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Migrant Subjects, Invisible Presences: Biography in the Writings of Caryl Phillips

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Abstract: This essay considers Phillips' biographical writings—essays, novels, and hybrid texts. Setting these works in the context of Phillips' lifelong conversation with modernism, the essay argues that Phillips adapts and extends Virginia Woolf's modernist notion of "new biography" by writing about migrant subjects, exemplars of the African diaspora, whose lives and life stories are haunted by the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and their aftermaths.

Keywords: Caryl Phillips, diaspora, migrant writing, biography, life-writing

Writing in the 1920s, Virginia Woolf describes the constitutive features of modernist fiction on the one hand and life-writing on the other.[1] She claims that in modern writing, "the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored," and she calls on the writer to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall [and] . . . trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" ("Modern Fiction" 156, 155). Woolf also suggests that modernist writing seeks to recover voices rendered mute or unintelligible in traditional histories and biographies, and she supplements absences in the archival record with stories of invented figures such as, most famously, William Shakespeare's sister Judith. The textual strategies that Woolf regards as central to the modernist project in many ways anticipate Caryl Phillips' writing—and contemporary migrant or postcolonial writing more generally. Like the writers Woolf

admires, Phillips breaks the sentence and breaks the sequence (Woolf, *Room* 81). Like Woolf herself, he reaccentuates canonical historical and biographical narratives and imagines the lives of persons who cannot be found in such narratives or who make their appearance only as others see them. Although he rejects the label "postcolonial" and situates himself among writers he deems "post postcolonial" (Clingman 122), Phillips' writing links Woolf's modernist agenda with the project of postcolonial cultural critique as it has taken shape over the more than thirty years since he began publishing his work.

From the inception of his career, Phillips has engaged in a conversation with Anglo-American modernism, a conversation he undertakes from the perspectives of diasporic subjects who traverse the globe as migrants to and from the "distant shores" (to adapt the title of his 2003 novel) of Britain, Europe, and the United States.[2] He launches this conversation with an epigraph from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" in his first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), which is dedicated to his parents, who migrated to England in 1958. In recounting the lives of those whom Eliot identifies as a "people without history" (5.20), Phillips reframes Eliot's meditation on time and timelessness as an exploration of place and placelessness. Phillips continues the conversation in his rewritings of *Beloved* (1987) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), among other texts, in novels such as *Crossing the River* (1993) and *Higher Ground* (1989).[3] Reading Phillips with Woolf expands the scope of this conversation. Phillips neither invokes nor rewrites Woolf. Yet her reflections on life-writing and especially her sense of the predicament of biographers who wish to remain true to their subjects, whether famous or little-known, and true to themselves illuminate how Phillips, primarily known, like Woolf, as a writer of fiction, addresses this predicament as he writes about actual persons who are not himself.

In what follows, I focus on Phillips' forays into life-writing, situating them in a discursive terrain that Woolf maps out. First, I discuss the elements of modernist biography as Woolf defines them. Next, I look at Phillips' profile of Marvin Gaye (2002) as an illustration of what Woolf describes and as a template for the biographical writings that Phillips published later in the decade. Finally, I consider *Dancing in the*

Dark (2005) and *Foreigners* (2007) as experiments in biography that expand the limited compass of his essay "Marvin Gaye," interrogating the conventions of life-writing and addressing the "conditions" that biography imposes—"that it must be based upon fact" (Woolf "Art of Biography" 192).[4] Throughout, I consider both "non-fiction" and "fiction" as intertwined with biography and point to the ways that Phillips' biographical writing, like his novels, erodes distinctions between "fiction" and fact.

I. Granite and Rainbow

In "The New Biography" (1927), Woolf asserts that the "aim" of biography is to "weld together" the "granite-like solidity" of truth and the "rainbow-like intangibility" of personality (149). "Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible; yet [the biographer] is now more than ever urged to combine them," she says, even as she acknowledges that she has not yet found a biographer who achieves the "queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" that she seeks (154–55).

Woolf returns to the topic of biography in "The Art of Biography" and "A Sketch of the Past," both composed in 1939 while she was struggling to write the life of her friend Roger Fry.[5] In these essays, she calls for changes in both the form and subject-matter of "life-writing" ("Sketch" 80), which includes both biography-proper and memoir. As if anticipating the explosion of information in our own digital moment, she notes that the proliferation of documentary evidence necessitates new forms of biography: "[I]n an age when a thousand cameras are pointed by newspapers, letters, diaries at every angle, [the biographer] must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking-glasses at odd corners" ("Art of Biography" 195).[6]

She rejects the restriction of biography to the "lives of great men" and, expanding the purview of the genre to encompass the "lives of the obscure" (after the title of an essay included in *The Common Reader*), she writes, "[T]here is the girl behind the counter. . . . I would as soon have her true history as the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon and

seventieth study of Keats and his use of Miltonic inversion which old Professor Z and his like are now inditing" (*Room* 90). She asks, "Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious?" ("Art of Biography" 195). She repudiates the obsolescent—Victorian—life and letters approach to biography and memoir and, elaborating on what she says in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" about the ways that fiction must register the change in human character that "occurred around 1910" (96), insists that life-writing must record the "invisible presences" that influence the life of the subject:

> [T]he consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think. . . . [I]t is by such invisible presences that the "subject of this memoir" is tugged this way and that every day of his life; it is they that keep him in position. Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes ("Sketch" 80).

