

Introduction:

Thinking Caryl Phillips Out of the Box

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In 1979, I started to write because I had something to say. I had no desire to be either famous or to become a celebrity. I still have no desire to embrace either fame or celebrity. These are terrible accidents that can destroy the privacy of a writer's life and impair his ability to see clearly.

Caryl Phillips, "Preamble" 7–8

This extract from Caryl Phillips' notebooks, which he read at a conference held in his honour in 2006, summarizes some of the major ideas contained in his contribution to this special issue of *ARIEL* devoted to his wide-ranging body of writing, which includes ten novels, five non-fiction books, and several plays and scripts. Although Phillips' essay in this issue is entitled "Nothing Personal"—a reference to a collaborative book published in the 1960s by writer James Baldwin and his photographer friend Richard Avedon—his piece is eminently personal. It provides indirect yet intimate insight into his status as a writer who seems, in this essay, to be more preoccupied by his artistic integrity than the complex background that has long been his hallmark in the field of postcolonial studies and which comprises his birth in Saint Kitts in the Eastern Caribbean, his early years in the north of England, his residence in the United States, and his interest in his African roots. Phillips' reflections on Baldwin's failure to manage his own celebrity in America following the civil rights movement give us access to the former's questions about the changes that have recently marked the publishing world, in which literary fiction is taken less seriously than it was when his first novel, *The Final Passage*, came out in 1985. Phillips analyses Baldwin's professional choices while never relinquishing respect for the writer who was

also a literary father figure to him, and he concludes with a refusal to take part in the “circus” (15) that the literary world has become, join the “self-promoting lap dance” that it entails (15), or, to borrow Baldwin’s words, play the “dancing dog” (25). Although some readers might wonder about the relevance of this piece to *ARIEL*’s postcolonial agenda, one should insist that it is written by an author who, by virtue of his origins, experiences, and work, definitely has his place in the postcolonial domain and has most often been read as “diasporic” or “migrant.” It is also important to keep in mind that, in Phillips’ writing, the biographical can often be read performatively as auto-biographical (Yelin, “Plural Selves” 58) and what is left unsaid can, in many cases, prove more important than what is openly expressed. His texts, both fictional and non-fictional, therefore deserve to be read for their submerged meaning, a point obliquely raised by Louise Yelin’s and Daria Tunca’s contributions, which discuss “invisible presences” in Phillips’ writing (Yelin 103) and his “poetics of (in)visibility” (Tunca 159), respectively. While “Nothing Personal” visibly tackles the vagaries of Baldwin’s career as an artist and the changing face of a publishing world in crisis, it also crucially suggests—as do most of Phillips’ texts—that we should learn the lessons of the past. Moreover, it intimates that fame and celebrity tend to make writers forget their origins. Of course, this turns out to be more problematic for artists who, like Baldwin and Phillips, write in a society in which they are viewed by some as outsiders, in terms of both race and class, and are therefore more likely to be discriminated against, even when they have made it to the “centre.” Incidentally, this theme is also at the heart of Phillips’ fascination with the character of Othello, as shown in two of his essays (“A Black European Success” and “Rude Am I in My Speech”) and, most notably, his 1997 novel *The Nature of Blood*.

Like “Nothing Personal,” the next two contributions to this special issue—tributes to Phillips by fellow writers Robert Antoni and Johny Pitts—highlight the centrality of literary friendships and intergenerational relationships in Phillips’ development as an artist. In “The Enigma of Unarrival,” Antoni, author of *Blessed is the Fruit* (1997) and *As Flies to Whatless Boys* (2013), starts with Phillips’ pervasive interest in displaced

people and shared personal memories to provide an idiosyncratic reading of the Kittitian-born writer's plural sense of home. In "Daffodils: A Meeting with Caryl Phillips," Pitts, a young British artist who describes himself as AfroEuropean, narrates his meeting with Phillips and addresses questions of mentoring, notably in the Black British context. As Pitts points out, it is always enlightening to hear "writers talk about writers" (42). Interestingly, both Antoni and Pitts use the word "tribe" in their attempts to capture Phillips' elusive identity, whether in reference to a carnival band in the Caribbean and the Lost Tribes of Israel in the former's text, or a group of like-minded writers and the Leeds United Football Club in the latter's. Although, as Phillips' first collection of essays *The European Tribe* (1987) suggests, the term "tribe" carries a number of connotations, it is strongly evocative of Phillips' fascination with the possibilities of acceptance and recognition, which nevertheless remain, in Antoni's words, "fleeting illusion[s]" (30). As described by his peers, one of the consequences of Phillips' complex background and the unstable sense of belonging that it entails is that whatever geographic or cultural label is used to circumscribe his art—Caribbean, Black British, European, or even postcolonial—is bound to be unsatisfactory in the long term.

