for Kelsal, that he is trying hard to forget, therefore while the reader could expect him to be grateful to Mintah, he shows anger against her, and he is extremely cruel. Thus, he wants to silence Mintah, to avoid remembering his past; this is the reason why he condemns her to be thrown overboard even if she is not ill. If in Africa he was in the weaker position, on the *Zong* he plays an active role in Mintah's bondage (Lafargue in Misrahi-Barak, 2016).

When describing the slaves' punishments D'Aguiar goes into details, even more than the early black writers did in their Slave Narratives. The reader is involved in the fictional account to such an extent that he/she manages to vividly imagine the detailed descriptions of the punishments and empathizes with the slaves. By inventing a fictional past which links together Mintah and Kelsal, the man's actions appear even more cruel to the readers:

Kelsal saw her menstrual blood. The boatswain cursed and stood up.  
Disappointment marked his face. There would be another time, he consoled himself... the men pulled Mintah on to her stomach and kneel on her arms

and held her splayed ankles. Kelsal kicked the whip that he had dropped at his feet further away and grabbed his club. He began to beat Mintah on her shoulders. She screamed (D'Aguiar, 1998: 33).

The failed rape left no hopes for Mintah, as 'there would be another time'. During the beatings she screamed Kelsal's name hoping he would spare her, as he should remember the times in Africa, and be grateful to her, but it reminded him of what he wanted so hard to forget that made her punishments even harsher.

Both characters during their lives forgot their names, and, as a consequence, almost lost their identities: while Kelsal was injured during the shipwreck and forgot his name; Mintah's sufferings on the Zong made her almost lose her identity, her traumatized mind dissociated from her body to survive. She states: 'My body belongs to everyone but me' and 'My name does not match my body anymore' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 200), she does not want to recognize her suffering body, only thanks to Simon who 'keeps saying [her] name' she begins 'to learn it': 'as we touch and kiss and I hear my name on his lips I see my name attach itself to my body' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 202). Kelsal's abuses have corrupted her body, but Simon's love for her allows her to repossess her body and her identity. Simon's will to repeat Mintah's name doubtlessly reminds the moment when Mintah herself repeated Kelsal's name, so that he could remember it: 'you are Kelsal' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 195).

The two characters display a dichotomy, as their traumatic lives produce two opposed personalities: while Kelsal feels confident when he is on the sea and connects the land with traumatic experiences, Mintah is afraid of being at the sea (Lafargue in Misrahi-Barak, 2016). On the one hand, Kelsal has 'sea legs and a ship postures' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 132), and he is uncomfortable on land 'he complained about everything. The sun, the nature of the work assigned to him, the food, the water [...] everything' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 195). On the other hand, for Mintah, as for the other slaves 'the sea is symbol of their slavery' (Heyeres, 2012: 93), and once she landed on the US soil, she decided that 'land must never be left for water' (D'Aguiar,

1998: 206).

### 7.2.5.3. *Representing trauma through Mintah's narrative*

Mintah's first-person narrative represents her whole life: from her early life in Africa, her abduction, her Middle Passage, her years as a slave in Maryland and how she manages to buy her freedom, her life as a freewoman, and even her death. Therefore, her account reads as a rewriting of the early Slave Narratives, nevertheless, her account does not follow a chronological order, and moves back and forward depicting her traumatized mind. Therefore, when creating this new evolution of the Slave Narrative genre, D'Aguiar tries to make the narrative of a traumatized person as realistic as possible; in doing so, the writer involves the reader in the narrative by giving him/her direct access to Mintah's mind (Pinchler, 2007: 8). The fragmented narrative technique D'Aguiar uses produces the same effect Phillips's fragmented narratives have on the reader. Here, however, the plotline is already known by the writer thanks to the omniscient narrator's account in the first part.

Mintah begins her account by stating her identity: 'I am Mintah' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 183), recalling the early Slave Narratives' structures. However, she does not inform the reader of her African past, rather she defines herself as one of the people that were thrown off the Zong the prologue talks about; that is the traumatic event that would eventually influence her whole life. Though she dreams about her early memories of Africa, she describes these early memories by referring to herself in the third person narrative, as if that girl was not her anymore. After all her sufferings she has changed and cannot be considered the same person anymore.

Thus, both her memory and her body show the effect of the Zong on her, as even when she is a free woman, she has 'an ache in [her] side from a beating [she] took on a ship in another life' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 205). And similarly to her physical pain which continues to come back, her narrative always goes back to the memories

about the Zong, and so does her written account. This attitude depicts what Janet and Freud define as either attachment to trauma' or 'traumatic fixation', which pushes the traumatized subjects to focus again and again on the traumatic event, even if he/she tries hard to avoid it. Indeed, even if Mintah has survived, she lives almost as if she was haunted by the ghosts of the Zong. After having been thrown off the Zong, a part of Mintah died, when she was awakened by Simon, she is not sure if she was alive or dead: 'Am I living or dead?' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 196), and the other slaves thought she was a ghost, since nobody has ever returned from the sea 'she must be a spirit' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 197). In the end she is one of the 132 bodies, as the prologue points out, that 'are flung at this sea' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 3). Her story has been erased by the main narrative of history, she has been considered as the ghost writer of the diary on the Zong, her story lingers on the high sea together with the stories of the other slaves, until it is retold and listened to.

#### *7.2.5.4. Mintah's attempt to bring the past into the future*

When Mintah manages to climb back on the Zong, she knows what she has to do: 'I know I have to write everything that happens to me and everyone around me' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 190). As with Phillips's Cambridge, she feels the need to bear witness to what was happening to the slaves. Even if her testimony is not listened to during the trial, she had to witness the deaths of her fellows. As a consequence, her whole life is an attempt to bear witness to the Zong massacre, indeed, as soon as she has the chance, she buys a land where she plants 131 trees, 'One tree for each soul lost on the Zong' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 219), and she carves an army composed of 131 wooden sculptures.

Mintah has a strong link to wood, as her father used to carve wood, and she learned from him, thus, wood represents her safe past in Africa, in opposition to water, and by extension the sea that has divided her from her family forever. However, the two elements merge in her sculptures. As she remembers

[people] Said the wood I worked resembled water in its curves and twists.  
The very element I sought to escape rose out of wood shaped by me  
(D'Aguiar, 1988: 207).

Thus, even if, like Whitechapel, she cannot avoid remembering, thanks to the sculptures she finds some relief. Mintah cannot bear children because of the abuses she was subjected to, thus, she cannot tell her story to them; nevertheless, she conceives her sculptures as her progeny:

My progeny is wood. Wood crowds my hut. I sleep surrounded by them.  
from their shapes they appear to breathe like me. Each has a name, a likely  
age, and accordingly likes to be placed on the left or right side, on her  
stomach or back or propped against a wall standing [...] (D'Aguiar, 1998:  
210).

These sculptures seem to be alive and to talk to her keeping the memory of the Zong alive, so her life becomes an endlessly mourning of the Zong.

The narrative ends with a last chapter narrated by an external narrator, who tells Mintah's death: the former slave is burned alive in her house together with her sculptures. The fact that she is burning with the 131 sculptures, echoes the moment in which she was drowning in the ocean surrounded by the other slaves, thus, she metaphorically becomes the 132<sup>nd</sup> dead body in the sea. However, as the narrator states: 'the spirits carved in those figures fled into the wooded hills' (D'Aguiar, 1998: 228), which means that their ghostly memory lives as long as Miniath's memory has not been laid to rest yet, as it cannot be 'the last novel about slavery'.

#### 7.2.5.5. Conclusions

To conclude, my reading of D'Aguiar *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) has underlined its link with the early Slave Narratives through Mintah's account, and I suggest it

represents an accomplished evolution of the early Slave Narratives. In this novel D'Aguiar uses new strategies to make the narrative more appealing to a contemporary reader: the omniscient narrator of both the first and second part of the novel gives information to the reader of the general story of the Zong, and of Mintah's experiences on it, while also displaying the feelings of the white sailors, while Mintah's traumatized account reproduces a revisited version of the early Slave Narratives.

