Mike Phillips

REMEMBERING SLAVERY

My name is Mike Phillips and I'm a novelist. I also have some interest in criticism. My essay will focus on culture, heritage and their relationship with a number of ideas which have not only determined the shape of certain aspects of European identity, but which also have a role in determining what will happen in the cultures that we share on this continent. I'm going to discuss these things in the context of our current obsession with the historical phenomenon of slavery – and I want to point out problems associated with the way that we discuss this matter, and in particular with the network of exhibits which have been mounted in the United Kingdom around the topic and the issue of slavery.

First let me tell you something about my own relationship to these issues. I am a writer, critic and various other things which I will tell you about later, but at this moment I want to remind you that I have origins and interests in the regions inhabited by some of the most wretched, the most depressed, the most oppressed populations of the Earth, but I'm also a member of the post-industrial club of wealthy populations, where the poorest and most oppressed among us enjoys a life which millions would envy for obvious reasons. This provokes one of the fundamental features of modernity, which is the fact of migration, that is, people moving across borders for one reason or another. But to return, since we are speaking of migration, to myself, I live this peculiar contradiction in which I am obliged to engage with these origins as well as with the very different environment I have grown up and in which I live.

As it happens I am a Board member of the Heritage Lottery Fund which distributes large scale funds – in this case something like £400 million a year to projects which are concerned with preserving the country's heritage. In this role I was the leader of our involvement in the commemoration of the Parliamentary Act of 1807, which prohibited the transport of African slaves in British ships, effectively ending the Transatlantic slave trade. In this role I supervised the distribution of millions to various institutions which were mounting projects

about slavery, including the new slavery museum in Liverpool, the Museum in Docklands in London and so on. I suspect that in this position anyone asking me to talk about slavery and about the way British institutions are remembering it will expect me to furnish details about slavery and how terrible it was, about the profits of the trade and so on, that is to say, the sort of racialised discussion which has flourished over the last year in the UK.

The problem is that this is a classic postcolonial position which I intend to challenge. I think there are more interesting things to consider and much more urgent ideas towards which we are pointed by the globalised nature of transatlantic slavery and its long term historical consequences.

Let me develop the influence of postcolonial scholarship on this whole topic. The temptation for someone in my position is to engage in what Gayatri Spivak (1989: 282) calls 'retrospective hallucination'. She says that 'retrospective hallucination' is a mechanism by which the ruling elites in the Third World, along with academics, professionals and intellectuals who have their origins in the Third World, re-invent their roots as an authentic uncorrupted culture which existed before the incursion of European imperialism; and they use this hallucination as a basis of an imagined heritage.

Think about it. Not only do individuals in this position find themselves in the grip of 'retrospective hallucination', I will argue that nations also find themselves engaging in this particular trope, as well as, of course, the institutions which have to engage the sort of discourse which explains and analyses history.

In my experience after the conclusion of the British Empire the countries which had formerly been colonies all discovered an authentic native or nativist culture of whose existence no one had been previously aware. This is a phenomenon one could observe, in much the same way, throughout European history as empires – Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungary, and even more recent ones – declined or died. The demise of all these have seen the rise of new nationalisms, all of which have been marked or defined by precisely this kind of retrospective hallucination. But to return again to the individual, it is very difficult for creative artists to avoid being trapped in these postures, to avoid becoming the subject of one's own reinvention of history and heritage. Perhaps I should say object, but then one becomes both subject and object, which will tell you something about the difficulties of resolving such complex contradictions as an imagined heritage.

However, it seems to me one of the jobs of the creative artist both to outline these questions and to work out ways of resolving them.

In my particular case the heritage I value most is both personal and collective. That is to say the heritage that is implicit in the history of migration, which is also part of my own personal heritage. Part of that personal heritage is also concerned with slavery, and this is the difficulty with which we now have to struggle in the process of remembering the history in which British society was engaged, for at least a couple of centuries, and which has to a certain extent shaped our society.

I don't need to tell you, for instance, that history is a narrative which is retold by each new generation, and in this retelling we outline each new tranche of ideas, issues, and anxieties in contemporary life. So throughout the various countries of Europe at this moment we are coping with the political anxieties created by the act of migration, as if it were something new or even extraordinary within the cultural ecology of the European continent. In the UK, however, the commemorations of 2007 set out to restore and explore the connections between various elements of our population and Britain's imperialist and slave owning past.

