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**‘Poor Negro-Girl,’ ‘Little Black Boy’:
Constructing Childhood in Eighteenth-Century
Slave Narratives, Abolitionist Propaganda and
Postcolonial Novels**

Abstract: This article examines how eighteenth-century black writers and white abolitionists used the image of the slave child for their respective political purposes. (Auto-)biographies written by and about slaves abducted as children from Africa such as *The Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw* (1772) and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) contrasted the ‘white’ bourgeois narrative of infantile development with a tale of loss and deprivation. Their conventional narrative patterns constructed Africa as a pastoral idyll; Rousseauian ideas of innate goodness were combined with the topos of the noble savage. White abolitionists, too, turned the black orphan child into a sentimental icon; examples can be found in the writings of James Montgomery, Ann Taylor, Thomas Clarkson, Laurence Sterne and William Blake. Eighteenth-century educational and colonial policies were articulated in markedly similar terms; infantile and lower-class “ignorance” was juxtaposed with the mental “darkness” of the colonial subject. The article ends with a look at a late-twentieth-century transformation of the ‘slave child’ motif, David Dabydeen’s novel *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), which focuses on the figure of the black slave child in the second picture of William Hogarth’s eponymous cycle of paintings (1732). The novel discusses the problem of the narrative construction of ‘black childhood’ itself, rewriting the eighteenth-century sentimental tradition in postmodernist fashion.¹

When, in 1773, the black slave Phillis Wheatley describes how she was kidnapped from Senegal as an eight-year-old girl and sold to the merchant John Wheatley in Boston, New England, she commemorates her parents’ imagined sorrow, presenting her own childhood as a story of disruption and loss:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch’d from *Afric*’s fancy’d happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast? (Wheatley: 1773, 74)

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Yet Wheatley deliberately undermines her own role as a victim, insisting that slavery was really her salvation: her fate was only “seeming cruel,” and the West African motherland was only a “fancy’d happy seat.” Her poem values the ‘re-birth’ in Christ opened up to her in New England higher than the natural birth by her African parents. Issuing her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* during her travels to England, under the patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon and numerous English subscribers, Wheatley was the first black woman and the first black poet to be published in England. She returned to Boston in September of the same year as a free woman. Her over-reliance on classical poetic idioms resulted in heavily derivative poetry, westernized in terms of genre, style and content. This obviously links her poetry with other contemporary ‘slave narratives,’ for instance by Ignatius Sancho (1782) or Olaudah Equiano (1789), which follow established European narrative patterns, most prominently the conversion narrative, replacing an African childhood with western and Christian modes of experience. Vincent Carretta has compared this standardized structure of slave narratives to the biblical topos of the “fortunate fall” (Carretta: 1996, 2).

In this article I propose, firstly, that the loss and renunciation of childhood is one of the distinctive features of eighteenth-century slave narratives: Slave identity is characterized by stunted growth, by interrupted childhood. I will, secondly, analyse how a stereotyped image of childhood reappears in white abolitionist writings, where the little black child becomes a sentimental icon and an instrument of abolitionist propaganda. And, indeed, educational discourses about English (especially lower-class) children and abolitionist plans for educating freed slaves were in some respects strikingly similar. Alan Richardson has rightly called our attention to the later eighteenth century’s “colonization of childhood” and the parallel “infantilization of the colonial subject” (Richardson: 1994, 155). Thirdly and lastly, I will turn to late-twentieth-century attempts at rewriting the lost black experience, to reconstruct black childhood – and, along with the identity of the child, the identity of the adult.

I.

Having won the *Asiento* (the right to carry African slaves to the Spanish colonies of the New World) as part of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, the British had by the late eighteenth century become “the pre-eminent slave traders of the western hemisphere” (D. Richardson: 1998, 440), depending on the slave trade to restock their West Indian plantations. Colonial slavery had already become hereditary, i.e. racialized, by the end of the seventeenth century, as is evident from contemporary colonial decrees that abolished the custom of manumitting black persons after their conversion to Christianity. Colin Kidd observes that “the basis of slavery became progressively more racialist” (Kidd: 1999, 24 n. 51). By the 1780s, British ships were carrying over 30.000 slaves from Africa to the Americas yearly. The horrors of the ‘Middle Passage’ across the Atlantic were augmented

“by such spectacular acts of cruelty as the *Zong* affair of 1781, when a slaver threw a shipload of diseased slaves into the sea in order to claim the insurance on them” (D. Richardson: 1998, 460).

