

## **The Spectre of the Slave Ship: Caryl Phillips's Adaptation for the Stage of *Rough Crossings* by Simon Schama.**

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### **The Problem of Representation**

Representation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade confronts both the dramatist and the historian with two problems which threaten the authenticity of their endeavours: a) the conventions of narrative structure which may, as historian Berel Lang (2000) asserts, pose the danger of aestheticizing horrific or traumatic events and b) a methodology that relies on archives that contain scant traces of the experiences of the trade's traumatised victims, or their response to those experiences.

Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings* recounts the hitherto underrepresented history of the contribution of black enslaved peoples to the American war of Independence while Caryl Phillips's dramatized adaptation of Schama's narrative history is both a response to and critique of Schama's methodology, revealing its limitations and unintentional biases. Both historian and playwright use formal narrative or dramaturgical devices to resolve the restraints of historiographical methodology, employing linguistic strategies which themselves pose various ontological challenges. This paper examines how emplotment, while making the story Schama tells vivid and engaging, also marginalises some of its chief actants, privileging the role of the white abolitionists over the agency of the black protagonists. On the other hand, Phillips uses emplotment and other dramaturgical devices – especially the rejection of authenticity and the deployment of anachronism - to reposition the black protagonists at the centre of the narrative, while constructing a dialogue between past and present, revealing in the process the impact of the ongoing legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on contemporary life. The theory of hauntology, which suggests that the legacy of the past resonates within or haunts present day reality provides a useful means of examining Phillips's dramaturgical strategies.

### **Untold Histories and the Silence of the Archive**

Simon Schama's intention in writing *Rough Crossings* was to reveal a hidden history (Condie 2010). The book focuses on the underrepresented story of the enslaved African people who were encouraged by the British, during the American war of Independence (1776-1783), to escape their American captors ("owners") and serve on the loyalist side. In return for this service the enslaved Africans were promised their freedom. After the British defeat many of these black loyalists were helped by the British to flee to Nova Scotia where they languished neglected, barely able to scratch a living from the barren land and harsh climate. In Britain leading abolitionist Granville Sharp was petitioned by Africans such as prominent abolitionist Olaudah Equiano and African American Thomas Peters (himself a once enslaved veteran of the revolutionary war) regarding the parlous conditions in which blacks, both in London and Nova Scotia were forced to live. Sharp conceived a plan to establish a trading company in Sierra Leone where Africans who desired it could be repatriated. The repatriated Africans might sell what they produced to the Sierra Leone Trading company or keep it for themselves.

While Sharp's vision was for blacks to eventually govern themselves the initial set up was similar to other colonial settlements with a white governor (Jonathan Clarkson). This led to dissent and a sense for the black inhabitants of having been betrayed. The settlement rehearsed the conflicts of the nationalist movements that were to be played out across the African continent almost two hundred years later: the Africans bid for self-governance thwarted by white colonial rule.

While bringing this hidden story into the light, Schama's narrative exposes the limitations of historiographical methodology where the epistemological foundation is undermined by the repression, silencing and misrepresentation of the enslaved subjects who are central to the story. As has been pointed out by John McLeod (2009), Barbara Korte and Eva Ulrike Pirker (2011), while Simon Schama's intention in writing *Rough Crossings* was to represent a hidden or forgotten history as an act of memorialisation to ancestors both black and white, his history - because it is mediated through two white central characters who were well known activists in the British abolitionist movement - results in the marginalisation of the voices of the narrative's black protagonists. All three writers suggest that this diminution of the black voice can in part be attributed to a methodology which is compromised by the exclusion from the archives of the traces of the enslaved African.

Postcolonial literary theorists such as Simon Gikandi (2016) postulate that this archival lacuna limits the historiographical claim to authenticity, problematizing the postcolonial strategy of retrieving and memorialising the authentic voice of the enslaved Africans, making of the archive a kind of fiction.

