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► To cite this version:

Oriana Palusci. Crossing the River: New Stories to be Told. *Cycnos*, 2016, Traversée d'une oeuvre : Crossing the River de Caryl Phillips, 32 (1), pp.141-156. hal-03148709

HAL Id: hal-03148709

<https://hal.science/hal-03148709>

Submitted on 9 Mar 2021

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Crossing the River: New Stories to be Told

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« I am the product of a diaspora »
(Phillips in Sharpe 30)

I would like to start this paper with the words of the custodian of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, who in 2000 guided me through the local exhibitions on the slave trade and on black history: « The Atlantic Ocean is the biggest burial ground of Africans on earth ». At the entrance of the Wright Museum, the light filtering from the huge cupola illuminates a ceramic map on the floor, the centre of which is occupied by the Atlantic Ocean, the grave of millions of unknown West African people as well as the unknown “river” of diasporic trauma. Paul Gilroy has aptly named it the « Black Atlantic ». This is one of the main African American Museums in USA. Recently President Barack Obama has opened the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture in Washington. On that occasion, he stated: « It is a glorious story, the one that’s told here. It is complicated and it is messy and it is full of contradictions, as all great stories are, as Shakespeare is, as Scripture is. And it’s a story that perhaps needs to be told now more than ever » (Obama 2016). Caryl Phillips would agree. In an interview with Jenny Sharpe, Phillips underlines that his main preoccupation – maybe also reacting to the huge success of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* – is the question of a peculiar British literary/cultural attitude, denying or demeaning « a black British sense of identity ». He does not belong to the American scene, although he has been living in the United States for many years, but wants to be put back into his black British roots:

The longer I stay here in the States, the more I realize how underdeveloped the black British sense of identity is. And rather than making me feel that I want to sit down and write a novel in the black American tradition, it makes me bullishly determined to do something about overturning the insular view the British have of themselves as a nation. (Sharpe 29)

Abigail Ward shares Phillips's view and expands it insisting on the fact that «most received historical accounts have downplayed, or ignored completely, Britain's role as a slave nation. [...] If slavery is remembered, the focus falls on the abolitionists, so Britain's role in this past is remembered only in terms of ending, rather than perpetuating, the trade » (Ward 1). Taken to England by his parents as an infant from Saint Kitts – one of the Leeward Islands which are part of the Lesser Antilles chain in the Caribbean, now a sovereign state but with a long history of British rule and of slavery – educated in Leeds then in Oxford, teaching in the United States, the author of *Crossing the River* investigates the black diaspora in his novels and essays, delving deep into Britain's role in the slave trade.

The main icon of the slave trade is the diagram of the *Brookes* slave ship, prepared in 1787 for the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson, which depicted the appalling conditions suffered by the enslaved people in the hull of the vessel. Hundreds of black bodies of men, women and children lay chained in rows on the lower deck and poop deck. The Triangular Trade was the route of the *Brookes* sailing from Liverpool, via West Africa (to load the slave cargo) to Jamaica and back to Europe. The Middle Passage from West Africa to the Caribbean and the Atlantic shores of America constituted the traumatic, unspeakable experience in which identities, languages, beliefs were annihilated. As Fatim Boutros aptly explains, «[f]or the enslaved Africans, [the slave ship] was a spatial deprivation that led to a state of deterritorialization so extreme that it prevented acts of reterritorialization » (xviii). Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson have called the slave ship icon the first and foremost «afrotrope», a euphemism they coined «as a way of referring to those recurrent visual forms that have emerged within and become central to the formation of African diasporic culture and identity in the modern era » (Copeland and Thompson 2016).

