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For the "Dark Star": Reading Womanism and Black Womanhood in the Novels of Caryl Phillips

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Abstract: Representations of black women in literature by black men received much critical attention in the latter part of the twentieth century. Frances Smith Foster argues that "black men shared the nineteenth century predilection for defining women . . . and for limiting the female protagonist." Trudier Harris' book *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* examined the literature of the twentieth century's most impactful African American male writer and his persistent portrayal of black women as morally constrained. More recently, Curdella Forbes' *From Nation to Diaspora: Sam Selvon, George Lamming and the Cultural Performance of Gender* explored several depictions of women in Afro-Caribbean literature. Yet this area of study has not been exhausted, and it seems necessary to pursue it with regard to Caryl Phillips, one of the most prolific writers in the African diaspora today. Phillips' work has already garnered attention for its ability to authentically represent women's voices. His novels *Cambridge* and *The Nature of Blood* in particular have been highly praised for their female narrators, and Phillips has discussed the ease with which he engages women's voices. This essay aims to advance the study of Phillips' unique and varied portrayal of women by analyzing his depiction of black women in *Dancing in the Dark*, *The Nature of Blood*, and *The Final Passage*. The article explores how women in the world of Phillips' texts navigate the physical and emotional spaces of intimacy in which their voices and experiences initially seem to be occluded by men's stories. I argue that Phillips offers nuanced depictions of black women which bend, break, and at times reify so as to critique well-established and often controversial

literary archetypes of blackness, revealing that his fiction works in what Gary L. Lemons describes as a pro-woman(ist) mode.

Keywords: Caryl Phillips, black womanhood, womanism, pro-woman(ist), black intimacy

> When he come home, I don't need him to say he love me
> I don't need him to bring me gifts, I just wants him
> to hold me close, make like he glad to see me
> bend down t'my ear an whisper my name.
>
> Frank X Walker, "Say My Name"

In a moment in Caryl Phillips' novel *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), the narrator pushes us awkwardly from George Walker's frenzied coitus with his white lover Eva to a brief, cold moment in bed with his wife, Ada. The contrast arrests the reader, but even more striking than the juxtaposition of George's uncontrolled desire and utter repulsion is the simultaneous disdain and admiration he has for his wife. The short paragraph acknowledges her hurt alongside his betrayal and presents her repeatedly within the realm of her theatrical work as the talented "Dark star" (117). Yet the brief passage is overrun with George's regrets. The narrator tells us that "lying next to her he is filled with remorse" and "his stiff body stiffens further at her accidental touch" (117). Other black women in Phillips' work experience similar moments of intimacy, where they are rejected emotionally and/or physically. Like Ada, both Lottie in *Dancing in the Dark* and Leila in *The Final Passage* (1985) find themselves married and untouchable. Even Malka in *The Nature of Blood* (1997) has a similar encounter, albeit not with a husband.

The corpus of Phillips' fiction offers varied representations of black women, but these women's intimate connections are governed by a tenuousness wrought primarily by their men. Phillips' work has already garnered much attention for its ability to authentically represent women's voices. His novels *Cambridge* (1991) and *The Nature of Blood* in particular have been highly praised for their credible female narrators,[1] and Phillips has discussed the ease with which he writes

female characters.[2] As such, the dearth of scholarship on Phillips' black women is particularly striking considering that figures such as Leila in *The Final Passage* and Patsy in *A State of Independence* command critical attention in how they take up space and mark the formal structure of the novels. This essay studies Phillips' unique and varied portrayal of women by analyzing his depiction of black women in *Dancing in the Dark*, *The Nature of Blood*, and *The Final Passage*. Even as the novels engage nineteenth-century archetypes of black women, they simultaneously upturn those conventions for a more nuanced portraiture of black womanhood. A testament to the highly complex literature that makes up Phillips' oeuvre, black woman figures such as Lottie and Ada in *Dancing in the Dark*, Malka in *The Nature of Blood*, and Leila and Millie in *The Final Passage* emerge as characters who elucidate the manifold experiences of black women and although constrained on the page, in the story, or within a largely male-driven narrative, are not cursory but anchor the broader themes of the texts.

The novels I examine show black women whose voices and experiences initially seem to be occluded by or secondary to the men's stories, or in the case of *The Final Passage* where the women's voices are balanced with the men's, men negatively shape their experiences in the world of the text. The women's existences, however, are incursions that critique even the most endearing male protagonists. What unfolds, then, is a distinctly Phillipsian mode of portraying the black woman. This mode is neither directly black feminist nor womanist,[3] nor is it, as Trudier Harris has said of some black male writers writing women, "as complicitous as the white-created mythology surrounding black women" (*Saints* 2). Instead, it approaches a representation of black womanhood in a white supremacist world, all the while recognizing male privilege in the world of the text and even in the prose form and structure. Phillips' fiction thus moves along a continuum of portraiture that Gary L. Lemons describes as "pro-woman(ist)" gender-progressive black writing "in solidarity with black women against black antifeminist ideology" (*Womanist* xiii). This essay explores how Phillips' black women navigate the physical and emotional spaces of intimacy in an effort to show the novels' complex treatment of black women, a treatment which includes both a sensitivity

toward and a disdain for the women. Beginning with the novel that was the impetus and foundation for this study, the essay first examines *Dancing in the Dark*, which most explicitly illustrates the intimate lives of black women, and it will close by looking at Phillips' earliest work, which has attracted the least critical attention, particularly around issues related to black womanhood. Phillips' female characters simultaneously succumb to and resist domination; this essay appraises whether these actions occur in any particular pattern or frequency or within specific relationships. I first consider the women's relationships to the men in their lives, their platonic and sisterly relationships with other women, and their interactions with maternal figures and the state of motherhood. This essay does not intend to compare Phillips' treatment of white and black women, nor does it make any claims about Phillips' intentions with his much-praised representations of women, although this area is certainly fertile ground for academic study. Instead, I analyze the texts' rich drawings of black womanhood while keeping in mind that white supremacist ideology[4] shapes and affects the lives of the characters, both men and women. Cornel West argues that

> [w]hite supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them. One of the best ways to instill fear in people is to terrorize them. Yet this fear is best sustained by convincing them that their bodies are ugly, their intellect is inherently underdeveloped, their culture is less civilized, and their future warrants less concern than that of other peoples. (85)

For Phillips' black women, intimacy (or lack thereof) is linked specifically to the male protagonists' internalized white supremacy, which projects stereotypical images of black women, particularly as hyper-sexualized and conversely as unseen, unseeable, or undesirable.

