

**“I had rather to adopt a child than get it”:  
Mythical Lost Children in  
Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood*<sup>1</sup>  
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When he renounces Desdemona in one of two Shakespearean plays woven into the fabric of *The Nature of Blood*, Brabantio, with his early modern callousness, illustrates the thematic connection between *Othello* and Caryl Phillips’s late modern novel. Declaring “I had rather to adopt a child than get it” (1.3.192), Brabantio retrospectively annuls his only daughter even as he plays fast and loose with the blood line imperatives of the lost child plot. Ironically, Phillips’s Othello in *The Nature of Blood* is a chiasmic version of Shakespeare’s Brabantio. The very character whose marriage enrages Desdemona’s father in the play abandons his own child and betrays his first wife when he leaves Africa to remake himself in the fifteenth-century Venice Phillips invents for the novel. Thus, Shakespeare’s Brabantio and Phillips’s Othello fuse. Both display the same belief in human disposability and anticipate the fundamentally selective genetics inherent to the “genocidal mentality”<sup>2</sup> that links the ancient myth of the foundling to its exponentially multiplied historical corollary in the twentieth century. As elucidated by Shakespeare and challenged by Phillips’s revisionism, the lost child plot becomes a vehicle for the imposition of a male order that renders gender as well as race key players in the drive for mastery.

While the patriarchal characters in the play and novel gravitate toward the dark side of the foundling plot, Phillips himself confirms his interest in the more positive aspects of adoption in “On *The Nature of Blood* and *The Ghost of Anne Frank*,” an essay that attributes the origin of the 1997 novel to his initial confrontation with the Holocaust when, as a teenaged émigré from St. Kitts who had lived in Leeds since infancy, he learned about the extent of its abominations through a television series, *The World at War*. “Within the next few days,” he writes, “I had written my first short story,” a fiction also based on the ancient myth that governs Brabantio’s dismissal of Desdemona (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 4).<sup>3</sup>

The early parable articulates a belief in redemption shattered by the multiple plots of *The Nature of Blood*. Phillips reminisces:

The story concerned a young Dutch boy. His parents informed him that he had to wear a Star of David on his coat. This was now the law. But, of course, the boy was intensely upset to learn of this new decree, and saw no reason why he should obey. He was, after all, just the same as all the other boys. His parents tried to explain that it was not a mark to be ashamed of, and he should wear the star with pride. Reluctantly the young Dutch boy agreed. Soon after the boy and his parents were in the process of being transported to a camp in a cattle truck, and somehow the boy managed to pry open a small gap in the wall of the boxcar and leap from the speeding train. Unfortunately, he struck his head on a rock as he fell, and he knocked himself unconscious. He was bleeding heavily, and clearly he was in danger of hemorrhaging to death. Luckily a farmer, who was out working in his fields, happened to see the sun glinting where it caught his yellow Star of David. He found the boy, bandaged his head, and nursed him back to health. The boy survived.

The Dutch boy was, of course, me. A fourteen year old black boy . . . in working-class Yorkshire in the North of England. (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 6)

A “large poster of Anne Frank [sits] above [his] desk” (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 7) as he writes *The Nature of Blood*, but the hero of Phillips’s teenage fiction seems more like another girl of the same name: Orphan Annie. Phillips’s Dutch boy is plucky. Able, like the comic strip character, to “leap” out of the boxcar of trouble, he gets lucky. The Dutch boy’s Farmer-Warbucks acts both as a mother, by nursing him back to health, and as a father, by creating a pastoral retreat from the war. In Phillips’s childhood fantasy, the oppressive yellow Star of David aligns itself with the “glint” of the sun and becomes the bright shining armor that leads the boy to his knight. The adoptive farmer circumvents all thoughts about biological blood-ties and provides the resolution that makes for a

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happy ending, protecting Phillips’s early hero from the “utter numbing shock” of human cruelty (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 6).

*The Nature of Blood* contains many adoptions and fosterings that do not directly mirror the naively happy salvation that the young Jewish Dutch boy experienced. Some characters, like Phillips’s teenaged hero, begin with the expectation of mythical rescue but, unlike the Dutch boy, they are left languishing in dark variations of the ancient plot. The gulf between Phillips’s early fantasy, that racial hostilities can be overcome with a miraculous rescue, and the foundling stories in *The Nature of Blood* where the stereotypical adoptions culminate in recapitulations of loss reflects Phillips’s subsequent understanding of Europe’s obsession with blood lines and what Andrew Armstrong calls, “the recurrence of atrocity” (3). At the core of Phillips’s novel, which centers on Eva Stern, and begins with her liberation from a concentration camp at the end of the Second World War, there are many examples of fosterings that approximate centuries-old mythical patterns. No heroic farmers grace *The Nature of Blood*. In fact, adoption itself is challenged as, time after time, the adoptive ‘parents’ either literally abuse the children they pick up, or they dash their children’s expectations. Like the little boy in Phillips’s story, the characters in *The Nature of Blood* start out hoping that they will find saviors such as the solicitous Dutch farmer. Instead, they end up confronting versions of Brabantio as the plotlines become twisted in ways that threaten, rather than save, the various children.

In “Extravagant Strangers,” Phillips writes that “every writer discovers that his or her main struggle is with this one word: form” (*New World Order* 293). As he tells Stephen Clingman in an interview, “I knew I had to disrupt form” (“Other Voices” 128). Performing the permutations he theorizes, Phillips enacts his belief that “the writer who is by virtue of birth and upbringing both of and not of a society—and by extension its literature—will bend and shape [the] traditional line of the literature to accommodate this positioning.”<sup>4</sup> Through the interwoven stories that make up the whole of *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips simultaneously integrates and changes the “trajectory” of the foundling plot or demonstrates how others (like Brabantio) distort its premises. Phillips thereby intervenes with the historical inevitability to which both its princi-

pal outcomes, and its Brabantio-like variations contribute. The novel describes the material consequences of that inevitability through local flashbacks that delineate the Nazification of middle European countries after Hitler's *Anschluss* and traces the slow decline of Eva Stern's parents and sister until their deportation to the camps where all but Eva perished. The plotline makes huge chronological leaps backward to fifteenth-century Venice and two intertwining stories: one of the narrative regressions is based on an historically recorded event that literalizes and inverts Shylock's demand for a "pound of flesh" in *The Merchant of Venice*. The second chronological inversion creates a back story for *Othello* that eliminates the machinations of Iago and instead focuses on Othello's pre-Venetian life, rendering him a traitor who, having left a wife and child in Africa, strains "conveniently [to] forget [his] own family" (181): a "black Uncle Tom" (181), a "sad black man, first in a line of so-called achievers, too weak to yoke their past with their present" (182). The mythical happy endings fall apart as Phillips connects his Othello both to Eva's uncle Stephan who left his wife and family in order to immigrate to Israel before the war, and to Eva's wife-intimidated would-be lover, Gerry, who forsakes her in order to migrate back home after the war.<sup>5</sup>