The problem here, of course, is that this is a narrative which has been, more or less, frozen in time by the barriers and distortions created by racism – by the obsession with the colour of people's skins in our society. In the mid 20th century our historians and academics were not talking about the connections between the appearance of black faces in their city centres and the slave trade, and it has taken 50 years since the mid 20th century tranche of migration in the UK to explore this link. What we have now is a conversation in which you can read the complex changes which has imposed a new focus on postcolonial scholarship, along with a political need to demonstrate a new interest and concern with the identity of African and Caribbean migrants and their children. Now you may say that it's better late than never. But, again, the problem is that in the 50 years since this confrontation with our imperial history became a necessary part of our ongoing debate about British identity, the world has moved on. That is to say, to put it plainly, at the time when this history of slavery and of British engagement with it was relevant to the need for explanations about history and heritage of migration into Britain, racist fears prohibited its discussion. Now that the social needs have changed as a result of a history of interaction between communities the historians and their adjuncts are prepared to examine this history. But there is a sort of feedback loop in play here, because the discussion is 50 years late, it proceeds from the obsessions of its appropriate time, and as a result it focuses public debate and discussion on elements which have lost their relevance, and distracts attention from

contemporary issues, and contemporary needs.

Let me give you an example. Later this month [November 2007], I am due to go to Liverpool to present a sort of audit, an analysis of what happened in 2007 around this topic. This conference will take place in the museum which houses the new slavery museum. The new slavery museum has a trail of commentaries on the walls. Not one of the quotations comes from a black British person, or even a black person with any connection with Britain. The interactive displays which explain the history of slavery has very little or no content about the physical relationships with the Caribbean, where most black migrants in Britain came from – the maps largely feature the USA. The history of black identity is mostly about the Civil Rights struggle in the USA and says nothing at all about the history of black people in Liverpool – one of the earliest and largest black settlements in Europe – and so on. Finally, part of the conference is a video link with schoolchildren in Senegal. What – I keep asking myself – what has all this to do with me or my black children born and brought up in London. 50 years ago it might have made sense. Now we live in a context where our fellow citizens might have come from Albania or Bulgaria, as my next door neighbours do. We need different approaches to our history to make sense of our everyday lives. Our current approach in Liverpool, Bristol and London is archaic and its focus on the concerns of half a century ago actually distorts our understanding of what we're being told. More important, all of this approach is centred on the colour of people's skins – white, black, the arguments of 50 years ago, because if transatlantic slavery was about race it was also about many other things, and we now begin to understand from a platform of mobile, globalised identity that our history can tell a great deal more, and tell us a great deal more about trends which have us all in their grip, as opposed to a simple story of oppressed and oppressors.

So many contradictions, but let us discuss for a moment how our exploration of history needs to change. So, let us begin with the Enlightenment, where among a number of extraordinary movements in the eighteenth century the nation state emerges to dominate the rhetoric of identity. And in this moment, the way that people defined the nation and citizenship was concerned not only with who belonged to the nation and why, but also with where the boundaries lay between inclusion and exclusion; and here we find the ideology of ethnicity, race and nation pervading the practice of European artists and writers in the modern period and beginning to outline a certain view of culture. Here is a 19th century notion which is fundamental to the development of the nation state and its cultural underpinnings; and I

want here to summarise the critique of the German academic Wolfgang Welsch (1999) as he describes certain trends which emerge from German Romanticism in the late 18th century. Speaking of Johann Gottfried Herder, he outlines a concept of culture with which we are still struggling.

The concept is characterized by three elements: by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation. Firstly, every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals, making every act and every object an unmistakable instance of precisely *this* culture. That is to say, the concept is unificatory. The concept also ties together culture and finally the concept has a decided *delimitation* towards the outside. That is to say, every culture was, as the culture of one folk, to be distinguished and to remain separated from other folks' cultures. The concept therefore is all about separation. I suspect that this 18th century high concept of culture is one to which many people in the present day would subscribe without necessarily understanding or approving of its consequences. But it is crucial to understand that all three elements of this traditional concept have become untenable today.