As a consequence, the British movement for the abolition of slavery was gaining influence; the publication of anti-slavery pamphlets peaked in 1788 (Richardson: 1994, 157). In 1807 Parliament passed the Abolition Bill, putting an end to British participation in the slave trade. Yet British ownership of slaves in the Caribbean continued until emancipation in 1833. Today, there is an intense debate about the motives of abolitionism; generally, enlightenment thought and evangelical movements are cited alongside purely economic reasons.² Moreover, John R. Oldfield and Igor Kopytoff have demonstrated that the abolitionist campaign heavily depended on western middle-class notions of personal liberty and property: “slavery did present an intellectual and moral problem in the West, but almost nowhere else” (Kopytoff: 1986, 84; see also Oldfield: 1995).

The genre of the British slave narrative – the texts are most easily accessible in Sukhdev Sandhu and David Dabydeen’s volume on ‘Black Writers’ in the *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* anthology, supplemented by Vincent Carretta’s anthology *Unchained Voices* – is an interesting but problematic outgrowth of the British abolition movement. Heavily sentimentalized, these writings filter the slaves’ “first-hand experience” through western genres and styles (A. Richardson: 1998, 462); in most cases the result of a ‘collaboration’ between a black person and a white benefactor, they are a mixture of “authentic testimony” and “abolitionist fiction” (Sommer: 2001, 151). References to childhood tend to be brief in these texts which usually proceed from capture and deportation to the hardships of slavery, the pursuit of literacy, the conversion to Christianity and, in some cases, the attainment of freedom. Ottobah Cugoano, in his account of 1787, allows us a brief glimpse of his childhood games in Africa, such as excursions into the woods “to gather fruit and catch birds,” but quickly turns to his capture by slave traders, which “brought [him] from a state of innocence and freedom [...] to a state of horror and slavery.” In slavery, however, he learns to read and write, accomplishments which meet his own “strong desire to learn” (Cugoano: 1787, 151; 152; 155; 157). In Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, by contrast, the scene of learning is already located in his African childhood – his mother took “pains” “to form [his] mind,” and Equiano was also trained in the “art of war”: “In this way I grew up till I was turned the age of eleven, when an end was put to my happiness” by slave traders (Equiano: 1789, 32). This conversion narrative ends with Equiano’s buying his own freedom. Talking about his African people, he shifts between an inside and an outside, even ‘ethnographic’ view. His final plea for abolition is supported by a vision of prosperous trade with a freed Africa childishly and “insensibly adopt[ing] British fashions, manners” – and products

² Eric Williams notoriously claimed that “abolition of the slave trade and emancipation of the slaves in the British colonies were driven not by philanthropy or humanitarianism but by economic forces within England” (Williams: 1944, 35). See for counter-arguments Williams: 1966, 278-79 and Ward: 1998, 428.

(Equiano: 1789, 249). It is important to note, however, that the authenticity of Equiano's African childhood story was challenged even in his own lifetime; two 1792 newspaper articles asserted that he was, in fact, a native of the West Indies, and from the fifth edition of the *Interesting Narrative* onwards, Equiano included in his front matter a number of letters written by himself and others to refute these attacks (repr. in Equiano: 1995, 5-14). Carretta, although personally accepting the childhood story as true, suggests that Equiano may have "invented an African identity for rhetorical and/or marketing ends" (Carretta: 1996, 16 n. 13). If this were so, it would demonstrate even more forcefully how important the narrative structure of disrupted childhood and western-style conversion was for the ideological work of these texts.

