

Perspectives

Signifying (Non)Linguistic and Subliminal
Spirituality: Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River*

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Abstract: In “West,” the second narrative of his 1993 novel, *Crossing the River*, author Caryl Phillips writes the life story of Martha, a former slave in the American South. Phillips privileges Martha’s recounting of her own trials. At times, Martha’s idiom seems to demonstrate an interspersed, omniscient perspective, and she shares in the production of the text. What results is the viability of Martha’s spirit: Phillips uses her suffering to demonstrate her resilience. The author creates verbal and non-verbal cues that project Martha and the narrative into various states of (divine) consciousness. This style shows that Martha operates from a very sophisticated system of signs in which she uses emotions instead of words to relay, or to “signify” as Henry Louis Gates would suggest, alternate meanings. Martha’s minimal use of language and her reliance on other signs to understand and create meaning contrast with the biblical character of Martha that Phillips’ text enjoins. The biblical Martha actually misses or misinterprets cues of meaning. “West” augments the novel’s greater aim of showing the inter-relatedness of races on a global scale, allowing the author’s Martha to define “freedom” through her dreams with the help of a woman of another race.

Keywords: postcolonialism, slavery, African diaspora, Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River*

Contemporary Afro-British author Caryl Phillips has gained an international reputation for his body of literary works, which are dedicated primarily to exploring issues of race, gender, class, culture, and nationality. *Crossing the River* (1993) is customary of the works in Phillips’ corpus,

with its overarching thematic gestures regarding Western religious hypocrisy, postcolonialism, the globalized American South, and the black diaspora. The opening scene of the novel depicts a seventeenth-century African father who sells his children into slavery when his crops fail. The subsequent narratives of the novel record the lives of three individuals, one female and two males, who live in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Living in different time periods and in different geographic locations, these individuals are examples of the effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the diaspora. They are representations of the children that the African father sells. That moment of parental betrayal in the seventeenth century, then, functions as a backdrop for each of the characters' narratives, allowing Phillips to span three subsequent centuries, to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and to encompass three continents (Africa, North America, and Europe).

The narrative of Martha most dramatizes this patriarchal act of desertion, linking the heroine to spiritual abandonment by the godhead. Obviously, Phillips takes great poetic license in suggesting that nineteenth-century-born Martha is one of the immediate biological children of the ancient African father who sells his children into slavery in the opening frame story of the novel; given the time frame of Martha's story, there is no literal relationship between Martha and the African man. However, this allegorical father represents the African ancestor in the larger context of slavery as manifested in all the narratives of the novel. Phillips further complicates his examination of slavery by making this African character complicit in the act of abandonment, particularly in Phillips' suggestion that this ancestor helps bring about often deleterious consequences for the "offspring" spread across the diaspora for generations to come. The sins of the "father" are visited directly upon the "children." The author references here the literal selling of black Africans to Europeans by other black Africans and the presence of indigenous slavery on continental Africa prior to human trafficking across the world by, at least, the fourteenth century. These real-life events help structure the plots of the novel.

The fitting title of Martha's narrative, "West," echoes the work's general themes of nostalgia, dislocation, and displacement: as we explore

Martha's memory, we discover that she continuously recalls particular moments of desertion throughout her life. Given that Phillips builds the text on his heroine's reminiscences, the story of Martha is, in Toni Morrison's literary sensibility, a "rememorative" narrative.¹ Introduced more fully to readers as an elderly pioneer in the North American Wild West in the late nineteenth century, Martha flashes back to her transition from slavery to freedom. Her geographic travel west from southern US slave states signifies her shift from a state of bondage to one of liberation; but, as the heroine's sojourn exemplifies, the narrative also marks her psychological transition from emotional bondage to spiritual deliverance. Through Martha's narrative, Phillips demonstrates how individuals obtain redemption when divine favor is not immediately available or accessible. Creating a heroine who endures extreme hardship and constant separation from loved ones, the author renders a woman whose severed earthly relationships parallel her tenuous relationship with the divine: she has no relationship with her real father or her real family (given slavery's disruption of such), and she does not have a relationship, in patriarchal Protestant terminology, with God the "Father." Accordingly, Martha repeats the phrase, "Father why hast thou forsaken me?" (the significance of which I will return to later in the discussion). Phillips leaves Martha with little recourse except to actuate her own redemption. But he does so in a way that reveals the extent of her earthly suffering: Martha does not find spiritual/parental reconciliation in the reality of her daily existence because it is too rending; she instead fosters such reconciliation through (non)linguistic significations and various subliminal dream-states.

