



**HAL**  
open science

## Repetition and Reckoning in Crossing tire River

Lanone Catherine

► **To cite this version:**

Lanone Catherine. Repetition and Reckoning in Crossing tire River. Cynos, 2016, Traversée d'une oeuvre : Crossing the river de Caryl Phillips, 32 (1), pp.57-71. hal-03148477

**HAL Id: hal-03148477**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03148477v1>**

Submitted on 9 Mar 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Repetition and Reckoning in *Crossing the River*

Catherine Lanone

*Université Paris 3 - Sorbonne*

As Yogita Goyal has it, « [e]mblematic of Phillips's refusal to be confined to national, racial, or gendered boundaries is the sheer scope of *Crossing the River* » (Goyal 216). Indeed, spanning across centuries, piecing together the lives of black men and women (Nash, Martha, Travis) but also of white characters (Joyce, Edward Williams, or James Hamilton), *Crossing the River* creates a compelling chorus of contrapuntal voices, exposing slavery and racism as a transnational, trans-period process. Like the metatextual « tributary » that « stumbles and swims out in all directions to meet the sea » (Phillips 1), the novel plays on intertextual sources to create sections that flow into each other and connect across centuries – beginning in eighteenth-century Africa but unfolding, via the Middle Passage, in the United States (roughly at the time of the Civil War) and in World-War-Two England. One of the tropes used by Caryl Phillips to map the « black Atlantic »<sup>1</sup> and allow the reader to cross such temporal and geographic rivers, is simply repetition. To study the way in which Phillips reconfigures narratives of the past through powerful repetition and displacement, we shall first see how he uses rhapsodic repetition to create a threshold for his versions of « unspeakable things unspoken »<sup>2</sup>; then we shall look at two instances of the way in which the writer engages with archival memory, in order to create shock tactics and revisit or « rememory »<sup>3</sup> blind spots of the past, problematizing repetition and reckoning.

Repetition, in the guise of rhetorical epanalepsis, shapes the opening section of the novel. Indeed, the prelude opens and closes with the same ternary rhythm: « A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I

---

<sup>1</sup> By the « black Atlantic », Paul Gilroy refers to a culture that is not to be considered as specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but as diasporic and hybrid.

<sup>2</sup> We are referring to one of Toni Morrison's key concepts. See her article entitled « Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature » (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison uses this term in *Beloved* to evoke remembering memories.

sold my children » (Phillips 1, 2). While the first occurrence suggests the dire necessity brought by cause and effect (hunger led to the « jettisoning » of the children, which was a desperate and foolish deed), the second occurrence sounds like an echoing lament, a kind of incantation<sup>4</sup>. It rounds off the paragraph, confirming the sense of fracture, precluding reparation: « There is no return » (2). At the same time, repetition is a kind of return, which suggests that the deed which cannot be undone is a traumatic rupture, an event « not assimilated, or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it » (Caruth 5). Repetition is a structural device in this brief prelude, from the anaphoric distribution of « to » (there is no return « To a land », « To a people », « To a father », 2), of images (the « weary paths », the « hopeful roots » [1]<sup>5</sup>), of numbers (the anaphoric two hundred and fifty years spent waiting and listening, or the three children, two boys and a girl). Such echoes help to characterize the voice of the father « consumed with guilt » (2), an allegory of Africa and of the active involvement of Africans in the slave trade; these echoes also create slippage, shifting to myth or magic realism: the father has listened to the metatextual chorus of voices (the « many-tongued » alliterative « chorus of a common memory ») for two hundred and fifty years, roughly the span of the diegesis, while the children he seeks to reclaim, whose names sound like an incantation (« My Nash. My Martha. My Travis », 1), are about to become the protagonists of the following sections, across different periods of time. Here the powerful voice of the father, with its images, its clipped sentences, is endowed with a rhythm of its own (the voice too is « a drum [pounding] across the water », 2). But this voice is also enmeshed with utterances in italics that build up a different kind of repetition (which may not be deciphered at first reading). For the prelude is peppered with sentences that reappear towards the end of the eponymous section, « Crossing the river »:

Returned across the bar with the yawl, and prayed a while in the  
factory chapel. Stood beneath the white-washed walls of the

---

<sup>4</sup> This sentence also recurs in the epilogue of the novel, with a slight variation: « A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my beloved children » (237).