Hayden White's essay 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation' explores this tension between the production of fiction and the production of historiography. White asserts that one of these tensions arises in the stricture that in the work of historians "Only the facts must be recounted because otherwise one lapses into figurative speech and stylization (aestheticism). And only a chronicle of facts is warranted because otherwise one opens up oneself to the dangers of narrativisation and the relativization of emplotment." (White 2009 p28). While White suggests that historiography cannot be entirely free of the constructions of fiction, his exhortation might also be extended to suggest that fictionalisation begins with the creation of the archive itself. Simon Gikandi states that, because the archive was used as part of the capitalistic mission of enslavement, that the story it tells is one that has two aims: to reduce the captive African people to chattel and property as listed in the inventories and wills of the slavers and to conceal that strategy behind a seemingly civilised and civilising mission:

"Archiving seems to be driven by the desire to close down the voices of the dominated...the archiving gesture is a form of violent control: the authority of the archive is pegged on the mastery of enslavement as an event...In this archive of domination and subjection, the men of power seek to reduce the enslaved to a lower order of being."(Gikandi 2016 p587)

The historian whose project reveals a hidden or repressed history is forced to use methods and materials which are impressed with the history and legacy of the slave masters' control and manipulation of the archive. This raises the question of the epistemological soundness of the archives: if they are incomplete then the historical narratives they produce must also be incomplete. Pirker, Kolte and McLeod suggest that a necessary reliance on the archives and the existing historical texts that have been so far constructed from them weights Schama's narrative towards the white abolitionists.

Hayden White writes of historical representation "Narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story." (White, 2009 p28). These poetic, or rhetorical (story) elements are conventionally distinguished from the work of fiction by their relationship to source material or "reality". The historian can deploy narrative techniques but only in service of representing the facts, while conversely and conventionally the writer of fiction is at liberty to "make things up." The academic distinction between narrative fiction and narrative history is often used to dismiss the value of dramatic literature as historiography, because it is assumed to lack the positivist aspect ascribed to historical narrative, even though the claim of historiography to positivism can itself be tenuous - as Hayden White affirms in "The Burden of History." (1996)

Schama's use of fictional techniques serves to further obscure the importance of the black protagonists in the story. As Korte and Pirke point out, Schama is known for using novelistic techniques, which make his work vivid and engaging. In the narrative history *Rough Crossings* both Clarkson and Sharp are fleshed out as living breathing characters by the use of detailed sensual description. Schama uses internalised discourse to simulate and suggest the thoughts of the characters, bringing them to life. Schama extends his use of thick description to his visualisation of place in order to reconstruct eighteenth century London. These mimetic techniques suggest that the historian is not as hamstrung by focusing on "only the facts" given up by the archives as White has suggested, but also has recourse to "making things up" in the way that the writer of fiction does.

The lack of archival material doesn't completely answer the question of Schama's mediating his reclaimed history through the voices of the abolitionists because, as pointed out by Korte and Pirker one of the characters excluded from his list of dramatis personae is Olaudah Equiano who was a prominent and active abolitionist who was central to the organisation of the Sierra Leone repatriation project, bearing the title "Commissary on the part of the Government for the African Settlement" (Korte and Pirke 2011 p98). Schama claims that his history is a "true story" which reconstructs events recorded in journals, letters and historical records. It should be noted that Equiano Olaudah also wrote a well-known autobiography (Equiano 2013). When Schama subsequently adapted *Rough Crossings* into a screenplay for broadcast on the BBC (see below), he revised the telling of the story to include the first black political leaders of the Sierra Leone settlement. Equiano remains excluded from the screenplay thus

leaving untold the story of the black British contribution to the abolition movement. Although Equiano is not a character in Caryl Phillips's stage play, Phillips nevertheless goes some way towards correcting Schama's other omissions.