Even the earliest slave narrative – and the most interesting in our context –, the *Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As Related by Himself* (1772), turns the catastrophe of deportation into the source of salvation in the same way that Wheatley and Cugoano do. Gronniosaw's childhood is styled proleptically as a phase of lack, of yearning for an unknown God:

I had, from my infancy, a curious turn of mind; was more grave and reserved in my disposition than either of my brothers and sisters. I often teased them with questions they could not answer: [...] it being strongly impressed on my mind that there was some GREAT MAN of power which resided above the sun, moon and stars, the objects of our worship. [...] I was afraid and uneasy and restless, but could not tell for what. I wanted to be informed of things that no person could tell me; and was always dissatisfied. – These wonderful impressions began in my childhood, and followed me continually 'till I left my parents, which affords me matter of admiration and thankfulness. (Gronniosaw: 1772, 3-4)

Gronniosaw's feeling of lack is finally answered when his third master, a minister, not only teaches him to read but also converts him to Christianity: "There, says I, I always thought so when I liv'd at home! Now if I had wings like an Eagle I would fly to tell my dear mother that God is greater than the sun, moon, and stars; and that they were made by him." His homesickness and yearning for his childhood companions – "my father liv'd at BOURNOU, and I wanted very much to see him, and likewise my dear mother, and sister" – is now finally replaced by his longing for heaven. The narrative ends with Gronniosaw, a "very poor Pilgrim," waiting for death and his "HEAVENLY HOME" (Gronniosaw: 1772, 14; 40). With their nearly identical structure, these slave narratives forestall any inquiry into their factual authenticity; like Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, which according to Carretta "marks the culmination of the Afro-British tradition of the eighteenth century," these narratives are generically and topically over-determined. They are, simultaneously, "spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, narrative of slavery, economic treatise, and *apologia* (justification and vindication of one's life)" (Carretta: 1996, 14). In all of these narratives, white religion and 'enlightened' ways of life completely supplant a brief and 'ignorant' African childhood.

II.

White abolitionists' texts, by contrast, typically construct even grown-up black people as children, referring to them as "Afric's sable Children" (Savage: 1737, 16),³ "the swarthy children of the sun" (Blake: 1989, 175),⁴ "sad Afric's injur'd sons," or "the waifs and foundlings of mankind" (Montgomery: 1807, 15). James Montgomery's poem *The West Indies* (1807) pities Africans for being "doom'd to slavery by the taint of birth" (Montgomery: 1807, 6). In fact, this taint of birth had been connected to original sin ever since the Church Fathers, who interpreted the famous Old Testament story of a child's crime against his father, Ham's punishment by Noah for filial disobedience (*Genesis* 9:24), as the origin of the 'African race' – and of slavery: One commentator notes in 1765 that the African continent was "peopled by the posterity of Ham, who bear his curse to this day; for they have been always slaves to other nations." He further claims that "Ham, the youngest son of Noah, [...] was cursed for his disrespect and contempt of his father [...]. The old Carthaginians, Grecians, and Romans, and all the nations of Europe, made slaves of the Africans" (Milton: 1765, *ad* 1.585 and *ad* 12.101).

In addition to these images of tainted childhood, conventional abolitionist narratives also draw on Rousseauian ideas of children's innate goodness, combined with the topos of the noble savage. Africans are "innocent, from home and comfort torn"; Africa is a wild and beautiful "world of wonders," a lost paradise (Montgomery: 1807, 17). The abolitionist Elizabeth Benger, writing in 1806, concentrates her empathy on the slaves' irrevocable loss of childhood and motherland:

Is there a spell the Negro's soul to wean
From childhood's lov'd traditionary scene?
No – long estrang'd, through slow revolving years,
The exile pours his unexhausted tears:
E'en he, the favour'd man, from thralldom free,
Yearns to behold his tutelary tree,
And those dear hills by summer ever blest,
Where the great spirit makes his hallow'd rest. (Benger: 1806, 119)

The exile's life is spent in yearning for lost childhood days, in helpless "unexhausted tears," and his infantile state of mind is foregrounded by his tenacious belief in a "great spirit." As in John Bicknell and Thomas Day's poem *The Dying Negro* (1773), abolitionists employed what Richardson calls "a sentimental lexicon of tears and sighs," portraying their black protagonists "as passive, chained and weeping, raising a weapon not in revolt or revenge but in self-slaughter" (A. Richardson: 1998, 461). In Montgomery's *West Indies*, personified Africa, immobilized by grief, stands "entranced with sorrow," while activity is assigned ex-

³ "Afric's sable Children", Savage comments, are "[v]ended for Slaves, tho' formed by Nature free."

