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# **Queering the Black Atlantic in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* and Jackie Kay's *Trumpet***

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This article is divided into two sections as it attempts to think about the ways in which it is possible to theorise, engage with or make visible the queer Black Atlantic in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), juxtaposing this reading with an engagement with Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998), to ask what associations or relations might be drawn between an acknowledged queer black Atlantic text and one not usually read as such. Firstly, it considers the influence of James Baldwin's writing and friendship in informing and inflecting Phillips's own investigation of slavery, of black diasporic identity, African-American identity and black male sexuality. It then explores developments of the concept of a black queer Atlantic in critical theory, asking how a subversive queer potentiality is depicted at the heart of slavery and plantation culture, as it intersects with spectacles of black suffering and desire for the black body, exploring how this critical work intersects with and informs contemporary writing and activism around race and sexuality. It asks how Phillips and others address or mobilise queer interventions into dominant ways of thinking the diaspora and raced interventions in queer thinking of the subject and desire, to question how they impact on the memorialising of and living in, the legacy of slavery in the present.

## **Part 1: In Baldwin's Wake**

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of too-long a memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. (Hartman 2007: 6)

I've been thinking a lot about wakes, on a personal and a larger Black global diaspora level. And that brought me to what I am

trying to articulate as a theory and praxis of the wake and wake work. (Sharpe 2016:15)

We weren't born woke. Something wakes us up. (DeRay McKesson 2016)

'Wake work' is necessary according to queer African American critic, Christina Sharpe in her new book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), speaking of African American life, and diasporic black life more generally. Speaking of the present political moment in the United States, she comments that her interest is not merely to outline and critique the non-black desire to consume, produce and stage spectacular and quotidian Black death. This is taken as read, « That is the ground we stand on. The space we enter into » (Terrefe 2). She offers an uncompromising assertion that, « I think that once one accepts that violence precedes and exceeds the Black, that it's not situational violence or conflict in a civil society – that the violence is the grammar that articulates the real continuum of black life – then one has to take up the question of what it means to suffer » (Terrefe 3). In response to a history and present of terror she offers the formulation of the wake as a different form of care: a ritual through which to enact grief and memory, mobilising the multivalent resonances of 'wake', wake as a vigil for the dead or dying, wake as coming into consciousness, and wakes as the track left by a ship on the surface of the water. Wake work she argues must oppose itself to other forms of care, « Care of the state...which is care as prison cell, as grave, as mental institution » (Sharpe 2016: 19).

In this discussion I want to argue that an engagement with Sharpe's multivalent conception of wake work very insightfully illuminates Caryl Phillips' writing project in his 1993 novel *Crossing the River*. I would argue that it can be read as a text that can be fruitfully situated in James Baldwin's wake. It is in Baldwin's wake because it follows the trail left behind his pioneering writing, echoing and memorialising the civil rights movement of the early 1960s and performing its own act of 'watching with the dead', both in his seeking out and tending to the lost histories of black diasporic men and women, and in the chorus of common memory. It stands as a text of self-awakening, one that is 'woken' by the discourses of black civil rights calling to a Caribbean British subject. By teasing out Phillips' connection to Baldwin I also want to ask how Phillips addresses the question of Baldwin's sexuality and how he

incorporates and explores the relation between sexuality and race in the Black diaspora.

The 1969 documentary film by pioneering Black British director Horace Ové, *Baldwin's Nigger*, which was filmed in the West Indian Centre in London, depicts James Baldwin in conversation with Dick Gregory discussing the civil rights movement at a public meeting. Baldwin opens with an anecdote about his first visit to London, and a conversation he has at the British Museum with a West Indian security guard who asks him where he was born. Baldwin describes how the guard is not pleased when he says he's from Harlem, and asks where he was born before that. To Baldwin's response that he doesn't know he asks, « Don't you care enough to find out? » Baldwin's reply sums up the condition of the African-American experience of the Black Atlantic diaspora as it is marked by the physical, geographical, psychic and social devastation of the Transatlantic slave trade, « I couldn't find out where it was because my entry into America is a bill of sale, and that stops you from going any further. At some point in our history I became Baldwin's Nigger » (Ové 1969). Baldwin succinctly distills the trauma of loss of origins, in his shocking unnamings of himself.

