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"AMAZING GRACE": THE GHOSTS OF NEWTON, EQUIANO AND BARBER IN CARYL PHILLIPS'S FICTION

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> If he had never written another word, John Newton would have been famous for "Amazing Grace," the hymn he wrote in December 1772 (Walvin).

Several of Caryl Phillips's novels focus on slavery in the British Empire in the eighteenth century, and among the intertexts he has used in his reconstruction of the evil institution we find the writings of John Newton (1725-1807) in *Crossing the River* (1993) and Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745-1797) in *Cambridge* (1991), as well as the ghostly presence of Francis Barber (c. 1735-1801) in Phillips's last novel to date, *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007). Newton and Equiano left behind ample written evidence of their experience and their texts offer invaluable insights into slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire, while Francis Barber, the Jamaican who was Samuel Johnson's manservant for over thirty years, remains a silent figure in history, whose life has come to us through the indirect evidence of contemporaries that interacted with him. The present paper explores the presence of Newton, Equiano and Barber in these three novels, which present slavery and the African diaspora in the eighteenth century as a crucial part of British history and highlight the consequences and reverberations of the history of slavery in the twentieth century.

The ghosts of John Newton, Olaudah Equiano and Francis Barber haunt Caryl Phillips's recreation of eighteenth-century society in these novels about

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British involvement in the history of slavery, a topic that has not entered the official narratives of the nation until very recently. The slave trade in Britain has been traditionally linked in public memory to narratives of abolition, which have managed to shift the focus from the participation of Britain in the institution of slavery to the role of the country as a European leader in the movement to do away with it. As J. R. Oldfield states, "Britons –and Britain's colonial subjects– [have been] taught to view transatlantic slavery through the moral triumph of abolition, therefore substituting for the horrors of slavery and the slave trade a 'culture of abolitionism'" (2).[1] Like the writings of some other black British novelists since the nineties, Phillips's work tries to bring to the forefront of British history the traditionally hidden narratives of the trade and slavery and the crucial role they played in the creation of wealth in the British Empire. He is indeed the author who has "re-visioned the history of slavery the most extensively in his writing … as unfinished business in terms of its continuing impact on the sense of self and on relationships between black and white people in the modern world" (Joannou 195).

Newton, Equiano and Barber were contemporaries whose lives provide different perspectives into the history of British involvement in slavery and the slave trade. At the time when the former slaver John Newton composed his most famous hymn "Amazing Grace" in December 1772, Francis Barber had just left Bishop's Stortford grammar school after five years of schooling, for which Samuel Johnson had paid £300 (Fryer 424), and Olaudah Equiano had just returned to London after a year trading as a free man in Jamaica, to find that the city had been shaken up by the famous Somerset case, in which the frequently misinterpreted ruling of judge Mansfield determined that enslaved Africans in the country could not be removed to the colonies against their will. Their personal paths may never have crossed in significant ways, but their lives help shape a vision of eighteenth-century Britain as a country enriched by the profits of trading in human flesh:

> The British did not initiate this Atlantic slave system, but by the mid-eighteenth century they dominated it; by about 1750, slavery had established itself as an

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> unquestionable institution in the British way of life. Hundreds of British ships, thousands of British sailors, tens of thousands of British settlers –not to mention British workers, merchants, financiers– and millions of consumers, all depended on, or benefited from, slavery (Walvin xvi).

The experiences of John Newton and Olaudah Equiano are rather profusely documented in writings of their own, while that of Francis Barber remains on the edges of written history as it was recorded in texts related to his very famous master Samuel Johnson. The historic figure of Newton, the slave-ship captain turned minister, is behind the character of the slave trader James Hamilton, whose voice we hear in a ship log and in personal letters in *Crossing the River*, while Equiano provides the main inspiration for the African protagonist of *Cambridg*e, whose voice comes to us in his brief autobiography in the novel. Francis Barber's experience is re-imagined as one of the examples of the oxymoron in the title of the novel *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, but he is granted no voice and appears through the perspective of an unnamed member of Samuel Johnson's inner circle of acquaintances. *Crossing the River* and *Cambridge* present the lives of enslaved and free Africans as they are interlinked with those of white characters, from the eighteenth century to World War II, and *Foreigners* links the life of the Jamaican Francis Barber in eighteenth-century Britain to the mid-twentieth-century lives of the boxer Randolph Turpin, Britain's first black world champion in 1951, and the Nigerian immigrant David Oluwale, who died at the hands of the police in 1969.