⁴ The quotation is taken from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: "Stamped with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun; / They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge" (1.21-22).

clusively to Britannia, who waves her sceptre majestically, “crying to weeping Africa – ‘Be free!’” (Montgomery: 1807, 40; 20). In such depictions, the Africans remained child-like, passive recipients of British mercy.

In abolitionist writing, accordingly, the black child became a sentimental icon symbolizing the helplessness of the African race, designed to rouse the British reader into action. Infant mortality in the colonies was an all-too-real problem, of course; committee reports and medical pamphlets discussed – and often tried to deny – the high number of infant deaths among slaves. Thomas Trapham, in his *Discourse of the State of Health in the Island of Jamaica* (1679), for instance, tries to play down the evidence: “It’s evident that [Jamaica] abounds with Children, as who so when he lands at Port-Royal, may convince himself at the easie rate of his first sight. It’s true, among so great a crowd of young many will drop, as all the world over, ere they arrive their riper age” (Trapham: 1679, 17-18). A *Parliamentary Enquiry* of 1789 was somewhat more critical, stating that of the “Infant Brood” in Jamaica, “[o]ne-third die of the Tetanus or Locked Jaw, before the Ninth Day from their Birth, and of those who survive this Period, One-half too frequently perish by Worms, or the Yaws, before they attain the Age of Five Years.” The report goes on to admit that the ratios are probably better for “the Children of Free Negroes” and definitely better for the “Children of the White Inhabitants” (*Parliamentary Enquiry*: 1789, 189). Rather than dealing with demographic realities, however, abolitionists considered sentimental stories about black children the most effective means of gaining public attention. An especially drastic example is Ann Taylor’s poem for children, “The Little Negro”:

Ah! the poor little blackamoor, see there he goes
And the blood gushes out from his half frozen toes,
And his legs are so thin you may see the very bones,
As he goes shiver, shiver, on the sharp cutting stones.

He was once a negro boy, and a merry boy was he
Playing outlandish plays, by the tall palm tree;
Or bathing in the river, like a brisk water rat,
And at night sleeping sound, on a little bit of mat. (qtd. Richardson: 1994, 165)

The present victimized condition of the “negro boy” is here contrasted with his past “outlandish plays,” which evoke the comfortable fantasy Africa of popular literature. In a similar vein, Thomas Clarkson’s *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1788) keeps returning to stories of “negro girls” who become mad with grief “for the loss of [...] friends and country” or commit suicide to prevent being sold (Clarkson: 1788, 47; 46). To impel his mostly female readers to action, John Newton in his *Thoughts on the African Slave Trade* (1788) recounts the horrid story of a ship’s mate throwing over board a black baby whose crying annoyed him at night: “I am persuaded, that every tender mother who feasts her eyes and her mind, when she contemplates the infant in her arms, will commiserate the poor Africans. – But why do I speak of one child, when we have heard and read a melancholy story, too notoriously true to admit of contradiction, of more than a hundred grown slaves, thrown into the sea [...]”

(Newton: 1788, 94-95). Why, indeed? Because the black child was most likely to arouse pity in a sentimental audience.