First: modern societies are differentiated within themselves to such a high degree that uniformity no longer constructs and is no longer achievable for them (and there are reasonable doubts as to whether it ever has been historically). Modern societies are multicultural in themselves, encompassing a multitude of varying ways of life and lifestyles. There are vertical differences in society. And there are horizontal divisions: gender divisions, differences between male and female, and so on. So already with respect to our first plank in the traditional platform, the traditional concept of culture proves to be factually inadequate: it cannot cope with the inner complexity of modern cultures.

Secondly, the ethnic consolidation is not only difficult, it is fundamentally dubious: The 18th century Romantics sought to envisage cultures as closed spheres or autonomous islands, each corresponding to a folk's territorial area and linguistic extent. Cultures were to reside strictly within themselves and be closed to their environment. But as we know, such definitions are highly imaginary and fictional; they must laboriously be brought to prevail against historical evidence of intermingling; and they are, moreover, politically dangerous, as we are today experiencing almost worldwide.

Finally, the concept demands outer delimitation. Wolfgang Welsch quotes Herder's view which now has obviously dangerous echoes: "Everything which is still the *same* as my nature, which can

be *assimilated* therein, I envy, strive towards, make my own; *beyond this*, kind nature has armed me with *insensibility, coldness* and *blindness*; it can even become *contempt and disgust*" (quoted in WELSCH: 1999, *online*, italics mine).

So this is a defence of a double emphasis on ownership and exclusion of the foreign. And you know we're being told in one way or the other in the present day that this is the essential nature of people's relationship to each other. This is the narrative about slavery which we continue to reproduce in one way or the other. But this is a notion which renders impossible mutual understanding between cultures, produces separatism and paves the way for political conflict. To sum this up — the classical model of culture is unserviceable, dangerous and untenable in the modern world – and our understanding of historical phenomena like slavery requires a more complex analysis than is currently available within the postcolonial canon.

In a sense we already have a model in which modernity in art and literature seeks to reinvent identity. By way of illustration Wolfgang Welsch quotes Carl Zuckmayer's play – *The Devil's General* – describing the nature of specific European identities and their relationship with the culture in a piece of dialogue:

> There was a Roman commander, a dark type, brown like a ripe olive, he had taught a blond girl Latin. And then a Jewish spice dealer came into the family, he was a serious person, who became a Christian before his marriage and founded the house's Catholic tradition. – And then came a Greek doctor, or a Celtic legionary, a Grisonian landsknecht, a Swedish horseman, a Napoleonic soldier, a deserted Cossack, a Black Forest miner, a wandering miller's boy from Alsace, a fat sailor from Holland, a Magyar, a pimp, a Viennese officer, a French actor, a Bohemian musician – all lived on the Rhine, brawled, boozed, and sang and begot children there – and Goethe, he was from the same pot, and Beethoven, and Guttenberg, and Mathias Grünewald, and – oh, whatever – just look in the encyclopaedia. They were the best, my dear! The world's best! And why? Because that's where the peoples intermixed (quoted in Welsch: 1999, *online*).

In my own work I have set out to look at black individuals and groups who illustrate precisely this ability of people to transcend boundaries of ethnicity and culture (Pushkin, Dumas, Bridgetower, Coleridge Taylor etc), and more important the extent to which these people are the tip of an iceberg in which the meaning of slavery as we look back has very much to do with the production of globalised movements, in trade, in people and in ideas.

And now I must tell you that as a writer language is my tool, my

comfort zone. English is my native language – it's also the pre-eminent language in the world. What makes it so important – diversity. English speakers in England are a minority in the population of the world of native English speakers – diversity.

In the 19th century, we see, in Freud, the argument that we aren't born as ourselves – we acquire a self which is pre-stressed, fractured into ego, superego and unconscious – , we hold those things together by entering into a symbolic order of language and culture. This idea constitutes a new statement about the nature of the individual self. In fact, it's a statement which invents the individual, and with this invention we arrive at the beginning of the end point of the European Enlightenment – Modernity; and it must be clear to you that when I say Modernity I am not referring merely to the contemporary, to now-ness. I mean the long climax which marked the arrival of industrialisation, capitalism and its export along with military power and its various uses. Hand in hand with modernity goes its cultural expression – modernism – aesthetic self-consciousness, interest in language, rejection of realism in favour of 'the real', abandonment of linearity in favour of montage and simultaneity, Romantic emphasis on the value of aesthetic experience, depth and universal mytho-poetic meaning, privileging fragmentation, and so on. As an English writer, when I think about these matters, some lines from the beginning of a poem by T.S. Eliot always come into my mind. The poet begins the *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917) like this:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table;
> Let us go, through certain half deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one night cheap hotels
> And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells:
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question –
> Oh, do not ask, "What is it?
> Let us go and make our visit.

