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Negotiating (with) the Other: Prostitution, Double Consciousness and Diaspora in Caryl Phillips' *The Atlantic Sound* and V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*

Caryl Phillips's most recent travel book, *The Atlantic Sound*, and V. S. Naipaul's latest novel, *Half a Life*, both discuss how the mobility that characterises contemporary life shapes the journeys and encounters between diasporic peoples in a neutral, or third space to use Homi Bhabha's term, half-way between "home" and nowhere.¹ In his travel narrative, Phillips reads three historic ports of the Black Atlantic against the grain of the history of enslavement of African peoples, by contrasting and comparing Liverpool, West Africa and the American South of old with their late twentieth-century counterparts. Naipaul's equally ambitious fiction, expansive in its geographical scope, chronicles its protagonist's birth and upbringing in India, his mediocre studies at an English university, and his move to an unnamed African country to follow his lover, Ana. Unlike the communitarian focus of Phillips's historically significant journey and narrative, Naipaul's *Half a Life* is markedly individualistic and misanthropic in its worldview. However, both texts depict a homosocial triangle that develops between two fellow male travellers (*The Atlantic Sound*) or sojourners (*Half a Life*) and young, ethnically Other prostitutes in

seedy bars in a foreign locale—Costa Rica for Phillips’ travelogue and Mozambique for Naipaul’s novel. Such illicit meetings between European-educated narrators and exploited members of the African diaspora allow Phillips and Naipaul to explore the national, gender and economic dimensions that the contemporary wave of deterritorialisation or displacement exert upon narratives of seduction and self-construction. Acting simultaneously as the enforcers and victims of a European imperial set of racial prejudices, the young prostitutes in each narrative (re)present an abject sexuality which claims to be both discerning and affordable. By reading the seedy bars/brothels in *The Atlantic Sound* and *Half a Life* as “diasporic public spheres,” to use Arjun Appadurai’s term in *Modernity at Large*, and discussing the relationship between narrators and their European peers as homosocial triangles, I suggest that both Phillips and Naipaul cynically read encounters between members of the same (or even different) diaspora(s) as inescapably commercial rather than motivated by nostalgia or historical curiosity.² There is no element of recognition or emotional sense of homecoming in these chance meetings between diasporic peoples in either of these cold narratives.

My comparison between these two texts from different genres, a travel narrative and a novel, is made possible by the structural similarities of the encounters they each recount between the narrator in a foreign country and a “native” prostitute. Male protagonists in V. S. Naipaul’s fiction often frequent prostitutes as in *The Mimic Men* and in the London episodes of *Half a Life*, to name only a few examples, but these trysts more often result in humiliation and failure than in a sense of pleasure and release. In the early sections of *Half a Life*, Naipaul describes the initiation of young boys to sex in the Caribbean through Percy, Willie Chandran’s Jamaican roommate, who coldly speaks of

“practising on the little girls.”³ It could be argued that Percy’s matter-of-fact tone is more objectionable than Naipaul’s portrayal of Willie’s sex with child prostitutes if only because the young Jamaican girls in question have no say over what happens to them and do not even stand to profit from their involuntary role as “training ground” for adolescent boys. Some semblance of Western morality is restored when the reader finds out that Willie Chandran looks “shocked”⁴ upon hearing Percy’s off-hand comment. Rather than discussing all of Willie’s sexual transactions with prostitutes in the novel, in this essay I consider only those encounters which take place outside England and involve members of different diasporic communities.