<sup>5</sup> The recurrent metaphors of trees and seeds connect the three main narratives to these three children, presenting the diaspora, as Yogita Goyal puts it, as « something organic and violated, or rather, born out of the violation of something organic » (Goyal 217).

factory, waiting for the yawl to return and carry me back over the bar. Approached by a quiet fellow. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl. I believe my trade for this voyage has reached its conclusion. (124)

Quoted *verbatim* in italics in the prelude, those sentences from James Hamilton's log are also dislocated, since they are interpolated with the father's perspective (looking at the factory, the ship, sensing his children's eyes as they wonder why he has betrayed them). The transaction is signified by anadiplosis, another rhetorical figure based on repetition: « And then I approached. *Approached by a quiet fellow* » (1). The contrapuntal structure juxtaposes the father's reminiscence and the captain's written account, pitting a fragmented white narrative against an African voice; the proleptic entwining lays bare the novel's aim, tearing within white historical accounts the space for another reverse narrative, that of the « disremembered and unaccounted for », to borrow Toni Morrison's phrase in *Beloved* (Morrison 275). The accounts do not tally, and the moment of reckoning approaches, through the textual structure meant to arouse the reader's response.

Presenting the reader with a guilt-stricken voice that sounds personal, as the father pines for his lost children, this paradoxical beginning calls for a compelling mythical reading of the father as a representation of Africa's involvement in the slave-trade, which paves the way for the redistribution of the children's narratives across space and time. For Abigail Ward, « [s]lavery is the point of intersection of multiple histories » (Ward 3), and here Phillips multiplies those points of intersection across time and space, to present slavery as a transnational web of cause and consequence, spanning centuries. This narrative strategy forces the reader to go against the grain of expected readings; for instance, we are made to witness a reverse passage towards Africa and Liberia, rather than the expected Middle Passage towards the United States; similarly, Martha's journey west as a « pioneer » (74) recalls and parodies heroic tales of the conquest of the west and ends up in a dead-end, in the middle of nowhere. Most significantly, the text suddenly loops back upon itself in the central eponymous section. Indeed, just when the reader was beginning to think that he had grasped the method, and could predict that the next section was going to leap forward into the twentieth century (a method which is resumed in « Somewhere in England »), the section entitled « Crossing the River » suddenly leads back to an eighteenth-century slave ship, in a tale which repeats, as we

have seen, elements from the prelude, the moment posited as the origin of the series of journeys, the selling of the three « children », a moment which concludes rather than begins this section. Narrative strategy, here, aims to challenge the reader's response. The point is not simply to play on postmodern lack of closure and haphazard narrative method, but to create a compelling affect of disorientation, to force the reader to confront fragmentation and discontinuity. Reading must become a shared experience of rupture, seeking to approximate the slaves' own attempts to make sense of the systematic uprooting which forces them to change places, owners and conditions every time they are taken or sold. This sense of uprooting lies at the heart of Martha's section, when she runs away to avoid being forced to cross the river one more time. This is also at stake in the eponymous section « Crossing the River », where the narrative shows the preparations for the Middle Passage, and the frame of the log stresses book-keeping and computing, an « account » in both sense of the terms; such a terminology must prompt the reader to engage with, *a contrario*, the silenced experience of those trapped below deck. In *Saltwater Slavery*, Stephanie E. Smallwood recalls that the Eurocentric Atlantic trade was mapped in terms of duration, coordinates, and financial networks, whereas for the abducted chained Africans, the ship was a space of terror and the Atlantic crossing was not a coherent geographic entity, but « an experience of motion without discernible direction or destination » (Smallwood 122). The structure of Caryl Phillips's novel aims at reactivating the reader's mirror neurons as it were, to arouse empathy for broken lives but also to trigger a philosophical reflection and an ethical engagement with History.

