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## Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* and the (Re)construction of racial identity

### Abstract

In his study of the revisiting of the form of the slave narrative by African- American authors in the 1970s and 1980s, Ashraf Rushdy argues that the primary motives for this literary disinterment were political. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, these writers 'wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject' (7). A parallel movement can be seen at work in the black British writer Caryl Phillips's fourth novel, *Cambridge* (1991).

DAVE GUNNING

## Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* and the (Re)Construction of Racial Identity

In his study of the revisiting of the form of the slave narrative by African-American authors in the 1970s and 1980s, Ashraf Rushdy argues that the primary motives for this literary disinterment were political. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, these writers 'wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject' (7). A parallel movement can be seen at work in the black British writer Caryl Phillips's fourth novel, *Cambridge* (1991). However, the political subject suggested by this novel is certainly not the unified and autonomous agent implied by Rushdy. The questioning of political identities based around static conceptions of race, gender, and class throughout the 1980s in Britain engendered a situation in which recognition of complexity and the dissolution of conceptions of fixed, essential identities seemed vital. The 'proliferation of new sites of social antagonism' based around the politics of identity and disputes around race, gender, sexuality, ecology, ethnic nationalism, and other 'single-issue' political articulations, required a fresh understanding of conflict and the subject positions created by unequal social relations (Hall and Jacques 17). In *Cambridge*, the complexities of history are dwelt upon and the totalising claims issued by the supposedly unitary monoliths of race, gender, or class are disturbed. The stories of Emily Cartwright, the plantation owner's daughter who travels to inspect her father's holdings on an unnamed Caribbean island, and of Cambridge, the African whose two periods of suffering as a slave are punctuated by a period as a free man in England, are each closely based on original nineteenth-century sources. Through occupying the forms that have been inherited from the past, Phillips is able to reconstruct the ideologies inherent in these modes of writing. However, in his decision to present these accounts together, placing the voice of the well-off white English woman alongside the voice of the male black slave, Phillips demands that tensions between moments of harmony and discord unsettle the easy categorisations that were made at that time and resonate into the present day. By re-enunciating past understandings of social distinction and conflict, the obscured yet sustaining principles of today's complex political fashionings may be disclosed. Writing in the context of British anti-racist politics, Alastair Bonnett stresses the need for whiteness to be deconstructed and interrogated for the sake of the continuing utility of the anti-racist project. He laments that with

the era of the 'ethnic assertiveness' of the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was only the essential black subject that was made the subject of critique, while the envisioning of whiteness as essential and unitary in meaning continued unabated (123). *Cambridge*, as an intervention stemming from precisely this moment of race relations in Britain, participates within the work of critical re-assessment of identity politics by staging one of the formative textual moments of the idea of whiteness. The success of this political act is crucially dependent upon the particular stylistic choices made by Phillips, and particularly upon the mode of his manipulations of the archival texts. In reconstructing the particular boundaries of racial identity that can be found within these remnants of a colonial era, Phillips is able to draw our attention to the very fact of their construction. The contemporary reader is asked to question their own assumptions about the constituents of a racial self.

Evelyn O'Callaghan's 1993 reading of *Cambridge* looks to identify the accounts from which the novel is constructed. O'Callaghan identifies many of Emily's words in the novel as a pastiche of travel writings by authors including Matthew 'Monk' Lewis, Lady Nugent and Mrs Carmichael:

I do not refer simply to the narrative's conventional form and use of nineteenth-century 'polite' English, but to specific incidents, phrases, even whole passages in the novel which are deliberately 'lifted' from the source documents. (36)

She also notes that *Cambridge's* narrative is heavily reliant on Olaudah Equiano's autobiography (38–39); Phillips has ransacked the archive in order to seize fragments of these sources and assemble them within his novel. O'Callaghan argues that this helps to establish the 'authenticity' of Phillips's fiction but also that 'the deliberate, even ostentatious, borrowing from and echoing of source material ... focuses attention on the *connection* between the fictional and historical narratives' (39). However, despite establishing this 'connection', O'Callaghan proceeds seemingly to confuse aspects of the 'fictional' and 'historical' in her reading of Phillips's novel. She recognises that the forms of the travel journal and slave narrative are often inflected with a degree of 'self-conscious artificiality' as the authors struggle with the burden of being both subject and object of their tale, but goes on nonetheless to identify these ambiguities and evasions as no more than strategies through which Phillips 'lulls us into a sense of familiarity only to jolt us out of it' (43). It is not the case, as O'Callaghan seems to claim, that Phillips writes contradictions such as Emily's shifting evaluations of both planters and slaves so that 'the text's apparent familiarity ... is subtly destabilised by strategies [that] shock the reader into awareness of incongruities and discordance below the conventional surface' (45). One can easily find this 'discordance' on 'the conventional surface' without any need to excavate below.