Chronicling this sexual dynamic is more of a departure for Caryl Phillips, whose works of fiction are often praised by critics for their sensitive depictions of what are usually considered to be “women’s issues”—such as Martha’s loss of a grown child in the “West” segment of *Crossing the River*, the stillbirth of Emily’s baby in *Cambridge*, and the recovery from a forced abduction and rape in the “Heartland” section of *Higher Ground*. Although Phillips does portray an interracial encounter between an older European Jewish man and a Ethiopian immigrant-turned-prostitute in Israel in the novel *The Nature of Blood*, the episode follows the conventions of a fairytale romance instead of showing us the underbelly of the international trade in cash crops, such as bananas, as happens in *The Atlantic Sound*. Like the isolated Willie of Naipaul’s *Half a Life*, Phillips strives for narrative objectivity in his travel account and therefore attempts to limit contact with his fellow passengers to a minimum. However, the prostitute incident in both texts marks a rare moment where each narrator experiences a deep level of intimacy with another male character by imagining how this acquaintance experiences sexual

arousal and seeks to satisfy his need for pleasure. As observers of this erotic negotiation and (potential) participants, Phillips-the-narrator and Willie Chandran address the social and ethnic hierarchies at play in the exchanges between diasporic peoples even as they also react to the trace of colonial morality left in these postcolonial spaces.

Appadurai calls these intrusions of international politics and commerce into the sexual arena, “tragedies of displacement,”⁵ occasioned by the manipulation of desire brought about by mass media, especially the “communicative genres,”⁶ among them television and cinema. In his reading of Mira Nair’s film, *India Cabaret*, Appadurai contends that these outlets of mass media shape the imagery of attraction and seduction which then become globally marketable. Because of the gender inequality in the diasporic model of capitalist interaction, males have full access to mobility and travel whereas females are more stationary. To attract their menfolk, then, these same women resort to performing a simulacrum of exoticism, rendering themselves unfamiliar or uncanny to increase their mystery and appeal. Local prostitutes, in turn, adapt their behaviour and appearance to meet their prospective customers’ expectations. Neither of the narrators, of *The Atlantic Sound* nor of *Half a Life*, ultimately provides enough description of the individual prostitutes for readers to objectify these women as attractive or sexy according to an arbitrary sense of aesthetic standards. What both Phillips and Naipaul demonstrate in these two texts, however, is that the rhetorical transaction of desire as a commodity that may be bought or sold may in fact depend more heavily on the discourse of racial hybridity than on abstract notions of ideal gender characteristics. Rather than arbiters of global sexual standards, the prostitutes become the arena through

which the male characters negotiate their relation to one another and to their respective “home” countries in these accounts.

In his non-fiction travelogue, *The Atlantic Sound*, Phillips incorporates a vibrant mixture of genres and writing styles as he traces and re-enacts significant journeys of the African diaspora. The book consists of five sections. The prologue describes Phillips’ anxiety aboard a banana boat as he counts down the days of the Atlantic crossing which separate him from his eagerly anticipated first sight of the white cliffs of Dover. The first chapter, “Leaving Home,” is a whimsical interplay of fiction, narrative historical account, and interview. The middle section, “Homeward Bound,” offers pithy character portraits and a pseudo-anthropological dissection of Panafest, a large-scale festival celebrating African culture and heritage meant to attract international tourists who are members of the African diaspora. In the final chapter, “Home,” Phillips demonstrates the bittersweet empathy he feels while telling the love story of a white southern judge and his wife in Charleston, South Carolina, set against a background of racial intolerance and hate crimes. The book concludes with a note of scepticism and wonder when describing a group of African American settlers in Israel in “Exodus.” Rather than delve into a discussion of Phillips’ postmodern re-enactment of the triangular trade of slavery and goods exchanged between Europe, Africa and the New World, I want to concentrate on his discussion of intra-Caribbean labour diasporas, briefly mentioned in the travel journal’s introductory essay.

As a black British passenger in a German banana boat setting sail from the French-ruled island of Guadeloupe, Caryl Phillips delights in recording and analysing other people’s responses to and deconstructions of him as an enigmatic cultural subject.

Simply put, none of his fellow passengers knows quite to make of Phillips as a traveller. During the trip itself, Phillips maintains such a strict level of authorial distance and objectivity that he refuses to divulge any personal information to any of his interlocutors, apparently in an effort to limit the scope of the various racial and national stereotypes into which his audience of interpreters try to force him.