This leads us to consider how Phillips engages with archive to repeat and displace significant echoes, by considering first the name of « Eliza » and then the replication of the log of the captain of a slaving ship. To begin with, the separation between mother and daughter is a familiar trope for broken families. In the second section of *Crossing the River*, Phillips portrays a mother whose connection with her daughter is severed when they are both sold. The child's bafflement and pain is expressed through the repetition of a word which encapsulates the emotional uniqueness of the link with a mother, a repetition which creates pathos since the talismanic word is helpless rather than performative: « 'Moma'. Eliza Mae whispers the word over and over again as if this were the only word she possessed. This one word. This word only » (Phillips 77). Here the repetition of the term « word » suggests the indelible scar of a moment which echoes throughout the

section. As Martha curls up to die in the doorway when the section opens, the name proleptically<sup>6</sup> returns: « As though her body was sliding carelessly towards a kind of sleep. Like when she lost Eliza. Moma. Moma » (74). The kind of sleep or numbing suggests a survivor's response to trauma, but also tropes separation as a kind of death. The word is also implied by the « Voices from the past » (79) that Martha keeps listening to and that the Hoffmans, her new owners, ask an evangelist preacher to exorcise, to no avail (note that the image echoes the prelude, where the father also listens for his lost children's voices, throughout the centuries).

Phillips draws upon several models here<sup>7</sup>. First, Martha's story echoes Clara Brown's lifelong quest for her daughter, and draws attention to unknown episodes scotomized by the mainstream mythic construct of the American journey west. Brown was a slave born in Virginia, then taken to Kentucky, where she married and had children, but the family was split when she was sold. She was freed at the age of 56; she worked as a cook, travelling to Kansas and then to Denver, Colorado (she was the first African American woman involved in the Colorado gold rush). She set up a laundry and slowly made profit, investing in mine claims and land, earning enough money to give generously to her community and begin searching for her daughter<sup>8</sup>. Whereas Clara Brown managed to find her daughter and granddaughter, an incredible feat, Phillips's Martha also travels west, cooks and washes clothes, but is granted no such comfort. Phillips switches from Eliza Jane

---

<sup>6</sup> This is both a prolepsis, since the reader has not witnessed the scene of separation yet, and a return, since chronologically this occurs long after the moment of separation, when Martha is approaching the end.

<sup>7</sup> Caryl Phillips also draws upon visual culture to subvert the myth of the heroic west. Thus the shooting of Chester displaces a common western scenario, recalling for instance Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*, where a forsaken Gary Cooper must face four killers, and waits for them as no one will help him. The film switches from anguish to romance as his bride Grace Kelly, a religious woman who shuns weapons, ends up killing a man to save him. In the novel, Martha is powerless to help Chester, she must serve food and wait helplessly until they kill her only remaining love.

<sup>8</sup> By that point, one of her daughters had died in infancy, she managed to find out that her husband and other daughter had died, while her son was lost. She therefore focused on finding her remaining daughter, Eliza Jane. After years of looking, travelling to Kentucky and dispatching letters, she finally located her daughter in Iowa and travelled there to meet her at the age of 82.

to Eliza Mae, recalling the modal « may », opening up and negating the realm of possibilities. In Martha's blurred thoughts as death comes near, the name of Eliza Mae recurs like an incantation, a spell that might make dreams come true.

