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Caryl Phillips and the Rhizomorphous Gaze: A Geophilosophical Reading of Crossing the River

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« Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes. » Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

Caryl Phillips's writing in general, and Crossing the River in particular, is characterized by what may be called the nonequilibrium of deterritorialization. In Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces (2007), Bertrand Westphal indicates that he finds nonequilibrium more enticing than equilibrium since nonequilibrium derives its vitality from historical experience. He adds that, while equilibrium generates « a nonstory, » nonequilibrium presents « a very complex story » (Westphal 19). As Phillips's stories revisit human history and bring to the surface the traumatic ordeal of deterritorialization, they engage in spatiotemporal fluctuation and fragmentation ¹. Thus, Renee Therese Schatteman suggests that the fragmentation in Phillips's narratives mirrors the fragmented lives of the African diaspora caused by slavery and migration (Schatteman 14). I argue that Phillips utilizes the literary modus operandi of fragmentation to spatialize the temporal dimension; in other words, the historical traumas are given distinct spatiality. The image of space and time is therefore stratified and rhizomatic, an idea supported by Westphal who indicates that «[t]he fragmented view of time has decisively affected the image of space » (Westphal 14). The title of Phillips's novel itself, Crossing the River, is suggestive of this spatialization of temporality as the river metaphor carries both spatial and temporal undertones. However, the act of crossing as another prevalent spatial

¹ For instance, as noted by Bénédicte Ledent, the fragmentation of Phillips's enigmatic The Nature of Blood generates a complete sensory disorientation in the reader (Ledent 160).

metaphor in the title denotes the rhizomatic nature of the narrative, which will be further elaborated in the paper.

The concept of « rhizomorphous gaze » which appears in the title of this paper may be considered as relevant to the analysis of such heterogeneous spatiotemporality and of Caryl Phillips's dense modus operandi. The term « gaze » geocritically evokes the process of mapreading and surveying, and Westphal points out that the scrutiny of the gaze has evolved: the world is no longer shaped by the bipolar relationship of the gazing cultures and the gazed-upon ones, or of the center and the periphery, or of the male and the female (Westphal 123-124). The emergence of multiculturalism and the diversification of voices, the critic adds, have given rise to « an aesthetics of postmodernism, an authentic receptacle for counterhegemonic discourses and the place in the arts for third space » (Westphal 124). Geocritically speaking, the rhizomorphous gaze is therefore the map-reading, or mapmaking act of rhizomatic texts such as those of Caryl Phillips.

Rhizomatic Plateaus of Thought

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus:* Capitalism and Schizophrenia explore rhizomes as the first plateau. It is not surprising for Deleuze and Guattari to choose this phenomenon as the first leg of their stunning geophilosophical journey since the rhetoric of *A Thousand Plateaus* itself is the epitome of rhizomatic structures. Their thought system is indeed marked by a network of labyrinthine multiplicities, a complex language, a non-linear narrative temporality which offers a possibility of non-linear reading, a decentralized patchwork pattern, fragmentation, open ended and repetitive cycles (Massumi ix-xv).

« Rhizome » is the botanical name of a subterranean stem system; rhizomes can reproduce by budding, and any section of a rhizome can continue reproducing elsewhere, which signifies that they can be deterritorialized and reterritorialized. Rhizomes are heterogeneous multiplicities, and unlike trees and roots which work on fixed orders, they can establish connections with other multiplicities such as hollows of trees (botanically speaking), or power organizations and social struggles (geophilosophically speaking); languages are rhizomatic entities, for instance; « Puppet strings » as a rhizomatic multiplicity relate to the puppeteer only insofar as they are directly linked to the multiplicity of his nerve fibers (Deleuze and Guattari 7-8). We may here argue that a rhizomatic text such as *Crossing the River* cannot be reduced to the

author himself but must include other multiplicities the author identifies with. Rhizomes also work on the principle of a signifying rupture, which means that they have the capacity to start all over again: « You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed » (Deleuze and Guattari 9). Rhizomes, therefore, symbolize the ultimate resistance dynamic against the state apparatus; rhizomes have the potential to restructure their formation and develop a process of renewal through their lines of flight. Bonta and Protevi argue that the state apparatus represents all hierarchies and orders which organize and control spaces (Bonta and Protevi 149). They also argue that the subterranean nature of rhizomes is indicative of their latent resistance to infiltrate the striations of the hierarchy (Bonta and Protevi 136). Lastly, rhizomes work on the principles of cartography: they do not tend to take the shape of any structural or generative model, they create maps, not tracings, and maps can be subject to continuous change, and contain multiple entry points (Deleuze and Guattari 12).

