**A Meeting with Caryl Phillips**

In 1852, an emancipated slave turned respected novelist and travel writer called William Wells Brown wrote “He who escapes slavery at the age of twenty years, without any education, as did the writer of this letter, must read when others are asleep, if he would catch up with the rest of the world”.

When I was 20, one hundred and fifty or so years after Wells Brown wrote those words, I was literate, educated and raised with the kind of freedom he could only have dreamed of, even after his emancipation. Yet his words resonated profoundly with my experience of growing up black in the north of England in the 1980s and 90s. I was literate in the figurative and literal language of the coloniser, educated about white historical figures, free in a Europe of secretive prejudice and glass ceilings. There was still reading and ‘catching up’ to be done, and perhaps more than any other writer, it is the work of Caryl Phillips that has helped me navigate the treacherous terrain of class, race and identity as a working-class black writer born into Margaret Thatcher’s Britain.

It was Caryl himself who said “I was a voracious reader, but at a certain point, I started to realise that none of the stories were about people like me”. Whenever ‘people like me’ *were* included in the stories we read about at school, and through popular media, it was as history’s victims or villains, or as subhuman savages. A case in point is a childhood favourite of mine, Hergé’s Belgian comic explorer Tintin, and the first time I ever met Caryl, I handed him a copy of a *Tintin* book I'd recently discovered and that had deeply angered me.

I found *Tintin in Congo* in the flagship store in Brussels, en route to the University of Liège, where Caryl was a guest speaker. I was at the beginning of a five-month winter journey through the continent, hoping to write a book about ‘black-Europe’, and sought out Caryl in the same way he once reached out to James Baldwin on a similar trip in the 1980s: as a young black writer trying to learn from a literary hero who had trail blazed various landscapes, both imagined and real, that I was now traversing.

We met in the cafe of Liège’s elegant Crowne Plaza, and he emerged in the only outfit I’ve ever seen him in since: dressed from head to toe in non-committal black. Caryl greeted me quietly, but warmly, with eyes that looked slightly jet lagged. Either that or he had been up writing all night; the non space of a hotel room is his favourite place to work. We both ordered Americanos and, presenting the Tintin book to him, I asked if he’d ever heard of it. He looked at me with puzzlement and replied, almost quizzically “I’m aware of it, yes…”.

I had been incensed that this globe-trotting cartoon reporter, who partly influenced my choice of career, had been used by its creator as colonial propaganda, only a few years after King Leopold II’s brutal reign over the Congo Free State came to an end. During the period between 1885 and 1908, over 10 million Congolese were murdered, with many more maimed and tortured. Hergé’s depiction of Congo was of black people as lazy, unruly golly-gremlin like creatures who were lucky to have white men to organise them. To think: a whole generation of kids grew up with that powerful depiction of black people. But when I told Caryl it was a gift, he thanked me politely, and we quickly moved onto another subject, namely, the nature of the book project I was working on, and how he might be able to help.

“Refocus on your work to make a change” he later told me when I spoke of my anger ,“…you’re an artist with far more penetrative weapons at your disposal”. And this interaction symbolises the nature of my relationship with Caryl. The postmodern twist on an old proverb goes *‘the truth will set you free…but first, it will really piss you off!’,* and Caryl has been one of those rare voices to guide me gently, discreetly and sometimes amusedly down a productive path away from the constant temptation to get swamped in black bitterness. Caryl is a professor at one of the world’s most prestigious universities for a reason -- he isn’t just a great writer, but, as I have found out since that first meeting, also a great teacher and mentor.

Like me, Caryl was raised in a working-class area in the north of England, and has often explored his black identity not just through the lens of black Britain, but in a wider context, feeling, as he wrote in his *The European Tribe “*Of and not of Europe”. His work contains sentence after sentence that made tangible my own loose and half formed ideas, the vague notions about my black identity that I didn’t know how to express using the education I’d been given. Apart from the elegant restraint of the prose and his thoughtful understanding of black history and its relationship with the West, there is something quietly alternative about the way he approaches his writing, and the way he presents himself as a writer of Caribbean descent. This has, I think, something to do with his atypical black British experience.

To be part of black Britain’s collective identity, it helps if you are from the Caribbean and from London, even if this is changing.[[1]](#footnote-2) Though Caryl was born in St Kitts, moving to Britain when he was just four months old, he wasn’t transplanted to the safety of a mini-St Kitts in a huge multicultural capital city, but to a largely white, working-class area of an industrial northern city. That isn’t to say that Caribbean immigrants to London had an easy time of it, but in the face of discrimination and marginalisation, in larger clusters its communities did at least manage to forge a more coherent sense of themselves as being both black and British. Caryl would have to learn how to *colour himself English* in a completely different environment: one which relied more heavily on understanding white, working-class culture.

Perhaps this explains why, though he has written about the Caribbean, Britain, Africa and America vividly in his novels, it was his relationship with Europe he felt compelled to engage with in his first published work of nonfiction. This is where I feel a deep kinship with Caryl; the feeling of having to escape both a Britain I didn’t truly feel a part of, as well as a *black* Britain in which I didn’t quite fit in. Perhaps Caryl sensed this too on our first meeting in Liège, because even after my clumsy gift, he graciously invited me to dinner with a group of scholars and friends later that day, after his talk.