Phillips's version of *Othello* posits a series of betrayals that have principally to do with the utter desolation of Eva. Like Desdemona, Eva is caught in the web of male self-actualizing projections. Similarly, like Desdemona, Eva feels doubly forsaken, first by her biological parents who let her slip through their fingers, then by Gerry, one of the English camp liberators, who promises to marry her but then returns to the wife and children he left at home. As if to heighten the effect of Eva's abandonments by her parents and by Gerry, Phillips interjects another story based on yet another phantasm: the adoption and subsequent mourning of a presumed-to-be-orphaned child who never existed. In Phillips's other historical leap backward to Venetian environs (to 1480 and the town of Portobuffole) a boy is "discovered" and then goes missing. Everybody wants to adopt the non-existent stranger ostensibly "sighted" by so many witnesses. Accused of the crime of killing "an innocent Christian boy named Sebastian New" (59), three Jews of Portobuffole

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are brought to trial and then burned at the stake. As the Christian citizens of the town begin to foster the imagined Sebastian New, he is shaped into someone worth fostering. The whole town falls in love with its fabrication.

Through its professed cannibalism of a child without a past, the Portobuffole story—and its reversion to still older anti-Semitic beliefs—presages the Holocaust and its attempt to render the Jews a race without a future. As Jean-Francois Lyotard writes:

The sufferers in the gas chambers are victims of the double bind imposed by a representable law: to have seen a gas chamber work is to be dead, unable to speak of the wrong one has suffered. The victim is one who has suffered a “damage accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage.” (5)

In the case of Sebastian New, the Jews allegedly ate the evidence. In the case of the Jews burned at Portobuffole, no one can prove that they existed. Phillips’s narrator describes the disappearance: “the executioner threw the ash into the air and it dispersed immediately” (156). Twenty two pages later, Phillips skips over five hundred years and speaks of the effects of Zyklon B in the gas chambers of the second world war: “The ash is white and easily scattered” (178). With the same dispassionate, almost reportorial, tone, Eva Stern muses about her own city: “In time, there would be no evidence that any of us lived here” (71). The narrative line of *The Nature of Blood* alternates between evidence and fantasy as Phillips weaves Holocaust histories into family narratives and tells truths about documented events that are built on myths. Finally, Phillips superannuates fiction, giving Shakespeare’s *Othello* a background that renders its African hero a child abandoner.

Influencing all the fictions are Ovidian stories that exist as ideals to be repeated in the future or as models against which present moments are judged. In that light, Phillips’s Othello and his avatars, Stephan and Gerry, recall Pygmalion and Narcissus: whether idealizing or rejecting women, they imply that women are “entirely disposable to those who profess to love [them]” (149). In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips follows the belief in interchangeable parts to its destructive conclusion in one

version of the foundling theme and then picks up on his early hope for adoptive salvation in yet another subplot. Dispelling the biological fatalism of the genre, his revisionist readings reconstruct essentialist narrative assumptions with the understanding that, in Kwame Appiah's terms, "culture talk is not so very far from the race talk that it would supplant in liberal discourse" (136). As a generic construct, the lost child plot exists at the intersection of race talk and culture talk. The plot might therefore be thought of as a 'primal' literary form that questions 'kinds' as inherited traits. This notion is supported by the last story of the book—that of Malka—in which Phillips tosses out all the prescribed 'kinds' of the lost child plot and suggests that the cultural traditions themselves—and even their variations—may still be in need of further mutations, ones not yet realized in the established scripts of our literary inheritance.

Generated by Biblical and classical traditions, revived in Shakespearean comedies and romances, stretching through the great novels of the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, the formulaic foundling plot of that inheritance involves an aristocratic child abandoned or stolen in infancy, raised by substitute parents (usually of a lower class) and recovered when the grown child is of marriageable age and can restore an imperiled dynasty with a proper biological heir. In the archetypal plots, Christ meets his Heavenly father. *Oliver Twist* comes into his inheritance. Snow White marries the prince who morphs the dwarfs. The found child is rich, royal, or sometimes even divine. The word *foundling* itself implies that the child will ultimately be returned and that the adoption is just a temporary aberration in the long history of dynasties. Otherwise the name for an abandoned or stolen child would more accurately be *lostling*. The very structure of the plot is oxymoronic: the myth demands biological truth even as the chances of recovery are more often than not totally fabricated. But when Shakespeare's Brabantio changes the story in the hypothetical "next time" he projects, he chooses to end (as Phillips's *Othello* does) in the middle of the story, rendering the adopted child more amenable than its biological predecessor. Desdemona can be replaced with any child who fits the socially constructed mold. In *The Nature of Blood*, "the practice of using blood as a barometer of acceptability" operates schizophrenically ("On *The Nature of Blood*" 6).

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Blood is at the root of the Nazi belief in the exclusionary superiority of race expressed in Himmler’s injunction to be “honest, loyal, and comradely to members of our blood . . . and to nobody else.”<sup>6</sup> But, following Brabantio’s doctrine of disposability, it is also easily ignored when it suits patriarchal whims.

*The Nature of Blood* focuses on differing versions of the adoptive middle interlude: first, the one that unites fathers and husbands, as it does in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Brabantio’s wish to change the past in order to achieve another future presumes that, through art, he can shape a child more readily in his image than he can through the nature of his blood-line. Phillips’s Othello drops his African wife and biological child and fosters the Venetian Desdemona by making a marriage that cements his standing in the European men’s club. In Phillips’s novel, the playboys of this variation of the foundling plot similarly pick up and then abandon women in order to fit themselves into images that adjust to changes in their own life situations: Gerry forgets Eva and returns to England; uncle Stephan leaves a wife and child and acclimatizes himself to the Palestine of his dreams.