Thus, in the novel, the journey west is construed as a fantasied quest to heal the traumatic wound of the past, but the novel explores the common plight of women, rather than the outstanding exception. The section resonates for the reader, since the name Eliza also functions as an allusion to the legendary run-away Eliza, who manages to escape from the slave owner by crossing the Ohio, leaping from block of ice to block ice, holding her baby child against her breast<sup>9</sup>, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery fiction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (the novel which, according to Abraham Lincoln, triggered the Civil War). In Phillips's novel, we also witness « a mother's struggle » (the title of the corresponding chapter in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Unlike Eliza, who can cross the river and keep her daughter, Martha may never breach the great geographic and temporal divide that separates her from her daughter, other than in her dreams. The journey is cold too, but instead of leaping on the ice, old arthritic Martha dies of exposure, of cold. Thus the title bristles with echoes, from the Biblical crossing of the Jordan river, Jimmy Cliff's song « Many Rivers to Cross », to Beecher Stowe's Eliza's great heroic moment; but in Martha's case being sent back « across the river » (80) by the Hoffmans means being doomed to violence, and the only river that she may cross in the end is the Styx, the river of death. The woman who helps her takes her in too late, the stove cannot be lit, and this merely allows to switch focalization, as the woman watches Martha's body and muses that she will have to invent a name so that she may be buried properly<sup>10</sup>, a gesture which ironically runs against

---

<sup>9</sup> In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the dashes mimic the difficult crossing, a graphic sign of each leap on a block of ice adrift: « The great piece of ice pitched and creaked as her weight came upon it. But she stayed there not a moment. With wild cries she leaped to another and still another—stumbling—leaping—slipping—springing up again! ».

<sup>10</sup> The woman herself remains anonymous, so that a mirror effect is created between the protagonist and the secondary character: « And the woman wondered who or what this woman was » (94).

Martha's decision that she will never be named again: « (Never.) Never again would she be renamed. (Never.) » (80)<sup>11</sup>.

If « West » rewrites the scenario of the journey west, the section entitled « Crossing the River » returns to the dire conditions of the slave trade. Neo-slave narratives must convey the pain inflicted upon each individual, while giving a sense of the staggering amount of men, women and children who were forcibly removed. *Crossing the River* must engage with historical archive and slave narratives<sup>12</sup>, and respond to influential literary models, such as Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. Indeed, Judith Misrahi-Barak calls *Crossing the River* a post-*Beloved*, transgeneric, dialogic Neo-slave narrative<sup>13</sup>. For Misrahi-Barak, *Beloved* almost put an end to the genre, with its powerful polyphonic evocation of Sethe, the mother who killed her baby-daughter to prevent her from returning to slavery. Let us briefly recall that in *Beloved*, the Middle Passage is evoked in an experimental poetic prose that is almost devoid of punctuation:

They are not crouching now we are they are floating on  
the water they break up the little hill and push it through I  
cannot find my pretty teeth I see the dark face that is going to  
smile at me it is my dark face that is going to smile at me the  
iron circle is around our neck she does not have sharp  
earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in the water  
with my face (212)

---

<sup>11</sup> Once again, in this whole paragraph, the ritual repetition of the word « never » conveys Martha's resilience, her inner strength (the brackets create pockets of resistance, of selfhood), but she is trapped in a racial system that leaves her no chance to win.

<sup>12</sup> Like all Neo-slave narratives, the novel also draws upon the historical archive, like Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography, or Olaudah Equiano's 1789 autobiography which evokes the Middle Passage and the shock of stench, the bodies lying in their vomit and their faeces, as well as force-feeding and flogging; Equiano also depicts their fear before the white men's strange faces, the nightmarish sense of cruelty towards black people, but also the captain's cruelty towards the white crew, as a sailor is flogged to death and tossed overboard.

<sup>13</sup> « African-American slavery writing was written specifically by African-American writers, in the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative. They became transnational and global, polyphonic, dialogic and transgeneric » (Misrahi-Barak).



