Caryl Phillips’s *The Lost Child*: A Story of Loss and Connection

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1.

This essay focuses on loss as condition and consequence of the violent meeting of two hemispheres, north and south and more specifically, Britain and its African “others” in the theatre of the Caribbean. We pose the question of how it might be possible to conceive, now, of the “lostness” of those who centuries ago were brought from one world to another under coercion, or who came in expectation of transformative possibilities that proved devastatingly illusory, and who were all bound together by a sense of exile in whatever “home” they found themselves. One could argue that in the absence of a balanced and unbiased official record, the most effective imaginative evocations of this state of lostness have been articulated in Caribbean literature. Repeatedly, writers like George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, Maryse Condé and Caryl Phillips – to name only some of the best-known – have engaged with the colonial archive (historical *and* literary) of this world-changing contact and clash of cultures and races. Such an engagement is framed within the dialogue between literary narratives of the north (Britain) and those from the tropical south which revisit and rewrite them, thereby claiming those lost/silenced/ invisible children of Empire whose presence (or absence) haunts? the pages of the British canon. Here we focus on Phillips’s latest novel, *The Lost Child* (2015), and the ways it combines such historical loss with connections between these two worlds, although paradoxically it is set exclusively in England, covering a time span from eighteenth-century Liverpool, through nineteenth-century Haworth to Leeds, London, and Oxford between the 1950s and the 1980s. In particular, we consider how this many-stranded narrative puts the northern English realm of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) in conversation with writing from the Caribbean and its diaspora, thereby performing, in a sense, what Derek Walcott in his Nobel lecture called the “gathering of broken pieces” to effect the restoration of “shattered histories” (69). For Phillips, as for Walcott, this re-membering is at the very heart of Caribbean writing.

From its opening the novel calls attention to the lost children of the *first* encounter of eighteenth-century northern England and the Black Atlantic, meaning enslaved Caribbean people who for various reasons found themselves ex-slaves in Britain; but it also tells the story of *their* lost children, and children’s children. Through our discussion of the text’s conversation with *Wuthering Heights*,and with other works by Caribbean writers (specifically those of Jean Rhys and several of Phillips’s own earlier works) we unravel how *The Lost Child* engages in an intricate web of intertextuality, and we elaborate on the structural and hermeneutic patterning of its dialogue with other writers and their books. Like Phillips’s historical fiction *Cambridge* (1991), the new novel is deeply invested in ‘literary parenthood’: that is, the narrative reclamation/adoption of absent stories, the unvoiced accounts of orphans, of stolen or denied children of Empire missing from, or only shadowy figures within, the official records. The haunting trope of the lost child and the liminal and savage landscape of the heath pervade Phillips’s new work, a text in which narrative disjunction mirrors the broken and disjointed families that are its subject. At the same time, family connections, legitimate and apparently illegitimate, parallel similarly awkward connections between the various strands of the novel, a narrative construction which challenges us to experience a rewarding simultaneity in our reading praxis.

2.

In his collection of essays, *The Atlantic Sound* (2001), where Phillips denounces the amnesia surrounding the transatlantic slave trade, he tells us of sitting on the Liverpool docks and remembering his first reading of Brontë’s novel. At that time, he was particularly struck by the scene where Mr Earnshaw embarks on his three-day walk to Liverpool on unspecified business and returns with a gift for his children. Unwrapping a “dirty, ragged, black-haired child” who speaks an incomprehensible language, Mr Earnshaw declares “it” a “gift of God; though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil” (Brontë 77). “This seven-year-old dark stranger . . . ‘rescued’ from the streets of Liverpool in 1771,” Phillips recalls “was one of the first literary characters to seize my imagination” (Phillips, *Atlantic Sound* 92). More recently, in a conversation with John McLeod, Phillips speculated on why this “dark stranger,” Brontë’s Heathcliff, is one of the most fascinating of the multiple orphans and foundlings that feature in eighteenth and nineteenth-century English fiction: because, he suggested, Heathcliff made readers uncomfortable, uneasy, puzzled as to how to place him as he eludes extant categories.[[1]](#endnote-1)As early as 1991, Phillips’s own novel *Cambridge* deliberately referenced *Wuthering Heights.* This is suggested in the name of one of two central narrators: Emily, an unmarried young woman, the daughter of a cold father, who comes from the north of England. The literary allusion is consolidated by the older widower whom her father has arranged for her to marry. His name, Thomas Lockwood, recalls Mr Lockwood, one of two narrators in [Emily Brontë](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Bront%C3%AB)’s [novel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wuthering_Heights). Like the anomalous presence of the black general Othello in the Venetian court of Shakespeare’s tragedy, the enigma of the dark alien child in *Wuthering Heights*, adrift in a major eighteenth-century slaving port, haunted Phillips’s imagination for a long time. Decades later, in 2015, *The Lost Child* is in part an attempt to solve the puzzle of Heathcliff’s back-story.

