Theatre Academy

Gönderilme Tarihi/Submission Date: 23.07.2023
Kabul Tarihi/Acceptance Date: 25.01.2024
Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10829667

Re-imagining the History of British Abolition: The New Historical Consciousness in Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights*

İngiliz Köleleştirme Tarihini Yeniden Hayal Etmek: Winsome Pinnock'ın *Rockets and Blue Lights* Adlı Oyununda Yeni Tarih Bilinci

Xiting QIAO

Renmin University of China, School of Foreign Languages

shytineqiao@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6152-2104

Abstract

Examining Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* through a new-historical lens, this study aims to shed light on the theatrical intervention in the historical narrative of the British abolition, and to evaluate Pinnock's contribution to modern art and its interpretation through her attempt to highly fictionalize history. By constructing the protagonist J. M. W. Turner as an anti-hero, Pinnock places Turner back in a Victorian ethical context to question the arbitrary construction of Turner's heroism by the complicity of discourses of art history and abolitionism. The juxtaposition of historical and social texts reflects Pinnock's awareness of the fictional nature of historical texts, and reveals the continuing impact of the transatlantic slave trade. By restoring black voices across time and space, Pinnock reconstructs the black subjectivity in the history of abolition and in contemporary society. The play encourages readers to understand Britain's past in a more inclusive and pluralistic way. While calling Britain to take responsibility for slavery, the play also explores the critical role of art interpretation in reassessing and reshaping historical narratives.

Keywords: Winsome Pinnock, British Abolition, Discourse, Slave Trade, Anti-hero

Cite this article: Qiao, X. (2024). Re-imagining the History of British Abolition: The New Historical Consciousness in Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights*. Theatre Academy, 2(1), 15-31

Öz

Winsome Pinnock'ın *Rockets and Blue Lights* adlı oyununu yeni-tarihsel bir mercek altına alıp inceleyen bu çalışma, Britanya'da köleliğin kaldırılmasının tarihsel anlatısına teatral olarak müdahale eden bu oyuna ışık tutmayı ve Pinnock'ın modern sanata katkısını ve tarihi kurgulama çabasıyla buna kattığı yorumu değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Oyunun ana karakteri J. M. W. Turner'ı bir anti-kahraman olarak kurgulayan Pinnock, Turner'ı Viktorya dönemi etik bağlamına yerleştirir ve onun kahramanlığının sanat tarihi ve kölelik karşıtlığı söylemleri ile ortaklık yoluyla keyfi bir şekilde inşa edilişini sorgulayarak onun söz ve eylemlerinin tarihsel sürekliliğini kurgular. Tarihsel ve toplumsal metinlerin yan yana getirilmesi, Pinnock'ın tarihsel metinlerin kurgusal doğasına dair farkındalığını yansıtırken aynı zamanda transatlantik köle ticaretinin devam eden etkisini ortaya koymaktadır. Pinnock, siyahi sesleri zaman ve mekân içine yeniden konumlandırarak, köleliğin kaldırılması tarihinde ve çağdaş toplumda siyahi öznelliğini yeniden inşa etmektedir. Oyun, okuyucuları ve izleyicileri Britanya'nın geçmişini daha kapsayıcı ve çoğulcu bir biçimde anlamaya teşvik etmektedir. Britanya'yı köleliğin sorumluluğunu üstlenmeye çağırırken aynı zamanda sanat yorumunu tarihsel anlatıların yeniden değerlendirilmesi ve yeniden şekillendirilmesindeki kritik rolünü araştırır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Winsome Pinnock, Britanya'da Köleliğin Kaldırılması, Söylem, Köle Ticareti, Anti-kahraman

Introduction

Abolitionism, the movement that aimed to end the Atlantic slave trade and to free the enslaved people, was important in the historical development of countries in Western Europe and the Americas. Although the movement began earlier in France and Britain, the United States is written in the history of abolition to have played a more important role. From a historiographical perspective, the movement in the United States was more intense, as a backdrop to the American Civil War. Moreover, it operated in tandem with other social reforms, such as the Prohibition and women's suffrage movements, thus adding the complexity. On a literary level, slave narratives, abolitionist fiction, and neo-slave narratives also constitute important genres in the African American literary canon, playing an ongoing role in opposing slavery, preserving historical memory, and documenting the progress of civil rights. In the 21st century, the neo-slave narratives produced by cultural industries (musicals, films, documentaries, etc.) have also occupied a central place in the representation of abolitionist history.

