

**“The plantation owner is never wearing a kilt”: the power of memory versus Scottish amnesia in Jackie Kay’s *The Lamplighter***

“The discourses on slavery, both in attack and in defence, are a matter of living debate as well as the object of historical analysis”: this is Isobel Armstrong’s premise in her study *The Discourse of Slavery. Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison* (1994) and one of the assumptions behind Jackie Kay’s *The Lamplighter*, a hybrid work interweaving various genres (it is a radio and stage play but also a polyphonic epic poem) that Kay wrote under commission to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. Five different voices, one male and four female, deliver from their own point of view, and according to their own personal experience, the story of the slave fort, the ship transportation, the plantations and the impact of slavery on British economy and culture. This historical narrative intermingles with individual stories of violent separation, capture, marginalisation, subjugation, loss, sexual abuse, resistance and survival.

Why keep the slavery debate alive nowadays if the slave trade was abolished in 1807 and slavery itself in 1833? Past and present, Kay suggests in her work, are not discrete but a continuum involving concepts and categories that cannot stop being recalled and interrogated at any time. Scotland in the eighteenth century was certainly a centre of intellectual and cultural developments. However, as Kay clearly shows, it was not exempt from one of the worst crimes of humanity, and the fact that some Scots were among those who actually helped to draft the successful 1807 Emancipation Bill cannot but reinforce the critical consensus that the long eighteenth century was for Scotland an age of ideological paradoxes and cultural controversies.

When the producer Pam Fraser Solomon first asked me to write something to mark the 200th anniversary of abolition, I replied that I thought enough had been written about slavery, and that I didn’t want to be pigeonholed as a black writer. Black writers are often expected to write about slavery and race.<sup>1</sup>

Kay’s justification of her initial scepticism in accepting Solomon’s invitation is interesting. As she repeatedly shows in her writing, her ideological convictions as well as her imaginative world are grounded on a perpetual refusal of class-, race- or gender-based labelling, while they gravitate around an idea of identity that is mutable, many-faced and independent from fixed geographical or national roots. This position is particularly significant for a woman with her personal experience of being born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father but adopted and brought up by a white couple in Glasgow – deracination, physical and psychological dislocation and a wide range of identity issues are, needless to say, at the core of most of her plays, poems and short

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<sup>1</sup> Jackie Kay, “Missing Faces”, *The Guardian*, 24 March 2007.

stories, as they are in her only novel to date, *Trumpet*. Her second reason for hesitating initially to accept the invitation is apparently less relevant: “enough [has] been written about slavery”, so wouldn’t her contribution be redundant?

Ironically enough, though, Kay’s second thoughts on the opportunity she was offered resulted from a revision of both those original objections, since her research concerning slavery convinced her that being African and Scottish were reasons enough to investigate a field that still offered many unexplored areas, especially as regarded Scotland’s unacknowledged involvement in the historical reality of slavery. As she observes in the same *Guardian* article,

Most British people think of slavery as something that happened in America and perhaps the Caribbean. [...]. Being African and Scottish, I’d taken comfort in the notion that Scotland was not nearly as implicated in the horrors of the slave trade as England. Scotland’s self image is one of a hard-done-to wee nation, yet bonny and blithe. I once heard a Scottish woman proudly say: “We don’t have racism up here, that’s an English thing, that’s down south.” Scotland is a canny nation when it comes to *remembering and forgetting*. The plantation owner is never wearing a kilt.<sup>2</sup> [my italics]

“Remembering and forgetting”: “These are the things I cannot stop remembering;/ these are the things I cannot stop forgetting”, says the eponymous character of *The Lamplighter*; “I tell my story to remember” says the character called Mary, to whom Black Harriot, another central figure, replies “I tell my story to forget”.<sup>3</sup> The main voices speaking in this “epic play” mixing folklore, balladry, and the rhythm of blues – Black Harriot, Constance, Mary and the Lamplighter (Anniwaa as an adolescent) – belong to four women African slaves who achieved emancipation after much suffering. They seem to emerge out of that desert of silence and amnesia to which one of the most dolorous chapters of Scottish history was long relegated. Challenging Gayatri Spivak’s rhetorical question “Can the subaltern speak?”<sup>4</sup> Kay retrieves their voices from that forced dumbness, and, by combining knowledge gathered from original testimonies<sup>5</sup> with her sensory imagination, she addresses that silent world.