Of course, Caryl Phillips is not the only Caribbean writer to engage with the world of the Brontës.[[2]](#endnote-2) One thinks of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Maryse Condé’s *Windward Heights* (1999), which transplants Emily [Brontë](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Bront%C3%AB)’s plot to Guadeloupe. Interestingly, Theo D’haen claims that Condé’s novel knowingly reframes *Wuthering Heights* “through the prism of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and even of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*” (80). He does not elaborate, but the deliberate foregrounding of these links alerts the initiated reader to a web of literary connections which is taken even further, we argue, by Phillips in *The Lost Child*. Rhys and Condé share with the Brontës a secondary status as women writers. And as Caribbean writers, their fictions are as interested as those of Phillips to highlight the marginalization of the ‘dark Others’ demonized in the early texts. Another crucial aspect of the Brontë imaginary that has also imprinted on these Caribbean writers, particularly Phillips, has to do with the specific qualities of the English landscape. In an interview with Tanya Agathocleous, Phillips recalls that during his urban childhood in Leeds he became aware that “there was this wild strange place” on the periphery, a bleak desolate moorland that he recognized from *Wuthering Heights* in which, he insists, “the heath is the character.” Here is another point of connection which binds northern Britain and the Caribbean: both places have been depicted in ways that *fix* the character of the place. The moor, the heath is an elemental space that serves to project onto the landscape the darker side of human consciousness, the repressed, the sinister, the magical and the other-worldly, qualities which are more easily intuited than analyzed.[[3]](#endnote-3) For writers from the New World tropics, whose own space has been for centuries configured in similar ways (as wild, savage, unpredictable, changeable and dangerous, full of mysterious forces that can overpower reason), the northern imaginary is one with which they can to some extent empathize and therefore connect. For example, Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes lists *Wuthering Heights* among those books that were important to him precisely because of Brontë’s literary recognition of “unreason,” of the inexplicable as intrinsic to human experience, a recognition that seems more readily sensed by writers from outside the center, whether in parochial northern England or the “New World” islands of the West Indies, or in Fuentes’s case, Latin America. Emily Brontë, Fuentes asserts, was “the outcast within the center” who offered an alternative to “the religion of Reason, the bedrock of the bourgeoisie” (212-13). The literary evocation of the moor, then, and all that it signifies to these writers from a different hemisphere, at least partly accounts for their continued engagement with the writing of the Brontës.

And of course, Northern Britain also contained some of the largest mercantile centres and ports engaged in business with the West Indies, including the slave trade: Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and, of course, Liverpool, which by the 1770s outstripped London and Bristol. Phillips, in *The Atlantic Sound*, observes that “by the end of the [eighteenth] century Liverpool was by far the largest and most vigorous participant in the English slave trade, its docks playing host to more slave ships than London and Bristol combined” (31). Profit and loss are more important than human lives in such places. Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger* (1992), which starts in a Liverpool shipwrights’ yard, eviscerates the capitalist philosophy which subsumes ethical responsibility to the capitalist imperative. So too, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette refers to her husband’s English mansion financed by his West Indian properties and concludes that “gold is the idol they worship” (122). Similarly, the Earnshaw figure in the penultimate section of *The Lost Child*, who does business with Antigua where he has “sugarworks” (243), enters Liverpool dreading his commerce with “men whose hearts were hard like stone, and whose Christian charity went no further than the looking glass” (243). *Wuthering Heights*, like *Jane Eyre* and so many nineteenth-century British fictions, is haunted by the guilty secret of British complicity in and profit from the history of slavery, in the same way as *The Lost Child* is dominated by the “burdensome secret” surrounding the unofficial relationship between the former slave and the respectable and gentlemanly Earnshaw figure (11).