I. Black Women Undone by the "Whiteness of Winter"

Gwen Bergner's essay "Who Is That Masked Woman? Or, the Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*" attempts to "broaden Fanon's outline of black women's subjectivity and to work toward

delineating the interdependence of race and gender" (77). Although Bergner neglects black feminist critique[5] and instead employs feminist psychoanalytic theory to "review Fanon's construction of gender while illuminating the contributions of his psychoanalytic framework of racial identity" (77), her work is useful to understand aspects of Phillips' depiction of black women in *Dancing in the Dark*. Bergner questions Fanon's proximity to and purported understanding of black women, problematizing his "decontextualized analysis of black femininity," which she argues "re-creates the structure of the colonialist discourse Fanon successfully deconstructs in much of *Black Skin, White Masks*" (83). Phillips has noted Fanon's influence,[6] but his work opts for a more complex treatment of black women. Whereas Fanon says of the black woman that "[w]e know nothing about her" (157), Phillips, via his fiction, demonstrates how a black woman can be known. *Dancing in the Dark* depicts black women and black womanhood bound by a racialized and patriarchal sexism perpetuated by black men and others in the community who have internalized oppression. What initially seems like ambivalence toward black women in the text is contrasted with often precariously sexed and simultaneously nearly invisible black women. This contradiction, in which they are at once unseen and the objects of desire, is not a vacancy on the part of black women but rather a result of the black man's racial trauma,[7] which makes him incapable of connecting with them. The novel presents pathologized black women who are not offered the same absolution as that given to the black men. By portraying these men as decidedly patriarchal, the novel functions in a pro-woman(ist) way. In particular, the women's consciousness in this crisis of intimacy further amplifies the text's gender-progressive critique. The women repeatedly ponder their condition, which resembles what Alice Walker notes in the writing of Jean Toomer, who saw women "lay vacant and fallow as autumn fields, with harvest time never in sight: and he saw them enter loveless marriages, without joy; and become prostitutes, without resistance; and become mothers of children, without fulfillment" (233). Walker's observations identify an early tradition of black male writers depicting black women's troubled and unsatisfying intimate spaces.

That she is relegated to a life of discontent comes as no surprise to the main female character, Lottie Williams, in Phillips' *Dancing in the Dark*: she "knows that a colored woman cannot expect too much out of this life" (53). However, Lottie is initially satisfied with her husband, Bert, and she views him as "a capital second husband[,] . . . a man solid like a tree but with the sensitivity of a boy" (52–53). Early on in the novel the couple shares some intimacies and Bert attempts to reveal how he came to play the controversial role of being a black vaudeville actor performing in blackface. In a moment of shame, he explains the on-stage dynamic between him and George and how he came to play the clown. Lottie "understands that he is asking to be forgiven[,] . . . that her suitor is a man who is playing a part. . . . [H]e is playing a character[,] . . . a performer who applies makeup in order to play a part" (35). However, her friend Ada chides her for wanting to marry a "white man's fool" (37). Lottie's reaction to this conversation is poignant: "[She] looks herself up and down in the dressing room mirror, and then she picks up the powder brush. These days she finds it necessary to apply extra makeup, which both depresses and alarms her" (37). Lottie's need to augment her physical beauty seems directly linked to Bert's blacking up and the trauma caused by his performances. Just as Bert dons the burnt cork to play a part, Lottie adds extra makeup to play the part of the wife of a blackface performer. Initially, the routine appears to be a way for Lottie to align herself with her fiancé. However, the novel emphasizes Bert's disconnection from Lottie as a result of finding her sexually undesirable and unfeminine. The narrator, while attributing Bert's melancholy to his role on the stage, presents Bert's inability to be intimate as a consequence of his view of Lottie, which has, however, little to do with any lack on Lottie's part and is more a result of Bert's feelings about himself. His reclusive nature is repeatedly juxtaposed with images of a physically flawed Lottie. In her groundbreaking study, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, Harris explores the way black women become scapegoats for the black male ego, where, in the case of *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, "black women are conceived against the backdrop of the fundamentalist church in the black community" (12). Similarly, Lottie

becomes victim to Bert's projection from the stage, and the white supremacist ideas of his polluted self-perception distance his wife. Bert is consumed by the caricature of himself, and his viewing Lottie through this grotesque lens leaves her unable to provide Bert with whatever he needs to ease his psychological burden. The young couple exists and remains in a dispassionate state of wedlock:

> At night, in their bed, he recoils from her touch, and his eyes brim with tears at the slightest woe. Now that they are married he calls her Mother, but she does not have the heart to ask him to discover an alternative word for she instinctively understands that he has no other. She would prefer Lottie, or wife, or darling, for Mother instantly reduces her to something less than a woman, but she imagines that in some part of his unconscious this is probably how her husband now regards her. As being something less than a woman, a companion perhaps, or a new extension to the family, but certainly not the trusted bedrock upon which he will build the rest of his life. (Phillips, *Dancing* 42)