In recent times, the slave ship afrotrope has increasingly been used in the visual arts, chiefly by African and African American artists. Suffice here to mention the installation «La Bouche du Roi» by the Benin artist Romuald Hazoumé, presented for the bicentenary of the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. «“The Mouth of the King” is taken from the name of the estuary of the Mono River and refers to the tidal exchange between the sea and the land that takes place there » (White 2007), from which African slaves were transported to the

Caribbean and the Americas. On display at the British Museum in 2007, 304 « masks » made from petrol cans, each with an open mouth, eyes and a nose, mirrored on the one hand the *Brookes* slave ship, yet on the other hand gave individual dignity to the slaves they represented. According to Hazoumé, slavery has not disappeared and that is why he establishes a strong link between the past and the present of his country. Caryl Phillips has achieved something similar in *Crossing the River*, not only by devoting one of the sections of his novel to the journey towards Africa of a slave ship, but especially by telling the story of those who had no name, only an identification number.

Postcolonial Studies, Diaspora Studies, Trauma Studies have been investigating Black History and Cultures for decades, digging up stories and texts while uprooting obstinate stereotypical images. I would also like to quote another interrelated field of studies, that is Memory Studies, dwelling on a specific concept, that of « Postmemory », a term first used by Marianne Hirsch in reference to the children of Holocaust survivors and the memories of their parents (1992-93) and further developed in her later work, especially in her essay « The Generation of Postmemory » (2008). In the latter she defines the term as following:

Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch 2008: 106-107)

I would like to expand the concept to include the thousands and thousands of African children who were dislocated during the Middle Passage, and like Hirsch, consider postmemory « as a structure of inter-

and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience » (Hirsch 2008: 106), although we should also take into consideration the radical erasure – or the total forgetting – of names, languages, spiritual rites. In his novel *Crossing the River* Caryl Phillips investigates the collective trauma of slavery, and more specifically the postmemory of slavery, a 250-year process of mass genocide and diaspora: «In total some one and a half million Africans died on board, to be cast overboard, their numbers (never their names) simply struck from the ship's logs like so much lost cargo » (Walvin 72-73). Indeed, in section III of his 1993 novel, aptly called *Crossing the River*, Phillips adopts the genre of the captain's logbook, where slaves are literally reduced to numbers in the counting system of colonial exploitation and profit. Besides, as Gilroy underlines, the « rapport with death emerges continually in the literature and expressive cultures of the black Atlantic » (198). Indeed, loss and death pervade the narratives of the lost children of Africa. Phillips's main characters – Nash, Martha, Travis – all suffer and die, enduring an unfulfilled life in order to serve a white master (Nash), the white dream of the American pioneers going West (Martha), the American government sending its black, still discriminated citizens to fight and die in Europe during World War II (Travis). Phillips gives voice to those black characters that are weighed down by the heavy spiritual burden of slavery; they must be remembered in order to historically recapture the roots of identity buried in the past and give a different meaning to the history of the British nation.

Crossing the River introduces the reader to a complex, fragmented, unstable narrative pattern in which conflicting voices – and also times, geographical spaces, historical reconstructions – face each other and clash on the page. The title itself, *Crossing the River*, suggests different events. The river to be crossed is obviously an imagined, unknown, Atlantic Ocean, the huge stage of the Transatlantic Trade, and it is not by chance if the four narrative actions structuring the novel deal with Africa (I), America (II), England (IV) and, of course the mouth of a river off the coast of West Africa (III), in an endless crossing of waters. Maybe there is an indirect underlying reference to the rivers of death and life associated with black history summed up by the universal voice, the « I » speaking to all African Americans in « The Negro Speaks of Rivers » by the African American poet Langston Hughes, published in 1921. In his thirteen-line poem in free verse, Hughes creates an immortal mystic union between black people and

