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The Enigma of Unarrival: A Tribute to Caryl Phillips

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Abstract: Well-known Trinidadian-American novelist Robert Antoni, author of *Blessed is the Fruit* (1997) and *As Flies to Whatless Boys* (2013), draws on an essay that Caryl Phillips wrote about the lost tribes of Israel, as well as personal memories, to provide an idiosyncratic reading of Phillips' plural sense of home.

Keywords: Caryl Phillips, home, migration, tribalism

I.

In a recent interview with Margaret Busby at the Bocas literary festival in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Caryl Phillips remarked: "Home is the most difficult word in the English language" (qtd. in Baksh). In many ways his life's work has been the exposure, and the exploration, of this difficulty. In the concluding essay of his collection *A New World Order* (2002), Phillips talks about growing up in Leeds in the sixties and seventies: "a world in which everybody, from teachers to policemen, felt it appropriate to ask me—some more forcefully than others—for an explanation of where I was from. The answer 'Leeds,' or 'Yorkshire,' was never going to satisfy them. Of course, as a result, it was never going to satisfy me either" (303). Later in the same essay Phillips describes the kind of characters he has chosen to write about, in both his fiction and non-fiction, as one book has led to another: "They have felt alienated from, or abandoned by, the societies they have hitherto known as 'home.' They have hoped that somewhere, over the horizon, there might be a new place where they might live and raise their children" (305). Yet for Phillips' characters this hope is seldom, if ever, fully realized. At best

it remains a fleeting illusion—still at the other end of the horizon—or a deception. And in this sense their journeys, and the circumstances of their "arrivals," are no different from the author's: "I have grown to understand that I am, of course, writing about myself in some oblique, but not entirely unpredictable, way" (305).

In 1999, not long before he published the essay from which I have just quoted, Caryl Phillips and I "played mas" together in the streets of Port of Spain, in Peter Minshall's Carnival band called—appropriately enough for both of us—The Lost Tribe. The extent to which that experience of "playing mas" as a "lost tribesman" might have contributed to Phillips' own fascination with the Lost Tribes only he can say, though I suspect that his interest in the long history of speculation about these people—displaced from their ancient home in the kingdom of Israel, in biblical Palestine, subsequently disappearing and reappearing in various parts of the modern world—emerged long before his participation in Trinidad's Carnival. Nonetheless, a couple of years later, in 2002, Phillips wrote an essay entitled "Belonging to Israel" (later included in his collection *Color Me English*), in which he becomes something of what he calls "a Lost Tribes hunter" himself (188).

II.

Phillips examines the work and discoveries of an Israeli-American writer, Hillel Halkin, who may be considered the foremost and most contemporary of these hunters. Lost Tribes hunters have run the gamut, since antiquity, from erudite biblical scholars to outrageous quacks—with the latter far outweighing the former. Yet Halkin is a learned man, a very fine writer, bringing Phillips to ask: "When faced with a history of such quackery, what on earth would persuade an intelligent man like Halkin to join this long and undistinguished tradition?" (188). Clearly there is, in Halkin's search, a personal investment. Born in the Upper West Side of New York, the son of Russian immigrants, he had returned to Israel in 1969 a committed, though secular, Zionist (186). His own writing, like Phillips', is in large measure a rigorous intellectual interrogation of the meaning and difficulty of his own journey. Which is not to say it is lacking in passion. According to Phillips, Halkin is

a writer who is keenly in touch with the "desires of the human heart" (194). He understands the emotional intricacies of tribalism, and their complex relationship with belonging and the "deeper mysteries" of identity (186).

The book that Phillips scrutinizes is Halkin's *Across the Sabbath River: In Search of the Lost Tribe of Israel* (2002). (The legendary "Sabbath River," which might define the northern border of biblical Palestine, beyond which the Lost Tribes were banished, "flows for six days a week and then, like the Jews, rests on the seventh day" [Phillips, "Belonging" 187].) Halkin's search consists of three expeditions to a remote and hilly corner of northeastern India, a tiny state sandwiched between Bangladesh and Burma called Mizoram. Here, in this predominantly Christian land, without any real evidence of a connection, several thousand "Mizo" people passionately identify with the practice and history of Judaism. Furthermore, they know themselves to be descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, and they have even petitioned, unsuccessfully, the United Nations to be recognized as such. For hundreds of years these

Fig. 1. Photo of Phillips and the author in 1999, playing mas together in Peter Minshall's Trinidad band, The Lost Tribe. Photo courtesy of Robert Antoni.

Mizo have lived in exile. They dream desperately of retuning "home" to modern day Israel. Phillips quotes Halkin: "There were only two ways to think about it. Either a Tibeto-Burmese people in a remote corner of Southeast Asia had a mysterious connection with ancient Israel, or they were victims of a mass delusion. Either way, there was a story to be written" (189–90).

Halkin makes his first trip to Mizoram in the company of an expert "tribesman," Rabbi Avichail who, by Halkin's own admission, scholars of Jewish studies consider to be something of a crackpot (188). But Halkin is captivated by the old man's enthusiasm. Earlier, Avichail had helped arrange for a number of Mizo to realize their dream of emigrating and settling in Israel. Yet even after his further investigations with Halkin, Avichail still had not found enough hard evidence to welcome the Mizo as his brothers, true descendants of the Lost Tribes. Halkin returns to Israel from his trip with Rabbi Avichail frustrated. Why could the old man not bend his orthodoxy a bit to satisfy these disenfranchised and clearly suffering people, whose only desire is belonging, whose only need is to know *who they are?* Halkin accuses Avichail of turning Judaism into a kind of "exclusive club" (qtd. in Phillips, "Belonging" 189), the sole criterion for membership determined by rabbinical law and blood.