Through the protagonist's account, which appears as a realistic narrative written by a traumatized subject, D'Aguiar reflects the impossibility of creating a linear account of traumatizing events, the reader can access Mintah's thoughts until her death. After having read Mintah's account, the reader is handed over her legacy, thus, the novel prompts the reader to actively look for more information on the Zong, and on slavery in general, so that the ghosts can find peace and the past can finally be laid to rest.

In the next section of this chapter, my aim will be to introduce the writer Andrea Levy and to provide a context for her writing. Her novel *The Long Song* (2010) closely reminds of the early slave narratives, thus, I will underline the main feature of the novel and I will point out the novelty she introduces.

### 7.3. Andrea Levy

Andrea Levy was born in London in 1956, however, her whole life had been influenced by a previous date, notably the year 1948: when her father left Jamaica on board the well-known ship *Empire Windrush* SS to arrive in England with great hopes to build a brighter future for his family.

I don't know what my dad's aspirations were when he arrived in Britain - he certainly didn't realise that he was making history at the time. [...] Far from the idea that he was travelling to a foreign place, he was travelling to the centre of his country, and as such he would slip-in and fit-in immediately. Jamaica, he thought, was just Britain in the sun. (Levy, 2000)

Like all the first-generation migrants who moved to England, her parents were deceived by the treatment they received in England; they were discriminated as black people, however, when in Jamaica, they benefited from a good social status, as they were considered to be *coloured*: in the then British colony, complexion divided people into different social classes; there were *white Jamaicans*, *coloured Jamaicans* and *black Jamaicans* (Greer, 2004). Thus, the coloured people were considered to be of higher social status than the black people, as they were closer to the white people. These different complexions were the result of the intercourses between slaves and their masters, and these categories are the evidence of what Fanon has described as 'the colonized inferiority complex' (Fanon, 2008). As Andrea Levy's states, 'the idea that to be lighter is to be better' has deeply influenced the contemporary world, nevertheless, this topic is not debated enough (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 135), thus, it seems extremely relevant to her, as she deals with it in all her works.

Levy started writing in her mid-30s after her father's death, and her writing is an attempt 'to make him visible' (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 122); like Phillips, she decided to write to represent the stories of black Britons like her father,

who were never represented in English literature. Levy wrote five novels and a collection of essays, through which, she managed to investigate the connections between England and the colonies from different perspectives and in different times; she has dealt with topics such as discrimination, integration, and the black diaspora. She received an Arts Council Award, the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Novel Award, the Whitbread Book of the Year award, the Orange Best of the Best, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. Levy died in 2019.

In the following section I intend to examine Andrea Levy's connections to her heritage, which has positively influenced her literary creativity, and ultimately brought her to reflect on transatlantic slavery.

### 7.3.1. *The Jamaican heritage*

Levy grew up in London, and, as a second-generation migrant, she faced racism, even if not commonly 'violent, or extreme, but it was insidious and ever present and had a profound effect on [her]' (Levy, 2014: 8). Levy was surrounded by white colleagues, white friends, and a white boyfriend, thus she felt to be part of the white British society. Also, she was given no knowledge about her legacy, indeed, both her teachers and her parents never mentioned either British colonial history or Jamaica; like them, in her childhood, Levy tried 'to be as British as [she] could be' remaining 'completely indifferent to Jamaica' (Levy, 2014: 4).

However, one day during a racism awareness course, the staff had to split into two groups, to represent the black Britons and the whites. Levy instinctively went to the white group, but the other people in the room 'had other ideas', in that moment she realized she was actually considered as a black person 'it was a life changing moment' (Levy, 2014: 10). From that moment on she felt the need to investigate her complex and rich cultural heritage:

Everything from Jamaica was odd to me. [...] Until it grew into a need to visit Jamaica. [...] the jewel in this island for me was my family (Levy, 2000).

Becoming aware of her legacy and the connections between the Caribbean and Britain, she proudly defines herself as a black British writer, differently from D'Aguiar, she considers this label more as a fertile starting point that can help her expand her imagination: all her writings deal with her Caribbean heritage, and the more she learns about it the more interesting it becomes (Levy, 2014: 11).

The next part will propose my reading of *The Long Song* (2010), there I will argue that through July's centrality, Levy foregrounds slavery's centrality in British history: through a personal account in which well-known historical events only provide a background for the everyday struggles of the slaves; July's life is central. Also, I aim to investigate the editorial fictional context created by Levy, to both give a sense of truthfulness to the novel and to create connections with contemporary Britain and the reader him/herself.

### 7.3.2. *Remembering slavery with pride in The Long Song (2010)*

The novel tells the story of a black female slave called July in the Amity plantation; the story is almost entirely narrated by the former slave July and her narration is framed by the prologue and epilogue written by her eldest son Thomas Kingsman, who encouraged his mom to record her experiences.

*The Long Song* (2010) is the only novel written by Andrea Levy that focuses on colonial slavery. Indeed, while her other novels are set in the contemporary period, with it she felt the need to explore her colonial heritage and to represent the society that produced the racism that is experienced by the protagonists of her other novels, as is the case for Faith the protagonist of *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999). Therefore, it is her first approach to a temporal setting which goes 'beyond living memory', as

the story takes place on the Amity plantation in Jamaica during the last years of colonial slavery. Nevertheless, through the epilogue of the novel, Levy manages to connect her narrative of slavery to contemporary, and multicultural Britain (Perfect in Baxter; and James, 2014: 41). Like both Phillips and D'Aguiar, Levy's writing aims to bring to light the British Caribbean heritage, through her black characters, whose stories have been neglected by both literature and history; in particular, thanks to *The Long Song* (2010), she wants to retrieve the role of slavery in British history as it 'went on for 300 years and a society grew up'<sup>10</sup>.

Levy had the initial idea for *The Long Song* (2010) when, at a conference in London on the legacy of slavery, a young girl asked the panel how she could be proud of her own heritage, since her ancestors were slaves. She details that moment in her essay 'The Writing of The Long Song' which has been published attached to the novel itself:

Of Jamaican ancestry myself, I wondered why anyone would feel any ambivalence or shame at having a slave ancestry? 'If your ancestors survived the slave ships they were strong. If they survived the plantations they were clever.' It is a rich and proud heritage. It was at that moment that I felt something stirring in me. Could a novelist persuade this young woman to have pride in her ancestors though telling her a story? (Levy, 2010: 405)

Thus, the girl's question pushed her to write a novel on slavery, even if that was 'the last thing [she] wanted to' (Levy, 2010: 405), indeed, to write such a book meant to do research on slavery, to go through racist accounts and to investigate European racism's roots. All of that appeared extremely painful to her, however while researching she realized that the slaves were much more than silenced victims, they suffered but they found a way to survive, and they even created a culture through their creole language, their music, and their cuisine, which has survived until today: 'these are people who, from their tiny islands, have made a

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<sup>10</sup> Levy: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/mediapacks/thelongsong/andrea/>

mark on the world' (Levy, 2010: 405). Therefore, when writing her Neo-Slave Narrative, Levy found an answer to this question, she strongly believed that all the young black people in Britain should find 'pride' rather than 'shame' in their slave ancestry (Lima 2012: 137) and remember the stories of their ancestors to give them back the voice history had stolen from them. Like *Cambridge* (1991), *Crossing the River* (1993), *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), *The Long Song* (2010) represents a 'tribute' to all the slaves whose humanity was denied through the trade, but who played a key role in British history, and need to be remembered: this novel aims to be 'an inspirational story not only for their descendants but for us all' (Levy, 2010: 416). What is more, the black girl at a conference should be proud of her heritage, but also the white audience should be fully aware of that part of history.

