

A State of Interdependence: Caryl Phillips and the Postwar World Order

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Abstract: This essay examines Caryl Phillips' second novel, *A State of Independence*, suggesting that it is often left out of critical accounts of Phillips' career not only because of its formal simplicity, but also and primarily because of its ambivalent representation of the United States. Considering the novel's critical reception within the broader patterns of postcolonial literary scholarship, the essay argues for a reading of the book that emphasizes its measured evaluation of U.S. influence in the post-independence landscape. In doing so, it ties the novel's concerns directly to Phillips' later work and career while proposing that his entire oeuvre can be seen to suggest a mode of critique far more attuned to the affective, political, and economic nuances of global U.S. power than is normally encouraged by postcolonial critical paradigms.

Keywords: Phillips, Caryl; imperialism (United States); neocolonialism; postcolonial criticism; Caribbean literature (English)

Caryl Phillips' 1986 novel, *A State of Independence*, is something of an anomaly in his now extensive and well-regarded canon. Elena Machado Sáez observes that this novel "is a work that has often been overlooked in the course of Phillips's writing career" (23), and she goes on to postulate that the conventionality and clearly autobiographical features of Phillips' second novel may lie at the root of critics' relative diffidence about the text.¹ Machado Sáez's sense of the novel's uncomfortable fit within certain modes of postcolonial critical discourse is surely a discerning one. A limpid chronological account of the return of its protagonist, Bertram Francis, to his island of birth (modeled closely on St. Kitts, but never

named as such) twenty years after having left for England on scholarship and a few days before the official declaration of independence, *A State of Independence* provides very little of the exhilarating formal satisfactions to be found in Phillips' later, more lauded novels, including especially *Higher Ground* (1989), *Crossing the River* (1993), *The Nature of Blood* (1997), and *A Distant Shore* (2003). These later works enact the diasporic concerns most often associated with Phillips' writing in palpably formal ways, juxtaposing characters, places, times, and modes of communication as a means of conveying the insistently multi-layered junctions and disjunctions of human lives caught up in a world in which mobility and deracination seem increasingly impossible to ignore.² Often eschewing even the faint whiff of the autobiographical in their adoption of narrators and focalized subjects remote from Phillips in gender, race, time, and nationality, the bulk of Phillips' fictional output takes on such a shape, embodying in both content and form a type of border-crossing cosmopolitanism frequently held up as an emblem of the contemporary postcolonial world.³ Indeed, in an interview with Kevin Rabalais, Phillips himself endorses a narrative that emphasizes a shift between his early novels and their more formally complex successors:

With *The Final Passage* and *A State of Independence*, I felt like I had done something that was reasonably conventional in terms of chronology. After that I didn't want to mimic the form. I wanted to push the edges of how you tell a story. . . . I wanted to keep pushing at the boundaries. Luckily, the subject matter that I found myself dealing with kept demanding that I address the issues in the stories with something that was more formally challenging than before. (175)⁴

Along with his first novel—*The Final Passage*, an immigration novel loosely based on Phillips' own parents' journey to England—Phillips' second novel is portrayed here as apprentice work, merely a prelude to Phillips' more mature concerns and abilities. This narrative of authorial development suggests, in keeping with Machado Sáez's view, that the perception of *A State of Independence* as an artistically inferior, mundanely autobiographical text causes it to be downplayed in many critical accounts.⁵

For Machado Sáez, a further contributing factor to the novel's lack of critical prominence is what she terms "the novel's overtly cynical rendition of a migrant subject," which "acts to disrupt celebratory diasporic readings of Phillips's fiction" (23). This assertion, however, seems a less straightforward one to confirm. For one thing, readings of Phillips' more overtly diasporic and cross-cultural novels are not uniformly celebratory, even if this may be a familiar strain of criticism. For example, Brad Buchanan has made the case that, in his portrayals of cultural collision, Phillips "finds little to celebrate and much to lament," such that, Buchanan concludes, Phillips' works overall advance the view that "'hybridity' as a concept is still deeply marked with the sign of colonialism" (187).⁶ The editors of a recent volume of essays on Phillips suggest in their introduction that there is in fact a longstanding critical debate about his works' overarching disposition toward the situations of alienation and deracination that they portray. Presenting the discussion in terms of "whether the writer has an optimistic or a pessimistic take on life," Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca assert that this is "a question that has intrigued Phillips critics for years" (xvi), and a general survey of the criticism suggests the presence of scholars who, to different degrees, register the productive critique—neither stoical quietism nor unproblematic triumphalism—to be found in Phillips' writing.⁷ That is, the awkward, unresolved quality of the migrancy Machado Sáez rightfully perceives in *A State of Independence* is not necessarily distinct in kind from that which characterizes Phillips' other work. What *is* distinct about the awkwardness is that the novel focalizes it through a solitary character—the protagonist, Bertram Francis—rather than through a diverse set of juxtaposed and overlapping figures more characteristic of Phillips' oeuvre. This formal choice, rather than the cynicism in the characterization, then, is what would seem to make the novel less amenable to the transnational, transcultural strain of postcolonial criticism.⁸

One of the most unique and crucial aspects of the narrative is the fact that it is Bertram, a native-born Caribbean man, who is the primary focus of the novel's withering critique. Thus, not only does the book disallow the reader from diffusing the burdens of responsibility for migrant alienation onto a larger, transhistorical cast of differently

culpable characters, it also concentrates its ire on somebody who is (class notwithstanding) traditionally envisioned as the admirably resistant ex-colonized subject.⁹ In this way, *A State of Independence* complicates the enactment of another, more anti-colonial strain of postcolonial criticism as well.¹⁰ Critics have grappled with this aspect of the novel in varying ways. Petra Tournay, for example, suggests that Bertram should be seen primarily as an imperial tourist, someone whose view of the island partakes of “rhetorical conventions commonly associated with colonial discourse” (220). Placing Bertram complexly but firmly on the colonizing side of the colonizer-colonized divide, Tournay’s reading emphasizes his “foreignness and powerlessness” (230) while holding up “the newly acquired confidence of the locals” (229) as the salutary, valorized counterpart to Bertram’s compromised civic legitimacy. Though convincing on many levels, this reading almost entirely overlooks the overt presence of American hegemony portrayed in the book, reducing the focus of its critique to a conventional Caribbean-British binary that seems untrue to the novel’s anguished engagement with manifestations of United States neocolonialism.¹¹