In contrast, the writing and representation of the history of the British Abolition have not received adequate creative and scholarly attention. In terms of theatre, black British playwriting in the 21st century explores more on contemporary racial inequality as a legacy of slavery than on confronting or rewriting the history of abolition. Only a few productions, like Selina Thompson's *Salt* and Giles Terera's *The Meaning of Zong*, focused on such history. Meanwhile, as Rukhsana Ahmad noticed, multiculturalism or cultural diversity, though popular in the 1980s, would face today resistant powers that would "devolve into neo-isolationist political standpoints and increasing public disavowals of Britain's imperial past" (Ponnuswami, 2020, p. 385). Considering this current state, Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* is a timely work that intervenes and rewrites the history of the British Abolition. The play is also an important symbol of Pinnock's re-acceptance in mainstream British theatre since the 1995 production of her play *Leave Taking*. *The Guardian*'s chief theatre critic, Arifa Akbar, points at the play's timeliness and significance:

> ... it feels like a relief to see Britain's slave history dramatised on stage rather than the many more stories of slavery imported from the US that give the impression its legacy is theirs to bear, not ours. Britain's slave past is not dead, it is suggested here, but bleeds into the present and terrorises it. (Akbar, 2021)

The decentering of the abolitionist narrative and the not-yet-acknowledged responsibility for slavery, two agendas that urgently needed to be faced in Britain, converge in Pinnock's play. This paper explores the play's anti-heroic images and the juxtaposition of historical and social texts by combining the theoretical perspectives of post-colonialism and new historicism. It also presents a multi-layered inter-reading of the historical and contemporary contexts of the play and its eponymous painting, to explain Pinnock's theatrical strategies in rewriting the history of the British Abolition.

Anti-Heroic Images and the Subversion of Historical Myths

Since her 2016 play *Tibuba*, a rewriting of the 1682 Salem witch trials, Pinnock has moved beyond recreating the experiences of the Windrush Generation and contemporary black British life, to an exploration of global history of slavery. In *Rockets and Blue Lights*, she does not only explore the image of slaves in the historical narratives, but also focuses on the myth of the white saviour within them,

especially the heroic portrayal of Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). By constructing Turner as an anti-heroic figure, Pinnock responds to the multiple historical discourses that mythologize him. Turner functions in three timelines: he was historically the author of *The Slave Ship* and *Rockets and Blue Lights*; he was also active in the 1840s, when the slave trade clandestinely continued after the Slave Trade Act was enacted; he is a fictional character in *Ghost Ship*, an imagined film that celebrated the centenary of abolition. The images of Turner, therefore, also divide to three: the one constructed by historical mythology, the one shaped by film and art, and the one re-imagined by Pinnock. The distinction between the three images is key to understanding Pinnock's sense of new-historical rewriting. Reflection on the historical issues behind the first two images is the starting point for Pinnock's creation of the third image.

The implicit premise in Pinnock's rewriting is the intertwined construction of Turner's status by the discourses of art history and abolitionist history. Whereas art history reads Turner's abolitionist ideology based on the content of his work, abolitionist history discovers Turner in his relationships with abolitionists, thus reinforcing the argument for Turner's abolitionist identity. In Ernst Gombrich's view, the history of art is shaped by the artist's "trial and error" (p. 265) to technically transcend the art tradition, and to personally "make his choice" (p. 306) in the system where "the hierarchy of modes, the language of art, exists independent of the individual" (p. 306). The history of art is that of the individual artist, because the artist is the subject of artistic creation. But Pinnock recognizes Turner through a new-historicist view of authorship. This view questions the author's "unified, unique, and enduring personal identity" (Abrams, 2015, p. 247) and affirms the author's existence as an individual in society, rather than as an established presence in art history.