Phillips's travel narrative constitutes a virtuoso performance of "double consciousness," more directly influenced by Paul Gilroy's articulation of the dilemma of "striving to be both European and black" in *The Black Atlantic* than by the regionally-specific context of W. E. B. DuBois's theory about the internal/external hybridity experienced by African Americans in the United States.⁷ Structurally, Phillips's chance encounter with a young prostitute in a seedy bar in Costa Rica takes place outside the Atlantic paradigm of the Middle Passage, although the chapter itself follows Gilroy in its use of the "ship" as a "chronotope" or a metaphor for movement through time and space in the Caribbean basin. Before describing the prostitute to the reader, Phillips discusses the racial makeup of the country he is briefly visiting: "The population is a mixture of black, Hispanic and Indian."⁸ Rather than discussing the effects of creolisation in Costa Rican society achieved through *mestizaje*, or racial intermixing, Phillips introduces the idea of diaspora when he briefly mentions the Jamaican immigration into the country and the institutionalised racism these emigrants faced until recently. The German captain informs Phillips that the port of Limon

has a very large population of Jamaicans who first came to Costa Rica at the end of the nineteenth century, and who were largely responsible for building the railroad which links the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Having finished their labouring, many of the Jamaicans settled in Limon and slowly began to learn Spanish. However, these days they are relearning English in order to get back in touch with their 'roots.'⁹

As Phillips tells it, the discontent among the Costa Rican Jamaicans is such that they are reconstructing their cultural heritage by learning English once more in the hope of one day returning to the “home” they left behind because of economic necessity.

Institutionally marked as national Others even as their linguistic assimilation means that their first language is Spanish, these “Jamaicans” are barred from owning property or joining fully into the life and politics of Costa Rican society.

Within *The Atlantic Sound*, the Jamaicans of Limon exist only as anecdotes.

Although he sees the evidence of their cultural contribution to the port city through an advertisement for an upcoming musical show, Phillips does not actually report encountering or interacting with anyone who might fit into this national/ethnic category. His own internal assumptions of what constitutes the Costa Rican musical scene are challenged when he reads the names of the bands featured: “Daddy Banton, Ragga by Roots, Rut by Nature, Weked Boys, Getto Fabulous and the Jamming Discomovil’, none of which seem particularly Costa Rican to me.”¹⁰ By quoting the captain’s account of the Jamaican labour migration to the port city, Phillips constructs both Limon and the bar, El Bohio, as a public diasporic sphere rather than merely a “contact zone,” between various cultures and/or nationalities. Arjun Appadurai introduces the concept of “culturalism” to explain the complex ways in which ethnicity and culture are interwoven into a constructed sense of otherness within a nation-state:

When identities are produced in a field of classification, mass mediation, mobilization, and entitlement dominated by politics at the level of the nation state, however, they take cultural differences as their *conscious* object. These movements can take a variety of forms: they can be directed primarily toward self-expression, autonomy, and efforts at cultural survival, or they can be principally negative in form, characterized largely by hate, racism, and the desire to dominate or eliminate other groups.¹¹

The “rooted” or semi-permanent nature of the Jamaican community in Limon means that the music scene in that area has changed to reflect their tastes, rather than catering to outsiders or tourists who might be looking for a particular transnational musical “Caribbeanness.” As agents of Jamaican “self-expression” within Costa Rican coastal society in Limon, then, Daddy Banton and company emerge as “positive” agents of culturalism within this paradigm. Yet, once more, since Phillips only reads about these musical groups’ upcoming performance rather than actually hearing them play, his reading of their names as un-Costa Rican is more a projection of his own internalised assumptions of the Costa Rican national and cultural character than at all indicative of the separatist Jamaican transnational identity these groups may (or may not) ultimately claim. His encounter with the self-exoticized Other is yet again postponed and mediated through the familiar—in this case, mass media advertisements.