Woolf sets modern life-writing, as exemplified in the work of Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson, in opposition to the "parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous" works of the Victorians ("New Biography" 152). What she defines as the distinctive features of the "new" biography of the early twentieth century also inform the writings of Caryl Phillips, reflecting what Hermione Lee identifies as continuities between "modernist" and "contemporary" (or postmodern) biography. These continuities include "explorations of inner lives as much as public achievements, . . . reluctance (with a few notorious exceptions) to moralize, take sides, or cast blame," and a commitment to "truth-telling" (91)—that is, to the unmasking of pieties enshrined in the historical record.

Phillips has not produced a full-scale, book-length, single-subject Life, yet many of his works might be considered as versions of biography.

Similarly, as I have argued elsewhere, although Phillips has not written a book-length autobiography, some of his essays might be regarded as instances of autobiography or memoir ("Plural Selves"). Several essays describe the lives of actual persons. So, too, do the three pieces collected in the book titled *Foreigners*; his novel about an historical personage, *Dancing in the Dark*; and some of his scripts for radio and television documentaries.

Most of these works offer fractured, multi-faceted, and, in Woolf's terms, contradictory versions of their subjects. Some describe persons who were little-known or once famous but who later disappeared from public view by a kind of historical amnesia that Phillips seeks to rectify.[7] In attempting to comprehend the lives he writes about, Phillips limns the "invisible presences"—among them race, gender, migration, nationality, class, and family—in and against which his subjects take shape. In *Dancing in the Dark*, he imagines for his protagonist a realized inner life; often he portrays his subjects in action, in motion, in performance. Throughout his writings, what Woolf calls the truth of fact often rubs up against the truth of fiction.[8] As Phillips explores the incompatibility of the one with the other, he also questions the authority of the evidence—archival records; official dossiers and documents; diaries, letters, and journals; literature; newspapers and magazines; interviews and oral histories; photographs; and audio and video recordings—on which biography, even modern and contemporary biography, traditionally relies, and he acknowledges the inevitably partial character of biographical writing. In the process, he asks and prompts readers to inquire what makes a "Life" and what makes a life story worth telling.

II. What's Going On?

Caryl Phillips begins his profile of Marvin Gaye in the imperative mode by commanding readers to "imagine the scene" ("Marvin Gaye" 35). Gaye is absent from the scene Phillips sets before us, that of a slave auction where young black males are valued as studs with the capacity to "produce new slaves for free" (35). Beginning before the beginning, Phillips presents the life of Marvin Gaye as a recent episode in a narrative that stretches back hundreds of years. Before Phillips arrives at the

story of his protagonist, he places Gaye in the company of the African-American writers and musicians he especially admires: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, who helped him understand the "conundrum" of his existence as a black Briton (*European Tribe* 8), and Curtis Mayfield and Stevie Wonder, whose songs "transform[ed] pain into art . . . [and] fearlessly addressed injustice" ("Marvin Gaye" 36). Phillips singles out Gaye, who, he writes, "made the most important musical statement of all with his brilliantly original suite of songs on the album *What's Going On* . . . [and also] displayed, in this and other work, a deep connectivity to the word 'love'" (36). At the same time, he portrays Gaye as an entertainer who felt compelled to please audiences by playing out the stereotypes they expected him to enact.

Readers of Phillips' novels, in which the author is diffused in the words and actions of his characters and does not speak in his own person, might be surprised to find that Phillips inserts himself into the story of Marvin Gaye. He explains, in an interview with Bénédicte Ledent, that when he writes nonfiction he is "present as an agent of narrative purpose" (190). The "narrative purpose" here drives a portrait of a man who is, to use two words that resonate throughout Phillips' writings, "marooned" and increasingly "unmoored." When readers meet Marvin Gaye a few paragraphs into the piece, he is refracted through the lens of Phillips' disappointment at a 1981 London performance in which Gaye presented himself as "little more than 'Mr Sex Machine'" (37). The performance and the ensuing disappointment are seen as sequels of the history sketched out in the opening of the essay. They are signs of the "invisible presences," the specifically American conjunction of race and sex that constrain the lives of African-American men.

The profile, like its subject, might seem unmoored: it wanders around in time and place, a collection of disconnected vignettes. Different interlocutors tell different versions of the same story. Gaye's mother Alberta, for example, describes her husband, Gaye's father Marvin Gay (no –e) Senior, the abusive, cross-dressing preacher who shot and killed Gaye in 1984. Among those Phillips interviewed are Gaye's friend David Simmons, who reported that Gaye was ashamed of his sexually confused, insufficiently masculine father and provoked the

shooting as a way of committing suicide while punishing Gay Senior; Gaye's biographer, David Ritz, who recommended "sexual healing" as an antidote for Gaye's addiction to sado-masochistic pornography; and Freddy Cousaert, a promoter, producer, and nightclub owner who hired Gaye to perform toward the end of his life and arranged for a documentary about Gaye to be filmed on location in Ostend, Belgium. Throughout, Phillips' take on Gaye moves back and forth between disgust, disappointment, and empathy.

