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# « Only then, if I listen carefully »: The Sounding(s) of Countermodernity in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*

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« . . . some of the most eloquent and politically powerful writing is actually whispered. » (Ward 636)

## Introduction

Both published in 1993, Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* have been noted for their apparent similarities in the interrogation of the black diaspora and the memory of slavery as a repository for linking the present to the past. Indeed, Gilroy's famous injunction that black expressive culture arising from the black diaspora is the « slave sublime » (37) and his emphasis on « black musical expression » and « expressive counterculture » (36, 38) find a resonant echo in Phillips's framing of the novel. The phrase « many-tongued chorus » (1, 237) repeated in both the prologue and the epilogue of *Crossing the River* syncopates with black expressive culture such as jazz music and the black « beat. » However, despite these similarities, I would argue that *Crossing the River* does not necessarily equate the memory of slavery with black race *per se* as in *The Black Atlantic*, and moreover, does not privilege black music over other forms of testimonies, elliptical fragments and muted voices of those who suffered and resisted against slavery and colonialism.

In order to conceptualize the myriad sounds and utterances, including music, emanating from the historical experience of slavery and colonialism in *Crossing the River*, I would like to borrow and extend Houston Baker Jr.'s notion of African American « sounds » and « sounding. » In his well-known book *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Baker Jr. argues that the black vernacular with its own rhetorical structure carries a distinctive African American « sound, » and posits W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, calling it a « cultural performance » (58), as the quintessential African American

text that attempts to recuperate the sounds of the slaves. Baker Jr. attempts to resuscitate a specifically African American « sound » from his analysis of Du Bois's use of « Sorrow Songs » in order to resurrect a genealogy of a black modernist tradition. It might seem counterintuitive to use this term that obviously has a strong nationalist connotation. Phillips's *Crossing the River* in its broad stroke of delineating 250 years of black diaspora connecting American slavery, the British slave trade and World War II, of course transcends and rejects nationalist ideology in defining the black experience. But I think this term is useful for two reasons. The word « sounding » rather than « black expressive culture » is more inclusive to not only refer to black music but also to voices and utterances rooted in black history and the black diaspora. Moreover, the word « sounding » also has an implied meaning of resistance to « Western verbal arrangement » (Baker Jr. 60)<sup>1</sup>. The term « sounding, » is thus used in this paper to refer to the voices and musical sounds embedded in the history of slavery and colonialism that resist the colonial discourse, without a specific identitarian attachment to the 'black' 'race.' Phillips imagines and enlarges the scope of the black diaspora to include even white characters such as Joyce who becomes part of the black diasporan history through empathy and testimonies of such « soundings ».

This paper examines these moments of historical « soundings » in *Crossing the River* to argue that the text articulates countermodernity through the memories, fragments, and the voices of those who witnessed the history and legacy of slavery and colonialism. I am largely reliant on Gilroy's formulation of « counterculture of modernity » in my theorization of countermodernity in Phillips's text. Gilroy writes: « [T]ime has come for the primal history of modernity to be reconstructed from the slaves' points of view » (55). For Gilroy, excavating the memories of slavery provides an alternative story of enlightenment and a challenge to modernity. Gilroy revises « what Zygmunt Bauman has called a distinctive counterculture of modernity » (36) by including slavery – and thereby de-privileging the Holocaust – and argues that

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<sup>1</sup> Brent Edwards's formulation of « *decalage* » emphasizes the articulation and disarticulation of the untranslatability between black Africans and African Americans to refer to the complexity of the African Diaspora. I use the word « sounding » not to identify a particularly 'black' sound, but sounds associated with slavery and colonialism. See Edwards (13-15) for a more detailed theorization of the word « *decalage* ».