rivers, tracing their movement through ages from the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi. Slavery and racism are condemned in the refrain, repeated twice: « My soul has grown deep like the rivers ». Similarly, *Crossing the River* adopts the point of view of silenced black slaves, forced to sail on a mysterious ocean, experienced as a huge river, as the watery world that has radically changed their lives. Reminiscent of Hughes's « negro I », Phillips adopts the cosmic voice of a disembodied father speaking in the prologue and in the epilogue – the anguished voice of Africa itself – covering 250 years of slave trade or, in the narrative shifts of the novel, a time span of 200 years, from 1752 to the end of World War II and up to 1963. It tells of betrayals and suffering, but also of transformation and cultural contamination, leading the main characters, the children of Africa, towards a new uneasy, sometimes elusive consciousness of their human predicament. Phillips's characters reshape their personal stories in new political entities (Liberia), or in faraway lands (United States, England), where they try to start a new life, recapture a sense of freedom and, maybe, of individual fulfilment, although, after getting rid of the prison of the slave ship and of the prison of slavery itself, they have to face a final challenge: the limitations and deceptions of the English language and culture they had to learn and adopt with its ideological burden of religious and economic presuppositions.

In order to mould a resonating story out of denied narratives, to reposition the tales of the African diaspora, Phillips overtly and subtly threads together layer after layer of intertextual references, for instance slave narratives such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, first published in 1789, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) and Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). These works belong to the canon of Black British and American literature, yet they are also saturated by the language of the masters, constituting a moralising providential, positive narrative in which sorrows and atrocities are justified by a higher goal, the journey towards the Christian faith, bringing spiritual peace and forgiveness. Not so in Phillips's novel, where as we see in « The Pagan Coast », the Gospel does not bring redemption, nor does it in the final section, where a provincial England under the German bombs is marked by moral emptiness, selfishness, indifference.

The only text that Phillips overtly acknowledges in *Crossing the River* is John Newton's *Journal of a Slave Trader*, written in the 1750s,

which he draws fully from. The novel also incorporates a series of echoes leading to a range of texts, among which the speech of the American President during the Civil War. In his Inaugural Address, delivered at the National Capitol on March 4, 1865, Lincoln declares that « the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk » (Lincoln 1865). If Lincoln's allusion to the 250 years of bondage is relevant in the prologue, in the epilogue, Martin Luther King's famous words, delivered on 28 August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial (Washington) are integrated in the body of the novel: « I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia... » (237).

Phillips has answered many questions in a number of interviews on his use of sources. Two observations seem to sum them up. One concerns his view on canonical history: « my way of subverting received history is to use historical documents, use first-person voices, digest what they're saying, and somehow rework them » (Sharpe 31). The other builds a tight link between the formal aspects of the novel and documentation: « It's a novel which is fragmentary in form and structure, polyphonic in its voices, which means that a lot of my reading and a lot of the people whose work I've enjoyed have made their way in » (Davison 22). The writer acts as an omnivorous reader, who cuts and pastes bits and pieces of black and white stories and dips them into a new chemical milieu, assembling not a *pastiche*, but narratives of fracture, a postmodern representation of a black postmemory mould *in fieri*. On the whole, in *Crossing the River* Phillips raises a textual scaffolding encompassing a novel structure in order to question textbook history.

The prologue and epilogue function as strong framing devices, giving thematic coherence and unity to the novel, in which the long time span of slavery – two hundred and fifty years – turns into a sort of emotional litany. Its meaning is empowered in the key sentence which haunts the novel: « I sold my children » (1). Usually, in English, the verb « to sell » requires a direct object, which can be an inanimate object or an animal, but not a person. Besides, the first person I, the disembodied father, insists on the possessive adjective “my”. What have been sold are individuals: « (two boys and a girl) »: « My Nash. My Martha. My Travis » (1), brothers and sisters, human beings with family ties and feelings, not chattels. However, the brief prologue is in a certain sense « contaminated » by the intrusion of scattered sentences in italics similar to notes out of tune, breaking the sorrowful mourning chant, sentences which are literally taken from James Hamilton's slave

ship log that the reader will contextualise in the pages of section III. In this manner, Phillips inserts the verb « to buy » – « Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl » – introducing the slave owner in « the chorus of a common memory » (1). The river that shapes their existence belongs, first of all, to the African landscape; it is the symbol of the fluidity and unpredictability of life, an African river, leading to the great currents of the ocean. As Linebaugh and Rediker explain, « the planetary currents of the North Atlantic are circular. Europeans pass by Africa to the Caribbean and then to North America » (2000: 1). It is the river of slaves that are caught in the currents generated by the politics and economics of European slavery.