The web of sensations conjures up the overcrowded space in transit between two worlds, and harps on the link between mother and daughter, which is severed when the mother falls into the water. The narrative creates an area of intensity<sup>14</sup>, the movement of the wave-tossed ship, the anguish of nameless faceless figures, are shaped by the rhythmic waves of prose. Thus the text de-individuates trauma through a hallucinatory account of the Middle Passage as a collective experience, connoting the sheer uncountable, as well as unaccountable, pain of the Middle Passage.

As a post-*Beloved* narrative, *Crossing the River* opts for a drastically different method; there is no Gothic haunting, and magic realism is limited to the prologue and epilogue, when the destitute father sells his children, triggering destinies that span centuries. But to approach the Middle Passage, Phillips chooses the unexpected perspective of the captain of a slave ship.

For Gilroy, the slave ship is a crucial chronotope:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. (Gilroy 4)

Here too the ship is a metonymy of the politics of the triangular slave-trade, as shown by the names of the ships (the *Duke of York*, the *Devon*, the *Halifax*, not to mention the misnamed *Charity*) but the Martha section did little to prepare the reader for the shift in focalization.

Indeed, as acknowledged in the brief note prefacing the novel, this section draws upon « John Newton's eighteenth-century *Journal of a Slave Trader* », relying on repetition to ventriloquize the white trader (the opening statement fends off accusations of plagiarism). For instance, the entry of « *Thursday, 20<sup>th</sup> May* » (Phillips 124) blends three entries that may be found in Newton's journal (for clarity's sake, I have underlined identical phrases by using bold type, while slight changes are signalled by italics):

---

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the section remains unanchored in any specific situation of enunciation since the « I » seems to correspond to *Beloved* but the mother who goes overboard is both Sethe and not Sethe, since she never jumped ship.

Sunday 26 May [...] **In the evening, by the favour of Providence, discovered a conspiracy among the men slaves to rise upon us**, but a few hours before it was to have been executed [...] this morning I've found **near 20 of them had broke their irons**. Are at work *securing* them.

Tuesday 28 May [...] Their plot was exceedingly well laid, and had they been let alone an hour longer, must have occasioned us a good deal of trouble and damage. I have reason to be thankful they did not make **attempts upon the coast** when we had often 7 or 8 of our best men out of the ship at a time and the rest busy. They still look very **gloomy and sullen** and have doubtless **mischief** in *their heads* if they could find every opportunity to vent it.

Thursday 13 June [...] This morning *buried a woman slave (No 47)*. **Know not what to say she died of for she has not been properly alive since she first came on board.** (Newton)

The slight changes often merely paraphrase the original text, drawing attention to the rhetoric which posits the slaves' rebellion as treacherous (« conspiracy »), dangerous (the attempt might well have succeeded) but also childish<sup>15</sup>: the « sullen » faces and the « heads full of mischief » (Phillips 124) hardly represent the men's despair at having been unable to free themselves, while the understatement (punishing the leaders) fails to convey the degree of pain brought by lashes. This example of repetition casts light on the politics of discourse, what Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, calls the white lies of myth-making. What Phillips borrows, and thereby exposes, is the rhetoric of denial that strips the trapped black people of agency, construing it as devious danger instead.

We may also note, in the aforementioned example, that Caryl Phillips systematically alters figures. The date is changed, and three women, rather than one, are thrown overboard; instead of « No 47 », they become « (Nos 71, 104, 109) » (Phillips 124). The device is recurrent: for instance, Newton's entry for the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, « Buryed a boy slave (No 86) of a flux » (Newton), becomes « Buried a boy slave (No. 189) of a flux » (Phillips 122).

---

<sup>15</sup> One may recall the adjective childish which Edward applies to Nash's repeated pleas for goods and money.

