

BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT

Ambiguous Visions of Home: The Paradoxes of Diasporic Belonging in Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*

“What is Home?” is a question that echoes virtually throughout the writing of Caryl Phillips, novelist, dramatist and essayist born in St. Kitts, brought up and educated in Britain, and now also a resident in the USA. As he himself puts it, “I don't think you need to be a rocket scientist to spot that I'm interested in the notion of ‘home.’”¹ All his characters, both black and white, are indeed torn by a double sense of belonging and unbelonging, divided between a painful past and an unwelcoming present, unable to find a place they can definitely call “home.” As early as 1981, in his first play *Strange Fruit*, Phillips seemed to speak through Alvin, a young man of Caribbean descent living in England, when he declared that “the most important part of knowing where you're going to is knowing where you've come from.”² Alvin then went on to

regard it as a frustrating though somehow unavoidable solution to his cultural dispossession to “live on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic at a point equidistant between Africa, the Caribbean and Britain”³ where he would be left to sink. It is perhaps an index to Phillips's maturation as a writer that, almost twenty years later, he views this point in the middle of the Atlantic as his “imaginary home,” as the satisfying reflection of his multiple identity, since, as he reveals in an as yet unpublished essay entitled “The ‘High Anxiety’ of Belonging,” he wants the middle of the ocean to become his “long home,” i.e. the place where, ultimately, his ashes will be scattered.

The choice of this watery grave is no doubt the expression of his being forever enmeshed in the complexities triggered off by the Middle Passage and the triangular trade. It also marks a development from a feeling of being homeless and existentially “adrift” to a sense of having finally found an anchorage in the ocean, albeit of an ambiguous kind since the sea implies constant movements and fluctuations. What a critic recently wrote on “Tidalectics,” i.e. aquatic metaphors, in Caribbean literature seems to apply to Phillips's arrangements for his posthumous life: “This imaginative return to the abyss,” she writes, “indicates an aquatic symbology that ‘territorializes’ through history rather than through ethnic or national ‘roots’ and therefore complicates the limitations of nation-based, terrestrial belonging.”⁴ No doubt, this pelagic mooring is a welcome image at a time when identity construction, and “home,” are still geographically confined, and viewed by some in simplistic and static racial or national terms.

My contention is that Phillips's mature, undogmatic, and fluid vision of home has been achieved through his repeated explorations of the diaspora, which is literally

ubiquitous in his novels from *Higher Ground* (1989) onwards, and even more clearly focused in his recent book-length essay, *The Atlantic Sound* (2000). As the following analysis will attempt to demonstrate, Phillips does not regard the diaspora as a notion to be exploited theoretically, but rather as an empirical and historical reality that needs to be probed without prejudices and from multiple and ever-changing angles. A pragmatic artist, Phillips has always examined the very concrete social and psychological implications of the diasporic for individuals striving first of all to understand their exilic plight, and leaving his readers and critics to derive the more abstract meaning from the predicaments he approaches imaginatively in his novels and more rationally in his essays, though, as we shall see, these occasionally contain partly fictionalized narratives of the past.

I have demonstrated elsewhere that the diasporic pervades Phillips's writing, not only at an obvious thematic level, but also in his use of imagery and his structural choices.⁵ This seems to suggest that the diaspora is not an agenda imposed from the outside on Phillips's work, but is a fully integrated element of his world vision, thus a catalyst for his complex approach to what home can be. His use of memory as alternative and ambivalent history within the individual may be taken to illustrate this interiorisation of the diaspora in his novels. In *Higher Ground*, for example, memory is clearly associated with bodily functions. It is as vital as blood for Irina, a victim of Nazism, yet she also needs the relief of occasional blood-lettings: "She could not spend another winter in England staunching memories like blood from a punched nose. She could not afford a memory-haemorrhage, but to not remember hurt."⁶ In *Cambridge*, Emily's memory is an "incessant waterfall" which, she vainly hopes, will "freeze solid at its source."⁷ While these images insist on the almost fluvial nature of memory, its uncontainable fluidity - whereby the title of Phillips's fifth novel

Crossing the River takes on yet another meaning - they also focus on the tension between the desire to forget and the impossibility of forgetting the unforgettable that affects the children of the diaspora, also a major preoccupation in the writing of other diasporic novelists like Fred D'Aguiar. Forgetting and remembering, Phillips shows, are equally tormenting, as the examples of both Cambridge in the eponymous novel and Edward Williams in *Crossing the River* testify. While to Cambridge, "murdering the memory" of the Middle Passage causes distress "at least as great as that suffered whilst enduring the voyage,"⁸ to Edward memory is just like "an open wound,"⁹ something he bears within himself.