Phillips's shifting language avoids the triviality of generalizations or simplifications. It is true, the master's voice prevails in the four episodes: it is embodied by Edward Williams' Christian worldview, idealising the free African state of Liberia with no consideration for his « black » son, dispatched there as a missionary and agent of civilisation, by the master ruling the life of Martha in the second section, by the captain's greedy eye on his slave cargo in the third episode, by the background of a largely white lower middle and working class England during World War II in the last section. Phillips does not judge his characters. What he strives to do is make contradictions surface on the waters of history, deeply challenging the reader's assumptions on slavery and anti-slavery, racism, freedom, right and wrong. In a quite different historical context (the United States immediately before and after the Civil War), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) tackles the same issues, although we can detect in *Beloved* stronger ties with the literary tradition of the American supernatural romance.

The four interlaced, yet separate sections of *Crossing the River* adopt a number of literary genres and techniques in order to weave a tapestry about the postmemory of slavery which dives deep into the past of British distorted history and surfaces in the present, like the currents of a river in its seasonal flow. If the novel is divided into four sections, each of them occupies a different textual space, their length is not the same, the shorter sections are placed in the middle (II and III) of the book and their chronological (dis)order have a clear function in Phillips's novel as noted by the author: « It hasn't seemed right to write a novel about people whose lives are fractured and ruptured without trying to reflect some of that fracture and rupture in the narrative » (Schattelman 2001: 96).

The buying of the slaves and the loading of the slave cargo do not constitute the beginning of the narrative, as one would expect. Instead, Phillips offers the reader one loose huge canvass, which reminds us of those by the African American artist Romare Bearden, such as, for instance « Captivity and Resistance » (1976), centred around the 1839 rebellion on board the slave vessel *Amistad*. Besides, within each section, time jumps backwards and forwards according to the apparently unruly rhythm of the narration. It is interesting to remember that Phillips had already juxtaposed time spans of several centuries in his 1983 two-act play *The Shelter* (1984), based on the interracial encounter of a white British woman and a black man, in which Act One is set on an unknown desert island towards the end of the 18th century and Act Two, in Ladbroke Grove, the Notting hill area of London, some time in the 1950s. Two further observations connect *The Shelter* to *Crossing the River*. The first is related to Act One, where HER (a white lady from England) and HIM (a black free man) have been shipwrecked together on the same shore. The male protagonist states to the hateful woman the following: « I am 200 years old now, and getting older » (Phillips 2014: 66). The second is the choice setting, that is England (as we see in the final section of *Crossing the River*), where Irene, a lower class Londoner, is expecting a baby by a Caribbean railway worker.

Personal letters, in one case the captain's logbook, dated entries as if taken from a diary, a web of personal subjective impressions all create the solid foundation of the ground chosen for the representation of the ties between father and son, mother and daughter and surrogate parental figures in the interplay between black and white characters. Bénédicte Ledent has already dealt with « the centrality of the trope of kinship » (127) in *Crossing the River*. What I would like to add is that Phillips stages uncertain and ambiguous relationships originated by the African diaspora, which are re-enforced by his choice of unexpected marginal characters in order to look « at history from a different angle – through the prism of people who have nominally been written out of it, or have been viewed as the losers or victims in a particular historical storm » (Jaggi 26). Phillips also engages a debate on the question of names, of the naming process (basically chosen by slave owners), names which mark and reveal their condition, their lack of a fixed identity as slaves undergo a name change once they switch master. The children of the African diaspora have been named according to the rules of slavery and ownership, creating mock family ties. Moreover, Phillips scatters a web of names in the novel, with a series of cross references

linking the different time spans together, as a list of the names used in the novel will reveal. Suffice it to mention one example: Nash Williams' wife from Georgia is called Sally Travis.