Crossing the River can be seen as an example of Phillips's rhizomatic discourse: it is multi-voiced, fragmented, non-linear, plateau-patterned with an introductory narrative and an epilogue, both of which are the backbones of the other narratives, and most importantly, it brings together seemingly unconnected yet extremely related chapters which seem to follow the rhizomatic principles proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. Each chapter as a separate assemblage operationally forms a rhizomatic union with other chapters, and together they establish a narrative rhizosphere and connect through their hidden subterranean stem system and model a resistance structure against the state apparatus. Even though the narratives of Crossing the River offer temporally structured voices from different centuries, they do not really follow any particular hierarchy, nor do they require any linear reading; each chapter in the novel similarly has the capacity to bud into new and distinct rhizomatic analyses.

Crossing the Boundaries in Crossing the River

In addition, Caryl Phillips consistently uses the topos of the bordercrossing character, which brings to mind another binary comparison Deleuze and Guattari suggest in their geophilosophy: deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which is a phenomenon directly related to bordercrossing. It is no wonder that Phillips writes about diasporic experience of both the Blacks and the Jews whose deterritorialization has been a significant focus of academia. Westphal argues that, in the dialectic of Deleuze and Guattari, any movement resulting from deterritorialization and reterritorialization is that which flows from «homogeneous and unitary systems [with] explicit and stable limits [to] heterogeneous and multiple systems [with] their own escape routes » (Westphal 51). Bonta and Protevi elucidate that deterritorialization occurs when a body departs a territorial assemblage through a line flight and reterritorializes in order to form a new assemblage; they also note that « deterritorialization is the process of leaving home, of altering your habits, of learning new tricks », reterritorialization is «forming a new territory,» and it always accompanies deterritorialization; yet, reterritorialization does not denote « a return to an old territory » (Bonta and Protevi 78, 136). Lines of flight are thresholds or passageways between assemblages; Bonta and Protevi identify them as « the primary constituents of all assemblages, all bodies, all spaces, plugged by machines of enslavement and order but unplugged by forces of desire and smoothing» (Bonta and Protevi 106). One traverses from one assemblage to another using lines of flight, or thresholds

Deterritorialized individuals in Crossing the River strive to sink « hopeful roots into difficult soil » (Phillips 2), in other words, they try to reterritorialize themselves in a new space. It is significant that Phillips should dedicate his novel to « those who crossed the river, » that is, to those who are uprooted and waiting to settle elsewhere. Crossing the River starts and finishes with the conflicting voice of an African father who transgresses all familial codes and sells his children to slavery. This lapse initiates the process of Africans' centuries-long deterritorialization and Phillips points to the ordeal of reterritorialization through the voice of the same African father who « hear[s] a drum beating on the far bank of the river wand whose children arrive « on the far bank of the river. loved » at the end (Phillips 235, 237). Between these two narratives are the liminal stories of this «desperate foolishness» (Phillips 2; 237), which show the passages from limes (border) to limen (threshold), or from the striated (homogeneous) to the smooth (heterogeneous). As Westphal points out, *limes* (border) suggests control and closure, whereas one may expect free flow and crossing in limen (or threshold) (Westphal 98). In addition, Phillips's smooth narratives suggest the multi-voiced heterogeneity of the nomad as opposed to the one-voiced homogeneity of the state apparatus. Smooth narratives are counterhegemonic and cartographic, which means that they are open and connectible on all their sides, and most importantly rhizomatic. Crossing the River is therefore a

patchwork of smooth narratives in the same way A Thousand Plateaus is an effort to construct « a smooth space of thought » and plateaus with their specific « pitch[es] of intensity » (Massumi xiii, xiv).