Alternatively, critics have read Bertram as a new type of colonized: the victim of American power in the region. Ulla Rahbek, for example, presents the novel as an unremittingly bleak statement about the categorical collapse of Caribbean independence: “The utter failure of Bertram’s Garveyite dream of black self-sufficiency, the proud display of American cultural and economic neo-imperialism and the widespread political corruption underline the state of *dependence* characteristic of the island and the islanders” (87; emphasis in original). Ledent, too, despite paying some attention to the ambiguities in the novel’s portrayal of the United States, nevertheless maintains that for Phillips “the post-independence political structures are simply a copycat reproduction of the former colonial rule, with the added danger that they take on the guises of democratic leadership and thereby leave people fewer holds for criticism” (45). Although astute in noting the subtle and profoundly important distinction between the old and new systems of power, Ledent’s account is content to leave this distinction in the background, emphasizing instead the unwavering continuities discernible in the “substitu-

tion of multinational capitalism for the former plantation economy” (45). In these examples, critics seek to capture the novel’s politics of resistance through a distinctly oppositional binary, arguing that Bertram is either a colonizer of the old British type or the colonized in a new American system. In one reading, the United States is largely left out of consideration, while in the other, the U.S. slips smoothly into Britain’s place as the imperial oppressor, simply taking up where its predecessor left off. In what follows, I will suggest that neither approach captures the critique or the ambivalent embrace of American power suggested by Phillips in *A State of Independence*, and that it is in fact the uncertain role the novel attributes to the United States that makes for its uneasy fit within the conventional modes of postcolonial criticism.

The United States occupies a contentious and unresolved position in postcolonial studies. Viewed with suspicion because of its institutionalizing power vis-à-vis the field, the country is also nevertheless a crucial, enabling site for postcolonial critical practice, a fact not unrelated to the justly celebrated rise of ethnic and race studies in American universities. Outside of this self-reflexively sociological register, however, postcolonial scholars typically treat the United States simply as the center of new imperial power. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, arguably the founding text of the field, inaugurates such a stance. In the opening pages of his introduction to the book, Said suggests an almost seamless historical continuity between European and American hegemony in the East: “From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once did” (4). Said reinforces this structural congruence shortly thereafter, describing Orientalism as a “system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign-service institutes) from the period of Ernest Renan in the late 1840s until the present in the United States” (6), and he continues to characterize his object of inquiry as “European and then American interest in the Orient” (12).¹²

Said’s book’s persistent slippage between “European” and “Euro-American” comprises a largely unproblematized political orientation

toward the United States that has persisted in postcolonial studies to the present. Anne McClintock's 1992 "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'" represents an early and influential instance of the tendency to draw direct parallels between the historical practices of British imperialism and more contemporary political practices led by US power. It finds an important echo thirteen years later in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, whose editors begin their introduction with the assertion that "The shadow the 2003 US invasion of Iraq casts on the twenty-first century makes it more absurd than ever to speak of ours as a postcolonial world. On the other hand, the signs of galloping US imperialism make the agenda of postcolonial studies more necessary than ever" (1). In a more recent iteration, Neil Lazarus' *The Postcolonial Unconscious* praises the passage cited immediately above for urging postcolonial scholars to "take central cognisance of the unremitting actuality and indeed the intensification of imperialist social relations" led by the United States in the contemporary world. Lazarus goes on to provide a long passage from Jonathan Schell arguing that the US "is seeking to reinvent the imperial tradition and reintroduce imperial rule" and then asserting the remarkable "similarities between the old style of imperialism and the new" (qtd. in Lazarus 17).¹³ While entirely laudable in political intent, such views have a tendency to elide salient differences between UK and US dominance, even to the point of characterizing all instances of colonial power as undifferentiated Anglo-American imposition.¹⁴ *A State of Independence*, however, suggests the need for a much more nuanced assessment of the workings of U.S. power in the contemporary world, offering a capacious view of how both British and American allegiances have been deployed by islanders in the post-independence period.

The novel was written in the wake of the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, the United States' most blatant violation of sovereignty in the English-speaking segment of what it patronizingly considers its "back-yard." As Louise Yelin argues, *A State of Independence* emerged directly out of Phillips' conscious engagement with a post-invasion Caribbean political terrain in which the United States was unquestionably in control ("Living State-side" 85).¹⁵ Phillips relates in an interview with Kay Saunders that the novel was influenced by his presence at the ceremony

in which St. Kitts and Nevis became politically independent, a matter of weeks before Operation Urgent Fury was undertaken in Grenada by U.S. forces. Talking about this context with Saunders in 1986, Phillips names the ceremony as something of a sham: “I just kept thinking to myself: ‘This is nonsense because already the place is completely infused with American colonialism’” (45). Given this genealogy, and in keeping with the analyses of Ledent and Rahbek, it becomes easy to read *A State of Independence* as a straightforward condemnation of the hegemonic presence of the U.S. in the region. However, as Phillips himself observed in that same interview with Saunders, acceding to this substitutive logic does an injustice to the facts of historical change: “It’s not good enough to conceive of history in terms of ‘Slavery and here we are now—Toyota’” (51–2).¹⁶ Read with an eye toward this injunction—and perhaps a glance toward Phillips’ own evolution into a New York-based U.S. citizen—*A State of Independence* can be seen to advance something considerably more than a reflexive dismissal of U.S. power as neocolonial repetition.