Lottie, like the enslaved wife in Frank X Walker's poem "Say My Name," which I use as an epigraph to this article, longs to hear her name and have her humanity acknowledged. The moments that depict Bert and Lottie's lack of intimacy are almost always followed by a negative regard for Lottie's physical appearance and demeanor. The narrative is decidedly gendered and racialized, as it reveals the man's internalized white racist ideas about beauty and womanhood, which plague Lottie and other black women characters. Under the yoke of the white gaze[8] and loaded with the stereotypical markers of black womanhood, the women in the novel long for physical intimacy even as they are deemed sexually undesirable. The characters are ailing in the shadow of whiteness. While Bert chooses to perform the white racist caricature of blackness, Lottie's subjugation to such projections is beyond her control. As a young girl, Lottie endured her grandmother's weekly and torturous efforts to straighten her hair, and the narrator juxtaposes this experience to her sister's flowing hair and light eyes. Evidently, Lottie, like Bert, wears a

kind of mask that is also shaped by whiteness. In addition, "Lottie does not know whether to talk to him about her hair. The fact is she does not talk to anybody about her hair. She simply hopes that nobody will notice. It is her own private misery, and she is seldom without a hat" (43). Lottie's suffering under the valuation of a white racist standard, one that arguably oppresses Bert and his on-stage partner George (albeit in gendered ways) as well, widens the distance between the characters. Yet the degree of intimate distance between them arguably shifts when there is resistance to white supremacist patriarchy.

The subtleties of this portrayal problematize black male privilege and illustrate the need for a new trajectory in counter-hegemonic discourse about black women—a calling out to the pro-woman(ism) of which Lemons speaks. Black women, as Deborah King notes, experience a "multiple jeopardy" in which their lives and opportunities for liberation are limited by the intersection of race, gender, and class (47). *Dancing in the Dark* portrays a nuanced multiple jeopardy in Lottie's case. Even though she is not limited in terms of class—she and Bert have access to significant capital—her life continues to be shaped by a raced and gendered notion of blackness, and racist ideas about the insufficiency of black womanhood directly affect her ideas about herself and her interactions with Bert. Both Lottie and her husband are governed by white supremacy: Bert is relegated to nightly performing of a white racist caricature of blackness that emasculates him, and Lottie pines for a man whose trauma has left him impotent.

The text's imagining of Lottie's psychosis being rooted in the "problem" of her hair as opposed to her husband's inability to satisfy her sexual and emotional needs does not relieve Bert of this responsibility but instead suggests that Bert finds Lottie somewhat untouchable. Again, the fissure in their intimacy is caused by white supremacist notions of beauty and desirability. White ideals of beauty are impressed upon Lottie well before she meets Bert. The text's acknowledgement of the complexities of black womanhood mark Phillips' novel as pro-woman(ist). The dilemma of Lottie's hair is set against the story of her sister Florence, whose appearance fits well into a white standard. Flo's story, another portrait of black womanhood that is anchored by an archetype, begins

with her hair. The narrator emphasizes that "Florence's hair took nice and easy" to straightening and "flowed out to her shoulders" (Phillips, *Dancing* 45). Lottie is positioned against the white symbols of beauty emblazoned on Florence's body, and *Dancing in the Dark* engages the familiar and pervasive depictions of black womanhood shaped by white racist discourse. Florence embodies the mulatta archetype[9] and is the object of many men's desire, though she ultimately partners with one man and has several children. As is the case with the mulatta archetype, Flo becomes a sexual object and her life ends tragically, but Phillips challenges this formulation of black womanhood in *Dancing in the Dark* by exposing the white supremacist ideas responsible for imagining blackness in this way. This portrayal reveals the text's acknowledgement of black women's struggles. Lottie is both mother to her husband and negligent aunt as she nurtures Bert and yet neglects her nieces during her previous marriage. This presentation of an un-sexed, mammy-like[10] Lottie persists, and she internalizes these roles: "She had long ago convinced herself that to be touched was not that important, and she had imagined, as was the case with Mr. Thompson, that once they were married he would choose not to press any serious claim upon her body. And being a gentleman, Mr. Williams has chosen not to do so" (83). Despite her desire, Lottie attempts to accept the imposed abstemiousness.

Phillips captures the crisis that almost devastated black love and rendered many black women untouchable in the early twentieth-century United States. The narrative explains that Bert "sleeps now in a different room than Mother, but she never mentions this fact. These days, neither the thought nor the touch of his wife produces any stirring of ardor in his loins and so he eventually deemed it best to make a dignified, if somewhat clumsy, exit from their bedroom" (108). Lottie's pining for Bert becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses, and her ritual of masturbating daily in the bathroom is described in rather unsensual terms: "Lottie lives for the cherished moment in her sprawling day when she is able to secrete herself in the privacy of the bathroom" (115). Her deep longing for physical intimacy is more acute later in the novel:

> Lottie hopes that one night she might feel a cool tongue against her body, pulling lazy trails of saliva that will be massaged into her skin with the mouth and tongue working as one joyful unit, working slowly, slowly, fly-flicking tongue bruising her in the hollow of her neck don't stop don't yes breathe on me face down on me deeper and down hoping that she might wake up damp and exhausted and on the very edge of civilization bearing the gift of another person's body. (115)

Repeatedly, the novel represents women in sexual terms—either as preoccupied with and longing for sexual intimacy or as sexually undesirable. George and Bert, who live under the glare of the white power structure both on and off the stage, reject their wives and, ultimately, black womanhood. While Bert struggles with his inability to connect with Lottie from the beginning of their marriage, George's passion for Ada shifts from hot desire to a cool rejection of her. His explicit rejection comes immediately after a frenzied sexual encounter with the white woman Eva. Ada, like Lottie, becomes "untouchable": "Her small breasts are now no more than two stubborn buds that appear to be no longer either sensitive or inviting" (117). George's body resists any closeness with Ada, which further emphasizes her suffering under the constraint of white supremacy. She, too, pines for her husband, who is taken by a white woman. While Ada resists the racist ideas that seem to plague Lottie, she becomes undone in opposition to white womanhood, ultimately succumbing to the standards of a white ideal and losing a sense of her identity. Ada's performance in the play *In Dahomey* reflects her struggle. Her rendition of "I'd Like to be a Real Lady" is an unfortunate irony that positions her (and black women) outside of "ladyhood" despite her confident and assertive personality. Ada does not care about George's affairs, except in this case, when "Ada believes that her full-lipped, ebony-hued husband has no place with a flame-haired, hip-swinging white maiden" (103). Her objection solidifies the irreconcilable distance between herself and George, and she remains marginalized and disempowered in her relationship and on stage.