Most of Caryl Phillips's fiction deals with the past, both the distant past of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in his fiction about slavery, and the more recent past of the twentieth century, from the recreation of the early twentieth century in *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) to the time of the Holocaust in *The Nature of Blood* (1995) or the fifties and sixties in *The Final Passage* (1985), *A State of Independence* (1986), *Higher Ground* (1989) and *Foreigners*. Phillips always necessarily relies on historical documents and previous literary creations as intertexts for his fiction, from the tragedy of Othello in *The Nature of Blood* to Victorian women's travel writing in *Cambridge* or the archival material of the New York Public Library on Bert Williams that he acknowledges

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in *Dancing in the Dark*.[2] Sometimes he flaunts the use of historical material so openly in his texts that occasionally his pastiche of older texts has been seen as bordering on improper appropriation. Phillips's pastiche of John Newton's writing has been openly criticised by Marcus Wood as "reduc[ing] the complexities and complicities of the original" (54), and I'm aware of two significant examples of uneasiness with pastiche in the case of *Cambridge*: one of them is Françoise Charras's suggestion in her analysis of the novel that his use of former writing by women travellers is dangerously close to plagiarizing (72); the other is the reaction of the scholar Paul Edwards regarding the use of black texts in *Cambridge* that Lars Eckstein describes in his volume *Remembering the Black Atlantic* (2006). "The Cambridge section", writes Edwards in a letter to Phillips,

> uses so much material from Equiano and other sources in a wholly undisguised way that I doubt the value of the narrative… [it] degenerates into easily recognizable pastiche, a kind of impersonal patchwork with little contemporary value, since the original sources have said it already (quoted in Eckstein 71).

The image of the ghost or spectre is appropriate to refer to the presence of these three historical figures in the novels, both to describe Newton's and Equiano's texts haunting Phillips's fictions and to capture the appearance of all three in the fictional characters that re-imagine elements of these real eighteenth-century lives. In different degrees the novels use a pastiche of eighteenth-century language, with *Crossing the River* and *Cambridge* providing clearer examples of montage of earlier texts and *Foreigners* resorting to a more diffuse pastiche of the voices of Samuel Johnson, his friends and acquaintances.

Crossing the River presents the interconnected voices of characters whose lives have been traumatised by slavery from the eighteenth century to contemporary times, "figures most often excluded from conventional historiography and literature" (Ledent 118). In the prologue and epilogue, we hear the mythical voice of an African father who sold his children into slavery ("I soiled my hands with cold goods in exchange for their warm flesh. A shameful

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intercourse" [1]), and the novel joins the stories of a free African-American man that settles in Liberia in the early nineteenth century, an old black woman who is escaping West in the US in the late nineteenth century, and an English woman who falls in love with a black GI in the forties in Britain. The novel has been described as the weaving of dispossessed existences into the broad canvas of the African diaspora (Ledent 108), but it significantly weaves not only these lives of members of the African diaspora but also the voice of a white eighteenth-century participant in the trade, the slaver James Hamilton, who brings into the novel the perspective of the British who were most directly involved in the slave trade. His thoughts come to us through his ship log and some personal letters to his wife, which show the perfect accommodation of the trading in human flesh within his Christian frame of mind. His voice is captured in Part III of the novel, which gives the title "Crossing the River" to the whole text, and Caryl Phillips acknowledges his use of John Newton's *Journal of a Slave Trader* as a source for the novel (the only one he explicitly mentions). It is not difficult to find parallelisms between the two texts in the main content and tone of the journal entries. There are also several cases of Phillips's lifting phrases and sentences from Newton's journal to incorporate them into his character's log book. Here is one of the many moments in which we can find a clear parallelism between the entries in Phillips's fictional log book and in John Newton's original journal (the selected passage from the novel includes words and phrases that have been lifted verbatim from Newton's original text; these have been underlined in the corresponding passage from John Newton's *Journal of a Slave Trader*):