To dramatize Martha's seemingly desperate creation of spiritually meaningful moments, Phillips allows for interplay of meaning between conventional notions of signification and the African-American notion of "signifying." He incorporates both traditional Western denotations of words and black vernacular double meaning. Consider the following short excerpt in which Phillips, by way of his narrator, describes information that Martha gains from her friend Lucy. The excerpt shows the narrator's rendering of that information and Martha's interpretation of it:

—Lucy would be waiting for her in California, for it was she who persuaded Martha Randolph that there were colored folks living on both sides of the mountains now. [narrator]

—Living. [Martha] (73)

The word “living” means “residing” in the narrator’s use of the term, but in Martha’s usage it means “thriving in freedom,” and her usage has as a deeper significance. Through the word “living” Martha signifies a completely transformed life, one in which she eschews slavery and is able to make her own choices. Since she is the protagonist, we witness her journey to fashion a life of freedom for herself. In the above excerpt, Martha signifies on the word “living” in order to express its transformative power.

While “signification” in Western traditions refers to particular meanings gained from agreed upon oral, linguistic, and conceptual understandings, “signifying” in African-American folk culture necessarily intends verbal agility and variability, engaging modes of deception to convey double meaning; according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., rap music, for instance, utilizes signifying. Gates further argues that signifyin(g) within the black vernacular implies a “double-voicedness” that always finds itself in variable relation to standard English and is predicated on repetition, mutability, revision, difference, and intertextuality.² In concert with Gates, Phillips couples these seemingly polemical concepts of meaning creation to demonstrate that the black (female) subject must transfer meaning through non-linguistic cues when the overt use of language reifies her vicarious social status. She is reconfigured when she is able to create meaning, especially in a subconscious state.

Phillips further complicates black female subjectivity by using the duality of Western signification versus African American signifying to create particular fragmentations of cultural and religious identity. *Crossing the River* is reminiscent of the Du Boisian notion of double consciousness, which asserts a dichotomized awareness for black Americans,³ and Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of unhomeliness, which refers to the multiple and yet nonexistent citizenships of the postcolonial subject and connotes a particular dislocating aspect of that identity: Phillips demon-

strates how dominant Western Judeo-Christian ideology may hamper the black female subject's ultimate search for psychological/emotional wholeness. Phillips invokes biblical tropes in his narration of Martha, namely borrowing from New Testament characterizations of the biblical Martha, in order to suggest an alternative identity for his heroine. Thus, the culturally recognizable figuration of the biblical Martha coincides but fails to fully capture the complexities of a nineteenth-century black woman who feels rather outside the folds of God's grace and mercy. In that sense, Martha exists largely as a character with no spiritual "home" and therefore, within the purview of the novel, has little chance initially of reconstructing her life. Martha exists doubly as a woman who seeks yet is at first unable to ascertain spiritual redemption. Phillips emphasizes his heroine's sentiments of divine rejection and, by so claiming, cautiously and critically parallels—while not fully embracing—biblical narrative to lend additional insight into his depiction of Martha.

I am not suggesting that Phillips uses the specifics of the biblical Martha's story given his obvious critique of Christian missions, his anxieties about the misuse of the Bible, and his awareness of the Christian justifications for slavery that are demonstrably present in the novel as a whole. In fact, every narrative in the novel levies some critique against Christian hypocrisy. But Phillips' insistent critique does bring to the fore his invocation of Christianity for revisionary purposes. Further, I am suggesting that the author's antagonism toward Christian hypocrisy provides a basis for his metaphorical recasting of biblical mores, including characteristics of the biblical Martha: the biblical Martha is an engaging figure for the author precisely because of her symbolic value as a servant or slave figure.

William Smith's analysis of the biblical Martha is particularly relevant and provides a logical starting point for further examination:

The facts recorded in Luke 10 and John 11 indicate a character devout after the customary Jewish type of devotion, sharing in Messianic hopes and accepting Jesus as the Christ. When she first comes before . . . [Jesus], [in] Luke 10:38, *her spirit is "cumbered with much serving," is "careful and troubled about*

many things.” Her love, though imperfect in its form, is yet recognized as true, and *she has the distinction of being one whom Jesus loved.* [In] John 11:3[,] [h]er position is obviously that of the elder sister, the head and manager of the household. In the supper at Bethany, [in] John 12:2, the old character shows itself still, but it *has been freed from evil.* She is no longer “cumbered,” no longer impatient. Activity has been calmed by trust. (385; emphasis added)

Smith’s citations here draw attention to the fact that Martha’s preoccupation with work is a point of concern for Jesus, but Jesus recognizes the depth of her love for him and returns that love to her. Phillips’ Martha as a slave recalls the biblical Martha’s serving. Although Phillips’ Martha has to dream her final spiritual and psychological emancipations, the biblical Martha is “freed from evil” simply by trusting in Jesus’ love for her. Showing the latter woman’s evolution, as noted in Smith’s description above, the figure of Martha appears three times in biblical scripture, specifically in two of the books of the New Testament—Luke and John. Two of her appearances especially mark significant encounters with Jesus Christ. Martha moves from being preoccupied with household chores and from doubting spiritual power to understanding the life-giving powers of Jesus and his ability to perform miracles.

