

Autobiography of the Other: David Dabydeen and the Imagination of Slavery

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Two hundred years have passed since the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, but slavery continues to capture the imagination of writers today. As Paul Gilroy famously argues in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), transatlantic slavery formed the foundation of “western” modernity, both in terms of its economic system and its ideological basis. The condition of the absolute subjugation of African slaves antithetically created the concept of freedom that has been the scaffolding of modern liberalist thinking. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, champion of Romantic individualism, established the idea of modern self as a unique, integral, and free-thinking individual. It may not be accidental that while Rousseau was working on his *Confessions*, black writers, who were brought to Europe initially as slaves, pioneered a mode of autobiography different from Rousseau’s. Slave narratives were written on the assumption that the self is subjected to the other and confined within social roles; they were not personal confessions but political statements written for a public cause: the abolition of slavery.

David Dabydeen (1955-) Guyanese-British poet, novelist, and scholar of literature and art, is one writer inspired by slave narratives and who attempts to revise the genre in postmodern and postcolonial contexts. He has to date published several works related to slavery, among them *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), which is the focus of this paper. Prior to that novel, he wrote a monograph on William Hogarth, *Hogarth’s Blacks* (1985) in which he asserts that Hogarth successfully represented class solidarity between black slaves and underclass whites. Yet *A Harlot’s Progress*, a fictional slave narrative based on Hogarth’s series of prints of the same title, discloses how solidarity among the oppressed—for example, the solidarity between the white prostitute Moll and the black servant in the second plate of Hogarth’s series—turns out to be an unrealizable dream. This paper proposes to call the novel’s project an “autobiography of the other.”

Autobiography of the other means to write an “I” narrative that is not my own—at first sight an impossible project, as logically no one can author an autobiography of someone else. It signals a text divided between the atomized, free-floating individual and the community to which the individual aspires to return and belong. In this light, the project is not only about analyzing the slavery of the past; by rewriting the narratives of slavery, Dabydeen does not simply try to reconstruct an alternative history of modernity. In fact, the novel *A Harlot’s*

Progress is an attempt to translate the imagination of slavery into a critique of contemporary British society.

Postcolonial Autobiographies

Whereas autobiography is an important subgenre of postcolonial literature, much emphasis has been placed on the distinction between “western” and “non-western” autobiography. The French philosopher Georges Gusdorf established the idea of the autobiographical self as a unique, solid and integral entity, declaring that “autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area,” and that “it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man” (29). For Gusdorf, non-western autobiographies are at best derivative, the writers having been “annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own” (29). His ideas about western selfhood provided the basis of James Olney’s epoch-making *Metaphors of Self* (1972). Around the same period Olney also wrote a pioneering book on African literature, *Tell Me Africa* (1973), in which Olney suggests that African autobiography is the product of a social environment different from that of the West. In the introduction to the book he declares that he considers autobiography from Africa “less as an individual phenomenon than as a social one” (vii). According to Olney, “the life that provides the subject for African autobiography is much less individually determined, much more socially oriented” (vii).

The title of Olney’s book reveals that his emphasis on and appreciation of African differences are still to a considerable degree designed to serve the demand of western readers for the exotic other who would tell “me” what Africa is like. And yet, more politically-oriented critics have appropriated this prevailing view of “non-western” autobiography. Attention has increasingly been paid to such alternative genres as testimony, slave narrative and prison diary, termed by Caren Kaplan “out-law genres,” since they provide examples of decentred, relational, social and collective selves. In *Postcolonial Life-Writing* (2009) Bart Moore-Gilbert contests Gusdorf’s idea that non-western autobiography is derivative, arguing that postcolonial autobiography/life-writing has offered “advanced conceptions of personhood which are highly culturally specific” (xx). Quoting from Wole Soyinka, Moore-Gilbert asserts that African auto/biographers, working within an epistemology of “collective inner worlds” (even if West African society in reality is never as cohesive as Soyinka imagines) “is likely to have a different conception of psyche and Selfhood to what usually obtains in the West” (xix).