In the art discourse of film and television, Turner's artist-centred narrative and even the historical narrative of abolition continues to ignore the historical other in Levinas' sense. Pinnock responds to this reality in her historical rewriting, considering that "our relation with people from the past can be called ethical, and writing history can be seen as an ethical activity" (Froeyman, 2016, p. 208). She expresses the critique of media discourse through the second image of Turner in *Ghost Ship*, the

imagined biopic, as well as the film crew's response to the script. In the biopic, Turner uses a slave named Olu as a muse for his artistry, but Olu's scenes are drastically cut to highlight the complexity of Turner's character. Such setting can be regarded as an oblique hint at the Oscar-nominated biopic *Mr. Turner* (2014). While *Mr. Turner* attempted to rewrite art history by portraying Turner's eccentric character, complex relationships and highly controversial painting techniques, the dominant logic behind the standards and representations its new-historicist anecdotes is what bell hooks criticises as "collective white supremacist capitalist patriarchal imagination" (p. 76). The reason is that female characters like Hannah Danby and Sophia Booth still serve in the film as objects of exploitation on the fringe of Turner's charisma story. Pinnock questions the anecdotes as the techniques of historical narratives by mimicking this actual biopic. In a Turner-centred film narrative, the fascination of anecdotes still serves Turner's heroic image, and fails to disenchant Turner's artist myth by repeating the myth production merely from another perspective.

Recognizing the limitations of the anecdote-backed heroic narrative, Pinnock takes an alternative approach by rewriting Turner as an anti-hero. Whereas the protagonist of a traditional play usually has a certain status, dignity and courage, the anti-hero in the play "is petty, ignominious, passive, clownish, or dishonest" (Abrams, 2015, p. 16). Turner becomes Pinnock's anti-hero in three ways: he abandons his mentally-deranged mother in an asylum until her death, with his own mind occasionally tormented by his mother's ghost; he has incestuous relationships with not only Danby, his housekeeper, but also Sophia Caroline Booth, a widow who he historically formed a relationship with after her second husband's death. Worse still, he pretends to have a broken arm in order to be able to go on board the ship and paint the sea, thus exempting himself from the ticket while not having to pay the equivalent labour in exchange as other ship passengers. The most important distinction between a heroic Turner and Pinnock's anti-heroic Turner, however, is that when Turner discovers that he has boarded a slave ship and that Thomas, a fellow black seaman, will also be sold as a slave after his failed resistance, Turner shirks his ethical responsibility to save Thomas:

> I don't want no trouble. I just want to get home... Do my work... I am an old man. I make sketches for a few pennies. That is all... Leave me out of it. It's got nothing to do with me. (Pinnock, 2021, pp. 54-55)

Turner's words convey a sense of detachment and a desire to distance himself from any responsibility or involvement in the plight of Thomas and the larger issue of slavery. By reducing Thomas' resistance to a trouble, Turner saves himself from a disruption of his personal comfort and safety. By claiming to return home and continue his career as an artist, Turner is also insensitive to the larger social and moral implications of the slave trade. Using his age as an excuse to position himself outside the realm of active engagement, Turner explicitly distances himself from the injustices surrounding him, refusing to acknowledge his complicity or the interconnections of all individuals within a seemingly post-slavery society. Pinnock's detailed dialogues in this scene highlights the character's moral ambiguity and self-serving nature, thus making a radical departure from the traditional, heroic, and humanist image of an abolitionist hero.