slave memory proffers a «redemptive critique» and a «distinct interpretation of modernity» (71). While my analysis of the soundings of countermodernity in *Crossing the River* owes much to Gilroy's work, there are crucial differences. I claim that Phillips's text does not privilege music and is more hybrid in its non-identitarian approach to the agents of the black diaspora. As I have briefly explained, Phillips's text does not confine an alternative interpretation of modernity only to «the slaves' points of view» but includes the views of those, regardless of race, who have empathized with and attempted to give testimonies of slave history and its legacy of colonialism. Also, Phillips's text is more invested in the entanglement of enlightenment in slavery and colonialism and a critique of modernity that extends to the postcolonial moment. By specifically making connections among specific nodal points of jarring historical events with a striking enlightenment ideology thrusting forward towards so-called «progress» – Liberian repatriation, territorial expansion towards the West before and after the Civil War in the US, the British slave trade and finally World War II – *Crossing the River* historicizes the black diaspora for a politicized present. The text reveals that slavery and racial terror were internal to American and European Enlightenment with its attendant ties to colonial ventures, and shows how Western «progress» from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 20<sup>th</sup> century is deeply embedded in the enslavement and marginalization of blacks. But more importantly, through a textual explication of various moments of «sounding (s)» of countermodernity, I elucidate how *Crossing the River* imagines the diaspora and the colonial past in order to arrive at a critique of the postcolonial present, with a political commitment to making the history of slavery relevant in the present. It is not the purpose of this paper to locate a romanticized diaspora and claim a «feeling» of redemptive critique of the black slave past that embodies countermodernity in *Crossing the River*, but to argue for concrete claims to a politicized present, moving beyond Gilroy's privileging of music and the memory of the «slave sublime.»

## **II. The Politics of the 'Black Diaspora'<sup>2</sup>**

Before delving into a close reading of the text, a brief discussion of how previous critical works have staked out the politics of the black diaspora or «the black Atlantic» in *Crossing the River* will clarify how

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I use the phrase 'black diaspora' rather than African Diaspora, to emphasize the political nuance.

this paper contributes to a black diasporan reading of *Crossing the River* through the conceptualization of « soundings of countermodernity. » As already noted, the rather astonishingly coinciding similarities between Gilroy's seminal text and Phillips's novel have been the source of fascination for many critics. Had there been a time lag between the publication of the two texts, one might have been almost tempted to say that *Crossing the River* with Captain Hamilton's ship sailing the « black Atlantic, » as the central motif that binds the other narratives, is literally a novelistic rendition of Gilroy's ship representing cross-cultural, transnational and international hybridities. Referring to such obviously overlapping thematics and concerns, Yogita Goyal writes, « Phillips's narratives of diaspora are remarkably similar in orientation to the theories of Paul Gilroy » (7). Timothy Bewes, in a more sardonic tone, agrees with Goyal: « The British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips seems like a gift for readers and critics interested in the theme of the black 'diaspora' in contemporary literature, or the closely associated concept of the 'black Atlantic,' deriving from the works of the cultural critic and theoretician Paul Gilroy » (33).

Suffice to say, these two critics, for very different reasons, have vigorously attacked the black diasporan tendencies in these texts. Goyal expresses disdain for *Crossing the River*'s « universalizing the experiences of diaspora » and its « privileg[ing] the experience and perspectives of white subjects » (7). Bewes, on the other hand, debunks the usefulness of the concept of the 'black diaspora' altogether announcing in rather absolute terms that the « 'diaspora,' 'the black Atlantic,' and even 'postcoloniality' are not the only ways to comprehend the works of Caryl Phillips and they may not be the best » (34). In a nutshell, Goyal criticizes *Crossing the River* for de-racing the « African Diaspora »<sup>3</sup> (translation: not black enough), while Bewes scorns the concept of black diaspora and history altogether in a wholesale measure (translation: too black). In mapping out the current critical discussions surrounding the relationship between the black diaspora and *Crossing the River*, other critics such as Gail Low and Benedicte Ledent have noted the redemptive possibilities of the black diaspora vis-à-vis these dismissive evaluations.

I would like to make it clear at the outset that in arguing for the « soundings of countermodernity » as voices and utterances connected to

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<sup>3</sup> Goyal uses the phrase « African Diaspora » instead of « black diaspora » to emphasize the connections to the African continent.

the history of slavery and the black diaspora, I am unequivocally claiming that the black diasporan ethos in *Crossing the River* clearly makes ethical connections to the past. In fact, I am profoundly concerned about the political implications of the kind of theoretical claims made by a critic like Bewes. By privileging « form » over content, this kind of reading erases any historical or ethical accountability of the text or the critic for that matter, and in doing so, dismisses any meaningful ruminations on the historiography of novelistic narratives. It also subsumes colonialism and slavery into the « materiality » (Bewes 36) of the text. As for Goyal's concerns, criticizing *Crossing the River* for its generosity to the white « perpetrators » is misreading the text through a narrow lens of political correctness.