In her first Biblical appearance in Luke 10:41–42, Martha is upset that her sister sits seemingly idle at Jesus’ feet and does not assist in the household duties. She asks Jesus why he does not chastise Mary. Instead of siding with Martha, Jesus rebukes her, saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but *only* one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (*NASB*, Luke 10:41–42; emphasis in original).⁴ This scene shows a preoccupied Martha, who is unable to discern the only true, necessary, good, and, by implication, most important thing in life—she, unlike her sister, does not “listen to [Jesus’] word.” Nor does Martha read the interaction between her sister and the savior correctly. Here the scripture underscores the fact that Martha misses the significance and signification of their exchange. She does not understand that

the depth of Christ's power is located in the transfer of his word—notably, “the word,” or God's holy scriptures as given to various scribes, is, in the biblical sense, divine, creative, salvific, and protective.⁵ Phillips, on the other hand, minimizes for his heroine the significance of verbal utterance, instead making silence the mark of signification, and thus Phillips reinvents the notion of divination, or the ability to read signs.

The second and probably the “most triumphant scene” featuring Martha in the Bible “deals with the raising of . . . [her] brother Lazarus from the tomb” (Deen 178). Despite the fact that Martha is the first biblical character to whom Jesus discloses that he is “the resurrection and the life” (*NIV*, John 11:25), solidifying his position as an “incarnate deity” and her as a confidante, she ultimately reveals her vulnerability and inability to decipher spiritual codes. Martha doubts that Jesus will be able to resurrect her brother Lazarus because Lazarus has been dead for four days and opening his tomb may reveal that he is causing a “stench.” Jesus reminds Martha that Lazarus will rise from the dead and that those who believe in him will never die—they will have life after death. Martha remains distrustful of Jesus' ability and therefore is not truly cognizant of the extent of Jesus' authority. She misinterprets his words even after he reveals these promises to her and brings her to the precipice of the miraculous, intending to make her an agent of divinity. To prove his spiritual power, Jesus prays to God and then calls Lazarus forth from the tomb.

While Martha does not believe that Christ will resurrect her brother before the miracle occurs, a council of chief priests and Pharisees do understand the impact of Jesus' actions, especially after Jesus performs the miracle on Lazarus. The subsequent chapter delineates the council members' schemes as they begin to plot against Jesus. Understanding the revolutionary implications of Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus, they impugn him for “performing signs,” or working miracles. But Martha, who is considered to be a true friend of Jesus, completely misses the significance of both Jesus' words and his deeds: she does not understand, at first, that Jesus embodies the spiritual Word and that through his actions, he can bring to fruition spoken or imparted promises via the power of God. Moreover, the fact that Jesus has raised someone from

the dead is a true miracle, especially performed by someone in human form. According to Biblical lore, that feat is not repeated often and will be performed by God when Jesus himself is raised from the dead. In this instance, Martha is unable to reconcile verbal promises of transformation with impending physical gestures of the same. In other words, she lacks true faith. Likewise, Phillips' heroine is illiterate: she cannot read and therefore cannot navigate the sign systems of Western (linguistic) culture. Although the Biblical Martha and Phillips' Martha exhibit different forms of illiteracy, their misunderstandings of verbal and written communication, respectively, establish their needs to form distinctive systems of meaning. As a non-participant in Christianity and, as the heroine maintains, a rejected individual within the purview of Christian salvation, Phillips' Martha is not privy to orthodox religious signs of reformation (e.g., a moment of spiritual encounter, a confession of worldly sins, a public proclamation of faith, and renewal through baptism). She does not trust Christianity and devises alternative signs of fulfillment through her dreams.