This slight revision functions as a symptom which points out the importance of figures in the journal. For the log offers an account, that is to say a systematic recording of numbers, from temperatures to tons of rice to prices in abstract « bars »<sup>16</sup> to human beings. Hamilton's tone reflects industrious efficiency, his only qualms being his own relative inexperience. What stands out, in Hamilton's log, is the cold factual dimension of the account, the sheer process of reckoning, of computing figures, as the log-book lists routine activities, such as negotiating with other captains, methodically adding extra space (the carpenter's work adds tiers below deck), loading the required supplies for the Atlantic crossing. The itemization of the numbers, adding and subtracting (because of the death-toll) to compose the « cargo », figures the unspeakable process of dehumanization at work. We are faced with the slave trade as business: Hamilton is warned that there must be no hatred, no feeling, only the commercial dimension of the transaction.

Paradoxically, Phillips chooses to also include in this section the letters written by Hamilton. The tone is entirely different, as Hamilton confesses that the trade cannot coincide with Christian beliefs (although the log mentions praying), and professes with gushing sentimentality that he is mocked by the other, more racy captains, because he insists on being faithful: « They say I am a slave<sup>17</sup> to a single woman » (Phillips 109). This may serve to make the captain more of a round character<sup>18</sup>, just as his longing to hear about his father makes him more vulnerable perhaps, implying a riddle or an abortive subplot switching to hatred, recalling Kurtz and *Heart of Darkness*. But such sentimental attachment contrasts sharply with the rape of a pregnant black woman by a crewmember (115), and the self-justification (Hamilton must be good because he faithfully worships the woman he loves, and only entered the trade to provide her with the standards of living she is used to) ironically rings hollow compared with the broken community of the hellish hull.

What Caryl Phillips explores here is what Scott Slovic calls psychic « numbing » (Slovic 5) (people may be moved by the plight of a single

---

<sup>16</sup> Bars represented an abstract amount used to evaluate the price of goods and slaves, measuring up the amount of goods (beads, weapons, or Indian cloth) that should be given in exchange for each purchase of man, woman or child.

<sup>17</sup> Note Phillips's ironic use of the word as a sentimental cliché, a symptom of denial.

<sup>18</sup> We may recall that he is modelled upon John Newton, who repented and was the author of the popular hymn, *Amazing Grace*.

person, but compassion dissolves when faced with uncountable numbers of victims), or what Hannah Arendt defines as the « banality of evil ». This is a phrase that must not be misconstrued. Hannah Arendt does not mean that cruelty and torture are banal (neither does Phillips, hence the repetition of the image of the thumbscrew at the end of the book). Arendt coined the term while reflecting upon the nature of evil, and human beings' ability to inflict suffering, while she covered the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She challenged Manichean or pathological readings of Nazism, by considering genocide as a matter of figures, name withdrawal, dehumanization, and routine: the failure of Eichmann and the ordinary people who applied orders was a failure to think.

Replicating and displacing the journal of Newton evidences and denounces the banality of evil, the routine organization of dehumanization: by adopting the terminology of bookkeeping, the text turns the journal into an account, taking on, to use Mark David Kaufman's words, « a connotation of testimony, reportage, and confession—in short, a narrative that audits the tropological underpinnings of racial discourse » (Kaufman). The pastiche of the white dominant narrative may well prove as chilling and as powerful a weapon of deconstruction as the emotional view from inside the hellish hull would be. Coming after Nash's and Martha's sections, the pastiche forces the reader to compute in his own mind what remains unsaid: the many months spent below deck by the first slaves between November and May; the abominable stench (evoked, *a contrario*, by the fact that the women's room is cleared and scraped, and that the ship is smoked with tar and tobacco); the death toll, through suicide or disease (it makes one wonder if the length of time spent loading is really worthwhile, since so many die before actual departure). The slave trader is in denial of humanity, his own as much as those of his so-called cargo.