### **Caryl Phillips's Dramaturgical Strategy: Highly Fictionalised History**

As John McLeod asserts Caryl Phillips's stage play *Rough Crossings* is not a straightforward transposition of Schama's material from the structure of historical narrative to that of dramatic text intended for onstage performance. While one would expect that the conversion from one genre to another would necessitate a degree of alteration Phillips appropriates and radically revises the source material, using theatrical devices to transform historical fact in order to introject a critical commentary on the ongoing legacy of the historical events depicted. Phillips shifts the emphasis from Schama's centrally focalised white abolitionist characters to the black protagonists David George and Thomas Peters who are (perhaps unwittingly and unavoidably) marginalised in Schama's source text. The audience sees both Peters and George debating the decision about whether or not to escape the American planters and defect to the loyalist cause. We then see them, engaged with the theatre of war which means having to kill a fellow enslaved African who is fighting on the side of the Americans. Faced with further decisions and arguments about migrating to Nova Scotia and subsequently agreeing to take part in the repatriation to Sierra Leone both George and Peters emerge as political leaders. Throughout the play both protagonists argue their relationship with Clarkson, George more trusting of power sharing under Clarkson's leadership, while Peters proclaims his fervent desire for self-governance.

Phillips situates George and Peters at the centre of the play, the conflict between them providing the tension that drives the narrative. Phillips, as McLeod suggests, also ascribes to each of the two characters the political discourses more usually (and recognisably) associated with the iconic figures of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Phillips is quoted by McLeod as asserting "I want [the audience], hopefully to think about the connections between what was happening 200 years ago and how that led to what's happening now." (Smirke 2009) By doing this Phillips initiates a significant and dynamic dialogic relationship with the source text, commenting on the relationship between historiography, the production of dramatic fiction and the politics of the present moment. (McLeod 2009)

Historian Berel Lang asserts that one of the dangers of fictionalising historical events is the risk of aestheticizing and therefore distorting the truthful representation of the events to which it refers (White 2009 p34). Writing about the Holocaust he suggests that the proper response to such an atrocity is silence. Lang suggests that when writing about the Holocaust young writers who did not endure it should not attempt to write about the event as though they were speaking for the dead, but that they should write about the event as though they were happening or had happened to the young writers themselves. By doing this the current generation of writers would draw attention to the ongoing impact of the Holocaust on their own lives. Lang's suggestion describes the technique deployed by Phillips: interventions which ascribe to the historical figures

David George and Thomas Peters the arguments of recognisable political figures drawn from recent history.

Phillips's dramaturgical strategy offers a tentative answer to the question postulated by Nikita Dewan, Elisabeth Fink, Johanna Leinius, and Rirhandu Magela-Barthel (2016) of "how to trace the entanglements between diverse European and non-European narrativities when the political imperative is to undo the violation that informs post/colonial normative orders in such a manner that those subjected to it may have a possibility of intervening and transforming them." McLeod points out that, in a radical rewriting of Schama's source material, Phillips rejects authenticity altogether and introjects the ghosts of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X into Schama's narrative. Phillips ascribes to the protagonists the respective discourses of black consciousness and nationalism espoused by King and Malcom X, namely passive resistance (David George) and violent revolution (Thomas Peters). The haunting presence in the play of more recent black revolutionary politics forces the play's audiences to read backwards to the archives, rather than forward from the archive to the present moment. (Gikandi 2015)

It is useful to explore Phillips's dramaturgical strategy by using theories of hauntology, which postulate that the theatre space is haunted by apparitions, the meaning of whose presence is interpreted by the collective memory of the audience during performances. The spectre of Shakespeare hangs over the first scene of Phillips's play, recalling the opening scene of *The Tempest*. The captain's suggestion that the boy will contract a disease if he doesn't stand downwind of the hold echoes Alonso's self-reassurance that the boatswain has the look of someone who will probably die by the noose rather than by drowning. The scene is also haunted by ghosts of past productions of *The Tempest*, especially those that interpret the play from a postcolonial perspective.