Smooth and striated spaces are one of various binary concepts Deleuze and Guattari consistently compare in A Thousand Plateaus. While « the sea is a smooth space par excellence, » « the city is the striated space par excellence » (Deleuze and Guattari 479, 481). Striated space is produced by the state apparatus. While « striation » is a geological phenomenon which basically means « the scratching of the earth's surface by continental glaciers, » it indicates the effects of the state apparatus in Deleuzoguattarian geophilosophy; thus, there exist smoothing and striating forces acting and counteracting (Bonta and Protevi 151). Crucial to the concept of the smooth versus striated space is that these spaces are not mutually exclusive. Both spaces can hold smooth and striated patches within; for instance, shantytowns are « the smooth spaces arising from the city » (Deleuze and Guattari 481). The ship as a striated patch of space exists in the body of the sea which is a smooth space. Therefore, smooth narratives such as those of Caryl Phillips hold the capacity to create free-flowing thresholds within the obstructing striations of the hierarchy and the order.

In one such narrative, «The Pagan Coast,» Nash Williams experiences social and geographical deterritorialization. The story ends with Nash's absolute reterritorialization; Nash abandons his Christian faith and adopts pagan ways of life before his death. The title «The Pagan Coast» insinuates the intrinsic transgressive nature of the narrative. Liberia provides Nash with a nomad's perspective and sensibility. Just as America as a striated space stands for oppression, Liberia offers Nash his liberty and a smooth space where «he may live by the sweat of his brow» (Phillips 61). Massumi's elaboration of smooth and striated spaces in Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophy is noteworthy:

The space of nomad thought is qualitatively different from State space. Air against earth. State space is "striated," or gridded. Movement in it is confined as by gravity to a horizontal plane, and limited by the order of that plane to preset paths between fixed and identifiable points. Nomad space is "smooth," or open-ended. One can rise up at any point and move to any other. Its mode of distribution is the *nomos*: arraying oneself in an open space (hold the street), as opposed to the logos of

entrenching oneself in a closed space (hold the fort). (Massumi xiii)

stories, Phillips frequently juxtaposes In his smooth representatives of the striated space (the homogeneous space of the state apparatus) and smooth space (the heterogeneous space of the nomad). In «The Pagan Coast,» Nash and Edward stand at each end of this spectrum in a binary comparison. Edward is the archetype of the state apparatus, the ultimate striating force, and the representative of the tutelage system; Nash is on the other hand one of Deleuze's war machines (or nomads) who smooths the striations of the hierarchy. The disruption of Nash's letters causes a fracture in this union and triggers a communication gap between the state apparatus (Edward) and the war machine (Nash). Additionally, Liberia as a transgressive space offers Nash a line of flight from his former master Edward's control, and this threshold leads him from the striated space of the state apparatus to the smooth space of the nomad, as well as from the presumed identity of Nash Williams to the acquired pagan self. This transition, in Ledent's analysis, is « simply the outcome of a profound distress » (Ledent 121). However, Nash also finds a smoothing force in his new habitat. « Liberia has provided me with the opportunity to open up my eyes and cast off the garb of ignorance, » he writes to Edward whom he addresses as « father » (Phillips 61-62). Nash turns his gaze from the burdens of his past to the hopes of Liberia. As Deleuze and Guattari point out: « nomads have no history; they only have a geography » (Deleuze and Guattari 393).

In Crossing the River, the institutional religion is considered a segment of the order, or a striating force, opposed by the characters Nash, Joyce, and Martha. Nash's break up with Christianity is therefore another important factor in his transformation; Nash believes that his Christian faith « can never take root in [his new] country. Its young shoots will wither and die, leaving the sensible man with the conclusive evidence reap what grows naturally » (Phillips Geophilosophically, roots represent the striating forces of the state apparatus. Nash's reference to natural phenomena in the quotation is striking since nature and natural growths as well as thoughts, music, landscapes are shaped by smoothing forces (Bonta and Protevi 144; 151). Instead of sinking roots into hard soil like a tree (Phillips 2), Nash prefers the life of a rhizome which is « always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo » (Deleuze and Guattari 25; original italics). Nash also dismisses the authoritarian role of a missionary as well as imposed state elements: « The school is no more, and shall never again occupy a position of authority in any settlement of which I am a part. This missionary work, this process of persuasion, is futile amongst these people [...] » (Phillips 62).