Without question, the book is concerned with critiquing naïve discourses of sovereign self-rule in a region hugely shadowed by U.S. dominance, and it uses its protagonist Bertram as a figuration of this discourse at both a personal and national level. As Richard F. Patteson observes, the “title *A State of Independence* refers as much to Bertram Francis’s state of mind as it does to political conditions on his native island” (125), and this reference is clearly ironic in orientation.¹⁷ However, Phillips’ critique is aimed primarily at Bertram—or, reading allegorically, his island birthplace—for his unthinking, almost adolescent desire for a dubious type of independence. In the novel, it is not so much the external oppression that is held responsible for this unpromising state of affairs but the internal dysfunctions that allow that oppression to hold sway. Such is made clear enough by the novel’s four epigraphs. The first is a quotation from a Marcus Garvey speech to St. Kittians in which he exhorts the island’s residents toward political self-actualization: “If you don’t do it other men will do it for you. Your country can be no greater than yourselves” (7). The next two are taken from St. Kitts newspapers—one identified as the government newspaper, the other as the opposition

newspaper—revealing a level of partisan journalism that has degraded into demeaning insult and *ad hominen* attack rather than addressing anything substantive. The final epigraph, taken from the novel itself, quotes Bertram’s nemesis, the government minister Jackson Clayton, who testifies to U.S. dominance of the island, claiming that the islanders are “living State-side now” (7).¹⁸ The epigraphs thus progress from a statement of principled vigilance and responsibility to one of craven, self-serving quietism: though they acknowledge the rise of U.S. dominance, their ordering points more forcefully toward a sense of betrayed promise in the residents and political leaders of St. Kitts itself. While Bertram’s status as returning exile complicates the allegorical link between personal and political responsibility, the novel ties the two closely together throughout, such that his flaws—and their potential amelioration—must also be read at the level of the national body politic. In neither case can the state of affairs be attributed solely or perhaps even primarily to external causes.¹⁹

Over the course of its narrative, the novel condemns Bertram for his ill-considered desire to be entirely free from all social and historical ties. Indeed, it quickly emerges that he has not been in contact with his family for the entire two decades of his absence and only finds out about the death of his younger brother after his arrival. Expecting, somehow, to be welcomed back home after such a protracted period of self-chosen alienation, Bertram is shown to be both callow and callous: his exile in England ultimately serves as the novel’s model of a selfish, self-contained sovereignty. In describing his life to his mother, Bertram emphasizes the sense of freedom leaving home seemed to offer him: “England just take me over. New things start to happen to me, new people, like I was born again and everything is fresh” (85).²⁰ However, the damage caused by this “independence” from everyone is emphasized throughout the novel, which ultimately suggests that Bertram’s “self-centredness is such that he is unable to assess the extent to which his uncaring behaviour might have affected people around him” (Ledent 49). Over the course of the novel, Bertram continues to ignore his ill mother’s needs, neglects to ask after his neighbor’s family, and generally resists answering any difficult questions asked about his reasons for doing what he has done. This

last tendency appears most insistently in his interactions with his old flame Patsy, and it is established as foundational to Bertram's worldview when the narrative describes his reaction to Patsy's breaking up with him before he leaves for England. Without responding to her as she ends their relationship and walks away, Bertram retreats into his own personal space:

Bertram stared out over the sea and into the distance. . . . Then he played a game with himself that he often did when disturbed. He would pick out a spot on the horizon, focus on it, then close his eyes and try and imprint it on his mind. Then he would reopen his eyes and look again, and try to pick out a spot beyond it, close his eyes, imprint, then open his eyes again and try to look even further beyond that spot. This way he was trying all the while to see further into the distance so that he might one day see another island that nobody else had ever seen, and then proceed to people it with persons from his mind so that he had his own world that nobody could touch. (97–8)

Bertram's escapist fantasy of a personal autonomy is conceived provocatively in geographical terms, and as Patteson has observed, it also seems to be "informed by the terrible solipsism of the imperialist" (126). Thus, Phillips makes clear that the issues of viable independence with which Bertram struggles throughout the novel find a parallel in his island's attempts to assert its own political sovereignty. More importantly, both are impugned for their intensely monadic, particularizing drive.

The novel is primarily concerned with undermining the legitimacy of such singular pursuits. As several critics have noted, the novel casts immediate doubt on the independent nature of the island in its portrayal of Bertram's arrival at the airport. In the arrivals lounge, Bertram catches sight of a sign:

Welcome to Rum'n'Sun.

And beneath this sign hung a second, and more assertive,
placard.

INDEPENDENCE. Forward ever – Backward never. (11–2)

The positioning of the signs—a hollow, sloganeering claim about independence, superseded by a marker of the island's subordinate position within a tourist economy—speaks eloquently to the novel's suspicion of any simplified rhetoric of independence, and its pointed comparison of the immigration officer with a plantation worker “who had spent the day occupied with stressful manual labour” (12) brings the message home with even greater clarity. As Bertram walks along the road to his mother's home upon arrival, the novel looks askance at the assertions of autonomy of one of the island's smaller sister islands, ostensibly Anguilla, discussing how the island had agitated for a dubious “freedom” (which Phillips puts into quotation marks) and archly relating how “the British secured for this island its own sovereignty” (21).²¹ The novel is also littered with small, ironic signals that the much lauded independence is hardly worthy of the name, such as signs advertising Princess Margaret opening the island's “new” hospital (54) and the presence of British gunboats just off the shore “ready to fire their independence salute” (137).

Bertram's personal politics are treated similarly, most visibly in the book's portrayal of his unthinking repetition of canned slogans about starting a business at home that, in his words, “don't make me dependent upon the white man” (50). This hoary slogan of racial independence is mocked as naïve by both his mother and Patsy, the novel's two most valorized characters.²² In the initial scene in which Bertram broaches his ill-formed plan of starting such a business, Phillips indicates his protagonist's immaturity by emphasizing the emotional and intellectual gap between him and his mother: “It was only now that it became clear to Bertram his mother was speaking to him with an open contempt. And he discovered himself answering her with the polite manners of a schoolboy, as opposed to the self-assurance of a thirty-nine-year-old man” (50). Mocking his plans mercilessly, Bertram's mother “laughed, at first with confidence, then with more control as though unsure if the fragility of her body could support too much humour” (50). She then meets his contrived speech about the “only way the black man is going to progress in the world” (51) with a decisive local counter-example that essentially undermines his stance. In this scene, Bertram's mother is shown to possess self-control, humor, knowledge, and experience, in