The invidious corruption of all involved is, in the Caribbean at least, not a matter of the past: the madness of slavery, it might be argued, continues to infect the memory of generation after generation centuries after its abolition. This is why it is obsessively revisited by the region’s writers at home and, increasingly, in the far flung diaspora where the wound may be less acknowledged, even silenced, by the host society, paradoxically reinforcing the impact of the repressed past on the present. One might think here of a novel like Trinidadian-Canadian writer Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999). In this tale of marronage through generations of one family, an estranged daughter writes to her absent mother in a vain quest for family genealogy, aware that history is being lost: “we forget who we were. Nothing is changing, it is just that we are forgetting. All the centuries past may be one long sleep” (234). It is against this forgetting that Caribbean writers are ranged, perhaps especially those – like Phillips – who have spent much of their lives in the diaspora. They are alert to the long shadows cast by history, and in Phillips’s case, those shadows that haunt the north of England where he grew up, in texts like *Wuthering Heights* and in cities such as Liverpool “where history is so physically present, yet so glaringly absent from people’s consciousness” (*The Atlantic Sound*, 93). Ben in *The Lost Child* performs this disposal of the archive when, after his mother’s death, he attempts to exorcize his painful past, by throwing out “all of her letters and postcards to him. He also gets rid of the newspaper clippings” about his brother’s death (202), and later refuses to take possession of the documents left behind by his mother. But even though the material record is expunged or ignored, the novel demonstrates that the afterlife of trauma persists in memory, as testified by the chapter “Childhood” which registers Ben’s painful remembrances of his early life tragically shaped by his mother’s chronic depression. As Phillips notes in his interview with Agathocleous, the descendants of all those whose lives and feelings and hopes and dreams were erased from history are driven to “attempt to repair memory or repair amnesia.” Quite significantly the novel opens in the present tense, with the story of an ex-slave from the West Indies who is dying on the Liverpool docks in late eighteenth-century England; thus begins that remembering process that her lost child, and all those who come after, have been encouraged to dismiss.

3.

In *The Lost Child*, Caryl Phillips revisits the northern imaginary but, we argue, he does so in novel and complex ways, which not only acknowledge losses, as do Rhys and Condé, but also strive towards connections, narrative, cultural and historical. Certainly, like other Caribbean authors, he writes back to the English literary canon, in which *Wuthering Heights* has an established place: the subtext of colonial dominance and its consequences is played out in the early and more contemporary sections of *The Lost Child* in damaged characters who struggle with the betrayal of love, with loss and anger. Like *Cambridge*, the novel is deeply invested in the textual reclamation of the orphans, the abandoned, denied children of Empire, both black and white, whose stories may be missing from the official history but, as Phillips’s texts insist, are nonetheless inextricably interwoven into the *British* national narrative. Both Rhys and Condé set up a dichotomy between centre and margin, and within their binary imagining the *Caribbean* gaze is privileged, so that Britain will always be that “other place.” While the main figures in their stories ultimately return to the Caribbean, spiritually if not physically, the tensions between centre and margin in *The Lost Child* are played out on *British* soil. In the section “Childhood,” the specificity of the images, television jingles, pop songs and lexicon of each period of Ben’s memories from age six to seventeen, – “telly,” “clot,” “Mam,” “Ta, love,” “rag and bone man,” “nicking it” – economically evoke the quintessentially local working-class north of England world he inhabits, but where he still remains a racial other. Belonging to a different generation of writers and with a different background than Rhys and Condé, Phillips can and does bring together both cultures: his characters are not faced with a choice between England and the Caribbean but with the ambivalence of being “of and not of” Britain (Phillips, *New World Order* 4). *Wide Sargasso Sea* rescues the Jamaican Bertha from British erasure and stereotype; Phillips’s novel writes back to canonical texts but also ‘writes in’ aspects of key Caribbean classics, most notably by Rhys herself. And it is worth noting that those *The Lost Child* seeks to recuperate from silence, forgetting and stereotype are children of *Britain*: like “the dark stranger” brought back from Liverpool in Brontë’s classic, the white Monica and her mixed-race boys Ben and Tommy are all British-born, so that this novel has a wider trajectory in that it juxtaposes the nineteenth-century stories of Rhys, Brontë and Condé with the relatively recent history of multiracial Britain.