The coinage “autoethnography” (which Moore-Gilbert does not mention in his otherwise comprehensive book) designates one of the key concepts developed through studies of postcolonial autobiography. According to Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, editor of the book *Auto/Ethnography* (1997), the term has been used in several different contexts as it can be interpreted as either “self-ethnography” or “autobiographical ethnography.” Indeed, it is the dual nature of autoethnography that makes it a “useful term with which to question the binary conventions of a self/society split, as well as the boundary

between the objective and the subjective” (2). Generally, autoethnography in the sense of “ethnography of one’s own culture” is assumed to be more truthful or more “authentic” than ordinary ethnography; however, underlying the term’s ambiguity are serious questions of agency and representation: “Who speaks and on behalf of whom” (3). Reed-Danahay refers to Mary Louise Pratt as one of the leading critics who have reinterpreted the term. Pratt emphasizes that autoethnography is primarily a transcultural phenomenon in which the autoethnographer appropriates or mimics the narrative modes and idioms of the dominant (that is, the colonizer’s or conqueror’s) culture. In so doing, the conquered can construct “a parodic, oppositional representation of the conqueror’s own speech” (29), opening up the possibility of anti-colonial interventions.

Contemporary postcolonial writers often consciously take up the role of the autoethnographer as defined by Pratt. David Dabydeen is one such practitioner of autoethnography, or oppositional autobiography—“oppositional” in the sense that its representation of collective self constitutes a resistant and interventional strategy in relation to dominant culture or ideology. Debuting as a Creole poet with *Slave Song* (1984), Dabydeen’s career as a writer began with the project of recuperating the collective memories of African slaves and East-Indian indentured labourers on the Caribbean plantations. Autobiography was already an important motif in his early works. His first novel *The Intended* (1991) is apparently autobiographical; it portrays a teenage Indian-Caribbean immigrant growing up in London, giving a relatively realistic description of the multicultural metropolis in the early seventies. Tobias Döring discusses Dabydeen’s early autobiographical texts in comparison with V. S. Naipaul’s fictional autobiographies and coins another new term “parabiography” to describe the strategies of postcolonial autobiography. Parabiography attempts to form a counter-discourse of western autobiography by inserting differences within the traditional discourse on *auto/self*; *para* means not only “counter” or “against” but also “near” or “beside” (151). Döring suggests that Dabydeen pursues the tactic of parabiography more strategically than Naipaul, disclosing the problematic of postcolonial selfhood latent in Naipaul’s colonial anxiety of influence.

From the mid-1990s onwards Dabydeen developed the theme of fictional autobiography. During this period he published two works based on masterpieces of British art: the long poem “Turner” and the novel *A Harlot’s Progress*. Transatlantic slavery is central to these two works, in which he explores the (im)possibilities of postcolonial autobiography, as well as providing a critique of his earlier recuperative project. Rather than attempting to recover the full “truth” of slavery, the poem and the novel deliberately disclose how the past is newly imagined and constructed by the postcolonial writer. “Turner” and *A Harlot’s Progress* also question and re-evaluate the collective values of black politics that the author endorsed in the 1980s. Due to his complicated positioning as a British writer of East-Indian-Caribbean origin writing about black African slaves, the scope of his

work always goes beyond the boundaries of ethnic communities; “black” can be an inclusive, political unity. However, his work produced in the 1990s suggests that he became increasingly aware of the fragmentation of British society, where institutional multiculturalism stresses and consolidates “cultural differences” and where the project of postcolonial autobiography to recover the collective black self is doomed to failure. Indeed, both “Turner” and *A Harlot’s Progress* are fictional autobiographies that declare the failure of oppositional autobiography. When I call this failed attempt the “autobiography of the other,” the oxymoron is fully intended. I refer to an attempt to write an autobiography of someone else who has a similar, but ultimately different, life-story; Dabydeen’s fictional eighteenth-century slave narrative is literally an autobiography of an other, demonstrating a deliberate irony (no one can author another’s autobiography). Moreover, the autobiography of the other foregrounds the differences that inhere in the autoethnographer’s speaking subject (“I” as “we”) and undermines the solidarity of the “we.” Yet it does not obliterate the demand for collectivity; rather, it perpetuates our longings for community and belonging even as it fails to realize the dream.