As Gerald David Naughton notes in his comparative reading of Baldwin and Phillips, Phillips sought out Baldwin's writing over and above that of Caribbean writers who were being read and published in Britain. He was in need of someone who could articulate « what it means to be a black person in an urban setting » (Naughton 2013: 113). Writers like V.S. Naipaul and George Lamming didn't in his view speak to his condition, or offer an urgent critical intervention into the politics of the streets, of what was happening in British cities at the time he was growing up. For Phillips, Baldwin's politically involved and passionate writing offers a different trajectory through which to come to an understanding of the condition of Black British life and subjectivity. The sea of voices in Phillips's chorus then is not just attempting to evoke a diverse set of references to diaspora but also Phillips excavating a particular black political history to lean on, something that can be a foundation for his own arrival in the UK in 1958. It forms part of a larger project to insist on a black European history that precedes the ways in which racist discourses of nation have sought to project black migration to Britain as a flood, as starting with the arrival of the ship *Empire Windrush*, where Britain is imagined as homogenous, undifferentiated and untouched by questions of race or racism. There is no Black British voice in this list of voices in the chorus of common memory for example

although Samuel Selvon's landmark novel about Caribbean migration to the UK, *The Lonely Londoners* was published in 1958. Indeed, James Baldwin is the only novelist cited.

Phillips's 1987 text, *The European Tribe*, which documents his tour around Europe taken three years earlier in 1984 contains within it the essay « Dinner at Jimmy's » where Phillips offers an account of his visit to the village near Nice, St. Paul de Vence, where James Baldwin lived at that time. For Phillips, as for many readers and the general public, Baldwin is a towering literary figure, and in the 1960s the foremost analyst of the race problem in the U.S. who has, when Phillips goes to visit, become an international celebrity, with his house on the tourist coach route. Phillips comments that Baldwin is also the first writer he gets to know properly, perhaps less by accident and more by design he chooses Baldwin over either Caribbean or Black British authors.

To some extent, Baldwin overwhelms, he is a Black, gay, ex-pat American writer and social critic, with a global reputation, « His face is highly distinctive, and he is recognized everywhere he goes. I have been in restaurants and bars with him in Britain, America and France, and in all three countries he has had to perform the task of shaking the quickly proffered hand or signing the book that has magically appeared as though from nowhere » (Phillips 1987: 39). But his relocation in Europe appears as a kind of trap or prison, oddly juxtaposed to the effect his writing has had on the politics of race in the United States. This makes him a dizzying mentor to Phillips, affirming a Black Atlantic friendship and admiration, and also a Black Atlantic dislocation that worries at Phillips. What is the link between race, sexuality and diaspora that Baldwin's seeming exile can tell of?

Whenever I arrive at the tall iron gates separating James Baldwin from the outside world, my mind begins to wander. The gates remind me of prison bars. I wonder if Baldwin has been in prison, or whether this exile, his homosexuality, or his very spacious home are different forms of imprisonment. My mind becomes supple, it feels strong and daring, and although the questions and thoughts Baldwin provokes are not always logical, I have always found that there is something positive and uplifting about his presence. Baldwin, unlike anybody else I have ever met, has this ability to kindle the imagination. (Phillips 1987: 39)

I use this example to offer a foundation for my reading of Phillip's text, and as a way to organise my discussion of *Crossing the River*, firstly, because in « Dinner at Jimmy's » Phillips notes Baldwin as a link to the literary and cultural voices of the African diaspora, here, Baldwin entertains Miles Davis for dinner, whilst Phillips conflicted about his position in relation to these two great figures, slips away to bed. But secondly because the complex mechanisms around Baldwin's own racial switching and white voicing of policed black sexuality seem to resonate with Phillips' specific stylistic choices, notably his adoption of female narrators, his voicing of white characters and his inclusion of veiled or obscured proto-queer voices. Thirdly, it is because insisting on Baldwin's voice as one of the « chorus of common memory » is important as the one identifiable Black queer voice embodying what Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley calls « the unstable confluence of race, nationality, sexuality and gender » (Tinsley 2008: 2).