These patriarchal variations are countered by mythical subplots that influence the women within the novel. The cast-off daughters and wives subconsciously project in their fantasies the Ovidian stories of Ceres and Proserpine. Thus, while Gerry and Stephan follow Othello in their narcissistic versions of adoption, Eva clings to a different, more communal, idea of nurturing, one that evokes both a parental and societal determination to recover the missing child. In Ovid’s version of the Ceres-Proserpine story, there are two women who help Ceres find her child: Cyane, lamenting the rape of Proserpine; and Arethusa, herself rescued by metamorphosis from a would-be rapist. Both women were changed into the symbol of their misery—flowing streams to match their flowing tears. Both women take up Proserpine’s cause and help, Cyane by leaving a clue, Arethusa by telling Ceres the story of Pluto’s rape. Ceres never forgets the daughter she loves and is helped in her journey of recovery by a community of women who take on her loss. Bloodlines are restored through sympathetic interventions and a belief that the lost child should not be left alone against the elements.

Such adoptions form a backdrop of expectation on the part of the women in *The Nature of Blood*. These adoptions are what Eva Stern hopes for as she struggles to continue her life after the war and they are what the women of Portobuffole offer Sebastian New as they take on his cause and relentlessly pursue the allegedly cannibalistic Jews. The mythic background in fact illustrates the slippery trope of the foundling story. What happens when the borderlines between fact and fiction are blurred both in the myth itself and in the way we assess identity? What are the effects of long-held mythological beliefs on real-life behavior? And what does the creation of reality in the compulsory essentialism of the myth have to do with the invention of reality in the Aryan elitism of the Holocaust and the subsequent denial of the genocide in the racist resurgence evidenced by the rise of neo-Nazis who claim that the mass murders of World War II never took place? As Stafania Ciocia argues, “no other episode in our past is so palpably surrounded by the fear that an improper artistic treatment of the historical facts might lead to an aestheticization of their abjection and inhumanity” (15). In light of Ciocia’s hesitation to fold the Holocaust into the annals of fiction, we need to ask whether the scale of the Holocaust’s horrors demands, as Lawrence Langer maintains, “a scroll of *inhuman* discourse to contain them, and [whether] we need a definition of the *inhuman* community to coexist with its more sociable partner before we can inscribe [them] in historical or artistic narratives that will try to reduce them to some semblance of order” (105–106)?

Langer’s questions are important, especially when posed to a work of fiction that seems to create such a “semblance of order,” a set of imagined actions and historical reactions, with measurable consequences. By weaving in and out of a literary genre and establishing parallel antecedents and corresponding pairs—Othello / Brabantio; Eva Stern / Sebastian New; Gerry / Uncle Stephan; *The Merchant of Venice* / *Othello*; classical myths / twentieth-century repercussions—Phillips seems to be consciously “ordering” his universe. But beyond the design of *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips raises a fundamental question about the normative plot on which his patterns are based. Is there not something in the very narratives Langer insists should remain sequestered from the



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Holocaust and its atrocities that instead feeds into them? Can we address the concerns Ciocia raises by viewing Shakespeare and the myths that inspire him as cultural analogues for, rather than as pristine alternatives to, what went so terribly awry in the middle of the twentieth century? While the psychologist narrator of *The Nature of Blood* probes the “psychic numbing” (174) of Holocaust survivors by asking how they can “remember and move on” (157), Phillips himself seems to be asking of our tendency to isolate recent cataclysmic events from anything that came before them: “how can we move on and *not* remember?” Attaching his Holocaust narrative both to actual historical events, and to accepted literary genres, Phillips reads backward and forward to offer, as Stephen Clingman so aptly puts it, “a crucial definition and alternative: of a *transnational* view of identity, inseparable from a transtemporal view of history” (“Forms of History and Identity” 162). How do those old stories render the new ones inevitable? How are all our cultural scripts, as Appiah writes, “shopsoiled by history” (ii)?

For Phillips, memory involves an understanding that our contemporary experience connects to our mythological past and that such an understanding requires us to read that past from the retrospect of its historical repercussions. In *The Nature of Blood*, he illustrates how language systems that bypass the alterity of sexual and genealogical perspective in favor of a seamless patriarchal prerogative make themselves felt in *Othello* and in the parallel stories of Gerry and Stephan. Though there seem to be divisions within those linguistic structures, they are in fact replications of an original construction whose early modern influence on Shakespeare’s play collapses racial divisions into gender issues. In Phillips’s presentation, that fusion had disastrous results in the middle of the twentieth century. The death of a few Jews in Portobuffole prefigures the death of millions in the Second World War and Desdemona augurs Eva. In Eva, Phillips has created a character who forces us to see that what we think of as unbelievable—the massiveness of the Holocaust murders—may in fact be ascribable in terms that we have been using all along.

The only character in *The Nature of Blood* who refuses to fit the mold and who resists the culture in its entirety is Malka. She doesn’t appear

until the very end of the novel in the incident that cemented Phillips's feeling that "the practice of using blood as a barometer of acceptability is very deeply ingrained in the European consciousness" ("On *The Nature of Blood*" 6), and that "in the face of overwhelming evidence the mythology of homogeneity not only exists, it endures" ("Extravagant Strangers" 288). Bound by race to Othello and by gender to Desdemona, Malka turns the racial and national divisions of *Othello* against themselves by remaining defiantly outside the entire European *mythos* and its patriarchal biases. Contrarily, Eva seems trapped by her belief in the tradition as she keeps searching for someone who—like Ceres—would protect her from the overwhelming social forces rendering her losses culturally inevitable.

**Mythical Expectation: "Why did you not come and look for me?"**

Phillips presents two scenes between Eva and her mother that illustrate how Eva's myth-inspired belief in parental sustenance enables her to tunnel out of her desperation. In the first, she appears as Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, preparing for her future life; in the second, she begins as Hermione—retreating in order to preserve herself—and ends as Desdemona, claiming ownership of her death. At the opening of the novel, Eva still believes in the possibility of a saving community. When she imagines her mother alive again, she exhibits both the incredible faith of the foundling convention and its essential sense of loss:

I was expecting [Mama] to return, for I never truly believed she had gone. And now she is back. I hold her hard and encourage her to tell her story once more [. . .] 'But Mama,' I ask, 'why did you not come and look for me?'