The writing of *The Long Song* (2010) was extremely painful for Levy, however, it inspired her to look for her own family history, which surprisingly had many things in common with her own novel, thus, she affirms that it 'is not a history out there with nothing... it's absolutely here, it's absolutely here with us'<sup>11</sup>.

#### 7.3.2.1. *The centrality of July's portrait*

Throughout her narrative, July mentions a portrait which depicts her slave owners, Robert and Caroline Goodwin, together with her. To have a slave portrayed together with his/her masters was not an exception, indeed, by including a slave in a portrait, the family displayed its wealth (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 109). Moreover, as the painter in the novel suggests to the recently married couple, the black slave adds 'a touch of exotic' to the portrait (Levy, 2010: 222). In an interview with Susan Fisch, Levy talks about this kind of portrait which usually gives a mitigated image of slavery, as it does not portray the horrors of slavery; when

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<sup>11</sup> Levy: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/mediapacks/thelongsong/andrea/>

looking at these images, she wondered if a more realistic representation of the Empire would change the people's attitude towards black people (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 133), thus, through her novel she tries to pass on the actual image of slavery.

Andrea Levy then decided to use the painting to send a message to the reader. For it she took inspiration from the painting *Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray*<sup>12</sup>, which portrays two young ladies, one of whom is black. Dido Elisabeth Belle was the daughter of Lord Mansfield's nephew, and she was raised with her white cousin Elisabeth Murray. In the painting Elisabeth is depicted with a book in her hands, while Dido is carrying a basket full of fruit. As Fischer as suggested, through this representation, Lady Elisabeth appears as a cultivated woman, while Dido becomes an exotic figure (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 110). The actual painting closely resembles the one described by Levy, as both Dido and July wear white simple dresses, while both Elisabeth and Caroline wear more refined clothes; Caroline even wears her wedding gown which the artist depicted trustfully to such an extent 'that the pink silk of the garment shimmers as if the actual cloth were pasted upon it' (Levy, 2010: 219).

Despite Elisabeth's centrality in the painting, 'Dido absolutely steals it by the look on her face and her demeanour', as Levy points out (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 133). Similarly to Dido, who unconsciously stole the scene from her cousin, July's beauty manages to drive attention on to her, stealing it from her mistress and she becomes both physically and metaphorically central to the painting. July's centrality in the painting shows her importance in the Goodwin family and, more importantly, alludes to the slaves' centrality in the British history; thus, by allowing July to reclaim of her key position, Levy reminds the reader that slavery should be reconsidered within English culture and history (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 110).

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<sup>12</sup> David, M. *Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray* (1778). Oil on canvas. Scone Palace, Scotland.

### 7.3.2.2. *A person's account*

Levy's novel is not meant to give an historical account of slavery, it is actually 'a story about a person's life' (Levy, 2010: 415), indeed, she depicts the real humanity of the people who have been dehumanized during slavery (Tolan in Baxter; and James, 2014: 98). Through July's narration many important historical moments are evoked, such as the Baptist War (1831-1832) and the abolition of slavery (1833). Nevertheless, July did not take part either in the war, or in the celebrations, instead, Levy uses these events only as a background for the characters' personal experiences; Flaisarova suggests that Levy portrays the 'personal stories' of people: even if these events are already known, the consequences for the slaves' real lives have not been analysed (Flaisarova, 2013: 320); these are, indeed, some of the blanks the Neo-Slave Narratives try to fill.

Through her narrative, July recollects her authentic memories, and she does not aim to create an historical reconstruction of the events she witnesses. Her attitude is different from the her son's, for whom it is important to fix 'historical experience in a definable and named historical event' (Baxter in Baxter; and James, 2014: 89); rather, she invites the readers who look for 'a fuller account of what happened during this time' (Levy, 2010: 103) to read other texts; she even mentions two fictional books on Jamaican slavery: George Dovaston's pamphlet, *Facts and documents connected with the Great Slave Rebellion of Jamaica (1832)*, and John Hoskin's *Conflict and change. A view from the great house of slaves, slavery and the British Empire*, the latter is, however, not worthy to be read in July's opinion (Levy, 2010: 103). July does not even know how to define these main events, for instance she hesitantly uses the definition 'Baptist War', 'has [her] son does name it' (Levy, 2010: 102); even in the case of the slaves' emancipation, July does not include any official account of the Abolition, rather she reports the accounts of people who have heard about it (Baxter in Baxter; and James, 2014: 89).

### 7.3.2.3. *July's painful narrative*

Similarly to Phillips's and D'Aguiar's characters, the act of remembering is extremely painful for July: at the beginning of her account, she even decides to use the third-person narration, when talking about her birth she either refers to herself as 'July' or as 'the pickney' and she says: 'When the pickney was finally released from within Kitty she yelled with so mighty an exhalation that the trees bent as if a hurricane had just passed' (Levy, 2010: 18). Bekers interprets this choice as a way to distance herself from the pain of recollecting her memories (2018: 36); Lima goes further and suggests that the use of a third-person narrative creates a confusing effect: the reader does not immediately understand that the 'pickney' at the beginning of the narration and July are the same person (Bekers, 2012: 139). Nevertheless, at the same time she also feels compelled to tell her story. Thus, July's narrative begins with her birth, however, like both Phillips and D'Aguiar, Levy adds new elements to the early Slave Narratives, in order to pass to the reader, the traumatized status of her characters. Moreover, July's childhood is not connected with pleasant memories of Africa, as she was born a slave like David George.

Levy manages to represent the fragmentary nature of July's existence through a disrupted narration, which moves back and forward from the past of July's slave life to the fictional present where she is with her son. Also, Levy introduces a new feature to produce a narrative which appears as authentic to the reader: sometimes July directly addresses the reader:

But, reader, I cannot allow my narrative to be muddled by such an ornate invention, for upon some later page you might feel to accuse me of deception when, in point, I am speaking fact (Levy, 2010: 13).

Her life is destroyed by loss and pain: she suffers the consequence of rape, she loses her mom, she is forced to abandon her first child Thomas and her second

child is taken away from her. Indeed, while narrating July tries to anticipate the end of her story to avoid some sorrowful moments; in a similar vein to Cambridge and Whitechapel, she tries hard not to remember her mother's killing, the pain Mr. Goodwin has caused her; and the loss of Elisabeth (Fischer in Baxter; and James, 2014: 116). Nevertheless, her son encourages her to continue:

Reader, alas my son is not yet finished with me. Must an old woman endure this? [...] He wishes to know of those years betwixt July's stolen pickney and her shuffling starving upon the courtroom (Levy, 2010: 394).

#### *7.3.2.4. The fictional editorial context*

Thomas Kinsman, the child that July abandoned, is the one who convinces her to put into words her own story: by creating this artificial context for the narrative, July's story is presented as an authentic Slave Narrative, and Levy reproduces a structure which is typical of the Slave Narratives, where an editor supported and encouraged the writing of the novel (Bekers 2018: 34). However, differently from the early Slave Narrative, the editor is not a white abolitionist, but Thomas who was 'as black as a nigger' (Levy, 2010: 186).

Also, the prologue and the epilogue are fictionally written by him. In the prologue he details how he convinced his hesitant mother to write down her story, since for a slave it was forbidden to write. Nevertheless, she 'felt impelled, by some force which was mightier than her own will, to relay this story to [him], her son' (Levy, 2010: 1): a desire which is typical of traumatized subjects. Not only does July want to tell her story to her son, but she also desires it to be passed on to the next generations, so it 'would never be lost' (Levy, 2010: 1), the memorialization of the past echoes Mintah's need to feed the ghosts. July's story was meant to have the length of a 'pamphlet' or of a 'chapbook' (Levy, 2010: 4), but it became much longer. The idea of an oral tradition that is passed on the generations is also reminded

through the title, as the Tainos, the original inhabitants of Jamaica, used to do so through songs. Moreover, the term 'long song' is used to define the cyclical songs which 'end up where they began' (Levy, 2010: 421).