In this regard, I would like to point out that I also am in disagreement with those critics (Julien, Bewes) who praise *Crossing the River* as being generous to the white characters and blurring the lines between the « perpetrator and victim of colonialism » (Bewes 49). Critics like Goyal worry about 'de-racing' the 'black diaspora' precisely because many (white) critics have argued that *Crossing the River* is ambivalent towards white characters. I am not interested in playing the blame game here, but it should be made clear that while *Crossing the River* does move towards an inclusive and « shifting, flexible and invariably anti-essentialist » (Goyal 5) black diaspora in the melding of racial and cultural hybridities, this does not mean that the text does not impart historical accountability to the colonizers like Edward Williams and Captain Hamilton.

My critical approach is also different from those critics who see a redemptive black diaspora in *Crossing the River* in a celebratory note. The epilogue, as poetically eloquent and uplifting as it may be, does not give a neat closure or a « feeling » of redemption in the voices of those scattered around the globe. It does not allow a cathartic redemption but calls for a politicized present. In this context, David Scott's provocative claim that the « tragedy of colonial enlightenment » (15) brings us to consider « what present it is that the past was being reimagined *for* » (2), sheds light on the ethical dimensions of delineating the « many-tongued chorus » in *Crossing the River*. I would argue that, diverging from Gilroy's model of positing the « ship » as a symbol of countermodernity, the 'sounding(s) of countermodernity' in *Crossing the River* present a 'felt connection' between the past and the present and the colonial and postcolonial histories of 250 years, by juxtaposing the four disparate moments of significant historical moments in Western history. The past

imagined in the *Crossing the River* is not contained within a reified 'African Diaspora' but intricately connected to the postcolonial 'present.' As Sadiya Hartman notes, « Then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead » (759). If the history of slavery is an « unfinished business » (Joannou 195) we must ask what kind of present we want to construct as a collective community, to slightly rephrase Scott.

### III. “Many-tongues chorus”: the sounding(s) of countermodernity

*Crossing the River* is structurally complex. The novel is framed by the father's voice that inaugurates the story in the prologue, expanding to encompass all of the other voices in the epilogue where the « many-tongued chorus » is syncopated into merging with the « sounding(s) » of the black diaspora. Framed within the prologue and the epilogue are the voices, utterances and stifled muffles embedded in and counterpoised by historical events that purported to advance Western liberal enlightenment. These sounds, utterances and voices articulate the soundings of countermodernity, challenging and deconstructing enlightenment thinking and « progress, » and western liberalism.

In order to understand how the text makes intricately wrought and sustained connections between the different layers of past in Europe, Africa and the United States and a politicized present, it is essential to examine the prologue and epilogue in detail. The epilogue is indeed a repetition of the prologue, but with important changes. While there are repeated phrases that impart consistency to the overall arc of the novel, the epilogue is an expanded variation of the prologue with significant differences. The prologue begins with a father's « remember[ing] » (1) of selling off his children. As the father reflects back on the source of his guilt, he confesses to the readers that he has painfully attempted to listen to the fleeting sounds of the children he has sold off, and the moment of this « shameful intercourse » (1) overlaps with the slave trader's words in italics whose identity is not yet known to the readers. The opening merely narrates in the father's voice the painful act of « soil[ing] » his « hands » « in exchange » (1). This « shameful » act sets off the recurrent haunting of « the chorus of a common memory » (1).

