



## Orchestrating the ‘many-tongued chorus’: Using music to analyse polyphony in Fred D’Aguiar’s *The Longest Memory* and Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*.<sup>1</sup>

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Whilst the transatlantic slave trade affected both black and white people, the historical record is predominantly culturally and racially univocal, heavily shaped by dominant western discourses. However, particularly since the 1980s, contemporary authors have sought out new literary forms to reflect slavery as a *shared* past with a legacy which endures into the twenty-first century. Caryl Phillips and Fred D’Aguiar, in *Crossing the River* and *The Longest Memory*, return to the history of slavery to repopulate it with a multiplicity of perspectives, amalgamating different voices, documents, and literary styles in an attempt to construct a ‘polyphonic’ history that is collective rather than reductive.<sup>2</sup> Their intention gestures to Edward W. Said’s theory of contrapuntal reading.<sup>3</sup> Said sought to dismantle white, metropolitan history by revisiting colonial texts to reveal the voices that had been suppressed, arguing for ‘intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites’.<sup>4</sup> *Crossing the River* and *The Longest Memory* do not need to be ‘decoded’ contrapuntally because Phillips and D’Aguiar deliberately intertwine the voices of ‘whites and non-whites’ to present slavery from both sides. Nevertheless, Said’s use of music as a means to discuss narrative voices invites further examination and it is this idea that I want to explore and develop in this essay.

Critics and authors alike have attempted to find the appropriate framework to discuss polyphonic novels about slavery; Bénédicte Ledent suggests ‘vocal kaleidoscopes’<sup>5</sup> and ‘canvas[es]’<sup>6</sup> whilst D’Aguiar talks of threads woven into a ‘prodigious carpet’.<sup>7</sup> Whilst these analogies capture how different voices might blend or weave together, they are visual metaphors whose subtexts remain subtly preoccupied with colour rather than sound. I argue that music provides a better framework to discuss polyphony; it offers an appropriate vocabulary to discuss phonological texture and, unlike kaleidoscopes and carpets, it has the capacity to echo in the present, making it a suitable analogy to address slavery’s continuing relevance. Beyond its practical uses, music has deeper resonance with this particular context. James Baldwin asserts that ‘it is only in his music [...] that the Negro [...] has been able to

<sup>1</sup> Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Collins Educational, 1999), p. 1. All further references from this edition will be cited directly after the quotation as (*CR*, p.).

<sup>2</sup> Polyphony describes the texture of music when simultaneous lines of melody overlap. It was first borrowed into literature by Mikhail Bakhtin to discuss multi-voiced narratives. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Contrapuntal’ is also a musical term, synonymous with ‘polyphonic’. See Michael Kennedy and Joyce Kennedy, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, ed. Tim Rutherford-Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Bénédicte Ledent, ‘Slavery Revisited through Vocal Kaleidoscopes: Polyphony in Novels by Fred D’Aguiar and Caryl Phillips’, in *Revisiting Slave Narratives*, ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2005), pp. 281-93 (p. 281).

<sup>6</sup> Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips: Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> Fred D’Aguiar, *The Longest Memory* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 33. All further references from this edition will be cited directly after the quotation as (*LM*, p.).

tell his story'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, for an enslaved people who were denied access to many forms of cultural expression, music was an essential creative outlet, exemplified in the work songs, the spirituals, and the subsequent strands of blues, jazz, reggae, soul, and hip-hop that evolved in their wake. Therefore, whilst Said's theory was inspired by Western classical music, my analysis will draw on African and African American musical genres in order to illustrate how Phillips's and D'Aguiar's quasi-musical writing styles gesture to their creative heritage. This essay will firstly compare how the authors structure the voices of their characters, moving on to examine the novels' underlying rhythms, before finally addressing their discursive styles, that is, how they orchestrate dialogues both internally and externally.