In Matthew Lewis' *Journal of a West India Proprietor, 1815–1817*, the most heavily utilised of Phillips's sources, the reader can easily locate moments where the categorisations of the slaves employed by the author seem subject to

slippage. Sometimes Lewis is able to paper over these gaps with the use of his self-deprecating humour (in which he, of course, nevertheless remains master). Occasionally, however, he seems to remain unaware of the absurdity of his account — such as where, following a digression on how content the ‘negroes’ are with their position, he laments their unfortunate habit of wishing to poison their masters (126). Phillips does not need to insert such instances of ambiguity into the colonial sources from which he liberally borrows in order to demonstrate their instability; the ambiguity is already there.

It is significant that the two principal accounts in *Cambridge* (those of Emily and of Cambridge) are inspired by ‘privileged texts’ that already exist in contradiction with one another. There is no need for the author to undercut a definitive account, for it is doubtful that such an account exists. To raise the ontological question of whether such an account could exist is irrelevant; Phillips is interested in the epistemological characteristics of the texts he investigates. His awareness of the already-existing complexity of the historical archive motivates an exploratory heuristic, not a call for refutation. Rather than denying the veracity of the accounts he addresses, he shepherds them into an encounter that may enable more profound readings.

The prologue that guides the reader into Emily’s narrative ends with two short paragraphs: ‘England. / The truth’ (4). In leaving the metropolitan centre, Emily abandons the structures of certainty that have so far shaped her experience. However, the resonance of ‘truth’ persists throughout her journals. She wishes explicitly to create a record of her ‘observations, for good or ill’ (7) and to approach the experiences that await her with what she believes to be an open mind. The lists and regulations with which she subsequently fills much of her journal are reminiscent of the ‘scientific’ form of the categorising list integral to the travel narratives of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Pratt 15–37). In clinging to these systems to organise data, Emily believes she can achieve a true knowledge of her Caribbean stay that is initiated by ‘breaking the last remaining link with a past that I understood’ (22). Bénédicte Ledent argues that ‘one senses [Cambridge] is slightly more trustworthy than Emily for his story operates on a narrative rather than merely descriptive mode’ (94); within the terms set out in the novel, however, the reader is given no reason to accept his ‘facts’ over those given by Emily. Indeed, Cambridge’s wish to portray ‘the truth as it is understood by David Henderson (known as Cambridge)’ (167) rests on exactly the same empirical understanding of knowledge claims that informs Emily’s scientific approach. His statement of intention can be usefully contrasted with that given in one of the source texts, Equiano’s *Narrative*, in which the author explicitly indicates the pedagogical purpose of his text in hoping that it ‘promotes the interests of humanity’ (1). Neither of Phillips’s narrators declares such vested interest but instead cling to a notion of wishing to present the facts as they have experienced them. The unspoken assumption here is that such ‘disinterested’

reportage is the pathway to truth; in fact, it allows Phillips firmly to delineate the then-current discursive boundaries of 'the true'.

Paul Sharrad describes the fact that Cambridge is in some ways 'silenced' within the novel as a 'technical problem' that Phillips is required to overcome in order to 'make present the absences of history' (206). On the contrary I would suggest that it is precisely these silences within both Emily's and Cambridge's narratives that Phillips wishes to concentrate upon. In the novel, Phillips is keen to take the forms inherited from the past and push them to the limits of what can be said within their registers. The silences that then open up, the apertures that disturb the creation of meaning within these diegetic accounts, provide much of the force of *Cambridge*. Alasdair Pettinger has suggested that the classic slave narratives present lacunae that demand revisiting by the contemporary imaginative writer (xviii). These lacunae are revisited by Phillips in *Cambridge*, although he does not do so with the intention to repair or reconstruct but rather with a wish to explore the absences, to mount an investigation of the discursive circumstances that led to their appearance and persistence across history.

However, Phillips' novel should not simply be understood as an anthology of the source documents. He selectively builds his fiction from a variety of sources and his novel contains many incidents and rhetorical strategies that are absent from any of them. It is an act of creative re-writing far more than one of plagiarism. Phillips' text speaks to its late-twentieth-century context through exactly these means. While the words we read may be often taken directly from the past, the organising consciousness that brings them together (and, indeed, the ideological milieu in which they are received by the reader) is wholly contemporary. Phillips does not aim so much to rewrite history as to restage it; under his manipulation, particular events and relationships can be emphasised. The effect is to focus our attention on precisely those places where the racial discourses of colonial slavery strained for hegemony. Recognising the difficulty involved in constructing and sustaining the tropes of whiteness at this crucial time in the formation of racial knowledge, the reader is asked to reconsider how their own understanding of whiteness is sustained.