The diaspora is again at the heart of *The Atlantic Sound*,¹⁰ a book of non-fiction, which explores the legacies of the slave trade and seems to have played a significant role in shaping Phillips's "Atlantic Home." Like many of his novels, this book has a ternary topography that follows the lines of the infamous triangle: it takes us to the English port of Liverpool, to Elmina in Ghana, and to Charleston in South Carolina. It reminds us of the indissoluble links that the three places have woven with the slave trade and with each other, although these have been romanticised, thus blurred, in the case of Elmina, and conveniently obliterated in the other two cities, where "history is so physically present, yet so glaringly absent from people's consciousness."¹¹ As its polysemic title indicates, the book undertakes to examine the past and present history of the "sound," or channel, of water called Atlantic, listening to the "sounds," or voices, of its protagonists, then "sounding" or probing the depths of their opinions and feelings. In this, Phillips seems to follow the advice he addresses to the silenced African slave transported to the Americas away from his native land: "Look. Listen. Learn."¹² Only then will he be able to evoke the "fragments of a former life" and the "shards of memory"¹³ even if these can "draw blood,"¹⁴ i.e. make

him suffer. Unlike the slave, however, Phillips has now achieved freedom of choice and is in charge of his own existence, as indicated by the recurrent, almost obsessive, use of the verb “decide” in the first two chapters of this new book.

Quite predictably, this intercontinental journey is also one of self-discovery for a writer with such a complex background, who has been described as a “citizen of the world.”¹⁵ The prologue to *The Atlantic Sound* focuses on his voyage from the Caribbean to England aboard a banana boat, a re-enactment of his own parents' migration from St. Kitts to the Mother Country when he was just an infant. Free from the “nervous anticipation”¹⁶ his parents felt when reaching England, Phillips fleetingly thinks he has found home when he sights the white cliffs of Dover: “For one brief moment I imagine that a chapter in my own personal narrative has closed....I have arrived. I imagine - desire – closure.”¹⁷ Yet the ensuing unsentimental exploration of the African diaspora, which ends with a visit to a community of African-Americans who have “come home”¹⁸ to the land of their biblical ancestors in Israel annihilates this short-lived confidence. Phillips is then led to conclude that “There is no closure”¹⁹ and that “It is futile to walk into the face of history.”²⁰ However central to his own identity construction, then, Britain cannot unproblematically become his only home, nor can Africa or America for that matter, for history dictates a different choice, more intricate and less reassuring perhaps, but the only way for the displaced individual of ever achieving some kind of meaningful belonging.

One of the driving forces behind this investigative book may be Phillips's wariness of the diaspora as a blanket concept, and now often hackneyed term, that could magically solve the identity conundrum of the twentieth-century postcolonial.

In this abstract form, the diaspora indeed runs the risk of being exploited either economically or intellectually. Ironically enough, these two forms of abuse were the primal causes of the African diaspora because they initiated the slave trade and colonisation through the lure of gain, later justified by the European 'need' to civilise the savage Other. As Phillips repeatedly points out in this long essay, the diaspora is now too often idealised as a convenient myth of origin and authenticity with sectarian overtones. In this perspective, Mother Africa, erroneously presented as "One Africa,"²¹ a single and static entity, very much as in the colonial period,²² is viewed by many of its now displaced children as the solution to "whatever psychological problem they possess."²³ No wonder, therefore, if such a simplified conception of the diaspora has led to a tourist industry that helps the mostly American returnees not only "to liberate their spirits,"²⁴ which is welcome, but also to "view history through the narrow prism of their own pigmentation,"²⁵ which may eventually result in intolerance. Throughout his stay in Ghana, Phillips is determined to spot the incongruities of this "roots" trade which fails to make tourists aware of the very system of oppression it is supposed to denounce or at least oppose. For instance, Phillips wonders about the wreath in the form of a cross used to commemorate the victims of anti-colonial struggles,²⁶ because it is a clear reminder that Africans are now actors in the Christian religion which played a major role in their erstwhile enslavement. In a similar vein, Phillips also comes to see the New World tourists as neo-colonialists of sorts, particularly a group of undisciplined Jamaican "pilgrims" who take by storm the hotel where he is staying and cause a "diasporan crisis."²⁷