As a composer might orchestrate their work into a set of instrumental sections, Phillips and D'Aguiar structure their novels by dividing them up according to the voices of their characters. *Crossing the River* is made up of four parts with seven seemingly disparate voices; Nash, Martha and Travis represent the allegorical children of the African diaspora and Edward, 'the woman', James Hamilton and Joyce provide the voices of the white people that they encounter, all framed by the transhistorical voice of the African father. In the prologue, the father admits: '[t]he crops failed. I sold my children' (*CR*, p. 1). From this point, the structural trajectory follows an outward path of dispersion that leaps globally and temporally, from Liberia to Colorado in the wake of the Slavery Abolition Act, back to the horrors of the middle passage in 1752, and then forward to 'Somewhere in England' during the Second World War. Phillips comments that 'it hasn't seemed right to write a novel about people whose lives are fractured and ruptured without trying to reflect some of that fracture and rupture in the narrative'.<sup>9</sup> His 'fractured' structure can be discussed in musical terms; Ralph Ellison discusses 'jazz shaped' novels, made up of 'sudden turns', 'shocks' and 'swift changes of pace'.<sup>10</sup> *Crossing the River* is identifiably 'jazz shaped', borrowing its structure from a genre that similarly shifts sporadically in time signature and abandons a sense of linear progression that can be disorientating for its listener. Thus, by compiling disparate voices, times and spaces, Phillips asserts his creative artifice — much like a jazz musician — whilst simultaneously using it to reflect the social disruption and disorientation that the slave trade left in its wake.

D'Aguiar also structures *The Longest Memory* according to its voices, framing them by Whitechapel's prologue and epilogue. However, unlike the magic realism that Phillips exploits to cross boundaries of time and space, *The Longest Memory* is comparatively secular; its spatial dimensions remain self-contained within the boundaries of the plantation between the years 1796 and 1810. Antonio Benitez-Rojo describes the novel as '[d]ense, intense, [and] compact'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if *Crossing the River* is a novel of structural and social dispersion, *The Longest Memory* is a novel of structural and social insularity. Within these finite parameters, D'Aguiar aims at striking a vocal balance; the novel is made up of ten voices, five black and five white. D'Aguiar orchestrates these voices in such a way that presents the same events from the perspectives of both the 'house and field'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, each character has their counterpart: Whitechapel's story is retold by Mr Whitechapel; the events of Sanders Senior's diary are also given by Cook; Chapel and Lydia provide separate versions of their love story; and the Granddaughter and Sanders Junior both reflect on Whitechapel's death. D'Aguiar is effectively writing contrapuntally, reproducing the white testaments but also writing in the voices of the slaves in order to reveal 'what was once

<sup>8</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (London: Corgi, 1970), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips in Renée Schatteman, *Conversations with Caryl Phillips* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), p. 582.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Benitez-Rojo, 'Creolization: An Interpretation', in Kawme Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> A phrase borrowed from Charles Johnson's novel, *Oxherding Tale*, to mean the side of the plantation owners and the side of the slaves. Charles Johnson, *Oxherding Tale* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999), p. 8.

forcibly excluded', to use Said's words.<sup>13</sup> Whilst *Crossing the River* draws on the jazz aesthetic by leaping temporally and spatially, the structure of *The Longest Memory* is regular, shifting between the black and white voices to arrive at a vocal and racial equilibrium. This oscillating structure gestures to the African call-and-response pattern that informs many African American musical genres. According to David Murray, 'the musical phenomenon of call-and-response [...] is usually seen as an expression of a social relation as well as a musical form'.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, the call-and-response pattern aptly illustrates D'Aguiar's attempt to represent slavery as a collective past by constructing a historic 'social relation' between the black people and the white people.

John Sutherland suggests that, 'when the Africans were moved to America [...], all they were left with were the drum and the voice'.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as well as orchestrating different voices, Phillips incorporates an underlying rhythm that gestures to the beat of this African drum. In the prologue of *Crossing the River*, the father says: '[f]or two hundred and fifty years I have waited patiently for [...] the drum to pound across the water' (*CR*, p. 2). The drum becomes audible in the short, staccato sentences that 'pound' beneath the polyphonic variation of each chapter: 'My Nash. My Martha. My Travis' (*CR*, p. 2). Interestingly, the sound of the African drum is not reserved solely for the voices of the African diaspora but is also audible in the white voices. For example, Joyce talks of '[f]ear. Mud. Shivering Cold. Noise' (*CR*, p. 229) and Captain James Hamilton logs:

2 girl slaves, who have long been ill of a flux, died. Nos 117 and 127. [...] At 3 p.m. she came on board, brought 10 slaves, 3 men, 3 women, 1 boy, 2 girls, 1 small boy (*CR*, p. 117).

Here, the pulse also serves to reflect the abrupt market culture of the slave trade, with the short clauses listing the slaves like commodities. By making the drum audible in both the black and white voices, Phillips unites his 'many-tongued chorus' to present the slave trade as a unitary institution that affected both black and white people. Crucially, this is a drum that 'continues to be beaten' (*CR*, p. 237). Wanda C. Finnen explains that slave owners banned drums among slaves because they were 'fearful of [their] communication potential'.<sup>16</sup> Despite this, the African drum is audible in later black, African American music. According to Benitez-Rojo, 'hidden within the Samba, there are the ancient pulsations brought by the African diaspora, the memory of sacred drums'.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, rhythm and blues and hip-hop also owe their rhythmic development to these 'sacred drums'. So, by incorporating the steady beat into the voices of his characters, Phillips emphasises the resilience of these drums that unify the African diaspora and '[continue] to be beaten' and enjoyed in subsequent musical and literary variants.

