

# *The Insistence of Voices: An Interview with Caryl Phillips*

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*This interview took place on the 10 April 1999, during the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies "Colonies-Missions-Cultures" Conference at Tübingen University, Germany.*

*Caryl Phillips, you were born on St. Kitts, an island in the West Indies, but you grew up in England. As far as I know you never really went back to live in the Caribbean, but you choose to live in London and New York, which are, as critics would refer to, centres of the West. Still, you are labelled as a Caribbean writer. Here at the conference, you are labelled as Caribbean, in bookstores you are labelled as Caribbean. What do you think about that and what is your attitude towards the Caribbean?*

Well, first of all, I did spend most of the 1980s going between London and the Caribbean, and I did live in St. Kitts in 1989 and 1990. I did try to spend some time there. The Caribbean, both in the academic world and in the literary world, obviously likes to appropriate those from the Caribbean region; and there is a long history of "Caribbean authors" who are not living in the Caribbean. The Caribbean has always seen its literary tradition as diasporic, outside. Derek Walcott lives in New York, Naipaul lives in London and has done for 45 years, Jamaica Kincaid lives in Vermont, Maryse Conde, Edouard Glissant also in New York. Caribbean literature has always flourished and developed outside, but the Caribbean literary canon has always been able to accommodate and deal with this fact. So, I am quite happy to be called a Caribbean writer although I don't really feel it fully describes me. But you know, most writers who have what one might term multiple identities don't really bother to fight too hard. It doesn't really matter to me if I go to a bookstore and I am under English literature, Black British literature, Black literature, African-American literature, Caribbean literature, sometimes

women's literature (if they don't get the first name right) — it does not matter to me as long as I am in the bookstore, you know, that's the most important thing. The categories come after, but it's a very good point about the Caribbean label because I think most of the places in the world are very quick to let their writers go if they show allegiance to elsewhere. But the Caribbean because of its history, its literary history, because of the smallness of its size — has always in some respects been a little bit more generous. For instance, a Haitian writer growing up in Brooklyn is still regarded as a Caribbean writer.

*You've worked in all kinds of genres. I think you started out with drama, you wrote for the theatre, movies, film, radio, you also published non-fictional works like "The European Tribe" [1987] In the last years, however, you focused on the novel, having published six novels by now. Why was that change to the novel, is it the form expressing your ideas best?*

No. I've always wanted to be a novelist, but the first few years out of college I didn't have any idea how to write a novel. I also didn't have any money. So, I had to do something to earn money, and the easiest thing I thought of was to write — but obviously not write novels because as I've said I was serving a long apprenticeship reading and trying to understand the novel form. At that stage, in 1979-1980, it was possible at the BBC to write plays for television, or to write plays for the radio without much experience. Often they weren't very good, and often they weren't produced. But it was possible to sort of scramble a living as a freelance, doing a bit of journalism as well, and writing for the theatre. So, it was basically my other job whilst I learned how to write a novel; it took six years from when I left college to when "The Final Passage" was published in 1985. But in that time I had written for all these different genres. Once I started to publish novels I obviously continued to write for other genres because writing novels, at least to begin with, wasn't earning me a living. But it's only in the last I would say five or six years that I've really stopped doing as much work for television, for radio, and for film. I still do filmwork, I have a film being filmed next year, and I am writing another movie; but I really only work with the one company now, which is Merchant Ivory Films. As to theatre — I've bought the rights to Sam Selvon's

book "The Lonely Londoners," and I am adapting it for the National Theatre in Britain. So, I do very specific things that I really want to do and that I have some control over rather than spending a lot of time, if you like, scrambling to make money. I can sort of slow down a little bit with that because of, you know, the later novels perhaps began to sell better than the first ones.

*Right. The conference that we are at right now is titled "Colonies-Missions- Cultures." Let's look at the "mission" aspect for a moment. Turning to your books: religion plays a major role in much of your work. In the last three novels, for example, we find characters like Cambridge, the hero of the novel [1991] named after him, and Nash Williams, a hero of the following novel "Crossing the River." They both receive a thorough Christian education, and this seems part of taking them away from their roots and leads to a loss of identity and supposedly to a fatal end. The same is in a way true for the character of Othello in "The Nature of Blood." On the other hand, in "Crossing the River," for example, you have characters like Travis who is very Christian but depicted in a much more positive way. Why is that, what is your attitude towards Christianity and the Christian mission in particular?*