In the epilogue, the initial act of selling off the children echoes back to the prologue and constitutes the core of the narrative, but the children's voices – among which Joyce's name, not mentioned in the prologue, is claimed for the first time – merge with the black diasporan voices all over the world. First, the father claims not only « My Nash, My

Martha, My Travis » but also a white woman « Joyce » (236) as his child, embracing a white character whose story of witnessing Travis' travails makes it possible for her to be claimed as part of the black diaspora. In fact, in the epilogue, the father puts Joyce's name ahead of the others— « But my Joyce, and my other children » (235), and implies that Joyce's ability to listen to Travis and to narrate an otherwise obscure and suppressed voice of a marginalized black soldier's story is what encloses her within the circle of the black diaspora: « For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To my Nash. My Martha. My Travis. *Joyce. That was all he said. Just, Joyce. I could see now the gap in the middle of his teeth. At the bottom. And then he reached out and pulled me towards him* » (236). Travis's voice faithfully transcribed by Joyce who was always careful to not allude to Travis's race, as a sign of humility and protective measure, gives her the right to be claimed as one of the father's 'African' children. Joyce's rather unusual way of identifying Travis by referring to the missing bottom tooth, humorously mocks the society's insistence on using 'race' as a major signifier of marking one's identity.

The voices of the children expand into the sounds of those whose lives have been touched by the history of slavery. These voices, enmeshed in the black beat – « drum beating », « pounding », « voices hurt », « haunting voices », « reggae rhythms of rebellion and revolution » (235-236) are equated as the sounding (s) of the « survivors » in the cities and the ghettos of the former colonies of Europe and the Americas: « Brooklyn, » « Sao Paulo, » « Santo Domingo, » « Oakland, » « Charleston, » « Paris, » « Harlem, » « Georgia, » « Trinidad, » « Rio ». These « enduring cities » (235) and their colonial legacies still linger into the present. The father also confesses to a strange obligation to accept the « insist[ance] » of « those who lever pints of ale in the pubs of London » and « salutations from those who submit to (what the French call) neurotic inter-racial urges in the boulevards of Paris » (235). This reference to the white colonizers in the heart of the colonial metropolises, London and Paris, insinuates that the history of black diaspora is intimately connected to the heart of the empire, and the postcolonial present.

Punctuated in between the stories of « survivors » in these « enduring cities » are specific references to historical protests, rebellions and uprisings against Western imperialism: Muhammed Ali's protest against Vietnam (« Man, I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong »), the leader of Haitian revolution calling out for struggle (« Brothers and

Friends. I am Toussaint L'Ouverture ») and Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 speech in March on Washington (« I have a dream ») (236). These moments of historical upheavals syncopate in jazz rhythm with the music of Miles Davis (« Sketches of Spain in Harlem »), Marvin Gaye (« Mercy, Mercy, Me. (The Ecology.) »), The Supremes (« Baby, baby. Where did our love go »), and finally, an essay collection of James Baldwin (« Nobody Knows My Name ») (236-237) who pointedly claimed the black beat as the living voice of those who suffered through slavery. The accumulative effect of these historical events and black « soundings » merging into the « swelling » of « many-tongued chorus » is not merely locating black music and expressive culture as the source of redemptive critique voicing countermodernity, but alerting the readers to participate in transforming history in a politicized present.

The epilogue, in effect, imbues the voices of those who bore witness to slavery and colonialism with the black syncopated beat, of jazz music. The soundings of the children's voices blending in with the black beat ask the readers to listen to the traces of the elliptical past like the fragments of the « melancholic lamentations » (124) that Captain Hamilton mentions on his slave ship. However, the « swelling » of the « many-tongued chorus of common memory » produces discomfort and disturbance, rather than redemption and comfort. Even when the father hopes that « on the far banks » they were « loved, » (235) it is love filled with suffering and pain, as the father repeats the line « Only if they panic will they break their wrists and ankles against Captain Hamilton's instruments » (237), almost as a refrain. These soundings of countermodernity do not articulate redemption for the readers but implicate the readers who are able to listen – like Joyce, in the legacy of slavery.