Again and again, Phillips shrinks from the "overstatement"²⁸ that a romantic view of the diaspora entails. Not only does this sentimentalism erase the many complexities of human life, those very complexities which make it impossible for

Phillips ever to give a satisfying answer to the problematic question, “Where are you from?”²⁹ But it also promotes an exclusive, as opposed to an inclusive, view of identity which cannot but be sterile, as symbolised by the setting of the book's last pages which are also written in an arid prose characterised by fewer verbs and shorter sentences. The Negev desert where the African-American “Hebrew Israelites” have settled for good indeed stands in stark contrast to the ocean, a space without borders, whose unpinnable fluidity accommodates metamorphoses, even though the deep is not without its own dangers. The desert, on the contrary, crystallises the dry and disciplinarian life of the new community which claims to have succeeded in eradicating crime and violence, but also, more ominously, welfare and homosexuality.³⁰ Presented by its supporters “as though it were a celestial compound of heaven here on earth,”³¹ the black Hebrew community is a place from where it is possible to speak “without doubt. Without anxiety. Without ambiguity,”³² a utopian society indeed suggestive of a “New World Order,”³³ but a ghetto-like one which, for Phillips, may not be very different from the protracted plantation system the American settlers wanted to escape, and which does not bode well for the future of humanity.

How, then, does Phillips respond to the diasporan excesses just described? Very much as in his fiction, it is mostly through form and characterisation that he energises the diasporic threatened by the theoretical straitjacket. A central narrative in three parts framed by a prologue and an epilogue, the juxtaposition of stories that interweave through similar situations and language, and the wave-like movements of a text that constantly flows forward and backward, like the sea, are just three of the formal techniques reminiscent of his novels and their diasporic quality. Another similarity with his fiction is the focus on several figures who are part of the history of

the diaspora either by virtue of their birth and experience, like the African, John Ocansey, who visits Liverpool on business in the nineteenth century, or by virtue of their achievement, like the American, Judge Waties Waring, a white man who championed the civil rights of blacks in the USA in the 1950s and was, for that reason, made an outcast in his own home. Interestingly, what Phillips says about his fiction seems to apply perfectly to his non-fiction: “you subvert people's view of history by engaging them with character. I don't think you subvert it by arguing schematically about ideas.”³⁴ Though his non-fiction never achieves the emotional intimacy of the first-person narratives to be found in his novels, these methodological overlappings may point to a blurring of the borders between fiction and non-fiction, thus ultimately to a disruption of the conventional genres and thereby to a dismantling of the “dominant narrative of a unified, homogeneous nation,” which, according to Bronwyn T. Williams, typifies Phillips's diasporic fiction as a whole.³⁵

So, though apparently quite different from each other, the life-stories from the past and the present that *The Atlantic Sound* contains demystify the diasporic myth by highlighting the intricacies of individual lives. They also show, as pointed out in a very perceptive review of the book, that “the intellectually honest approach to the past, which we must keep revisiting from the ever-shifting perspective of today, is through the imagination rather than through ideology.”³⁶ This emerges clearly through the story of Philip Quaque, an eighteenth-century England-educated African missionary who lived in a West African fort, in the “remarkable twilight world of inter-dependence and fusion which characterised the relationship between the native and the European in this period before the concrete formality and racial separation of the colonial period.”³⁷ Although Quaque never expressed indignation at the humiliation suffered by his fellow Africans, Phillips still admires the dignity and