In the chorus that frames the multiple narratives of the text, a few key voices are identified, either directly by name, or through a recognisable iconic phrase. Both Miles Davis and James Baldwin feature in this chorus side by side, preceded by the repeat phrase, « Jazz, Jazz » and followed by Martin Luther King's famous speech, « For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To the haunting voices. [...] Listened to voices hoping for: Freedom. Democracy. Singing: Baby, baby. Where did our love go? Samba. Calypso. Jazz. Jazz. Sketches of Spain in Harlem. In a Parisian bookstore a voice murmurs the words. Nobody knows my name » (Phillips 1983: 236-237). This group of references (Diana Ross and the Supremes, Miles Davies, James Baldwin and Rev. Martin Luther King jr.) places the voices of the U.S. civil rights era at the heart of the chorus offering a more concentrated set of references than other moments or places that are also included in the chorus. *Nobody Knows my Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, was published in July 1961, and contained amongst other things essays on Faulkner and Gide, as well as critical commentaries on the state of U.S. racial politics. The essay collection navigates sophisticatedly between questions of race and sexuality, and Baldwin's open investigation of the prejudices and persecution of 'homosexuals' is unavoidable. The titular essay being an account of Baldwin's journey to the Southern U.S. States. Its inclusion in the chorus, and the choice of this title over others, is particularly appropriate to the politics of naming in the brutal history of forced incarceration that was transatlantic slavery but also resonates with the intersections of Baldwin's queered, raced, diasporic, expatriate identity.

In « James Baldwin, Expatriation, Homosexual Panic and Man's Estate », Mae G. Henderson comments on how this dynamic manifests itself in Baldwin's work. She argues that,

In James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), geographical expatriation and literary masquerade, or "racial expatriation," combine to provide a space for the articulation of the homosexual dilemma within the context of postwar American culture. She argues that in some respects, Baldwin's own geographical expatriation found its literary counterpart in what might be regarded as the racial expatriation of his characters. Baldwin's flight to Paris and his all-white novel must be regarded as attempts to open the space of black literary expression to subjects and experiences not deemed appropriate for black writers in the 1940s and 1950s. (Henderson 313)

Written during Baldwin's early years in Europe, *Giovanni's Room*, then, becomes the textual analogue to the author's personal expatriation. The absence of black characters in the novel obviously defied the contemporary prevailing tacit assumption of the American critical establishment, in some ways confirmed by Baldwin's precursor and self-proclaimed 'spiritual father', Richard Wright, that black authors must write about what was euphemistically referred to as 'the Negro problem'. Phillip's own discussion of this novel in his collection of essays, *A New World Order* (2000) reflects on the ways in which *Giovanni's Room* represented for Baldwin a refusal of what had been assumed as the traditional burden of the black writer, as well as an insistence that race and sexuality needed to be thought together. « In reply to an interviewer's question, James Baldwin made plain his feelings about the connectivity between race and sexuality: "The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism then they have to mature on the level of sexuality" » (Phillips 2000: 47). Phillips's discussion of the text claims it is absolutely the successor to *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, despite mixed reviews and some barely stifled homophobic responses to the novel in the United States. Phillips praises both Baldwin's bravery in publishing the novel and acknowledges the significance of Baldwin's professed objectives. « The uncloseting of sexual desire was to be viewed as just another step on the path towards the uncloseting of the racially prejudiced mind. Baldwin challenges us with a question: How, in fact,

can one write about race without writing about sexuality? » (Phillips 2000: 47).

## Part 2: A sea of queerness

The structure of Caryl Phillip's *Crossing the River* has been read by many critics as paradigmatic of Paul Gilroy's theoretical model advanced in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Sharing the same year of publication, it appears as a key literary embodiment of writing with a black Atlantic sensibility. However, I want to propose that reading for a queer black Atlantic in *Crossing the River* might also be valid. Phillip's text resonates with Brand's and Tinsley's figuring of black diasporic routes, as it maps three 'misdirected' journeys that have spun out of the long legacy and present effects of the Transatlantic slave trade. I would argue that the journeys of Nash, Martha and Travis might be fruitfully understood as misdirections, as journeys taken at the behest of others, overwritten by powerful historical and hegemonic discourses, of the rights and justice of religious missionary movements, of the powerful discourse of U.S. manifest destiny and the overwhelming power of a war machine with entry of the U.S. into the Second World War. Phillip ties these misdirections, initiated by history's Grand Narratives, to an origin that can never fully be reckoned with in his inclusion of a slaver's journal at the heart of the text, and tracks the effect of further journeys on already diasporic Black lives to show how they might become the way. The framing narrative, the chorus of common memory, enables the reader to experience the reading of these multiple, fragmented partial and dispersed narrative trajectories as woven into one another or counterpointing one another as a 'sea of colour', resonant of Tinsley's conception as evoked, a sea singing of the black memories and forgettings that it contains.