I have no idea. As Bénédicte [Ledent] tells me, I have an attitude towards Christianity and Religion, and I am sure she is right. I am not ducking your question, but I don't actually have a philosophical position, as it were, that I try to sneak, if you like, into the books. All I can say is that obviously one of the principal organizing factors of the whole process of colonizing — European colonizing of Africa, of the Caribbean, of Asia — was the use of Christianity. There is the old adage that you enter a people's country with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. My interest in Christianity is perhaps best characterized by the fact that I'm interested in the picture of the colonizer arriving with spiritual force and physical force side by side. And I am interested in how, for the colonized, the only way to self-expression often, the only way to literacy was by way of the Bible. So many slaves learned to read by learning to read the Bible. In a rather peculiar way Christianity was both oppressing and liberating the colonized. It was oppressing in the sense that it was an alien doctrine that was imposed upon a people. But it was liberating in that it gave people the opportunity to express themselves because it gave a certain literacy, and therefore it gave the capacity

for self-analysis and self-expression. So really, that's as far as I am able to think about it. I mean people like Bénédicte Ledent and other critics have an absolutely valuable and important role to play in going in, if you like, rummaging through the work and trying to find these threads out, but for me they are very unconscious and they don't develop much beyond that rather superficial philosophical position. You are right, she is right, other critics are right to say that there is much in my work about Christianity, but it would be hard to write about the things that I write about without at least touching upon the question of faith and the role of the Bible.

*Basically in all of your work, but especially in your last two novels, "Crossing the River" and "The Nature of Blood," you deal with suffering, suffering on a great scale. David Dabydeen pointed out in his reading, two days ago I think it was, that he was trying to aestheticise suffering in his new work "A Harlot's Progress." To aestheticize suffering so far was mainly a Jewish task, as he pointed out, and was a big issue in the debate after World War II and the discussion whether there could be poetry after Auschwitz. You are writing after "The Duke of York" [a slave ship, the events upon which are subject of one part of the novel "Crossing the River"], for example, and now you have also turned to Holocaust literature with "The Nature of Blood." Would you say that your work is aestheticizing suffering?*

I wouldn't lay claims to anything as grand as the aesthetics of suffering. As far as I am concerned, a novel concerns a group of people about whom one attempts to give voice to their experiences, and sometimes their experiences are unpleasant, difficult and painful, even tragic. One wants to render these experiences as authentically as one can, and obviously part of that is to use the language, is to use form, is to use structure with as much finesse and as much elegance as possible — that's the only type of aesthetics I am interested in, it's the form, formal aesthetics. As for the actual lives of the people — I would not want to lay claims to whether or not anybody's suffering was aesthetic or not. People who suffer suffer. The form can be aesthetic, one has to care about language, but for an individual — who are after all the bedrock, that is the substance of novels — suffering is suffering is suffering. I don't see how one

suffering can be prettier, more aesthetically acceptable than another type of suffering. Somebody who dies in a bottom of a slave ship is suffering in the same way as somebody who dies in Auschwitz. It's the same thing as far as I am concerned.

*Does it actually personally affect you to reconjure all the suffering that you write about?*

Well, yes. It takes me a while to write a book, and it takes me a while in-between. Most writers have a kind of down period when, if you like, the well is filling back up again with water in-between novels. It takes me usually two to three years of fooling around, playing golf, doing anything apart from writing because the novels take quite a lot out of me because they are painful to research, they are painful to write. They are based on character; they are not, as I said, principally based on ideas; in some sense they are very nineteenth-century. I want to hide behind the people, I don't actually have a desire to be visible as an author. I want to be invisible behind my people because it's as though I feel entrusted with their lives. If you write a novel which concerns such harrowing material as the middle passage, as slavery, as the Holocaust, it does take something out of you; and I have found that it is taking longer for the well to fill up in-between novels because I find it very painful to go back to writing after having expended so much of myself on a particular book. So, you know, my mortgage is in danger because I'm not working a lot of the time. I'm spending time doing other things because I am finding if you get close to and you are entrusted with lives that are as painful as the lives of the people, some of the people I've written about — they are part of you, then you can't just abandon them and say I am moving on to the next novel. It takes a while for you to let them leave your system.

*Referring again to David Dabydeen's reading two days ago: he said that he is feeling somewhat at unease writing about historical material. With regards to his upcoming novel which is set in the eighteenth century, he claimed that he himself has never been a slave, so he has to find a way to connect to his material — which he found by working with Hogarth's eighteenth-century paintings. Keeping in mind what you just told me about characters, is character then your approach to connect . . . ?*

Well, there has to be a beginning somewhere, there has to be a point of communication with a character particularly, as I said, if you write in such character-based material. I have to hear the *voice*. I have to hear the voice of the person very clearly and that takes a long time. I mean I can have an idea of writing a novel of say about a 25-year old woman, growing up in, I don't know, Stuttgart, in 1999; I can have that idea that she is a highly politicized woman, her mother was maybe an activist in the 1970s, her father is in the Green party, and, you know, she wears a leather jacket, she's got a stud in her nose — I know everything about her, but unless I hear her speak, I don't have a novel, I don't have a character because it will be my voice in her body. So for me it's the voice. Once I know what she would say, once I know what her response would be to somebody who said to her, you know, "Crazy bitch, why have you got a stud in your nose," once I know what she will say back, and how she will say it, then I've got a beginning of something. But that takes a long time to know somebody that well.