In Phillips' text, Martha's struggle to overcome a dysfunctional and disrupting childhood underscores her helplessness as a neglected child of God. The opening passages of Martha's tale recall the sins of the figurative African father at the beginning of the novel (particularly, the intentional sale of his children into slavery) as we witness Martha's complete desertion: she is dropped off by the wagon train of black pioneers heading west to California because she is too old and frail to complete the journey. Left in the snow, the elderly Martha mentally returns to her beginnings, recalling the last interaction between the figurative father of the novel and his children while standing on the coast of Africa and facing the seemingly never-ending Atlantic Ocean or, as the narrator and the African patriarch of the work call it, "river." Phillips juxtaposes scenes of Martha's final and initial symbolic abandonments to demonstrate the cyclical pattern of rejection to which she has been subject and to suggest God's early departure from her as the source of her anguish. In response, Martha asks and bemoans, "*Father why has thou forsaken me?*" (73; emphasis in original). Her query of uncertainty and skepticism interestingly recalls that of Jesus who uttered

the same while being crucified⁶ and establishes the absence of both Martha's biological father and a heavenly one.

In order to aid in his heroine's spiritual self-discovery, Phillips differentiates his Martha from the biblical figure. The biblical Martha is a character who misinterprets meaning and who lacks understanding of certain significations. But Phillips creates an African-American heroine who creates a unique system of meaning in which articulation, silence, and (non)action are precariously balanced to forge self-awareness and self-identification. This system of meaning helps her to revise her social standing. In other words, Phillips's Martha evaluates and revises her status as a slave by developing a way to communicate with her loved ones that reinforces their self-understanding and that re-affirms her own self-worth. In the examples of free indirect discourse below, Martha interprets her friends' sentiments and signals her love for her husband. Although the story is mainly told in third person, Martha's cultural and spiritual consciousness become evident through interjections of her perceptions throughout the text by way of free indirect discourse. Phillips' separation and yet commingling of the self and its devices of communication, no matter how unorthodox, in effect doubles the self—as Gates describes generally—“as a speaking subject . . . [through] spoken language” (Gates, *Signifying* 207),⁷ causing Martha's voice to inhabit the text in a forceful though indirect way. Gates notes that free indirect discourse “is not the voice of both a character and a narrator; rather, it is a bivocal utterance, containing elements of both direct and indirect speech. It is an utterance that no one could have spoken, yet which we recognize because of its characteristic ‘speakerliness,’ its paradoxically written manifestation of the aspiration to the oral” (Gates, *Signifying* 208).

When Phillips introduces Martha, he insistently demonstrates that she relies on a strong sense of the oral, which demonstrates the nature of Martha's character since she also uses her orality to negotiate herself through a literate world (for instance, she does not read her friend Lucy's letter, she instead “makes out [its] sense” [Phillips 74]). Phillips' audience, in turn, “reads” and interprets Martha's perceptions.⁸ Through the little dialogue Phillips awards, he also indicates that Martha shares with

her first husband, Lucas, certain ways of signaling meaning through language, which the author suggests are endemic to African-American (slave) culture. Married while enslaved, the couple retains, in both silence and speech, specific culturally meaningful signs that combat the miscommunication and disconnection that the institution of slavery fosters.

In the following excerpt, Martha “reads” her husband’s bodily expressions of worry even while she listens to what he actually says. Unlike her daughter Eliza Mae, she understands that his wearied countenance and posture reveal more than another hard day working in the field. Martha recognizes that her husband’s actions signify a graver issue:

I look into his eyes, but his stare is constant and frightens me. He shows no emotion. ‘Lucas?’ He turns from me and scrapes the wooden chair across the floor. He sits heavily upon it. He lifts his hands to his head and buries his face in his cupped and calloused palms. . . . Lucas looks up. He opens his mouth to speak. His face is tired, older than his thirty-five years. The weight of yet another day in the field sits heavily upon him. But not just this. . . . ‘Master dead.’ Eliza Mae looks from me to her father, then back to me. Poor child, she does not understand. “Lucas, we going to be sold?” Lucas lowers his eyes.
(75–76)

As this excerpt exemplifies, there is very little verbal or emotional exchange between the couple in this scene, and admittedly there is no need for more dialogue or affect. Even Martha notes that her husband shows little expression. Therefore, Phillips renders customary forms of communication that would otherwise lend greater meaning (i.e., extensive or more descriptive dialogue and inflected emotion) void such that they cannot be accessed as modes of revelation. Rather, the lack of discussion and sentiment is what is significant. This lack is underscored at the end of the scene when Lucas responds to his wife’s inquiry about their status through bodily action and not through speech or emotion. Interestingly, Phillips expects readers (and not just Martha) to understand and to participate in this process of signification. The author’s

sanctioning of Lucas' "lowered eyes" not only completely ends the scene but also signals to readers the family's doomed fate. Thus, readers acknowledge that the family will be sold off and possibly severed from one another in subsequent scenes.