That’s where I met Jamaican dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, a longtime friend of Caryl’s and perhaps the most coherent voice of Brixtonized black Britain. Linton recalled the first time he heard of this strange writer from up north. “He must have been about 19 or 20 and he used to send me these letters, saying he admired my work and wanted to meet up, and I thought ‘who’s this lickal Oxford bwoy?’And to tell the truth, I ignored them. But over the years we have become firm friends”.

For Caryl, then a young man studying English at Oxford, reaching out to Linton was no doubt an attempt to connect the cultural dots of an increasingly complex identity. Where could a black kid from the north of England, now moving into a new social class through an elite education, find his tribe?

Watching these two old friends -- and two of my literary idols -- talk, I thought of something Susan Sontag once said: “Any situation between people, when they are really human with each other, produces intelligence”. Hearing their old stories through lively, teasing banter and their thoughts on black British literature, I was struck by Caryl and Linton as individuals who had taken hugely different journeys but ended up at the same destination; a place of integrity and wisdom. Their friendship personified what black Britain is at its core: a unifying search for truth and identity against the backdrop of colonial misinformation and hegemony. Caryl and Linton were both on the right side of that search, and I found it reassuring that their journeys weren’t made without their own mentors providing a platform from which to think and grow.

One of the big topics discussed was the black British canon. Linton said that he owed a lot to Sam Selvon, who showed him “great kindness”. Caryl talked about his last meeting with Derek Walcott, at his home in St Lucia: “A difficult man, but that’s why we love him. His eyes teared up as I left, and there was the sense it might be the last time we’d see each other”. Hearing writers talk about writers is one of the most enlightening experiences and to a young wordsmith, it shows above all that they are *human*. Walcott is now in his 80s, but it likely wasn’t his age that prompted Caryl to mention their emotional farewell. News had circulated that day of the death of the great Chinua Achebe, and the mood amongst the writers attending the event, which also included Scottish poet Jackie Kaye and Belgian Nigerian novelist Chika Unigwe, was one of pathos and nostalgia.

When Caryl mentioned Derek Walcott though, Linton went a little quiet. “He thinks Derek doesn’t like him”, said Caryl. It seemed Linton felt that Walcott never took him seriously, which Caryl thought was both amusing and completely inaccurate. “Derek loves you, and I really don’t understand why you think he has something against you”. Deflecting the issue somewhat, Linton looked at me and said “in the English speaking Caribbean we have two school of poetry; Walcott is more colonial -- a guy who has mastered the English language, and then Brathwaite who is more lyrical, and uses slang. The two poets divide people”.

In some ways I thought of Caryl and Linton as similar influences on black British literature for a younger generation. Roots Manuva, Ghost Poet, Benjamin Zephaniah and Anthony Joseph owe a lot to Linton’s lyricism, whilst Zadie Smith, Gary Young and Inua Ellams were no doubt influenced by Caryl’s cross-continent prose. But hearing Caryl and Linton wax lyrical about their heroes, and the writing scene growing up, there appeared to be a sense of community that is missing amongst my generation. Young black British writers, as with black presenters and actors, deal with each other with a certain amount of apprehension. Rather than the intellectual pursuits and friendly competition that produced excellence and camaraderie in the 1980s, the type of competition I see amongst my peers seems to me to be of an unhealthy variety. Perhaps it’s because we don’t have the established channels and outlets we once had in Britain. If I’m not *the* black creative in my field, then someone else will be and there won’t be enough room for both of us. This is thankfully changing because of social media, as artists such as Cecile Emeke hammer out a space online, but only last year a friend of mine was told by a producer at a major broadcaster he hadn’t been hired for a job he auditioned for because ‘they already had their black presenter’.

I expressed this frustration, and Caryl said that a lot of the creative and artistic unity in the 1980s came through organisations like The National Theatre and the Keskidee Centre, Britain’s first (now defunct) fine arts centre for the black community, which would commission its own projects. “There was a feeling at the time that all the work had been done, and black Britain had integrated into British society, so that it was now simply ‘Britain’, which of course wasn’t true”. Organisations like The Keskidee Centre gave Caryl his first sense of a black community, which was perhaps missing in 1960s and 70s Leeds. When I complained about the lack of such institutions in existence today, Linton set me straight. “We went through some hard times with the Black Panthers so that the next generation could thrive, you kids don’t realise how good you’ve got it compared to what we had to go through. It’s like Chinua once said, God rest his soul, ‘we write about politics so you can write about daffodils’”.

My generation do have it easier because of the boundaries broken down by the work of Caryl and Linton, but there is a certain disjuncture between all those writers who came of age and collaborated in the 1980s, and young black Britons today. It’s as though all that great knowledge work was done and then not passed down as coherently as it might have been to the next generation. How many twenty-somethings could name a Linton Kwei Johnson poem? And it wasn’t until I approached Peepal Tree Press in Leeds about my project ten years ago, that I read any of Caryl’s work. By that time I’d read my way through Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, and, to a lesser extent, African writers such as China Acheba and Wole Soyinka, but why hadn’t the work of any black British writers found their way to me?