Mama looks sad now.

'They told me that you were dead, and I believed them.'

I touch my Mama's face, her lips, her eyes, her nose. I stroke her wisps of hair. Mama is back with me. I can now begin to plan a future for both of us. (35–36)

In this reversal, Eva first plays mother to her mother, as "Mama" describes her escape into "another hut" and abandonment—"they left her

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for dead” (35)—by the very people who took her in. Eva’s initial questions about the details of her mother’s survival echo those of Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*: “Tell me mine own, / Where hast thou been preserv’d? Where liv’d? How found / Thy father’s court” (5.3.123–23)? But, when Eva switches roles again, she speaks as the lost child, questioning her mother’s lack of faith. Her mother is not, like Hermione, a Ceres willing to suspend all life until her daughter is found. Eva cannot move forward without an explanation of why her mother stopped looking for her. Planning the future depends on a presumption of maternal solicitude—a tenacity of love—in which her mother, like Hermione, “preserve[s] herself” to see the issue” (5.3.127). Fortified by that imagined return, Eva invents a tableau out of the myth, and recovers from her loss by dramatizing the recognition scene so crucial to the foundling plot.

In the second instance, Eva posits a past in which, like the hero of Phillips’s early story about the Dutch boy, she attempts to flee with her mother from the pursuing Nazis and to resist for her mother their attempts to restrain her. In this recognition scene, Eva casts herself once more as mother to her mother, but this time, both escape the misfortune they have already lived and experience the salvation promised in the foundling plot’s resolution. That future lies in the death Eva chooses. Mother and daughter emerge—one to the other—as the saving community. Eva fashions herself after Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale* and Ceres in Ovid, who both use the cover of disguise, playing dead or causing blight in order to see the “issue” of an imagined rebirth. Hiding from the dogs hounding her family, Eva’s one concern is to protect her mother:

Eva offered her Mama a thumb to suck on and waited, and wondered if, lying here in the vast expanse of this platform, the soldiers might mistake them for a mound of abandoned garbage. . . . And then the creaking of the ladder as the soldiers mounted its rickety structure, and the triumphant shouting, and the laughter, and then she felt the warm thuds as the bullets found scraps of flesh in which to nest. (185)

In this fantasy, Eva turns the tableau of the founding plot recognition scene into the protective disguise of the middle interlude, using the figure of the recovered child and restored parent to confound her enemies. Coming later in the literal time sequence of the novel but reliving in imagined space a scenario, which would have preempted all the suffering Eva actually survived, this dream follows the episode describing Gerry's abandonment in England. At the moment her love is rejected Eva imagines herself shielding her mother from the parental and romantic disappointment she herself has lived through. Mimicking in her protective cover the very identity her betrayers force her to assume, she seeks to deprive them of the satisfaction of reducing her to nothingness. "Abandoned garbage," mother and daughter hide themselves as remnants of a past life simultaneously as, in the "mound" of an open grave-site, they prepare themselves for an anticipated burial. Through that hibernation—mother sucking daughter's thumb, daughter encircling mother's body—they also appear pregnant with each other. Like the creature that plays dead in order to stay alive, mother and daughter deploy their dehumanization in the abandoned mound as a pre-humanization, the stage before their entry into another life. Bonded together by mutualizing their plights, their imagined death becomes a signal for rebirth. As the bullets drive seminally through their bodies, the "scraps" of their flesh cohere to enable their metamorphic emergence from the "nest." Eva's imagined death (which precedes her actual suicide) returns her to a belief in the possibility of a nurturing parent and a loved child. Restored in a mythical union, Eva and her mother protect and sustain each other.

The burial in the mound also precedes Eva's evolution from the worm of Gerry's serpentine appearance through the cocoon of her retreat until she emerges the "butterfly" (194, 197, 198) of her final metamorphosis. No longer bearing the imprint of male artistic vision, the imagined freedom of Eva's butterfly transfiguration is possible only through the suicidal choice she makes. The precipitating image that links romantic and parental betrayal corroborates a circular connection that Eva always felt. Earlier, when she finds the body of the married woman, Rosa, who shared the hiding apartment with her family and who took her own life because her husband was deported, Eva's reaction to the forsaken

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lover is the same as that for the foundling child—a one-word sentence: “Abandoned” (70). In both the love plot and the lost child plot, the sense of helplessness persists, rendering the Nazis and their racial policies subsidiary in their impact to the genealogical and sexual wounds. Betty Jean Lifton explains how it might be possible to compare “cumulative adoption trauma [to] the cumulative trauma of child survivors of the Holocaust. . . . To a young child the pain and deprivation may feel similar. [All survivors] share a feeling of being abandoned, alone, and powerless” (77).<sup>7</sup> In terms of the separation anxiety paramount to Eva, Phillips himself argues, “suffering is suffering is suffering” (Eckstein 37). To Eva, the personal feelings—not the political ones—repeat the abjection she experienced when she was released from the camps: “Now there seems to be just me and the night and the sky” (24). There is no protective barrier, no parent to shield her from the monumental indifference of the universe. Ironically, this overwhelming sense of vulnerability hits her just at the beginning of her relationship to Gerry, compounding the symbiosis between child abandonment and romantic betrayal.

If there is a double version of Eva’s foundling plot, so too there is a double revision of the plot in the two Venetian flashbacks: the story of Sebastian New and that of *Othello*. The early modern stories illustrate, first, that mythical expectation can be annulled by fabricating the loss and that the life-link in the myth can be actualized (as it is for Eva in the end and for Desdemona in the play) only through a death-wish. In the Portobuffole subplot, Phillips tells us a story presumably based on history, in which such a recovery is impossible because the loss is invented. We are faced with the spectre of a fabricated conclusion from a false start: *ekphrasis* without a visual antecedent. As he moves backward from the Holocaust foundling story to the early modern event, Phillips hints that Sebastian New is a sign invented to displace other signs, the history of a people. His story—the invented picture of a child—turns real people into imagined ones, signs without an original. If Sebastian New is retroactively invented and subsequently vanquished, the Jews of Portobuffole, like their Holocaust counterparts, disappear totally; all resolve themselves as “white” ash. “Valueless,” Eva muses toward the end (168). Women lose the signifying markers of gender. “Her full breasts,

soon to disappear. An imaginary pebble near the nipple, distorting the length. Then the sack will shrink. Shorter. And then she will become a man. No breasts. Plumes of smoke" (169). As women fuse with men and so forfeit the maternal capacity to propagate the future, so all peoples disappear. White ash and "plumes of smoke," the Jews evaporate.