My use of the term “autobiography of the other” also marks a turn to Derridean ethics. Jacques Derrida himself took a great interest in autobiography from the early eighties to the nineties, as his deconstructive philosophy always underlined the impossibility of the autonomy of self. In “Otobiographies” (originally published in French in 1982) he considers the other as an inherent problematic in the very practice of autobiography. Having Philippe Lejeune’s notion of the “autobiographical pact” in mind, Derrida contends that the signature of autobiography does not guarantee the solitary authority of the autobiographer but, in fact, the signature takes place on the side of the addressee, the reader; hence an autobiography is necessarily what he calls “heterobiography.” In the 1990s, his theory of other-oriented autobiography was put into practice in such works as “Circumfession” and *Monolingualism of the Other*. The latter can be considered as an historical intervention into his former, more generalized textual/linguistic theory. His autobiographical, historically particular linguistic condition—the French language of an Algerian Jew—brings about the “performative contradiction” of his public declaration: “I only have one language, yet it is not mine” (*Monolingualism* 2). The statement derives from a particular case, but the antinomy of the statement leads to highly theoretical and ethical reflections over language and its inherent otherness. Dabydeen, who could be called “Derridean” in the sense that the boundary between art and criticism is constantly questioned and blurred in his work, implements Derrida’s idea in his fictional autobiographies in order to analyse postcoloniality simultaneously from a historically-specific point of view and within a theoretical/ethical framework.ⁱ

“The Communalism of Suffering and Pleasure”

In addition to poetry, Dabydeen published scholarly and critical works in the 1980s, one of which is a monograph on William Hogarth, *Hogarth's Blacks*. In this book Dabydeen emphasizes the subversive aspects of Hogarth's representations of black figures. In Hogarth, Dabydeen argues, blacks are often ironic observers of the follies and ugliness of upper-class whites, and his pictures, like other popular images of blacks in eighteenth-century Britain such as *A View of Cheapside* (1761) and *The Rabbits* (1792), show how blacks were well integrated in British working-class culture (17-40). Dabydeen insists that Hogarth, with his own East-End background, was able to imagine class solidarity between blacks and working-class whites, even though his blacks are not entirely free from racial stereotypes of his time. The concluding section of the book includes a detailed analysis of Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* (1732). Dabydeen stresses the importance of the black woman who appears in the fourth plate of the serial prints, the scene in Bridewell prison, rather than that of the black boy in the second plate after whom Mungo, the protagonist of his version of *Harlot's*, is modelled. The black woman, standing at the back of the picture and hardly recognizable, is nonetheless the symbol of what Dabydeen considers the dominant theme of the work: the analogue between black slaves and underclass white women. The shape of her body indicates that she is pregnant, which is reminiscent of the sexual exploitation of Moll Hackabout; also, her presence at Bridewell portends the fate of white prostitutes deported to the colonies for further exploitation under the economic system of the British Empire (106-108). Dabydeen refers to Oglethorpe's Georgia Scheme, which Hogarth knew about from his acquaintance with Oglethorpe in 1729, and which proposed the transportation of impoverished English people to Georgia as well as the Christianizing of the blacks in the colony. Hogarth depicts two figures involved in this Scheme, Magistrate Gonson (Plate 3) and Bishop Gibson (Plate 1), and these historical references support Hogarth's rhetorical strategy through which slavery is made an inclusive metaphor for class and gender oppression (114-121).