Laurence Sterne intentionally used this appeal in an episode of *Tristram Shandy* that he himself, in his correspondence with the black writer Ignatius Sancho, had called "a tender tale of the sorrows of a friendless poor negro-girl" (letter, July 27, 1766, qtd. in Aravamudan, ed.: 1999, 1). In this passage, a black girl is found in a shop, flapping away flies but not killing them; in the ensuing discussion between uncle Toby, Trim and the corporal, she becomes an emblem of mercy in the face of injustice: "she had suffered persecution, [...] and had learnt mercy" (Sterne: 1759-67, 446-47).⁵ Her innate goodness – "She was good [...] by nature" – has not been prejudiced by her hardships. After persuading the corporal that "a negro has a soul," uncle Toby concludes that the girl's very weakness "recommends her to protection," along with her "brethren" (Sterne: 1759-67, 447). The episode is very short indeed, and interrupts the bawdy tale of the corporal's wooing of a Jewish widow. The girl's past is summarily passed over in the usual vein: Trim hints at the fact that "there are circumstances in the story of that poor friendless slut, that would melt a heart of stone," but he tellingly defers this account until some unspecified "dismal winter's evening, when your honour is in the humour" (Sterne: 1759-67, 446-47). But at least the corporal feels "an embarrassment" about proceeding with his trivial tale, and needs two attempts to call back the "sportable key of his voice" (Sterne: 1759-67, 447). Similarly, Sterne himself staged his own emotion after writing the episode in his letter to Sancho: "my eyes had scarce done smarting with it, when your Letter [...] came to me." And the episode did have a strong sentimental impact – Wilbur L. Cross in his *Life and Times of Sterne* reports that "in the years that followed, it became the fashion among the tender-hearted to rid themselves of flies, not by torturing or killing them, but gently brushing them aside" (Cross: 1929, 390). This slave girl obviously recommended herself as a perfect victim by not fighting back.

There was the odd exception, such as the black child in Montgomery's *West Indies* whose mother incites him, Hannibal-like, to revenge: "Son of my widow'd love, my orphan joy! / Avenge thy father's murder, O my boy!" This child's subsequent conquest of the world as the uncontested "Jenghis Khan of Africa" is a rare vision of horror which abolitionists set out to nip in the bud (Montgomery: 1807, 44; 45). On the whole, however, the image of the little black child as constructed in abolitionist writing uncannily resembled the 'pet' black child *en vogue* in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English and Dutch aristocratic society, often represented as an alternative to a lapdog in fashionable portraits.⁶ As Dabydeen concludes from his analysis of a range of examples, in such paintings "the black and the dog are mirror images of each other" (Dabydeen: 1987, 26). In Anthony van Dyck's *Henrietta of Lorraine* (1634), for instance, the depicted boy's blackness throws into relief the lady's whiteness, and his upward gaze of

⁵ The same episode without the closing paragraph is reprinted in Aravamudan, ed.: 1999, 3-7.

⁶ Compare William Wissing, *Mary of Modena*, c. 1685 (lady with lapdog) and Pierre Mignard, *Dutchess of Portsmouth*, 1682 (lady with black boy), reprinted in Dabydeen: 1987, 24-25.

adoration her superiority (repr. Dabydeen: 1987, 22). As Dabydeen notes, this use of the black child as an aesthetic foil is also evident from numerous “For Sale” / “To Be Sold” advertisements in contemporary English newspapers which routinely emphasized that the coveted servant must be of an intense black skin colour. *Williamson’s Liverpool Advertiser* of 20 April 1756 announces: “Wanted immediately a Black Boy. He must be of a deep black complexion [...]” And the black boy offered for sale in 1771 at a public auction at Lichfield is described as “friendly, officious, sound, healthy, fond of labour, and for colour, an excellent fine black” (Dabydeen: 1987, 30). P.J. Marshall reminds us that although “slavery was not a condition recognized by English law,” it is certain that “several thousand slaves were being held in Britain at any time in the eighteenth century” (Marshall: 1998, 15).⁷ On the whole, the above-described paintings, with their iconography of dominance and inferiority, reflected the political relation between ‘mother country’ and ‘infant colony,’ the little black boy’s “diminutive stature” standing for the “real physical and psychological emasculation” of the black people in contemporary colonialist societies (Dabydeen: 1987, 36).

Abolitionist writers continued this symbolic infantilization in their plans for educating freed slaves after abolition. Coleridge, an outspoken abolitionist, in 1809 compared slaves to “Children in the *first Form*” (Coleridge: 1980, 224). The freed “negro,” the abolitionists promised, would gladly accept white “Instruction,” which he had spurned in the state of slavery (Grahame: 1809, 85; 88). James Ramsay was even convinced that “West Indian children, educated in England, improve not only in complexion, but in elegance of features: an alteration arising, perhaps, equally from change of climate, of diet, and of education” (Ramsay: 1784, 6). And finally, Edmund Burke’s ‘Negro Code’ (1792; drafted in 1780) explained how an education programme could ‘civilize’ the slaves. As Burke wrote to Henry Dundas, “the minds of men being crippled with [a state of slavery] can do nothing for themselves; everything must be done for them” (Burke: 1792, 173).