As both Tommy and Ben discover in this text, “the idea of talking about family in general was completely off the agenda” (196). For long, the same applied to talking about the “family” of Empire, the matrix of British-Caribbean connections, and the migrations that made possible the presence of mixed-race British families, and indeed of diasporic families who have roots in both Britain and the Caribbean. The West Indies, “the tropics,” the colonies, and of course Africa, constituted the other vectors of the flow of commodities, including human bodies, that was a crucial part of the British imperial project. And that trade chained together these disparate geographical sites for centuries, weaving a web of links and connections. Phillips’s text seems to suggest that the dysfunctional nature of the “family” that results from this history *does* need to be talked about, not just via the fractured families and lost children that are the novel’s subject but through a reclamation of literary family ties: with the Brontës, with Rhys and with Phillips’s own scribal progeny. Such connections, and the complex structure within which they are brought together, might help to fathom Phillips’s idiosyncratic way of imagining a “lostness” that can nevertheless be shared.

While both *Cambridge* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* take on early British constructions of the Caribbean “other,” *The Lost Child* is more ambitious in the sense that its own web of connections goes beyond the unity of time and action that characterizes these earlier texts and privileges an assortment of narratives which take the readers across time and space in unpredictable manner. Perceptively, Wendy Smith’s review of *The Lost Child* in the *Boston Globe* describes it as a “riff on Emily Brontë’s masterpiece . . . like a jazz improvisation: Phillips plucks the themes that resonate most deeply with him and transposes them into a polyphonic narrative.” The musical analogy highlights the plurality of Phillips’s riddling narratives, composed of apparently discordant and unrelated stories, some related in the present tense, some in the past, by multiple narrators who connect with (but are often not heard by) others. The disorientation caused by such an intricate narrative fabric is part of the “lostness” inherent in *The Lost Child*, but which, as we will see, is partly compensated by its numerous literary ramifications.

While Phillips’s historical fictions (like *Cambridge*) write to and, in the sense of a palimpsest, write *over* texts from the colonial narrative archive, it is important to realize that others which feature twentieth-century British life (like *The Lost Child*) are equally invested in historical concerns. One way in which the author effects this constant bond with the past is by “writing back to [him]self, which might be described as a form of auto-intertextuality” (Ledent 85). Certainly, allusion is crucial in both novels referred to above. Lady Nugent’s *Journal*, Equiano’s slave narrative and Matthew Lewis’s planters log are liberally mined in the former, and, as noted, the fictional worlds of Emily Brontë and Jean Rhys in particular are very much a presence in *The Lost Child*. But so is *Cambridge*, and *Colour Me English* and *The Atlantic Sound*: indeed, Phillips channels earlier Phillips in audacious auto-intertextuality that deepens and enriches the multiple contexts of the recent novel. Talking to Agathocleous, he acknowledges that his new book is “‘in conversation with [his] earlier works’ but I’m quite not sure what’s going on in the conversation.”