Whilst *Crossing the River* has had a serendipitous relation with Gilroy's text, there is another lesser-known intervention into transatlantic slavery's legacies that provides a different route for reading Phillip. In the same year that *Crossing the River* was published, Black British film artist Isaac Julian produced the short film *The Attendant*, juxtaposing scenes of gay S/M fantasies in front of paintings at the Wilberforce museum in Hull, notably re-imaging the painting depicting a white master bending over a dying black slave as a 'living' painting of leather-clad black and white men. This second felicitous timing offers a black queer intervention into the ways in which national forms of memorialising and displaying histories of transatlantic slavery operate in



the institutionally controlled and overwritten space of the Wilberforce museum in Hull. William Wilberforce campaigned for the abolition of slavery and his home was later transformed into a museum, primarily of Britain's role in abolitionist campaigning. The Transatlantic Slavery Gallery at the Liverpool Maritime Museum was not to open until the following year, and as many critics, activists, artists, and public viewers had noted the Wilberforce museum appeared as an institutional space of disavowal of the role of the British in the transatlantic slave trade. The controlled space of the museum is interrupted in the film, as it becomes a stage for the eruption of queer interracial desires, ones that open up the hidden histories of the museum. Sharpe suggests that it speaks of « the museum's unconscious. Its kinky haunted spaces » (Sharpe: 2010, 112). Julien's film makes the highly stylised nineteenth-century paintings of slavery scenes that the visitors are calmly viewing come to life, embodied now by black and white men enacting S/M sexualised encounters using whips, leashes and manacles. Julien mobilises a queer double view in the film, as we see the original painting by French artist François-Auguste Biard « Slaves on the West Coast of Africa » (1883) but now are permitted/invited to see this also as a scene of desire, of spectacularisation of the black enslaved body, as a different queer vision comes into play, calling into question the libidinal desires and investments at play in the installation and memorialisation of slavery in the museum space. In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (2009), Sharpe comments on the ways on which

The monstrously intimate relation between violence and sexuality (at the heart of chattel slavery) continues to ripple through a re-fashioning of post-slavery Black subjectivity. Desire and violation are entangled, ambivalently figured, rehearsed, and disturbed, working in excess of meaning. In 'The Attendant' the scenes of S/M in the museum invites a whole other set of questions concerning not just (inter)racial desire and history but open up other possible unreadable domains of signification. (Sharpe: 2011: 6)

For Sharpe the film is powerful through its juxtaposition of different forms of subjection, where S/M scenes are juxtaposed with images of the Black male attendant guarding the museum, and Black female cleaner, dusting the paintings, suggesting an embodied and quotidian suffering. If Julien's text has a role to play on reading Phillips's it is I would argue in

his making visible that European discourses of transatlantic slavery and the staging of black enslaved bodies have a continuing relationship with the pleasures and desires, fears and pleasures of present regimes of racialised desire. The space of the museum and its 'archive' offer an important way of considering the disavowed regimes of desire, of pleasure in the subjugation of raced others.