'The future is just more of the past waiting to happen' (D'Aguiar, 1995: 1) is the old slave Chapel's first sentence: similarly, the epilogue of *The Long Song* (2010) reveals its connections to the present; indeed, as the cyclical songs, the novel began with the birth of a child, July, who is taken away from her mother, and ends with the search of July's lost child (Tolan in Baxter; and James, 2014: 105). The epilogue displays another fictional aim of the novel: Thomas would like to find his lost sister Emily, July's second child, who is believed to live in England. Thomas's words prompt a reflection on the awareness on the part of British people of their connections with the colonies and slavery: indeed, July's white child Emily may not be aware of the strong connections she has with Jamaica, and of the negro blood running in her veins. And as Thomas suggests, this revelation may be 'unsettling' for her because 'in England the finding of negro blood within a family is not always met with rejoicing' (Levy, 2010: 313). Nevertheless, the two siblings, both the ugliest black-skinned child [July] had ever seen' and Emily (Levy 2011: 186) are equally the heritage of Jamaican slavery (Tolan in Baxter; and James, 2014: 106). By creating two siblings with different complexions, Levy underlines slavery is not exclusively black people's past.

#### 7.3.2.5. *Conclusions*

My reading of *The Long Song* (2010) has highlighted the connections with the early Slave Narratives, thanks both to the topics July deals with, and to the fictional editorial story, which includes July's son, Thomas. Therefore, as far as July's account is concerned, the topics she focuses on are retrieved from the early Slave Narratives, as she details her whole life, from her birth, through her sufferings under slavery, her life after the Amity plantation, and finally her happy reunion with her

abandoned son. However, Levy manages to forge the literary genre of the Slave Narratives into a new form, like both Phillips and D'Aguiar, she envisages a fragmented structure with a non-linear plot, in which July's memories naturally come to her mind.

Moreover, Levy makes use of the Neo-Slave Narratives' 'bitemporal' function (Rushdy, 1999: 5), by providing an open ending that manages to connect the story of slavery to contemporary Britain: 'the past, an imagined future and the present are juxtaposed to reveal a highly complex black contemporary moment' (Baxter in Baxter; and James, 2014: 93). In doing so, she also creates a leitmotiv among all of her novels, as her Angela in *Every Light in the House Burning*' (1994), Vivien, Olive in *Never far from Nowhere* (1996) and Faith in *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), like Emily, are the living legacy of the slave trade.

Finally, the last author I am going to introduce in the next section is Bernadine Evaristo. Her Neo-Slave Narrative is particularly interesting as she creates a dystopian reality in which the white people are the one who are enslaved by black people.

#### 7.4. Bernardine Evaristo

Bernardine Evaristo was born in 1959 in Eltham in the southeast of London, as the fourth of eight children. Like Phillips, D'Aguiar and Levy, she is a black Briton, however, what distinguishes her from the other authors I discussed, is her mixed heritage, as her father was Nigerian and her mother English. She first expressed her creativity as an actress as she studied drama at the Rose Burford College of Speech & Drama, and then she earned her PhD at Goldsmiths University in London. She became interested in writing when she was in drama school, when she was encouraged to create her own theatre plays, and in 1982 she co-founded the Theatre of Black Women, which is recognized as the first company run by black women in England. Since then, she has continued to feed her creativity through writing, as she stated in an interview in 2021<sup>13</sup>.

Evaristo is a successful and complete writer, since her writing explores several literary genres: fiction, poetry, verse fiction, essays, literary criticism, playwriting, both her novel *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and her short story *Hello Mum* (2010) were adapted as radio plays. Her works have been largely praised; indeed, she was longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, and she won several awards, in particular she is the first black woman to win the Booker Prize in 2019, the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize, and the Orange Prize Youth Panel Award, moreover, she is a lifetime Fellow, of Rose Burford College of Theatre & Performance and of St Anne's College, at Oxford University. Currently, she is Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University of London.

Besides being an extremely successful writer, Evaristo is also a literary activist. Since the founding of Theatre of Black Women, she has fought for a more

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<sup>13</sup> Evaristo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TZpzw0puZk>

inclusive literature, which gives black writers more opportunities of being published. In order to pursue her aim, Evaristo contributed to the creation of extremely successful schemes to help black writers to be published, for instance she founded *The Complete Works* (2007-2017) a program that monitored black poets, and which was extremely successful <sup>14</sup>.

Evaristo's writings have been influenced by her mixed heritage background, thus, in the following section, I will provide a context for her work and her aims as a writer, by reflecting on her peculiar position in British society as a person with a mixed heritage.

#### 7.4.1. *'My preoccupations are in my DNA'*<sup>15</sup>

Evaristo inherited her complexion from her Nigerian father, and being black and British she has always been considered by the British society as an outsider:

As someone who was female, working class and a person of colour, limitations had been determined for me before I even opened my mouth to cry at the shock of being thrust out of my mother's cosy amniotic womb, where I had spent nine months in dreamily sensate harmony with my creator. My future was not propitious – I was destined to be regarded as a sub-person: submissive, inferior, marginal, negligible – a bona fide subaltern (Evaristo, 2021: 6).

Through these lines, Evaristo describes racial discrimination against black people, who in contemporary society hold an 'inferior' position, and are considered as 'sub-persons'. However, differently from Phillips, D'Aguiar, and Levy, she has always faced her own complex identity: she knew her Nigerian father's family had connections with Brazil, as her grandfather was one of the Africans who came back

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, 2008: 1203.

to Nigerian from Brazil after the end of slavery in 1888; and even her British mother had a complex origin, as her ancestors were English, Irish, and German. When she grew up, Evaristo, similarly to Levy, felt the need to know more about her heritage: at that point she already knew a lot about her mother's family, but not much about her father's; indeed, he was not used to talk about his family and his cultural background, thus, at the age of 27, she decided to write a letter to her relatives in Nigeria, and then visit them.

She details the history of her complex heritage that informed her identity in her latest work, which is her first collection of essays: *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021). Here she includes an essay entitled: 'ONE ān (Old English) ẹni (Yoruba) a haon (Irish) ein (German) um (Portuguese) heritage, childhood, family, origins'; this long title connects all her origins through the translation of the word 'one', which is also used to convey the meaning of unity: while the different complexions are only different outlooks of the human beings, the different languages convey the same meanings through different words.

Like D'Aguiar, she would not define herself as a black British writer, as no white writer has ever been defined as a 'white British writer', thus, she is only a writer who is both black and British (Muñoz -Valdivieso, 2004: 12). Nevertheless, her multiracial background allows her to create complex works presenting different perspectives on reality, and her personal story has become a rich source for her writing, (Muñoz -Valdivieso, 2004: 9). Therefore, through her writing, she crosses 'the borders of genre, race, culture, gender, history and sexuality', in order to represent the narratives connected to the African diaspora, which creates bridges among 'ancient and modern history [and] our contemporary society', as herself states in her website<sup>16</sup>. Thus, her family history which is included in her 'DNA', as she states (Collins, 2008: 1203) is the inspiration of her writing, as much as 'the question of identity is deeply part of [Phillips's] DNA'<sup>17</sup>. Using Gendusa's

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<sup>16</sup> Evaristo: <https://bevaristo.com/statement/>

<sup>17</sup> Phillips: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kELzEJji4YY>

definition, through her writing, Evaristo challenges binary notions such as black and white; man and woman; past and present, by representing both poles with their internal contradictions (Gendusa: 2014: 99). Moreover, the tension of the opposing forces she represents are displayed through the creation of an extremely innovative writing, as she plays with different literary genres to surprise the reader:

One of my aims as a writer is [...] play with ideas, conjure up original and innovative fiction and forms, and to subvert expectations and assumptions. Writing is an adventure, a journey into the unknown, and I enjoy liberating myself from the shackles of convention<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, her concerns and the topics she deals with certainly connect her to postcolonial black British literature, being it a label which does not restrictively differentiate black writers, rather it is intended to bring together those writers who, because of their legacy, deal also but not exclusively with racial issues, as I conceive it in this dissertation. However, as Gendusa has argued, differently from postcolonial writers who 'write back' from the margins to the center, Evaristo is writing from the center challenging its homogeneity through its internal hybridity represented by people like Evaristo herself (Gendusa: 2014: 106).