The invented foundling child who never was merges with the real child who disappears. Sebastian New is Eva now. He is nothing to begin with. She is nothing to end with. The legend opens with the expectation of return. The women await their husbands demobilized from a war sounding like the very one which Othello fought in the other racial story of the book. The year is 1480, the city a suburb of Venice; a young beggar boy enters the town and asks directions to the Jew Servadio's home. Rumours build from the brief sightings of the boy until a village "story" takes shape:

There was no doubt that the boy had entered the house of Servadio. . . . The image of the poor boy was clear, but the name was missing and then one old woman retrieved his name from the corner of her mind. His name was Sebastian. The Jews had killed a beggar boy named Sebastian, and the precise details of this monstrous crime were on everyone's lips. The Jews had killed an innocent boy named Sebastian New. They had dared to make a sacrifice in the Christian town of Portobuffole. (59)

Out of these rumours of an un-named child comes the sacrifice of the Jews and a named adult, Servadio, waiting to become unnamed, identified only as a murderer. The alleged crime becomes a real crime. Burning for burning: Old Jew, Servadio, for young Christian, Sebastian New.

The novel begins and ends with the vision of Palestine peopled by the orphans of the war, already inhabited by the uncle of the central character, Eva Stern. Uncle Stephan immigrated to Palestine before the war, letting his wife and children drift to America, where they felt safe from their Jewishness. In the opening scene, an orphaned teenager — Moshe—asks Stephan a question about genealogical continuity, a natural question given his ruptured past:

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‘Do you think I will find a wife?’

I laughed now.

‘Moshe, you will be able to choose from hundreds of pretty women.’ (8)

Moshe’s story unfolds into one of hope as Stephan promises that the boy will find a life for himself in Palestine with a marital love that substitutes for the parental love forever lost. The narrator refers to an American postwar fantasy, that of the camp director, Mr. Bellow:

Mr. Bellow took a special interest in these young people—the orphaned and the unattached, as he called them—both boys and girls who were too old to be placed with families, yet too young to be treated as adults. . . . *We must endeavor to treat them as though they were our own lost children.* He could have saved his words, for most had already been quietly recruited by armed emissaries from Palestine who regularly infiltrated the camp. The majority of the ‘orphaned and unattached’ were now *Haganah* trainees, secretly preparing themselves for a life of military service in the underground army. (4–5)

In *The Nature of Blood*, one war leads to the next. Bellow’s “lost children” shift their allegiances and find in the Haganah the family feeling they lost. The army becomes a revenge mechanism, an instrument that replaces biological ties with an attachment to the brotherhood of the underground.

Toward the end of the novel, Eva remembers a day in the park with her sister whom she hopes to recover after the war. Here the childhood fantasy is lost even as image. Eva and her sister speculate about marriage in the same way as Moshe does, imagining themselves into familial normalcy. Only Margot’s question was posed before the war, Moshe’s after. Her retrospection in the memory sequence is tainted by what she lived through as her reality overtakes the childhood dream. There is no recoverable circle. The innocent past is effaced and remains only as memory. In the fictional “reality,” the man entrusted to save Margot rapes her. In Eva’s postwar fantasy, that unknown fact nevertheless dislodges her memory. The wished-for children bear silent witness to Nazi brutality:

Margot and I sat together in the park and watched the small children playing on the grass with their parents [. . .] How many babies do you want, Eva? [. . .] I want to have three children. Three boys. Or three girls. Or four, maybe[. . .] We sat together and watched as the mothers led their children away. And then, in the distance, as the final boat nudged up against the jetty, and the park became enveloped in darkness, I saw the man take away the older children and walk them to a large ditch, where one by one they were thrown into the fire. Having dispatched the last child, he walked back to where the infants were huddled with their mothers. One by one, he picked them up by the legs and smashed them against a brick wall. The pulped corpse of the infant was then pushed back into the mother's arms to prevent unnecessary littering. I saw Margot standing with three dead babies in her arms, the blood flowing freely from their crushed heads. They were boys. Dead boys. (192–93)

Eva's projected future now involves the inevitability of the severed dream. Childhood expectation is erased. The wartime blood-pulped corpse fills in for the imagined family. The dream child vanishes in the stream of not-lived life and the real child floats away in the bloodily wanton stream of smashed connections.

In *The Nature of Blood*, there is no normal future, no recovery for loss. The love plot merges with the child plot as Eva's initial temptation to withdraw from isolation fills her with separation anxiety for the sequestered existence in the camps. Befriended by Gerry, a member of the liberating English army, Eva is both hopelessly attracted by his attention to her and confronted by an inner sense of disbelief that she is in any way a woman at all, that she is nothing but a "skeleton[] facing men" (12). The English man offers her an apple:

'Anything you need, you know that you have only to ask.' He pulls an apple from his pocket. I saved this for you.'

Gerry holds out his hand and I take the apple from him. Thank you.



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He fidgets slightly. I watch him as he sways first left, then right, and then on to the outside edge of his boots. . . .

‘You can smile you know.’

He laughs as he says this. He doesn’t know that, should I attempt to smile, my face would break clean in two. (23–24)

Gerry tempts and Eva/Eve accepts the apple, knowing that it sets a bind of obligation for her. Taking the apple compels her to begin a life she cannot trust. In his shift, Gerry emerges as a serpent, moving “first left, then right, and then onto the outside edge of his boots.” Like a parent coaxing a child to mimic him, Gerry urges Eva to smile. But that demand leads only to a sense of fragmentation, a feeling that the helpful hand is hurtful. The serpentine extension becomes a whiplash, cutting Eva’s face in two. The nurturing parent sinks downward into the snake in the garden, the long tail of terror that leaves Eva feeling utterly alone in a vast universe. There are no buffers for war orphans.