The collective amnesia that, from 1833 until about the 1990s, surrounded Scottish involvement in the Atlantic slave trade has been challenged by various historians and literary

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<sup>2</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>3</sup> Jackie Kay, *The Lamplighter*, Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2008, p. 35. All references are to this edition and will be henceforth indicated parenthetically by page number.

<sup>4</sup> This is the title of Spivak’s pioneering and thought-provoking essay originally published in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988, pp. 271-313.

<sup>5</sup> These are contained in the documents, history books and slave narratives Kay lists at the end of *The Lamplighter*.

critics.<sup>6</sup> And in this context *The Lamplighter* can be seen as Kay's unconscious protest against the symbolic removal of the black servant figure from Archibald McLauchlin's 1767 portrait of the Glassford family as a testimony both to Scots' participation in the tobacco trade, and to their attempt at erasing what had become a source of shame. Composing *The Lamplighter* was for Kay an ethical imperative, like "writing a love letter to [her] ancestors",<sup>7</sup> a tribute to their memory and a form of therapeutic salvation as well, since this is what is meant by the apparently oxymoronic purpose of "remembering and forgetting" expressed by the *dramatis personae*. Nothing less than this is what must be remembered in order to allow both victims and victimisers to "forget", as a precondition for moving on. So *The Lamplighter* takes us on a journey through the heart of darkness of Britain and the British West Indies colonies.

I belong to Glasgow, dear old Glasgow town, but, alas, there is something the matter with Glasgow that's going round and round. Glasgow does not readily admit its history in the way that other cities in the United Kingdom have done - Bristol, Liverpool, London.<sup>8</sup>

The *incipit* here revises some verses from a popular music-hall song by Will Fyffe, which Kay ironically quotes in *The Lamplighter* as well: "*I belong to Glasgow, dear old Glasgow town./ There's nothing the matter with Glasgow/ For it's going round and round*" (p. 74). "Bristol, London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh" are the British cities that Constance (p. 17) indicates as those deriving most economic benefits from the slave labour in the colonies, while Black Harriot says "London, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, Glasgow belongs to me!" (p. 80), suggesting that all these British cities owe their affluence to the exploitation of slaves in colonial fields.

In the eighteenth century, Glasgow, alongside Bristol and Liverpool, did become one of Great Britain's major ports and trading centres. Through the voices of her characters, Kay asks the reader to reflect upon the source of such Glaswegian topographical names as the Gallery of Modern

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<sup>6</sup> See, among the historical studies, Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire*, Tuckwell Press, East Linton, 2001; T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire*, Penguin, London, 2003; Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2005; Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery 1756-1838*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006; and D. Dobson, *Scottish Trade with Colonial Charleston, 1683 to 1783*, Humming Earth, Glasgow, 2009. A first important attempt to map the territory concerning the figurations of the colonial experience and slavery in post-Union Scottish literature is Carla Sassi's chapter *Acts of (Un)willed Amnesia: Dis/appearing Figurations of the Caribbean in Post-Union Scottish Literature*, in Covi G., Anim-Addo J., Pollard V., and Sassi C., *Caribbean-Scottish Relations. Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language & Literature*, Mango Publishing, London, 2007, pp. 131-198.

<sup>7</sup> Kay, "Missing Faces".

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi.*

Art, originally called Cunningham Mansion after the tobacco lord William Cunningham, or Jamaica Street, Tobago Street, and the Kingston Bridge. She encourages us to see how it was the slave trade that helped the merchant city to prosper thanks to the trade in tobacco, indigoes and sugar. In *Black Ivory: A History of British Society* (1992), James Walvin shows how the origins of the slave trade can be located in British coffeehouses and tea rooms,<sup>9</sup> and Kay translates this historical information into her characters' lines. "We were sold for sugar in the coffee./ Sugar in the tea" (p. 17), recites Black Harriot, and the whole of scene 8 is a bitterly ironic commentary on the various usages of sugar in the western world, where "la dolce vita" (p. 46) contrasts with the hardships slaves had to endure to grant Britons those palatable privileges.