In true modernist style poets like Eliot reflected on the unreliability of words themselves – how they crack and break down into imprecision – a metaphor for the way that identity in modern times could never hold a single irreducible form. *'Things fall apart/the centre cannot hold'* as W. B Yeats, his contemporary wrote (*The Second Coming*, 1919).

Now that is one way of looking at the encounter of cultures within the arena of modernity, but I want to argue that halfway through the 20th century new processes emerged which are not only instructive but have begun to shape crucial aspects of European identity. I emphasise this point because important problems are now inextricably wrapped up in the development of culture. This also brings me to the concept of heritage to which I promised I would return, and to the discussion of the history of slavery and its relationship with contemporary needs, with the social imperatives of the present day.

The difficulty is that there as many versions of heritage as there are individuals and the priorities you award to any version becomes subject to the influence of political and social power. The way that we understand our heritages, therefore, is now also a product of a culture which exists within parameters determined by a changing and changeable environment. This fact indicates something of the relationship between culture, heritage, and some aspects of Modernity. In Britain there were important cultural processes which began to change our ideas about what culture was in the middle of the 20th century. One of these processes was migration, the inevitable consequence of modernity. But what was important about this was that the migrations which alter cultural perspectives in the 20th century do not emerge from isolated moments of inspiration or compulsion. They are the resolution of processes which were set in motion during preceding centuries by the operations of the most powerful nation states. One of these processes being slavery and the trade associated with it.

And what consequences can we read from the existence of that trade in that time? Well – modernity – in the shape of speed, industrialisation, the irresistible export of capital, instantaneous communication, centralised authority, universal surveillance, a culture of despotism. So now, as a result of the movements of the last three centuries, we have in the 21st century a globalised space in which the movements of migrants into regions like Western Europe are like an instruction manual about the effects of global culture on our ideas about identity and the nature of the self.

We now have simultaneous communications, the collapse of class traditions which went with the decline of industrialised manufacturing, the hollowing out of nativist peasant cultures, all producing in Europe a mood which goes with a new narrative of the self – uncertainty, fragmentation, irony. At the same time we are influenced by 19th century ideas about ethnic identity and its relationship with cultures reproducing themselves. In Britain, however, during the 20th century, the migration which was one of the consequences of slav-

ery, has also been one of those extraordinary trends which created an impact that forced the realisation that we lived in the middle of a peculiar break with the past.

Here I will call my own experience into play. Over the last 50 years Britain has seen legal and constitutional struggles which have opened up new categories of identity. A large part of this change has been provoked by the need to create a framework which would accommodate and legalise new strands within the population, and this process is not at an end. I won't go into the details of how the processes operate right now, for that you can read my books (Phillips and Phillips 1998). But it is clear that we have emerged into the 21st century with a very different statement about the nature of our citizenship, and in comparison with 1950, this is not a statement which depends on ethnicity or racial origins. It is a political formula which defines, for instance, the citizenship of someone like myself who was born in a different country, who has a number of complex loyalties and who could have fundamental arguments with his fellow citizens about practically everything. Even so, this political formula which guarantees my citizenship does not account for the way that individuals perceive themselves. My passport tells me where I can go, for instance, and even what I am able to do in certain cases. It does not tell me who I am. This 'who I am', however, goes to the heart of a fundamental issue: the problem of how our notions of self are constructed.

In my youthful experience the self was a sort of a *priori* characteristic of skin colour or geographical location, something to do with the individual's relationship to a particular ethnic group or a particular place, a particular piece of territory. For a long time, this view of the individual self seemed to draw on a post-Freudian argument which laid down specific conditions about the individual's identity. Many of our artists and commentators in the postcolonial world, for instance, were concerned with mapping the outlines of an authentic self which sprang out of specific historical continuities, and whose health could be determined by the extent to which it resisted the invasion of alien elements and cultural dominance.