Phillip's text also revisits the archive of slavery as he explores the significance of the 'curated' logs of the slave ship Captain Newton, and creates a series of letters between Nash and Edward that conceal and disavow as much as they reveal. In the first of its three sections, "The Pagan Coast", the complex relationship between Nash and Edward, former master and slave, then free man and 'benefactor' who address one another as father and son is also marked by veiled and embodied admissions of desire for black men on Edward's part. The reciprocity of such desires on the part of his two ex-slaves Nash and Maddison is impossible to find, either in their actions or in the letters addressed to Edward in the novel by Nash, where a paternal filial relationship is fostered by both sides, a replacement for Master and Slave that has been disavowed. A clearer refusal of Edward's desires is to be found in a brief scene with Maddison where after Edward expresses how lonely he is and lays his hands on him he simply says 'no' and they turn away from one another. I do not want to be too hasty in reading this 'no', either as a straightforward denial of desire, or as an act of liberation from previous moments of sexual coercion. Its parameters are too uncertain, as what is revealed of Edward's relationships with Black men, as ex-slaves or otherwise is only explored through his relationship with his traumatised wife. It is therefore impossible to know whether with Maddison or Nash Edward engaged in consensual sexual encounters or reciprocated desires, at some moment in the past. Phillips offers a similar problematic in his earlier text, *Higher Ground* (1989), a text that shares *Crossing the River's* triangular narrative structure and its preoccupations with the Black Atlantic, where the first story, 'Heartland', also registers suppressed queer desires, in the form of the dream of a disgraced and abject African collaborator living in a slave fort in West Africa. The dream is of a loving and reciprocal homosexual act in stark contrast to the extreme and traumatising account of sexual violence and torture inflicted by white men on African women in that story. It is an image of sexual pleasure and desire outside the brutalising heteronormative frame of the slave fort, where all other sexual and relational acts should more properly be characterised a perverse. The slave fort, as Faizal Forrester

notes in his discussion of the text, « like the slave ship and the plantation, signify an emasculating violence and spiritual death » (Forrester 320). Here psychosexual violence pervades every space of the fort and those who inhabit it, it breeds sexual violence and marks all human interaction as abject. Under this oppressive condition, forbidden sexual ecstasy is framed, Forrester argues, by panic, anxiety, loss and longing for bodily and psychic recognition in a context that denies it.

Both moments suggest that Phillips is interested in exploring the archeology of relations between slavery and sexuality. As Forrester warns, reading for queer desires under such conditions is perilous. Edward's admissions of desire and the unreadability of his relationship with Nash offers a case of the problematics of performing a « literary archeology where I go in search of what I most desire: the euphoria of cross-sexing the narrative; that rather dubious task » (Forrester 331). Phillip's first narrative evokes glimpses of a relation but leaves a fuller understanding of it out of reach, perhaps offering a way of reading and addressing queer relations as they refract with ways of imagining and theorising the Black Atlantic. The implied 'monstrous intimacies' here evoke a plantation culture whose physical presence and events are off stage, and its ideologies and tortures, its assumptions and sexual organisation are implicit only. Traces of U.S. plantation culture are present in the filial relations that Nash and Edward participate in, in written form, in letters that never arrive, or are read by others. As Michael Bibler has demonstrated in *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation*, « the plantation was conceived of as structured like a family, its organisational structures drew on a model of patriarchal and paternalistic structures to make a pseudo-familial rigidly vertical arrangement » (Bibler 6). Phillips' text reaches back to plantation culture itself and registers a power dynamic that reeks of all forms of sexualised and racialised structures.

Both of Phillips' texts link homosexual desires and transgressions to the space of slavery in order to see otherwise, to explore the disavowed desires that structure violent raced inequality. Phillips' work has explored and represented how a queer potentiality intersects with a certain postcolonial chronicling of the multiple experiences and complex legacies of the middle passage and its transoceanic crosscurrents. Phillip's *Crossing the River* and Kay's *Trumpet* were published only five years apart and share similar vectors and trajectories, preoccupations with movement and origins, memory and forgetting that inflect the Black Atlantic. Both texts also enact Sharpe's concept of 'wake work' as they

involve an ethics of thinking with and caring for the dead and dying through fictional renderings of exclusion, ontological violence and erasure as well as depicting Black and queer modes of resistance, self-naming and of what Sharpe calls « being in the diaspora » (Sharpe 2016: 19).

In her 2008 article « Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic, Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage », Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley offers an important critical reframing of Paul Gilroy's influential and groundbreaking work *The Black Atlantic* (1993), by thinking through the figure of a slave ship as not only a figure or symbol for imagining and tracing the routes of black histories, but as a material site of possible queer relationships and affiliations. She does this not to assert the chronotope of the slave ship as the site of origin for a black queer Atlantic but in order to examine the fraught crosscurrents in maritime relations and the global legacies of slavery as they shift between spaces of memory and erasure, brutality and survival, violence, sexual oppression and desire.