stark contrast to her son. Bertram fails to answer his mother's pertinent question about progress—exculpating his silence by his assumption that his mother “had already switched off from him” (52)—but goes on to reveal the irony of this accusation with his next question, in which he asks her about his brother, who unbeknownst to him has already been dead for some time. Thus, Bertram is shown to be living in a puerile fantasy world, disengaged from any sense of familial responsibility and unaware of the social reality around him. The novel conveys similar judgments in his conversations with Patsy. When he first professes to Patsy his desire to “establish [himself] in some kind of comfort that don't rely upon the white man” (93), Patsy is simply puzzled.²³ When it comes up in conversation later, Patsy has just expressed incredulity at Bertram's inability to understand why his mother might be upset. Again, Bertram is figured as a child, as Patsy upbraids him: “Bertram, you're talking foolishness, and I can't believe a grown man like you don't realize so” (141). Bertram's foolishness is also revealed in his entrepreneurial plans, which Patsy immediately describes with facetious scorn, suggesting to Bertram that all will be well “after you open up the black man's business that bound to make you come a millionaire in a few weeks at most” (141). Thus, Bertram's simplistic dreams of returning “home” as if nothing has happened in the intervening twenty years are roundly discredited. In depicting Bertram as childish and out of touch, Phillips suggests that his protagonist's isolationist rhetoric of sovereignty is unable to account for the true complexity of the contemporary situation.

Indeed, Bertram seems ill-prepared to deal with the intricate combination of old and new, familiar and strange, through which he is obliged to navigate over the course of the novel.²⁴ For Bertram, the most jarring contribution to the changed order of things on the island is the decisive influence of American business and culture, a phenomenon that disrupts Bertram's binary vision of power and deprivation. As the novel progresses, he is confronted with a Chicago Bears t-shirt here, a bar bill figured in U.S. dollars there. This phenomenon is directly linked to the book's denigration of the island's putative autonomy: as Jackson, Bertram's old friend and now government minister admits privately, the idea of independence is merely notional, since, as he tells Bertram,

“what you must realize is that we living State-side now. We living under the eagle” (112).²⁵ Jackson, it emerges, styled himself Jackson X earlier in his political career and has become rich running a business that imports reconditioned Japanese cars from the United States. He represents one side of the book’s portrayal of the American footprint on the island. His unhesitating, self-serving embrace of life “under the eagle” is the focal point for the novel’s critique of neocolonial dominance facilitated by native political elites, as Jackson is seen to manipulate anti-British Americanism almost solely for personal gain. Lauding “Miami, not your precious London” (112) as the most important major city for life on the island, Jackson, Bertram realizes, is simply a newer, glossier version of power, someone who advocates a type of “modernizing” change that serves only to exacerbate the same old inequality. As Bertram thinks to himself: “Of course the island had changed, he was not blind. There were bigger buildings, foreign vehicles, video shops, American news magazines on sale, a Pizza Hut, but all this was in the capital. Nothing much seemed to have changed in the country. . . . But for people like Jackson, a wealthier Baytown probably indicated a healthier island” (114). Phillips thus employs Jackson to illustrate how the American presence has allowed certain privileged neocolonial powerbrokers to pursue consumerist pleasure under the auspices of island-wide national advance.

Importantly, however, there is another side of American influence that emerges in the novel. This more redeeming aspect is figured in Patsy’s nineteen-year-old son, Livingstone, who, the book makes clear, was almost certainly fathered by Bertram just before his departure for England. At their first encounter, Bertram is taken aback by Livingstone’s Americanized appearance, uncomfortably noting that “his hair was relaxed and sheened in the manner of prominent black American entertainers, and from his neck dangled a pair of black wraparound sunglasses on a thin fashionable cord” (101). The younger character’s identification with the United States has been seen by some critics as a bleak testament to “Livingstone as the dead end of Bertram’s seed” (Machado Sáez 36), someone who is slavishly devoted to a foreign culture rather than recognizing value in his homeland. Phillips himself has suggested something of the pessimism of this view in his discussion of the character’s name:

“That’s why I call the kid in *A State of Independence* ‘Livingstone.’ It does suggest that there is a new beginning; whether that beginning is going to be correct or whether the island is going through another kind of awful exploitative rebirth is anybody’s guess. But . . . the clue is the name, ‘Livingstone.’ I don’t think they are going anywhere” (Interview by Kay Saunders 50).²⁶ Although taking a decidedly dim view of the prospects of renewal here, Phillips nevertheless carefully qualifies his assessment of his character, allowing that the beginning Livingstone could represent is still an open question—“anybody’s guess”—and phrasing his final conclusion in terms of a personal hunch. This caution about advancing a definitive outsider’s view can be gleaned from the narrative strategies of the novel as well: as John McLeod has argued, in *A State of Independence*, Phillips seems “conscious that he cannot articulate the islanders’ lives and perspectives on their terms, or assume to access with ease their points of view. . . . Phillips acknowledges his position by making questionable the expatriate perspective of the island as articulated by Bertram” (118).²⁷ Moreover, to dismiss Livingstone entirely because of his violation of cultural-national orthodoxy would itself violate one of the cardinal aims of Phillips’ work: “to write in the face of a late-twentieth-century world that has sought to reduce identity to unpalatable clichés of nationality or race” (*New World Order* 6).²⁸