Assembling these fragments, readers discover a man who is marooned wherever he happens to be: in Hawaii, in Los Angeles, in London, in Belgium; in performances that initially held audiences rapt; in two marriages; in his sexuality—a "connoisseur of pornography, he feared intimacy, disliked kissing and viewed women as dangerous" (42); in his drug-induced isolation from others; in his tortured relationship with his father; and in his own self. There is a through-line: Phillips traces in Gaye a tension between the "imaginary nightmare" of fetishized black male sexuality—beginning with slave auctions, in the figure of the stud—and the caricatures of black men in minstrelsy and cinema that are designed to be as sexually unalluring as possible (45). He represents Gaye's pathology as an expression, internalization, and symptom of the contradictory racial and sexual stereotypes that infect American history and culture in general, as well as the lives of Gay Senior and Gaye Junior in particular:

> For most black males, whose self-image had been long blighted by white America's notions of black sexuality, the growth in confidence simply heralded a movement from stereotype to stereotype. In essence, from sambo to superspade, with rampant sexuality as the undignified barometer of black men's changing status. . . . Where, in all of this, one might wonder, is there room for ambivalence? For doubt? For Love? (46–47)

Phillips tracks the uneasy coexistence of Gaye's talent, epitomized in the extraordinary achievement of "What's Going On," a song that became an anthem for an entire generation, and his compulsive performances of sexual personae—stud, misogynist, cross-dresser—

he could never comfortably inhabit. The last paragraph of the profile echoes its beginning: "Imagine the scene" (59). Here the scene, shown at two removes in Phillips' description of an episode in the film titled *Transit Ostend*, is "a small church in Ostend." Phillips places Gaye in the scene and observes that he is "alone in Europe. In Belgium." The profile ends not, as might be expected, with Gaye's death or a summing up of his legacy or the contradictions he embodies but inconclusively, with a sentence that lacks a verb: "But meanwhile, in a small church in Belgium" (59). Eschewing predication and resisting the judgment that predication would afford, Phillips leaves Gaye suspended, marooned and unmoored, in a timeless, placeless meanwhile.

Phillips' treatment of Gaye sets the stage for both *Dancing in the Dark* and *Foreigners*. In presenting Gaye primarily as a musician and entertainer and through the lens of others' accounts of Gaye's life, Phillips gestures toward but does not describe the interiority to which Gaye's audiences had limited (if any) access. Later texts intensify Phillips' delineation of the gap between public selves performed onstage or inscribed in documentary records, however distorted or incomplete, and the thoughts and feelings—subjectivity—buried deep within or absent altogether from the archive.

III. Nobody

Dancing in the Dark is not a biography. Nor is it a fictionalized biography. To characterize it as a "fictional biography," as Michelle Ann Stephens does (129), flattens the tension that stems, in Woolf's terms, from the incompatibility of the truth of fact and the truth of fiction. This tension lies just under the surface of *Dancing in the Dark*, which Phillips, his British and American publishers, the Library of Congress, and the British Library all classify as fiction. (The British Library catalog identifies *Dancing in the Dark* secondarily as "biographical fiction.") The protagonist is an actual person, Bert Williams (1874?–1922), a black blackface performer in minstrel shows, vaudeville, and musical revues who was famous in his own era but later largely forgotten. Motivated in part by absences and contradictions in the existing accounts of Williams, who, as Phillips explained to Michael Krasny, left behind just

a few photographs but no "'confessional material': . . . diaries, . . . letters, . . . journals" (151), Phillips rediscovers and recreates him for our times in what Petra Tournay-Theodotou aptly calls an "imaginative retelling" of Williams' life (94).[9]

Spike Lee, too, rescues Williams from the obscurity into which he had fallen and, although only for a few moments, gives viewers a glimpse of him. As Itala Vivan points out (349n8), Lee interpolates a brief segment from one of Williams' films in *Bamboozled* (2000), a satire of the contemporary entertainment industry. Lee points to the erasure of Williams from historical memory by presenting Williams' performance, a tour de force portrayal of a gambler playing poker with himself, only as it is remembered by Mantan, a character in Lee's film. Williams and his performance are unknown to the other characters and encountered by Lee's audience bracketed—contained—in an embedded memory.[10]

Recent scholarship on African-American history, literature, performance, and popular culture puts Williams' career in context. Literary critic Louis Chude-Sokei examines the Caribbean-born Williams as an exemplar of an intra-racial "cross-culturality" that undermines essentialist conceptions of race and accentuates the role of Caribbean and other migrants in the formation of African-American culture.[11] Historian Karen Sotiropoulos sets Williams in the vibrant milieu of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African-American politics and culture, site of debates about authenticity, identity, performance, and entertainment in the era of Jim Crow. Critic Michelle Ann Stephens draws on critical theories of race and historical studies of culture to explore Williams' blackface performance as a "case study," an exemplary instance of a "historical formation that develops both over the time of modernity and the space of diaspora" (128, 130). And biographer Camille F. Forbes focuses on Williams' theatrical career, which spanned more than forty years and encompassed medicine shows, minstrelsy, vaudeville, film, recording, and musical theater.