Dabydeen concludes his analysis of *A Harlot's Progress* by celebrating Hogarth's idea of class solidarity, despite his “flirtation with racist myth”: “it is equally clear that he reveals, in *A Harlot's Progress*, a deep sense of the communalism of suffering and pleasure between lower-class white and black slave-servant;” also, Hogarth “senses a solidarity between blacks and lower-class whites which overrides racial division, a solidarity of peoples victimised by an economic system controlled by the moneyed class” (131-132). In this book, Dabydeen not only discusses eighteenth-century representations of blacks, but also critically reflects upon the individualist ideas of contemporary society. For Dabydeen, the conflict between individual freedom and the “communalism of suffering and pleasure” is an ongoing problem in the present. In *Hogarth's Blacks*, he points out repeatedly that Indians and Africans are put in the same category of primitivism and servitude in eighteenth-century art and popular images

(the emblematic image of this being the black boy in the second plate of *A Harlot's Progress*, who, ethnically African, is seen wearing a turban and other Oriental outfits). In so doing, he asserts that Africans and Asians should be united as "peoples victimized by an economic system" despite cultural differences.

Dabydeen's appreciation of Hogarth's "communalism" agrees with the contemporary trend of cultural criticism which, as counter-discourse to the hyper-individualism promoted by the Thatcher regime, rejects mere identitarianism and instead considers "race" as interlinked with class: racial discrimination is closely connected to the inevitable exploitation of the underclass under the efficient working of the capitalist system. The interrelation between the two categories, class and "race," has been debated since the outset of the multicultural era. In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), Paul Gilroy questions some of the Marxist approaches to the "race" issue which assume that since "race" as a biological category does not exist, racism will be abolished if we banish the concept of "race." Instead, Gilroy proposes that we should understand "race" as "a process." It is not a straightforward alternative to class, but "racial" activity and struggle "must be recognized to be potentially both an alternative to class consciousness at the political level and as a factor in the contingent processes in which classes are themselves formed" (19-20). Gilroy does not disregard the real-world diversity of black cultures, increasingly recognized since the late eighties. Rather, his idea of "race," reintroduced not as a biological category but as political consciousness and a factor in the formation of classes, leads to Pan-Africanist politics in *The Black Atlantic*, in which black unity is revalued as the desire to transcend both the structures of the nation-state and ethnic or national constraints.

No doubt Dabydeen has been influenced by Gilroy, and "Turner," a narrative poem based on J. W. M. Turner's painting "Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying" (1840), is very likely to have been inspired by Gilroy's comments on the painting in *The Black Atlantic*. And yet, Dabydeen's works in the nineties, including "Turner" and *A Harlot's Progress*, do not celebrate communalism and solidarity as does *Hogarth's Blacks*, faced with the predicament of black identity in the era of neo-liberalism. "Turner" ends in a bleak vision of the new world in which the "first of our tribe" emerges in the midst of absolute nothingness: "No savannah, moon, gods, magicians/ To heal or curse, harvests, ceremonies,/ No men to plough, corn to fatten their herds,/ No stars, no land, no words, no community,/ No mother" (XXV: 40).

Reinventing *A Harlot's Progress*

In the second plate of Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress*, Moll, the young woman from Yorkshire who has arrived in London, is now the mistress of a rich Jew living in a lavishly decorated apartment. Despite her apparent affluence, she is frustrated by her confined life, kicking the table over while her young lover, stealing away, can still be seen at the back of the room. In the right corner of the picture is a young, turbaned