In 2016, through the hard work of Linton’s partner Sharmilla, I found myself part of a black British writers tour, which brought together a collection of black writers from across generations, to share their work with each other and then with an audience. It was the first time I’d experienced any kind of nucleus of black British thought, and the experience was invaluable; stories and book recommendations were passed around, advice offered about how to deal with publishers (in the UK, 98% of all commissioning editors are white) and feedback was given. It was a space where we could collaborate without looking over each other’s shoulders. Recommendations of important black British writing, which often languishes on the dusty shelves of specialist book stores, or in the dark recesses of ‘cultural studies’, was shared. The Cultural Studies section is where I eventually found a copy of *The European Tribe*.

I mentioned this to Caryl, and he shot me a characteristically bemused smile. “Just a moment…you found a book I wrote 30 years ago in a well known bookstore…what is there to complain about?”. Many book stores didn't even have a cultural studies section when Caryl was crafting his skills as a young reader and writer.

Since I’ve known him, I've watched Caryl in social situations and at talks deal with awkward questions and interact in an elegant, informed and lateral manner, very often with a dash of dry humour specific to Yorkshire. There are very few people that handle themselves with such class. I use that word here to talk of what the Oxford English dictionary describes as ‘impressive stylishness in appearance or behaviour’. There is another definition of class that too often gets mixed up with the former, which is of course the age-old system still rife in Britain of ‘ordering society whereby people are divided into sets based on perceived social or economic status’. This word, class, perhaps more so than race, is one that is important when understanding Caryl’s story and the position he is writing from. In his company, as a someone raised in a ‘lower-class’ council estate I’ve put my foot in it more than a few times with out-of-place jokes or missed literary references in conversations with top-tier academics, and Caryl has often been able to help mediate these awkward situations because he himself has made the all too rare journey from one to the other.

When we see his story we understand how so much black intelligence and talent can get lost. Caryl’s life until young adulthood is one marked by alienation, perhaps the perfect breeding ground for a writer in the making, and though Caryl’s intellect and creativity may well have played its part in the sense of loneliness he felt growing up (high intelligence, especially at a young age, can be a golden cage), it’s easy to see how Caryl might attach his loneliness to his blackness. Inside this poor black boy with a working-class accent, was the complex, thoughtful, creative mind that we know went on to produce brilliant, prize-winning literature. But in the white working-class north, which can still veer towards the parochial and philistine even when its *white* members show such creative and intellectual leanings, Caryl was reduced to an anomaly at best, or a wog at worst. As Caryl reflects in the third person in *Colour Me English*…

“Aged Five: He is the only black boy in the school…the final lesson…is a tale about ‘Little Black Sambo’. He can feel eyes upon him…”

Aged Eight: “Two brothers up the street sometimes let him borrow their Enyd Blyton paperback….However, he tells his mother he does not understand why the boys’ mother warms warms the Enyd Blyton paperbacks in the oven when he returns them. The brothers mention something about germs. His mother is furious. She forbids him to borrow any more books from these two boys.

Aged sixteen: “The truth is, his brothers aside, he has very few friends of any kind…he learns to lose himself in the world and lives of others, and in this way he does not have to think about the woeful state of his own life.”

Caryl survived the same way I, and many others like me, did. Nobody wanted to hear about a black kid from the streets thinking deeply, so you gained kudos in one of a few narrow fields where black excellence is expected and accepted: in music, sport or sheer toughness. Despite his apparent loneliness, Caryl was popular at school, a good sportsman and tough enough to make sure bullying wasn’t part of the equation. He couldn’t rely on his blackness for solidarity and found a tribe of sorts through football, his beloved Leeds United offering a sense of community he would eventually find later through black arts and literature hubs in London.

“I grew up in a town where one was aware of the fact you were different, but I had a real sense of unity and bonding with that city, cultivated around Leeds United,” he said in an interview. If you listen to that conversation with the BBC’s Razia Iqbal, you’ll hear how Caryl pronounces the word ‘one’ as ‘won’. That his working-class Leeds accent, though slightly softened over the years, has survived the halls of Oxford, where he was a student, the streets of Manhattan, and the lecture theatre at Yale, isn’t only evidence of Caryl’s long journey, but also evidence that he hasn’t allowed himself to forget the journey.

Living on the cultural periphery of both black and white Britain has enabled Caryl to observe the cultures he is connected to with the clarity of someone who is both on the inside and the outside. His oeuvre, like anything of excellence, should be understood by everyone, but for people like me it is a priceless, detailed map of under explored territory, that has written and rewritten black people into their own history.

*Afropean: An Encounter With Black Europe* will be published by Penguin UK in summer 2017

1. In the last census, black people in Britain identified themselves as predominantly black African, rather that Caribbean for the first time since the census began. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)