The rest of the issue is made up of eight scholarly essays examining Phillips' work from a variety of angles that enhance our understanding of this multi-talented artist's production as well as various issues pertaining to postcolonial studies. While Phillips' work has, until now, been overwhelmingly viewed from the perspective of diaspora, identity, or trauma studies, these eight articles pursue underexplored paths through Phillips' oeuvre and thereby cover several of the blind spots in today's scholarship on the author. They do so either by using unusual lenses such as ecocriticism, stylistics, and sports, or by tackling such topics as Phillips' black female characters, view of the heroic, use of the biographical genre, treatment of Eastern European migration, and recourse to intertextuality in *The Lost Child* (2015). For all its kaleidoscopic nature, this investigation of Phillips' fiction and non-fiction cannot achieve comprehensiveness but will hopefully open up new vistas for the study of his still-evolving body of work.

In interviews, Phillips has repeatedly stated that characters, as opposed to plots, are fundamental to his writing process. “By placing character at the heart of [the story],” he explains in a 1999 interview, “you immediately have tension because characters resist the slogan-eering” (“Disturbing” 55). Appropriately, two contributions in this issue—by Shauna Morgan Kirlew and Ulla Rahbek—revolve around Phillips’ characterization (and the ambiguity that it often leads to) and interrogate aspects of his handling of character which have so far been under-researched, despite being inherent to his work. Although gender is one of the facets of identity, along with race and class, that Phillips has most often tackled, it has so far been under-examined critically, especially in terms of its interconnectedness with skin complexion. Focusing on Phillips’ representation of black womanhood, Kirlew demonstrates the tension at the heart of Phillips’ complex treatment of black female characters in *Dancing in the Dark*, *The Nature of Blood*, and *The Final Passage*. These three novels display a keen awareness of the plight of women, Kirlew argues, and can thus be described as gender-progressive or Pro-Woman(ist). However, the three texts can simultaneously be read as complicit with conservative views of womanhood and prejudices influenced by white supremacist ideas if one takes into account these women’s invisibility and untouchability in the universe of the text (a marginalization that is reproduced at the critical level since scholars have discussed few of these characters in any depth). One of the women Kirlew focuses on in her exploration of Phillips’ nuanced portrayal of black female characters is *The Final Passage*’s Leila. Kirlew reads Leila, who is usually regarded through the lens of her irredeemable passivity, as a woman whose tragic fate is relieved by motherhood and her bond with her Caribbean friend Millie. Rahbek’s essay also analyses Leila and contends that she can be viewed as a hero of sorts, in spite of her seemingly unheroic behaviour. Rahbek applies the same reading grid to other characters from Phillips’ fiction and non-fiction, whether minor figures often overlooked by commentators—such as Madison in the first section of *Crossing the River* or Carla in *A Distant Shore*—or unassuming protagonists, such as Judge Waties Waring, the figure at the centre of the Charleston section of *The Atlantic Sound*.

Such an interpretation might come across as paradoxical; many figures that can be viewed as heroic according to Rahbek's criteria—an ability to change the status quo and the execution of dignified actions that often go hand in hand with loneliness—would not be regarded as such in common parlance. However, Rahbek's reading touches upon an important aspect of Phillips' writing: its fascination with solitary, suffering individuals whose lost dignity the text attempts to restore. The distress of his characters confers a form of inner strength and moral superiority on them that can be equated with heroism. The possibility of glorifying such ordinary individuals, which Rahbek invites us to consider, is linked to Phillips' democratic vision of the literary text as able to understand any characters, not only the most conspicuous ones—possibly an inheritance from his native Caribbean, a region that was denied local heroes for historical reasons and has, as a result, always paid special attention to the hardships of the common man.

This interest in those who Virginia Woolf named “the obscure” (“Lives of the Obscure”—a category that can be made to include migrant subjects and women, among many others—is particularly prominent in Phillips' biographical writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, as Yelin's article corroborates. Starting with the intriguing formal and thematic similarities between the Modernist agenda, especially Woolf's, and Phillips' writing practice, Yelin analyses three of Phillips' texts that testify to his ongoing attachment to the biographical genre and his expert combination of what Woolf calls “granite and rainbow” (“New Biography” 235)—that is, fact and fiction, historical truth and emotional truth. Yelin demonstrates that Phillips' novel *Dancing in the Dark* and his non-fiction book *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, as well as his essay entitled “Marvin Gaye,” do more than simply retrace the lives of public figures. Not only do the texts problematize crucial issues of representation that relate to the use of conflicting source materials and the “instability of identity categories” (116), they also confirm the revisionary potential of Phillips' biographical narratives which, like much of his work, strive toward a non-judgmental retrieval of unheard stories from the past. The fruitful dialogue that Yelin establishes between Woolf's and Phillips' visions of life-writing should alert us to the benefits of viewing his work,