At the end of the novel, Eva is pulled to England in the belief that Gerry offers a sustaining hand, a parent who might help her find her lost sister and a lover who might allow her to recover her womanhood again. The racially motivated evil of the camps is replaced by the personalized evil after the camps. The snakes slither away and Eva becomes what the Nazis wanted her to be: invisible, a wisp that will vanish. But, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, she is betrayed by the snake who offered her the apple. When she finally reaches England, she discovers that Gerry already has a wife there, the woman who greets her at the door of his house.

Finally, Gerry levels with her:

‘The wife. Well, I told her you were a bit crackers. I’m sorry, but I had to tell her something.’ Please, Gerry, do not do this to me. Do not be somebody else now that you are back home. . . I watched him go. I don’t want to be hurt again. I won’t be able to survive being abandoned again. Not again. Through the window, I saw people snaking along the evening street. (195)

For Eva, all London flows into, and hooks onto, the reptilian Gerry. “Snaking along the evening street,” everyone betrays her. When, in his parlance, Gerry “crack[s] a smile” (194), he proceeds to characterize her as “a bit crackers” (195) and contributes to the breakdown that signals her death. Her initial feeling of splitting in two with the offered apple now becomes the catalyst of her final disappearance. Confined to a hospital after she falls apart, she imagines herself totally disappearing. Refusing to speak, she is metamorphosed. The materiality of Gerry’s worm in the cocoon of their earliest encounter precipitates her evanescence as she becomes an extension of his desire to make her disappear: “I scrutinize the doctor’s face, but then I realize that he cannot see, on my shoulder, the butterfly that I have become” (197).

The doctor who treats her in the hospital uses her as a case study in his definition of psychic numbing: “*Naturally, their suffering is deeply connected to memory. To move on is to forget. To forget is a crime. How can they both remember and move on*” (157). The doctor’s analysis is correct. How can Holocaust survivors proceed with normal lives after what they have experienced? But for Eva, who attempted to move on, the step forward pushes her back into the abyss of betrayal. Gerry’s act of wishing her away fuses with the Nazi desire to eliminate her. Personal and political abandonment feel the same. The dream of Margot’s dead babies comes just at this juncture, in the hospital, because it is there that she discovers that the life she anticipated as a young girl can never be realized. And, similarly, it is there that she becomes aware that the promise Gerry offered—the tempting apple itself—leads to her violent expulsion from the narrative. She didn’t exist in the story. Like the Jews of Portabuffole, she is expendable, a butterfly at the vanishing point. It is the double deception that hurts. She is always outside until, finally, she metamorphoses and flies outside the cocoon of herself.

Phillips’s invented story, that Othello already has a wife, that Othello “adopts” Desdemona and Venice and therefore is disposed to disposability, renders the failure of fidelity the source of disappearance: “My friend, the Yoruba have a saying, the river that does not know its own source will dry up,” (182). Liquid life, associated with generational continuity, is cut off in *The Nature of Blood*. Water evaporates into airy

nothing—the butterfly, the ashes—or thickens into blood—the slimy inescapable inherited liquid. In the book’s central story, Gerry betrays Eva by letting her slip, like water, between his fingers. Margot is similarly betrayed by the “hiding parent” who rapes her: “In the morning she awoke to discover her nightgown gathered about her waist, and her face bathed in the thin spokes of light that filtered around the edge of the curtains” (176). Light “bathes,” merges with the flood-waters, and washes over individuality. Naked below the waist, Margot prepares for being put to waste, “naked among naked strangers” (176). Her italicized questions speak to her imminent sense of triple abandonment: (“*Did you think of me that morning as I stumbled naked and shivering toward my death? Did you think of me?*” 176). Is Margot’s question directed at her biological parents, her hiding parents, or her sister? What she feels is a sense of being nothing to all of them. In the end, she becomes just that: nothing to no one. She is turned to ash and “scattered.” Phillips’s description of Zyklon B precedes this section. Chronicling historical events in the present tense and disintegration in the future-perfect tense, the narrator suggests that the white ash is always about to be scattered, poised toward extinction. And citing the liquid element—the African river Othello traded in for the Venetian canal, Margot’s drenched body, and uncle Stephan’s seaside epiphany at the close of the novel—Phillips connects water to evaporation and vaporization, the same disposability he finds in Shakespeare’s play.

Desdemona’s story predicts what happens to Margot and Eva; it foreshadows their disintegration in the material world. But the novel closes, as it opens, with uncle Stephan who, like Phillips’s Othello, is the betrayer of family, the man who walked out by choice. The narrator writes, “He was definitely leaving his wife and child and returning to Palestine” (213). Like Othello’s, Stephan’s decision to abandon his familial past so that he might live in another story is at the root of narrative disposability. While Othello becomes the other nation, Stephan chooses to become his own. But that choice, too, leaves him stranded and rootless. In the last section, Stephan, the white man, allies himself with Malka, the black woman, the Ethiopian Jew, in the second chiasmic inversion of Shakespeare. In Stephan’s fantasy she is like Desdemona in Othello’s

eyes (“monumental alabaster,” 5.2.5). Malka “was carved like a statue” (211).