In this confused internal border zone between “banana republics,” imbricated in commerce between first and third world countries, Phillips and his fellow British passenger, Kevin, have to negotiate their relation to one another and to the national/cultural Other in the bar when both men are propositioned by local prostitutes. Within this brief vignette, Phillips constructs a homosocial triangle of desire, to use Sedgwick’s term, whereby he narrates his white male companion’s attraction to and transaction with “a young prostitute who clearly has yet to pass through puberty.”¹² Previously, Phillips has described Kevin, a fellow British passenger, as “a man in his late forties who is travelling alone”¹³ who “is making this journey, without his wife, in order that he might relive his teenage years at sea and think about his future.”¹⁴ From the outset, then, Phillips codes Kevin’s desire as illicit, improper, and adolescent because it

involves relations outside both marriage and the law, as well as framed within an earlier discourse of “teenage” erotic adventures reminiscent of Humbert Humbert’s sexual perversion in Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Following this particular dynamic, the only physical description Phillips provides of the prostitute herself is of her extreme youth; to him, her body attests to its unripeness for sexual intercourse since she is so obviously (to him, at least) prepubescent. Thus, in this formulation, Phillips emerges as the agent of a normative and compulsory heterosexuality that rejects the said prostitute as an object of desire because her physical characteristics, or lack thereof, do not inscribe this child sex worker within an economy of desire predicated upon sexual difference. Since she lacks the outwards manifestations of femininity—noticeable breasts and hips—this sex worker is not attractive to him. Presumably, then, his sexual desire is more mature than Kevin’s arrested development.

The triangular tensions at work in this encounter, then, are not between Kevin, the prostitute and Caryl Phillips, as may first appear to be the case. In this triangle, Phillips functions as a mere observer since he is not interested in outbidding Kevin to secure the young girl’s sexual favours. Rather, by addressing the reading audience directly in the present tense in this account, Phillips courts our favor instead of that of the prostitute. By criticizing Kevin’s taste in women and clearly suggesting his paedophilia, Phillips the narrator echoes the conservative, Judaeo-Christian values which deem adult male sexual activity with children to be reprehensible. In an interesting twist to the British imperial assumptions about black male sexuality, Phillips here portrays the white, British tourist as the uncontrollable pervert, exploitative and predatory in his travels, all the while setting himself, as a black British male, as the epitome of self-control. In this episode, Kevin’s

actions mark him as every bit the savage, while Phillips emerges as a culturally-sensitive, enlightened traveller whose actions do not incur his audience's disapproval.

The libidinal economy of this episode in *The Atlantic Sound* becomes more complicated once Phillips himself becomes the focus of a different prostitute's attention. Age is no longer a factor in the transaction of pleasure, since Phillips does not report anything unusual about the prostitute's youth. The woman who approaches him does so as a member of the underclass, actively plying her trade. After describing the young woman who has captured Kevin's attention, Phillips narrates: "Her friend approaches me and whispers, 'Usually no coloured, but you I like.' As I try to uncouple insult from compliment, another girl approaches and whispers exactly the same words, in the same confidential manner."¹⁵ Racism, vanity, double consciousness, class oppression and linguistic "passing" are all at work in this exchange. As mentioned before, Phillips does not give any specific physical descriptions of the prostitutes he discusses. As readers, then, our only racial context within which to imagine these young women is Phillips' earlier description of the population of Limon as being a mixture of "black, Hispanic and Indian," in which the "Indianness" in question refers to the native inhabitants of Central America rather than to those of the Indian subcontinent. This is an important distinction since European plantation owners imported Indian "coolie" labourers as a cheap replacement for newly emancipated slaves in the Caribbean islands, like Trinidad, birthplace of V. S. Naipaul. While the (likely) transaction between Kevin and the prepubescent prostitute has all the elements of an imperial re-enactment of the white man exerting his economic power over the oppressed, racial Other to fulfill his sexual longing, the (potential) encounter between Phillips as a black British man and the creole or

racially hybrid prostitute is coded as an interaction between members of two (presumably) similarly oppressed groups.