When Ada Overton becomes Aida Walker, Lottie wonders at her attempts to become someone new, and the novel presents the women struggling with their multiple consciousness[11] of race, class, and sex. Incapable of moving forward, Aida attempts suicide: she takes morphine after being held "spellbound by the winter storm" (129). Aida succumbs to the consequences of a white racist ideology that effects daily violence upon her psyche, and she tries to kill herself facing the whiteness of a winter storm. Even in crisis Aida is shaped by white iconography embraced by her husband. George sees her "draped in white with her eyes shut tightly against the electric light" and he thinks "she looks like an angel" (131). In this instance George sees his wife anew, and how she looks, draped in whiteness, has more of an effect on him than the fact of her near death.

Dancing in the Dark continues its troubling of archetypes of black womanhood, eventually cementing Lottie and Aida as mammy figures.[12] Again, the text moves in and out of convention and in a pro-woman(ist) mode portrays the crisis of the black woman, in this case, her eventual relegation to the role of caretaker. As I note above, Bert refers to his wife as "Mother" soon after they are married, and she indeed becomes his caregiver. Aida eventually shares a similar fate when George becomes ill after her suicide attempt. Both men suffer because of a commitment to the white supremacist model: Bert suffers at the hand of white representations of blackness—ironically doled out by him during his blackface performances on the stage—and George as a result of his adoration of the white woman Eva, whose sexuality ultimately destroys his body and mind with syphilis. George's tenderness and affection for Aida comes only after he is overrun with a disease that affects his thought and renders him incapable of physical intimacy. More importantly, this happens when his wife becomes his nurse. Aida "sings [to George] as though serenading a child" (149); she also feeds him and helps him to drink water, at which point "he manages to smile at his wife, which appears to lighten her heart" (151). The marital relationships appear to shift, creating a distance that relegates the women to serving their husbands. Within the pro-womanist framework, however, this can also be read as a renewed familial intimacy. The depiction reveals how

black women's bodies are a renewable resource to be used and exploited when other, more appealing options have been exhausted. At once, black women are bombarded by images of a white ideal of beauty that directly contrast with their concept of self and face a reality in which they (and their characteristics) are automatically placed in opposition to whiteness and deemed undesirable and ultimately fit only for service. Phillips' novel explores the experiences of the African diaspora, but its attention to black women, in a decidedly pro-woman(ist) mode, offers narratives that expose the instability of black love even as they elevate black womanhood.

II. Impassive Masks and Unseeable Blackness

Phillips' novel *The Nature of Blood* also brings to light the plight of black womanhood and black women using a pro-woman(ist) approach. While the novel has received much critical attention for its treatment of the Holocaust and exploration of diaspora, little or no attention has been given to an almost invisible and dislocated figure in the text. The brief story of Malka, the Ethiopian Jew, presents a caustic indictment of white supremacy by depicting how the white gaze renders her unseeable. Brief introductions to these seemingly marginal characters are woven into the narrative of one of the major characters, Stephan, a doctor working in Cyprus and then in Palestine during the British Mandate. In these concise narrative moments, we meet Moshe, a young refugee in Stephan's company, and another character, a black general of the Venetian army who has married a Venetian woman (and who we can assume to be Othello). The stories of these individuals are tied to Eva, a victim of the Shoah. Eva's narrative and her life at a concentration camp occupies the majority of the text, while Malka, an Ethiopian Jew who was resettled in Israel in the late twentieth century, initially seems to be a minor figure, an aside. Other black figures, such as the Venetian general, appear briefly, and their roles help to illuminate the lives of Jews from the fourteenth century onward. Kathie Birat suggests that the stories of Phillips' black characters in *The Nature of Blood* are not important in their specificity but rather pave the way for a better understanding of loss in general: "Phillips may be

moving away from specific reference to the African diaspora as a way of capturing all the more clearly the experience of loss which is the essence of all forms of uprooting" (198). I contend, however, that race (and particularly the African diaspora) is, in fact, at the heart of this novel which so thoughtfully captures the Shoah. While Malka's story accounts for fewer than ten pages of the novel, it arguably anchors Phillips' central point, which is, according to Phillips in his essay "On *The Nature of Blood* and the Ghost of Anne Frank," "Europe's obsession with homogeneity, and her inability to deal with the heterogeneity that is—in fact—her natural condition" (6). Thus, a novel set primarily in Europe includes the marginal story of an Ethiopian Jew in Israel to portray something about Europe and, more importantly, to speak about the black woman's condition in a decidedly European (albeit not geographically continental) space. The story reveals that Europe's legacy has evolved, and it has done so not only on the continent but also across the globe. It continues to evolve in Malka's story in former Mandate Palestine, a colonial space, now Israel, still reeling, at the time the novel is set, from European notions of white superiority which persistently plague black women.

While Phillips has garnered much praise for this work, a number of critics suggest that he misappropriates the Holocaust.[13] Still, scholars such as Wendy Zierler state that Phillips has "created fictional works that bring together stories of African slavery and the Holocaust in meaningful and ethically compelling ways" (12). *The Nature of Blood* calls into question the fascist roots of the atrocities performed by European white supremacist powers for centuries, and the novel situates imperial projects such as colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade as the offspring of an ideology which also led to the Holocaust and continued subjugation of various marginalized groups into the late twentieth century. Phillips meticulously scripts very different lives and varied experiences borne out of the seed of European notions of white supremacy. Furthermore, the narrative illustrates that those white supremacist crimes reverberate, leaving communities of still-unacknowledged victims.