Like these works of history, criticism, biography, and cultural theory, *Dancing in the Dark* places Williams in his own historical moment. Unlike them, it also endows Williams with an inner life about which the documentary record, itself riddled with lacunae, is largely mute.

(Forbes observes that it is especially difficult to trace the life of a subject as reticent about his private life as Williams had been [xii].) As Phillips explains, "the actual facts, the nuts and bolts of his life were not as important to me as the emotional texture of his life—as the heart of the man, the loneliness of the man, the courage of the man" (McLeod 144).

Like the modern biographer envisaged by Woolf, Phillips composes his narrative of Bert Williams' life from fragmentary and often conflicting accounts. Williams, as Phillips describes him, is a split subject, a man "who ever feels his twoness," as W. E. B. Du Bois puts it in *The Souls of Black Folk* (5). Chude-Sokei suggests that the double consciousness that for Du Bois defines the "'souls' of '*all*' 'Black' folk" (58; emphasis in original) is "complicated by [the] intra-racial and cross-cultural signifying" that enacts and perhaps exacerbates the tensions between African-Americans and West Indian and other immigrants (26), tensions played out in Phillips' depiction of Bert Williams.

Phillips, too, invokes Du Bois. He points to commonalities as well as differences between migrants like Williams and their American-born contemporaries, many of whom had themselves left the rural south in the Great Migration and settled in the urban north:

> Peering through DuBois's newly embroidered veil, they saw before them a new century and new possibilities above 110th Street, where a powerful Harlem harmattan was blowing fresh news from Africa. Tan maidens, with peachy bleached skin and recently straightened hair, stepped around tall muscular men fresh off the ships from the Caribbean, who in turn rubbed shoulders with excited southerners who had tilled enough soil for a dozen lifetimes and were overjoyed to have finally arrived in the north. (*Dancing in the Dark* 5)

As Du Bois provides Phillips with an interpretive framework that makes Williams legible in his own moment, James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan* helps Phillips situate Williams and his theatrical collaborators in the political and cultural milieu of early twentieth-century New York. Phillips fills in the outlines set out by Du Bois and

Johnson, developing his portrayal of Williams with material drawn from archival research and inserted into the text of the novel: playbills and advertisements; snippets of play scripts; song lyrics; articles about Williams in *Variety* and *The New York Age*, one of the most influential black newspapers of the time; reviews of his performances; excerpts from the writings and speeches of Williams' partner, George Walker; and Buster Keaton's account of Williams in a segregated Boston bar. These documents, among others, chart Williams' trajectory. In San Francisco, Williams met and first performed with Walker in minstrel shows; later, at the 1894 Mid-Winter Exposition, the two men impersonated Africans in the Dahomeyan Village exhibit when the actual Africans were delayed en route. After leaving San Francisco, Williams and Walker traveled across and around the United States, touring in successful vaudeville performances as "Two Real Coons." In New York, they worked on and performed in musical revues, including *In Dahomey* (which also took them to England), which was set in Africa and written, produced, and performed by African-Americans. After Walker's death, Williams performed solo in New York and elsewhere, finally appearing, from 1910 through 1919, as the only black performer in *Ziegfeld Follies*. As in Phillips' other novels and in *Foreigners*, some of the source material is quoted verbatim in the text; some is diffused in the narration as reported speech; some is attributed only with a date or tagline or left unmarked altogether.

The portrait of Williams culled from the documentary record, a portrait that resembles Williams as he appears in the work of Chude-Sokei, Sotiropoulos, and Forbes, is augmented—and interrupted—in *Dancing in the Dark* by the portrayal of Williams' inner life. Phillips braids together accounts that register, however tenuously, Woolf's truth of fact with thoughts and feelings reflected in Williams' interior monologue or in dialogues with himself. Phillips presents Williams primarily as a performer and entertainer, underscoring the theatrical character of Williams' public persona by dividing the novel, like a play, into three acts, a prologue, and an epilogue. At the same time, he suggests that Williams' performed life is only part of the story. While Walker is a race man who is militant in his pursuit of a black cultural aesthetic and less

interested than Williams in placating the white producers, managers, and paying customers on whom their livelihood depends, Williams as Phillips portrays him is troubled by the need to please audiences, both black and white, who expect him either to rehearse or to reject the racial stereotypes enacted and parodied in blackface minstrelsy (McLeod 145; Krasny 154–55).

As Chude-Sokei points out (81), Williams self-consciously reflects on the gap between the mask and the man. Williams wonders whether *In Dahomey*'s audiences "understand that his character, this Shylock Homestead whose dull-witted antics amuse them, bears no relation to the real Egbert Austin Williams" (*Dancing in the Dark* 12). This passage is echoed toward the end of the novel. Williams is visited by a delegation of prominent black citizens. When they take him to task for playing a "shambling, pathetic dupe," he responds, "The Negro I portray is not any man in this room so there is no need for any among you to behave defensively. In fact, I have to believe that my public is sophisticated enough to understand that I am impersonating a particular type who does not exist except in my imagination" (179).