In *Crossing the River*, economy, politics and Christianity on the one hand, and kinship and domesticity, on the other hand, are in perpetual conflict and battle in the masters' explanations and self-justifications and are re-enforced by the English language employed by the (former) slaves. Let us analyse the four narratives centred upon four different moments of the African diaspora.

I. The Pagan Coast

The river allows the educated (former) slave Nash Williams, to travel towards the interior of Liberia, sailing back from the United States to the land of his « forefathers ». Section I brings into play the conventions and styles of both early 19th-century British travel literature and the epistolary novel. The language is very formal, not spontaneous or natural, a language which is unable to portray the contradictory effects of the « civilizing » enterprise. What is at odds is Phillips's choice of the two protagonists: a white father (master) and a black son (slave). Even if Nash Williams is « free », in Edward's discourse he is – Phillips underlines – a *former* slave and he the *former* master. The historical-ideological bond is linguistically strong, binding as the iron chains with which the slaves were tied down in the ship's hold. *Former* is repeated insistently, yet the very repetition of the adjective denounces the odd collocation with *slave* and *master*, nouns which ideologically invade and pollute the pages. After all, Nash's surname – Williams – does not mean that he is his son, but rather that Edward « owns » him.

Nash Williams is a “mimic man” (in Naipaul's meaning of the phrase [Naipaul 1967]), who imitates his master's world order, cultural perspective, religion, language. « I am *Mr Williams* » (33). He even calls one of his sons Edward in the hope he might emulate his white « father ». He also reproduces the master's life style, adopts his Christian ethics, while rejecting an « original » culture he knows nothing about. Nash Williams' five letters are sound proof of how he has been (generously) educated in the guise of a Christian son, who obeys and is grateful to his benefactor. In this section the root and motor of everything is Christianity. Phillips stages the collapse of Christian Providence, questioning previous black writings which trusted the providential voyage towards a Christian salvation. Edward Williams has

taught the son-like slave a false, mendacious worldview. As a matter of fact, in search of Nash in the interior of Africa, Edward discovers the inconceivable: Nash's « going native ». In his final letter the former slave does relinquish his old affections, and morphs into a grotesque Conradian Kurtz-like figure.

II. West

The literary genre displayed in section II, set in the second half of the 19th century in America, is the Western, the tales of the American pioneers. However, the point of view is that of the coloreds and especially that of the former slave Martha Randolph. Phillips comments in an interview on his intention in the choice of such a character, giving consistency to a black old lady, as a missing voice in pioneer narratives:

[...] it would have been so much easier to have written about a black guy – a cowboy – which is what I wanted to do originally. But it just struck me that there wasn't really any first-person documentary material I could draw on for a black woman in the nineteenth century. There was plenty of stuff for black guys. But it struck me that I'd never seen a film in which there was a black person on one of those wagons heading west, let alone a black woman. A lot of photographs of frontier towns contain women who are obviously cooking and the cleaning and the laundry and what have you in the forts and towns all across the West. So that's why I wanted to write about the American frontier from the perspective of a black woman. (Sharpe 34)

The inclusion of Martha's story in Phillips's narrative structure destabilizes the reader. If in section I Phillips deals with the voyage back to Africa, from west to east, here the story deals with the West, and embraces the American Dream of success. Moreover, if previously Phillips had investigated the father/slave-son relationship, he now chooses a black mother/daughter relationship to speak of the bitter consequences of slavery in the gendered perspective of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Strangely enough, the two sections together, implying a somewhat chronological order, delineate divergent albeit complementary stories of the postmemory of slavery.