> *Friday 2nd April* … By the favour of Divine Providence made a timely discovery today that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprised 4 attempting to get off their irons, and upon further search in their rooms found some knives, stones, shot, etc. Put 2 in irons and delicately in the thumbscrews to encourage them to a full confession of those principally concerned. In the evening put 5 more in neck yokes (*Crossing* 114).

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Monday 11th December … By the favour of Divine Providence made a timely discovery to day that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprised 2 of them attempting to get off their irons, and upon further search in their rooms, upon the information of 3 of the boys, found some knives, stones, shot, etc., and a cold chisel. Upon enquiry there appeared 8 principally concerned to move in projecting the mischief and 4 boys in supplying them with the above instruments. Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumbscrews to urge them to a full confession (*Journal* 71).

Although Phillips mentions Newton's *Journal of a Slave Trader* as a source for the novel, he chooses to omit another key text by Newton that must have inspired the slaver section. Part of the emotional power of this part of the novel is the intermingling of Hamilton's cold matter-of-fact account of his buying and storing human beings aboard his ship with the tender loving letters addressed to his young wife. The interpolation of the love letters in between entries in the log book that records the daily occurrences in the trade is in keeping with the real character of John Newton, who wrote most tenderly to his wife in England and maintained his study of the Bible and his desire for spiritual growth, while he was away on his slave trading business: "Newton felt no irony in, concurrent with his slave-trading journey, travelling on a spiritual journey of prayer, Bible reading and Sunday services of Christian worship for his crew" (Aitken 65).

Some of John Newton's private letters to his wife were published in 1793, after her death, as *Letters to a Wife*, and, even though they are not explicitly acknowledged, they must have been a crucial intertext for James Hamilton's letters in the novel. Phillips most likely used them for his two fictional letters, since we find phrases and expressions lifted from Newton's original text, such as the closing of one of them with Newton's farewell to his wife in the first letter of the collection dated in St Albans on 19 May: "I am, &c Inviolably yours" (*Letters* 12), or the use in Hamilton's first letter of phrases and sentences taken from John Newton's letter to his wife of 3 September 1750 (which are underlined in the passage below):

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I travel abroad in the comfortable knowledge that my better, precious part is safely at home, and though she understands absence to be painful, she knows it is so for her sake. I am engaged in active business, and have some new scene every day to relieve my mind; besides I have long been used to suffering. On the contrary, you, by marriage to one such as I, have exposed yourself to anxieties to which you were a stranger (*Crossing* 109).

Though I feel absence painful indeed, I do not deserve much pity because I am absent for your sake. I am likewise engaged in active business, and have some new scene offering every day to relieve my mind; besides, I have been long used to suffer, and did not begin to know what peace or pleasure meant till I married you. On the contrary, you, by marriage, exposed yourself to cares and anxieties to which you was before a stranger (*Letters* 23).

The voice of the fictional James Hamilton resonates even further with those readers who are aware that, twenty years after writing the log book that inspires Caryl Phillips, John Newton became a great spiritual leader and one of the most popular preachers in Britain, known to future generations mainly as the creator of one of the most famous hymns in history.[3] The contradictions in the humanity of James Hamilton that the novel captures so well, his being a loving husband and pious Christian who feels no qualms about buying and selling human cargo, are the contradictions in John Newton's personal life. After his time as a slaver (1750-54) Newton became a minister in 1764, but only at the end of the century in his old age did he show any open awareness of the evil nature of his business activities, and only then did he make any significant contributions to the fight against the slave trade.