One example of these multiple textual family resemblances is the similarity between the figures of Antoinette/Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Emily in *Cambridge* and Monica in *The Lost Child*, who are all traumatized to such an extent that they manifest psychopathological states, exacerbated by incarceration. For all three women, mirrors are both reassuring and deeply unsettling. And it is striking that both Antoinette and Monica come to the realization that in their claustrophobic spaces – whether the attic of an English mansion or the mental home – “there is no looking-glass here” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 117) and “there’s no mirror in this room” (*The Lost Child* 236). This awareness, arresting in its resemblance, signals Antoinette/Bertha’s and Monica’s inability to see and recognize themselves, the *loss* of themselves at an ontological level. *The Lost Child* also contains several incarnations of Rhys’s iconic “madwoman in the attic”: the “Crazy Woman,” a former slave from the West Indies, encountered in the novel’s first pages (3); “the crazy woman” (221) who lives in the first floor flat of the squalid building in which Monica temporarily finds a shelter; Monica herself, at some stage living in a “tiny attic room” (214) and always subject to a “flighty state of mind and proclivity to wander in her head” (27-28), whose husband tells her “your mind is full of all sorts of craziness” (37); and finally the fictional Emily Brontë who continues “to wander in her mind out onto the moors” (105). These connections are further enhanced when one considers Monica’s resemblance to another Rhys character. A particular meaningful scene in that respect is when her sunbathing in her underwear on the grass fuels the outrage of her prissy neighbor (231) and leads to her court case and her consequent sectioning and institutional commitment. This episode clearly echoes Rhys’s story of another disturbed and incarcerated woman, “ Let Them Call it Jazz,” where West Indian Selina is, very much like Monica, set up in a flat by a male friend, and ends ups in prison for being a nuisance to her self-righteous neighbors. These troubling literary echoes *within* a novel that some critics find fragmentary actually reinforce the subtle demarcation of Phillips’s fictions from the canonical ones he references. For instance, one of the male characters who figure prominently in the Brontë novel (Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*) is unnamed in Phillips’s texts and it is worth noting that in *The Nature of Blood,* the Othello figure is similarly nameless. It is as if Phillips calls up these famous literary presences and simultaneously establishes that his are distinct, separate literary subjects, with universal connotations perhaps, but functioning in a clearly different context of relevance to his contemporary readers.

Phillips’s decision in his recent book to keep one of his central characters anonymous is also part of the indeterminacy of his writing; and quite unsurprisingly the riddle of *the* eponymous lost child is never solved. There are several abandoned boys here: the Heathcliff figure, the wild boy from the moors in Emily’s feverish dreams, her dead brother Branwell Brontë, Monica’s children, both the disappeared son Tommy and Ben who is to all intents and purposed orphaned from a very early age. Moreover, if we widen the focus to include *Cambridge*, the notion of lost children extends to daughters: not only Julius’s “child from his first marriage” (33) but also Monica and the Emily of both novels. The latter three women are lost to their fathers by virtue of their inferior gender and willful determination to escape the rigid limitations imposed on “these children of a larger growth” (*Cambridge* 4), who end up vulnerable, defeated and lost to themselves (*The Lost Child* 52). Both the Emily of *Cambridge* and that of *The Lost Child* share with Monica a dysfunctional relationship with their fathers, sinister though outwardly apparently benevolent patriarchs. In the former novel, Emily and Cambridge are both lost to parents, and have themselves lost children. It is ironic that in *The Lost Child* the interactions of an extended and mutually supportive family of immigrant Pakistani parents and children that Monica avoids in the Leeds park (65-66), contrasts so tellingly with the novel’s failed English nuclear families: parents and children are estranged, siblings disappear and single mothers buckle under the task of childrearing. Such family crises are hardly alleviated by either fostering or siblings’ solidarity, and tend to repeat themselves. The Emily Brontë character grieves over “Papa, who has shown no desire to present himself at the bedside of his ailing daughter. Half the family gone, but still, he refuses to bestir himself and offer his fading Emily the comfort of his company” (106). And three hundred years later, Ben and Tommy’s father is “increasingly removed from his two children” (44).