However, the prostitute changes this power dynamic between herself and Phillips by asserting her superiority to him on the basis of her racial status as someone who is demonstrably (at least in her own estimation) not “coloured.” Although her words to Phillips convey her assessment of him as someone with surplus capital at his disposal, the prostitute apparently believes that the racial whiteness to which she lays claim gives her enough cultural capital when it comes to clients that she can exercise some degree of control over her own body by working according to a self-imposed general rule of “usually no coloured.” Thus, by informing Phillips of her normal or normative code of behaviour even as she expresses a sexual interest in him, the prostitute tries to flatter him by the implied suggestion that he must indeed be an exceptional “coloured” man to inspire such a breach. Then again, as a businesswoman plying her trade, there is no reason to believe the prostitute’s words are anything more than a slogan designed to attract more customers.

Phillips’ status as a “coloured” man in this context is the result of two different semiotic texts working in tandem. The first, and most obvious, is the pigment of his skin. The first prostitute determines that Phillips is “coloured” because his outward appearance matches her preconceptions of who is “coloured.” The second, more subtle, semiotic text at work in this determination re-inscribes the triangle of homosocial desire. To both the first and second prostitutes who approach him, Phillips is black or “coloured” in as much as he is not as white as Kevin. Thus, although these women communicate to Phillips their extra-ordinary sexual and monetary interest in his person, they also convey a sense that

the exception to their usual standards they are willing to make to sleep with Phillips is relational—his “coloured” identity is immediately rendered acceptable because he is in the company of a white man. If Kevin is taken, these two prostitutes will compete for Phillips’ attention and money. Conversely, since the younger, more “virginal” prostitute has claimed Kevin’s attentions, Phillips at least stands to get a girl because he is friends with the “real” (i.e. white) British man. The implied assumption of the prostitutes is that Phillips must hang out with Kevin in order to get prostitutes who would otherwise refuse to have sex with him.

For his part, Phillips’ own attempt to “uncouple insult from compliment” belies his own male vanity and self-delusion. He faux-naively interprets the prostitute’s words as if they were meant for him personally, and were therefore a true reflection of the woman’s desire for him, instead of regarding this statement as part of the prostitute’s professional discourse. This pose of innocence contrasts with the decidedly lecherous portrayal of Kevin that preceded it, to once again affirm Phillips’ more mature sexuality. This effect is rendered even more powerfully by the sudden materialisation of a second prostitute who echoes the first one’s proposal. Although this doubling structurally undercuts the first prostitute’s individuality, the general effect of having two women express their interest in seducing Phillips is to render him structurally more sexually attractive to his readers’ perception than is Kevin, who is the object of desire to only one childish/childlike sex worker. This effect is further strengthened by the fact that we never hear Phillips’ reply to this double proposal. In the narrative equivalent of a cinematic cut to a closing bedroom door, the next paragraph completely changes focus to discuss the

departure of another passenger from the banana boat from the larger expedition. A master of suspense, Phillips keeps his readers guessing as to the outcome of this erotic episode.

Just as he fails to satisfy our prurient curiosity, Phillips also neglects to elucidate another key mystery surrounding this scene; namely, the specific origin or ethnicity of the prostitutes in question. One way or another, this chapter has clearly established that both Phillips himself and the prostitutes belong to the transnational community of the African diaspora by beginning the chapter with a reference to the creoleness of his first interlocutor and guide, Gilbert Pyree. Phillips' claims of sameness therefore trump the prostitute's explicit assertions of difference. As he reports the encounter, the prostitutes proposition him in English. However, in the context of a Hispanophone nation, such as Costa Rica, and the captain's earlier discussion of a Spanish-speaking Jamaican community within Limon, the English words seem strangely unexpected. Because Phillips makes no mention of any particular accent nor quotes any further conversation, the Englishness of the proposal becomes uncanny in its gendered and racial implications. The prostitutes see Phillips as both "coloured" and "English speaking" and while they clearly define themselves as not-coloured, their brief use of English is not enough to clearly illustrate within which national framework they place either themselves or Phillips. The reader is left to wonder—do they see Phillips as either African American, Caribbean, British, or simply European? What other half of the equation do they supply to complement his brief moment of double consciousness?