Phillips (or his authorial avatar) does not offer his own view within the novel itself on Williams' sense of his own enterprise. In interviews, however, Phillips links Williams' dilemma—and the challenges it poses to historians and cultural critics—to contemporary performances of racial types and stereotypes in rap and hip-hop. On the one hand, he acknowledges the impetus in Williams and in rap to make money (Tournay-Theodotou 104). On the other hand, he sees the artist as responsible primarily to his or her art: "One of the reasons I wrote this novel now is because of hip hop. Because this same debate surrounds rap and hip hop. At what point do you tell an individual, 'You are letting the side down'? 'You should not do that because your responsibility is not to your art, your responsibility is to your imagined community'?" (McLeod 145).

Williams' response to the delegation of black notables is one of only a few instances in the novel in which he answers his critics aloud. For the most part, Williams—like Henry James in Colm Tóibín's *The Master*—voices his thoughts in an interior monologue to which only the novel's

readers are privy. Williams believes that his father, a migrant who is "bewildered" by life in the United States, is "deeply ashamed of his only son" (14) and has "no desire to . . . witness his son transforming himself into a nigger fool" (13). Williams is plagued by a self-doubt that is silently articulated when he looks at himself in the mirror and is often directed at the internalized figure of the father he feels he is betraying.[12]

Williams' wife Lottie is barely mentioned in the documents contained in *Dancing in the Dark*, but, as Dave Gunning points out, hers is a crucial perspective on the text's characters and events ("Concentric" 372). Lottie regards her husband as a talented performer and a tortured soul who is isolated, even imprisoned, in himself and unable or unwilling to engage with her sexually or in any other way. In giving us Lottie's version of Williams, Phillips supplies some of what is missing from the archive and, again, indicates the pressure exerted on Williams by the "invisible presences" that tug at him and keep him in position. At the same time, Phillips tacitly acknowledges not only what is not known about his protagonist but also the essential unknowability of a self—a man who identifies as "nobody" —caught between the mirror and the mask.

IV. English Lives

Like *Dancing in the Dark, Foreigners* highlights what the documentary record cannot tell us about the biographical subject; unlike *Dancing in the Dark*, it does not lay bare—or imagine—the inner lives of its subjects, Francis Barber, servant of Samuel Johnson; Randolph Turpin, a champion boxer in the mid-twentieth century; and David Oluwale, a Nigerian who immigrated as a stowaway to the United Kingdom in 1949 and, harassed and beaten by two policemen, died in Leeds in 1969. Barber's narrative, "Dr. Johnson's Watch," and Turpin's, "Made in Wales," point to the ways that popular prejudices and stereotypes inflect the historical record and, internalized, inform the subjects' sense of themselves. In "Northern Lights," in contrast, Oluwale recedes behind the many and competing accounts that Phillips assembles in telling the story of his life. Yet, paradoxically, the more Oluwale disappears from his own story, the more present and powerful he becomes.

Originally published in the UK with the subtitle *Three English Lives*, *Foreigners* explores the imbrication of Englishness and foreignness in the lives of three men who, Phillips explains, "are all foreign in approximately the same way; they are black, male, and nominally British. Their race, gender, and nationality play a great part in the way in which their various identities are constructed and offered up to them by British society" (Ledent, "Only Connect" 184). The instability of identity categories—English, foreign—is paralleled by the generic instability of this hybrid text, which has been variously classified by the British Library and Library of Congress catalogs as fiction, historical fiction, biographical fiction, and biography. Phillips himself resists labeling *Foreigners* but accedes to the generic imperative dictating a text be assigned to at least one genre: "I would describe it as non-fiction, but in an attempt to resolve this problem I've dispensed with the division between fiction and non-fiction on the header pages of my books. Of course, this won't solve anything because people will still feel the urge to label, be they academics, bookstore owners, or publishers. This being the case, 'creative biography' might be a suitable label for *Foreigners*" (Ledent, "Only Connect" 188).[13]

Like *Crossing the River*, *Higher Ground*, and *The Nature of Blood*, *Foreigners* juxtaposes the lives of multiple protagonists who occupy disparate spatial and temporal locations. *Foreigners*' three subjects share, in addition to their race and gender, the nominal Englishness that is an endpoint of the diasporic trajectories that brought them or their forebears to England from Africa (Oluwale) or the Caribbean (Turpin and Barber). Phillips shows, to return to Woolf, "what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us [and] how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class" ("Sketch" 80).[14] Phillips indicates both changes and continuities in what it means for a black man to be at once English and foreign in the mid- and late-eighteenth century and in much of the twentieth, linking the different times and places traversed in *Foreigners* through patterns and keywords—*bewildered*, *marooned*, *unmoored*, *squandered*, *dignity*, *freedom*—that reverberate throughout the three narratives. Barber, Turpin, and Oluwale are seen from the outside as the objects of first-hand accounts by people who knew them or as

they are represented in historical documents, dossiers, and discourses; none has, as Williams does, a realized inner life. Yet, in all three sections of *Foreigners*, as in *Dancing in the Dark* among other novels, Phillips critically, almost diacritically, marks what the archival record reveals—or conceals—about a biographical (historical) subject. And, as he does in the "many-tongued chorus" of "diasporan souls" he invokes at the end of *Crossing the River* (236–37), he sometimes supplants the truth of fact with the invented truths of fiction.