If the familial rifts and losses are pervasive in *The Lost Child*, its zones of connection may be less obvious. This pattern of connection underpins a comment made by Kathryn Sutherland, in one of the most perceptive reviews of the novel, that it is “a serious work” which, like Brontë’s masterpiece, coaxes the readers “into reading signs and gathering details into patterns that might prove adequate to explain the mystery at the book’s heart”; in other words, patterns that can teach them to read the text properly. As for the mystery at the book’s heart, one might wonder what connects Brontë’s dark, wild Heathcliff with Phillips’s abandoned or missing brown-skinned boys in 1970s Britain? As always, Phillips asks us to build bridges between the different narratives that make up this novel, and with others. What they share is one key consequence of the colonial encounter: the pathologized human products of racial and cultural contact, those creolized and miscegenated, often illegitimate children of empire, in most cases unwanted and unacknowledged, in a sense, still wandering in search of a textual home. Phillips’s concern in *The Lost Child* is less with the historical context of *Wuthering Heights* than with the notion of *family*, the broken bonds between parent and child, the failure of parenting and the burden of care this places on their traumatized offspring, both in eighteenth-century Liverpool and twentieth-century Leeds. The dark seven-year-old boy and Ben, like Brontë’s Heathcliff, the lost boy from the moors, are all outsiders, the result of parental transgression of racial boundaries. Yet it is the children who suffer from the consequences of the parents’ defiance, no matter how founded in fleeting love the liaison from which they issued. The moving plight of such innocents having to pay society’s price for their parents’ desire forcibly brings home the continuities across the centuries of Britain’s ‘outside’ children.

To return to the notion of patterning, what is the effect of these multiple textual conversations on the reader? What story, what text (s) are we reading? How do they all hang together, or is the point that they do not cohere in any easy way? How do the sections that echo *Wuthering Heights*,or the Brontë family’s intimate yet uneasy relationships, interface with the narrative of Monica and her boys? On the one hand, the bringing together of these stories, these voices and the worlds they inhabit, in a northern space, suggests a form of reconciliation. Yet the text seems to work against such a positive ascription, and it is worth trying to unpack this apparent contradiction.

Going back to Smith’s musical analogy, Phillips’s narrative voices are on first reading so disparate as to be discordant. This is deliberate because the story moves the different characters and their histories both towards and away from mutual recognition, in the same way as the reader is torn between a sense of dislocation and one of possible if difficult consonance. If *The Lost Child* attempts to recognize and legitimate the denied and forgotten children of Empire, it does so by employing a literary form in which narrative disjunction is commonplace and apparently illegitimate connections are taken for granted. A few reviewers have suggested that, in the same way as northern England and the Black Atlantic are worlds apart, the stories comprising the novel do not hang together, nor do the characters. While Alex Clark describes the book as a “frustratingly patchwork novel,” Todd McEwen states that it may be difficult to “discern where [the opening narrative] is heading.” But look around at today’s Britain, the novel also seems to suggest, and see the “patchwork,” the multiplicity of peoples and cultures that share the same space. Who belongs together, and who does not?