Many of *Cambridge's* valuable perspectives on nineteenth-century thought and of the historical construction of whiteness are achieved by carefully engineering the circumstances of the accounts Phillips presents, and by far his most significant manipulation is his use of gender. As noted above, the most frequently utilised of the source narratives is Matthew Lewis' *Journal*. Many of the descriptions of landscape, people, and situations in *Cambridge* are taken from its pages, often with very little alteration. However, the plot of the novel is dependent on Emily's identity as a woman. Her femininity dictates much of what happens to her and determines the ways in which she reacts. This impacts forcefully on the manner in which Lewis's writing can be utilised.

It is precisely because of Emily's marginality that the lacunae that reveal the precariousness of the prevailing discourse come to light. She exists simultaneously as white mistress and as sidelined female and the difficulties of maintaining this position become increasingly evident. Her total reliance on Brown to quell the disturbance among the slaves who ostensibly belong to her is an example of this:

As soon as [the house-servants] think me out of earshot they renew their animal chatter as though I am in some way responsible for this disagreeable situation. They obviously assume that I am prejudiced on the side of the young overseer in this irksome dispute, but in this they are mistaken. I am merely waiting for Arnold to dispense his justice, being confident that whatever decision he reaches will most likely be the correct one.  
(119–20)

Emily fails to recognise the 'responsibility' that her class and race bring about, reasoning (perhaps correctly) that the powerlessness dictated by her gender overrules these apparent privileges.

In refiguring the events of Lewis's *Journal* to make them a part of Emily's experience, Phillips is forced to stretch the bounds of historical plausibility. O'Callaghan identifies additional sources behind Emily's account such as Lady Nugent and Mrs Carmichael, but fails to point out the gap between the almost entirely domestic events chronicled in these records, and the more active part played by Emily. Lady Nugent's recorded contact with the 'poor blackies', for example, seems principally to consist of very occasionally teaching them prayers (Nugent 53). In Claudia Brandenstein's words, 'Lady Nugent is restricted in what she can do, where she can go, and how she can see and experience her journey ... a more limited repertoire of activities is available to her' (47). In contrast, Emily's experiences and descriptions of plantation life seem remarkably close to the events.<sup>1</sup> To allow her location at the heart of affairs, Phillips has to manipulate her narrative in several ways: she is unmarried, and therefore independent of the restraining hand of a husband; her father is the absentee landlord, allowing her a greater say in events on the estate (although this is less as a deputy or heir, and more as a spy or intermediary); and the death of Isabella before they even reach the island means that she is denied the buffers to which a woman of her class would be accustomed — she is forced to communicate directly with the slaves and, specifically, with her new maid, Stella.

Through these fictional adaptations, Phillips is able to create a female character whose narrative tests the very limits of what may be said in the discourse available to her. She is relocated at the edge of slave-owning-class white femininity. The absence of the traditional supports of the privileged white woman have left her especially open to the contradictions that exist on the fringes of ideology. Emily's relationships to her servants particularly put the boundaries of race and class under interrogation. Isabella and Stella (it is unlikely that the similarity between their names is accidental) are crucial in determining Emily's sense of herself. The

reliance Emily places on Isabella at the beginning of *Cambridge* suggests a bond of psychological dependency: 'there is nobody who knows more of the sorrows and joys of my heart than dear Isabella' (11). Isabella's death leaves a gap in Emily's life and the only available replacement, Stella, seems ill-suited to the task of filling it. Emily is torn between the need for female company and a confidant, and the inescapable fact of Stella's blackness. The difficulty Emily faces in trying to incorporate Stella discursively into her journal as simultaneously slave object and female subject is apparent when the housekeeper shifts from being a valuable piece of property — 'a fine breeder' (36) — to a carrier of feminine mystique — 'this dusky maiden' (37) — within the space of a couple of paragraphs. The restrictive and exclusive codes of plantation society ultimately render it impossible for Emily to accept Stella as a replacement for Isabella within the terms of her journal. The fact of race is, ultimately, non-negotiable in Emily's world: 'Stella is but a sad black imitation' (129). It is only in the extra-diegetic epilogue that Emily and Stella are allowed reconciliation and to begin to search for something that they might share (178). Within the historically and ideologically determined form of the journal, such an ending is impossible.