However, embodying the role of an anti-hero does not signify a lack of transformative processes, personal development, or the transcendence of one's own limitations. By imagining John Ruskin's dialogue with Turner, Pinnock reclaims Turner's voice as an author and deconstructs the fixed analyses of *The Slave Ship* in art history. In the early 19th century, Turner was "strongly criticized by conservative critics for his dynamic compositions and high-keyed colour" (Chamot & Butlin, 2022). Yet the first part of Ruskin's Modern Painters, published in 1843, played an important role in commenting on Turner's work. Ruskin's review of *The Slave Ship* bucked the mainstream of aesthetic interest and initiated an affirmation of Turner's revolutionary approach. In Pinnock's portrayal, however, Turner does not endorse such assessment, but reveals his self-explanation:

> Sometimes I see a painting in a dream. Or I appear in the dream myself. And I am all things in it. I am the slave ship. Wrecked. Empty. I am a shark: the speed of me through water. Livid with the desire for blood. I am the sea boiling with fury. A terrified enslaved woman screams in my arms, her fear pulsing against my chest. She slips through my fingers like water and I am drenched as she plunges into the ocean. Disappears and I can't get her back. (Pinnock, 2021, p. 74).

The artist's imagined words reveal a haunting and visceral connection to the subject matter of his well-known painting. The dream he mentions suggests a blurred boundary between his imagination and his own presence within the artwork, and his intertwining roles as the observer and the observed. When Turner no longer presents himself as an artist, but transcends his own perspective, he connects with the sufferers in an empathetic way. Such move to restore Turner as a person challenges the discourse of modern art history to establish him as a trailblazer of "visual truth" (Gombrich, p. 11) and a "correct" (p. 11) observer of nature. Turner's confession is therefore both a filler for the gaps in the history of British abolition and a response to modern art criticism. By affirming Turner's subjectivity as an artist, Pinnock questions the construction of the author and his work by historical discourses. In this way, she also emphasizes her own subjectivity as a literary scholar, thus establishing a rational logic for her rewriting of the history of Abolition.

Pinnock puts Turner back into a Victorian ethical context, where the reasons why slavery is wrong are debated. She imagines a process through which Turner saw how slavery increased total human unhappiness, how human beings were exploited and degraded to serve the slave-owner's ends. In this way, she adds to the historical continuity of Turner's words and actions to question Turner's heroism, which has been arbitrarily constructed by the complicity of art historical and abolitionist discourses. Britain had banned the slave trade at the legal level, achieving external restraint and freedom from the guilt of the direct slave trade and exploitation; but the British public's moral perception of slavery had not been completely transformed. On the one hand, the religious ethic, represented by the Quakers and Evangelicals and opposed to slavery, influenced the public. On the other hand, capitalism played a significant role in pushing British consumers to isolate themselves from slavery and shaping their consumer ethic of indifference to the ongoing legacy. In this multiplicity of ethical tensions, Pinnock's anti-hero has a logic of ethical choices based on both historical continuity and contradictions, and thus subverts the myths constructed by historical narratives since the Victorian era. Hayden White distincts historical events from facts, arguing that a fact is "a kind of utterance that has the aim of transforming an event into a possible object of knowledge" (Paz Soldán, p. 3). Compared to the events that are unique, certain and

empirical, facts are more diverse and unstable in thought, language and discourse. Pinnock's portrayal of the anti-heroic figure demonstrates her critical understanding of the textuality of history, acknowledging that historical facts possess a literary quality. However, she also recognizes that the historical events associated with Turner should be arbitrarily reconfigured by the discourses of art history and abolitionist history, because such moves nihilistically manipulate Turner's historical status. Such understanding also permeates her temporal and spatial settings and other characterizations of the play.

Hauntology-Based Juxtaposition of Historical and Social Texts

For dramatic representation, "the centring with its separation of major and minor matter, centre and periphery" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 87) is a typical accentuation. In constructing the narrative priority, and distinguishing between centre and periphery, the dramatic representation of abolitionist history usually has two means or orientations that can overlap with each other: either the historical text or the slave narrative is set in center. While both orientations have strengths in terms of dramatizing historical and literary texts, their flaws are not negligible when judged in the context of postcolonial and materialist historical perspectives. The former means, based on the tradition of historical drama, explores the links between slavery and the economy, culture and society of the time, but overlooks the ongoing impact of slavery by treating it as an isolated historical event. The latter means is a reproduction of individualist narratives in theatre, emphasizing the individual struggle of the slave as protagonist against the slave owner and the institution of slavery, divorcing the role from the enslaved collective at the expense of the construction of the protagonist's other social relations, and ultimately reinforcing the singular identity of the slave as protagonist and to reproduce the otherness of the slave collective.