black boy staring at the scene with his big round eyes. Mungo, the protagonist of *A Harlot's Progress*, is modeled after this silently amazed observer (although he changes his name from Mungo to Noah and finally to Perseus), and he is given a detailed personal history. Born in a village in West Africa, he is caught by slave traders and is shipped to England. On board the slave ship he is baptized, taught English, and sexually abused by Captain Thistlewood. Upon arrival in England he is prepared for sale by Betty the washerwoman and eventually bought by Lord Montague, whose wife Lady Montague treats him like a pet monkey. Finally, in order to escape from the fate of being sold again, he leaves the Montagues to join Mr Gideon the Jewish doctor, and helps him rescue the city's most destitute women, among whom he finds Moll Hackabout. Besides Hogarth's prints, Dabydeen has drawn on eighteenth-century slave narratives to compose Mungo's story. He has co-edited two anthologies of eighteenth-century black writers: *Black Writers in Britain 1760-1890* (1991; with Paul Edwards) and the above-mentioned *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* (1999) and his scholarly research on such writers as Briton Hammon (1747-1760), Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1710-1772), Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), and Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) must have provided the background details for the protagonist of his novel.ⁱⁱ Like Hammon's and Gronniosaw's texts, Mungo's narrative in *A Harlot's Progress* is (prospectively) to be written under dictation, whereas the novel seems to owe more to the later texts written by Sancho and Equiano, even though it is anachronistic to create a fictional narrative of Hogarth's black boy on the basis of those works.

Eighteenth-century slave narratives are written for specific political causes and directed towards a limited audience: the abolitionist movement and its advocates. In the opening paragraph of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Equiano explains that his motive in publishing it is not to gain "immortality or literary reputation" but for the common cause of humanity: "If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interest of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified" (32). Equiano's "friends" at whose request the self-declaredly non-literary autobiography was written are listed in the first pages of the book: they are the subscribers, the designated addressees of the book. This does not imply that *Interesting Narrative* is entirely alien to the western literary tradition; to a considerable extent, Equiano's narrative follows the Augustinian pattern of spiritual autobiography. Rather, he *intentionally* rejects Rousseauan individualism and tries to sublimate his autobiography to a communal property, declaring that he, "a private and obscure individual" (31), is writing for a public cause, "the interest of humanity." Equiano is an autoethnographer in Pratt's sense of the word: he has created an oppositional genre by appropriating the narrative modes and idioms of western autobiography. Equiano's description of the Igbo village in the first chapter is typically autoethnographical, at least in terms of its narrative strategy. As

Vincent Carreta suggests, Equiano may have been born in America, not West Africa (“Questioning” 232-233; *Equiano* 8). Equiano almost always employs the first-person plural pronoun “we” in describing village customs and traditions.

Dabydeen’s *Harlot’s Progress* departs from the original slave narratives most notably in its highly experimental narrative structure and frequent shifts in narrative voice. The novel also appropriates the plot and details from “Turner,” but the novel version is distinctly messier than the poem, implementing a strategy of polyphony. It is layered with conflicting narratives and forms a complex structure; unlike in orthodox autobiographical narratives, the story is never told in a straightforward, chronological way. The novel’s “Prologue” opens with a third-person “objective” narrative, in which Mr Pringle, sitting beside Mungo’s bed, asks him to tell his story in order to write his (Mungo’s) autobiography on behalf of the Abolition Committee: “For the book Mr Pringle intends to write will be Mungo’s portrait in the first person narrative” (3). Initially, Mungo is “ungrateful” to the Committee that finances him with food and clothing, and refuses to “return their benevolence with the gift of confession” (1). However, already in the “Prologue,” the text lapses into Mungo’s *real* first-person narrative, in which he insists: “I can write the story myself” (5). The first chapter is also narrated by Mungo but, unlike the monologue, the story is addressed to Mr Pringle. Yet this story, in which Mungo is buried alive as a punishment for his “crime,” is more like a fantasy than a truthful account of what has happened. The chapter that follows gives another “beginning” of Mungo’s life (and this sounds again like a monologue). There are also the ghosts of the villagers killed by the slave traders, who tell Mungo various stories of their own; one village woman called Ellar demands that he describe her as a beautiful woman in spite of her lame leg (60). Later there appear what might be fragments of the official autobiography written by Mr Pringle (although it is suggested that this autobiography has not yet been completed or published). These numerous narratives are often mutually contradictory, and none of them gives a definitive version of the truth. Admittedly, such formal experiments are today often denounced as too theoretical and “postmodern,” hence in an implicit alliance with western cultural dominance.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet this narrative complexity makes the novel an exemplary case of meta-autobiography. It is a deliberate disclosure of the production and commodification of the subaltern voice and of the process in which it is dictated and transcribed with the vocabulary of the editors, and its subject matter predetermined and censored by the demands of the reading public.