and postcolonial literature in general, outside the usual “writing back” paradigm and putting it into non-confrontational conversation with so-called canonical literature. Even if such an approach might be seen as a reinforcement of the traditional European canon and by the same token a marginalization of the non-European texts with which Phillips’ work also engages, it is still worthwhile to examine his writing away from the counter-discursive, if only because this could provide a means of grasping his multiple literary allegiances as an author who is both outside and inside the Western canon. For example, it might be productive to bring together Phillips’ formal agenda with the interest in structure of a writer such as Henry James who, like Woolf, is not usually mentioned among Phillips’ influences. Similarly, the connections between Phillips’ lyricism and that of T. S. Eliot, referred to briefly in Yelin’s piece, are still to be fully explored.

Like Yelin, Ben Carrington concentrates on texts by Phillips that belong to different generic categories: his screenplay *Playing Away* (1987), which focuses on a cricket match between an English and a Caribbean team; several essays from *A New World Order* (2001) that deal with Phillips’ ambivalent attachment to Leeds United; and the section entitled “Made in Wales” from *Foreigners*, which provides a portrait of British-Guyanese boxer Randolph Turpin. Carrington’s article evinces that Phillips’ sportswriting, though often regarded as marginal and therefore neglected by critics, is vital to any attempt to understand his identity and development as a writer and an intellectual, a point that could also be made about Trinidadian C. L. R. James, to whom Carrington compares Phillips. By providing a unique insight into the complex interaction between race and class in British society, Carrington argues, sport, whether cricket, football, or boxing, is a fundamental constituent of Phillips’ political thought and a formative element in both his imaginary and the conceptions of home and diaspora developed in his fiction. In this regard, it may be interesting to note that one of Phillips’ first published pieces of fiction is titled “The Football Match.” The short story focuses on Winston, a Caribbean migrant to England who promises his six-year-old son Rupert they will attend a game but is prevented from following through when he is

asked to work overtime at the factory where he is employed. Father and son never attend the football match, which is thus another one of the “absent presences” in which Phillips specializes. Still, the story hints at the ambivalence of sport as a potential yet defective vehicle for intergenerational bonding within migrant families that could contribute to social inclusion but does not manage to do so. This is also the case in other texts by Phillips, such as *In the Falling Snow* (2009), in which father and son again fail to attend a match together, and *The Lost Child*, in which Tommy’s passion for football is a way to make up for the bullying he suffers but is also the indirect cause of his tragic death at the hands of Derek Evans, his mother’s boyfriend, who manages his budding football career.

The final four contributions to this special issue, unlike the previous ones, each address a single book by Phillips and view it through a specific methodological lens. These different frameworks can nevertheless be applied to other texts by Phillips and are therefore likely to inspire further analyses of his work along the lines pursued in these innovative case studies. Tunca’s article focuses on the first two sections of *Foreigners*, a biographical triptych also discussed, though less centrally, in Yelin’s and Carrington’s essays. Tunca’s perspective differs from the others’ in that she uses stylistic tools to carry out a close examination of the subtleties of Phillips’ narratives. Commentators almost unanimously recognize Phillips’ qualities as a stylist, but so far few scholars have conducted a detailed investigation into his writing techniques. As this article demonstrates, such an approach enhances our understanding of his writings by unveiling how they are ideologically encoded since, as Tunca argues, Phillips hides within them. By engaging with Phillips’ use of adjectives and his expression of modality in “Dr. Johnson’s Watch” and “Made in Wales,” Tunca’s piece unpacks the complexities of Phillips’ linguistic craftsmanship, even if, as Vahni Capildeo notes in her review of *Dancing in the Dark*, his use of language can be viewed as “plain” and “unadorned” (21), the expression of a refusal on his part to “write up” and “overwrite” (32). For all this apparent linguistic economy, Tunca illustrates how Phillips’ stylistic choices are instrumental to his larger project of exposing the failures of historiography. She also draws our

attention to the duty that befalls Phillips' readers to decode and unravel the intricacies of his seemingly underwritten prose. Stylistics can help us to do so and could be fruitfully applied to other texts by Phillips—for example, the Portobuffole narrative in *The Nature of Blood* which, like “Made in Wales,” reads on the surface like a straightforward tale but in fact conceals a mesh of various opinions.