Malka's identity exemplifies the Phillipsian exploration of diaspora, in which black diaspora is similar to the Jewish diaspora. The text

evinces the reality, reach, and permanence of white supremacy. Malka is one of white supremacy's victims, though she also exerts some degree of agency. The flashes of her resistance to white supremacist patriarchy are the pro-woman(ist) moments in the text, which, according to Alice Walker's definition of Womanism, demonstrate a commitment "to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (xi; emphasis in original). Malka's brief presence at the end of the novel successfully illustrates the reach of white racist ideology, whereby the voice of the Jew remains subdued despite the creation of a homeland or a space for that voice. Phillips' text depicts Malka's subjugation in content as well as in form, as she occupies little textual space. Thus, Malka's identity and voice are presented and understood mainly through the filter of Stephan's.

Malka's subordinate status is indeed a result of her compounded difference—her "multiple jeopardy," in King's words. As a Jew residing in Israel, her difference, and the reason for her subjugated status, lies at the intersections of race and gender. Presenting Malka as such, the novel calls to mind Gayatri Spivak's argument in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* that "the political goals of the new nation are supposedly determined by a regulative logic derived from the old colony" (77–78). In this case, the old colony seems to be the World War II-era leadership that led to the divisions and concentration camps maintained by Nazi Germany. Thus, the legacy and root of anti-Semitic ideas and practices endured by Jews for centuries are now transformed into the very tools which exclude the Ethiopian Jews. Europe, as Spivak's "old colony," has exported its retooled ideology from the continent along with the white supremacist ideas that infect the rest of the world. More specifically, as internalized racist ideology permeates Israeli communities, we see, according to Bénédicte Ledent, the turning of "former victims of racism into racists" (140). Malka's new home among those who are supposedly her cultural brothers and sisters thus becomes a state of exclusion and a site of severe subjugation. Ledent states that "blood, though life-saving, embodies a form of racism" (140). She further asserts that *The Nature of Blood* illustrates Phillips' "point about the inherently racist nature of Europe" (138). In the novel,

> blood [acts] as multifaceted metaphor, as something that both unites and separates people. On the one hand, it is the substance of life that links all human beings together, whatever their race, and hence symbolizes the common fund of humanity so forcefully denied by all racist ideologies. . . . [O]n the other hand, [it] symbolizes the barrier between the different human groups, whether families or races, thus standing for their irremediable estrangement and the violence this eventually engenders. (Ledent 139)

While Malka does not experience physical violence, the alienation she feels is evident. The novel emphasizes that her new home, Israel, alienates its own "blood" because of skin color. This in-community (religious) discrimination can be seen as analogous to the in-community (black) antifeminism of which Lemons speaks. In "On *The Nature of Blood* and the Ghost of Anne Frank" Phillips discusses the 1996 report of the rejection of black Jewish blood by Israeli authorities as "the story that would enable [him] to put the final piece of the narrative puzzle into place and finish [his] novel" (4). This performance of purging blood from black donors calls to mind the experience of members of the black diaspora. In the US, the Jim Crow-era one-drop rule fed white supremacist efforts. While the Bete Israel (the name that Ethiopian Jews give their community) did not endure slavery in the Americas, the racist ideology that upheld the enslavement and postbellum oppression of African descendants arguably led to their unequal treatment in Israel. The legacy of Eurocentrism and rampant white supremacy, which, as Aimé Césaire notes, was violently enacted upon Africans and the diaspora, likely made its way to the biblical lands with the European and American efforts to form a Zionist nation. Phillips broaches the compounded subjugation of the black/woman/Jew[14] and effectively asks his readers to reconsider the interrelation of historical trauma brought about by white racist ideology. Edward Said discusses this concept in his essay "Ideology of Difference," in which he suggests that the ideas which led to anti-Semitism in Europe also led to Orientalism and global racism. While Phillips' text does not create a parallel between the Shoah and the

Atlantic slave trade, it suggests that European racism is so infectious that it cuts through bloodlines even as it moves to define bloodlines. Thus, even as Israel mounts a multinational effort to relocate the Jews of Ethiopia, rescuing them from persecution under the stigma of the pejorative term *Falasha*, the nation's efforts to gather the tribes ultimately leads to a clear demarcation of who can be accepted. It is important to note, as Michael Rothberg and others do, that "the novel's primary focus is not the simple binary between perpetrators and victims of racist violence" (164). Phillips' fiction offers more complex and highly nuanced relationships that reveal a racial dynamic that is neither accidental nor mere historical coincidence. The text shows that even former victims of racist violence have the potential to participate in white supremacy as oppressors. This elucidation in Phillips' work represents what Lemons describes as "a contemporary, black male space for writing/speaking our own narratives of *self*-recovery, a recovery grounded in black feminist thought" (*Womanist* xv; emphasis in original) and Phillips' novels and characters approach but do not always accomplish this restorative task.

Phillips crafts framed narratives which reveal an interconnectedness that spans time, space, and culture. As we meet Stephan, the European Jewish doctor working in Cyprus and leaving for Palestine, along with Moshe, a young refugee, and Eva, Stephan's niece and concentration camp survivor, there is a common thread of relationships. Whether these connections are blood relationships as with Eva and Stephan, or political as with Stephan or Moshe, or regional and cultural in the way the Othello figure connects to the other characters, we come to understand racial interpersonal connections or rather the way that racial difference can disconnect people, as in the case of Malka. Within that web, the author crafts even more complex relationships. To begin the task of recovery, Phillips, through the avuncular character Stephan, connects Malka's and Moshe's experiences. The novel creates a sense of balance by opening with Moshe's story and closing with Malka's, and the two young people are linked by the dominant male figure Stephan. He, like other adult male characters, is free to make choices for himself such as abandoning his family, wife, and children, while the experiences of the boy Moshe and the young Malka are colored by hardships and lack

of options. Both Moshe and Malka are refugees whose fates are decided by the government. Their displacement is characterized by uncertainty; however, their interactions with Stephan reveal that the possibilities for each person's life are vastly different.