The black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic. What Paul Gilroy never told us is how queer relationships were forged on merchant and pirate ships, where Europeans and Africans slept with fellow – and I mean same-sex – sailors. And, more powerfully and silently, how queer relationships emerged in the holds of slave ships that crossed between West Africa and the Caribbean archipelago. (Tinsley 4)

Tinsley continues, « I evoke this history now not to claim the slave ship as the origin of the black queer Atlantic. The ocean obscures all origins, and neither ship nor Atlantic can be a place of origin » (Tinsley 4). Tinsley identifies a strong preoccupation in both critical fields with different discourses around fluidity and water, where wateriness is both metaphor and history. Queer theory has, she argues, used « the repetitive, unpredictable energy of currents, waves and foam » to refer to mobile 'fluid' sexual identifications or gendered positions, where multiple identities share « a common sea of queerness » (Tinsley 4). However, she suggests that queer studies and Black Atlantic studies should be fruitfully brought into dialogue, questioning whether this 'queer sea' has a colour.

What would it mean for both queer and African diaspora studies to take seriously the possibility that, as forcefully as the Atlantic and Caribbean flow together, so too, do the turbulent fluidities

of blackness and queerness? What new geography or oceanography of sexual, gendered, transnational and racial identities might emerge through reading for black queer history and theory in the traumatic dislocation of the Middle passage? (Tinsley 4).

Asking if queer theory can fully pay attention to race as anything but an afterthought she proposes that work by Butler, Sedgwick and others ought to start with explicit formulations of racialised sexuality and sexualised race, rather than adding them once theories of performativity have already been formulated. Through a close reading of Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of no Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001) she suggests one way in which this might happen. Brand's project she argues, is to shift the focus from individual fluxes of gender or sexuality and to engage with « larger bodies, a shifting oceanography of the African diaspora » (Tinsley 21) and as a result to produce a text which is fluidly genred, focused on water, dominated by the sea. For Tinsley, Brand has created what she views as a black diaspora queer ruttier, one that can trace how the violent re-routings and misdirection's of Transatlantic slavery become the way for retrieving and living with the fragments of the archive of slavery as it intersects with questions of race, desire and sexuality. Brand tells us that a ruttier was a long poem which was memorised, containing navigational instructions to sailors for finding one's way at sea. Brand's queer ruttier undoes gender, fragments and repeats, thinks through and with the water as it traverses histories of migration slavery, lost origins, and unarming dislocation. The black queer Atlantic effaces nationality, ethnicity, citizenship, « no citizen, no national, no one christened, no sex » (Tinsley 21) and Tinsley argues, produces a queer time, resignifying and re-membling history. Travelling without a map, without the desire to travel, marks the enslaved African experience and is Brand's key reference point throughout, « To travel without a map, to travel without a way. They did, long ago. That misdirection became the way. After the Door of No Return, a map was only a set of impossibilities, a set of changing locations » (Brand 224).

Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* very much speaks to this model as it relates the events following the death of a Black Scottish jazz trumpeter Joss and the reactions of his family and different communities to the revelation that he was a woman. Already dead, Joss cannot be questioned, the revelation is not the final sensational denouement of the novel but its starting point. Joss's gender is worried over in diverse ways