As the novel’s figuration of the future, Livingstone is clearly portrayed as a moral, considerate, hard-working young man. He has a menial—but in the straitened terms of the island’s economy, perfectly good—job working as a groundskeeper at a newly opened hotel, The Royal Hotel, itself an ironic combination of British and American traits.²⁹ For Livingstone, nevertheless, the United States represents economic mobility and opportunity, not colonialist oppression. Indeed, he wants to emigrate there, admitting as much to Bertram in their first conversation: “‘I think I prefer America,’ said the boy. ‘New York Yankees, Washington Redskins, Michael Jackson, you can’t want for more than that.’” (103). While the novel is leery of Livingstone’s cheery romanticization of American cultural plenitude—the “I think” signals his lack of concrete experience—it nevertheless takes seriously the important role American style plays, as well as the economic aspiration America

legitimately inspires. Certainly, Phillips makes clear that Livingstone's economic assessment of his own position is unassailable. Even Bertram plainly recognizes the limitations of Livingstone's situation vis-à-vis employment—"the boy was clearly proud of his job, so Bertram tried to look pleased" (103). Despite this recognition, Bertram tries half-heartedly to convince Livingstone to stay, questioning both the urgency and the rationale of the young man's desire to emigrate: "It seems like a good job to me. Why it is you're in such a hurry to leave?" (103). Failing to register the parallels between his own youth and Livingstone's present circumstances, Bertram is negatively portrayed by Phillips as an almost reflexive nationalist without the suppleness of mind necessary to grasp or relate to his younger counterpart's complex reality—Livingstone's situation is similar to that of Bertram twenty years before, a detail only enhanced by the strong suggestion of Bertram's paternity.³⁰ Just as Britain held an undeniable attraction for Bertram in his youth, the United States now attracts Livingstone, and if the novel does not wholeheartedly embrace the notion of emigration, neither can it endorse the simple stay-at-home nationalism discovered belatedly, not to mention conveniently, by Bertram. Thus, Phillips suggests that, whatever its uses by people such as Jackson, the United States also functions as an important site of aspiration, both culturally and materially, for some of the island's residents.³¹

In this way, *A State of Independence* presents a state of affairs in which America functions in variable and uncertain ways. On one hand, it is clearly perceived as a malignant force on the island. In the bitter assessment of one character, the barman Lonnie, the US is the new center of gravity for those who want to exploit the island. As he expresses the contemporary situation to Bertram crudely: "if you really want to make some money in this country you best butter up your backside with some bendover oil and point your arse toward New York" (131). On the other hand, the novel reveals that American influence has decisively affected the material quality of life on the island—unequally, to be sure, but inarguably nevertheless. Although Bertram disconsolately notices that many things have stayed the same on the island—indeed, the government, with the help of Barclay's Bank, merely renames the usual car-

nival grounds Independence-ville for the upcoming independence celebration—some have undoubtedly improved. The bus—“clean and modern and trimmed with well-shined chrome” (55)—that Bertram takes to town reflects the new US-driven prosperity, as well as the influence of that country’s automobile culture. Moreover, the cultural reach of the US affects not only Livingstone and his generation, but also, as Bertram recalls, his own adolescent development, when he and his friends watched American westerns, absorbing “the geography lesson of the movies . . . the same movies they took their school nicknames from” (56). Thus, the US presence emerges as both ambiguous and historically dense, irreducible to caricature as exclusively an *arriviste* colonial power.

This multifaceted depiction of the United States affects the role of Britain in *A State of Independence* as well. The perfidious Jackson is the most vocal anti-British voice in the novel, dismissing Bertram as an “English West Indian,” one of those undesirable lackeys who “let the Englishman fuck up your heads” (136), all in order to consolidate and justify his own position of power and his old rivalry with Bertram. Meanwhile, the support for the hospital (and, arguably, the naval defense) that the UK conspicuously provides in the novel is hardly a pure exemplar of imperial exploitation. In the complicated contemporary world depicted in *A State of Independence*, a simple, reflexive oppositionality to *either* perceived imperialist force does not appear to be a valid response. Indeed, the novel suggests, shows of strictly categorical cultural rejection, however useful in their time, should give way to tactics that recognize an unavoidable state of cultural *interdependence*: the proper response cannot be simply to reject or embrace American influence but to somehow work within the competing claims of the Caribbean, the American, and the British, among others.³² As Phillips has remarked, it is Patsy who speaks most pertinently to the novel’s ethical demands because she “realises very early on, something which is implicit in the title: there is no such thing as a ‘state of independence,’ either for the country or for them as individuals” (Interview by Kay Saunders 48). For Phillips, “The whole notion of being independent in the Caribbean is what screwed it up for many, many years” (48) and ultimately, he asserts, “It comes back to the notion of responsibility and inter-dependence which

is what is desperately needed in the Caribbean" (51).³³ From this angle, then, *A State of Independence* attests to the need for a far more flexible, pragmatic, and accepting stance toward the lineaments of power in the post-independence Caribbean world.

The novel's ending underscores its insistence on a complex vision of contemporary cultural negotiation. As the novel closes, Bertram leaves the rather debased independence celebrations and walks back towards home, a crucial moment of decision that contrasts with the aimless drinking and sleeping that have characterized his time on the island thus far.³⁴ Bertram first walks by a figure of past rebellion, Buddy, "a man who was already a legend in his own lifetime" (156). Buddy had become famous via a brazen act of anti-colonial resistance: "He ordered and disposed of a large and expensive meal, then he calmly asked the waiter to put his bill on the Governor's account" (157). Bertram remembers that based on this act, "Buddy's place in Sandy Bay folklore was secure" and he subsequently subsisted "as a man who, if he talked for long enough, you would be happy to give a cigarette to, not in the hope that he might go away, but because of the pleasure of his anecdotes" (157). Now, however, Buddy represents a sad sight "as he cowered by the side of the road" (157), unkempt and destitute. Crucially, although Buddy sits with "his mouth open as if ready to speak" (156), he remains silent: the novel emphasizes that "he said nothing," repeating this flat description at the beginning and ending of Bertram's fleeting encounter with him (156, 157). The tattered, threadbare fate of this formerly celebrated raconteur is poignantly symbolic at this moment in the text, suggesting that the old defiant tactics of opposition are no longer effective, even if their basis in poverty and exclusion remains.