The experience of double consciousness is a constant fact of life for the narrator of V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*. The novel opens in India, and then follows its narrator, Willie Chandran, as he studies in England and later moves to Africa with Ana, the

woman who becomes his wife. The African section of the novel is set in an unnamed African country modelled on Mozambique.¹⁶ As an exilic Indian intellectual living in his wife's estate with no fixed role or occupation, Willie exists in a no-man's-land of racial and class hybridity: he is clearly an educated person and a kept man, a "pure" ethnic Indian Other living above his station and among racially mixed European/African peoples. Although he spends eighteen years in the country, Willie has not become creolised. He and Ana have no children to tie them to the land; Willie has not opened a business or otherwise established any professional relationships with people other than his wife. Chandran's rootlessness marks him as a sojourner, a traveller whose stay in a given place is anything but permanent; in this respect, his status in Africa resembles that of both Phillips and Kevin as travellers in Costa Rica in *The Atlantic Sound*. None of them are at "home."

Like Phillips's pair of travellers, Willie Chandran's first encounter with child prostitutes is mediated by the presence of another man, Álvaro, the manager at a nearby estate who acts as unofficial guide to the nightlife. Willie Chandran triangulates his relationship to the prostitute he eventually hires through his imagined assumptions of what would arouse Álvaro's desire. As in the bar episode in *The Atlantic Sound*, the narrator's companion is considerably older and more established than the pre-teen prostitute. Willie describes Álvaro as "a small and wiry mixed-race man in his forties with an educated way of speaking."¹⁷ Unlike Phillips' travelmate, Kevin, whose whiteness was undiluted, Álvaro's racial hybridity places him in an ambivalent relation to power vis-à-vis the local "native" population. He clearly does not see himself as an African, yet he has no legitimate claim to the status of "second rate Portuguese" as does

Willie's wife, Ana, and their circle of friends who also "have an African grandparent"¹⁸ mixed in with their Portuguese heritage. Unlike almost everyone around him, Álvaro has "gone native" or creolised by marrying an African woman and having children. The ties of kinship he has developed in Africa unite him both to the land and to the people, but do not prevent Álvaro from exercising whatever degree of superiority his contested Portuguese "whiteness" affords him in this society.

In contrast, neither Caryl Phillips nor Willie Chandran have any children to tie them down to a particular location. Instead, they constantly portray themselves in the role of their parents' children: Phillips, by narrating how his mother spent her entire Atlantic Crossing memorising the easiest route from her cabin to the life boat so she could save her infant boy in the event of an emergency, while Willie Chandran measures his life against his father's achievements and his mother's silence. Their skin tones mark both Phillips and Chandran clearly as racial Others within the society in which they operate, but their parentage is not racially mixed. Caryl Phillips' parents are African-Caribbean people from St. Kitts while Willie Chandran's parents are both Indian. However, Naipaul's novel complicates the issue of race and class by making India's caste system a central concern of the novel's first section, which chronicles Willie's childhood. Willie's ethnic identity is fundamentally hybrid because he is the son of a high caste *Brahmin* and a woman of low caste. Thus, while the bar scene in *The Atlantic Sound* breaks down into two relatively pure extremes of Britain's imperial past, the white Englishman and the black Briton, facing an ethnically hybrid, under-age, gendered Other in a sexual arena, the same triangular dynamic in *Half a Life* plays out as an assortment of mixed-race

individuals facing one another in an open marketplace of desire for physical pleasure, social status and class advancement.