restraint of this figure whose ambivalence makes him unworthy of being celebrated by the diaspora. Strategically placed in the middle of the Panafest, i.e. a celebration of African cultural unity, Quaque's paradoxical narrative seems to fly in the face of the Pan-Africanist model according to which an idealised, black and white past should be retrieved as a key to the future.³⁸ Such a view means leaving the door wide open to manipulations so that, far from being informed of an African collaboration in the slave trade, Ghanaian school children are taught "that those sold into slavery were not always that good, and that in some respect they got what they deserved."³⁹ For Phillips, on the contrary, the past "surges like a mighty river" that "empties into the present;"⁴⁰ it cannot therefore be tamed but should be taken with all its ironies, even the unpalatable ones. If one goes on with the aquatic metaphor mentioned at the beginning in relation to Phillips's oceanic home, one could say, in the words of Diran Adebayo, that the supporters of Pan-Africanism "[swim] against the tide of history,"⁴¹ while Phillips allows himself to be swept by its waves and even yearns to be part of it, the better to plumb its depths.

Stories such as Quaque's, but also their juxtaposition with contemporary tales, counteract the amnesia that characterises the Eurocentric and Afrocentric agendas alike by underlining how the present is but a repetition of the past, also a major motif in Phillips's fiction, especially in *The Nature of Blood*.⁴² This focus on the actual effects of history on the present is also one of the major differences that distinguish Phillips's approach from Gilroy's in *The Black Atlantic*⁴³ where, as a critic has pointed out, slavery "becomes nothing more than a metaphor."⁴⁴ For Phillips, on the contrary, slavery may have been abolished in the New World, yet some people still live like slaves of sorts, like the Burmese crew of the boat on which he crosses the Atlantic. Moreover the past is never completely over, as John Ocansey's experience in

nineteenth-century Liverpool suggests. Not only is it full of images that evoke clichés now often associated with third-world countries, such as his meeting with insistent beggars and a shoe-shine boy, his visit to an orphanage, and his confrontation with procrastinating officialdom. It also contains all the elements of the unromantic reality that Liverpool would like to keep under wraps, but, as Phillips's own tour of the city makes clear, are still to be seen and appear, negatively as it were, in the city's monuments, the vestiges of its "former imperial splendour."⁴⁵

Phillips's constant focus on the isolated individual, himself included, is another feature that this book shares with his novels. Though this solitariness may be read as a rampart against dehumanising systems, whether colonialism or the diaspora, as a theory it certainly does not preclude a belief in a community of experience, of uprootedness and dismemberment, that binds the descendants of the African diaspora, but which also links them to other dispossessed peoples like the Jews, as he most clearly suggests in *The Nature of Blood*. Yet, this collective identity is never allowed to take over the individual sense of self, which remains central, since displacement is first of all lived in a personal mode, a painful experience which, Phillips shows, is a far cry from the glamour and adventurousness that one sometimes associates today with trans-national living. As *The Atlantic Sound* makes clear, there is no natural, *a priori* solidarity based on phenotype or nationality, either in the past or in the present. The story of the Ghanaian, Mansour, a story full of concrete details that point to the constant vexations of his life as an illegal immigrant in today's England, most forcefully illustrates this: he is eventually denounced to the police by one of his fellow nationals, his best friends turning out to be Pakistani and Danish. But the book does not idealise interracial relationships either, for we realise through the story of the American judge that they are seldom devoid of ambiguities, of a "dependency of

sorts,”⁴⁶ all the more difficult to unravel because they are most often left unsaid. For Phillips, then, there is no single, immovable allegiance, but several of them, such as class, religion, or even sport, which combine and fluctuate over space and time to make each individual a unique being always in becoming. Phillips's only dedication is to what has been called “a state of perpetual wandering,”⁴⁷ embodied in the ocean, which, as a repository of history and as a gateway to the unconscious, paradoxically conveys a form of belonging as well.