The next section will be dedicated to my reading of *Blonde Roots* (2008), which suggests connections to the early Slave Narratives while highlighting different aspects of the novel, and it focuses mainly on the reversed narrative, through which Evaristo manages to represent transatlantic slavery from a new perspective, challenging the reader to rethink his/her beliefs. Also, I will discuss both the antagonistic voices that narrate the story, which provide the readers multiple perspectives on slavery.

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<sup>18</sup> Evaristo: <https://bevaristo.com/statement/>

#### 7.4.2. *A reversed perspective in Blonde Roots (2008)*

Evaristo's family connections clearly link her family history with slavery and make her the legacy of the trade. Thus, with *Blonde Roots* (2008) she aims to create connection between the present and the past, raising awareness on slavery. However, she was inspired by some pro-slavery texts kept at the Senate House Library of the University of London: these texts presented slavery with a 'very reasoned, very civilized and very educated' tone<sup>19</sup> that outraged her and pushed her to make the slave's perspective central to her novel.

*Blonde Roots* (2008) is Evaristo's first novel completely written in prose, and entirely dedicated to slavery, as in the case of Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010). The novel's title reminds of Alex Haley's best-selling novel *Roots* (1976). However, in her work, Evaristo tries once again to draw on her creativity to create something new and unpredictable, since she did not want to create the novel people expected of her. She

really didn't want to write the kind of predictable novel about slavery that we're used to, where the reader knows where they are going emotionally and morally (Collins, 2008: 1202).

Rather, she aimed to make people reflect on slavery in a different way<sup>20</sup>, Evaristo created a fictional reversed history of slavery (Gendusa, 2014: 186). Thus, she came up with a novel in which the 'whites' are enslaved by black masters, in a reversed narrative of the slave trade. The title already displays its innovativeness: while the word 'roots' connects the novel to the Slave Narrative tradition, which is linked to the African legacy; she introduced the adjective 'blonde', making her narrative completely different from the others (Toplu, 2011: 46).

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<sup>19</sup> Evaristo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HxtBDKnEVo>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

The novel is composed of three distinct sections accounting for both the narrative of a slave and the pamphlet of her pro-slavery master. The first part represents the narrative of the English slave Doris, or Omerenomwara, as she was renamed by the Ambossians; while Doris is trying to escape at the moment of the writing, her memories come back to her. The second focuses on her slave master Kaga Konata Katamba's anti-abolitionist thoughts; and the third part comes back again to Doris's account, from the time in which she is recaptured by her master and sent to work in the colonies, to her freedom. Both Doris's and Kaga Konata Katamba's narratives are first-person accounts, which give the readers the chance to explore two different perspectives of slavery by directly accessing their thoughts and feelings (Olejniczak, 2020: 9).

#### 7.4.2.1. *Representing slavery*

Similarly to Phillips, D'Aguiar and Levy, Evaristo's primary aim when writing *Blonde Roots* (2008) was to represent slavery and its aftermath. Even if in a reversed way, Evaristo truthfully details the actual history of transatlantic slavery, fictionally reproducing in her novel the triangular trade: through the 'Cabbage Coast' in England she represents Africa; through Doris's experiences in 'Londolo' she refers to the domestic slaves living in England; and through Doris's description of the field slaves' work in the 'West Japanese Islands', she represents the plantation system in the colonies (Gendusa, 2014: 187). Also, she details the atrocities endured by the slaves first when kidnapped, then during the Middle Passage, and once they arrived in the plantations. Doris is repeatedly punished, as her body is objectified by the black perpetrators, her descriptions recall both Mintah's abuses on the Zong, and Mary Prince's detailed accounts of the abuses she has endured. Evaristo depicts all slavery's aspects, as she also reproduces the Africans' involvement in the slave trade, when Doris makes reference to the Europeans' betrayal of their own countrymen:

The slave raiders, it seemed, were in cahoots with aristocrats like Percy and the middlemen who supplied them with slaves for shipment overseas. Criminals and prisoners of war were hot favourites, but when they weren't available it was anyone who could be captured, so long as they weren't too old or, in Percy's case, his own serfs. Children were taken too (Evaristo, 2020: 54).

Moreover, like Phillips and D'Aguiar, Evaristo includes the perpetrators' perspective through Kaga Konata Katamba's words, referring to the civilizing mission of the Europeans in real life, and of the black people in the book, indeed, one of the chapters written by the black master is entitled 'Heart of Greynes' which alludes to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

The fictional reality Evaristo creates, mirrors the actual history of transatlantic slavery, thus, it should prompt the reader to have a fresh perspective on slavery, as, in this case the victims are the white people with whom the white readers should easily identify. Evaristo challenges the contemporary racist attitudes towards black people, inviting the reader to imagine a reality in which roles are reversed, and in which the notion of 'civilization', which in real life is still attributed to Europe, is considered as 'savagery'<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, as the quotation from Nietzsche included at the beginning of the novel states:

All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth (quoted in Evaristo, 2020).

By including it, Evaristo underlines that the main narrative of history adopts the winners' perspective. The African culture has been considered as savage by the Europeans who colonized them and used the Africans as slaves; this ideology has survived until today, however, this concept depends on a subjective interpretation, and, as Evaristo seems to suggest, things could have developed differently if the

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<sup>21</sup> Evaristo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HxtBDKnEVo>

Africans' interpretation of reality would have prevailed on the Europeans'' one.

If the other writers of Neo-Slave Narratives give voice to those who were silenced in the main narrative of history, Evaristo goes further and while giving voice to the African slave through the fictional voice of a white slave, she also creates a reversed reality in which black people are the 'winners' that can impose their perspective; in doing so, she demonstrates how easily different perspectives give rise to different interpretations. She urges the reader to reflect and to ask him/herself: why should white culture be considered as superior? Why white manners should be considered as more civilized? In the reversed reality created by Evaristo the African look is regarded as the standard of beauty, while Doris's 'fair' complexion, her 'slim nostrils', her 'slender lips', her 'oil-reach hair', and her 'non-round-bottom' are regarded as ugly (Evaristo, 2020: 32).

Evaristo herself stated that *Blonde Roots* (2008) is a 'What if?' narrative, but it also a 'This is what was' book (Collins, 2008: 1201). While apparently representing a dystopian version of the black Atlantic (Newman, 2012), Evaristo is also, and most importantly, representing the actual history of slavery, and though the sufferings of Doris, the sufferings of all the black slaves are brought to light. Therefore, the epigraph of the novel connects the fictional story to the history of Portuguese slavery, which began in 1444, and was outlawed in 1888. The whole novel is, indeed, a tribute to both the enslaved Africans, and their descendants:

Remembering the 10 to 12 million Africans taken to Europe and the Americas as slaves... and their descendants, 1444–1888 (Evaristo, 2020).

#### 7.4.2.2. *Redrawing the world's geography*

Evaristo's reversed Neo-Slave Narrative is set in a revisited geography illustrated in a fictional map which portrays Doris's world and placed as a prefix to the book. In the map Europe and Africa replace one another, thus, Evaristo's 'Aphrika' takes

the place of Europe, and 'Europa' replaces Africa, 'England' is situated inside 'Europa' and has a coast called 'The Cabbage Coast' which evokes the African Gold Coast. In her imagined 'Aphrica', Evaristo creates an island with the shape of the UK, which she names 'U.K. of Great Ambossa', whose capital city is 'Londolo'. America which is not geographically displaced is renamed 'Amarika', however, the Caribbean Islands are renamed as 'West Japanese Islands', whose name was given by the fictional explorer Chinua Chikwemeka, who, as Doris states, 'was trying to find a new route to Asia, he mistook those islands for the legendary isles of Japan, and the name stuck' (Evaristo 2020: 5). Moreover, in this imagined geography the Middle Passage takes place below the Equator. By displacing the Middle Passage and replacing Europe and Africa, Evaristo demonstrates 'the exclusiveness of space, besides dislocating the readers' spatial and national assumptions' (Toplu, 2011: 47).