Whereas Phillips finds fault with his companion's arrested sexual development because of what he considers Kevin's inappropriate interest in a pre-pubescent prostitute in Costa Rica, Willie Chandran tries to understand the appeal of the young African prostitute to his guide, Álvaro. Before they even arrive at the bar, Álvaro instructs Willie about how to re-focus his adult male gaze to properly interpret the body language of the African girls and women around them:

Álvaro said, 'How old do you think that girl is?' I really hadn't thought; the girl was like so many others; I wouldn't have recognised her again. Álvaro said, 'I will tell you. That girl is about eleven. She's had her first period, and that means that she's ready for sex. The Africans are very sensible about these things. No foreign nonsense about under-age sex. That girl who looks like nothing to you is screwing every night with some man.'¹⁹

Álvaro considers the onset of menarche, not chronological age, to be the indicator of sexual maturity in young women. He therefore conveys a disgust for inappropriate sexual activity with prepubescent minors similar to that voiced by Phillips in his condescending description of Kevin's prurience in *The Atlantic Sound*, although neither man's standards of what constitutes the age of consent might meet with their readers' approval. While both men situate the earliest beginnings of femininity at puberty, for Álvaro, the acceptable age range begins around eleven, while Phillips makes no definite statement about an acceptable age for young girls to start engaging in sexual intercourse with forty year-old men.

For his part, even after becoming initiated into the process of semiotic reading of African bodies, Willie does not internalise these standards even after having sex with a

young prostitute. By consciously modelling his behavior, if not his desire, on the patterns taught to him by a cultural insider who is, nonetheless, not “African,” Willie engages in the same colonial mimicry that he first developed upon arriving in England. By having sex with a child prostitute, Willie behaves *like* one of the “second rate Portuguese” even though he is Indian. Willie Chandran also exerts the relative power afforded to him as a colonial agent who is not-“coloured” or, more precisely, not at all African by trading on his own exoticness much like the discerning prostitute(s) who approach Phillips and single him out as an exceptional “coloured” man in a rhetorical ploy to win his favors.

In his description of the physical transaction with a prostitute, Willie clearly establishes both himself and the young sex worker as ethnic outsiders within the African society they inhabit as well as within the bar in which they meet. Willie’s Indianness sets him apart from other patrons; though the sex workers are indeed African, they are not from that particular country, and are therefore strangers. Willie reports his moment of racial recognition without the possibility of establishing an alliance: “When I got used to the light I saw that many of the girls on the other side of the dancing area were not village girls from the interior, but were what we called Mohammedans, people of the coast, of remote Arab ancestry” (Naipaul 172). This reference to the prostitutes’ “Arab ancestry” firmly establishes this bar as a “diasporic public sphere,” where in one instance, members of three distinct diaspora communities—the Indian (Willie), the African (Álvaro) and the Arab (the prostitute)—meet. It also introduces the element of religious, rather than commercial or political, imperialism but portrays it as a failed project because of the young woman’s occupation. Willie’s gaze defines the girl paradoxically—as a Muslim prostitute, an Arab African.

Given the setting of their encounter, Willie reads these girls not as individuals, but rather as a group marked by their common occupation: prostitution. Momentarily, he empathises with the shame he imagines the African men must experience upon seeing their countrywomen sell themselves to foreigners. This brief, and isolated, instance fulfills the potential for a political recognition of a shared oppression promised, but not developed, by Phillips's encounter with the prostitute in *The Atlantic Sound*. The recognition does not, however, prevent Willie from personally participating in their oppression. Although he claims not to be interested in engaging the services of any of the prostitutes present, he does agree to accompany a girl who propositions him. As they have sex, Willie applies the semiotic reading skills Álvaro had taught him earlier in the evening; he interprets her body, looking for traces of Álvaro's desire: "I felt the girl's breasts; they were small and only slightly less hard than the rest of her. Álvaro would have liked those breasts; it was possible to imagine the stiff young nipples sticking up below a cheap village cotton dress."²⁰ After his encounter with the girl, Willie knows Álvaro more intimately because he himself has experienced, "what Álvaro lives for."²¹ For the first and only time in the novel, Willie alters his sexual behaviour specifically to conform to the colonial paradigm for subjugating the ethnic/racial Other.²²