Halkin is not a religious authority. He is a writer, and it is the "human cry for help" which moves him and which brings him back to Mizoram for a second time in search of more "evidence" that will connect the Mizo to the Lost Tribes (189). But despite a fruitful beginning, his second visit eventually begins to flounder, to frustrate and wear him down. He is ready to admit his failure and pack his bags. Phillips writes: "And then, as in all good dramas, just when we believe all is lost, that what seemed real was only imagined, the author makes the 'discovery' that leads to a breakthrough and prepares the way for the final act" (192).

Just as he is preparing to depart Mizoram, Halkin is visited by a local ethnographer, a Dr. Khuplam, who presents him with a manuscript he has spent thirty years assembling. It contains old chants, songs, and tales he has collected from the old people in the hills. The manuscript fascinates Halkin. More so, it provides all the evidence he has needed to

make sense of all of his previous discoveries that have so far eluded him. Now everything falls magically and neatly into place.

Almost completely convinced, Halkin departs for Israel, only to return to India for a third time. He has come back to see Dr. Khuplam and other authorities who might provide the piece of evidence Halkin still requires to solidify his theory. And he finds it. The Mizo are not bread eaters; yet Halkin discovers a select group of the tribe who—for some inexplicable reason they cannot comprehend—feel compelled to sit down on a particular day of the year and eat unleavened bread (193). It is a holy day clearly reminiscent of biblical Passover. He is now "107 percent sure" that the Mizo have descended from the Lost Tribes (193), knowledge he is finally prepared to hand over to them. But it is not simply knowledge or evidence that they crave, and a member of his audience asks Halkin the pertinent question: "Will the government of Israel recognize us through the cooperation of your good self?" (193). In other words, *Will they welcome us home?*

According to Halkin the Mizos are a "never civilized" people (qtd. in Phillips, "Belonging" 190). It is his "Western education that enabled [him] to think about textual and historical problems in a way they were unaccustomed to" and which allows him to decipher and impart to the Mizo—whose language he cannot even comprehend without the aid of translators—their own ancient history (Halkin, qtd. in Phillips "Belonging" 193). And so he does. But here, Phillips states, the story takes another twist. "It is this same 'Western Education'—fed as it is by the authority of books, and unmoved by the special appeals of the human heart—that, ironically enough after his admonitory words to Rabbi Avichail, now leads Halkin to fail the Mizo at the very moment when he is finally offering them hope" (193).

The Mizo are not Jews. Not by the stern strictures of blood. True, they have descended from the Lost Tribe of Manasseh; they are related to the Israelites of the Bible—and, by that measure, to Halkin himself—yet they are not Jews. The Mizo are not even "half bloods" (195), which is all Halkin can claim, somewhat shakily, for himself (an irony of which he is fully cognizant). They are "no bloods" (195). It all happened too long ago. There has been too much thinning along the way. Halkin

advises the Mizo to take pride in this "amazing" knowledge that he has given them (qtd. in Phillips, "Belonging" 193), to seek solace in it, but he cannot recommend that they attempt to immigrate to Israel. The Mizo will find no "home" there (195).

It is at this point, clearly caught up in the fate and the drama of the Mizo himself, that Phillips chides Halkin. This is not the ending to the story he would have wished for: "It strikes me as oddly cruel," Phillips writes. "Would it hurt that much to allow them a chance to belong?" (195). Would it be so wrong to offer the Mizo—despite the great complications and hardships of such a pursuit—the possibility of returning "home?" The same possibility that Halkin himself has realized and embraced with such vigor?

III.

Some of us, like Halkin, are lucky to belong. To have found a belonging. Yet Halkin seems to be telling us, along with the "never civilized" Mizo, that for certain citizens of our modern world, this sense of belonging will never exist. The Mizo must remain forever lost. And in some ways this *is* the predicament of our modern world. It is interesting how, at the end of his essay, Phillips talks back to Halkin on behalf of the Mizo. But it is even more interesting that this same hope that Phillips would wish for "these good people" (196), the Mizo, Phillips has renounced unconditionally for himself. Here, in their understandings of the enormous difficulties for many of us of belonging in the contemporary, multicultural, multiracial, multinational world, Phillips and Halkin are no different—although the path that Phillips has chosen for himself might be the more strenuous.

There is a moving passage in the concluding essay of Phillips' *A New World Order* where he describes attending an England-Colombia football match in Lens, France. When the time comes, Phillips succumbs to his enthusiasm, "belting out" the words to "God Save the Queen" with thirty thousand other English fans (308). Phillips writes: "For a moment the cloud of ambivalence was lifted. I belonged. Why not, I wondered, submit to the moment and cease struggling? After all, what's wrong with a tee-shirt emblazoned with the Union Jack? The sixties and seventies are

over, I thought" (308–09). Yet Phillips knows full well that he will never give in. He will never cease struggling. Phillips will never be British, a member of that other exclusive club to which Brexit has only reinstated the ancient laws of its own perceived exceptionalism, any more than he will ever belong fully to St Kitts, the United States, Africa, or anyplace else: "I have chosen to create for myself an imaginary 'home' to live in alongside the one that I am incapable of fully trusting. My increasingly precious, imaginary, Atlantic World" (308). It is in this place, in the mid-Atlantic, equidistant between the west coast of Africa, the east cost of North America and the islands of the Caribbean, and Britain itself—a place Phillips has articulated on numerous occasions—that he has cultivated his plural notion of home. And it is with admirable diligence and fierce intelligence that Caryl Phillips has consigned himself to the Lost Tribe.

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