

Caryl Phillips

Introduction

Kathie Birat



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/4433>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.4433

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2017

Number of pages: 5-10

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Kathie Birat, "Caryl Phillips", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 40.1 | 2017, Online since 02 April 2021, connection on 22 May 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4433> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.4433>



Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.



Introduction

“A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children.” With these three short sentences, the opening lines of his fifth novel, *Crossing the River*, Caryl Phillips undertook an imaginative and intellectual journey that would involve an active engagement with a subject which had become a crucial and difficult one for writers on both sides of the Atlantic – the legacy of the slave trade. When he published the novel in 1993 he had already written four other novels focusing on the effects over time of the trade, particularly on people living in the Caribbean (*A State of Independence*, 1986) or those who emigrated to Great Britain (*The Final Passage*, 1985). He had already begun to use the polyphonic technique which he initiated with *Higher Ground* (1989) and which would allow him to explore different voices as a way of making audible the intimate suffering of those caught in the complex web of historical forces. With the publication of *Cambridge* (1991), he revealed his interest in the use of written sources like the slave narrative as a way of giving his fictional voices an authenticity grounded in the only remaining trace of the past, written archives.

Crossing the River, published in 1993, represents not necessarily a turning point in Phillips’s career, as it relies, like his two previous novels, on the use of historical archives and the creation of “a many-tongued chorus of common memory” (235) but nonetheless reveals an increased “sense of responsibility to history,” as Bénédicte Ledent points out in her monograph devoted to Caryl Phillips (107). Phillips has continued to weave connections between historical periods as a way of revisiting history through an imaginative recreation that calls upon the reader to see beyond the obvious landmarks and insidious stereotypes in novels like *The Nature of Blood* (1997) and *A Distant Shore* (2003). However, he has sought diverse ways of satisfying his desire to understand his own past along with that of all people displaced by history. In a recent conversation with John McLeod, Phillips evoked his working-class upbringing in Leeds, where his parents immigrated from St. Kitts, and explained how in his writing he was “trying to expand the vocabulary of who I was.”¹ He has done this by working in several genres, combining his fictional works with non-fictional essays like *The European Tribe* (1987), in which he explores questions of identity while travelling through Europe, or *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), where he once again takes on the voice of the travelling subject to investigate several poles of what he calls his “Atlantic home;”² the American South, Liverpool, Ghana. The careful attention he has paid to both history and its fictional representations has allowed Phillips to create a form of complementarity between his respect for the truth and his need for personal engagement. Without any taste for the sensational, for the fashionable attraction of difference and alterity, he has investigated the forgotten corners of history, bringing to life characters like Bert Williams, the vaudeville artist who is the subject of *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), and to which two of the articles in this

1. This conversation took place during the conference on Caryl Phillips entitled “Inhabiting the Voids of History” organised at the University of Caen Normandie by Françoise Kral, 23-24 May 2017.

2. Phillips uses this expression in the final essay of *A New World Order* (304).

collection are partially devoted (Mascoli and Pirker). In an interview with Diane Rehm, Phillips evoked his fictionalization of the life of Bert Williams as “a way to approach this very private man’s life” (“Caryl Phillips: ‘Dancing in the Dark,’” *The Diane Rehm Show*). He mentioned the difficulty he had finding material on a man who was at one time “the biggest black entertainer in America.” He clearly saw a connection between the dilemma facing a performer who viewed himself in Phillips’s words as a “made-up person” (interview with Diane Rehm), but who was “just another coloured man” offstage (*Diane Rehm Show*), and his own situation as a writer faced with questions about his choices and his own artistic performance. In answer to a question about the pertinence of writing a book about Bert Williams today, he replied with another question: “Where does responsibility to a larger community begin?” (*Diane Rehm Show*). However, in his interviews and essays he has also insisted on the importance of recognizing the difference between information and knowledge and on the role played by fiction in “understanding people who are not you” (Interview WFCR). One of Phillips’s most interesting exercises in understanding others is his “creative biography” *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007),³ in which he fictionalizes the lives of Francis Barber, Samuel Johnson’s servant, but also those of the black boxer Randolph Turpin and of David Oluwale, an African migrant who died in Leeds in an incident that threw light on the vulnerability of people in Oluwale’s situation. His most recent fictional work, *The Lost Child* (2015), integrates his sense of history in a different way by embedding in the central narrative, which involves a mixed-race couple living in England and their two children, the mysterious story of Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff, imagined by Phillips as being a child of mixed blood, and a fictionalization of the relationships within the Brontë family, with the suggestion that Emily’s brother Branwell may have been the model for Heathcliff. Once again, a series of fictional frames serves as contact zones between history and fiction, making it possible to reassess the past in its relation to the present.