Because he bases his physical actions on the desire of another man, Willie loses his sexual interest in the prostitute. Curiously, what replaces lust in Willie's male gaze at the young woman's hard breasts is anthropological curiosity: he reads her nipples not as objects of desire, but rather as an instrument of nourishment. By looking at the "spongy tip" on the "nipples of this little girl," he concludes: "she had already had a child or children."²³ At this key juncture, then, the very hard nipples which seemed attractive to

Álvaro because of their apparent youth, simultaneously convey a sense of physical maturity to Willie. Thus, rather than the virgin/whore dichotomy embodied by the pre-pubescent prostitute in *The Atlantic Sound*, Willie Chandran's girl/woman symbolises the continent of Africa as simultaneously a mother separated from her children and a whore that sells herself to strangers. Africa, thus, is both the place of origin of a diaspora as well as the victim of a continued oppression by European and internal tyrants.

Metaphorically, then, the tale of these encounters between the various diasporas—Indian, African and Arab in *Half a Life* and African and Jamaican in *The Atlantic Sound*—have no future because they come to nothing, in a Shakespearean pun. The meetings seem predicated on an observable difference in age—the men are considerably older than the prostitutes who service them, yet their very interest in such young women marks the men as sexually immature because they are fixated on an idea of youth. Even if the prostitutes themselves are having children as a result of these sexual interactions, as Willie Chandran conjectures, the illicit nature of the liaisons guarantees that the men do not father a lineage that will be recognised and carry on the family name. Willie first disowns his desire for the prostitutes, and then embraces it as a means of escaping from the physical constraints of his loveless marriage to his colonial wife, Ana. Phillips similarly distances himself as narrator from the events he chronicles by never reporting his answer to the prostitutes' double proposal. The outcome of Phillips' and Kevin's interaction with the extremely young prostitutes remains uncertain because Phillips refuses to provide any narrative closure to the episode; and changes the topic. By not explaining how he negotiated his way out of the experience of double consciousness, Phillips avoids providing a blueprint for others to navigate similar conflicts. In this, he

stays true to his novelist's calling by dramatising a situation rather than preaching about social change even as he writes a non-fiction account of his travels.

The aesthetics of diaspora portrayed in the bar episodes of *The Atlantic Sound* and *Half a Life*, then, are predicated upon a notion of the abject as the common experience that binds a disparate people together. By simultaneously expressing a desire to return to the womb of the mother country as sexual conqueror rather than as a child, Phillips's travel account and Naipaul's novel re-enact the colonial violence perpetrated upon the originary homeland by the invading forces, but without any of the monetary gain. Both texts also privilege the mobility of travel, which allows for a certain degree of anonymity, at the expense of the rootedness of a creole identity because it entails a commitment to a given (and known) racial/national/gender and cultural identity. By presenting the sexually charged space of the bar as the semi-private arena that mediates and facilitates encounters between and among diasporic communities, *The Atlantic Sound* suggests that a dispersed people cannot become one again except temporarily, while *Half a Life* suggests that the intimacies shared between oppressor and oppressed may be enough to challenge the entrenched prejudices within each individual community.

¹ Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (New York: Vintage International, 2001); V. S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

³ Naipaul, 67.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Appadurai, 38.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁸ Phillips, 10.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Appadurai, 147.

¹² Phillips, 11.

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ James Wood, "Saving Vidia," (*New Statesman* 130.4557, 2001), 79-80. Wood claims that the African country to which Willie Chandran refers as "Ana's country" is Mozambique.

¹⁷ Naipaul, 166.

¹⁸ Ibid., 136.

¹⁹ Ibid., 169.

²⁰ Ibid., 174.

²¹ Ibid., 175.

²² Thenceforward, Willie frequents these bars alone, looking to satisfy his own desires.

²³ Naipaul, 174.