Richardson has argued that eighteenth-century educational and colonial policies were articulated in markedly similar terms: “a number of anti-slavery poets were associated as well with educational innovation and writing for children [...]. Like the children’s literature of the era, anti-slavery writing [...] propose[d] needed reforms while condescending to those on whose behalf those reforms were advanced” (A. Richardson: 1998, 461). Indeed, infantile and lower-class “ignorance” was routinely juxtaposed with the mental “darkness” of the colonial subject. Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1733-34) endeavoured to excite compassion for the ‘poor African’ by pointing to his “untutor’d mind” which “sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind” (qtd. in Clarkson: 1808, 53), and in Montgomery’s *West Indies*, Africa is a place where “Man grows wild” and the “negro” displays his “untutor’d grace” (Montgomery: 1807, 13-15). The popular stage developed the stock figure of the loyal and likeable, yet dumb and childlike slave – mostly called ‘Mungo’ (see A. Richardson: 1998, 466). The juxtaposition of the British

⁷ Even the famous Somerset case of 1772, according to Marshall, “did no more than lay down that a slave might not be forcibly removed from England” (15).

lower classes and/or children with African slaves that became proverbial with William Booth's *In Darkest England* (1890) was already germinally present in Blake's parallel structuring of the story of "The Little Black Boy" with that of the little "Chimney-sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

Blake's "The Little Black Boy" is, however, a special case in "critically address[ing] the racist and colonialist attitudes informing both anti-slavery writing and children's literature alike during the Romantic era" (Richardson: 1994, 154):

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but oh, my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black as if bereaved of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree,
And sitting down before the heat of day
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointing to the east began to say:

"Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And gives his light, and gives his heat away;
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noon day.

"And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

"For when our souls have learned the heat to bear
The cloud will vanish, we shall hear his voice,
Saying: 'Come out from the grove, my love and care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.'"

Thus did my mother say, and kissed me;
And thus I say to little English boy:
When I from black and he from white cloud free
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me.

In its general movement, the poem seems to abolish the initial polarities between the white child, "white as an angel" (l. 3) and the black child, "as if bereaved of light" (l. 4): The text recodes "sunburnt" black skin as a sign of God's special grace. Moreover, this black child is emphatically not "untutor'd" – four whole stanzas are spent on his early education in Africa: "My mother taught me underneath a tree" (l. 5). The black child is then able to hand on his knowledge, becoming the English boy's instructor. However, whereas the black boy uses perfect standard English elsewhere, he falls back on 'nigger speech' as soon as he addresses the white boy: "And thus I say to little English boy" (l. 18). And whereas it is true, as W.H. Stevenson emphasizes, that "the black boy leads the

white boy to God, not vice versa” (Blake: 1989, *ad loc.*), still the black child keeps imagining himself as the other’s servant: “I’ll shade him from the heat till he can bear, / To lean in joy upon our father’s knee” (ll. 21/22). Moreover, he remains in need of the English boy’s approval, desiring to become “like him” (l. 24). One might recall that heavenly redemption was indeed a typical coda of abolitionist poetry, displacing the final abolition of racial inequality into another world, the Great Beyond (see also Richardson: 1994, 163).

III.

Late-twentieth-century postcolonial novels pick up on the ‘slave child’ motif and give it a twist of their own. A prominent example is David Dabydeen’s novel *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), which centres around the little black boy in the second picture of William Hogarth’s eponymous cycle of paintings (1732) and discusses the problem of the narrative construction of ‘black childhood’ itself (Dabydeen: 1999). In a familiar postmodern strategy of rewriting, Dabydeen turns a marginal figure into his protagonist: Hogarth’s stereotyped little black boy, attired in a fine if decidedly exoticist livery, looking on with large eyes as the old Jew discovers Molly’s adultery, has in Dabydeen’s version become an old man named ‘Mungo,’ recently liberated by the “Abolition Committee.” Molly, the central figure of Hogarth’s cycle, appears only briefly and already in her death throes (Dabydeen: 1999, 265). The slave’s lost childhood can only be recovered through reconstruction, through archaeological work: Here, Mr Pringle, a young abolitionist whose name alludes to the historical Thomas Pringle,⁸ is sitting at Mungo’s bedside in a small London flat, eager to produce a classical slave narrative, “a record of the Negro’s own words (understandably corrected in terms of grammar, the erasure of indelicate or infelicitous expressions, and so forth)” (Dabydeen: 1999, 3). Yet Mungo maliciously delivers a parody of Pringle’s white stereotypes about African childhood:

Mungo says that he cannot recall the name of his village but “it sound like Barambong-dodo.” “It be somewhere in Africa.” Question: tell me something about the landscape of your birth? Answer: a hot place. The only feature of the country imprinted in his mind is its heat. To variations of my question, designed to provoke his memory, he merely repeats, “Hot-hot place.” Apparently no birds, no wild animals, no trees existed; which is impossible to believe. He is, I opine, in the initial stages of dementia, brought on by the tribulations of a Negro’s life as much as by his advanced years. (Dabydeen: 1999, 2-3)

Finally Pringle, “realizing that Mungo is a ruined archive, resolves to colour and people a landscape out of his own imagination, thereby endowing Mungo with the gift of mind and eloquence” (Dabydeen: 1999, 3). The life he plans to write is “an epic [which] he has already constructed in his mind” as a series of neat chapter headings:

⁸ Thomas Pringle wrote the preface to *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself* (1831) as well as several abolitionist poems, among them the sonnet “Slavery” (1823).

- 1 Africa.
- 2 Voyage to the Americas in Slave Ship.
- 3 Plantation Labour.
- 4 Voyage to England with Captain Thistlewood.
- 5 Service in the Household of Lord Montague.
- 6 Purchase of Mungo by Mr Gideon, a Jew.
- 7 Debauched by Service to Moll Hackabout, a Common Prostitute.
- 8 Descent into the Mire of Poverty and Disease.
- 9 Redemption of Mungo by the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery.
(Dabydeen: 1999, 6-7)

Here, Dabydeen has Pringle follow the traditional westernized construction of black childhood which had already become ossified in the narratives of Wheatley and Equiano. Compare Equiano's summary for his second chapter:

The author's birth and parentage – His being kidnapped with his sister – Their separation – Surprise at meeting again – Are finally separated – Account of the different places and incidents the author met with till his arrival on the coast – The effect the sight of a slave ship had on him – He sails for the West Indies – Horrors of a slave ship – Arrives at Barbadoes, where the cargo is sold and dispersed. (Equiano: 1789, "Table of Contents")

When Mungo later seems to be telling the story himself – thereby, however, merely adding one more story to the considerable number of narratives competing in the novel –, his English is excellent, very different from what Pringle assumes. The reader is presented with several alternative versions of his African childhood and abduction: "I had many beginnings [...]" (Dabydeen: 1999, 27). Pringle, for his part, tries to cast his information in the form of a traditional conversion narrative, an abolitionist fiction rewriting the 'original sin' of slavery, whose mode of emplotment is a given before Mungo has opened his mouth: He will "reveal Mungo in his unfallen state. He will wash the Aethiop white, scrubbing off the colours of sin and greed that stained Mungo's skin as a result of slavery" (Dabydeen: 1999, 6). Yet Mungo himself tells a different tale: This little black boy was, even before his enslavement, anything but the innocent and harmless creature that westernized accounts habitually depicted; nor was he a noble savage. His contact with 'civilization' was not an entirely wholesome experience either: Captain Thistlewood, commander of the slave ship, introduced him to Christianity but also to depraved sexuality. In Lord Montague's London household⁹ Mungo's only function was to replace the Lady's deceased pet monkey – incidentally, just such a pet monkey appears in Hogarth's picture (Dabydeen: 1999, 204), and I have earlier discussed the topos of the little black 'pet' boy in eighteenth-century paintings. The final result of Mungo's western education is that he all but accepts his own status as a commodity, advertising himself as

a Christian already and with a hidden store of the classics. You have to pay fifty guineas for your normal nigger, and he comes with nothing but sadness in his eyes. You have to beat out of him all his pining, till he break and be new, and even then you have to pay for him to learn English, learn manners, learn to call you Ma and Pa and no more