Enslaved Africans provided the consumables that changed British lifestyle and city activities. This is the meaning of the Lamplighter's verses "My story is the story of the city" (p. 70) and "My story is the story of Great Britain/ The United Kingdom, The British Empire" (p.81), of Constance's singing "Glasgow belongs to me!", "Bristol Belongs to Me" (pp. 74-75), later echoed by Black Harriot – "I belong to Glasgow and Glasgow belongs to me!" (p. 79). Britain's, and more specifically Scotland's, responsibility for supporting the slave system is clearly denounced in Scene 13, in which the characters' single voices are deeply entangled to form a counterpointed and interactive chorus:

Mary: There is not a brick in this city

Lamplighter: But what is cemented with the blood of a slave

Constance (*sings*): *Bristol belongs to me.* (p. 79)

Here the image of the British cities prospering thanks to slaves' labour is "being built, brick by brick, in words" (p. 70), by each character's listing the financial and industrial enterprises made possible by the West-Indian plantation economy. Scotland's part in this profitable market is explicated in various ways. Mary maps Glasgow's street names to show how colonial history is inscribed in urban geography. Macbean, the only male character acting as the *Zeitgeist*, mentions John Glassford, the city's most powerful eighteenth-century tobacco lord. The Lamplighter refers to the historical episode of the slave ship Neptune that arrived in Carlisle Bay, Barbados, on May 22 1731, after leaving Port Glasgow months earlier, carrying 144 enslaved Africans, "Who had been shackled for nearly a year/ With leg irons" (p. 79). The presence of Scottish people in the West Indies in the eighteenth century is particularly emphasised by Macbean informing us that "In 1770 on the slave island of Jamaica/ There were one hundred Black people/ Called MacDonald", that "A

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<sup>9</sup> James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Society*, London: Harper Collins, 1992.

quarter of the island's people/ Were Scottish", and finally that "There was a network of Argyle Campbells at least 100 strong in Jamaica" (p. 81). "My daughters have Scottish blood", says Black Harriot, "Scotland has my blood" (p. 81).

On the other hand, Kay also has Macbean describe a Glasgow in which, as early as 1792, 13,000 residents put their name to a petition to abolish slavery (p. 84). Glasgow was where some abolitionists set up an Emancipation Society in 1833 with the aim of abolishing slavery all over the world.<sup>10</sup> Here Glasgow acts as a kind of synecdoche for the whole late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scottish nation, a small one with a rapidly growing economy and a distinguished intellectual heritage that felt the tension between the commercial advantages of a slave economy and the ignominy of its practices. The specific paradox of a nation participating in the building of the British Empire, and later in its dismantling, becomes even more complicated, if, assuming the legitimacy of certain post-colonial readings in relation to Scottish history, some parallelisms can be delineated between the condition of the colonised people in British imperial possessions and that of the Scots within the nation after the Union of the Crowns (1603), the Union of the Parliaments (1707), not to mention Culloden (1746) which led to the destruction of Highland society and culture.

"It's time that Scotland included the history of the plantations alongside the history of the Highland clearances", says Kay,<sup>11</sup> thus perhaps sharing some critics' scepticism about the applicability of the notion of internal (post)colonialism to Scottish history and literature: both Highlanders and African people were cleared off their lands, but many among the former chose voluntary exile, whereas no choice was left for all those who were forced out of the Slave Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Guinea Coast and transported as slaves to a foreign country. Kay does not want her readers to forget the clearances but to remember the plantations and that "the history of the slave trade is not 'black history' to be shoved into a ghetto and forgotten [...]. It is the history of the world. It concerns each and every one of us".<sup>12</sup> She lets her five characters elicit this sense of universal responsibility, as their voices are used to represent all those "missing faces" whose existence has been engulfed by silence.