Emily's attempt to reproduce the values of her society, both through her actions and, crucially, through the textual record she creates, is always performed through reference to her gender. She explicitly links the discourses of class, race and gender in her criticism of West Indian society:

In this West Indian sphere there is amongst the white people too little attention paid to differences of class. A white skin would appear passport enough to a life of privilege, without due regard to the grade of individuals within the range of that standing. ... The other men, perhaps because I am a woman, have shown little courtesy in affording the attentions proper to my rank. ... This is barely tolerable amongst the whites, but when I find the blacks hereabouts behaving in the same manner I cannot abide it. (72)

Emily makes it clear that whiteness must consist of more than just skin colour and that, despite it being exactly whiteness which supposedly sets the slave owners above the enslaved, it requires a conscious moral effort to ensure that 'white' is to remain the privileged signifier in the plantation environment. She is also clear about her role as a white woman in ensuring that these rules of conduct are followed. The white woman becomes the epitome of whiteness while, tautologically, it is the very fact of this whiteness that allows her the space in which her femininity can first be constituted.

It is Emily's tragedy that her stay in the Caribbean brings the tripartite supports of her identity — whiteness, femininity, and class privilege — crashing down. She expresses an awareness of this impending collapse in her increasingly panic-stricken considerations of her father: 'Does he have no conception of what would claim us all in the tropics were we to slip an inch below the surface of respectability?' (127). Of course, Emily herself slips from her position of respectability through her affair with Brown and commences the slide to her



eventual destitution. Ryan Trimm draws attention to how Emily constructs this movement 'not as a loss but as a result of development and progression' (237) while Abigail Ward suggests that she 'both fears and desires such a conclusion' (125). Phillips's intricate portrayal of Emily's decline reveals the complexity of imperial constructions of otherness.

The catalyst for Emily's eventual demise is her sexuality. Richard Dyer has succinctly identified the bind to which white women are subject within racialised discourse: 'To ensure the survival of the race, they have to have sex — but having sex, and sexual desire, are not very white: the means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves pure white' (Dyer 26). Emily seems able to reproduce whiteness ideologically; it is the physical reproduction that seems thwarted. The fruit of her union with Brown is a stillborn child, a 'little foreigner' (183). The buffers that protect the sacred spaces of white femininity in England, the 'backboards, corsets and stays' that she so despises (4), are missing from her colonial experience and she soon becomes undone in their absence. The return of her repressed sexuality on the island initiates the dissolution of the security of racialised and gendered positions.

As the situation on the plantation worsens, Emily experiences a significant moment in which she seems to understand the conditions of her whiteness. She is at the peak of her affair with Brown (although his passion seems to be subsiding) and is also being courted by the plantation doctor, Mr McDonald. Having teased McDonald's infatuation and deliberately provoked his jealousy, 'I retired to my chamber and looked into my mirror. Perhaps the affections of all these men turn in due course to some brown-faced beauty' (122–23). It is possible to read these lines as a realisation of Brown's fading desire but, considering the situation from which she has just come, another interpretation seems likely. Given that she is at this moment the object of desire of at least two men, the 'brown-faced beauty' may well be her. She recognises that her recent adoption of the role of sexualised female has come at a price: that of her unblemished whiteness. Emily's stay on the island enacts a translation that not only severs her attachment to Britain but also similarly curtails her attachment to whiteness. Her acceptance of sexual desire, and increasing identification with Stella (and even Christiania) causes a disintegration of the persona based on fixed and interlocking senses of race and gender. That such thoughts enter Emily's consciousness while she contemplates her reflection indicate the seeds of this awareness in her imagination, although the codes and limitations of her writing forbid a more explicit recognition.

Emily's journal does not reach a resolution; indeed, given the ideologically-determined form of her writing, such an ending would be impossible. Subject to the relations extant on the plantation, Emily's carefully-preserved sense of self collapses. The form of the colonial travel journal can no longer support her as it too relies on these knowledges and Emily becomes no longer the subject or the object of her discursive construction. She falls through the gaps in that text

and can only be restored in the third-person epilogue. The instabilities of the colonial order that were elided by the construction of the ideal of white femininity at one remove from the realities of plantation society now come to the forefront as the vision of the white woman crumbles through its own contradictions. The unified subject of the travel narrative is deferred and Emily's precarious position eventually falters beneath the contradictions her text could no longer contain.

Significantly, the account of events provided by Phillips's eponymous slave does not function to fill in all of the absences and omissions of Emily's testimony. Trapped within the logic of the source documents as much as Emily, he is unable to transcend the ideological strictures of the forms through which he articulates. The material brutality of the slave system ensures his death and it is the white woman who is given the chance to inhabit a new voice. The catharsis of Emily's fall from privilege sows the seeds of an original perspective on the plantation dynamic.