It was only in 2018, while researching Caryl Phillips' *Rough Crossings* (2007), an adaptation of Simon Schama's eponymous historical work, that Pinnock recognized the viability of juxtaposition in staging traumatic historical events. She affirms Phillips' dramatic strategy of "highly fictionalised history" (Pinnock, 2018) in his adaptation and adopted the same approach in her composition of *Rockets and Blue Lights*. By juxtaposing historical texts with social texts, Pinnock shows the

continuing impact of the transatlantic slave trade, and calls the audience to think critically about historical narratives. The textuality of history, as recognized by the new historicists, is the premise that allows for such juxtaposition. In Pinnock's perception, the history of the Abolition is not an ironclad context, but acquires textuality due to the linguistic nature of its writing. Therefore, it can not only constitute a plurality of intertextual relations with various artistic genres and cultural phenomena, but also has a spatiality when transferring from one sign system to another, making it possible to transform the signifying practices of historical texts to the field of social reality.

Pinnock's juxtaposition is a synthesis of Hayden White's view of historical narrative, Simon Gikandi's view of postcolonial history and Derrida's hauntology. The three theoretical sources further her understanding of the importance of innovation in theatrical constructions and strategies, as well as the task of historians and dramatists through her analysis of *Rough Crossings*:

> These poetic, or rhetorical (story) elements are conventionally distinguished from the work of fiction by their relationship to source material or "reality". The historian can deploy narrative techniques but only in service of representing the facts, while conversely and conventionally the writer of fiction is at liberty to "make things up." (Pinnock, 2018).

This argument implies that contemporary writers should not avoid writing about historical facts related to slavery and the slave trade, as this is in line with the intention of the capitalist patriarchy of white supremacy to identify and reduce those historical facts. Just as Hobsbawm states, there are "limitations of the historian's function as destroyer of myth" (1997, p. 274), the most obvious one being that in the short run, "they are impotent against those who choose to believe historical myth, especially if they hold political power, which...entails control over what is still the most important channel of imparting historical information, the schools" (1997, p. 275). In a 2022 online event "Decolonising Performance Histories and Contemporary Practices" (which the author attended), Pinnock's question of what she learned about the slave trade in history lessons resonates with Hobsbawm, but differs in terms of the duties of historians/artists. She meant that literature can generate a more positive critical

force with the help of fiction and imagination, establishing propositions that history can hardly question.

Hauntology is a neologism introduced in Jacques Derrida's 1993 book *Specters of Marx* in which he argues that "Marxism is not dead because it is not a singular entity" (D'Cruz, 2022, p. 2) and spectral figures "continue to pose questions about responsibility and justice" (2022, p. 2). Derrida uses this word to distinguish from ontology (the study of being), and appeals for the necessity to "speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it" (1994, p. xviii), whether the others are already dead or not yet to come. Disseminated from historiography to music, media, aesthetics and other fields and a critical lens, hauntology is seen as a particularly important dramatic strategy in Pinnock's view, so as to avoid the same concealment of theatrical strategies as those resistance strategies employed by the enslaved.

In Pinnock's analysis, Phillips' play produced its meaning in the way that "each scene reverberates with the ghosts of the previous or other scenes, creating a critique, or what Hayden describes (in historiography) as an explanatory method" (Pinnock, 2018). According to her reading, hauntology functions as a theatrical strategy that reveals the historical Other, and responds to its expectations, including Britain's continuous forgetfulness of the nation's past. This strategy is thus translated to her own play, the ending of which has Thomas, who is trafficked to a Brazilian plantation, enumerate the ghosts of the historical legacy of slavery, calling the historical Other while looking positively into the future:

> I survived the slave castles at Bonny, the Zong and Baptist massacres. I survived the fires of New Cross and Grenfell; Death in custody. Through all this I lived...I am Yaa Asantewaa, Yvonne Ruddock, David Oluwale. I am Sam Sharpe, Kelso Cochrane, Stephen Lawrence. Pull your trigger. I am not afraid of death. I have lived and died ten million times. And I will live and live again. (Pinnock, 2021, p. 77)

Through the enumeration of the ghosts of the historical legacy of slavery and the connection to contemporary events, Thomas intertwines past and present, invoking a haunting presence. The mention of slave castles and massacres immediately evokes the haunting historical presence of slavery. By emphasizing that he survived these traumatic events, Thomas is not only asserting his resilience but also invoking the

ghosts of those who did not survive. The juxtaposition of surviving these atrocities with the mention of specific historical events highlights the link between personal experiences and collective historical memory. And by connecting more recent tragedies to the historical legacy of slavery, Thomas suggests an ongoing cycle of injustice and violence. In his last powerful declaration, Thomas confronts the specter of death and asserts his unwavering resilience, his spirit that transcends mortality and embodies the collective spirit of all those who have endured oppression. This assertion of indomitable life force echoes the hauntological concept of the persistence of history and the constant presence of the past in the present. Therefore, through these lines, Pinnock effectively employs hauntology as a theatrical strategy to juxtapose historical and social texts, not only to underscore the cyclical nature of oppression and resistance, but also to reclaim the power and the existence of the historical other in a compelling manner.

Intertemporal and Interspatial Black Discourses

The juxtaposition of historical texts with real social texts in *Rockets and Blue Lights* serves as Pinnock's incisive critique of the underlying historical facts, while also establishing the necessary temporal and spatial conditions for constructing black discourse in theater. Rather than embracing a singular grand narrative, Pinnock challenges the prevailing historical perspective, which envisions history as a smooth and uniformly grand sequence. Such view of history has also been a target of Michel Foucault, with his rejection of the traditional historicist reading that generalizes historical record as narratives of progress. He claims that "by ordering the time of human beings upon the world's development" (Foucault, 2002, p. 400) or "inversely by extending the principle and movement of a human destiny to even the smallest particles of nature" (2002, p. 400), history was "conceived of as a vast historical stream" (2002, p. 400). Human and things become unified in such narrative of history, and deviations from the narrative become marginalized or eliminated. Such conception derives its cognitive power from the pursuit of sameness, and is closely tied to the episteme of modernity.

The global movements to abolish slavery are historicized in the same way, in which what Foucault calls "the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and

balances, the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments" (2013, p. 3) has been constructed as a narrative, and even strengthen by literary narratives in the following centuries. Within this framework, the discourse of the Abolition, specific to its historical period, profoundly influenced the formation of subjectivity for slave owners, the enslaved, and abolitionists themselves. It is through the lens of this smooth continuum of historical narrative in British abolitionist history that historical beings are perceived, dividing the enslaved from the abolitionists. The "white savior narrative", which Lou speaks of in Pinnock's prologue, perpetuates the perception of the enslaved as a continuum of the "saved", while religious and progressivist narratives cast abolitionists as a continuum of awakening, atonement, and progress. Consequently, the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of slave owners and the enslaved have both become blurred within the overarching historical narrative.

Pinnock skilfully reconstructs Victorian black discourse in the play through two distinct approaches. The first one involves empowering Victorian black characters, such as Danby, to assume the role of direct narrators who drive the plot forward. In Scene 3, Danby wants Turner to turn her "into a goddess" (Pinnock, 2021, p. 18) but only to have her face smeared with paint, she is irritated by such humiliation. While Turner says "two ugly little orphans together" (Pinnock, 2021, p. 19), Danby sees through his discursive manipulation aimed at eliciting empathy, and resists being reduced to a mere object of pity. The moment when Danby's independent perception of her subjectivity and her relationship with Turner becomes all the more significant, she becomes able to assert her autonomy and challenge Turner, affirming her right to be the subject of her own story. She boldly questions,

> ...who you calling ugly? Why shouldn't I be the subject of a painting? And I'm not talking about being no onlooker either while them's think they're better than me get the centre of the canvas. Problem is I'm too beautiful. That's what it is, isn't it, my beauty blinds you. (Pinnock, 2021, p. 19)

Danby suggests the limitation of Turner's male gaze, which prevents him not only from recognizing her agency and individuality, but also from a sensitivity to see the differences among people in a post-abolition time. By adding a new angle to Turner's

art and life, Pinnock emphasizes the importance of independent perspectives and such counterpower in challenging a traditional white-male-centered narrative.