by other voices in the text, as Ali Smith puts it, «to calibrate a shimmering response from the repeated unbindings (as if unbinding the question of gender each time) so that we judge human nature not by the shock of revelation of Joss's gender but by people's responses to it» (Smith 2016). The formal experimentation in Kay's text, the use of multiple first person narratives and repeated revisiting of the event via differently motivated subjects, the doctor, the son, the wife, the tabloid journalist attempting to package and sell Joss's story, has some resonances with the multiple and split chronicles of diaspora that characterise Phillip's work. *Crossing the River* approaches three 'hidden histories' of the diasporic African experience, where black experience or participation in history's Grand Narratives has been erased, forgotten or unrecognised, weaving together stories of a black missionary heading to Africa, a black pioneer in the American West and a black GI stationed in Yorkshire, across three different eras and geographical locations. Kay's narrative offers a different approach to the conceptualisation of 'hiddenness', as Joss's identity undoes the binary opposition between surface and depth, appearance and truth. In an important scene as the doctor unravels the bandages around the chest of Joss's dead body she is described as feeling as if she is peeling away layers of skin. «The bandages were sticky and sweaty. They were very difficult to remove. Doctor Krishnamurthy felt as if she was removing skin, each wrapping of bandage that she peeled off felt unmistakably like a layer of skin» (Kay 43). The body is not an index of gender, rather the life lived in it is. Alongside this unravelling of skin is an unravelling of Joss's own origins, travelling back through Joss's mother's memories to her meeting with and marriage to his African father. Caught in between the voices of all those who would name him or lay claim to him, Joss speaks for himself and claims a complex ancestry through Kay's masterful depiction of the playing of Jazz itself. Joss's relation to his trumpet is one that offers a route into attempting to speak or conjure the painful history of the black diaspora, one that also undoes race, gender sexuality and identity. Playing his trumpet is a descent into pain and a remembering but also a dislocating of self.

The trip shakes him up but there is nothing like that pain. That pain is the sweetest, most beautiful pain in the world. Better than sex. Soar or shuffle along, wing or glide, trudge or gallop, kicking out mugging heavy, light, licking, breaking, screwballing. Out of this world. He could be the fourth horseman, the

messenger, the sender. He could be the ferryman. The migrant. The dispossessed. [...] It all falls off – bandages, braces, cufflinks, watches, hair grease, suits, buttons, ties. He is himself again, years ago, skipping along the railway line with a long cord his mother has made into a rope. In a red dress. It is liberating. To be a girl. To be a man. (Kay 135)

Kay's writing speaks to Amiri Baraka's assertion in 1965, « New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it » (Baraka 1965). The sleeve notes that he writes to the album *New Black Music* assert an intelligent body of socio-cultural philosophy of African-American life and a music that can address it. Kay's narrative harbours this understanding of Jazz as a powerful and swirling set of images and voices, histories, spaces, times and modes of inhabiting the self, un-gendered, transgendered, raced and unraced, stripped, clothed, remade. It asserts this as both a vital black diasporic practice and a queer one. It is this I would argue that ultimately links Phillips and Kay in their exploration of black Atlantic queer identifications.

\*

### Afterword: Sharing the asterisk

slavery is the weather, at stake in the weather is anti-blackness  
as total climate.  
(Sharpe in Terreffe 2)

In her interview with Selamwit Terreffe, Sharpe deploys the term Trans\*Atlantic splitting the two terms apart so that we can re-read trans\* as it is utilised by activists and allies to signify multiple non-binary gendered and gender fluid identities.

I've been thinking about the Trans\*Atlantic both in terms of Omise'eke Tinsley saying the Black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic, I'm also saying it's been something in excess of that: the Black Atlantic has always been Trans\*Atlantic, the unmaking of Black bodies, Black flesh, and then the eruption into that of all those transes – transmogrification, transubstantiation, transmigration, transmediterranean etc. as a way to think about no-coherence in relation to gender to space to home to time. (Sharpe in Terreffe 1)

Much is at stake in the asterisk. Its queer potential is as a site of multiple possible identifications, an attempt to signal and acknowledge diverse selves and ways of being. But it also asks us to think again about how Phillips engages with the archive of slave trade ships and how to read Hamilton's log otherwise. The use of the asterisk is part of the convention by publishers, for making an edit of their account of the journey where only weather is observed.

As Phillips' adaptation of Newton's log book illustrates, this document is a monstrous disavowal of the violence done to black lives in the archive. The asterisks mark what is deemed not of interest to the reader, extraneous to the story, so unremarkable that it needs excising from the original account. What more potent form of signification could there be for the absence of any account of the enslaved Africans in the hold of the ship. The enslaved must share the space of the asterisk with unremarkable comments on the weather presumed to impede the enjoyment of the human story. If the asterisk can be mobilised otherwise by queer activists then this mark that signifies erasure can be read differently, as a way to recognise, honour and share in the multiple and different erasures, as way to envision and to resist the total climate, the weather.

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