We find Malka thinking in Othello’s images as an alien in an adopted culture. But, whereas Othello voluntarily left Africa, Malka was pulled out of her homeland. While Othello assimilates into Venetian society, Malka defies colonization:

This Holy land did not deceive us. The people did. The man at the hostel, he said to us, ‘Welcome my black brothers and sisters. You are helping us to understand what we are doing here.’ Is this true? Are we helping you? I know what a stamp is. I can use a telephone. I, too, can turn night into day by simply pressing a switch. I wear shoes. I have seen a highway. But please. My people never killed themselves. Hunger, yes. Disease, yes. But never this problem. During Passover, we kill a lamb and sprinkle its fresh red blood around the synagogue. But not here. You do not allow this. You say you rescued me. Gently plucked me from one century, helped me to cross two more, and then placed me in this time. Here. Now. But why? What are you trying to prove? (209)

Transplanting the Ethiopian Jews, the Israelis turn them into Othellos, the sophisticated inviting in the primitive, but the reasons are ostensibly the reverse. And, while the rhetoric is “you are helping us,” the Israelis see the airlift as a way of bringing the “savage” Ethiopians into the contemporary world. That “plucking” from one century to the next becomes in fact an irrevocable betrayal, like Othello’s of Desdemona, into a future that has already happened. Transplanting place means transposing time. Malka and her family enter the twentieth century and acquire by that move all the accoutrements of a European present: “I know what a stamp is. I can use a telephone” (209). But Malka is Othello with a difference. She refuses to acclimatize. She is also Desdemona with a difference. She recognizes that western culture promulgates a death-wish. Resisting all efforts to be molded, Malka subverts the expectations of her adopters, undoing a subplot Brabantio might expect. And there is no happy ending. The European Israelis do not really accept her as their

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own. She and the other Ethiopian Jews fail the blood-line test that legitimates the child in the main plot of the foundling theme. The specific news item inspiring Phillip’s invention of Malka—the dumping of Ethiopian blood donated to Israeli hospitals during the summer of 1995 that reminded Phillips about “how appallingly circular history can be” (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 7)—is absent from *The Nature of Blood*. But Malka’s ruminations nevertheless reveal “the racism of Jews toward their own black people” (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 7).<sup>8</sup>

The novel’s inversions (Israelis rescuing Ethiopians, Ethiopians serving Israelis, suicide / sacrifice) keep pointing backward to the violations that simultaneously fuel the symbolic expectation and disappoint it. The plot line collapses in the same way as Stephan lets go: the children just slip through his fingers. Stephan embraces Palestine instead of his wife and children. The Sterns give Margot up to the saving parents. Gerry drops Eva and replaces her with Iris, the waitress in the teashop. Acts of sacrifice and acts of selfishness merge and substitution displaces feeling. “Eventually, Gerry accepted that his infatuation with the [tea shop] girl was leading him nowhere, but it had served the function of removing Eva from the front of his mind” (179). The narrator comments about Othello: “you conveniently forget your own family, and thrust your wife and son to the back of your noble mind” (181). Only Malka remains the defiant alien, uncompromisingly herself.

In the concluding equivalent of the Othello story, with its reversal of race and generation, Stephan has an epiphany that comes too late: “He understood that people are not made to live alone, neither when things are good, nor when they are bad” (212). The wooden bench by the sea in Israel transports his thoughts back to the bench in the European garden, where Margot and Eva are playing but where he cannot hold them. Like his wife and daughter, they fall out of his grasp. “Uncle Stephan watched as they skipped away and left him alone on the bench, his arms outstretched, reaching across the years” (213). Finally, like Giacometti’s statue, “Invisible Object” and the French play on its name, “Mains tenant le Vide / Maintenant le Vide” (“Hands Holding the Void / Now the Void,” Stooss and Elliott 154), Stephan, arms outstretched, offers nothing and contemplates the emptiness of his life from now on.



*Alberto Giacometti, "L'Objet Invisible," 1934–5, Fondation  
Maeght—Saint Paul, Photo Claude Germain, © 2005 Artists  
Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADGAP, Paris*

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In this tableau, an inversion of Giacometti’s black mother-lover, the white father-husband recognizes what he never gave and what, from now on, he will never be able to hold. The “statue” he imagined Malka to be freezes him and, Medusa-like, locks him in the void he made of his emotional life. Malka’s story jams all the arteries of the foundling plot and suggests that somehow even the familiar subplots are in need of revision.

Early on in the novel’s *Othello* story, we see how the conventions of the plot were already skewered in Shakespeare’s play. Phillips’s Othello contemplates his wife and puts himself in the subject position of Desdemona’s father:

I now possess an object of beauty and danger, and I know that, henceforth, all men will look upon me with a combination of respect and scorn. I also know that never again will I be fully trusted by those of my own world, both male and female, but some of this I have already anticipated. For she who has now lain with me, and before her God declared herself to be of me, this will be her first taste of a bitterness to which she may never accustom herself. That she is entirely disposable to those who profess to love her will never have occurred to her. (148–49)

Othello’s sense of entitlement—his “possession” of Desdemona—renders him a double-edged yet powerful object as well. (“Men will look upon me with a combination of respect and scorn.”) Objectification has a domino effect. He becomes someone to fear and to hate, someone who, he himself affirms, has already betrayed a trust. When Othello looks at Desdemona, he first repeats Brabantio’s initial right of ownership. (“She is now mine.”) Then he becomes Desdemona’s father (“[She] declared herself to be *of me*”). Finally, he echoes Brabantio’s right of dismissal. (“She is entirely disposable to those who profess to love her.”)

But the narrator interprets Othello’s situation somewhat differently. He offers a double scenario. In the first hypothesis, Othello is an “Uncle Tom,” too eager to accommodate to Venetian mores; in the second, he is already Venetian, part of the coalition that puts gender over race as the significant demarcation. In both cases, Othello abandons his African

family: in the former to insinuate himself as “shadow” by playing into the rules of a new society; in the latter to behave identically as Venetians always do, collaborating (as a “figment”) in the elaboration of the sexual and genealogical regulatory pattern. In the “shadow” play, Othello is the “wide-receiver,” slipping into a tertiary role in the male establishment, tracing the “moves” of its female minion:

And so you shadow her every move, attend to her every whim, like the black Uncle Tom that you are. Fighting the white man’s war for him / Wide receiver in the Venetian army / the republic’s grinning Satchmo hoisting his sword like a trumpet / You tuck your black skin away beneath their epauletted uniform, appropriate their words (*Rude am I in speech*), their manners, worry your nappy woolen head with anxiety about learning their ways, yet you conveniently forget your own family, and thrust your wife and son to the back of your noble mind [. . .] You are lost, a sad black man, first in a long line of so-called achievers who are too weak to yoke their past with their present; too naïve to insist on both; too foolish to realize that to supplant one with the other can only lead to catastrophe [. . .] My friend, the Yoruba have a saying: the river that does not know its own source will dry up. (181–82)

Othello dismisses his past and abandons wife and child to a narrative from which he exempts himself. To attempt to cross the river is to double cross it, to fail to yoke the past to the present. Like his war, his love makes him the woman to Venetian men. He “appropriates their words” not by overtaking them but by accommodating himself to the Desdemona who gives birth to the Othello she marries. The “shadowing” process is threefold: first, as sleuth, Othello follows “[Desdemona’s] every move”; then as duplicative imitator, he mimics her; finally he becomes her spawn, black negative of her white alabaster, nesting inside her monumental being. In terms of the replacement ethos of the book, Othello is “too foolish to realize that to supplant one with the other can only lead to catastrophe.”