This leads us back to the first section, in which a contrapuntal structure also pits a white man's experience against letters, this time the letters of Nash Williams, the former slave who has been sent back to Liberia. Chronology is disrupted, since most of the letters were taken by Edward's wife, and so failed to reach him, just as she prevented him from sending one of the only two letters he ever wrote back; they create an incomplete tale, an episodic account with temporal gaps, read (if at all) far too late. The section opens with the news of Nash's disappearance, but Nash is instantly defined, not so much by reminiscences, as by numbers, an instance of the colonial frame of mind: Nash has spent « seven difficult years in Liberia », « seven long years » (Phillips 7) and

may be deemed a successful experiment since he is responsible for « at least fifty of the successes » among the « two hundred heathens » (or less) « converted in almost twenty years » (7). The figures, however, instantly bely satisfaction (two hundred in twenty years can hardly be called a sweeping success, confirming the title of the section, « The Pagan Coast », impervious to the logic of cultural conquest) and the repetition of « seven », a symbolic figure with Biblical echoes, qualified by the adjectives « long » and « difficult », opens up a space for woe and hardship. The rhetoric begins to revert itself when Edward wishes to seek Nash, and finds it hard to convince the American Colonization Society that « this was not simply the sacrifice of one missionary » (12), whereas for the Society identity is denied by the logic of sacrifice: « the mysterious disappearance of a single settler was something they could reasonably expect to occur on a regular basis » (12). Individual life does not matter, neither does the « regular » repetition of this singular disappearance (which adds up to an impressive list of casualties, as Nash's letters later testify). But in this section, the white man meets his reckoning, as his initial version of events is smashed by an encounter with the Real, with conditions in Liberia.

The first section forces the white man to confront the reality lying beneath the discourse of repatriation. Edward is confronted with illness, poverty, destitution<sup>19</sup>. The text mimics his blindness (as when he wonders why Nash chose to live in such a hovel) but he also feels more and more uneasy at having sent so many of his former slaves to Liberia. Edward's failure (he wishes to retrieve traces of Nash's life to prove that his own life has been of some worth) and guilt are enhanced by his ultimately hollow voice: he strives to sing a hymn<sup>20</sup>, but his lips move soundlessly, so that the natives see in him a mad, degraded white man, more dispossessed than they are themselves.

Whereas Edward ends up without a voice, Nash may be given the last word in his letters. The letters reveal the complex negotiation of identity. Existence in Liberia is hard to define, and naming is once again a symptom of precarious lives. Though Nash is proud of his freedom, and proud of being called « Mr Williams » instead of « boy » (32-33), he is a

---

<sup>19</sup> The journey on the river has Conradian overtones. Disorientation is conveyed by a conceit that turns the mind into a maze: « his anguished mind questing in every conceivable direction, but forever stumbling into blind alleyways which proved swept clean of any meaning » (Phillips 58).

<sup>20</sup> There is no « Amazing Grace » here.

« white man » to the natives (32), that is to say, to use Homi Bhabha's words, a mimic man. The identity provided by the surname is questionable, since there are so many Williamses anyway (Galloway Williams and his wife and son, Ellis Thornton Williams, Solomon Williams, Madison Williams, etc...). The parodic family structure of slavery, where the master is construed as the father of the slaves, is transported to Africa, where it proves equally faulty. Edward fails to respond to the letters or to send any of the goods or the money that, over the years, might have saved the life of Nash or his first wife and son. The former slaves may be « seeds » scattered over Africa, but Edward never sends the actual seeds Nash calls for, and never grows the poor cured seeds Nash sends back. The transaction is barren and broken from the start.