A steady beat is also audible in *The Longest Memory*: 'Bear me to them. [...]. Sweeten my mouth. Stir my dead loins. I'll lie down here' (*LM*, p. 27). This passage, spoken by Whitechapel, is almost monosyllabic with each short sentence constructed of four regular syllables or beats. However, whilst Phillips sources his rhythms from the African drum, D'Aguiar's rhythms are taken from the everyday workings of the plantation. Whitechapel says: 'I'd lie there and listen to the others [...] whinny like horses and bray like mules, grunt like hogs, howl like wolves' (*LM*, p. 3). This passage, carefully composed with its half rhyme

<sup>13</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> David Murray, "'Out of This World": Mackey and Baraka', in Graham Lock and David Murray, eds., *Thriving on a Riff: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Literature and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> John Sutherland, 'PM Programme', BBC Radio 4, 7th April 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Wanda C. Finnen, *Talking Drums: Reading and Writing with African American Stories, Spirituals, and Multimedia Resources* (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2004), p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Benitez-Rojo, 'Creolization: An Interpretation', p. 257.

of 'mules' and 'wolves' and its even rhythmic repetition, is reminiscent of the work songs that the slaves sung in order to set the pace and ease the tedium of repetitive labour. Further, when Mr Whitechapel lashes Chapel for reading with Lydia, each lash is felt in Chapel's voice:

Yes master.  
I am sorry.  
Thank you  
For sparing me (*LM*, p. 62).

D'Aguiar suggests that he 'harvest[s] a storyline from the prodigious fields of the past in order to sustain [himself] in the racist present'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, D'Aguiar also harvests the *rhythms* from these fields and filters them through the voices of the slaves, rhythms that, according to Benitez-Rojo, would go on to inspire Samba, Calypso and Jazz:

the rhythms of the sugar mill's machines, the machete-stroke that cuts the cane, [...] form a network of rhythmic flows whose most notable expressions today are salsa, jazz, and west coast African music.<sup>19</sup>

With this in mind, the voices of the slaves in *The Longest Memory* — like the subsequent strands of African American and African-Caribbean music — carry the rhythms of the slave experience, rhythms that continue to both haunt and 'sustain' the descendants of the slave trade in music and literature.

The orchestration of polyphonic novels also raises the question of whom these voices are talking to. Ledent argues that 'for actual polyphony to take place, [the voices] need to interact with [...] one another to produce meaning'.<sup>20</sup> The voices of *Crossing the River* can be mapped onto the African call-and-response pattern with the guilty father voicing his 'call' in the prologue which heralds the 'response' from Nash, Martha and Travis, amongst others. Whilst there is no explicit interaction between the chapters, there are implicit gestures to the voices of the other children; in 'West', Martha hears 'voices from the past. Some she recognized. Some she did not. Nevertheless, she listened' (*CR*, p. 79). In this way, Phillips places subtle but crucial emphasis on the importance of listening. Even James Hamilton stops to listen as his slaves 'sing their melancholy lamentations' (*CR*, p. 124). For a history of racial prejudice fuelled by a lack of understanding, the act of listening is a sign of social progress, an idea that both Phillips and D'Aguiar endorse by writing dialogical multi-voiced narratives. As well as this internal dialogue, Phillips also incorporates external voices:

I have listened. To the haunting voices. Singing: Mercy, Mercy, Me. (The Ecology.) Insisting: Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong. [...] I have listened to the voice that cried: I have a dream... (*CR*, pp. 236-7).<sup>21</sup>

Phillips brings in the voices of prominent black musicians and political figures, carefully orchestrating them all in a quasi-musical way that Ledent compares to jazz.<sup>22</sup> To an extent, the structure of this excerpt does resemble the jazz aesthetic with the repetition of 'I have listened' acting as a linguistic riff that Phillips 'plays off'.<sup>23</sup> Further, the allusions to

<sup>18</sup> Miranda Frias, "Building Bridges Back to the Past": An Interview with Fred D'Aguiar, *Callaloo*, 25:2 (2002): 418-25 (p. 419).