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If the happy ending of the traditional foundling plot depends on never forgetting (never letting one thing stand in for another, or the art of the finding family substitute for the nature of the biological family), then Othello, as the narrator describes him, is the precursor of both Uncle Tom, the betrayer of his race, and uncle Stephan, the betrayer of his family. Othello fails because he relies too much on self-creation and ends up condemned as a “figment of a Venetian imagination” (183). That puzzling epithet relates to the narrator’s final indictment of Othello. Denying his origin in order to match his invention, Othello’s accommodation itself is to an invention: an image created by defining the self in terms of another originally defined by the self. Like Stephan who mirrors the unyielding statue of his own design, Phillips’s Othello has no existence other than as a spin-off of his own image making, just as Eva has no existence apart from the shadowy butterfly that prefigures her death.

For a brief moment, however, she comes to believe in the saving grace of adoption, psychologically living out the subplot of the theme and finding a place freed from the hierarchical structures that doomed her to abandonment. Bypassing both the art of Brabantio’s interchangeable parts and the nature of the usual plot’s too often fabricated restoration of an inherited dynasty, that belief centers on a variation of the convention. Of his own journey in writing *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips concludes that the “fragmented obsessional task . . . had enabled me to achieve a moment of temporary reconciliation with the young Dutch boy of my story of twenty-five years ago and to repay a small part of the personal debt I owed to the remarkable young girl in Amsterdam” (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 7). Phillips thus uses the foundling theme with an understanding that he says derives from music, particularly Beethoven’s sixth symphony. “I can whistle that whole symphony *now*. . . . I know every single moment, because it’s about how you score emotion basically—how you move and keep a theme going. You keep going forward, but [you keep] remind[ing] us where we’ve been; there is a viable parabola (Clingman, “Other Voices” 130). In Eva’s butterfly transformation and Phillips’s memory of his early story, both leap—out of a cocoon,

from a speeding railway car—in order “to remind [themselves]” of a past thought forever lost.

Such imagined recoveries revise the middle interlude of the foundling convention, not as an artistic invention of an immobilizing force but rather as a pastoral of the mind, peopled with noble Dutch farmers and saving earthen mounds. Both returns are fabulations, versions faintly connected to reality but doomed from the start because the plot itself depends on the authority of blood lines which, in turn, become part of the ideology that led to the mid-twentieth century horrors structuring Phillips’s narrative. But if Phillips plays variations on “form and structure” (Clingman, “Other Voices” 130) throughout *The Nature of Blood*, in the creation of Malka (who refuses to be drawn into any theme), he offers another possibility, a reformulation of the form itself. The traditional ending of the foundling story recovers an essentially conservative foundation that depends on returning to the *status quo ante*. But Malka’s resistance takes its shape through a “a strategy of opposition” that works “from within the very terms by which power is elaborated” (Butler, “How Bodies Come to Matter” 279) in order to assert a new subjectivity, one that interrogates the hierarchies of those differentiating forms to “dislodge them from [their] prior and known contexts” (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 162). In emphasizing the fact that Eva finds herself only in death, Phillips demonstrates how her escape is confounded by the limits of western culture: all the excitement of metamorphosis is reducible to a shadow; all the recoveries in the variants of the foundling theme reiterate a false hope. But through Malka’s insistence on remaining outside the circle, Phillips reveals, as Luce Irigaray writes, “a fault-line in the construction of history” that suggests the “growing entropy of our socio-cultural organizations” (135). Malka’s unfinished story demands a different formula, a re-founding that augurs “a change in the horizon itself” (Irigaray 145). It is toward such a new beginning that Phillips’s remarkable novel threads its way through the devastating material consequences of the western mythological heritage.

## Notes

- 1 My thanks to Erin Wunker for her astute and imaginative editing.

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- 2 Robert J. Lifton and Eric Markussen’s term for the “cast of mind that created and maintains the threat of nuclear weapons” and that defines “the general nature of nuclear entrapment and then seeks insight from a major genocide that has already taken place” (1).
- 3 Stephen Clingman also quotes this essay, “Forms of History and Identity in *The Nature of Blood*”: 144–145.
- 4 Bénédicte Ledent (*Caryl Phillips* 173–74) cites this quotation from “The Insistence of Voices,” an interview by Lars Eckstein as an example of Phillips’s inclination to “enter into a dialogue with the past and to transform the apparent void of history into the vigor of the future” (*Caryl Phillips* 167). The section of the Eckstein interview Ledent quotes does not appear in the *ARIEL* article.
- 5 Ledent reads the characters of Othello and Stephan much more positively: “Of the three consciousnesses explored in the novel, Stephan is the one who most successfully manages the labyrinth of his own existence” (“A Fictional and Cultural Labyrinth” 189).
- 6 As quoted by Peter Haidu. Haidu explains, “Himmler’s discourse is *unheimlich* because it reproduces, with all nuances and paradoxes in place, the discourses we know as the discourses of poetry, policy, of idealism and religion, of administration and bureaucracy” (292).
- 7 Lifton is arguing here about Binjamin Wilkomirski’s much disputed memoir, *Fragments*, which DNA evidence has now proven to be a fraud.
- 8 Phillips writes, “According to the [*International Herald Tribune*], it appeared that black Jews in Israel had been giving blood in the hope that it might be used to save somebody’s life. However, the Israeli government, fearful of ‘diseases’ that might be contained in this blood, had instructed the medical teams to dump the ‘black’ blood. The secret practice had now been exposed, and the black Jews were rioting and demanding that this racist practice be stopped. I could barely believe what I was reading. This, it turned out, was the story that would enable me to put the final piece of the narrative puzzle into place and finish my novel” (“On *The Nature of Blood*” 4).

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