The letters function as a « contact zone », in Marie Louise Pratt's sense of the word: « I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today » (Pratt 33). In the first illocutionary letters, Nash seeks the words that will please his « father », using the rhetoric of a dutiful slave/son, so that he may be rewarded with the things he asks for. He even ventriloquizes the master's voice, writing a speech for his fellow slaves, praising the teaching he has received as a fitting preparation, warning Edward to punish those who fail to abide by his orders. Pervaded with religious rhetoric, the letters become an imaginary contact zone, seeking to maintain contact with the father figure (and those left at home, the other blacks to whom he seeks to give news) while asserting belief in a religious community that connects him with America and promises redemption after death. This implies that Nash's body too becomes a contact zone. As a missionary, Nash must be the vehicle of Christianity. His body functions as a cultural frame, that must also negotiate disease, poverty, and new cultural demands. Gradually, as the years pass without response, Nash evolves, learns the local language, switches to polygamy. His letters become a more hybrid space, signalling transculturation, that is to say for Pratt the process by which marginal groups select from materials transmitted by the dominant group. Longing for America (at one point he begs to return) yet adapting, plagued by physical weakness, Nash dies, but leaves a last letter which repeatedly orders Edward not to come, though the letter has been given to Madison, and so presumably was meant to reach him. The last letter renounces the call for help and

rejects Edward in turn. The biblical leitmotif<sup>21</sup> rings out in Nash's letters (« Why have you forsaken me? » 42) but in the end, Edward too has been abandoned.

Thus the novel engages with the ethics of vulnerability. Throughout the novel, the web of repetitions enhances the return of leitmotifs, the painful cry of the children forsaken by the father, an ironic echo of the Christian crucifixion. But in the epilogue, though pain reverberates (with the return of the thumbscrew found in Hamilton's journal, for instance, and intratextual enmeshing that picks up the haunting moment of buying the three children), other echoes mingle in a rhythmical weaving of time, place and themes, from Martin Luther King to Ecology. The repetition of the word « jazz » signals the musical quality of this improvised coda, mingling Samba, Calypso, drums, saxophone, a polyphonic music score that allows a final line of flight. In the end, the term « loved » opens up hope within pain, through repetition and musical variation:

A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my beloved children. *Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl.* But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved. (237)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ARENDDT, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem : the Banality of Evil*. New York : Viking, 1963.
- BARTHES, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paris : Seuil, 1957.
- BEECHER STOWE, Harriet. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852, <http://www.online-literature.com/stowe/uncletom/>, accessed November 3, 2016.
- BHABHA, Homi. « Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence in Colonial Discourse ». *The Location of Culture*. New York : Routledge, 1994 : 85-92.
- CARUTH, Cathy (ed.). *Trauma : Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- CONRAD, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Londres : Penguin, 2007.
- GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* Londres : Verso, 1993.

---

<sup>21</sup> See for instance the echo in Martha's thoughts, « *Father, why hast thou forsaken me?* » (73).

- GOYAL, Yogita. *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- KAUFMAN, Mark David. « Coming to Accounts: Fraud and Muckraking in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* ». *European Journal of American Studies* 8:1 (2013), <https://ejas.revues.org/10148>, accessed November 3, 2016.
- MISRAHI-BARAK, Judith. « Post-Beloved Writing: Review, Revitalize, Recalculate ». *Black Studies Papers* 1.1 (2014) : 37–55. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-00103775-17>, accessed November 3, 2016.
- MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved* (1987). New York : Plume, 1988.
- . « Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature ». *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (1989) : 1-34.
- NEWTON, John. *Journal of a Slave Trader*. [http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/slavery/middle\\_passage/john\\_newton.aspx](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/slavery/middle_passage/john_newton.aspx), accessed November 3, 2016.
- PHILLIPS, Caryl. *Crossing the River* (1993). Londres : Vintage Books, 2006.
- PRATT, Marie-Louis. « Arts of the Contact Zone ». *Profession*. New York : Modern Language Association Press, 1991 : 33-40.
- SLOVIC, Scott and Paul SLOVIC. *Numbers and Nerves*. Corvallis : Oregon State University Press, 2015.
- SMALLWOOD, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery*. Harvard : Harvard University Press, 2007.
- STOWE, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). <http://www.online-literature.com/stowe/uncletom/>, accessed November 3, 2016.
- WARD, Abigail. *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar: Representations of Slavery*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2011.