The selection of *Crossing the River* for the programme of the Agrégation externe d’anglais in France has drawn attention once again to Phillips’s fifth novel and been the occasion for a critical reassessment of the work in a context in which the author’s concern with the legacy of slavery and the trauma of displacement and migration seems increasingly relevant. This volume of essays has been imagined both as a response to the desire to reconsider *Crossing the River* at a moment when critical attention is being focused on the novel and as an occasion to reflect on Phillips’s writing, both past and present, in the broader context of studies revolving around the notions of diaspora, migration and displacement. It is one of several endeavours inspired by the critical moment but meant to find its place in an already impressive body of critical work devoted to the author’s work.⁴

3. This is the term that Phillips, in an interview with Bénédicte Ledent, said “might be a suitable label for *Foreigners*” (“Only Connect” 188).

4. Bénédicte Ledent’s meticulously maintained bibliography offers the possibility of tracking the progress both of Phillips’s work but also of the critical works, both mainstream and academic, devoted to it. Several works, both individual and collective, have been published in 2016 and 2017: *Traversée d’une oeuvre* : *Crossing the River de Caryl Phillips*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Christian Gutleben; *Caryl Phillips, Crossing the River*, by Françoise Clary, and *Sounding out History: Caryl Phillips’s Crossing the River*, by Françoise Kral. Also to be mentioned is Kerry-Jane Wallart’s article “De-contextualizing Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*” and Vanessa Guignery’s “Crossing the River: *A Conversation with Caryl Phillips*,” published in *Etudes anglaises*. A special issue of *Ariel* edited by Bénédicte Ledent (volume 48, no. 3-4, 2017) and devoted to Caryl Phillips has also appeared, although the project was started before the selection of Phillips’s novel for the Agrégation programme.

Five of the nine articles are devoted either entirely or partially to *Crossing the River* (Ledent, Bentley, Fratzcak, Garrait-Bourrier and Ranguin). One article (Julien) discusses *A State of Independence*, a novel which has received relatively little critical attention. Another (Mascoli) pursues a musical path, an area which has been broached in other studies of Phillips but never dealt with explicitly. Two articles are devoted to *The Lost Child*, Phillips's most recent novel, seen from similar but complementary perspectives and one (Pirker) looks at both *Dancing in the Dark* and *Foreigners* in the light of recent interest in the racial dimensions of masculinity and its representations. Taken together they offer new perspectives on a work which has become a classic while opening up the investigation of more recent works and suggesting relevant critical approaches.

The collection opens with Bénédicte Ledent's study of *Crossing the River* in relation to other texts which make up the archives of Phillips's work, namely two early radio plays broadcast in the 1980s and entitled *Crossing the River* and *The Prince of Africa* and an early draft of the third section of the novel entitled "Somewhere in England," as well as a radio adaptation of this section of the novel which was aired in 2016. This genealogical approach to *Crossing the River* makes it possible to understand important aspects of the novel, like the choice to make Joyce the narrator of the final section, in the light of a broad spectrum of Phillips's work. Ledent's study sheds light on the author's relation to his subject and to the complex ethical and aesthetic choices involved in his representation of voices from the past. It counteracts, in particular, any temptation to isolate the novel from a broader understanding of the writer and the historical and artistic context in which he has produced his work. Ledent points out, for example, that in spite of the importance of the African father's voice in the prologue and epilogue of the novel, "very little is said about the original African family" (15), while the radio play dramatizes the conflicts between the children, giving "a realistic dimension to the interaction and the communication failures between the three children" (16). This leads her to suggest the need for more "gender-inflected readings" (*ibid.*) (a suggestion taken up by Anne Garrait-Bourrier in this volume). Particularly interesting for the reader of *Crossing the River* is the examination of an early version of this section of the novel, in which Phillips alternates between first- and third-person narratives rather than using the voice of Joyce throughout. The creation of Joyce's voice is seen as corresponding to an important aesthetic choice, offering an explanation for what might be seen as the obliteration of a black man's voice in a novel focusing on historical absence. Nick Bentley approaches *Crossing the River* and *A Distant Shore*, both of which he sees as "the articulation of individual and shared experience of trauma as a consequence of (post)colonial systems of exploitation" (21) from what has become one of the dominant perspectives in postcolonial representations of slavery, migration and displacement, the idea of individual and collective trauma. In his review of some of the major works contributing to the use of trauma theory in postcolonial studies, he focuses on the controversy surrounding what some critics see as the tendency of trauma studies to "privilege western examples in the guise of a universalizing model" (22). According to Bentley, the fictional works of Caryl Phillips deal with personal trauma in ways that contribute to an understanding of the articulation of its personal and collective dimensions. His use of fractured narratives, multiple points of view and a subjective perception of time reflects a desire to represent the disruptive effects of history on individual narratives. He reads *Crossing the River* and *A Distant Shore* within a frame that seeks to observe the emotional