While *Crossing the River* relies heavily on the voice of John Newton for the creation of the slaver James Hamilton, the brief memoir of the slave protagonist in *Cambridge* is inspired mainly by Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), a book that greatly contributed to the abolition debate in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. Cambridge's narrative repeats several of the known facts about Olaudah Equiano. Like Equiano, who was enslaved around age eleven and taken to the metropolis after a month in Virginia,[4] Cambridge is captured at age fifteen in the same region of West Africa and, after undergoing the Middle Passage to Barbados

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and then Florida, sails to Britain to serve as domestic servant to a retired captain. Equiano bought his freedom after years serving a Royal Navy officer on various vessels and later working in commerce in the West Indies; as a free man in Britain he contributed with his writings to the abolition movement. Cambridge also devotes part of his time in Britain to lecturing against the evils of slavery and like Equiano, who never used his African name in private or public documents (except in the title of his autobiography), he closes his narrative reasserting the English name that he used during his years as a free man in Britain. The fictional Cambridge feels that he belongs in the nation whose language and religion he has adopted, and Olaudah Equiano's tentative phrase when he describes himself after four years in Britain as "almost an Englishman" (Equiano 77) is echoed in Cambridge's several references to himself as "a virtual Englishman" (*Cambridge* 156) or as "an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion!" (*Cambridge* 147). His memoir follows the common structure of slave narratives from childhood in Africa to arrival in the Americas and eventual escape from slavery. Cambridge's life story, however, subverts the ending of slave narratives, which are typically told from the present state of freedom of a former slave, and his autobiography closes with a second transportation to the Caribbean and the renewal of bondage on a plantation after having lived as a free man in Britain.

Cambridge has been analysed as a postmodern and postcolonial text that sustains a polyphonic structure to interrogate truth and question the validity of historical writing. The novel joins three narratives: a travelogue by a young Victorian woman, Emily Cartwright, who is visiting her father's plantation in the Caribbean,[5] a memoir by the old slave Cambridge, who is facing death for killing the plantation overseer, and a newspaper account of the murder. As O'Callaghan indicates, *Cambridge* is "self-conscious fiction: to a great extent, it is a pastiche of other narratives and [...] deliberately calls attention to its intertextuality" (34). Lars Eckstein provides a careful analysis of Phillips's use of his sources in this novel that integrates passages, words or echoes from, at least, twenty prior texts. He comes to the conclusion that *Cambridge* could be described as "a palimpsest which assembles specific passages from older texts

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in an artistic montage" (69), so that he argues that there is a parallelism between the novel's literary technique of montage and the key idea of displacement and uprooting at its centre, since "Phillips's narrative technique also consists of 'uprooting' and 'displacing' the material of older texts about slavery and the slave trade" (104).

While *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* are crucially shaped by their intertextual connections with the eighteenth-century writings of Equiano and Newton, in *Foreigners: Three English Lives* the voice of the unnamed narrator who tells Barber's story is a more diffuse pastiche of the original eighteenth-century texts that mention Francis Barber.[6] Going back to the three-part structure of *Cambridge* and other novels, Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners* uses "a variety of styles and genres combining fiction, biography and reportage" (Busby) to produce a hybrid form that reconstructs the life of three black men in Britain: Samuel Johnson's manservant Francis Barber, Britain's first black boxing world champion Randolph Turpin, and the Nigerian David Oluwale, one of the first blacks dead while in police custody. They enact the oxymoron of the title as examples of the outsider condition of blacks in Britain that has preoccupied Phillips so much throughout his writing career. The real Francis Barber left no written autobiography, so this recreation is inspired by contemporary references to him by people in the circle of Samuel Johnson, such as his friends Mrs Hester Lynch Piozzi or his biographers James Boswell and John Hawkins, as well as the work of scholars that have explored the black presence in eighteenth-century Britain like Peter Fryer, Gretchen Gerzina, F. O. Shyllon or James Walvin. The unnamed narrator in the novel captures well the affection that Samuel Johnson felt for this man who on and off worked for him for over thirty years, and to whom he left in his will a generous annuity of £70, as well as his valuable gold watch, a significant personal legacy that embodies the paternal feelings that Johnson frequently showed towards the manservant who was his long-time companion. As Fryer has indicated:

> Johnson was clearly very fond of Francis Barber […] When Barber left school, Johnson came to rely on him more and more, not merely as valet and butler, but also

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> as secretary. Barber arranged trips, received documents, and made sure that Johnson kept dinner appointments punctually (424-25).