As opposed to Nash, Edward feels « marooned » in Liberia, and the « unwholesome character » of Africa terrifies him; he is also surprised to see how unperturbed people, black and white, feel at such sights (Phillips 56, 48). For him, Liberia is an « inhospitable and heathen corner of the world », and existence in this part of the world is « wretched » and « savage » (Phillips 53, 54). Unlike Nash who finds tranquility and self-definition in the natural state of mankind in Liberia, Edward seeks the presence of striating forces and finds a striated enclave in the smooth body of this African corner: « a Gentleman's Club for white people » where gentlemen of various statuses and statures who « find themselves adrift and washed up on this furthest shore of civilization » can exchange anecdotes and memories (Phillips 54, 55). On the rejection of his second attempt to join this striated space, Edward falls into a state of gloom.

Joyce's rejection of religion is very similar to Nash's. Joyce enjoys the life of an outcast by dismissing all hierarchical structures. Joyce initially takes refuge in books against her mother's control mechanism: « I was always a disappointment, » Joyce protests, « I've continued to lock myself up in books » (Phillips 190). As for religion, Joyce decides to leave both the church and Christ as they do not offer her any solace. Similarly, Martha's despair seems deeper than « the sufferings of the son of God » (Phillips 79). Even though the Hoffmans attempt to « cast light in on Martha's dark soul », they do not prevail (Phillips 79).

Phillips tends to combine conflicting characters in rhizomatic unisons in his fictions, and the Travis-Joyce relationship is one of them. Two rhizomes merge with each other and form a rhizomatic space, in other words, a rhizosphere – « the zone of contact between two rhizomes, or between a treestructure and a rhizome » (Bonta and Protevi 136). Joyce finds a line of flight in her relationship with Travis whilst all others – her mother, Christ, Herbert, or Len – striate her life. However, after losing Travis who is the only smoothing body for Joyce in the story, Joyce once again falls victim to the social striation and gives her son for adoption. In her analysis, Ledent finds Joyce « exceptionally openminded, » « big-hearted » and « prejudice-free » (Ledent 122), which indicates that Joyce embodies a smoothing force for this American outcast, Travis, as well.

An exclusively striking moment in « Somewhere in England » carries the echoes of this unique rhizomatic union: Travis and Joyce sit in her room above the shop, and after she offers him food and tea, they enjoy the silence. Joyce also mentions the hidden presence of Len, the embodiment of striation: « Across the room I saw the framed photograph of Len and me on our wedding day. Turned down. Its face buried in a thin layer of dust on top of the chest of drawers » (Phillips 209). Joyce and Travis establish the rhizomatic entanglement with their hands, and then he leaves. However, she still feels his presence in the room, and wants to keep it longer:

> After I closed the door behind him, I went back upstairs. I picked up the cup and the saucer that he had been drinking out of, and I ran my finger around the rim of the cup. A little tea stain. And then I saw the mark in the settee where he'd been sitting. The room smelt of him. A good smell. I could smell him on me. I wasn't going to be alone again. As long as I didn't open any windows and doors. As long as I didn't wash anything. Then I could make the smell last a little longer. (Phillips 210)

In « West. » Martha's attachment to Chester bears resemblance to that of Joyce and Travis. Chester makes Martha forget the hardship she has endured: «that's a gift from above », comments faithless Martha (Phillips 84). Lucy plays the role of another rhizome in the story, but when Chester and Lucy disappear from Martha's life, she has to seek another line of flight: a westward exodus.

Phillips continuously works on the motif of two rhizomes forming a rhizosphere in his novels; for instance, in The Nature of Blood, the black commander of the Venetian army and the young Venetian lady bond in such a rhizomatic structure². In the same novel, Stephan, an estranged Jewish veteran, and Malka, Ethiopian black Jew, both in Israel, share a hotel room forming a rhizomatic structure, albeit temporary. In Higher Ground, Louis, a West Indian immigrant, is befriended by Irene, an outcast Jewish immigrant in England. In A Distant Shore, Solomon, an African immigrant in England develops a rhizomatic friendship with Dorothy, an alienated Englishwoman who paradoxically takes refuge in a

² I discussed Othello and Desdemona's rhizomatic relationship in detail in the article entitled « Isolated Spaces, Fragmented Places: Caryl Phillips's Ghettos in The Nature of Blood and The European Tribe. »

settlement to be further deterritorialized where she, however, meets Solomon. All these Phillipsian characters float in intermezzos between deterritorialization and reterritorialization whether it is geographical or social. Their in-betweenness occurs in no-man's lands, for instance, in the Yorkshire village as in the case of Joyce and Travis, or in Dodge as in the case of Martha and Chester, or in Stoneleigh as in the case of Solomon and Dorothy, or in a hotel room as in the case of Stephan and Malka. Westphal suggests that « the in-between » can occasionally become « the wasteland » or « the no-man's land » (Westphal 69). « The in-between is a deterritorialization in action, » he also notes, « but one that loiters, awaiting the moment of its reterritorialization. It is the equivalent of suspending all determination, all identity » (Westphal 69). These characters leaving all their assumed determinants behind connect with each other in liminal wastelands.

