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Daffodils: A Meeting with Caryl Phillips

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Abstract: In this article Johny Pitts offers a personal account of the influence of Caryl Phillips on the younger generation of black British authors and more generally discusses issues of literary mentoring. Starting from his first meeting with Caryl Phillips in Belgium some years ago, Pitts explains how much he learned from his famous elder, who, like him, grew up in a white working-class area in the North of England and has engaged in his writing with a Europe he feels "both of and not of." Phillips is presented both as a guide in Pitts' budding career and as a source of inspiration and confidence for the younger writer who also deals in his writing with the identity issues that affect Europeans of African descent. Pitts is the author of *Afropean: An Encounter with Black Europe*, which will be published by Penguin UK in spring 2018.

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In 1852, an emancipated slave turned respected novelist and essayist named William Wells Brown wrote, in his travel book *Three Years in Europe*, "He who escapes from 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" (107).

When I was twenty, 150 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, Caryl Phillips has helped me navigate the treacherous terrain of class, race, and identity as a working-class black writer born into Margaret Thatcher's Britain.

Caryl himself has mentioned how he was a voracious reader as a young man but slowly began to realise the stories were rarely about people like him. I had a similar experience; when black people *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 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

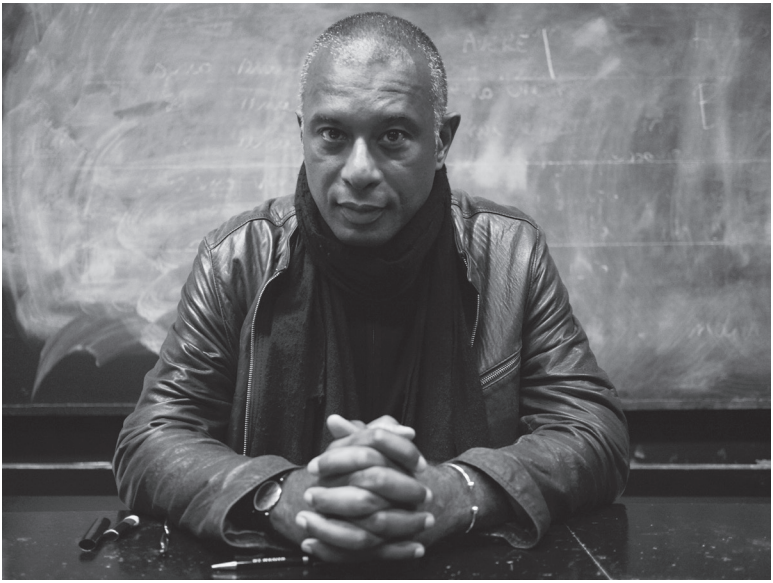

Fig. 1. Portrait of Caryl Phillips. Photo courtesy Johny Pitts, 2012.

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 jetlagged. 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 a strong black coffee 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 ten million Congolese were murdered, with many more maimed and tortured. Hergé depicted Congolese 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 representation of black people. But when I told Caryl it was a gift, he thanked me politely, and we quickly moved on to another subject, namely, the nature of the book project I was working on and how he might be able to help.

When I spoke of my anger he later told me, "refocus on your work to make a change, you're an artist with far more penetrative weapons at your disposal." 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 *The European Tribe*, "both of and not of Europe" (133). 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 his 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.

Being a part of black Britain's collective identity is easier if you are from the Caribbean and from London, even if this is changing.[1] Though Caryl was born in St. Kitts and moved to Britain when he was just four months old, he wasn't transplanted to the security of a mini-St. Kitts in a huge multicultural capital city but rather 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, communities in larger clusters did at least manage to forge a more coherent sense of themselves as being both black and British. Caryl had 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, he felt compelled to engage with Europe 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. 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

Fig. 2. Portrait of Caryl Phillips. Photo courtesy Johny Pitts, 2012.

strange writer from up north, telling me: "He must have been about nineteen or twenty 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 wrote: "Any situation between people, when they are really human with each other, produces 'intelligence'" (59). 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 was in his eighties at the time, but it likely wasn't only 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 present, which also included Scottish poet Jackie Kaye and Belgian Nigerian novelist Chika Unigwe, was one of gentle sadness and nostalgia.

When Caryl mentioned 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 schools 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 black Atlantic 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. Today, 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 sometimes strikes me as being of the 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 carve out a space online, but only last year a friend of mine was told by a producer at a major broadcaster that 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 was formed through organisations like The National Theatre and the Keskidee Centre, Britain's first (now defunct) fine arts centre for the black community, which commissioned its own projects. He continued: "There was a feeling at the time amongst some people 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 the 1960s and '70s in Leeds. When I complained about the lack of such institutions 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 wrote about politics so you can write about daffodils.'"

My generation does 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 Kwesi 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 Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, but why hadn't the work of any black British writers found its way to me?

In 2016, through the hard work of Linton's partner, Sharmilla, I found myself participating in 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; we passed around stories, offered advice about how to deal with publishers (in the UK, 98% of all commissioning editors are white), and gave feedback on each other's work. It was a space where we could collaborate without looking over each other's shoulders. We shared 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." The cultural studies section in a major British bookstore 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 book store? 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 deal with awkward questions in social situations and at talks and interact with people in an elegant, informed, and lateral manner, very often with a dash of dry humour specific to Yorkshire. There are very few people who handle themselves with such class. I use that word here to talk of what the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as "impressive stylishness in appearance, performance, or behaviour" (13.B). 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"

(4.a). This word, class, perhaps more so than race, is important for understanding Caryl's story and the position he is writing from. In his company, as 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 black and working class to educated and published.

When we hear his story we understand how so much black intelligence and talent can get lost to the feeling that one's personal identity is out of keeping to Britain's national identity at large, the archaic version that gets exported to the rest of the world and taught in school classrooms. Caryl's life until young adulthood was 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 (intelligence, especially at a young age, can be a golden cage), it's easy to see how he might attach his loneliness to his blackness. Inside this poor black boy with a working-class accent was the complex, thoughtful, and 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*, at age five, "[h]e is the only black boy in the school. . . . The final lesson of the day . . . is a tale about 'Little Black Sambo'. He can feel eyes upon him" (107). At age eight,

> [t]wo brothers up the street sometimes let him borrow their Enid Blyton paperbacks. . . . However, he tells his mother he does not understand why the boys' mother warms the Enid Blyton paperbacks in the oven when he returns them. The two brothers have mentioned something to him about germs. His mother is furious. She forbids him to borrow any more books from these two boys. (108)

He writes, at age sixteen, that "[t]he truth is, his brothers aside, he has very few friends of any kind[.] . . . He learns how 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" (109). 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 we gained kudos in one of a few narrow fields in which 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 the sense of community that 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 an insider and an outsider. His oeuvre, like anything of excellence, is valuable to anyone who takes the time to read and understand it, but for people like me it is a priceless, detailed map of underexplored territory by a scribe of the liminal terrain between cultures, spaces, and time. Caryl connects dots that challenge collective amnesia about Empire and writes and rewrites black people into their own history with depth and nuance.

Notes

1 In the last census, held in 2011, black people in Britain identified themselves as predominantly black African rather that Caribbean for the first time since the census began in 1801.

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