Caryl Phillips entitles the first section of *Foreigners* "Doctor Johnson's Watch", the object becoming a symbol of Johnson's concern for the welfare of his servant after his death. The story opens with the master's funeral in 1784, sixteen years before the main narrative that describes the narrator's visit to the town of Lichfield, where Francis Barber now lives in poverty with his English wife and children. The motivation of this trip to Lichfield is to interview the former servant to write for *The Gentlemen's Magazine* "a short biographical sketch" (43) of this person who was close to the great Samuel Johnson.[7] The narrator indicates that he wishes to find out about Barber's life "in order that I might discover for myself the full story of his fall from grace" (21). His thoughts, as he waits for an interview with the seriously ill Barber, recollect the known facts about the real Francis Barber, from his coming to Britain as a slave to his years as a member of Johnson's household, his marriage to an Englishwoman and his increasing poverty after his master's death, despite the economic provisions that were made for him in his will. What the narrator in this section of *Foreigners* calls Barber's "fall from grace", understood in a non-religious sense as the degradation of the character's personal and social position until he meets an unfortunate sad ending, is what connects Barber with Turpin and Oluwale, the other two "foreign Englishmen" in the novel. *Foreigners: Three English Lives* brings back the ghost of Francis Barber and his condition as an outsider who never really found a place in English society to show the parallelisms of his situation in the eighteenth century with that of the other two black men in England, whose profiles the novel presents. They share similar grim stories of exclusion and a lonely death after a time of hope and success in their lives: Barber died in destitution after years in a comfortable household, Turpin killed himself after a successful time as a boxer and a world championship, and Oluwale ended his days as a vagrant, after coming to England in his youth with the dream of becoming an engineer. Barber's ghost in this novel is linked to these other black lives in the country, but their narratives stand more separate

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as individual profiles than those of the characters in the other two novels. The interweaving of the characters' lives in *Foreigners* is less powerful than the reverberation of voices marked by the trade and slavery in *Crossing the River* or the refracting of the perspectives of Emily and the African protagonist in *Cambridge*, and the vision that Phillips's latest novel provides of black experience seems to be bleaker and more pessimistic than in his other two novels, with no room for the sense of hope that we find in the epilogue of *Crossing the River* or in the personal growth of Emily Cartwright at the end of *Cambridge*.

On the whole, we could say that the ghosts of Newton, Equiano and Barber, understood both as the intertextual echoes of the eighteenth-century texts in Phillips's novels and as the presence of characters based on these historical figures, fulfil a double function. On the one hand, the characters inspired by the African Equiano and the Jamaican Barber convey a vision of eighteenth-century Britain as a society in which a small number of Africans lived and worked side by side with the British, and they help refocus the lens of history so that, as Gerzina indicates, we get a different picture of the feisty London of Johnson, Reynolds, Hogarth and Pope as a city in which Africans lived side by side with the English:

> They answer their doors, run their errands, carry their purchases, wear their livery, appear in their lawcourts, play their music, drink in their taverns, write in their newspapers, appear in their novels, poems and plays, sit for their portraits, appear in their caricatures and marry their servants. They also have private lives and baptize their own children, attend schools, bury their dead (Gerzina 2).