Aime Cesaire's rewriting of Shakespeare's play is also brought to mind in Act One Scene One. Of particular interest is the fact that Cesaire revises Ariel and Caliban to reflect divergent political positions: mixed race Ariel is a benign integrationist sprite who serves Prospero, while Caliban is a black separatist whose desire is to be free of his white master. Cesaire's play was written in 1969, a year after the death of Martin Luther King and three years after the death of Malcolm X. John McLeod's suggestion that Caryl Phillips uses David George and Thomas Peters to reflect the binary oppositional approaches to black resistance movements would seem to have a precursor in Cesaire's play. However, while Cesaire's adaptation closely follows the events portrayed in Shakespeare's play, Phillips diverges radically from his source material. The ship at sea also recalls JMW Turner's iconic painting *The Slave Ship* and is a trope of the many ships (including the Windrush) and crossings suggested by Schama's title. It has been suggested that Turner's painting was inspired by the *Zong* massacre, although as Leo Costello has suggested the painting is not necessarily a literal evocation of that event (Costello 2004). Just as Phillips uses the history of the settlement of Sierra Leone by freed slaves to dissolve the boundaries between past and present in order to show the on-going legacy of the impact of this history, so JMW Turner may have used his painting to comment on the atrocities that occurred at sea

even after abolition when the slave trade continued as a black market or underground activity (Costello 2004). The Royal Navy's pursuit of illegal slave ships led to the swift "jettisoning" of human "cargo" by the underground slavers as they were approached by the navy. Costello suggests that Turner's painting establishes a dialectical relationship between past and present or even past and future, while Phillips co-opts Schama's narrative to bring about the same effect.

In the play's opening scene Phillips recalls the 1781 massacre that took place on the slave ship the Zong, with the captain ordering the old sailor Johnson to throw the sick or dying slaves overboard. While Phillips's allusion to the Zong massacre is implicit, the episode contains enough resonances to allow the audience to introject the memory of the Zong into the scene. The Zong affair may well have been prominent in audience members minds during the performance as the slave ship's history played a prominent role during the various commemorative performances that took place during 2007 to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade – one of these events was the mooring and exhibition of a replica of the Zong tall ship at Tower Bridge (Ligali 2007). Indeed, Phillips's play was also produced that year to mark the bicentenary.

In Schama's history, the Zong affair is mediated through Granville Sharp's involvement in the court case brought by the captain for an insurance claim on the dead Africans. However, it was Olaudah Equiano who petitioned Sharp's involvement, bringing the affair to Sharp's attention (Equiano would not presumably have been able to take up the case himself in the way that Sharp was able to). Phillips rewrites the scene, foregrounding the Africans who are silent in most retellings of the story. This silencing of the African enslaved is similarly evident in the film Belle, another cultural product which claims to tell a hidden or forgotten story of a black British protagonist (Asante 2013). In the film the Zong case is central to the dramatic action. In this film there is no attempt to reconstruct the reality of the horror that occurred on the ship in 1781. In fact, historian James Walvin who wrote a narrative history of the Zong went so far as to say of the film that "the brute ugliness of slavery remains a mere noise off-stage" (Mason 2017). In defence of the film, the filmmakers keeping the brutality of the slave trade "offstage" may have been deploying a strategy in line with Berel Lang's exhortation to writers of fiction that they should avoid writing about historical facts because to do so is to diminish them (Lang 2000). To have juxtaposed a realistic portrayal of the Zong massacre alongside the love story may have undermined both narratives.

In Phillips's play an event that echoes the Zong is given graphic representation. The audience witnesses the deaths of two enslaved Africans: one is thrown overboard and the other, a "buck slave" - i.e one who is virtually impossible to break (in the way that one might break a horse) – is shot dead by an officer. The scene depicts the buck slave's resistance to seasoning. Seasoning was the contemporary term used to describe the process by which an African was transformed into a slave. This process of transformation was carried out by experienced sailors such as the character Johnson who appears in the play, who had very close relationships with the enslaved Africans as they were the ones who fed them, "mucked out" the hold and ensured that the slaves were exercised – the "dancing" that is portrayed in the scene. This process occurred

over the course of the duration of the voyage, so that by the time they were sold at auction, the captives who had left Africa as free human beings were stood on the auction block as dehumanised slaves (Christopher 2006).