shocks which can be seen as indirect consequences of the system of slavery represented in the novel. Similarly, in his discussion of *A Distant Shore*, he explores the ways in which Phillips allows the reader to perceive, in the interstices of Dorothy's narrative, the sociological and historical forces that lie behind her personal traumas. Her fortuitous encounter with Solomon, a refugee from an unnamed African country, allows Phillips to construct a paradoxical relationship in which each character is able to listen to the other, generating another form of the intergenerational and intercultural resonance that is a vital part of Phillips's narrative strategy. In her article on the "allegorical realism" of *Crossing the River*, Marta Fratzcak is likewise concerned with Phillips's strategies for "reconcil[ing] undocumented histories with the practical demands of novelistic narration" (33). However, she adopts an approach which contests the capacity of trauma studies to account for the experience of history "outside the colonial metropolis" (*ibid.*) and suggests rather a reading based on Walter Benjamin's vision of allegory as a way of accounting for Phillips's capacity to reconcile "historical veracity with broader patterns of meaning" (34). Calling upon Hamish Dalley's notion of allegorical realism, she examines the way in which Phillips gives the personal stories of his characters a resonance which allows them to be seen as allegories of "the misunderstandings underlying the institution of slavery" (36). By relating the story of Edward Williams and his former slave Nash to several of the major motifs underlying African American history, such as the role of religion and orality, Phillips enlarges the meaning of the stories of his characters, allowing them to be understood in terms of broader patterns. But he gives, at the same time, a historically accurate picture of the slave trade and its aftermath. Anne Garrait-Bourrier explores Phillips's representation of the family in *Crossing the River* in an article that offers a partial response to the question of gender representations raised by Bénédicte Ledent. She begins by observing the way in which the system of slavery created an ambiguous relation between real and symbolic fathers, making it impossible for fathers to fulfil their role, and the way in which this paradoxical relation between father and master accounts for Nash Williams's difficulties in Africa. She then discusses the role of mothers and the way in which their experience corroborates Paul Gilroy's view of the Black Atlantic as essentially masculine, their power being an imaginative rather than a real one. According to Garrait-Bourrier, the many-tongued chorus is a masculine one, offering a vision of Africa which contrasts with the vision of the mythical grandmother associated with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Josaine Ranguin examines the ideas of commodification and containment in *Crossing the River* and Steve McQueen's film *Twelve Years a Slave*. By looking at Phillips's use of John Newton's Journal in the section "Crossing the River" and the visual techniques of McQueen, she shows how the novel and the film produce a performance of the processes that deprived slaves of agency.

These multiple readings of *Crossing the River* and of the issues of history, trauma, gender and voice that they raise are extended to other works in the five articles that follow. Claude Julien reads *A State of Independence* in the light of the epigraph taken from a speech given in St. Kitts by Marcus Garvey. Basing his analysis on the ideas expressed in the complete speech by Garvey, he reads the novel as "a commentary upon Garvey's philosophy" (72), observing the way in which the characters' behaviour can be seen as a reflection of their inability to live up to Garvey's ideals. Moving from a political to an existential level, he analyses the isolation that characterizes the relations between the

characters as a form of *islandization*, a metaphor for the island's problematic status. Julia Mascoli, in her article on Phillips's musicalized fiction, proposes a model for understanding the thematic and formal role of music in Phillips's fiction. She presents two critics, Emily Petermann and Werner Wolf, who have investigated the notion of musicality in fiction, and then studies *The Lost Child* as a novel "where music is present thematically" (82) before looking at the stylistic imitation of music in *The Nature of Blood*. In a final section she reads *Dancing in the Dark* as a novel "which is both thematically and stylistically related to music" (*ibid.*). Her analysis allows her to underline the way in which the thematization and imitation of music dovetails with the author's aesthetic preoccupations, allowing him to elicit the empathy of the reader through the very style of his prose.