Appropriately for a volume of non-fiction, the tone and attitude that Phillips adopts to communicate his reflections prove to be the most significant strategy in his attempts to counterbalance the “overstatements” of a simplified diaspora. What strikes first in his approach is his analytical distance, which several reviewers have compared to the by now legendary aloofness of V. S. Naipaul. To me the comparison does not hold, for even if Phillips's humour in this book is sometimes mockingly ironical, even sardonic (as when he comments on African driving habits and faulty timekeeping), it never conveys scorn as his Trinidadian peer's does. Rather, while being very critical, Phillips's rational approach does not prevent him from grasping, as Derek Walcott does, that “the African revival [can be] an escape to another dignity,”⁴⁸ as shown by the dance in Charleston of young African women whose “sinewy bodies weave invisible threads that connect them to the imagined old life.”⁴⁹ Phillips's intellectual undertaking is indeed always associated with a profound sympathy for human nature and its yearning for an elsewhere that can be called home, be it the Western world for the African, or Africa for the Westernized blacks.⁵⁰

As I have tried to show, in spite of his rejection of the soppieness that is sometimes the reverse of the diasporan coin, Phillips is aware of “deep wounds that

need to be healed.”⁵¹ For him, however, the healing process, if any, requires a courageous acceptance of the past, not the escapist amnesia that characterises the places he visits in this travelogue. Diaspora as understood by Phillips could thus be a useful tool in such a healing process, because its rich connotative web - combining both dispersal and togetherness, the larger historical upheavals and the individual stories - conveys a tension that invalidates attempts at exclusion, but can still lead to a sense of paradoxical belonging embodied in his “Atlantic home.” To quote Walcott again, Phillips knows that “what is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew.”⁵² And obviously this is what he does for the diaspora in this book.

Notes

¹ Martha Baker, “Well-traveled Caryl Phillips unpacks as he writes,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (25 January 2000).

² Caryl Phillips, *Strange Fruit* (Ambergate: Amber Lane Press, 1981), p. 77. Further references to this edition are given with the abbreviation *SF*.

³ *SF*, 99.

⁴ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Tidalectics: Charting the Space/Time of Caribbean Waters,” *SPAN*, 47 (October 1998,18-38) 24.

⁵ See my “Crossing a ‘Human River of Shattered Lives’: Caryl Phillips’s Diasporic Fiction/Vision,” *Literary Criterion*, 35. 1&2 (2000), 157-169.

⁶ Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground* (London: Viking, 1989), 180.

⁷ Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 181. Further references to this edition are given with the abbreviation *C*.

⁸ *C*, 156.

⁹ Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 43.

¹⁰ Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber, 2000). Further references to this edition are given with the abbreviation *AS*.

¹¹ *AS*, 93.

¹² AS, 221.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “A Citizen of the World,” *Newsweek* (10 May 1999), 63.

¹⁶ AS, 16.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ AS, 216.

¹⁹ AS, 220.

²⁰ AS, 221.

²¹ AS, 175.

²² AS, 81.

²³ AS, 172.

²⁴ AS, 137.

²⁵ AS, 178.

²⁶ AS, 138.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ AS, 148, 171.

²⁹ AS, 98.

³⁰ AS, 169.

³¹ AS, 170.

³² AS, 216.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Crossing the River: Caryl Phillips Talks to Maya Jaggi,” *Wasafiri*, 20 (Autumn 1994), 26.

³⁵ Bronwyn T. Williams, “‘A State of Perpetual Wandering’: Diaspora and the Black British Writers,” *Jouvert* (<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v3i3/willia.htm>).

³⁶ “Ethnic Identity: A Novel Eye,” review of *The Atlantic Sound* (*The Economist*, London, 17 June 2000), 13.

³⁷ AS, 141.

³⁸ AS, 116.

³⁹ AS, 117.

⁴⁰ AS, 220.

⁴¹ Diran Adebayo, "Africa and 'home,'" review of *The Atlantic Sound* (*Times*, London, 11 May 2000), 26.

⁴² Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber, 1997).

⁴³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁴⁴ Joan Dayan, "Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor," *Research in African Literatures*, 27.4 (Winter 1996, 7-14), 7.

⁴⁵ AS, 84.

⁴⁶ AS, 197.

⁴⁷ Bronwyn T. Williams, "A State of Perpetual Wandering."

⁴⁸ Derek Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says', *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber, 1998), 8.

⁴⁹ AS, 213.

⁵⁰ As Pauline Melville puts it in her collection of stories *Shape-Shifter*, in relation to the Caribbean sense of exile: "We do return and leave and return again, criss-crossing the Atlantic, but whichever side we are on, the dream is always on the other side." Pauline Melville, *Shape-Shifter* ([1990] London: Picador, 1991), 149.

⁵¹ AS, 172.

⁵² Walcott, "What the Twilight Says," 9.