⁹ See Ignatius Sancho's biography: his master was John, second Duke of Montagu (Sandhu and Dabydeen, eds.: 1999, 65).

dream of another place. But with me, I already done forget. "Forget the land! Forget the land!" Thistlewood done teach me. (Dabydeen: 1999, 247)

Scholars still debate to what extent Hogarth himself was aware of such mechanisms of reification. While Roy Sommer maintains that Dabydeen's novel uncovers the sexist and racist stereotypes implicit in Hogarth's paintings (Sommer: 2001, 157), Dabydeen, at least in his 1987 monograph on *Hogarth's Blacks*, claims more optimistically – and plausibly – that Hogarth's paintings themselves explicitly gesture at the "economic root causes" of prostitution and slavery, and at the link between injustice in the colonies and at home (Dabydeen: 1987, 110).¹⁰ In any case, the little black boy, a passive "surprised spectator" (Dabydeen: 1987, 51) in Hogarth's painting, has here been transformed into an active, spiteful, and eloquent figure – a forceful rewriting of both the eighteenth-century Afro-British conversion narrative and abolitionists' romantic tale of the poor little slave child.

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¹⁰ See also Dabydeen: 1987, 108 on the connection between prostitution and colonial trade.

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Carroll always loved children. As a child himself, he engaged in complex games with animals, built a puppet theatre and wrote little plays for the benefit of his nine sisters and two brothers. As an adult, he enjoyed playing with children, going on trips with them and corresponding with children. His favourite child was Alice Liddell, the daughter of the Dean of his College, for whom he often invented stories and who became the model for Alice. The novel shows the tragic fate of a poor girl. She struggles for happiness, but all the forces of her social environment are arranged against her and she perishes. Tess, the daughter of poor parents and a descendant of a proud and ancient family, is seduced by a young man Alec D'Urberville. A child is born but dies in infancy. And Then There Were None is a mystery novel by the English writer Agatha Christie, described by her as the most difficult of her books to write. It was first published in the United Kingdom by the Collins Crime Club on 6 November 1939, as Ten Little Niggers, after the children's counting rhyme and minstrel song, which serves as a major element of the plot. A US edition was released in January 1940 with the title And Then There Were None, which is taken from the last five words of the song. All The poor little pinched pretender to fashion, with his tarnished finery and his reed-voiced, simpering helpmate, "with his coffee-house cackle of my Lord Mudler and the Duchess of Piccadilly, and his magnificent promises of turbot and ortolan, which issue pitifully in postponed ox-cheek and bitter beer," approaches the dimensions of a masterpiece. Charles Lamb, one would think, must have rejoiced over the reckless assurance which expatiates on the charming view of the Thames from the garret of a back-street in the suburbs, which glorifies the 'paltry, unframed pictures' on its wall. It glows like a dark star in the constellations of my childhood. What I might have done yesterday, who I might have seen here in my room at the nursing home, what I might have said to them or they to me--those things are gone, but the face of the man in the black suit grows ever clearer, ever closer, and I remember every word he said. I don't want to think of him but I can't help it, and sometimes at night my old heart beats so hard and so fast I think it will tear itself right clear of my chest. I'm not sure people born after the middle of the century could quite credit that, although they might say they could, to be polite to old folks like me. She was wearing a housedress with little red roses all over it, I remember, and she was kneading bread. The UN children's agency Unicef said it was "angered and saddened" by yet another mass abduction of students in Nigeria describing it as "brutal" and a "violation of children's rights." Who was behind the attack? No group has so far claimed responsibility. Every time children are taken from their schools by armed gunmen in northern Nigeria, the kidnapping of the Chibok girls is mentioned. Similar raids took place before that well-publicised abduction but they received little publicity and they never involved girls. But global attention generated by the #BringBackOurGirls campaign showed armed groups that the mass abduction of children was a sure way of applying pressure on authorities, including asking for ransom, although the authorities always deny paying.