Francis Barber makes occasional appearances in James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* as a servant who tends to his master (and goes to and returns from sea); as an informant who apprises Boswell of Dr. Johnson's health and state of mind; as the recipient of the great man's generous legacy, an annuity of £70 a year; and as the object of Johnson's deathbed admonition to "attend to the salvation of [your] soul" (Boswell 286). "Dr. Johnson's Watch" takes up Barber's story sixteen years after Johnson's death. The unnamed narrator, primarily a man of business, was once a member of The Literature Club, in which capacity, he tells us, he attended Johnson's funeral and shared a coach with Johnson's servant Barber. Now retired, the narrator is writing a biographical sketch of Barber for *Gentleman's Magazine* and travels to Lichfield in pursuit of his subject. Barber's wife Betsy, toothless and old before her time, takes the narrator to the Staffordshire Workhouse Infirmary, where he finds Barber near death.

The narrator reports on the circumstances of Barber and Betsy, oscillating between pity, condescension, and unreflecting egoism. He states that Barber has "squandered" Johnson's legacy (20), which here includes a gold watch that Barber later pawned and that the narrator himself retrieved from the pawnshop. (The gold watch, a MacGuffin that points to the narrator's moral obtuseness, is not mentioned in Boswell's *Life*. It appears in Sir John Hawkins' biography of Johnson, in Peter Fryer's account of Barber as the object of Hawkins's antagonism [425], and in Michael Bundock's book about Barber.) The narrator does not help Barber, Betsy, or their children; he states that he intends to give Betsy the watch that her husband had pawned, but the narrative ends before he actually does so. Similarly, he abandons his biographical sketch when

he decides that readers of *Gentleman's Magazine* will not be interested in Barber's life story. Phillips observes that he was "fascinated" by the language of the Barber section: "The high civility of the English language when used to describe acts of cowardice and betrayal" (Ledent, "Only Connect" 189). Within the text itself, however, there is no authorial comment on the narrator's platitudinous "high civility" or the unselfconscious parroting of racist clichés that drive his identification of Barber as "sooty Francis" (30), "Blacky" (51), "Dr. Johnson's negro" (52), a "pathetic negro" (56), and so forth.

Phillips not only casts a sidelong glance at the narrator's casual racism and "acts of cowardice and betrayal," but also supplements Boswell's account of Barber, which ends with Johnson's death. The invention of Betsy's reflections on her husband's decline and fall, like the portrayal of Lottie's point of view in *Dancing in the Dark*, reminds us of Woolf's observation that a great deal of what women thought and said has never appeared in print (*Orlando* 219).

Most of "Dr. Johnson's Watch" presents Barber at closer range than he appears in Boswell's *Life*—or, for that matter, in Bundock's *Fortunes of Francis Barber*—but Barber remains, in essence, a character in the narrator's story. On one occasion, however, we encounter Barber speaking to the narrator in his own voice:

> "I wonder," he said "if perhaps I have disappointed my master. Have you come to this place to accuse me of this crime?" The negro paused and gathered his thoughts. "My master placed a great deal of faith in me that I might resist temptation, do you know this? . . . He never failed to point out appropriate passages in the scriptures, for he feared that my nature was too weak and that I might misuse all that he was about to bestow on me. . . . My master and myself, we often prayed together, the two of us, long into the night." The negro paused and gasped for breath. I instinctively reached down and clasped his black hand, and eventually his breathing subsided, but I chose not to release the poor man's fingers. "I lack dignity. Even coming to Lichfield was a fulfillment of my master's wishes." I looked

> at Johnson's dishevelled negro, but I could find no words. "My master provided me with many advantages yet I still find myself in these circumstances. I sincerely wish that he had used me differently." . . . He stopped abruptly, then sighed. "Well, look upon me, sir. Look liberty in the face. What see you?" (53)

The usually loquacious narrator is speechless, his silence an index of his inability and unwillingness to understand Barber or do more than grasp Barber's "black hand." Phillips slyly directs readers to take notice of what the narrator cannot comprehend and to see the narrator's temporizing inaction as a species of cowardice.

Like "Dr. Johnson's Watch," "Made in Wales" and "Northern Lights" at once reproduce and rewrite existing accounts of their protagonists. Unlike "Dr. Johnson's Watch," the two later narratives explicitly represent perspectives that pry loose the assumptions encoded in the official record. Turpin and Oluwale, like Barber—and Marvin Gaye and Bert Williams, for that matter—are victims of pervasive racism, sometimes subtly pernicious, sometimes brutally obvious, which they internalize even as they struggle against it in attempts, however equivocal, to assert their dignity.