The experience of the black woman is bleak as opposed to that of the young Romanian Jewish man. During an exchange with Moshe in the internment camp, Stephan says, "Moshe slips out his hands from between mine. Fruit growing freely on trees. Yes. Take it straight from the branch. Yes. . . . Now there will be a country. We can share" (Phillips, *Nature* 11). Phillips sketches the similarities between the early twentieth-century experience of European Jews and that of the Ethiopian Jews arriving in a now-established Israel decades later. References to language training and cultural education also appear in Malka's brief narrative: "[A]fter her arrival, [Malka] had undergone two years of intensive language study" (200). Malka's brief sections reveal aspects of her family's migration, and we learn of her family's journey to Zion and their hopes for the Promised Land: "No more wandering. No longer landless. No more tilling of soil that did not belong to us. What is your name? Malka. Malka, do not be shy. You are going home. And when we arrived, and stepped down off the plane, we all kissed the ground. We thanked God for returning us to Zion" (201). We see those aspirations juxtaposed with the family's confinement in the camp-like absorption centre and their subsequent experience in the community:

> In our country, we were not used to relying on outsiders. And then, as we learnt the language and your ways, our parents felt as though they were losing us. It was hard for them. They were no longer responsible for their children. Have you seen the ugly housing at the edges of the city where we live? My brother is in the army now. But my parents, they are sick. After the absorption centre, they are frightened of white walls and white coats. (208)

While Malka's story is reminiscent of Moshe's refugee experience, Phillips clearly exposes her marginal position. Although we hear her voice in three instances, it is ultimately framed by Stephan, and her narrative

is only witnessed because of her interaction with him. Thus, the text models a hegemonic structure in which Malka occupies an extremely small space. This depiction of Malka does not defend her subordination but aims instead to make a space for that status to be reconsidered. Malka's utterances find their way into Stephan's narrative and through that dominant narrative the text exposes the condition which silences Malka. Her situation presents her as gendered, raced, and unheard but holding a rightful claim to the nation—the community that subjugates her and creates the inequities she experiences.

Phillips illustrates how Malka's life, unlike Moshe's, is shaped by oppression in what is supposed to be the Promised Land. Unable to secure a job as a nurse, Malka is forced to work in a bar and meets Stephan in her role as paid companion; this encounter and the terms of their interaction seals Stephan's view of her. She is sexualized in his presence even as he fails to listen to and hear her. He objectifies her as he observes her beauty, and he sees her face as "an impassive mask" in which he is unable to detect the "exaggerated joy" that he finds on the faces of the other women present (198). Later that evening, he says that "her eyes were the deepest black, which made the white about them appear ivory," and he comments on "the warm strange smell of her person" (201). This objectification of Malka is rooted in a white racist ideology which views people of African descent as primitive, exotic others. Indeed, the "impassive mask" of which he speaks prevents him from getting to know Malka. Her visible difference keeps him from reaching beyond the surface. This othering of Malka renders her unseeable and distances her even in this space of intimacy in which Stephan finds himself incapable of speaking with and hearing her. Like the gendered subalterns at the heart of Spivak's argument, Malka attempts to convey a sense of her emotions but finds her receiver incapable of or unwilling to fully grasp her utterances. Stephan's consciousness of her race—her difference—prevent him from doing so. Furthermore, the text utilizes the Jezebel[15] archetype. Yet it also destabilizes it in a pro-woman(ist) mode.

Even as Malka is subjugated by Stephan's objectification of her, the man is not completely unaware of his infraction. Stephan's unusual,

even animalistic descriptions of Malka provoke a great deal of discomfort in him and force him to gaze back onto himself. In that moment, he becomes aware of his awkwardness on the dance floor and the fact that he is significantly older than Malka. He even admits that "none of the other women had ever made him feel that way" and "it was precisely the awful reality of these frailties that the [other] young women seemed temporarily to erase from his mind" (Phillips, *Nature* 201). This moment marks another example in Phillips' fiction where the portrayal of black womanhood is accompanied by a critique of the dominant power structure, something Lemons argues is necessary in gender-progressive writing by black men.

When Malka and Stephan are in the hotel alone, after another date at the club, "the moonlight stream[s] into the room" (Phillips, *Nature* 209), illuminating their space much like the fire between Moshe and Stephan in the refugee camp. Yet Stephan turns off the light, and a brief but loaded exchange further illustrates the cultural distance between the two. In the darkness, Malka asks, "Do you not wish to see me?" (209). Stephan does not answer her question but instead makes an unrelated statement about his own needs in the relationship, thereby emphasizing her subordinate status. This brief exchange depicts Malka as invisible to Stephan, the representative of (and based on his conversation with Moshe about his role and authority, arguably one of the fathers of) contemporary Israel and Stephan as ignorant of her need to be seen. His response to her question is to simply ask to be her friend, and when Malka tells him "but you *are* my friend" (209; emphasis in original), the gap between them is widened further. Each one's understanding of the nature of the relationship is different. They become even more disconnected when Malka "slid[es] into the bed, taking care not to touch him" (209). In direct contrast to the intimate hand-holding and quiet talking that occurs between Moshe and Stephan, this interaction with Malka is markedly colder. Ledent suggests that "Malka represents ultimate Otherness . . . as she is easily dismissed by Israeli society" (143). Stephan himself confirms this othering, as the next morning he ponders his night, wonders if Malka has stolen his wallet and tells himself that she and her people

"belonged to another land. . . . another place" (Phillips, *Nature* 210). Ultimately, the relationship succumbs to the distant intimacy created by the white gaze on black womanhood. However, the novel is pro-woman(ist) even if the character fails to move beyond his own white supremacist patriarchy. Malka confirms the text's pro-woman(ism) as she claims her legacy and criticizes the exclusionary actions, saying "[t]his Holy Land did not deceive us. The people did" (207). This indictment of white patriarchal racist ideology reflects Phillips' earlier assertion that "the danger of rampant tribalism, whether it emerges as a result of asserting nationalism, in the east, or of combating federalism, in the west, is that in order to affirm who you are as people you must also create a class of people who you are not. Who are different. Who are outsiders. Who can never be you. Who are less than you" (*The European Tribe* xii).