All kinds of consequences flow from this view, but I would argue that any individual consciousness is determined or over-determined by compulsory relationships and external processes. No one is a simple unity or no nation. Migration has been teaching us this in Britain, with a certain amount of difficulty, and as a migrant one becomes aware of the extent to which the transformation of self is a feature of a routine daily negotiation – a negotiation within a horizontal market place of cultures, coercive pressures, and a competing network of

narratives about identity, about what people were. The negotiation is a continuing one about the nature of language, about the meanings of behaviour, about what to say, what to learn, and what to teach. The negotiation is also attached to the internal play between histories which might be specific and singular or general and collective.

What emerges from this process is characteristically a divided, fragmentary, contradictory consciousness, which we are obliged to take for granted – if we notice, that is. So, the authentic experience of migrant communities begin, not with journey or arrival, but with the tension of operating several different selves at the same time.

But here is the point: as this new self emerges from the experience, the engine which alters the private individual also projects him into the public arena, and the alteration becomes the centre of a sympathetic vibration which shakes the structure of the entire society. So here we are, back with the question of heritage, because when you begin to understand the sense in which national identity is inevitably in the process of change, you also begin to realise that this is a phenomenon which reaches not only forward into the future, but backwards into the past, and you begin to make choices.

Now if what I've said about the fundamental mobility of culture, heritage and identity is actually true, we begin to face a new landscape. But once again we face the problem of a time lag between our understanding of the present and our ability to mobilise history as a tool for exploring our current needs and issues.

So in Britain, instead of exploring the historical ideas implicit in the struggle over slavery – about citizenship, about the nature of humanity, about the nature of freedom and identity – ideas which are an important aspect of our discussion about who we are –, instead of doing this we have, in the main, fallen back on a banal and fundamentally titillating drama about master and slave relationships – sado-masochism on a large scale, once again reinforcing the obsessive psychology of race. One of the big theatrical events of the 2007 season was, apparently, a reworking of a play by Jean Genet, with the familiar Genet themes, sex, sadism and master/slave psychology – and recently one of our cultural figures, a very respectable white lady, told me I should go and see it – 'it was very uncomfortable viewing' she told me with a gleam in her eye – and the thought occurred to me, among other things, that such issues had already made my life quite uncomfortable enough – no way I wanted to go to pay out money to go the theatre and be made more uncomfortable than I already am. But, of course, the privilege of being titillated by notions outside your own experience is part of the entertainment for prosperous and protected people in Western Europe. This is fine. I

wouldn't want to deprive them of the pleasure, but it has very little to do with the harsh realities of life in a society still influenced by the infrastructures of slavery and the imperialism which followed. In this sense, in Britain, the majority of activity about remembering slavery has so far been a distraction, rather than offering new ways of exploring our present condition. For example, it's hard to understand Liverpool's slavery museum, or Bristol's slavery displays in the context of the continuing exclusion of the oldest black communities in Britain from the decision making apparatus in those cities.

One final point: remembering slavery is pointless if the logic is a sort of mea culpa, or indeed a tua culpa. Demands for compensation are beside the point – a trope imported from North American culture which, again, is a distraction from the real issues of our time.

Remembering slavery should be about opportunity, a new opportunity to understand new choices, about cultural identity and about heritage. You may ask – if everything is mobile within this globalised idea about history and its meaning, how are we to decide what narrative about slavery to create and privilege. Well the short answer is that we can't. What is crucial is to understand that it is important to communicate the values and attitudes of that time which illuminate the significant issues of our time, but you can only do this if you also understand that this involves a collective will – not to recreate and restage the battles of the past, not to engage in retrospective hallucination about dignity and resistance, and not to invent mythologies which are designed to counter 19th century falsehoods, rather than engage with the issues of the present.

The 21st century will be a time of destruction and change, but it will also, like all the other centuries we see stretching behind us, be a time of rebirth and regrowth. The true commemoration of our mutual liberation from slavery will occur in the decade of 2030. I'm hoping, for all our sakes that we will have acquired, by then, a more thoughtful, more consensual and a more useful sense of what our history means.

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