Not only does Evaristo create a new geography, but she also plays with words by taking inspiration from actual places, shops, books, films, or famous people, which she revisits for her reversed reality; thus, the 1967 famous movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, becomes *Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner*, and Helen Bannerman's book *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899), becomes *Little Whyte Sambo* (Evaristo, 2020: 42). Also, she makes reference to contemporary coffeehouses, by using names such as Coasta Coffee, Hut Tropicana, Café Shaka, and Starbright (Evaristo, 2020: 33), which simultaneously evoke contemporary London and the eighteenth-century 'slave auctions' (Newman, 2012: 288); and she names the slaves using the names of black women and men who are recorded in history, such as Shaka Zulu, Dingiswayo, Cleopatra, Cetewayo, Sonni Ali, Tutankhamun, and Yaa Asantewa (Evaristo, 2020: 178). On the one hand, the act of reversing contributes to the making of a complex reversed reality, which becomes both unknown and known for the reader. On the other hand, by using known names, she refers to people, to books, to movies, or moments connected to the black history; thus, when reading those names, the reader is pushed to remember the actual person, or place, or book, or movie, and to reflect on them. To sum up, using

Newman's words:

Evaristo makes the Middle Passage a metaphor for both temporal and geographical dislocation by setting events in an unspecified time (both futuristic and historical) (Newman, 2012: 288).

Therefore, by using these strategies, Evaristo creates both a spatial and temporal disruption in the novel, which brings together past and present.

#### 7.4.2.3. *Doris's narrative*

Doris's first-person narrative include many themes constitutive of the early Slave Narratives: her past with her family, her capture, the Middle Passage, her experiences as a slave, her attempt to escape, her final escape and her path towards freedom. Of all the Neo-Slave Narratives analysed in the present dissertation, Doris's narrative is indeed the most faithful to the early Slave Narratives. However, since the reader needs to be introduced to Evaristo's fictional reality, before introducing herself Doris describes the fictional geography of the novel and she provides general information regarding the institution of slavery, the reversed condition of the 'whyte' and black people. On the trade she affirms:

Deep down I knew that the slave traders were never going to give up their cash cow. It was, after all, one of the most lucrative international businesses ever, involving the large-scale transport of whytes, shipped in our millions from the continent of Europa to the West Japanese Islands (Evaristo, 2020: 5).

Through these words, Evaristo shows the lucrative value of the trade, which is the reason why it lasted for so long. Also, she mentions Kaga Konata Katamba's pamphlet *The Flame*, which is presented to the reader in the second part of the novel, while she refers to herself as 'one of the Stolen Ones', as the inhabitants of 'Great

Ambossa' 'steal[...] countries and steal[...] people' (Evaristo, 2020: 6), echoing both Ashton Warner and Cugoano, who defined the Europeans as 'robbers' of people (Warner, 1831:8; Cugoano, 1999: 11).

Similarly to other Neo-Slave Narratives, Doris's narratives moves back and forward following her memories, which, like Mintah's memories in *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), haunt her too. At the beginning of her narrative, Doris is ready to escape from her master's house to be free, even in that moment her past memories come back to her, and they are so strong that she has to force herself to focus on the present: 'Memories would not get me to the station on time' (Evaristo, 2020: 14). The readers got to know her name only after many pages, when she meets her 'Ambossian' conductor, who will help her to escape. The 'Ambossian' man refers to her as Omorenomwara, which was the name given to her by her black master, but, as she was fighting for her freedom, she claims her identity back by letting him know her true name, Doris:

I could finally give my real name to an Ambossan. It was like reclaiming my identity. I trembled, stuttering (Evaristo, 2020: 37).

Through Doris's renaming, Evaristo tackles another trope of the Slave Narratives, like Phillips's character Cambridge / Olumide, her original name reconnects her with her past as a free girl.

Drawing on the early Slave Narratives' tradition, she also details the moment of the slave market, where she was treated like a 'goat' (Evaristo, 2020: 93), like Mary Prince, Doris compares the slaves to animals, as they were treated in such a horrible way by the plantation owners. Moreover, Doris's story has much in common with Mary Prince's narrative, and the two slaves share the common experience of being the companion of a young mistress: Doris had to please her mistress Lady Miracle, who taught her how to read and write, so that she could do her homework. At some point, Little Miracle pointing at their differences, as Doris was 'tall, thin and

angular', while her mistress was 'short and round' (Evaristo, 2020: 97), states that the slave was ugly while she was beautiful. Through this scene, Evaristo points to both the reversed perspective on the idea of beauty in the novel; and, by reporting Doris's thoughts, which confirm her mistress' idea, she also mirrors what Fanon has described as the 'colonized inferiority complex' (Fanon, 2008).

Throughout Doris's narrative, Evaristo uses the free indirect speech, which reminds of Phillips's strategy when he allows the reader to freely access Martha's thoughts in *Crossing the River* (1993). Especially when Doris is recollecting painful and traumatic moments of her life, her account becomes non-linear and full of pauses. After her mistress Little Miracle's death, she is sent to her new master Kaga Konata Katamba, thus she is on a ship once again, and her narrative becomes extremely fragmentary:

I listened for sounds – there were none.  
I looked around – at darkness.  
There was no light – I was sealed in.  
I checked my breathing – ragged, but there.  
I smelled wood polish, and my own foul breath.  
[...] I began to hear waves.  
I heard the roll of the ship.  
I heard my own stunted breath (Evaristo, 2020: 105-106)

Doris's words, almost like a poem, and indeed, convey her thoughts in a more evocative way. Though this fragmented narrative, Evaristo manages to display the traumatized subjects' recollections of the traumatic event, making the narrative more realistic, and allowing the reader to identify with her.

In the third part of the novel, Doris is recaptured by her master after her attempt to escape, and she is harshly punished: she is sent to 'Amarika' to work in her master's plantation as a field slave; her description of the work of field slaves is extremely detailed and reminds of Ashton Warner's own description. However,

there, before Doris manages to escape, she is reunited with her small sister Sharon who has hidden her English identity to survive as the favorite slave of Bwana, the black man who kidnapped their family (Gendusa, 2014: 196). Sharon has tried to forget her painful past, as Chapel in *The Longest Memory* (1994) does, in order to survive, she even speaks with the black men's accent, which is often reproduced in postcolonial literature, here, in Evaristo's reversed reality, this way of speaking represents the one of the dominant culture, and her English past only came back to life when she meets her sister:

Wid yu, Doris, fe de furz time since I waz a-kaptcha it feel like mi git Sharon bak. I had to kill her becörze nobuddee wanted to know dat gyal. Bwana call mi Iffianachukwana an dat waz who I had to be. Sharon ded. Sharon famlee ded. Sharon home ded. Sharon kuntree ded. All I had to do waz mek shure Miss Iffie stay alive (Evaristo, 2020: 241).

When Doris is finally free in the 'Freedom Country' she thinks back on her roots and details the events of the other members of her family, all of them have suffered and almost all have died. Doris's suffering for her destroyed family is deep and painful: 'I cried until my lungs felt as brittle as dried tobacco leaves' (Evaristo, 2020: 236). In the final chapter of Doris's account, she leaves a 'Postscript' where she details the actual situation of all the characters of the novel, both white and black, and she concludes with a harsh reflection:

In the twenty-first century, Bwana's descendants still own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside. The cane workers, many of whom are descended from the original slaves, are paid (Evaristo, 2020: 261).