Phillips's play graphically demonstrates that the process of enslavement was not as straightforward as the archives would have its attendants believe. The absence of the enslaved people from the archive creates the fiction of the Africans passive acceptance of their fate. Phillips's reimagining of the scene contests this account by dramatizing the African response and resistance to the slavers. In this scene Phillips uses a technique pioneered by Brian Friel in his play *Translations* (1981) where, while the play is written in English, the moments when characters resort to gaelic is signalled by a change of accent. In the same way Phillips indicates that the African characters are speaking African because they cannot be understood by Johnson, the Ship's boy or the Captain. Phillips does not state whether his authorial intention is for this speech to be actually translated and spoken in a West African language or if the director is to deploy the Frielian requirement that the audience buys into the idea that the characters are speaking an African language when they are actually speaking English. If the director chooses the latter there is a certain engagement for the audience with the African characters as they are "let in" on the plot. If the director chooses the use of the African language the audience shares the plight of the white ship's crew, which may make the phenomenological effect of the Africans' later chanting and aggressive standoff more menacing and challenging as the threat suggested by the standoff is therefore aimed as much at the audience as at the crew. The technique also highlights the consequent loss of language and diaspora that resulted from the trans-Atlantic slave trade: Writers of the black diaspora like Phillips may not speak or use African languages in their plays, but the Frielian device goes some way to addressing this lack by creating the theatrical illusion of the writer's ability to use an African language.

Marcus Rediker (2007) likens the slave ship to a factory, an apt metaphor, which captures the capitalistic imperative that brought the slave ship into existence. Throughout the scene the captain refers to the profit motive that is the engine of both the ship and the English economy. However, the atrocities that take place in the name of this capitalistic mission are mounted and concealed under cover of dark in the middle of nowhere far from British shores. Phillips demonstrates that, despite the hierarchy of power demonstrated by the various roles assigned to each person on the slave ship, the profit motive enslaves them all. In many ways the white crew are also held captive by the ship: Johnson spends much of his time in the hold with the enslaved and the ship's boy explains that he was forced to serve on the ship, which makes him also a captive. The captain, who is seen retching from the fetid stink of the slave ship (this smell is described in many contemporary accounts of the slave ship which announced its presence through smell long before it arrived at any particular location) is as much consigned to the hell of the slave ship as the captives, even as he conjures images of a more genteel existence as represented by the memory of his fragrant paramour. There is a nod toward the future cultural hybridity brought about by their shared captivity on the slave ship when white and black confront each other using music and song as weapons. In the moment when the Africans raise a defiant chant and the English crew

respond with a hymn, the overlapping of the different rhythms and languages is reminiscent of the fusion of black and white music in reggae or jazz. Phillips suggests that this moment should be of significant onstage duration before the British crew assert their control using their guns to repress the African resistance.

Phillips's dramaturgical strategies are at times as veiled or concealed as the strategies of resistance that, in reality, were employed by the African slaves. His play seems at times to signify as a subtle critique of its source, Schama's narrative history. Hauntology here becomes a significant dramaturgical strategy as Phillips uses ghosts, related to both fictional and real characters, to do his critical bidding for him. A play based on historical characters is one that acknowledges the spectral aspect of its content. Schama alludes to this in the introductory and concluding commentaries for his documentary adaptation of *Rough Crossings*.

Theories of hauntology may also be crucial to an understanding of how the play produces its meaning: each scene reverberates with the ghosts of the previous or other scenes, creating a critique, or what Hayden describes (in historiography) as an explanatory method. Therefore, not only is the play haunted by the memory of other plays and performances, but it also could be said to haunt itself. For this reason the staging of the play needs to be very fluid, with scenes flowing smoothly into each other. At the end of Scene One not only does the fusion of black and white music give way to the strains of Handel, but the slave ship also mutates into the yacht on which the Sharps give a musical recitation for their guests, the Clarkson brothers. While the scene takes place many miles away from the site of the Zong-like atrocities, it is thematically linked to them by the way in which scenes cast a spectral shadow over each other. It is impossible not to watch the scene with Thomas Clarkson trying to recruit William Sharp to the abolitionist cause (and ending up recruiting Granville Sharp and Jonathan Clarkson instead) without the memory of the gruesome sombre tone of the scene that precedes it. The dramatic stakes for the Africans who resist enslavement is much higher than those for the abolitionists. The way that Phillips juxtaposes scenes that involve David George and Thomas Peters as they act in the theatre of war, or as they toil at the barren land of Nova Scotia, or confront the racism of the British officers, as they are forced to kill their fellow slaves, is contrasted with Granville Sharp's ineffective activism (handing out leaflets to an uninterested public, disrupting slave auctions and giving lectures on the evils of sugar). This way of structuring scenes sets up a dialogue or critique between scenes, which foregrounds the courageous acts and articulacy of both David George and Thomas Peters. These strategies demonstrate the many performance languages involved in theatre, which doesn't exclusively rely on the performativity of speech acts. A dramatist can construct phenomenological affect by appealing to the senses through music and movement – all of which create emotional as well as intellectual responses in the audience.