<sup>19</sup> Benitez-Rojo, 'Creolization: An Interpretation', p. 257.

<sup>20</sup> Ledent, 'Slavery Revisited', p. 285.

<sup>21</sup> Here, Phillips quotes from figures such as Marvin Gaye and Martin Luther King, Jr., amongst others.

<sup>22</sup> Ledent, 'Slavery Revisited', p. 287.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of the jazz riff in literature, see Lock and Murray, eds., *Thriving on a Riff*.

other artists are typical of jazz, a genre which, for Henry Louis Gates, provides ‘the most salient analogue’ to discuss artistic homage.<sup>24</sup> Whilst I do not dismiss Ledent’s or Gates’s views, I think it is valuable to also consider more contemporary black musical styles; like jazz, rap is a genre that ‘samples’ the work of other artists without citation.<sup>25</sup> Further, the phonological texture of Phillips’s passage gestures to the rap aesthetic with its short, punchy sentences. Tricia Rose suggests that ‘rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America’.<sup>26</sup> With this in mind, discussing this passage in terms of rap gains further suitability; Phillips celebrates the voices of those that were marginalised and does so in a form that gestures to a musical genre with the same premise. Thus, he connects his own literary endeavour with the oeuvre of his musical contemporaries, gesturing outwards to the larger black creative landscape.

*The Longest Memory* is also dialogical with each character and their counterpart relaying the same events along the lines of the African call-and-response pattern. Like Phillips, D’Aguiar’s polyphonic form emphasises the importance of listening as a means to understanding, a notion exemplified by Chapel’s and Lydia’s love story. Lydia reflects: ‘At what point do I stop hearing the words and listen to the voice alone and realize I am in love with its cadence?’ (*LM*, p. 87). Further, D’Aguiar also brings in external voices and it is this dynamic that invites my critical attention. There are similar echoes of Martin Luther King in the voice of Whitechapel: ‘Free at last but not free to tell us anything about it’ (*LM*, p. 12), ‘free at last’ being a phrase that King himself borrowed from a spiritual.<sup>27</sup> Further, when Whitechapel talks about Chapel, ‘whose dreams were such that he argued his children would be free’, D’Aguiar’s language bears resemblance to King’s words: ‘I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin’.<sup>28</sup> Beyond these political echoes, D’Aguiar also alludes to literary voices. Lydia reminds Chapel of ‘the first two books of *Paradise Lost* [...]; of long passages from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, of the Homer and the Virgil; of Goethe’s *Faust* (Book One)’ (*LM*, p. 97). This list of works resembles the choral swell at the end of *Crossing the River* but, whilst both novels are highly allusive, D’Aguiar’s intertextual endeavour is far more literary than Phillips’s. It is what Gates might term a ‘double-voiced’ text in the sense that its ‘literary antecedents are both black and white novels’.<sup>29</sup> By ‘sampling’ the canonical voices of Milton and Spenser, D’Aguiar both inserts himself into western literary history as a British writer whilst simultaneously illustrating his ancestors’ exclusion from it. Interestingly, Rose suggests that ‘rap is at once part of the dominant text and, yet, always on the margins of this text’.<sup>30</sup> Thus, rap provides an appropriate analogy to discuss D’Aguiar intertextual polyphony; both forms occupy this peculiar space between inclusion and exclusion, asserting their creative artifice by drawing on ‘traditional’ influences whilst always aware of their proximity to the artistic border.

Music has provided me with a suitable framework to explain how both authors combine a range of disparate, discursive voices and rhythms to better represent slavery as a collective past. Returning to Baldwin’s assertion that ‘it is only in his music [...] that the Negro [...] has been able to tell his story’, this statement now seems too definitive; there is a growing literary genre that narrates the untold stories of slavery to which Phillips and

<sup>24</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (North Carolina: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xxvii.

<sup>25</sup> For further discussion of sampling, see Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> King, *I Have a Dream*, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. xxiii.

<sup>30</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, p. 19.

D'Aguiar have contributed.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, music is certainly ingrained in both authors' writing styles, a quality that originates from a time when it would have been their only form of expression. Ultimately, voices and rhythms, in both literature and music, have the capacity to echo as reminders of those that history suppressed and those that now have the power to write, speak and sing about this traumatic past. It was King who famously said 'let freedom ring' and Phillips and D'Aguiar respond to this call.<sup>32</sup> By giving voice to those who were excluded and writing them in alongside the white voices, they let their contemporary artistic freedom 'ring' down the centuries of enslaved silence.

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<sup>31</sup> Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> King, *I have a Dream*, p. 106.

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