For Gail Low, 'realisation of her complicit relation to the institutions of slavery is a necessary step in [Emily's] uneasy path to maturity' although this can only be achieved 'at a great price' (127). Part of this progress would appear to be the seemingly regressive step of having to abandon her position as subject of her own narrative. However, Phillips demonstrates that the ideological constraints inherent in the form of the narrative she was creating ultimately inhibited her expression of herself as a free agent. Emily's inability to complete her story in these terms can paradoxically be read as a triumph of her selfhood over the restraints upon her person imposed by her society. Referring to the epilogue of *Cambridge*, Graham Swift observes that the 'sense of a language that can talk about certain things suddenly bursting through Emily's own language in which she can't, is very volcanic' (Phillips & Swift 100). This final section, in which Phillips adopts the voice of a third-person narrator, is crucial to the novel. While the novel to this point has carefully reproduced the language contained in the historical documents that Phillips echoes, the epilogue shows him distancing himself from his sources, and searching for an original way to write about the scenes he stages.

Paul Sharrad argues that there is an 'unspoken but eloquent problematic at the heart of *Cambridge's* cool detachment', namely, 'how the modern post-colonial writer can speak objectively and with commitment about the hegemonic forces that shape his/her own life, language and literary production' (215). This problematic comes to the fore when Phillips is required to create a literary voice with which to end his novel. A striking feature of the epilogue is how little information is actually given. Not only is it relatively brief, but it also takes place entirely within one location (the semi-derelict Hawthorn Cottage) and over a short period of time (shortly after Emily's ill-fated labour). The earlier part of the novel saw Emily reaching a state of possible self-awareness that could not be expressed within the terms available to her. Phillips is now required to elucidate this awareness. He does so tentatively and with careful consideration of the fragility of the moment.

McDonald instructs Emily, ‘Please keep still and stop talking. Stop talking’ (178). Yet to stop talking and let the story rest is always to impose an arbitrary ending. Having reached this point, Emily is unable to stop. Unlike the record of her journal, which functioned to render the chaos of the real world into strict textual formations, Emily’s new state of consciousness resists any final meanings. In notable opposition to the chronology of a journal, events in the epilogue are presented out of sequence and sometimes more than once. Through this fracturing of time, Phillips’s protagonist is denied the chance to attach any single meaning to this new life she shares with Stella at Hawthorn Cottage. That her thoughts and impressions are now subject to constant revision can be seen in the novel’s repetition of the moment between McDonald’s statements ‘Strange fish’ and ‘I do hope my driver hasn’t made off without me’ (179–81). At the first time of relation, the silence of this moment is ‘peaceful’ and seems to fit with an image of Emily as numbed by her experience and unable to relate emotionally to what she has gone through but Phillips does not leave this interpretation unchallenged. The second account of this moment admits to the ‘unpleasant thoughts [that] broke into Emily’s bruised mind’ and reveals that the sought-after peace remains a state desired rather than achieved. Phillips seems unwilling to assign a final meaning to Emily’s fate. If the collapse of the discourses that previously had sustained her is seen as producing any positive effect, it is in how she is freed to act to some degree as an independent agent in forming her impressions of the world.

Phillips has argued that the writer’s ‘first responsibility is to locate the truth and to deal with the truth, particularly as it relates specifically to the characters’ (Davison 96). It is the pursuit of these subjective truths that motivates his wish to remain so faithful to the narratives upon which he draws in this novel. The anti-racist imperatives to ‘rewrite’ history, or to recuperate and make central the ‘other’, subaltern texts are seemingly rejected in the novel and Phillips instead dramatises the limits of what could be said within the iniquitous racial logics of that time. Rather than accepting any simplified idea of the politically and ideologically unified subject, in the past as much as in the present day, he is concerned to identify out how the discursive constructions of identity (and, especially, literary constructions) present monolithic versions of people who, outside the text, are necessarily infinitely more complex. The epilogue to *Cambridge* shows Phillips attempting to find a way of writing that refuses such closure and resists the imposition of fixed social and political identities. In doing so, however, what comes across most strongly is the fragility and transience of a voice that speaks outside of such supports.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Phillips at least once plays upon his ventriloquism of Lewis’s male voice through his female character. The processing of sugar syrup (see Lewis 1929: 79–81) is fully described before Emily admits her knowledge is second hand: ‘However, Mr Brown’s

explanation was so thorough that not only do I feel confident that I might explain the mysteries of this process to any stranger, but I am persuaded that I must myself have observed it in action!' (83). This moment might be read as the author's admission of his historical sleight of hand.

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