The ghostly presence of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (and perhaps also Frantz Fanon) permeate the play. John McLeod (2009) asserts that Phillips's dramaturgical method uses a kind of heightened fictionalisation of historical fact. "Making things up" becomes in this play a self-conscious rhetorical or poetic device which creates a



dialogic relationship between fact and fiction. It is an alienation technique that invites the audience to engage critically with the performance. In Caryl Phillips's stage play the conventional dramatic structures perform an argument, which functions in contestation and transformation of its source material (Schama's popular history) in line with the activist intentions of postcolonial theorists such as Nikita Dewan et al (2016) who view the strategy of postcolonial cultural criticism as having progressed from focusing on "the initial controversy [of colonisation] to an endeavour to gain more nuanced understanding of the various ways in which the colonized responded to the exercises of colonial power. This progression is a movement away from excavating the strategies and actions of the colonisers as explored in such works as Homi K Bhabha's The Location of Culture (2012)\_to focusing on the activism of the colonised; a progression that foregrounds the idea of the colonised as actants or protagonists rather than simply as victims of brutal colonialist strategies. Instead of attempting to bring George and Peters back to life as real characters, Phillips's give them a metonymical function; they "stand in" for the two main models of black revolutionary politics: integration or separatism. These two positions were epitomised by the seeming conflict between King and Malcolm X.

While there is an undoubted reference to two of the most prominent African-American leaders one might further surmise that the two political positions might also refer to various African leaders who presided over unrest in many postcolonial African countries. The play is haunted by the later fate of Sierra Leone as well as that of other African countries, many of which became embroiled in brutal civil wars in the postcolonial era. Some commentators controversially attribute this political demise to various African leaders who helped to create African "kleptocracies" as well as to the devastating impact of the slave trade and colonialism (Ayittey 1998). In this respect the character of Henry De Mane, while he isn't a main character in the play, is used in a similar way to the characters of David George and Thomas Peters to signify or embody this critique.

The character of Henry De Mane who, is depicted in Schama's history as a minor character, was in reality saved from enslavement by Granville Sharp and settled in Sierra Leone, only to become wealthy on the proceeds from his own engagement in the slave trade. He is given more space in Phillips's play where he is fleshed out into a three-dimensional character. While De Mane appears in only two scenes in the play, his presence provides a powerful insight into the impact of the slave trade on the minds of would-be African capitalists. In Phillips's play De Mane is presented at first as a freed slave whose act of resistance is to steal from the donations pledged to the abolitionist cause. When Eliza criticises his behaviour the complexity of De Mane's situation is not lost on the audience: her accusation that De Mane is a thief resonates with irony: the unpaid work of enslaved Africans like De Mane was the foundation upon which the wealth of Britain's economy was built (Williams 1944). De Mane's discourse in Act One Scene 8 seems to represent those African leaders who present themselves as serving the interests of the people while siphoning off the wealth of their countries in order to line their own pockets. Demane therefore becomes a haunting spectral figure who

foreshadows the “kleptocrats” whose actions are responsible for the continued impoverishment and slowed development of many African countries (Attiyey 1999).