The aftermaths of slavery have literally destroyed the humble protagonist's mind, haunted by the nightmare of the separation of her family during a slave auction. They have taken away her beloved ones,

yet not her memory of the cruel act staged at the auction market, where the one word that resonates is 'Moma':

My Eliza Mae holds on to me, but it will be of no avail. She will be a prime purchase. And on her own she stands a better chance of a fine family. I want to tell her this, to encourage her to let go, but I have not the heart. I look on. The auctioneer cries to the heavens. A band strikes up. A troupe of minstrels begins to dance. Soon the bidding will begin. 'Moma.' Eliza Mae whispers the word over and over again, as though this were the only word she possessed. This one word. This word only. (77)

Martha and Eliza Mae can be seen as the black reworking of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne and Pearl mother-daughter relationship in *The Scarlet Letter*, but they also hint at the anguished tortured love chaining Sethe to her murdered little girl in Toni Morrison's romance.

The *fil rouge* is the loss of Martha's daughter, Eliza Mae, who appears in her dreams, the traumatic dreams of a mother who imagines a decent future for her young unprotected child in order to overcome the thoughts of a hopeless destiny for her, that of a slave fit for old and new masters. For Martha's story, Phillips once again avoids the chronological sequence of events, and chooses complex narrative switches from third-person narration to first-person, inserting now and then the illiterate protagonist's African American speech: « Don't nobody own me know » (81).

Martha's pioneer story does not lead to success, but to physical and psychological suffering, loneliness and death. Martha is the only one of the three lost children evoked by the father-figure in the prologue, who owns a biblical name. In the New Testament, Martha appears more than once near Jesus, and embodies the female figure who, even if she complains, still trusts God. The sister of Mary and Lazarus, she accuses Jesus of her brother's death and witnesses Lazarus's rebirth. In *Crossing the River* Martha « could find no solace in religion, and was unable to sympathize with the sufferings of the son of God when set against her own private misery » (79). There is no resurrection for Martha, nor for her daughter.

The so-called American dream happens to be a nightmare for both coloreds (black Martha and her friends) and Indians, joined together in the same colonial project of dislocation and annihilation. Indeed, stories

of the American frontier do not usually include the point of view of coloreds or Indians, thus Phillips turns upside down the pioneer's voyage of hope emphasising the role of colored people washed away by the tides of American white history. See, for instance, the encounter of the black pioneers with the Indians: « We saw Indians, and I felt some sympathy with them, but the Indian bands kept their distance and watched, choosing not to make anything of their encounters with the dark white men » (91). As Phillips's linguistic invention « *dark white men* » makes clear, the colored troops of Leavenworth behave like white soldiers once in uniform, proud to parade Indian scalps. They too collaborate in the annihilation of a people.

Ironically enough, the dying Martha, helped in her final night by a charitable white woman, falls victim to a final process of « obedience ». The old black unreligious woman must die a Christian, and be renamed once again: « They would have to choose a name for her if she was going to receive a Christian burial » (94). Her flight from slavery has not set her free from the tentacles of compassionate white people. Martha's desperate cry when she flees from her master – « Never again » –, reiterated more than once, remains unheard. In the Denver streets packed with snow, Martha will be renamed once again, deleting her story forever.

III. Crossing the River

This section is characterised by the resort to the subgenre of the sea travel journal in the form of the captain's logbook and to love letters. The fragmentary entries of the slave ship along the coast of West Africa are related to the weather, navigational notes, to the life on board the *Duke of York*, the encounter with other ships, the purchase of slaves, seen as cargo according to a precise economic outlook. Figures abound, connected to the cargo of goods and the numbering of slaves. Set in August 1752, it works as a memory capsule, as a memento to the future. As already mentioned, Newton's *Journal* is the literary source, yet Phillips subtly juxtaposes two conflicting narratives in his portrait of a Janus-like figure: James Hamilton the young slave dealer (the ruthless author of the logbook) and the family man (in his passionate letters to his wife). The logbook is characterised by the concision and the terseness of the entries, in which the highly specialised language of ships is intertwined with the essential and unemotional language related to the selling, buying and death of slaves. Age, height, gender, physical appearance are correlated to monetary gain. The white gentleman does