While *The Nature of Blood* depicts this intolerance (often to those identified as others but also certainly, as in the case of Malka, to people who belong to the group), Phillips' emphasis on the idea that such hate is refashioned by its former victims reveals the reach of racism. According to Bart Moore-Gilbert, through this depiction of Malka's experience, "Phillips addresses Israel extensively and is certainly critical of the nation at moments. His doubts are primarily related to what he represents as its racism, which is seen as part of Israel's European legacy, towards Black Jews" (114). Moreover, Malka's experience in the novel further marks the legacy of racism as gendered and ultimately inescapable.

Phillips, without appropriating the Shoah to express the anguish of black people under European domination, effectively illustrates how white racist ideology can permeate even a seemingly inclusive space. Much like black women in *Dancing in the Dark,* the fate of the black woman in Israel is tenuous. She becomes a character for whom internalized white supremacist views decimate black love and black survival. Phillips' work, in a markedly pro-woman(ist) fashion, advances a distinctive portrayal of black women that reveals the complexities of their experiences in a world in which the ideology of white supremacy proliferates.

III. Sisterhood and Solitude from Sandy Bay to London

The literature of this black diasporic writer has always pulled on womanist threads. Phillips' earliest work of fiction, *The Final Passage*, published a decade before *The Nature of Blood* and two decades before *Dancing in the Dark*, seems even more firmly grounded in the pro-woman(ist) tradition It is, arguably, the most gender-progressive of the three novels, as it portrays a world in which black women are subjugated on many levels. The women in the novel are at once bold and submissive, desirable and repugnant, and they often speak and act in reaction to the men in their sphere. Yet even though their lives are acted upon and shaped by men, their stories, emotions, and woman-centered relationships occupy the entirety of the text. This novel portrays a fullness and depth, showing us black women who, in many ways, were "unaware of the richness they held" (A. Walker 232). The womanist prose of Alice Walker describes women like those in Phillips' novel as having been removed from society. She writes:

> [T]hey stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy of even hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than "sexual objects," they became "Saints." Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. (232)

The Final Passage manages to capture all the complexities that Walker presents. The women in the novel illustrate multiple aspects of black womanhood as the text moves between pro-woman(ist) and complicitous portrayals. The women's actions are often assertive and gender non-conforming, but the narrative at times refers to them in disdainful ways.

On writing women's voices, Phillips says in an interview with Carol Margaret Davison that "women's position on the edge of society—both central in society, but also marginalized by men—seems to me, in some way, to mirror the rather tenuous and oscillating relationship that all sorts of people, in this case, specifically black people, have in society"

(21). These oscillations are most prevalent for black women in Phillips' first novel. More importantly, *The Final Passage* arguably represents his most pro-woman(ist) work in the way that it, according to Alice Walker's definition of Womanism, "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength" (xi). Furthermore, the text approaches the wholeness of black love as a counterpoint to the dysfunction in which most of the characters are mired. Of the few works of scholarship exploring *The Final Passage*,[16] none exclusively considers the state or condition of black womanhood, the most central aspect of the work. The novel begins and ends with Leila and her baby Calvin linked together alone in the world as mother and son. This focus on the maternal role cements the text as pro-woman(ist), even as the novel engages multiple aspects of the women's experiences.

Leila, much like Lottie and Ada in *Dancing in the Dark*, remains intimately connected to a man who is primarily ambivalent or indifferent toward her. The narrator says that "her first night as a married woman had passed without incident" (Phillips, *Final* 57). In fact, Leila spends the night alone with the full knowledge that her new husband, Michael, would not come to her, and for the entirety of the novel she continues to pine for him as he draws further away from her. Not all the women meet the same fate as Leila, however, nor do they endure their fates in the passive way that she does. As a pro-woman(ist) text, *The Final Passage* presents multiple characters who balance and arbitrate the women's power (or lack thereof). Leila's closest friend, Millie, whom she considers a sister, directly contrasts with Leila. Millie is happily partnered with Bradeth, a man who was pleased to marry her, is attentive to both Millie and their child, and even advocates for Leila with her husband. Millie repeatedly confronts Leila's naïveté and passivity as the most assertive but also most loving person in Leila's life. The novel portrays the women living together, caring for their children side by side, and sharing a range of emotions. Millie is committed to supporting her friend: in an early section of the novel she tells Leila, "Don't worry[,] . . . there's two of us now and we'll both get by. We'll manage" (71). Millie and to some extent Bradeth provide Leila with the most stable relationship in her

life. These women represent what Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought*, calls a "collective wisdom" and the possibility of a "distinctive group consciousness" (28), albeit one not always articulated by all its members.