To give just a few examples of what we mean by these “illegitimate” narrative and intertextual connections, consider the titles of the different sections, which are misleading, to say the least, and suggest some form of preconceived development, which is then undermined. In her interview with Phillips, Agathocleous remarks that the “chapter headings . . . are like a bildungsroman gone wrong. All the developmental stages are out of sequence.” The opening section, for instance, establishes the connection with *Wuthering Heights* and provides an answer to Heathcliff’s dark skin and why he is brought to Thrushcross Grange in the first place. The next section is titled “First Love” and quite naturally, readers anticipate the introduction of Cathy and the central passion of Brontë’s novel. Instead, the entire quality, period and subject matter of the prose shifts: in the first segment, the diction is archaically eloquent, employing stylistic traits common to nineteenth century narratives such as periphrasis and investing the squalor with a gothic quality. Monica’s account, which follows, is a flattened realist record of a romance that quickly dulls into mutual silence and resentment. One could also examine a few clashes of genre and register that recur in the text. For instance, Phillips moves from what Christopher Tayler, with reference to in relation toPhillips’s *In the Falling Snow*, terms “low wattage realism” – a nod, perhaps to the 1950s-1960s tradition of “gritty” northern working-class fiction – to a highly charged, disturbed and disturbing inner monologue, especially in the section “Alone” where Monica’s descent into marginalization and madness is conveyed in a poignant first-person narrative. The same kind of disparity occurs in Emily’s various narratives in *Cambridge*: the clash between the perky, garrulous and naïve voice of the travelogue stockpiling information for the sake of the record, and the repressed rage and frustration palpable in the jarring syntax of the Prologue which gives way to a disconnected, dreamlike collage of memory and sensation and jumbled phrases in the Epilogue. All that is elided to fit the specific formula of the travel journal bubbles to the surface in the impressionistic pieces. As with Jean Rhys’s work, the “abyss of silence” (*The Lost Child* 23) which defines the characters’ relationships is not in fact silent in Phillips’s writing; it contains a surfeit of echoes. It is as if a kind of barely contained mania can be detected under the polite surface of the one genre which then sends shockwaves rippling outward via the disjointed prose used to represent Emily’s much-altered final state. In the same way the Emily Brontë character in *The Lost Child* exists both in the world of her family and more and more in the world of her fictions, and is even more aware after death that she lives “now in two worlds” (112). We argue that in Phillips’s *The Lost Child*,we are challenged to experience the same simultaneity in our reading, divided as we are between an acute sense of disruption and one, less obvious, of kinship.

5.

Broken in structure, fractured in terms of narrative, the form of *The Lost Child* parallels its subject matter of disrupted childhoods and shattered families, whether blood family or the displaced community of the African-Caribbean diaspora. Like much of Phillips’s work, the novel calls attention to the walls built between people – by themselves, by others, by race, by cultural differences – and how these divisions, so difficult to dismantle, isolate and damage the psyche. Repeatedly, variations on the phrase “all communication between the two of them had totally broken down” (17) occur in a novel where silences paper over buried feelings. For example, Monica and her husband “abandoned the ability, or desire, to converse with each other beyond the minutiae of daily coexistence” (38); relations between Julius and his politician compatriot “had finally broken down” (49); Monica deliberately refuses familiar exchanges with her father, “this warped man, who had already bullied his wife into near-mute submission” (16). Yet despite these barriers to communication in the fullest sense, there is an inextricable bond between Britain and the Caribbean, a relationship of blood (in many senses of the word) which has been in place since the seventeenth century. In the chapter entitled “The Journey” the Earnshaw figure visits the landlord of his dead black mistress, the “Crazy Woman” who is the mother of the dark child he has come to claim. The revolting slum proprietor tells the “gentleman” that “I have a final reckoning. I take it you’ll be settling her accounts” (250). Phillips’s novel, like much of his writing, underscores the point that Britain’s account to the Caribbean is long overdue, yet here the scene ends with a father finally taking responsibility: “Come to me, son, and let’s go home” (252). The family connection here is *owned*, legitimated in the text (and potentially in society); in the modern sections too, there are tentative attempts at rapprochement, reunion. Gerard Woodward argues in his review of the novel that Monica’s father never in his heart gives up on his daughter and reaches out to his grandson after her death: “he still has something to offer his own flesh and blood” (208). Equally belatedly, the Heathcliff character’s white father does own his dark son in some fashion, perhaps as Britain now – through shame, guilt, awareness or simple recognition – might claim its colonial bastards who are after all no longer colonial, but British.

The word “home” ends both the penultimate and final sections of *The Lost Child.* This repetition functions rather like the word “England” which recurs in the prologue and epilogue of *Cambridge*: it undercuts any simplistic understanding of the term. The “accommodation” offered by their only remaining family to the orphaned boys in *The Lost Child* , whether Ben or the Heathcliff figure, is a kind of promise of home. But a long shadow is cast by the unspoken words of the dark child directed at the man he doesn’t know is his father, “*Please don’t hurt me*” (260, italics in original). Evoking the possibility of undisclosed child abuse, they recall the lost Tommy, lured to his death on the moors by a father figure, and also echo Irina in *Higher Ground* when she silently addresses her father with these words: “Papa, you hurt me” (177). And they may resonate in relation to Monica herself, whose possible abuse at the hands of her father is so subtly suggested in the *Lost Child* narrative as to be overlooked by most reviewers.[[4]](#endnote-4) Certainly, knowing the outcome of *Wuthering Heights* shapes our expectations of what Phillips’s illegitimate “dark boy” can expect, and connects his future place in the family with that of other non-white northern British children of the 1950s-1960s: a difficult and contested place at home.