Another means through which Pinnock re-configures black discourses is by imaginatively incorporating the presence of the historical Other and contemporary concerns through inter-temporal dialogues between Meg and Lou. In Scene 14, following the party, Lou encounters in her own bedroom Meg, a Victorian black runaway in her seventies, “haunting” but also physically existing on stage. In their conversation, Meg recounts her harrowing ordeal: to prevent her newborn child from being sold by the slave owner Carpenter, Meg chooses to bury him alive. When Carpenter found the child, he mutilated Meg by cutting out the child’s tongue. Meg’s story exemplifies the profound pain and desperation experienced by enslaved black women, who had to make extreme choices to protect their children from the dehumanizing institution of slavery.

In his reading of Lisa Guenther’s reflection on Levinas’ 1934 essay, Kris Sealey points out that “natal alienation means that the slave’s womb is a site of a precise re-production of history” (2019, p. 637), and that the continuation of slavery locks history “into an eternal repetition” (2019, p. 637). Meg’s interspacial and intertemporal being thus functions as a reminder of the continuation of slavery. Yet in the midst of her fragmentary storytelling, an important statement from Lou intervenes the repeating narrative: “I want to hear it... I can take it. Speak, Meg.” (Pinnock, 2021, p. 66). The vulnerability and suffering endured by the enslaved like Meg does not only reveal the oppressive system, but also calls for ethical responsibility and demands a response from those who bear witness to it. Levinas posits that ethical responsibility emerges through the encounter with the other, where the face of the other is “a moment of infinity that goes beyond any idea which I can produce of the other” (Hand, 2009, p. 36) and “challenges all our philosophical attempts to systematize and therefore to reduce the other” (2009, p. 36). And Lou’s insistence on hearing the whole story, despite its distressing nature, demonstrates her recognition of the ethical imperative to engage with the suffering of the other. Even before Meg has made any demands, Lou opens herself to Meg’s presence by directly facing her, and actively engaging with her micro-narrative, assuming responsibility for her plight.

On the other hand, Meg's assertion of agency and her defiance against the oppressive system aligns with Levinas' notion of ethical subjectivity. Refusing to be reduced to a passive victim and instead becoming an agent of resistance, Meg turns her fury to "a passion in my legs" (Pinnock, 2021, p. 67), a driving force that propels her to run and escape, as an embodied action to resist slavery. Without her action, she would not have an opportunity to be the narrator of her own story.

Pinnock's portrayal of Lou echoes her postmodern ethical claim, resonating with Zygmunt Bauman's proposition that the other should be redefined as a vital figure, thereby challenging the exclusion of the other from the path of self-realization dictated by instrumental rationality and calculated interests. Although Lou's confrontation and attentive listening to Meg do not serve a predetermined plot-driven purpose, this inter-temporal dialogue carries profound postmodern ethical implications. Within this exchange, Lou grapples with her inability to provide a definitive answer to Meg's final questions: "Is it true? Do you live in better times? Are you free?" (Pinnock, 2021, p. 67). The to-be-answered questions are also for the audience and readers, who are alert that temporal and spatial distance cannot absolve individuals of moral responsibility. It becomes incumbent upon contemporary individuals to assume responsibility for the historical other, to unveil and confront the obscured figures hidden within historical narratives, and to acknowledge the enduring impact of slavery on postmodern society. This recognition empowers them to become agents capable of transforming the material and spiritual realms that continue to bear the weight of slavery's legacy, ushering in a renewed sense of social justice and collective responsibility.

