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Migration and Multiplicity of Belonging in Caryl Phillips

Abstract I: L'identità, l'appartenenza e il suo opposto, l'esclusione, sono temi di grande rilevanza nella saggistica e narrativa di Caryl Phillips. In particolare, alcuni saggi pubblicati in due raccolte, *A New World Order* (2001) e *Colour Me English* (2011), e il romanzo *A Distant Shore* (2003) esplorano in che modo immigrati e rifugiati stiano ridisegnando un nuovo ordine nel moderno mondo globalizzato e nuovi concetti di appartenenza e identificazione fondati sulla pluralità culturale. L'articolo seguirà l'evoluzione del pensiero di Phillips nel primo decennio del nuovo millennio, concentrandosi in particolare sui testi sopra indicati.

Abstract II: The themes of identity, belonging and its reverse, exclusion, have always been central to Caryl Phillips' works of non-fiction and fiction. In particular, some essays published in two collections, *A New World Order* (2001) and *Colour Me English* (2011), and the novel *A Distant Shore* (2003) investigate to which extent refugees and immigrants are redesigning a new order in the modern globalised world and new notions of belonging and identification based on cultural plurality. In my article I will show the evolution of Phillips' view on these topics in the first decade of the new millennium, with particular reference to the above-mentioned texts.

Most of Caryl Phillips' works, be they drama, fiction or non-fiction, are centred on the notion of belonging and identity of the migrating subject. Born on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts in 1958, Phillips was brought to the UK by his parents when he was four months old and raised in the industrial north of England, precisely in Leeds.[1] Throughout his infancy and adolescence, although he had a British passport, was an Anglican churchgoer and proficient in English, he felt a deep sense of exclusion and un-belonging in British society. As the author underlined, he and his two younger brothers were the only black children both at primary school and Leeds Central High School. They survived being victims of bullying and abuse because they "knew when to fight and […] when to run" (Phillips 2011: 3). Phillips studied at Queen's College, Oxford, and later moved to London, but the sense of racial isolation is something that has accompanied him throughout his life, despite the changes that were turning Britain into a multi-cultural society. In the late 1980s, following the advent of what

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[1] See his offical site: http://www.carylphillips.com/ (consulted on 18/09/2018).

he calls Mrs. Thatcher's "neo-imperial rhetoric of exclusion" (Phillips 2001: 304), he decided to spend more and more time in the United States, teaching in prestigious universities, but never renounced his British citizenship, as he felt he "had a responsibility to address British society from within" (Phillips 2001: 304). After being a permanent resident in the US for thirteen years, he also gained American citizenship (Phillips 2011: 35). The non-fiction volume *Colour Me English* (2011) shows his emotional attachment to both countries. Its introductory essay, bearing the same title, describes his shock at discovering that the 2005 suicide bombings in London were carried out by people who were British-born and that three of them were from Leeds like him (2011: 14). He forcefully hopes that his Muslim ex-schoolmate Ali (to him, a symbol of immigrants who had to confront not only racial but also religious prejudice) has not "given up on Britain" (15), that is, has not renounced contributing to a steady but peaceful evolution of British society. The next section opens with a vivid recollection of the attack on the Twin Towers in the essay "Ground Zero", defined a "communal trauma" (26) for all New York residents like him. His bond with the United States, however, is not less troubled than his involvement with Britain. As he explains in the same volume, Phillips had been mesmerised by the hope that the United States could be "everything that Britain was not" (29), namely a multi-racial and multi-cultural country where "a sense of pride in claiming the more inclusive American identity would far outweigh any profession of loyalty to a particular racial or ethnic group" (28). Conversely, he was faced with the reality of a country dominated by racial discrimination and a huge social inequality (31). He seems to suggest that the foundational "melting pot" ideal underpinning US society is a rhetorical device of a constructed self-celebrative mythology rather than effective practice.

Phillips has defined his sense of continued alienation in the British context "the high anxiety of belonging", an issue he discussed in the conclusion of the earlier collection *A New World Order* (2001). My article aims at analysing the development of the notions of belonging, home and identity of the migrant's subject in some of Phillips' works published in the first decade of the new millennium. I will refer to some essays from the collections *A New World Order* (2001) and *Colour Me English* (2011), and to a novel about recent migration and inter-racial relationships in Britain, *A Distant Shore* (2003). These texts reveal a gradual change in the perception of multiple identity, from an experience still imbued with a deep sense of loss to a conscious valorisation of its potentialities in the context of a changing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Phillips' view seems to be an inflection of theoretical positions in postcolonial criticism and Afro-American studies (for example, Stuart Hall's and Paul Gilroy's) that see identity as a process rather than an entity, as mutable and instable rather than fixed and rooted. I will also make use of the concept of transnation, recently elaborated by Bill Ashcroft, for depicting a new possible view of contemporary society.