In Phillips’s *Crossing the River*, the captain of a slave ship (based on John Newton, another northern Briton, who repented his involvement in the nefarious trade and is the author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”) combines in his diary observations of human abasement and cruelty with loving memories of his wife. But the purchase of three African children from their father implicitly corrupts his own future family; in tearing apart the one to help fund his own, the perversely intimate nature of “the enterprise” is manifest. And in the same volume, in “Somewhere in England,” the longed for reunion of the adopted Greer and his birth mother Joyce is anti-climactic. So freighted is she by eighteen years of loss, guilt and anxiety that she does not feel she has the right to even touch him. There are no easy accounts of fragmented families put back together in Phillips’s fictions; yet there is in several of them a muted vindication of those with the courage to try, painful as it always is, to strive for connections, for relationship, for the possibility of love. For all the ruined families, the lost children, for all the failures of communication that might have allowed the formation of alternative families/communities of alliance, *The Lost Child* does end with two moments of possible reconnection: Ronald Johnson’s love for his grandson, Ben, and the Earnshaw figure’s love for his orphan son. Perhaps in this love lie the seeds of their redemption, their own “Amazing Grace”.

Is the suggestion that Britain, while owning and legitimating those products of culture contact *within* its borders, still cannot guarantee that home will be either happy or safe? There is a shock of recognition when we read of mixed-race Tommy enduring his first day at a new all-white school (*The Lost Child* 117) and recall another outsider child, the brown “oriental apparition” Ali, terrified in the face of a similarly estranging group stare, in Phillips’s introduction to *Colour Me English* (4). The dual memory deepens the impact of such casual cruelty and demonstrates – as Phillips’s work always does – the often unrecognized connections across difference. Further, the simultaneous experience of reading one character and remembering reading another serves to underscore the contemporary consequences of ignoring such connections and perpetrating persecution of the outsider. So what happens to the vulnerable outsider black child in the fictional Leeds of the 1960s is reinforced in impact by referencing how similar discrimination affects an outsider Asian boy in 1960s Leeds or, indeed, how it might do an outsider Muslim child in today’s Birmingham. Now more than ever, readers of the novel might have to ask similar questions about the contemporary situation in Britain, and indeed in Europe. This novel is, once again, evidence of what Phillips asserts in *Colour Me English* (16): his faith in the power of the worlds opened up to us by fiction, worlds in which grasping the possibility of connections makes it possible to feel empathy and compassion for those so different, so other; compassion that may perhaps be acted upon in the other of the “two worlds” we inhabit.

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1. “Lost Children: The Black Atlantic and Northern Britain: an Interdisciplinary Symposium,” Institute for Black Atlantic Research, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, 30 April – 1 May 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Several postcolonial critics have expressed an interest in this character too. See, for example, Tabish Khair, who in his discussion of the Gothic novel brings together Heathcliff and the figure of the terrorist (61-71). Thank you to Delphine Munos for pointing this out to us. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interestingly this spatial referent calls to mind the homophonous Shakespearean “Moor”, Othello, who Phillips evokes in *The European Tribe* (1987) and revisits in *The Nature of Blood* (1997), a figure which, like the eponymous landscape, has been construed as both fascinating and threatening. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Monica’s relationship with her father radically changes when she is twelve, maybe from the point when “he leaned over and snaked his hand around her midriff” (21). One understands better why Monica speaks of her father as “this warped man” (16) when later in the novel Ronald recalls to himself the accusations that a friend of his daughter levelled at him, saying that she did not “much care for the way [Monica’s father] leer[s] at her” (208). The ambiguity remains as Ronald dismisses these charges while at the same time remembering that his wife “forgave him” (208). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)