As Phillips points out, Turpin's story is told in the manner of "sports reportage" (Ledent, "Only Connect" 189). More or less chronological, with some flashbacks and flashforwards, the narrative has a paratactic structure—and then, and then, and then—that makes each episode in Turpin's life seem as important or unimportant as all the others. Turpin grew up in the Midlands in the only mixed-race family in Leamington Spa. His father, an immigrant from Guyana, was gassed in the Great War, had trouble finding and keeping a job, and died of his injuries not long after Turpin's birth, leaving behind a wife and five young children. Class magnified the disadvantages of race, as did the interaction of Randolph Turpin's character and temperament with interwar notions of masculinity. As a child, Turpin bullied his siblings and schoolmates; as a young man, he philandered and abused his wife, who subsequently divorced him. Throughout his life, he turned his aggression to account in boxing.

Turpin's apex was the 1951 title fight in which he took the world middleweight championship from Sugar Ray Robinson, but his descent, which began with his loss in the rematch a few months later, was rapid. Turpin was preyed on by managers, promoters, and other charlatans who arranged his matches and, along with his friends and family, took advantage of his "reckless generosity" (132). Eventually, distraught about his debts and losing both sight and hearing, Turpin killed himself. (Contemporary readers might recognize his cognitive and perceptual deficits as signs of the dementia caused by the concussions boxers routinely sustain.)

At the end of "Made in Wales," the narrator reports in a kind of coda on a meeting with two of Turpin's daughters, Annette and Charmaine. What Turpin's daughters tell him revises what readers have already learned about their father. They revise, that is, the story of Turpin's fecklessness as it might have been recounted in the popular press. Annette and Charmaine explain that their father loved and was loved by their mother, his second wife Gwen, who brought them up in Wales, and they quietly assert that "he always had dignity and was good to people" (147). Wales here is a site of Turpin's making and unmaking, the place where he was exploited by the wildly unscrupulous Welsh "businessman" Leslie Salts (66). Wales also alerts us to regional (geographical) as well as historical variations in the relationship between Englishness and foreignness.

"Northern Lights" is similarly regional or local in focus, although it sets the local and the recent against a backdrop that reaches beyond England and back into the distant past. Phillips tells the story of David Oluwale as an ensemble of disparate, discrete narratives. He juxtaposes the first-hand accounts of people who knew Oluwale in Leeds; records of Oluwale's incarcerations in Armley prison and his confinement in the West Riding Pauper Asylum; excerpts from documents that place Oluwale in the context of postwar Leeds or relate the long history of blacks in Britain; transcripts and testimony from the trial of the two policemen accused of manslaughter in his death (the judge dismissed the charge of manslaughter because no one had witnessed the crime); and, finally, a second-person narration that addresses Oluwale.[15] These

narratives are interwoven with a history of Leeds, a city that grew up around the river in which Oluwale's body was found ten days after he disappeared. Phillips presents Oluwale as the object of brutal beatings that might, at first, appear to be the random acts of anomalous individual constables but are revealed on closer inspection to be instances of systemic racial violence that continue into our own present day, as a symposium on "Oluwale Now" held in Leeds in February 2016 made clear.

Among the narrative threads that stand out in "Northern Lights" is the account of another Nigerian immigrant, a man who knew Oluwale in Lagos and reports that Oluwale was unable to get along or go along with racism, whether systemic or casual: "The problem with David was he didn't understand the colour-bar situation and he would get very wound up. 'I'm from a British colony and I'm British,' he would say. 'So why do they call me nigger?'" (172). Oluwale's voice is missing from almost all of "Northern Lights"; we encounter it here as reported speech embedded in his friend's narrative and as a rehearsal of changing notions of race, immigration, and nationality played out in debates about the 1948 British Nationality Act and the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Bill. For the most part, however, Oluwale does not respond to the taunting of racist toughs—"Hey you, nigger boy. Did you come out of your mam's arse?" (171) —or, when he is "sleeping rough" in the center of the city (198), to the brutal beatings repeatedly visited on him by Detective Inspector Ellerker and Sergeant Kitching of the Leeds police force.

"Northern Lights" begins with the sentence "I remember," spoken by a teenage girl who greets Oluwale and is greeted by him in turn when they pass each other in the street in their neighborhood. The teenage girl, who later becomes an anti-racist activist, is an exemplary witness: she answers the call to "Remember Oluwale" by saying, "And we did" (153). The slogan "Remember Oluwale" runs through "Northern Lights," scrawled on walls throughout Leeds. The repetition of the word "remember" links "Northern Lights" with the entire corpus of Phillips' writing, an extended meditation on memory and forgetting that urges us to seek to recover and thus to remember what has often been casually

ignored or systematically forgotten, the claims of family or the exigencies of race, class, gender, and nationality.

What, finally, do "Northern Lights" and Phillips' other biographical writings suggest about the relationship of the migrant subject and the "invisible presences" that keep him or her in position? On the one hand, Phillips' research supplies a social, historical, and cultural context in which what might otherwise seem like the idiosyncratic quirks of personality or moral shortcomings of the diasporic black subjects he writes about take shape as signs and symptoms of larger histories and geographies, in particular the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and their aftermaths that haunt our own ostensibly postcolonial moment. On the other hand, Phillips' critical scrutiny of his situated subjects refashions standard-issue narratives such as the story of the extravagance that led Turpin to squander the considerable wealth he amassed during his short career. Phillips also enlists readers in his biographical project, whether directly, by commanding them to "Imagine the scene" or exhorting them to "Remember Oluwale," or indirectly, by asking them to evaluate the life stories inscribed in narratives presented without the mediation of authorial comment.