Her final words prompt a reflection on the contemporary situation, as things have only apparently changed, indeed, even if the former slaves are now paid, the power is still held by the black people in Evaristo's fiction, and by the white people in the

real world.

#### 7.4.2.4. *Kaga Konata Katamba's pro-slavery account*

Kaga Konata Katamba, Doris's master, is a pro-slavery intellectual, whose thoughts are mirrored by his meaningful initials: KKK, which remind of the Ku Klux Klan, with his name, Evaristo once again makes reference to black history. Kaga Konata Katamba's pamphlet *The Flam* is reproduced in the second part of the novel; his narrative is inspired by the pro-slavery texts Evaristo read before writing the novel, indeed, he tries to rationally justify the slave trade. His writing appears to be extremely organized and rational, as it begins with a list of seven points which are introduced as logical to justify his decision to recapture his slave Omorenomwara (Doris) after she has escaped, indeed, he refers to himself as 'a reasonable man and a man of reason' (Evaristo, 2020: 110). His attempt to convince the reader of his ideas is evident, as, differently from Doris's account, Kaga Konata Katamba's narrative directly addresses the reader: 'Dear Reader' (Evaristo, 2020: 112); moreover, as Olejniczak has pointed out, while Doris simply details her life, her master challenges the reader to read his text in order to have a complete and reasoned perspective on slavery (Olejniczak, 2020: 9):

To those of you who say, 'Poor Omorenomwara, let her go!', I say read on. To those of you who say the Trade is cruel, I say read on. To those of you who say the Trade is just and necessary, I say read on. To those who are betwixt and between, I say read on (Evaristo, 2020: 111).

Through his writing, the slave master praises the civilizing mission that the black men are perpetrating for the savage European tribes (Newman, 2012: 293), whose inhabitants 'are just now emerging from the abominable depths of savagery' (Evaristo, 2020: 118). Thus, Kaga Konata Katamba describes the colonization and

the following enslavement of Europeans as a 'Mission of Liberation' (Evaristo, 2020: 121). To demonstrate his thesis, he uses supposedly scientific theories which would prove that the 'Caucasoid' skull is smaller and contains less brain, thus, while the brain of a black person contains '100 billion neurons', the brain of a white person would have only '20 billion neurons' (Evaristo, 2020: 121). Kaga Konata Katamba's saving mission echoes 'The White Man's Burden' (Kipling, 1899).

Also, as is the case with Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991), both Doris and Kaga Konata Katamba narrate the same event: the slave's harsh punishment after her attempt to escape. From the master's perspective, Kaga Konata Katamba claims that he was forced to use violence in order to be obeyed too, he shows his frustration for he thought they had 'such a good working relationship' (Evaristo, 2020: 170): his words perfectly represent the colonizer perspective, as he considers the white people as inferior to black people, thus they are not deserved to be treated as such. Once again Evaristo plays with words and reverses a derogatory proverb used against the black people to fit Kaga Konata Katamba's ideas: you can take the child out of the jungle, but you cannot take the jungle out of the child' (Evaristo, 2020: 170). By including this pro-slavery perspective, Evaristo challenges the reader and forces him/her to consider both perspectives.

#### 7.4.2.5. *Conclusions*

Evaristo manages to write a novel on slavery which while using humor and irony, prompts the readers to reflect on the history of slavery: the dystopian fictional reality created by Evaristo is, indeed, ironic and plays with the reader's certainties. The novel challenges the binary opposition of black and white, by reversing the roles. Thus, the reader is firstly amused by the invented reality, however, he/she will feel both displaced and recognize the history of transatlantic slavery as connected to with his/her reality. Thanks to the reverse narrative, the reader identifies him/herself with both the slave and the slaver at the same time, crossing

the borders of race; also, he/she is reminded that the contemporary racism is directly connected to slavery (Iromuanya in Anim-Addo, Lima, 2017: 182).

My reading of *Blonde Roots* (2008) has highlighted both its connections to the topics of the early Slave Narratives, and the innovative techniques Evaristo used, such as the reversed narrative, Doris's free inner speech, and the introduction of the master's voice. Moreover, the analysis has shown that the novel pursues the Neo-Slave Narratives' aims, indeed, by displaying all the stages of Doris's life, Evaristo manages to give a complete account of slavery, filling the gaps the early Slave Narratives have left (Morrison 1998: 193); and she alludes to the present situation, with both the epigraphs and the last sentences of the novel. Therefore, this novel can be considered as an innovative example of a Neo-Slave Narrative.

### 7.5. Final remarks

Through the analysis of the six British Neo-Slave Narratives, I have intended to frame this new literary genre and to highlight its essential characteristics. In the six contemporary works I analysed, the authors portray transatlantic slavery making reference to the early Slave Narratives, by discussing the same topics and mimicking their structure; however, their focus is on the characters' traumatized mind and, differently from the early Slave Narratives' writers, they represent the characters' traumatized accounts using different strategies. Despite their differences, they all manage to challenge the idea of a unique and exclusive narrative of history. While *Cambridge* (1991), *Crossing the River* (1993), *The Longest Memory* (1994), *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), and *Blonde Roots* (2008) include the perspectives of the perpetrators of the trade, by displaying their internal thoughts and feelings; *The Long Song* (2010) relate July's unique perspective. Nevertheless, through the voice of the slave, Levy questions the main narrative of history, and she demonstrates that history is not only a sequence of dates and important events, rather it is made of the experiences lived by the people, like July. Thus, all the narratives aim 'to fill in the blanks that

Slave Narratives left' (Morrison 1998: 193), by portraying the stories of people which have been forgotten by history, such as D'Aguiar's fictional character Mintah, who is a symbol for all the victims of the Zong.

These contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives demand to 'to put the Caribbean back where it belongs – in the narrative of British history' (Levy, 2014: 22), as July's centrality in the portrait shows. On the whole, the narratives on slavery try to retrieve slavery's centrality in the making of contemporary Britain. Therefore, they are not only representations of the past, rather these narratives create strong and meaningful connections with the present, displaying their 'bitemporal perspective' (Rushdy, 1999: 5): in *Crossing the River* (1993), the African father is still listening to his children who have crossed the rivers, in *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), the Zong massacre is still happening on high seas, in *The Long Song* (2010), July's lost daughter lives in Britain still unaware of her strong connections with slavery, and in *Blonde Roots* (2008), the white people are still working in the plantations. Both *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *The Long Song* (2010) insist on remarking on the duration of slavery, with the word 'long', making simultaneously reference to the long period in which the slave trade was perpetrated, and its persistence in the present. Thus, the British Neo-Slave Narratives show the necessity of remembering Britain's slave past, by alluding to the discriminatory attitudes and the racism, which is still perpetrated against black people.

In conclusion, the analysis of the British Neo-Slave Narratives both connects this new genre with its eighteenth-century counterpart and displays its stylistic evolutions. Also, it relates the genre's importance in the British contemporary context. Therefore, the six Neo-Slave Narratives manage to enrich and fill in the gaps the Slave Narratives' account of slavery has left behind, providing the contemporary reader with a more inclusive and a complex account of slavery history. Thus, they both address the contemporary reader, and also, prompt his/her reflections on the contemporary situation.

## Chapter 8. *Critical overview and conclusions*

With the first part of this last chapter, I would like to offer an overview of the critical works that have dealt with the genre of the British slave and Neo-Slave Narratives. As yet, no study has appeared which was entirely devoted to the evolution of the Slave Narrative in the British context, thus, my dissertation aims to be an attempt to trace the evolution of the genre in Britain and to provide a corpus of both slave and Neo-Slave Narratives. I first defined the essential elements of the genre in a historical context in which it developed, and then, when it comes to the Neo-Slave Narratives, I identified the elements which come directly from the early Slave Narratives and innovations introduced by the contemporary authors in order to produce innovative works which can appeal to the contemporary reader. Moreover, through my readings of the texts, I created intertextual connections which link together texts of the same period, but also, I highlighted the connections among slave and Neo-Slave Narratives.