While *Cambridge* (1991) would be an excellent object of stylistic analysis, Carine Mardorossian discusses it here through an ecocritical lens. This might initially seem paradoxical; indeed, Mardorossian points out that Phillips, unlike Caribbean writers such as Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott, does not explicitly engage with the environment. Why, then, employ a methodology that seems difficult to apply to Phillips' writing? As Mardorossian explains, not only does his novel deconstruct binarisms such as self/other and nature/culture, which are at the heart of any understanding of the environment, but it also exemplifies how the construction of nature relies on a process of othering similar to that used in constructions of race and gender. Going beyond the interconnectedness between human and non-human that has of late been at the centre of ecocritical preoccupations, Mardorossian explores how systems of differentiation go hand-in-hand with the construction of “humanity.” *Cambridge*, she argues, undermines such arbitrariness through the ability of Emily, a nineteenth-century Englishwoman who visits the Caribbean, to be sensitive to a landscape that is visibly other, while she is unable to feel for the human otherness represented by the black slaves around her. That Emily paradoxically regards the latter as inseparable from the surrounding wilderness, which she admires in spite of its otherness, provides depth to her character, which can therefore be viewed as more than just a bigot. The same could be said of the slave Cambridge in relation to his wife, Christiana, an obeah woman he also associates with the wild; his sensitivity to her non-human alterity compensates for his obnoxious cultural mimicry. The role of nature in Phillips' work could certainly be discussed in relation to some of his other texts, for example his characters' bond with the “Yorkshire Moor” in *The Lost Child*, a landscape which conveys the alterity encapsulated in the novel's northern English and Caribbean others.

A great part of Phillips' fictional work, whether novelistic or dramatic, relies on the juxtaposition of the life stories of different people who are separated by time, space, race, or gender, but whose experiences nevertheless mirror each other in often subtle ways. *In The Falling Snow* is one such text, and has so far been mostly analysed in terms of the relationships between three generations of black men within a family of Caribbean descent—Keith, the protagonist, his father Earl, and his mixed-race son Laurie. In her contribution, Samantha Reive Holland proposes an alternative, decentered reading based on Michael Rothberg's concept of "multidirectional memory," which involves bringing together apparently unrelated traumatic histories and which applies to the connections between black and Jewish people in Phillips' fiction. Reive Holland's reading concentrates not simply on the main cluster of characters but on their links with a set of minor figures in the novel. Rather than view the text through the prism of the African diaspora, her analysis centres on the troubling correspondences that exist between the fate of early West Indian immigrants to England, as embodied by Earl and his friend Ralph, and that of Eastern European newcomers, represented by Danuta and Rolf, two young people working in London and coming from Poland and Latvia, respectively. Keith is unable to empathize with the latter two because of a form of historical amnesia that leads him to perpetuate the power dynamics that victimized his father's generation; he is unable to recognize the commonalities between the experience of Eastern European migrants and that of his own migrant father. Yet the form of the novel, Reive Holland observes, suggests the possibility of a transnational perspective that allows a view of Englishness and multiculturalism that can encompass "modes of post-racial belonging" (210), goes beyond issues of blackness and whiteness, and makes collective memory possible in spite of the characters' inability to communicate successfully.

The last essay, which I co-authored with Evelyn O'Callaghan, deals with Phillips' most recent novel, *The Lost Child*. The text intertwines a prequel to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) that focuses on Heathcliff, the account of Brontë's last days, and a more recent narrative dealing with a dysfunctional, interracial family living in England during

the second half of the twentieth century. Interestingly, *The Lost Child* could be read using several of the lenses (biographical, gendered, heroic, linguistic, multidirectional memory, ecocritical) adopted in this issue, or through the theme of sports which is an index to its thematic and formal scope as well as the coherence that characterizes Phillips' oeuvre. Other thematic angles—including the family or mental illness—could also be used. Yet we interpret the novel through a complex network of intertextual connections that bind the many-stranded narrative to Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, of course, but also to Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), her short story "Let Them Call It Jazz," and Phillips' own work, in particular *Cambridge* as well as some of his essays. This web of literary relations, which brings together the north of England and the Caribbean, produces a form of kinship that compensates for the severe disjunctions that exist at the narrative level and reflect the dislocating experiences, in the context of the Black Atlantic, of the lost children of Empire, both black and white. Their stories, though missing from the historical archive, have haunted Phillips since the beginning of his career. As this issue demonstrates, he makes it his responsibility as a writer to rescue these narratives from the silence to which they have been condemned.

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