These lingering inequalities are emphasized immediately after, as Bertram walks past some abandoned sugar mills of uncertain future and reflects on the ambiguities of history, memory, and commerce arising out of the island's colonial past. In the midst of this rumination on enforced Britishness, he looks up to see a man "threading wires from telegraph pole to telegraph pole, as though trying to stitch together the island's villages with one huge loop. . . . That evening the people would receive their first cable television pictures, live and direct from

the United States” (158). Bertram’s reaction is to “wave courteously” to the workman, turn away to spit, “grinding the spittle into the Tarmac with the tip of his shoe,” and then carry on homeward thinking of how he can reconstruct a meaningful life with both his old and newfound family (158). The careful balance between conscious personal courtesy and visceral scorn, between the overtones of American cultural imperialism and the possibility that the cable wires will unite the island in a new way, and between the oppressive patterns of the past and the potentialities of a new beginning, convey the novel’s insistence on purposefully eschewing the easy comforts of stark, shallow Manichean allegiances.³⁵

The ambivalent portrayal of the United States in *A State of Independence*, then, should be seen as Phillips’ initial foray into articulating what he later formulates as a “new world order,” the nature of which is described in his essay collection of that name: “The old static order in which one people speaks down to another, lesser, people is dead. The colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place we have a new world order in which there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none” (*New World Order* 5).³⁶ Susceptible neither to the seductions of celebrating a transnational global equality nor to the political charms of the customary colonial binary, Phillips’ vision marks a careful, critical course between these two poles, offering a potentially useful model for postcolonial criticism in the process. Certainly, Phillips has had to come to terms with the United States—his primary home now since 1990, and one to which he now belongs as legal citizen—in increasingly knotty ways. As he tells Clingman in an interview, his initial relocation to the U.S. dramatically changed his worldview:

It began to make me realize that I didn’t have to see questions of identity solely as I had been viewing them—in very colonial, if you like, or very post-colonial terms. The ley-lines that I was looking along had very much to do with that old map. Being in the United States made me realize that these same issues were present here, albeit in a different guise, and they were obviously impacting on my life, and so suddenly, I think the

old . . . struggles that came from being in Britain were being fused with some new questions, which came from being in the United States. (114)

Phillips' subsequent writings testify to the way in which, as he tells Clingman, political judgments get "complicated by North America and other parts of the world too" (122). His 2005 novel *Dancing in the Dark*, for example, offers a sympathetically imagined account of the simultaneous turmoil and exhilaration experienced by the Bahamian-born performer Bert Williams as he rises to stardom in the US by making himself up in blackface and acting out a variety of demeaning racial clichés. Phillips' latest collection of essays, *Color Me English* (2011), provides a similar sense of agonized engagement with both the pleasures and perils of American affiliation. Although stridently critical of the aggressive tendencies of US foreign policy and its hysterically heightened domestic security, Phillips' essays nevertheless preserve a sense that the country cannot be reduced to this aspect of its behavior:

For much of the twentieth century this great nation of immigration, reinvention, new beginnings and, yes, freedom for so many people has managed to maintain its vigor and enthusiasm. But it has done so, in part, by averting its eyes from the stain of genocide and slavery at the inception of the republic, and the bullying and posturing that have characterized its adventuring in other people's countries throughout the entire past century. (49)³⁷

Alert, perhaps inevitably, to the injustices wrought by his adopted country, Phillips nevertheless also insists on recognizing the regenerative capacities visible in both its history and the prevailing ethos of its founding.

A State of Independence, in registering careful distinctions between the various ways in which the U.S. might be perceived by Caribbean people, intimates the need for a carefully textured understanding of the workings of US power in contemporary times.³⁸ In doing so, it remains true to the overarching goal of Phillips' fiction, which, in his own

words, seeks “to wrench us out of our ideological burrows and force us to engage with a world that is clumsily transforming itself, a world that is peopled with individuals we might otherwise never meet in our daily lives” (*Color Me English* 16).³⁹ Deceptive in its formal simplicity, the novel paints a complicated, sympathetic picture of an island enmeshed in social change occurring at numerous levels, asking its readers less for a pat analytic solution than for the recognition of how bewildering yet familiar such a situation can appear to those who are in the midst of experiencing it. In a review of an academic book that theorizes a seafaring black Atlantic world, Phillips reveals his commitment to the complexities and confusions of the individual and the empirical, observing that

“the black Atlantic” world is one that neither the individual seamen nor their respective communities would have recognised. It is only by looking back through the long telescope of history that we are able to impose order and coherence on a universe that would have appeared irreconcilably fractured to the black individuals who were trying to ride its powerful and adverse currents. (*Color Me English* 80)

In a similar vein, we might read *A State of Independence* in a way that asks us to reconsider the order and coherence achieved by the conventional critical equation of contemporary US power with its imperial British forerunner. This, in turn, might better allow recognition of the creative potential and undeniable allure of an American culture differentially marked by the inheritances of imperialism and perhaps even the possibility of a *British*-inflected cultural opposition to American hegemony, revealing a world in which political opportunities, as well as the dangers of political opportunism, can arise from multiple, sometimes surprising directions and in myriad, often unexpected forms.⁴⁰

Notes

- 1 As will be clear from the discussion below, several critics have focused attention on *A State of Independence* since Machado Sáez published her piece. Nevertheless, the gist of her contention still holds true.