*Let's turn to your last novel "The Nature of Blood." It is particularly interesting for us here in Germany, I guess, for a large part of the novel is the story of the German Jew Eva and her family going through the Holocaust. It's said to be your most ambitious and daring work so far because apart from that story there are a number of others interwoven like the pretext to Othello staged in Venice, there is an anti-Semitic killing in the state of Venice in the fifteenth century, there is Israel being depicted, first from Cyprus [at the time of Israel's foundation] and then almost at present day. And in all settings, you are faced with intolerance and racism. What I'd like to know is, what was the motivation for you to construct the work the way you did it, how did you get to do it this way?*

Lack of discipline, mainly, because I always set out with the idea that I am going to write one novel about one subject with one set of characters. And then something weird always happens, you know. I sit down, I'm writing about this young German woman, and then I suddenly hear a voice from somewhere else that starts to talk to me. And I always try to push this voice away because it's generally in another century, in another place, and I am "well no, this can't work, concentrate, we are talking about the 1930s blabla, why is this person from the fifteenth century trying to tell me their

story as well?" So, eventually I submit to that, and I find a way in my own mind of linking the two together. And then of course no sooner than that's happened some black guy in Venice in the 16th century starts to tell me his story and I think "wait a minute, I don't want that, I've already got two things going on, I don't need another" — so I try to hold that at bay. So, it's a strange procedure, I mean the insistence of voices — stories which are interconnected suddenly begin to well up and declare themselves. But I do always begin with the idea of having some kind of unity of time, place, geography, one set of characters; but as the American writer James Baldwin once said, "a funny thing happened on the way to the typewriter." And that's what happens with me. I have this idea that I go to write, and then suddenly it's all gone kind of wrong, and then you have to make a sense out of it. But it makes one perfect sense in that if you are writing about Diaspora, dispossession, historical fracture, people being uprooted and displaced, then perhaps it doesn't make any kind of logical common sense to try to do it with one set of unities because then the book does not reflect the subject matter, which is dispossession, disruption, destruction. So I think that's why it happens. If I am writing about these kinds of diasporic topics then the structure will move in that direction. If I am writing a story about a little old lady who has lived in one village all her life and has never left, perhaps the whole novel would be set in that one village. But I am not. I am writing stories about people who find themselves on cattle trucks, I am writing stories about people who find themselves in ships sailing to countries that they don't want to go to, I find myself writing about people who wake up in the morning and their father is gone.

*Talking about the diasporic topic — an obvious effect of, well, bringing together Holocaust stories, life stories, and your obvious interest in slavery and the Black Diaspora is that both move very closely together. Do you actually see any principal difference between the Jewish Diaspora and the Black one?*

I see lots of differences, I see lots of similarities. I think it's probably dangerous to regard them as being parallel in any way. I mean they are similar in as much as you have two groups of people who, as a people, as a group of people, are scattered across the globe and maintain some kind of identity because of an accident of history.

You also have two groups of people who have a very powerful sense of memory. A very powerful presentiment of loss. But beyond that there are lots of differences and, you know, I think somebody could stand up and make a very good case for half an hour about the differences, somebody could stand up and make a very good case about the similarities. But for me, the principal similarities are what I've just said: this sense of having been bedevilled by an accident of history, this very profound sense of memory and loss which you find in the African diasporic community in the Caribbean, in African-Americans, you find it amongst Black people in Europe. We also find it very strongly in the Jewish community around the world. But, again, I don't think too much about the theoretical things, I just think about the people.

*You were just stressing again memory. It seems memory is really one of the most important topics you write about, being the key, I guess, to identity.*

Well, you know, it's an old adage, but it's true: if you don't know where you've come from you don't know where you are, and if you don't know where you are then you have no idea where you are going. So, you have to know where you come from, you have to understand how you arrived where you are. I grew up in Britain as a member of a so-called racial or ethnic minority, whose favourite subject was History at school, not English. Looking back now — I still I don't understand why — I really loved European history, Russian history, German, French, because that was all we were taught; we weren't taught anything about the Caribbean despite Britain having an Empire, we weren't taught about Africa, we weren't taught about India. At that stage Britain was losing its Empire, so I think there was an element of shame in British life about this aspect. All the focus was on European history, where Britain could pat herself on the back and say "we won two World Wars." We lose the football matches, but we won the World Wars. And it was a very perverse sense of history for a young Black kid because it was a history that did not include me. So when I look back now it's quite ironic that no teacher ever took the time or the trouble to say "what shall we do, something that includes Caz." You know, not literally say that, but sort of open up to the fact that Britain was changing. But it didn't. It was a history that pretended that people