In between this rather nuanced and complex frame of the black diaspora recalling Western colonial history and the postcolonial present are the four seemingly disparate stories. All four parts have different narrative structures – Nash's letters alternating with Edward's narrative, Martha's stream of consciousness sliding through the past and the present and the future, Hamilton's journal logs and Joyce's diary entries – but share similarities in having an important historical event that frames that particular story: Nash's feverish letters are written in the context of the Liberian repatriation, Martha's traumatic memories of her separation from her daughter and husband interrupt the present during the US territorial expansion towards the West after the Civil War, the muted voices of the enslaved on the slave ship are faintly heard during

Hamilton's mission as a British slave trader and Joyce's observations of her taunted relationship with her mother, her abusive husband, and the black soldiers in a small Yorkshire village take place against the background of British intervention during World War II. It is notable that only Captain Hamilton's story follows a chronological linear temporality through journal logs, compared to the other narratives where the voices, utterances and memories of Nash, Martha, the slaves on board and Travis (via Joyce) oscillate between many layers of the past, constantly spilling into the present moment. The narrative structure itself, by locating Hamilton's chronological ordering of the journal, « Crossing the River » as its centerpiece prompts a critique of modernity as a linear progress, continually disrupted by the voices of those characters whose lives are touched by the history of slavery and colonialism.

Simultaneously, in each story, these « soundings, » or testimonies of slavery and colonial history are confronted by various white characters (Edwards, the white woman who with a detached emotion looks in on Martha and Captain Hamilton) that ultimately fail to listen to and empathize with the « Other. » Joyce's story that takes up the bulk of the novel is the only story in which the white character succeeds in the feat of empathy. And it is Joyce's voice that critiques the racism of the US and the frivolity of World War II for people like Joyce and Travis who are merely pawns in the war: « He [Churchill] called it the people's victory, but we all knew it was his » (220). The text seems to suggest that « only then, if you listen closely » like Joyce, the reader is able to grasp the « sounding (s) » of countermodernity. »

« Crossing the River » based on John Newton's journals is deemed an objective recording of the Captain's observations of the cruel slave trade. However, when read closely, Hamilton is not always collected and not without any hesitation or qualms about his own involvement in the slave trade. One troubling factor is the presence of his father hovering over the trip. Bequeathed with the same vocation as his father, Hamilton is troubled by what really happened to his father at his last hour, asking « a certain Mr Ellis » (118) for answers. Hamilton does, in these moments, reveal certain anxieties about the legitimacy of the transatlantic trade, but for some reason, this « Mr Ellis » « parries [his] inquiries » (118), and Hamilton never finds out what happened to his father. Hamilton does not pursue the causes for his underlying anxieties and instead concludes that « my father's heart must surely have hardened on his final fateful voyage » (119), deciding not to go further.

A more telling moment comes later in the entries, when Captain Hamilton, after having successfully completed his projected purchases, leaves the readers with his last entry as he « lost sight of Africa »: « At dawn brought the ill-humoured slaves upon deck, but the air is so sharp they cannot endure, neither to wash nor to dance. They huddle together, and sing their melancholy lamentations » (124). This passage is striking for several reasons. « Crossing the River » is filled with the voyage logs mostly devoid of emotions and feelings compared to the ardent love letters Captain Hamilton sends to his wife, but this last entry comes closest for Captain Hamilton to empathizing with the slaves. He goes so far as to explain the reasons why it is impossible for the slaves « to wash nor to dance » from the point of view of the slaves, rather than simply observing the fact that on that particular day, they refused to do what they were wont to do. Instead, they « sing their melancholy lamentations, » and in this act of (passive) listening, Captain Hamilton, however fleetingly and slightly, comes closest to imagining what the slaves might be feeling. Unfortunately, Captain Hamilton fails – or it might be more accurate to say that he has barely begun – to decipher the meaning of the « melancholy lamentations ». What makes his failure more poignant is the fact that this last entry comes on the heels of a slave insurrection that consequently fails, recorded in the previous entry the day before. « In the evening, by the favour of Providence, discovered a conspiracy among the men slaves to rise upon us. Near 30 of them had broke their irons. . . They appeared gloomy and sullen, their heads full of mischief » (124). The « melancholy lamentations » may signal profound despair and also resistance against the white slave traders and an affirmation of the slaves' humanity, but Hamilton ultimately fails to see what these « soundings » may signify because he fails to empathize with the slaves till the very end.