- 2 The structure of essay collections such as *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) and *A New World Order* (2001) also supports the dominant sense of Phillips as an avatar of the border-crossing diasporic subject. Both sets of essays delineate an ultimately rootless arrangement of itineraries across Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean—the cardinal points of the Atlantic slave trade.
- 3 Machado Sáez focuses her critique regarding the reductiveness of autobiographical readings of the novel on Bénédicte Ledent's monograph on Phillips. For a compelling example of the possibilities of reading Phillips' work in productive conversation with his life, see Rebecca L. Walkowitz's "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer." In it, Walkowitz aptly suggests the highly self-conscious relationship Phillips upholds between his life and work, observing that "Phillips presents his books both as products and as philosophies of migration" (535). See also Louise Yelin's recent "Plural Selves: The Dispersion of the Autobiographical Subject in the Essays of Caryl Phillips."
- 4 Phillips has elsewhere suggested that *The Final Passage*, published in 1985, is in some ways experimental (see interview with Clingman). Renée Schatteman likewise classifies all of Phillips' fiction as formally inventive "with perhaps the exception of *A State of Independence*" (50).
- 5 Although Machado Sáez does not focus her discussion on *The Final Passage*, that novel's more traditional theme of migration to the metropolis from the colony may allow it to fit more easily into various critical rubrics, perhaps especially that of immigrant literature, than *A State of Independence*. Ledent's monograph discusses the two novels under the category of "early fiction," arguing for Phillips' third novel, *Higher Ground*, as the turning point into his more maturely sophisticated style (54).
- 6 Moreover, Buchanan includes *A State of Independence* prominently in his analysis, presenting it as of a piece with the rest of Phillips' oeuvre.
- 7 Ledent herself is probably the most influential of such critics: her book on Phillips, although undoubtedly inclined toward a more recuperative stance, does not shy from noting the tensions and ambiguities evoked in Phillips' writing. Exemplary versions of this kind of balanced reading also include Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi's "Beyond the 'Global Conversational Babble': Diasporic Conversation in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground*" and Michael Rothberg's "Fractured Relations: The Multidirectional Memory of Caryl Phillips."
- 8 See also Timothy Bewes' "Shame, Ventriloquy, and the Problem of Cliché in Caryl Phillips" for an intriguing, polemical, and theoretically laden take on how Phillips' work resists the conventional protocols of (especially) postcolonial literary critique.
- 9 It is important to note here that the partial critique of the colonized or ex-colonized is not especially unusual in Phillips' work. The example of the unnamed narrator of "Heartland" in *Higher Ground*—an African man who acts as an interpreter for European slavers—is perhaps the most famous example. The distinc-

- tion of *A State of Independence* is that this critique is not modulated or complicated by exposure to the experiences, or even thoughts, of other characters.
- 10 As various critics have pointed out, the paradigms of postcolonial criticism can be split roughly into two opposing camps—the Marxist-oriented, oppositional model that finds its roots in anti-colonial activism, and the more culturally oriented, border-crossing cosmopolitan mode that takes its cues from poststructuralist theory. See Leela Gandhi for an early influential statement of this view and Neil Lazarus for a recent, provocative reiteration of its terms.
 - 11 Jesús Varela-Zapata has also argued that Bertram sees the island primarily through a touristic, British lens in “Translating one’s own culture: Coming Back from the Metropolis in Caryl Phillips’ *A State of Independence*.” Although briefly acknowledging the text’s representation of American cultural power, his article emphasizes that “the comparison of both societies, British and West Indian, [is] ever present in the novel” (400).
 - 12 In the closing section of the book, Said discusses the contemporary American version of Orientalism in more detail, observing that it departs from its fusty British and French antecedents in adopting a more technocratic, social scientific guise. Nevertheless, after tracing the slightly different institutional formations underpinning the US version, Said argues that an extremely strong connection pertains, concluding that American Orientalism “retains, in most of its general as well as its detailed functioning, the traditional Orientalist outlook which had been developed in Europe” (295).
 - 13 It is interesting to note that all of these critics’ examples are of explicit US militarism. Certainly, they illustrate a type of imperial aggression that is ethically repugnant and reminiscent of the violence wrought in the name of the British Empire. On the other hand, despite their moral and rhetorical force, it seems difficult to accept these instances as a totalizing synecdoche for the category of US global power.
 - 14 The “you” of Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, however rhetorically effective, is an illustrative literary instance of this phenomenon.
 - 15 Yelin’s “Living State-side: Caryl Phillips and the United States” is compelling in placing his writing, via its various engagements with the United States (and especially the African-American literary tradition), into a transnational framework with the explicit aim of blurring the boundaries of nation-based literary analysis. Her brief treatment of *A State of Independence* aligns with Ledent and Rahbek’s views, suggesting that the novel is primarily “registering the pervasive influence of American political, economic, and cultural power and thus calling into question the key terms of its title” (85). Yelin sees Phillips’ later work, especially *Dancing in the Dark*, as a more sophisticated engagement with the complexities of American influence.
 - 16 Another statement by Phillips is often employed to characterize the book’s politics. Discussing the ending of the novel, Phillips observes, in the lines typically

- quoted, that “It is saying basically that there is no independence . . . The whole notion of independence for a place as small as St. Kitts or for islands generally as small as these in the Caribbean is that independence is a non-starter” (“World Within” 600). However, both immediately preceding and following these comments, Phillips introduces some complications of this strictly negative view, recognizing the power and attraction of black American culture as well as pragmatically suggesting that there are possibilities of different types of dependency, not all of them irremediably awful.
- 17 Ledent similarly notes that “Private and public spheres overlap in this homecoming story” (49).
- 18 Formally, with the insertion of a fictional epigraph at the end of the series, Phillips is also here suggesting that Clayton’s pronouncement of cultural and political submission is one that could conceivably be altered, since it is not part of the actual historical record. Alternatively, of course, it also suggests that the details of the novel should be recognized as a part of the island’s reality.
- 19 Ledent observes in her reading of these paratextual features that with them Phillips is signaling his attempt “to scrutinise his native society in an uncompromising yet understanding way” (52). Ultimately, though, these categories are kept somewhat separate in her portrayal of the novel, as she criticizes ruling elites such as Jackson Clayton uncompromisingly, while she treats the islanders themselves with understanding.
- 20 As Ledent astutely notes, Bertram realizes by returning to the island that this foreign newness is a delusion—he is, he confesses, much the same as he was despite his decades abroad (50).
- 21 Anguilla is now termed a “British overseas territory,” replacing its previous designation as a “British dependency,” a semantic switch that the novel is clearly making light of in some sense.
- 22 Phillips’ discussion of race politics in *A New World Order* provides further insight into his orientation toward Bertram’s glibly essentializing rhetoric: “For a moment my generation flirted with the idea of making being ‘black’ the basis of our identity, as African-Americans had done in the 1960s and 1970s, but mercifully this unsatisfactory notion never really took hold” (276).
- 23 In this scene, the narrator (focalized through Bertram) suggests that Patsy is confused because “She was clearly surprised that Bertram was considering returning to the island for good” (94). Given Bertram’s consistent inability to read the changed reality around him—especially the feelings and desires of women—the inclusion of “clearly” suggests a further misreading of Patsy’s reaction, which seems more likely to be an incomprehension of the 1960s-era vocabulary of racial autonomy with which Bertram speaks: the true villain of the novel is not a white man, but a black man, Jackson Clayton, who mobilizes precisely this kind of vocabulary himself.