Vincent Carretta's anthology of Slave Narratives has been key to my study, indeed in *Unchained Voices: an Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (1996), he collected together the works of black writers in the eighteenth century. Together with the Slave Narratives, I read critical works published on the genre of the Slave Narrative, such as the most influential Bernard Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), John Ernest's *Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (2014), and Audrey Fish's *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007). Clearly these works make reference to the American Slave Narrative, while no book-length study has been published on the British Slave Narratives. Thus, while borrowing from the here above quoted texts, my dissertation aims to highlight the characteristics which are typical of the British Slave Narratives. Few analyses of the single Slave Narratives have been written, the most analysed work is Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*: among

others, Douglas Anderson published 'Division below the Surface: Olaudah Equiano's "Interesting Narrative"' in 2004; Elman Francis analysed the figure of Equiano in 'Olaudah Equiano: A Profile' in 1981; and Peter Jaros published 'Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa' in 2013. However, no author has yet written on David George's narrative, or on Ashton Warner's work.

In the case of the contemporary genre of the Neo-Slave Narrative, the most influential critical work *Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) by Ashraf Rushdy makes reference to Afro American literature, however contemporary publications are becoming more inclusive, such as Joan Anim-Addo and Maria H. Lima's 2017 special issue published in *Callaloo*, and Sofia Muñoz – Valdivieso's 'Neo-Slave Narratives in Contemporary Black British Fiction' (2012). Abigail Ward examines works by Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar in her *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar Representations of slavery* (2011) and Elisabeth Bekers published 'Creative Challenges to Captivity: Slave Authorship in Black British Neo-Slave Narratives' (2018), which gathers together Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991), Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* (2007), and Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010).

In the next section I am going to provide an overview of the evolution of the Slave Narrative genre, from the early Slave Narratives to the contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives, to gather together the findings that emerge from my readings.

### **8.1. The power of the Slave Narrative**

'A Slave Narrative becomes a  
prism through which the  
present is examined.'  
(D'Aguiar in Misrahi-Barak, 2016)

The present dissertation has shown the evolution from the early Slave Narratives to

the contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives. Therefore, the literary genre has changed to meet the requirements of different epochs; however, with works such as Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993); Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997); Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010); and Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008), contemporary writers echo the tradition of the Slave Narratives written by slaves themselves, as they take inspiration from their stories and try to reproduce their voices. Thus, through the Neo-Slave Narratives the voices and the stories of the slaves reach contemporary readers. Since the involvement of Britain in the transatlantic slave trade has been underestimated for a long time, the Neo-Slave Narratives are 'deployed to redress the gaps and misrepresentations of dominant history through narrative' (Anim-Addo, Lima, 2017: 4). Thus, the British Neo-Slave Narratives are to be conceived as a contemporary evolution of the early Slave Narratives, which reproduce the essential themes of the early examples, but further hinge on more complex structures, in order to represent the experience of a traumatized subject. Also, by adding multiple perspectives to the narration as they create collective memories of colonial slavery, they destroy the concept of a unique narrative of history from the perspective of the dominant group.

If the original aim of the Slave Narrative was to support the abolitionist campaign, fight against British ignorance on the subject of slavery and raise empathy towards the slaves, its contemporary evolution equally attempts to fight against British amnesia, and to condemn the racial prejudice which originated in the colonial period and is still at work today. Today the consequences of this amnesia are even more visible, and the black British population is asking for their repositioning in the British history, as the attack against the statue of the merchant Edward Colston on 7th June 2020 exemplifies. Literature and art can represent a way to remember the past, overcome the trauma of slavery, and reposition the black population in Britain.

Slave and Neo-Slave Narratives aim to open the readers' minds, thus, in the following section, I will suggest a reflection on the active role of literature in changing the readers' lives.

## 8.2. The power of literature

According to Phillips, novels are 'an incredibly democratic medium' (Swift, in Schatteman, 2009: 14) through which everybody has the chance to be represented. Both the slave and the Neo-Slave Narratives clearly display the democratic nature of novels: on the one hand, the early Slave Narratives have given voice to the silenced slaves for the first time, and on the other hand, the Neo-Slave Narratives give voice to all the people involved in the slave trade. Thus, they should give the reader the chance to see through other people's eyes, which means, 'expand[ing] our minds' (Sharpe, in Schatteman, 2009: 34). Moreover, these narratives of slavery bring the attention to both the past and the present by linking together slavery and the present-day racial discriminations still perpetrated against black people. In Fred D'Aguiar's words 'a Slave Narrative becomes a prism through which the present is examined' (D'Aguiar in Misrahi-Barak, 2016). Therefore, by reading about the experiences of former slaves, people can become aware of the past.

Drawing on this interpretation, the writer gains an important role in the society, as Phillips claims:

Writing is very powerful, and you have to believe that you are having an effect on the people that read you, even if you don't see it. (Goldman, in Schatteman, 2009: 88)

He argues that the writer's fundamental duty is to stick to the truth, and work with it. But also, he affirms the writer plays a political role, when 'history is distorted, the literature of people can become their history', the writers are then

responsible for telling stories which can 'infuse a people with a sense of their own unique identity' (Phillips, 2000: 99). To use Toni Morrison's words, through literature a writer has the chance to 'rip that veil down over' and shed light on history (Morrison, 1998: 191). Thus, on the subject of slavery, art can be used as a means to 'cure' British historical amnesia, as D'Aguiar suggests:

Historical amnesia is a disease (...) people are changed by art, they are sensitized by it, their sleeping consciences are awakened by art. Art can be pleasing but it also makes you think and feel. It is a moral, intellectual and emotional force' (Frias 2002: 425)

The very last section of my dissertation prompts a reflection on the contemporary situation, in which racism still threatens the lives of millions of people. Thus, I will end by discussing the future perspectives of our multicultural world.

### **8.3. Future perspectives**

More than two hundred years after the abolition of the slave trade, discrimination still takes place, and causes pain:

I have much to fear in man's presence, but it is not the chains that I dread, it is the manner of thought that flashes between a man's clapping eyes on me and the opening of its mouth (Phillips, 2014: 56).

In his contemporary reinterpretation of the Middle Passage through the genre of the travelogue, Phillips reveals his brighter hopes for the future. In his travelogue, *The European Tribe* (1987), the writer journeys across Europe to find his

place, and to better define his identity. However, in his journey through Europe, Phillips found himself facing racial discrimination and does not feel accepted at all. Therefore, the work seems to leave a negative impression over Europe's capacity of acceptance. However, in an Afterwards, Phillips wrote in 1999 for a new edition of *The European Tribe*, the author expressed a different view of Europe's future: discrimination has not stopped to exist yet, but something is slowly changing. Actually, the writer could see that the black British man, who was driving him from the airport, strongly asserted his Englishness, no matter how much he had suffered from discrimination, he felt British (Phillips, 2000: 130-134).

The change has to be seen in what can be defined as a progressive multiculturalization of Europe. There is an unavoidable trend of mixing, which has not yet prevailed over racism, but no matter how long racism will survive, 'the process of hybridization is irreversible' ('Afterward to the Vintage Edition', in Phillips, 2000: 133). Nowadays the world is increasingly interconnected, travelling has become part of people's everyday life, and it is easier to go from one place to another, having contact with people all over the world is inevitable. Cultural boundaries are blurring, now more than ever in the past, cultures influence one another; this is the reason why Phillips strongly believes nobody will have a fixed perception of home. Both the general mixing and confusing situation and the writings on trauma, can help people understand the migrants' feelings of displacement and non-belonging:

In this new world order of the twenty-first century, we are all being dealt an ambiguous hand, one which may eventually help us to accept the dignity which informs the limited participation of the migrant, the asylum-seeker, or the refugee. (Phillips, 2002: 6).



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