Mr Pringle’s “benevolent” ghostwriting of Mungo’s autobiography represents the prototypical “autobiography of the other;” however, Mungo will not give him the expected information. Mungo repeatedly suggests that neither Mr Pringle’s ghostwriting nor Hogarth’s prints are trustworthy. He goes so far as to assert that hidden behind Mr Pringle’s anti-slavery campaign are chauvinism and anti-Semitism justified in order to protect the nation’s commercial profits (143-144). He also criticizes Hogarth for his “lies” about the Jew and

the black boy; in Hogarth, Mr Gideon, who rescues the destitute women, becomes Moll's master, while Mungo himself becomes a mere servant to Moll. Yet Hogarth's pictures sell well and his version of the story prevails. Hogarth's work makes Mungo a star, and brings him Mr Pringle, who tries to invent an autobiography for him along the line of Hogarth's story (and thence, "Mr Pringle too will replicate Moll and me in lies" [275]). Mungo's refusal to confess may remind us of what Gayatri Spivak calls the "native" who is an agent of withholding, "the curious guardian at the margin who will not inform" (190).^{iv} Yet Mungo is *not* the tongueless Friday in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, whose uncanny figure embodies Spivak's idea of the "Native Informant;" Mungo refuses to be a useful informant for Mr Pringle not least because he is determined to tell the story as *he* wants to tell it.

Nevertheless, Mungo's story itself is neither politically correct nor factually reliable.^v Unlike Equiano's autobiography, Dabydeen's novel does not present a utopian vision of African life. Equiano describes his Igbo village as a utopia where "we have no beggars," "[d]eformity is indeed unknown amongst us," and "[o]ur women too were [...] uncommonly graceful, alert, and modest to a degree of bashfulness" (38). This utopian vision is to some extent intended to attract the sympathy of the audience; it is suggested that even slavery is humane in Africa when compared with the transatlantic equivalent. Contrary to Equiano's utopia, Mungo's village contains "beggars" and "deformities," and women there may not be particularly "graceful." Women are treated as "slaves," and there are inhuman customs such as abandoning widows who are past the age of childbearing. Moreover, Mungo does not necessarily reveal the truth to us, as he often declares he has forgotten everything. For instance, Mungo insists that the scar on his forehead is a sign of his Greek ancestry (which may remind us of Equiano's assertion that the Igbo are descendants of the biblical Israelites [45]); however, we are informed elsewhere that this is all a fantasy in which he demonstrates an illusory white inheritance. It is more likely that, as confessed in another version of Mungo's "I" narrative, Captain Thistlewood has given him the scar as a sign of his ownership (66). It should also be noted that Mungo's autobiography remains unwritten until the end. Mungo's narrative fragments are not "written" words; rather, they are the incoherent debris of an autobiography which will never be put onto the page. Like Equiano, Mungo is a self-appointed witness of the truth of Africa, but the novel deliberately makes him an imperfect witness. His "broken" English mocks the reader's expectation of an African voice, and his *misrepresentation* of the truth undermines the authenticity of orality.