not mention his « trade » in his letters to his wife, he is just worried when a certain Mr Ellis, a slave trader, infuses doubts about the true activities of his father, a former sea-captain. Once again Phillips denounces the hypocrisy behind Hamilton's double morality: the Christian values highlighted in the two letters to his wife and the « natural » conception of slaves as non-human. For Hamilton, business is business, and commerce is, in any case, superior to the Christian faith piously practised at home. The writer also denounces the artificiality of a language that is false and hides the ideological assumptions feeding the British slave trade.

IV. Somewhere in England

Set in England during the troubled years from 1936 to 1945, with an addendum in 1963, this very long section follows the conventions of the war novel in the shape of entries in the diary of a Yorkshire woman, formulated through a realistic, dry, harsh language. Time shifts, guided by the indication of month and year, takes the reader back and forth in the narration of events. The protagonist, Joyce, is not black, although she considers herself an outsider (129). Through the life of an outcast, who explains the difficult relationship with her mother (a Christian fanatic) and with the men she is engaged with, the author presents a vision of the war from the bottom of the social ladder, a debased and brutal vision of England, bitterly questioning the idea of a united heroic country. « That silly brummie bugger Chamberlain's dead » (176); Churchill is « a fat bastard » and a « stuck-up pig » (164). Phillips debunks the rhetoric of pre-war times and of war in the description of the details of Joyce's petty daily life, of her abortion, after being seduced by a married theatre actor, of the murder of her friend Sandra, who was unfaithful to her absent soldier husband, of her life with Len, a mean individual who had not enrolled because of health problems and who goes to prison for trafficking in the black market. This section disparages British victory, and suggests that the white powerful nations of Europe are going to destroy themselves after conquering the world. It is in this context that Phillips continues his narrative of diaspora, when the colored soldiers (Yanks) appear in the English countryside. Phillips unsettles the reader who was expecting to hear the voice of the third lost child, that is Travis, a character who remains in the background and dies on the battlefield, and whose scraps of story are told from Joyce's perspective. Phillips uses Joyce as a mediator to make the Transatlantic Trade come full circle: from West Africa to America and back to

England. Now the former slaves help out the previous colonisers and slave holders. But race still matters both in war-time Britain and in the United States, thus Travis is beaten up by his American comrades for consorting with a white woman, while Joyce and Travis, the parents of a black baby, « wouldn't be allowed » (225) to live in the States together as racial promiscuity was still forbidden. Joyce, once a widow, is forced to give her son in adoption. Eighteen years later, the encounter of the white mother with her black son closes the section, suggesting a form of racial reconciliation, the « sinking of hopeful roots into difficult soil » (2).

To conclude, Caryl Phillips explores the linguistic and formal strategies challenging the master's voice from the inside. The supporting structure of his novel is based on the effort to unmask a series of narratives by critically exploiting the literary voices associated with a master narrative: the epic, the providential journey, the travel account, as well as « values » such as heroism, male supremacy, and race relations which are evaluated and found faulty. Crossing the river of words develops into a linguistic act not so much of open rebellion, but of mediation, of re-interpretation. The revisited historical past does not produce a grand narrative, but the fragmentation of tales and voices, defined by the English literary and cultural tradition, yet striving to find new ways of expressing one's own feelings and experiences in a « foreign » language, which, just because it challenges old stable patterns has now become a distinctive way of storytelling. In the epilogue, sentences in italics are not drawn just from Hamilton's logbook, as in the prologue, but from the narratives of the three lost children, with the tesserae put in a linear order, to which other fragments about diasporic trauma are added, forming a « many-tongued chorus which continues to swell » (237).

The worldwide view of the mythical African father, searching everywhere for the signs of diasporic acts of resistance, does not acknowledge the birth of a new order, but the unfettering of the old language, finally embracing new rhythms, new human experiences, new stories to be told.

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