This passage also recalls Edward Williams's complete failure to understand the meaning of his beloved Nash's recalcitrance and death in Liberia in « The Pagan Coast ». Nash's letters to his master/father Edward constitute the bulk of this section, and they recount his endeavors to realize the goals of « The American Colonization Society » to « remov[e] a cause of increasing social stress » for America and to « civilize[d] » « Africa » « by the return of her descendants » (9). Nash's gradual loss of faith in the Christianizing mission is revealed in the « sounding » of Nash's anguish in « going native » and his utter despair. Edward's narrative is told from his own point of view, and we only hear

Nash's despairing « sounding (s) » through his letters that never reach Edward.

Edward's determination to impose his will on Madison to take him to where Nash is, regardless of Madison's warning, reminds the readers of the tyranny of the slave masters, but takes on even more of an ironic tone, since Edward prides himself on being a benevolent master and even took the step of using the « American Colonization Society » « to divest himself of the burden, or at least some part of the burden, of being a slave-owner, a title which ran contrary to his Christian beliefs » (14-5). When he sets sail, the text mentions that Edward « listened through the planks to the moaning of his fellow passengers, a parcel of Louisiana blacks headed for the coast » (14) echoing Hamilton's slaves' moaning, but Edward is utterly unresponsive to these sounds.

Edward's inability to listen to the enslaved or understand Nash is foregrounded especially in the ending where the point of view of the narrative abruptly shifts from Edward's to those of the natives who have been completely objectified thus far in Edward's pursuit of reaching Nash's residence outside of Monrovia. After Edward is confronted with the incomprehensible and is repulsed to the core of his being, Edward finally admits to himself « that he was ill-equipped to disguise his true feelings of disgust in the midst of this specter of peopled desolation » (69). Not knowing what to do when even Madison does not respond to his request for consolation, Edward resorts to « a hymn, in order that he might calm his beleaguered mind » (69). Ironically, unlike the slaves' « melancholy lamentations, » « no sound » emerges from his lips.

The native stared at him, and watched as the white man's lips formed the words, but no sound was heard. Edward continued to *sing* his hymn. [...] Their hearts began to swell with the pity that one feels for a fellow being who has lost both his way and his sense of purpose. This strange old white man. (69-70)

In contrast to Edwards' own deaf ears and hardened heart against the reality of Africa and his inability to understand the failure of the mission of Christianizing Liberia, the text shifts to the « pity » that the natives « feels for a fellow being », underlining Edward's failure, and anticipating Captain Hamilton's failure as well. This surprising narrative shift functions to emphasize the white man's lack of empathy and incapacity to listen to the « sounding (s) of countermodernity, » because he is so immersed in the righteousness of his own benevolence in

extending « freedom » to his own slave and the righteousness of the mission of ‘enlightenment’ in Liberia.

The most powerful « sounding » of countermodernity emerges in « West » through the voice of a slave, Martha. This is the only section out of the four sections where the story is told entirely from the point of view of a black character. « [H]uddled in the doorway » (73) in the freezing cold of Colorado, Martha immediately recalls the children who « huddled together » (1) just before they were sold off to slavery in the prologue. In this sense, Martha embodies the collective interiority of the slaves. But more specifically, Martha’s voice is counterpoised against the Civil War and the Emancipation of the slaves and also the Westward expansion of the new nation. For or Martha whose daughter and husband were torn apart from her in a cruel slave auction, Emancipation does not amount to much:

For a week or so, all lines were forgotten as Dodge toasted the victors in liquor until most folks could no longer hold a glass. I was free now, but it was difficult to tell what difference being free was making to my life. I was just doing the same things like before, only I was more contented, not on account of no emancipation proclamation, but on account of my Chester. (84)

Her only comfort in her new found partner Chester again is ripped apart when jealous whites kill him. The only thing that sustains Martha is the hope of being reunited with her daughter Eliza Mae, and the traumatic memories of her young daughter torn away from her recur repeatedly to signal that for Martha, the only meaningful reality is the sound of her daughter’s voice, « Moma, Moma » (74, 77). What makes these painful memories of the past – of her daughter Eliza Mae and her husband Lucas and her subsequent life with Chester – more poignant is the fact that the present imaginings and hallucination of Martha’s reunion with her daughter are told in the present tense, while the white woman who attempts to provide some comfort to dying Martha has no understanding of Martha’s interiority. Martha says to herself « Can this woman not see that they abandoned me? » (75).