Autobiography of the Other

The analogy between slavery and the oppression of women is another important issue questioned in Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*, having been brought up first in *Hogarth's Blacks*, through the analysis of the black woman in Bridewell prison in the fourth plate of *A Harlot's Progress*. In fact, Mungo seems to be revealing more of the stories of the women he meets than his own story. The fates of these women are

all part of Hogarth's pictures including, perhaps, Lady Montague (her "hysteria" is reminiscent of Moll in the second plate of Hogarth's prints). To a considerable extent, Mungo and the women are analogous to each other. The novel makes explicit references to the Georgia Scheme; Betty the washerwoman mouths her fear that underclass women like her and her colleague Mary may be sent to the colonies as slave labour (109, 128). Mungo's intimacy with Betty suggests that there are indeed parallels between their stories. Initially their self-narrated tales are "fabricated stories" (152) but when Betty confesses how she actually came to London, Mungo remembers his own similarly-narrated story and is forced to confront the truth about his own arrival: "As Betty discloses her true past to him, he seems to recollect something of a smaller boy, perhaps his earlier self, stumbling in the mist of the katran bush" (153). Also, just as Betty has betrayed Mary by blaming her for her own theft, Mungo, too, suffers from a sense of guilt as he is the one who, encountering the slave traders in the bush, took them to the village.

And yet, the closeness between Mungo and the women does not necessarily make him the representative "we" narrator who speaks for their suffering and pleasure, especially of those who are dead. Mungo and the dead village women are not equal in power: the survivor possesses the ultimate power to tell what he wants to tell, even though their ghosts haunt him and demand that he should "[r]emember us as we are, not as the whiteman will make you" (62). Just as Equiano did in reality, Mungo contemplates the possibility of writing a fantasy story of a village where there is no poverty and deformity and where Ellar becomes a beauty and enjoys romance (118-122). Nevertheless, negotiations between the women and Mungo end in failure. Mungo, then renamed Perseus and helping Mr Gideon with his sanatorium, is visited by Ellar's ghost, to whom he declares that unlike Mr Pringle (and unlike Equiano) he does not believe that "a single book will alter the course of history" (256). He also reveals that the purpose of writing an autobiography is simply to earn some modest royalties from the sales of the book, and therefore, "to ensure that his book sells, he will not repel his readers" (257) by putting Ellar's abusive words in print – the subaltern voice is thus commodified and scrupulously censored. Indeed, "[m]y book lies. The whores die" (257). The ghost of Ellar harshly criticizes his writing: "Writing don't make you a god either [...] Just because you are making a book of fancy words and the whiteman mark your forehead don't make you better than us" (258). This statement infuriates Mungo alias Perseus, and he "resolves to scratch her name out and all her history from his autobiography," whereas Ellar anticipates this and declares: "I want no part in your doings" (258). Mungo/Perseus is not only a failed autobiographer but also a failed autoethnographer of "our" life.

Perseus's dealings with Moll form a brief episode but their relationship is emblematic of the way the novel represents gender/colour reciprocity. He finds Moll among the sick prostitutes under Mr Gideon's care, and immediately tries to identify her with himself and other slaves from Africa: she is "my fair Alexandrian who

had wandered into a jungle of hurts” (266), (and he considers himself of Greek origin). In Mungo’s imagination, Moll was a free person until “the inhabitants of this cannibal region called London trapped her in a cage;” Magistrate Gonson (who appears in the third plate of Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* to arrest Moll) exploits her and “[h]aving converted her into a beast they released her to move among them, as one of their own tribe” (266). And yet, with all his strong empathy for Moll and (later) their physical intimacy, she remains silent until she dies. Shortly after this, Perseus’s skin develops mysterious green blotches as if to share the suffering with her, but “when I looked upon her I too was dumbfounded by her appearance. I had expected to lift the blanket to a sight piteous beyond words, but was faced instead by unblemished form” (270). Her clean skin reveals her total otherness to him. Indeed, he cannot share his being with her since he himself is in the position of power and exploits her sexually (“My hands explored all the nakedness of her” [270]), taking advantage of her weakness. Finally, he euthanizes her with poison and ceremoniously buries her. To him, Moll in turn embodies the Spivakian agent of withholding, the guardian at the margin who will not inform.