Two articles are devoted to proposing analytical paradigms for the reading of Phillips's most recent novel to date, *The Lost Child*. Giovanna Buonnano studies the novel in terms of its intertextuality and the way in which it writes back to a number of literary antecedents, not only Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, but also the work of Jean Rhys in her "depiction of troubled female subjectivities" (96). In her analysis of the intersecting stories that make up the novel, she emphasises the role of place, in this case the North of England, in revealing the discontinuities of English identity. She also focuses on the way in which the interwoven narrative threads allow Phillips to explore his own past through the lives of the boys Ben and Tommy so that he "maps a complex autobiography of the other" (101). She shows how the author's rewriting of *Wuthering Heights* can be compared with Jean Rhys's revisiting of *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and reads Monica Johnson's demise in *The Lost Child* in the light of Rhys's short story "Let Them Call it Jazz," thus demonstrating the centrality of Rhys in Phillips's depiction of "women's displacement and alienation" (102). Alessia Polatti, also concerned with the relation of the novel to the British context and the historical past, studies the novel through the perspective of the trope of the lost child. She views the novel as a way for Phillips of understanding the historical underpinnings of "the current multicultural British society" (105) and the motif of the lost child as a way of perceiving the connections between the different plots. The mythical form of the lost child motif makes it possible to understand the importance of the working out of that motif in a narrative which does not rely on the happy ending promised to the mythical child, thus emphasising the distance between the reality of British social relations and the intertextual background in which it is rooted. In this perspective, intertextuality facilitates the understanding of the link between Heathcliff and the lost boys of Phillips's contemporary narrative. The last article, by Eva Ulrike Pirker, takes up once again the question of gender, this time focusing on men and "the limitations of black male agency in Western contexts" (117). Through a close reading of two works that she calls "literary biographies" (*ibid.*), *Dancing in the Dark* and *Foreigners*, Pirker suggests that Phillips has chosen to "cast [the lives of the men he studies] as radical downward spirals of disappointment and doom" (*ibid.*). In her reading of *Dancing in the Dark*, she compares other available sources of information with Phillips's fictionalization in order to explore the ways in which Phillips has emphasised the forces that obliged Bert Williams to conform to society's expectations at the expense of other possible views. In her examination of Phillips's representation of Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin and David Oluwale, she likewise observes the ways in which Phillips's narration deliberately fails to "satisfy the revisionist impetus

expected from biographical writing” (126) thus revealing the forces that make the exercise of a genuine black male agency impossible.

It is hoped that this collection of essays will be useful to students preparing the Agrégation and to all scholars interested in a writer who continues to represent the past in ways that encourage us to view a painful history with both empathy and understanding. In 1992, in the Foreword to *The European Tribe*, Phillips spoke of the “rampant tribalism” he sensed in Europe. While in 2018, almost thirty years later, this expression may seem to have a grim immediacy, the scope of the author’s fictional and non-fictional works and the interest that they have inspired in readers and scholars suggests a more optimistic view of those “who arrived on the far bank of the river, loved” (*Crossing the River* 237).

Kathie BIRAT
Guest Editor

Works Cited

- “Author Caryl Phillips in Residence at Umass-Amherst,” Interview by Bob Paquette, 88.5 FM WFCR, 6 April 2010.
- “Caryl Phillips: ‘Dancing in the Dark.’” The Diane Rehm Show, WAMU 88.5 FM, 28 October 2005. 30 April 2014 <<http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2005-10-28>>.
- CLARY, Françoise. *Caryl Phillips, Crossing the River*. Paris: Atlande, 2017.
- GUIGNERY, Vanessa. “Crossing the River: A Conversation with Caryl Phillips.” *Etudes anglaises* 3 (2016): 321-33.
- GUIGNERY, Vanessa, and Christian GUTLEBEN, eds. *Traversée d'une oeuvre : Crossing the River de Caryl Phillips*, Spec. issue of *Cyenos* 1 (2016).
- KRAL, Françoise. *Sounding out History: Caryl Phillips's Crossing the River*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de Nanterre, 2017.
- LEDENT, Bénédicte. *Caryl Phillips*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002.
- . *The Caryl Phillips Bibliography*. <<http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/phillips/index.html>>
- . “Only Connect: An Interview with Caryl Phillips on *Foreigners*.” *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*. Ed. Renée T. Schatteman. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 209. 184-91.
- , ed. *Caryl Phillips*, Special issue of *Ariel* 48.3-4 (2017).
- PHILLIPS, Caryl. *The Final Passage*. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.
- . *A State of Independence*. 1986. London: Picador, 1995.
- . *The European Tribe*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.
- . *Higher Ground*. 1989. London: Vintage, 1995.
- . *Cambridge*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.
- . *The Nature of Blood*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.
- . *The Atlantic Sound*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- . *A New World Order*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2001.
- . *A Distant Shore*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2003.
- . *Dancing in the Dark*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2005.
- . *Foreigners: Three English Lives*. London: Harvill Secker, 2007.
- . *The Lost Child*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2015.
- WALLART, Kerry-Jane. “Decontextualizing Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*.” *Etudes anglaises* 3 (2016): 259-77.