The section « West » critiques the so-called emancipation and westward expansion by playing on the word « West. » The only reason Martha is going westward is to escape from being once again hurled « across the river » to slavery (80) and with the hope of seeing her daughter again in California. California symbolizes freedom and

opportunity for those who believe in the dominant myth of the West, but for Martha « West » means something completely different. Through Martha's traumatic memories flashing back into the present, the narrative sets off the sounding(s) of countermodernity by using Martha's voice to criticize the ideology of freedom embedded in the westward expansion. As Martha muses, « she wondered if freedom was more important than love, and indeed if love was at all possible without somebody taking it from her » (86).

It is telling that Martha, like the African father who sold the children, « sometimes heard voices » (79). Martha gives testimony to her own suffering, but in telling her story she is also conveying the stories of those who died overboard during the transatlantic slave trade: « Voices from the past. Some she recognized. Some she did not. But, nevertheless, she listened » (79). In telling her own personal story of « [s]uch misery in one life » (85), Martha is voicing the interiority of the collective voice, like Beloved in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Her miseries are not just hers only, but all those who suffered the trauma of the dismemberment of families. When Martha hears voices, the Hoffmans attempt to Christianize her, but « 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). Martha thus on another level represents the voices of the slaves on board Captain Hamilton's ships who have no articulate voice but can only express their resistance and anger through their « melancholy lamentations » (124).

Standing in contrast to both Edward and Captain Hamilton's inability to listen to and empathize with the natives is a white woman, Joyce in « Somewhere in England. » Phillips has explained in several interviews that Joyce is the character who most resembles himself: « Joyce speaks a Yorkshire dialect I grew up speaking. But it's probably the most painful thing I have ever written » (Jaggi 29). From the very beginning, Joyce is associated with the act of « listening, » as she « heard the distant rumbling of their trucks » (129). Not only does she observe the everyday idiosyncrasies and hypocrisies of her contemporary English society, but also she is able to see through the racist hypocrisies of the American army. She astutely observes that the officer who came into her store to make excuses for the black soldiers is a « smug bugger » (145). Through Joyce's eyes, the text illuminates « the difference between the official stories and the evidence before [our] eyes » (165). Joyce adds, « And even when there was no evidence, I was learning what to disbelieve » (164). Joyce's ability to penetrate through the racist and

class hypocrisies is symbolically encapsulated in a scene where Joyce listens to the sounds of black music. In a still moment, Joyce is captivated by « the sound of their [black soldiers'] voices and their clapping hands » (146). In the portion of the text where racial markers are almost intentionally concealed by Joyce, the text makes it unmistakably clear that the music faintly heard from the church transcends time and space and somehow transports Joyce to an understanding of the pain and suffering of the slaves embodied in the music. This moment of empathy brings her into the circle of the diaspora as « my Joyce » (235).

Joyce's narrative ends with a meeting with Greer, « our son » (224), and like the African father who sold his children, Joyce expresses subdued grief and guilt in this reunion, but Greer appears as a hopeful figure of future, although tentative and uncertain. « 1963 », the chapter title, appears twice and the same story of this joyful but painful reunion with her son is told twice, much like the recurrent memories of Martha's daughter. The specified year also recalls the Emancipation Martha mentions, which took place 100 years before Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington speech in 1963. In this way, Joyce's tale reverberates the stories of the African father and Martha, giving testimonies to the legacy of slavery as a true daughter of the black diaspora.

#### IV. Conclusion

Caryl Phillips's novel politicizes the black diaspora echoing through almost three centuries by portraying both black and white characters involved in the history of slavery, implicating all who have witnessed and given testimonies to the legacy of slavery and colonialism. *Crossing the River* actively invites this reading through the concept of the black diaspora encapsulated in the « many-tongued chorus, » and I have argued that the sounding(s) of countermodernity can be heard in the delineation of the black diaspora in *Crossing the River*. Phillips's novel « whispers » to those readers willing to listen to the politicized present: « Only then, if one listens carefully » (2) are we able to hear the soundings of countermodernity, and understand that the postcolonial present is still very much the legacy of slavery and colonialism.

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