The final pages of the novel epitomize the novel’s ethical dilemma as seen in the aforementioned episodes about women. Mungo (Perseus) is aged and on his deathbed, alone and forgotten, his autobiography still unwritten. He is forever mourning for the dead women and haunted by their ghosts:

For all the voices will be Ellar’s, I know it, jungle howl, loud cackle or big-bosomed laugh, that make birds shoot from the trees in fright. I press my hands to my ear and sing and sing, but she still insurrect [sic] into my head, for there are some women—Ellar in particular—who no matter how strong the poison, secure the grave, will break out, torch the katran bush, blow with disobedient angel breath, fan the flames, that not even God’s Flood can drown them out, for when the waters ebb, there is smoke still, the first smouldering thing that arise [sic] is the spirit of Ellar. (279-280)

Derrida’s account of “unsuccessful mourning” might give us some insight here. A successful mourning, according to Derrida, completes the Hegelian internalization so that the dead is no longer other but taken into the self. Mungo can be seen as a case of unsuccessful mourning, as he cannot “interiorize the dead other” and the dead becomes “a persecutor perhaps, a living dead” (*Ear* 58).^{vi} Hence his autobiography becomes the “crypt” (the psychoanalytical term appropriated by Derrida) in which the living dead are incorporated. Ironically, it is in this cryptic ending that we have a glimpse of hope in Mungo’s project. Truly, his ghostwriting for the dead women (or we might make it *ghost*-writing—as it is a writing about ghosts, and ultimately it aims to be written by the ghosts themselves) is a project just as impossible as his autobiography written by Mr Pringle. Yet this failure, the failure of writing an autobiography of the other, is not merely a pessimistic representation of the failure of community in the real world. Something more is there: a determination to pursue a new form of community which opens itself up to otherness. Since neither Mungo nor Mr Pringle completes his ghostwriting, *A Harlot’s Progress*

remains open-ended. And yet, this open-endedness, the ever-haunting ghost on the final page, suggests that the autobiography of the other is an ongoing process, where there remains a hope for the future. This may also remind us of Derrida, especially his ethical move in the nineties; in *Politics of Friendship* he writes: “to think friendship with an open heart—that is, to think it as close as possible to its opposite—one must perhaps be able to think the *perhaps*, which is to say that one must be able to *say* it and to *make* of it, in saying it, an event” (*Politics* 30). Dabydeen’s novel is a performative ghost-dance, by which it tries to make the impossible happen—the friendship between Mungo and the dead women—as a future event.

Notes

1. In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh, Dabydeen states that *Slave Song* was composed in his Cambridge years under the influence of modern critical theory. Derrida is mentioned as one of the most influential theorists to reconsider the relationship between the artist and the critic (Grant 182-183).

2. For instance, Lord Montague may remind us of John Montagu (1690-1749), the patron of Ignatius Sancho.

3. Aijaz Ahmad is one of the first critics to analyse the complicity between postcolonial literature (“Third World Literature” in his terminology) and (post-)modernism (he considers postmodernism as the later stage of modernism). According to Ahmad, Salman Rushdie’s experimental work conforms to the aesthetic criteria of the western/modernist canon (123-158).

4. Spivak points out the double structure of J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, in which Susan (Roxana) tries to retrieve her story from Foe the author, whereas she in turn appropriates the story of Friday; however, Friday does not speak and refuses to be an informant: “it is Friday rather than Susan who is the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text” (190). The same structure can be observed between Mungo, Mr Pringle, and Moll in *Harlot’s Progress*.

5. He even tries to describe Captain Thistlewood as his benefactor, although readers will learn that Thistlewood is charged with the mass-murder of sick slaves on board the ship in order to claim their insurance value (as in the Zong Massacre of 1781, on which the narrative of “Turner” is based).

6. This passage concerns Nietzsche’s reading of Hegel, which proposes an alternative logic that deconstructs Hegelian dialectics. Derrida formulates that the dead is the father and the living (mourner) is the mother; in *A Harlot’s Progress* the gender roles are apparently reversed.

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