who looked like me didn't exist. So once I began to write, I had to do that restructuring of myself. You teach people European history in Europe because you want people to understand where they came from, what their relation historically is to France, to Germany, to Poland, to Spain, to Portugal. But if you teach Black kids that, particularly, whether they are from India, Pakistan, Uganda, Nigeria, Trinidad, Jamaica, you're not actually teaching them their history, you are not telling them where they come from, you are not helping them. So, I had to sort of educate myself. I had to go back myself and find out. And one part, not all, but a part of the background to my fiction has been to fill in some of these things for myself, has been to go back and explore.

*How about your parents or your family, were they of any help in this context?*

That's a good question. No. The thing about migrants is that the first generation of migrants to any country, whether Britain, whether US, want their children to become British or American. They don't want their children to be confused. So the first generation migrant always arrives in the new country with the children in mind, and they don't want the children to have any cultural confusion. So they don't want to be sitting down necessarily discussing with the children the past all the time because they've come to this country so the kids can have a future. In a peculiar way a lot of West Indian parents in Britain, a lot of migrant parents in America — I teach their kids now at University there — they don't know, the kids don't really know too much about where they've come from. The parents try to protect them, but paradoxically they are actually I think in a way damaging them by not filling in what the teacher is not giving them or what the school or what the system is not giving them. I never had a conversation with my mother really, or my father, about this. When I first went back to St. Kitts I was 22, and I was with my mother who had never been back since she left as a 20 year old with me in her arms. As the plane was circling over St. Kitts to land, I looked at her — and she just burst into tears. And I knew what the problem was: it's 20 years of silence, it was too late for her to now solve it. I was going to have to discover for myself. And it was too much for her because she knew that there were things she should have told me that I was now going to discover about myself,

but the reason she had said nothing was to protect me. Ironically, it had in a sense driven me to exactly where I was then, which was on a plane with her. I bought her a ticket because I wanted her to be confronted with this as well. So, it's kind of quite ironic.

*Right. Let me ask you just one or two finishing questions. I am sure you heard that in Germany we have had a pretty strange recent discussion about a "right way" to remember which was kicked off by two things. One thing was the discussion triggered off by Martin Walser in his statement when he received the Peace Prize, and the other one is the discussion about what kind of Holocaust memorial we want to have in Berlin. Is there a "right way" to remember, and the second part of the question would be: If you were in charge of designing this memorial, how would you do it?*

I don't know if there is a right way to remember. I just think it's difficult enough to encourage people to remember in the world as it is now because people's sense of history, people's sense of wanting to make the effort to understand and digest their own history is shrinking. People want instant, accessible history, they want CNN. They want Oliver Stone making "Nixon" or "JFK," they want their history neatly packaged, easily digestible, not complex, not bothersome. You push the button, it pops up on the screen, it's all explained to you. I want people to remember, I think it's important that people remember. But I think that people should remember the complexity of history rather than just digest facts, and understand that because you *know* that in 1492 Columbus set sail doesn't mean that that's the end of the story. You have to know why he went, you have to know what it means to say "somebody *discovered* America" — what does that mean, that's a very loaded term. You have to understand so much about these dry historical facts that I worry sometimes that people feel that, ok, they don't want to remember, they don't want to know, but if they're forced to, just give me the facts, just give me the headlines, give me the CNN headlines. That's all they want to know. And so, I *do* worry. I think making the effort to remember will become a much more urgent task in the twentieth-first century because, you know, as George Santayana said, and as it is inscribed at the end of the museum in Dachau, "those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." This is terrifying, but it's true.

As to the second question, as to the memorial — I have no idea. I have no idea what I would do about that. That's a very complicated debate, I mean really complex, as the whole nature of memorials for the Holocaust is. There are plenty of books written about it, and there was a recent exhibition in New York about Holocaust memorials around the world. I don't know. I just don't know enough about the subject, to be perfectly honest with you. But it's a complex and contentious area, but not just in Germany. I mean in Germany for obvious reasons, but it will continue to be a complex area around the world. You know, in the US there is a huge furore about why there is a Holocaust museum in Washington, and why there is no memorial or museum to African-American history or life in Washington. No Jews died in any camps in the US, so why is this huge memorial, this huge important thing right downtown in Washington, DC when nobody has bothered to do anything for Black people? So these memorials, they always throw up all sorts of difficult and problematic questions. One wants to remember, but once you build something and once you place it somewhere you are making a statement which can cause more problems than it solves.