Conclusion

Pinnock's reimagined history of British Abolition in *Rockets and Blue Lights* merges a decolonial stance with a new-historicist perspective, yielding profound implications. Through the deconstruction of heroic narratives and the juxtaposition of texts spanning time and space, Pinnock not only dismantles the intertwined discourses of abolitionism and art history, but also restores the British perspective back to the historical context of the British Empire. It is in such sense that the play uncovers the historical other, and invites audiences and readers to embark on a quest for the

historical truth within the boundaries of historical narratives. Pinnock masterfully employs the interaction between literature and history, effectively rewriting the white-centric British interpretation of the transatlantic abolitionist movement. Utilizing intertemporal and interspacial settings with multi-media approaches, she skilfully incorporates historical events into new poetic structures. *Rockets and Blue Lights* compels its audiences and readers to critically re-examine the writing of British abolitionist history, the political discourse surrounding identity within the culture of abolition, the capitalist patriarchal order of white supremacy, and Britain's obligation to confront its historical responsibility for slavery. The play resonates as a call to action, urging the construction of a postmodern ethical community that embraces pluralism, inclusivity, and respect for the other. In a testament to its impact, the play has also received recognition from esteemed institutions. Tate Modern, renowned for exhibiting J.M.W. Turner's paintings, posted online Pinnock's latest interpretation of *The Slave Ship*, while the Royal Academy of Arts featured the play in its comprehensive exploration of Turner's life[1]. These engagements highlight the complexities and potential controversies within Turner's work, further amplifying the play's real-life social impact beyond the theatrical realm.

References

Abrams, M. H., and Harpham, G.G. (2015). *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Eleventh Edition*. Stamford: Cengage Learning.

Akbar, A. (2021, Sep 3.) *Rockets and Blue Lights review – radical retelling of Britain's slavery history*. The Guardian. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/sep/03/rockets-and-blue-lights-review

Chamot, M., and Butlin, M.R.F. (2022, Apr 19.) *J.M.W. Turner*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from https://www.britannica.com/biography/J-M-W-Turner

D'Cruz, G. (2022). *Hauntological Dramaturgy: Affects, archives, ethics*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.

[1] See Winsome Pinnock on J.M.W. Turner's Painting 'Slave Ship', Retrieved January 18, 2024 from https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-50-autumn-2020/winsome-pinnock-jmw-turner-slave-ship ; and J. M. W. Turner, Retrieved January 18, 2024 from https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/j-m-w-turner-ra .

Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). London and New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (2002). *The Order of Things: An archaeology of the human sciences.* London and New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (2013). *Archaeology of Knowledge* (A. M. S. Smith, Trans.). London and New York: Routledge.

Froeyman, A. (2016). *History, Ethics, and the Recognition of the Other: A Levinasian View on the Writing of History*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gombrich, E. H. (2004). *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon Press.

Hand, S. (2009). *Emmanuel Levinas*. London and New York: Routledge.

Hooks, b. (2009). *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre* (K. Jürs-Munby, Trans.). London and New York: Routledge.

Paz Soldán, J. E. (1995). Interview with Hayden White. *Lucero*, 6(1). Retrieved January 18, 2024, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5r30d183

Pinnock, W. (2021). *Rockets and Blue Lights* (National Theatre Edition). London: Nick Hern Books.

Pinnock, W. (2018). *The Spectre of the Slave Ship: Caryl Phillips's Adaptation for the Stage of Rough Crossings by Simon Schama*. National association of writers in education. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/current-wip-edition-2/articles/the-spectre-of-the-slave-ship-caryl-phillipss-adaptation-for-the-stage-of-rough-crossings-by-simon-schama.html

Ponnuswami, M. (2020). Black and Asian British Theatre Taking the Stage: From the 1950s to the Millennium. In *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (pp. 368-385). Cambridge University Press.

Sealey, K. (2019). Levinas and the Critical Philosophy of Race. In M. L. Morgan (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas* (pp. 635-656). Oxford University Press.