- 24 The awkwardness of Bertram's relations with his fellow islanders is why Tournay and Varela-Zapata rightfully read Bertram as a tourist figure: he is explicitly signaled as such by Phillips, as well as being mistaken as such by locals in the novel itself. However, Bertram also possesses a good deal of local cultural, historical, and geographical knowledge, which is crucial in accounting for the uncanny discomfort that he consistently feels in the novel. That is, using Phillips' wording from *A New World Order*, Bertram is both "of, and not of, this place" (1).
- 25 Part of this quotation is used as the novel's fourth epigraph, as discussed above.
- 26 Ironically, a less literalist, more historical reading of the name "Livingstone" opens up a quite different reading, calling to mind the Victorian imperial explorer David Livingstone, who, regardless of how one interprets the results of his efforts, certainly did go many places.
- 27 McLeod reads the novel quite convincingly as an intertextual engagement with V.S. Naipaul. Via this lens—through which he sees Phillips both critiquing the caustic nature of "Sir Vidia" while preserving sympathy for the more humanized "Vido"—McLeod offers a compelling reading of the novel as a work that seeks a delicate balance between criticism and understanding of the plight of the residents of post-independence Caribbean nation-states.
- 28 See also Phillips' interview with Renée Schatteman, in which he articulates his desire to write "fiction that resists the easy reduction of history and contemporary events to sloganeering." As Phillips also goes on to assert, "As long as you have characters in the centre of fiction, you have immediate ambiguity" ("Disturbing the Master Narrative" 55).
- 29 Tournay observes that Bertram gains a "newly distanced and privileged vantage point" (224) after being led by Livingstone and his friends up a hill on the hotel's grounds to a promontory. She does not remark that the younger boys also gain this vantage point, doing so far more frequently and with much greater ease than Bertram or other tourists whom they guide there. Within these terms, it thus becomes possible to read Livingstone as somebody who actually has a good deal of knowledge about the place in which he lives, as well as, in his capacity as gardener, an intimate and productive acquaintance with its landscape.
- 30 In the novel's closing pages, Bertram does finally see the world from Livingstone and his friends' perspective, recognizing that, like Bertram in his youth, "they were young people occupied with their own revelry" such that "the idea of wasting their time on an old man from England [i.e. Bertram] was ridiculous" (155). This is a crucial moment of awareness for Bertram and it suggests that he might ultimately fulfill his paternal role by guiding Livingstone into a more productive path than he himself followed.
- 31 The taxi driver who drives Bertram from the airport might be another example of the mixed valences of the island's American-dominated economic system. Although Bertram initially finds the taxi—a Ford Corsair—laughably out of fashion, "the carefully-polished exterior, and the reverence with which his self-

- appointed driver parked it . . . made Bertram aware that in this society such a car was still a symbol of some status" (15). In this example, the cultural and material prestige of the US is acknowledged, if not warmly endorsed, as an economic fact on the ground.
- 32 The novel also notes the island's Canadian-built hospital that Bertram and his brother visit as children (71).
- 33 This interview makes Rahbek's characterization of the novel as mainly about "*dependence*" (87; emphasis in original) seem too sharply drawn. On the other hand, these comments by Phillips—made as part of his analysis of male behavior patterns in the Caribbean—give solid ballast to Machado Sáez's arguments that the novel is deeply concerned with the failure of political models reliant on the trope of the heroic migrant male.
- 34 At this moment Bertram has tentatively laid his brother's ghost to rest, though he anticipates "that a dialogue would be re-established" (156) once he is himself more stable and cognizant. Thus, Phillips suggests an ongoing and open-ended exploration of the past that Bertram has strenuously avoided for almost his entire life.
- 35 Ledent offers a complementary reading of Bertram's act of spitting, proposing that it shows "his defiance against, and disagreement with, the political system, and by mixing some of his bodily fluid into the stony cover of the road he signifies that he wants to achieve oneness with his native land" (53). Helen Thomas also reads the ending in terms of balance, asserting that Bertram is portrayed as being determined "to bring the past and present into a new equilibrium, one in which reparation and forgiveness might take place on both a national and personal scale" (27).
- 36 Interestingly, critics often note the homage to Curtis Mayfield's 1997 album, *New World Order*, though they rarely trace the term back to George H.W. Bush's use of it in a 1990 speech to describe the new post-Cold War geopolitical dispensation (with US hegemony assumed). It seems hard to imagine that Phillips did not have this in mind as well.
- 37 Phillips' shifting sense of the United States is palpable in his published writing over the course of his career and, not surprisingly, September 11, 2001 and the subsequent actions of the government of George W. Bush mark a crucial turning point in his perceptions. Until that time, Phillips had been more likely to defend the creative and economic opportunity offered by the US, especially to artists of color. After this time, he is much more sensitive to the animus catalyzed by the rise of the security state, although he generally sees this being implemented through the categories of religion or citizenship status rather than through race.
- 38 Recent critics who have productively explored the complexities of Phillips' relation to American and particularly African-American culture include Paul Giles, Alan Rice, and Abigail Ward, in addition to Machado Sáez and Yelin.

- 39 Some pertinent examples of Phillips' markedly counterintuitive way of thinking include his defense of the United States from European charges of barbarism in an interview with Bell ("World Within" 589) and his crediting Margaret Thatcher's election campaign materials with creating the first real step toward egalitarian racial belonging in Britain in *A New World Order* (278).
- 40 This more flexible critical disposition might also open the door to a method for more clearly identifying the political valence of various populist appeals to postcolonial cultural sovereignty, including those invoked by rulers like Robert Mugabe or Muammar el-Gaddafi, or, indeed, a comparative lens through which to view the rise of China as a world power.

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