In the deployment of irony and especially in the rendering of interiority, the fracturing of perspective, and the presentation of multiple, often conflicting points of view that, for Woolf, define "modern" fiction and the "new" biography, Phillips' biographical writings amplify the conversation with modernism elaborated in his novels. At the same time, they take that conversation in a new direction. Kwame Anthony Appiah has famously proposed that the postmodern and the postcolonial alike enact "space-clearing gestures" and that the postmodern, in particular, entails the rejection of "an antecedent practice that laid claim to a certain exclusivity of insight" (348, 341–42). Appiah, that is, treats the postmodern and, by extension, the postcolonial as gestures that overturn assumptions, or, as he puts it, "claims" once considered axiomatic or regarded as matters of common sense.

Appiah goes on to identify "delegitimation" as the project of "postcolonial writers" (353). Although Phillips' work participates in this project, Phillips rejects the label "postcolonial." He might be

similarly reluctant to classify his work as "postmodern." When Stephen Clingman asked Phillips which literary tradition he belongs to, Phillips responded by aligning himself with writers—we might characterize them as transnational or global—who "don't fit comfortably into a national tradition, . . . [and] would resist being grouped around race" (122). Indeed, Phillips is as critical of received opinions about race and nation as he is about the "exclusivity of insight" that Appiah connects with the "antecedent practice[s]" (122). of modernity. Yet, while Phillips shares the reluctance of many contemporary biographers to "moralize, take sides, or cast blame" (Lee 91), he also refuses the characteristic postmodern posture of unremitting skepticism.

Phillips' treatment of his subjects makes clear that the task of the biographer, whether writing the lives of the famous or, to borrow again from Woolf, the lives of the obscure, entails more than the work of sifting through and interrogating the evidentiary record. The recovery and dissection of historical documents and items from official dossiers does not capture the unknowable particularity of the subject, as palpable in the absence of David Oluwale from his story as it is in the presence of Bert Williams in his. For that, it seems, the biographer must rely on something akin to what Woolf identifies as the truth of fiction, which comes from the imaginative, empathetic, and also dispassionate engagement that brings the subject to life.

Notes

Some portions of this essay appeared in different form in my essays "Living Stateside" and "Plural Selves." I dedicate this article to the memory of Robert M. Stein, exemplary colleague and dear friend.

1 See, for example, "Modern Fiction," "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "The New Biography," and the Mary Carmichael section of *A Room of One's Own* (chapter 5).

2 On Phillips' self-identification as a migrant, see, for example, "The High Anxiety of Belonging," where he characterizes his life as one of "compulsive itinerancy" (305), and his assertion in "Necessary Journeys" of a "triple heritage of journeying: British, African diasporan, Caribbean" (125).

3 See Yelin's "Caryl Phillips" and "Living Stateside," as well as Najar.

4 Pirker suggests that "Made in Wales," one of the sections of *Foreigners*, is a "comment" on the "limitations of biographical writing" (203).

5 On Woolf's *Roger Fry*, see Cooley, Johnston, and Woolf, *Letters*, vol. 6 (262, 326, 362, 381) and *Diary*, vol. 5 (13, 92, 105, 137, 246–48, and *passim*).
6 On Woolf and photography, see Humm, chapters 1 and 2.
7 Timothy Bewes takes issue with the notion that Phillips' texts are "corrective narratives, telling a previously untold story about the past," proposing rather that the works "are caught up in a drama of literary possibility that is riveted to their contemporaneity" (35–36). I would argue that "contemporaneity" is what drives Phillips' exploration of the past.
8 See, for example, Ledent's "Only Connect" (184; 188).
9 See also Phillips' interviews with Ward (640) and Krasny (151). "Existing accounts" include the writings of Williams and his partner George Walker; contemporary newspaper articles and reviews; Johnson, Charters, Sampson, Smith, and Woll.
10 Some of Williams' performances can now be easily accessed online. Google "Bert Williams" and you quickly find Williams' recording of his signature song, "Nobody," and *Natural Born Gambler* (1916), the film from which Lee takes a short clip. You can also see parts of Williams' *Lime Kiln Club Field Day*, made in 1913 with a cast of African-American actors and recently found in the Biograph Collection at The Museum of Modern Art.
11 On Williams' Caribbeanness, see also Ledent's "Caryl Phillips."
12 Tournay-Theodotou offers a Lacanian reading of Williams' relationship to his father and of his frequent and troubled gazing at his own image in the mirror (99). Vivan reads the images of mask and mirror in the novel through Freud's notion of the uncanny (345; 348–49).
13 Phillips' web site lists *Foreigners* as non-fiction. See www.carylphillips.com/foreigners.html.
14 See Ledent's "Look Liberty in the Face" on the interplay between individual agency and the workings of transpersonal—social, historical—constructions of race and class in *Foreigners*.
15 Gunning identifies the second-person voice as that of Phillips himself ("Ethnicity" 800).

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