Given the author's diminished use of language and emotion in the above instance, Phillips must ultimately rely on modes of subliminal revelation to award Martha peace, love, and divine reconciliation, and he crosses racial lines to do so. The author orchestrates Martha's encounter with an altruistic white woman who initially takes her in from the cold in order to confirm for the heroine the effects of the black diaspora. The author claims that "there are no paths in water," which means that for the masses of persons dispersed throughout the diaspora (whom Martha partially represents) there is no physical return to Africa and no reversal of fortunes that pain and separation have engendered. Phillips uses the anonymous woman to trigger the heroine's dream-state and to prompt her self-recognition. Martha's ultimate dream, in which she reaches California and joins her daughter and her daughter's family, is to her, at least, reality. As Phillips notes, "She had a westward soul which had found its natural-born home in the bosom of her daughter" (94). Ultimately, Martha creates her own sense of "heaven," but the woman's sympathy (as symbolized by her outstretched hand) serves as a catalyst of time and memory for the downtrodden heroine.

Finally, moving his audience out of Martha's consciousness, Phillips renders the perspective of the sympathetic white woman who desires to name Martha so that the elder will receive a "Christian burial" (94). While the anonymous woman's desire to name Martha and to give her a "Christian" burial speak more to her invocation of Protestant world-views and rites in the face of Martha's impending death, Phillips' portrait of the anonymous woman critiques her overt religious gestures. Still, the author makes the woman a conduit of Martha's achievement of spiritual and humanistic awareness, asserting a necessary interrelatedness between the races on a more basic level: the woman's empathy for Martha's situation allows her to unhesitatingly aid a person in need. Phillips recasts the Martha figure, acknowledging her individual creative endeavors to obtain serenity. In effect, Phillips intimates that

preparation for Martha's death and her final demise through a dream-like reunion with her daughter propels her into her most sublime state.

Notes

- 1 In her 1987 neo-slave narrative, *Beloved*, Morrison uses the term "rememory" to refer to her heroine Sethe's recollection of her slave past. Phillips not only mimics this rememorative narrative pattern, but he also credits Morrison's *Beloved* as an unintended narrative model for *Crossing the River*. See his 1994 interview with Davison.
- 2 See Gates' "The Blackness of Blackness" (301–25) and *The Signifying Monkey*, especially 50–51.
- 3 Du Bois developed the notion of double-consciousness in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to describe an inherent dual turmoil in the average African-American ("two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" [11]) that both keeps complete spiritual satisfaction at bay and yet prompts an inner resilience. The notion of double-consciousness anticipates the emotional disenfranchisement but tenacity of Phillips' heroine.
- 4 I use the New American Standard Bible (*NASB*) translation here to make more clear that the scriptures emphasize Martha's neglect of the one "necessary," "good," and presumably best part of Jesus' visit to her home—his imparting of the word. Subsequent references to scripture are from the New International Version (*NIV*).
- 5 Two biblical scriptures ascribe these significant aspects to the function of "the word," or God's ordinances and utterances as recorded in the holy scriptures. The gospel of John aligns the word with the godhead and the beginning of time, thus implying the word's inherently divine and creative functions (*NIV*, John 1:1–2). In Ephesians, the word, denoted specifically as "the sword of the Spirit" (*NIV*, Ephesians 6:17), is revered as battle gear necessary to fight off evil powers.
- 6 See Matthew 27:46 (*NIV*).
- 7 Significantly, in *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates notes a similar "doubling" of self by Hurston's protagonist Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Gates contends that Janie, who recognizes that she possesses both "inside" and "outside" sensibilities, "divides" herself and thus develops a mode of expression ("free indirect discourse") to mediate and to communicate the internal struggle between the two.
- 8 Wilentz refers to the imaginative, written representation of African idiom and concomitant, dynamic vernacular traditions as "oral literature" (see especially xvii). By capturing both the spoken and unspoken speech of Martha (who cannot read, and presumably, cannot write) in narrative, Phillips provides his audience with "oral literature." Gates, within the purview of discussions of free

indirect discourse in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, refers to such representations of speech as “the speakerly text” in which Hurston renders both the idiom of Janie and the black community at large (*Signifying* 214–15). Phillips’s text is “speakerly” in the sense that it is written as Phillips imagines Martha to sound, particularly as a representative of the African American Southern slave community of which she originally is a part. (Note that Wilentz distinguishes the meaning of her term from Gates’s phraseology; see Wilentz 122.) In the case of Phillips’ Martha, we both understand the heroine’s (non-)oral proclivities and we later “see”/“hear” and decipher them.

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