"Everybody's writing is political", admitted Kay in an interview.<sup>13</sup> In *The Lamplighter* her stance seems to be a response both to Spivak's claim that the voices of the subaltern cannot be retrieved without being somehow manipulated or denatured, and to sociologists such as Maurice Halbwach, who opened the door for "memory studies" with his *Collective Memory* (1992), or

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<sup>10</sup> See I. Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>11</sup> Kay, "Missing Faces".

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi.*

writers such as Wole Soyinka, who believes that “a people who do not preserve their memory are a people who have forfeited their history”.<sup>14</sup>

History and memory are entwined. However, memory does not have to be restricted by historical rigour. Kay’s dramatic poem is about memory, about how the pain of remembering is a necessary step towards the understanding of the self and the other, the past and the present, the guilt and contrition demanded by the historical reality of the transatlantic slave trade. In fact, *The Lamplighter* does not merely intend to commemorate the abolition of slavery. It provides a form of therapy for the traumatic aspects of the past that help us construct a sense of who we are in the present. Indeed the journey through the dark – “I am a girl. I am in the dark”, says Anniwaa in the *incipit* (p. 9) – ends with the image of the Lamplighter carrying “the light to light the lamps/ The lamp across the wide dark sea” (p. 42).

National hypocrisy and guilt are unveiled mainly from the subaltern multiple perspective of the enslaved women, who tell their single and choral stories in order both to remember and to forget the endured traumas, the loss of homeland, family, freedom, identity and agency. So Kay focuses on the female experience, to restore history to them as both subaltern and women, and to combat the stereotypes of the dehumanized, passive, lazy and silent slave. In fact, they are not presented as passive victims, but rather as autonomous subjects, aware of the best behaviour to assume or the wiles for coping with their lot (“And I learnt how to, how not to”, says the Lamplighter, p. 19), ready even to support revolutionary action (as in the penultimate scene, entitled “Resistance”). It is through memory that they survive for themselves and for us. We are asked not to forget their stories, because remembering them becomes a means of understanding history beyond imperialist records, of “brushing history against the grain”, in Benjamin’s famous phrase – “don’t forget to remember me. My voice is coming back”, implores the Lamplighter (p. 20). Kay’s drama uses the historical records to write a new history here “embodied” by the female slaves’ corporeal experiences: in Lamplighter’s words “Slavery. The feel of it” (p. 20).

The characters and their experiences “are a fantasy created out of a historical reality”: this is in fact Kay’s comment on the Cape Verdian-Irish painter Ellen Gallagher’s 2007 exhibition at Tate Liverpool entitled “Coral Cities”, drawings and films imagining that all the black slaves drowned, thrown off the slave ship *Zong*, or lost at sea, are still underwater and live in a black Atlantis.<sup>15</sup> Although these losses are irretrievable, and so are their voices, as Spivak suggests, Gallagher, as well as Kay, through art and imagination attempt to plunge into that silent ocean and retrieve all

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<sup>13</sup> Interview in *Bewilderbliss*, the online periodical of the students of the University of Manchester: <http://bewilderbliss.com/interview>.

<sup>14</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The burden of memory, the muse of forgiveness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Jackie Kay, “Souls of the Sea”, *The Guardian* 28 April 2007.

those missing faces, those unheard voices. We may certainly agree with Linda Alcoff that “such representations are in every case mediated and the product of interpretation”,<sup>16</sup> but perhaps what Kay and Gallagher do is to speak “nearby or together with” rather than “speak for” or “about” the subaltern.<sup>17</sup> Their images and words may be defined, in Foucault’s words, as a “fictioning”, an “imaginative reproduction” of history, or, to borrow Norman Mailer’s term, as “faction”, which speaks to their countries to tell the untold, to show how to go through the darkness and re-emerge into the light. They also remind us that, if the abolition of the slave trade ended a tragic chapter of mankind’s history, the heart of human darkness is still beating, and that is why the past cannot be abandoned and placed in the archives but should be kept alive and repeatedly recalled.

This is the story of the Lamplighter:

One day, I finally managed to tell

My story. I wrote it down.

It was printed and reprinted

And told.

And retold again. (p. 92)

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<sup>16</sup> Linda Alcoff, “The problem of Speaking for Others”, *Cultural Critique*, n. 20, Winter 1991-1992, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> These expressions are used by Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 101.