Yet even as the women individually assert themselves, the narrative voice also betrays the text's overall pro-woman(ist) pulse. The descriptive language, much like that offered via George Walker's disdainful view of Ada in *Dancing in the Dark*, presents several women in unpleasant terms. Millie, who is not only assertive but also the most reasonable and rational character, is described as "small and spidery . . . with her bushy-up hair, which to comb posed problems" (Phillips, *Final* 23). Even the grandmother figure, often venerated and noble in black literature, appears haggard: "[H]er legs were hopelessly bowed, her thick varicose veins running up and down their bruised and stubbly length. Her face was silent and black, blank, neither eyes nor mouth willing to capitulate to movement or betray emotion" (109). Even with these images, the text indicates that black women's suffering is ultimately meted out by a white hand, as signaled by Leila's light skin color, from a presumably white rapist father. In a few brief sections, Leila's mother's story comes to us before her mother dies. A torrent of sexual abuses ultimately led to Leila's birth; the narrative reveals this story when Leila is seeking her ill mother and her mother's garden, and we are reminded of Alice Walker's homage to women whose bodies were "broken and forced to bear children" (233). This attention to the maternal remains at the heart of the text, which shows diverse perspectives on motherhood in a pro-woman(ist) mode. Although Millie and Leila form a sisterly co-mothering bond, Leila is physically attached yet emotionally detached from her infant. In addition, "Leila was not to know that her mother had never wanted a child"—a fact which suggests a legacy of maternal disconnection (Phillips, *Final* 125). The portrayal of these black women is further nuanced when the narrative reveals that Leila's mother "in fact . . . had never wanted a man, for when she saw her first penis hanging with arrogance before her, a great-uncle, she knew deep in her heart that the coupling of man and woman would hold no fascination for her" (125). Because Leila received no clear model of intimacy from her

mother, she, like her mother, lives in solitude. The flawed intimacy that shaped Leila's relationships with her mother and her husband follows her from Sandy Bay on the island to their humble residence in London: "[T]hese days he just seemed to use the house as a place in which to change his shoes and clothes. . . . In England, . . . he still did not want her" (174). As the distance grows between Leila and Michael, Leila attempts to draw nearer to her mother, but this relationship also leaves her unfulfilled. Flashes of Leila's past experiences resemble those of the women in *Dancing in the Dark* and *The Nature of Blood*. Her regard for her body is shaped by her interactions with men as Leila is pushed and pulled by disdain and desire: "[S]he would squeeze her own breasts and pretend the hands on the end of her arms were, for five minutes, not her own" (188). Unlike *Dancing in the Dark* and *The Nature of Blood*, however, *The Final Passage* closes with a semblance of pro-woman(ist) optimism. Leila seeks employment, discovers that she is pregnant, and is moved by this gravidity to imagine a reunion in which she is, again, co-mothering with Millie.

Of the three novels, *The Final Passage* is the most encompassing pro-woman(ist) text, even with its frequent unattractive portraits of black womanhood. It presents these women in complex and sometimes painful romantic relationships and shows the potential for Platonic love and sisterhood between women. Its ubiquitous presentation of the black maternal as healing—what Lemons would suggest is its most gender-progressive mode—firmly roots this text in a tradition of pro-woman(ist) writing. We may ask whether the author himself is pro-woman(ist). Certainly, Phillips' attention to the plight of women is a signature of his fiction, but Phillips' portrayals of individual characters often reify the very thing this writing attempts to counter. Here authorial intent and textual effect may contradict each other as these three novels from three different decades reveal the experience and condition of black womanhood to be a central thread in the corpus of Phillips' work. Women's experiences are not only painted in fully developed and complex ways but are also, at times, deeply problematic, bearing the burden of a pervasive racism, even as the texts offer glimmers of hope for sisterhood and black love.

Notes

1 While there has been no thorough treatment of black women in Phillips' work, several scholars have examined women's voices in Phillips. See, for example, Cuder Domínguez, DeLoughrey, Muñoz Valdivieso, and Preziuso.

2 See Schatteman, in which Phillips discusses this in several interviews, including in Davison's "Crisscrossing the River," Sharpe's "Of This Time, of That Place," and Iyer's "Caryl Phillips: Lannan Literary Videos."

3 There is an emerging discussion about the ways black male intellectuals, teachers, and writers work or have worked in black feminist or womanist modes. Lemons builds upon Alice Walker's collection of womanist prose *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* in his ground-breaking studies *Womanist Forefathers: Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois* and *Black Male Outsider: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man*.

4 Rather than offer a singular definition of white supremacist ideology, I should note that several articles deal with various manifestations of racism in Phillips' fiction. See Dawson, Gunning, Nowak, and Varunny. Phillips himself has produced considerable work in the form of essays that address these issues, such as *The European Tribe*, *The Atlantic Sound*, and *Colour Me English.*

5 Collins' landmark work *Black Feminist Thought* had already been available for four years by the time Bergner's essay was published.

6 In *A New World Order*, Phillips notes that "Fanon's writings perfectly reflected my own anxieties, both personally and literary" (130).

7 See Smith, who explores representations of masculinity in African American and Afro-Caribbean writing and performance and examines trauma as a rite of passage in black manhood and migration experiences.

8 See Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes* for a thorough discussion of "the subjectivity of black bodies under a white racist hegemonic gaze" (ix).

9 See Raimon, who explores the centrality of mixed-race figures in literature, and she considers how these characters, as well as notions of identity, shape racial politics of the nation.

10 For a discussion of the mammy figure see Hobson.

11 See King, who explores the crisis faced by black women who have a multiple consciousness as a result of their compounded identities at the intersection of race, class, and sex,

12 While the women do not fit the physiological depiction of the mammy figure, they are effectively made into mammies because they care and serve as surrogate mothers for their husbands.

13 Hillary Mantel's caustic review "Black Is Not Jewish" chides Phillips for supposedly equating black and Jewish suffering. She suggests that his portrayal is a "demented coziness that denies the differences between people, denies how easily the interests of human beings become divided," and she argues that "it is indecent to lay claim to other people's suffering: it is a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism" (39).

14 While I do not intend to construct Malka's identity with the use of these terms in this order, I maintain that her race and gender set her apart from others in her Jewish community. As such, I refer to her identity as black/woman/Jew.

15 For a discussion of stereotypical images of black womanhood, including the sexualized Jezebel archetype, see Harris-Perry.

16 See Goddard, Silku, and López Ropero.

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