On the other hand, the intertextual haunting of previous texts, that is the pastiche of Newton's and Equiano's writings in Phillips's novels contributes to a defining feature of their texture, a feature that is frequently described in critical writings about Phillips's fiction by means of the metaphor of "weaving". These novels about eighteenth-century slavery interweave the voices of traders, owners, slaves and former slaves, a combination of perspectives that recent historical studies on the subject of slavery try to accomplish, a paradigmatic

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example being the 2007 volume by James Walvin entitled *The Trader, the Owner, the Slave: Parallel Lives in the Age of Slavery*, a book that is significantly dedicated to Caryl Phillips.[8]

This sense of polyphony or multiplicity of black and white perspectives in recreating slavery in the eighteenth-century British Empire is at the centre of Caryl Phillips's conception of the history of the country and the interconnection between Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. Furthermore, we see how the recreation of this part of British history establishes a link with the present as the characters inspired by these historic figures interact in different ways with other characters in each one of the novels, other perspectives on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slavery, and other black and white lives in contemporary Britain. In each novel the eighteenth-century characters inspired by Newton, Equiano and Barber interact with voices from different times and are related to those of people of different gender and race. The opening lines of the hymn "Amazing Grace" refer to God's gift of grace that brings the spiritual enlightenment that allows us to see after being blind. Some biographers of John Newton wish to interpret the blindness in the hymn as that which "prevented his seeing the anti-Christian nature of the slave business" (Phipps ix),[9] but there is an element of wishful thinking in this interpretation, since it was only twenty years after writing the hymn when Newton came to openly recognise the iniquity of the business of his youth and became active in the fight against it. The reference to being blind but now able to see in the hymn, however, can be related to the wish to see more and understand better which lies behind Caryl Phillips's fictional recreations of slavery and the slave trade. As he has stated:

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

Novels such as *Crossing the River*, *Cambridge* and *Foreigners* play a crucial role in the recovery of voices of the African diaspora to narrate stories that have

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been hidden, and highlight the role of slavery in the history of Britain and the British Empire. They contribute to a richer understanding of the interconnected history of Africa, Europe and the Americas and the impact of slavery not only in the past lives of the British Empire but also in present day configurations of identity in people whose personal and collective history has been shaped by slavery and the African diaspora. The amazing grace of Newton's hymn is a fitting metaphor for the gift of the writer who has the power to create fictions that resonate beyond themselves and contribute to our understanding of the legacy of this part of British history in our contemporary world.

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[1] Most commemorations of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007 made an effort to qualify the celebratory mode and shift the focus from Britain's enlightened role as beacon of the humanitarian defence of slaves' rights to wider issues of past and present slavery. One of the most visible cultural products in the country that year, however, the film *Amazing Grace* (2007), provided a triumphant celebration of the humanitarian force of the British, headed by William Wilberforce.

[2] He indicates that he was a Mel and Lois Tukman Fellow at the New York Public Library. The library website shows that the topic of the fellowship granted to him in 2002 was "A Fictional Life of Bert Williams".

[3] As Walvin indicates, "[it has been] translated into dozens of languages, sung and recorded by many of the world's best singers, performed as some of the most memorable occasions –state funerals, national ceremonies, times of national grief and remembrance, almost a second national anthem in the USA […] The music was not Newton's but was added in the early nineteenth century in the USA, the country which adopted the hymn more quickly and more completely than any other" (3-4).

[4] Vincent Carretta has recently argued in *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2005) that he was born in South Carolina and not in Africa, and, therefore, that he did not undergo the Middle Passage. Against Carretta's argumentation, see Paul E. Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African" (*Slavery and Abolition*, 27.3, 2006), 317-47.

[5] For Emily's section, Phillips uses the travelogues of women such as Lady Nugent or Mrs Carmichael, who travelled to the West Indies in the early nineteenth century, with passages taken almost verbatim from these accounts and others, including Matthew Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (O'Callaghan, 36).

[6] A good example of this approach is the comparison between one incident of Barber's jealousy with his wife Betsy in the novel (41-42) and the original telling of the anecdote in a text by Mrs Piozzi (quoted in Gerzina 49-50).

[7] There is indeed a profile in *The Gentlemen's Magazine* in 1793 (Fryer 586).

[8] This study traces the lives of Olaudah Equiano, John Newton and the infamous Jamaican planter Thomas Thistlewood, who left a fully detailed diary of life on his plantation.

[9] William Phipps, for instance, establishes such a strong connection between the lyrics of the hymn and John Newton's personal history that he chooses lines from "Amazing Grace" as titles for the chapters of his biography.