### **American History and British History**

In his essay on Phillips’s stage play adaptation McLeod emphasises the way in which Phillips’s body of work looks to American literary authors and theorists with which to make sense of the black British experience and history. This focus on the African-American history poses a question about whose history is being told and if the local experiences of diasporic peoples is important in this regard: can the African-American experience speak for or to the experience of black British peoples?

It is interesting to note that very few plays about the British involvement in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade have been presented on the British stages. British theatres more usually produce plays about the trade that were written by African American authors. In the past few years British stages have produced original plays about the slave trade by Rita Dove, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. Of the few plays on the subject written by British authors most are, like *Rough Crossings*, adaptations from historical or literary source material such as Biyi Bandele’s adaptation of *Oroonoko* (1999)

Simon Gikandi highlights the fact that, although the American literary historian also encounters silence when scoping the archives for those voices of the enslaved which are not mediated through the desires of white abolitionists (as are some slave narratives), the situation changes after the American civil war as the archive fills with the slave narrative. This archive recording of the slave narrative did not occur in Britain or its slave/sugar islands, which is possibly why British writers and cultural historians have resort to American narratives through which to understand their own genealogy. However, this weighting of the historical material towards American history has the effect of silencing the distinct voices of Olaudah and other British people of African origin, which is ironic given that Phillips’s play was written to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of British involvement in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Schama describes Thomas Peters as one of the first African American political leaders, but does not so name Equiano or other men who formed “The Sons of Africa” a coalition of prominent Africans similar to the group of businessmen, politicians and members of the judiciary who made up the white abolitionist group who styled themselves “The Saints” as mentioned in Schama’s historical text. In Schama’s *Rough Crossings* Granville Sharp is credited with the idea for an African settlement for Britain’s blacks, but it is clear from Sharp’s memoirs that the idea may have originated from blacks themselves who petitioned Sharp to make this a reality.

### **Simon Schama’s Adaptation of *Rough Crossings***

Caryl Phillips’s stage adaptation of Schama’s narrative history is not the only adaptation of the book: Schama himself adapted the text into a documentary drama for BBC television in 2010. It is interesting to note that this adaptation of the historical narrative took place subsequent to Phillips’s dramatized version of the story, so one could surmise that this revision or adaptation was undertaken in response to the critiques

posed by Phillips's dramatization of the original historical text. As Korte and Pirke (2011) point out, this adaptation was a documentary drama in which Schama revised his material, excising the material concerning Granville Sharp and focusing on the triumvirate of Jonathan Clarkson, David George and Thomas Peters. However, even with this significant revision the story is told from Clarkson's perspective. Clarkson's failure and the failure of the Sierra Leone settlement are seen as one and the same, although the material suggests that the "failure" was strategic, institutional and driven by capitalist desire. Therefore, the history that Schama reclaims from obscurity in his revised docudrama is really that of Clarkson rather than that of the black protagonists. Clarkson's involvement in the abolitionist movement was short-lived, ending in ignominy: as Schama tells the story, Clarkson was co-opted into the Sierra Leone venture and became its first governor, but his prioritising of the building of a society with equality as its governing principal over the profit motive led to his eventual replacement with a more exacting governor, leaving Clarkson to disappear into obscurity, overshadowed by his more famous sibling and leading member of the abolitionist movement, Thomas Clarkson. Schama reclaims Clarkson from this obscurity. Schama's source text draws on the journals, memoirs and letters of Granville Sharp, various historical texts and the journals that Sharp encouraged Jonathan Clarkson to write. There is of course no record of David George, Thomas Peters or any of the other black participants in the venture having been asked to record and preserve their experiences of life in the Sierra Leone settlement (Schama 2010). In fact, the enforced illiteracy which was used as a weapon of enslavement meant that, even if they wanted to, they probably would not have been able to do so.

### **Writing Wrongs**

Dramatic fiction offers the opportunity to memorialise those whose lives were ruptured by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, Schama's historical text *Rough Crossings* demonstrates the difficulty of excavating an untold history whose memory may have been deliberately withheld from the archives. Phillips's dramaturgical intervention, the highly fictionalised recounting of historical events suggests a methodology for redressing the balance.

5,870 words

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