«West» in Crossing the River tells the story of Martha who undergoes a difficult passage westward. The narration spatiotemporally fluctuates, which brings to mind the difficulty of her passage. This passage is a process of becoming, an open-ended progress, and a rhizomatic expansion; it is « countless years of journeying » in Martha's words (Phillips 75). The geographical passage towards California in « West » stands for the slaves' movement from captivity to liberty. Martha remembers Kansas and Virginia as sites of her slavery and then « a smooth white beach » in Africa and then the Middle Passage (Phillips 73). A slave is a rhizome incarnate, a rootless intermezzo being, a deterritorialized body who is always on the move and can never achieve reterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari bring a certain perspective to our understanding of the relationship between the slave and the state apparatus; they state that « the slave-infidel-foreigner » has the potential to be of use to the state apparatus and at the same time stay deterritorialized « in relation to the lineages and the State » (Deleuze and Guattari 393). The rhizome-slave therefore searches a line of flight for survival under the pressures of the striation. Martha runs away in « West, » for instance; Sethe slits the throat of her daughter rather than seeing her going into slavery in Toni Morrison's Beloved.

Frederick Jackson Turner regards the American pioneering as a process of expansion, a fluid rebirth rather than a movement flowing from east to west, and argues that American institutions have been compelled to adapt to « the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the

complexity of city life » (Turner 190). Turner's elaboration of this passage evokes the state's desire to striate the smooth space. The West as an American frontier symbolizes the site of ultimate reterritorialization. Unlike Turner's suggestion, the black pioneers in «West » are like Deleuze and Guattari's nomads who hold the redemptive power of smoothing. Martha's observation of the black pioneers in their westward exodus is significant in the discussion since it supports Deleuze and Guattari's ideas that nomads hold a smoothing desire, and their primary concern is geography, not history:

Apparently, these days colored folks were not heading west prospecting for no gold, they were just prospecting for a new life without having to pay no heed to the white man and his ways. Prospecting for a place where things were a little better than bad, and where you weren't always looking over your shoulder and wondering when somebody was going to do you wrong. Prospecting for a place where your name wasn't 'boy' or 'aunty', and where you could be a part of this country without feeling like you wasn't really a part. (Phillips 73-74)

In conclusion, I argue that, in the geocritical context of this paper, Caryl Phillips can be viewed as a rhizome whose rhizomatic texts, as filaments of a rhizome, seek lines of flight against the striations of the state apparatus. As a rhizome in the middle and between things, Phillips recognizes « the mid-Atlantic » as the location of his spiritual belonging where his readers could also locate his life and work (Jaggi 77). Additionally, the complexity of the nonequilibrium of oppression and displacement, of dislocation and exile, and of diasporic experience is rendered into a rhizomatic and fragmented mode of writing as well as inbetween characters and spaces.

Crossing the River engages with geophilosophy on many different strata. Phillips crafts a multi-voiced narrative which surveys the geographies of deterritorialization with the motif of border-crossing characters. Crossing the River has four plateau-patterned narratives; and each story contains a peculiar « pitch of intensity » (Massumi xiv), and each story has the capacity to bear separate rhizomatic analyses. Phillips's writing in general, and Crossing the River in particular, juxtaposes representatives of the smooth space and the striated space, which can also clarify why Phillips always utilizes white characters in his narratives. Phillips always gives voice to the state apparatus that striates

the smooth space of the nomad, and to the war machine (or the nomad) that smooths the striated space of the state apparatus. Furthermore, the smooth space of nature is always compared with the striated space of the state, for instance, the sea vs. the city, or the sea vs. the ship, or the river vs. the canal. Hence, geophilosophically speaking, Caryl Phillips is a patchwork craftsman with a smoothing dynamism.

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