The high anxiety of belonging is something Phillips shares with the flow of immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers presently trying to enter Europe from North Africa, the Middle East or Southeast Asia. At the 2014 Venice International Festival of Literature "Incroci di Civiltà", Phillips still defined himself as a "migrant"[2]. His parents belong to the mul-

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[2] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqYnsoUs71s (consulted on 18/09/2018).

titude that arrived in Britain from the colonies after WW2. As Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe explain, "the Empire was coming 'home' claiming their rights of abode as British citizens holding a British passport" (1988: 79). Since the country was beginning to rebuild its broken cities, there was a great demand for workers of any kind, especially in jobs of low status and low pay. West Indians, in particular, came "with a sense of cultural identification with the 'Motherland'" (80): they had been educated according to the British system, their language was English or English-based, their religions (Anglican, Methodist, etc.) had been passed on to them by British missionaries. Nevertheless, it was a journey to an illusion. Despite their feeling British, West Indian immigrants had to face the reality of being rejected by British society: "They may have believed passionately in their closeness and affinity to Britain and possessed a sense of belonging, but the British were equally convinced of their alienness, their otherness" (81).

Phillips knows very well that it may take years and even more than one generation for immigrants to become socially confident. In "Rude Am I in Speech", an essay written in 2008 and included in *Colour Me English*, he describes his father's persistent social uneasiness in British society after being a resident for forty years. He claims that first-generation immigrants could find the only "zones of psychological relief" from the "anxieties of belonging" (Phillips 2011: 134) in the family (where they were free to eat their food and maintain their habits) or in social gathering places such as pubs or clubs, (where they could keep contact with their fellow migrants). Phillips also explores the social isolation of a character defined by him a "pioneer migrant" (137), who becomes the prototype of all first-generation black immigrants: the eponymous protagonist of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The title of this essay comes from a scene in which Othello, standing before the Duke of Venice, must defend himself from the charge of having beguiled Desdemona into marrying him. Despite his obvious eloquence, Othello protests his inability to speak, since he is a soldier, not an orator: "Rude am I in my speech, /And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (I.iii.81–82). Phillips considers Othello as the most isolated character in literature, despite his persuasive rhetoric and his being an "exotic celebrity" in Venice (Phillips 2011: 135), because he has no Venetian home to return to or peer group to be part of: places where he can "recuperate from the daily fatigue of living a performative life" (135). Othello is a racial and social outsider. Phillips maintains that Othello's "diversity" creates that "knot of anxiety" (2011: 132) eventually exploited by Iago. Like most black people, Othello is characterised by a "double conscience", in Du Bois' terms (Gilroy 1993: 126): he is inside and outside mainstream society, he is a brave military leader in the service of Venice but he is not a fully Venetian citizen. As a second-generation immigrant, Phillips was a witness of his parents' insecurity and still affected by it. So much so that he reckons that a full acquisition of social knowledge and understanding possibly rises from the third generation onwards (Phillips 2011: 138). This is in tune with Stuart Hall's assertion that: "Third-generation young Black men and women know they come from the Caribbean, know that they are Black, know that they are British. They want to speak from all three identities. They are not prepared to give up any of them" (Hall 1997: 59).

Phillips' search for "home" is further complicated by his West Indian background,

which has created an ambivalent feeling towards Britain. In *A New World Order,* he says he cannot consider Britain as home, after having been asked too many times in his life the question "Where are you *really* from?" (303). He also witnessed politicians, from the far left to the far right, using the cry of "send them back!" to collect votes from different strata of the population interested in blocking immigration fluxes from the ex-colonies (303-304). This sense of dislocation and marginalisation is something that Phillips shares with many other immigrants in Britain. But the history of Caribbean people, rooted in the predicament of slavery, the middle passage and the African diaspora, also carries a sorrowful inheritance of exploitation, abuse and violence. This casts another shadow on Phillips' idea of Britain as "home". Being unable to elude the sombre previous stages of his personal story and collective history, he has claimed his desire to cultivate a "plural notion of home" (Phillips 2001: 304-305), which takes into account his multiple origins from and (complex) attachment to Africa, North-America (including the Caribbean) and Britain. So he rejects the idea of Britain as his "sole home":

> As a young boy growing up in Leeds, I was both confused by, and afraid of, the word "home". […] Over the years I have written about my relationship to the word "home" and I have also read and reread literature which bears some relationship to this word, […]. I have tried, by some process of literary osmosis, to enter England, to *feel* England, to feel *for* England to the exclusion of the Atlantic world, but I have failed. Something in me rejects the idea of standing alone with Britain as my sole "home" (308).

He therefore imagines that his "home" is located in an equidistant point in the ocean between these three geographical regions: what he calls his "Atlantic home" (304).

This idea is akin to Gilroy's concept of "black Atlantic", the "modern cultural and political formation" which transcends "both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy 1993: 19). Identity, argues Gilroy, is unfinished, instable and mutable. It is as a process of "movement and mediation" that overcomes the idea of "roots and rootedness" (19). While rejecting nativist and essentialist assumptions of primordial black identities, established by either nature or culture, Gilroy surprisingly defines his view as "anti-anti-essentialist" in its giving centrality to the diaspora as a common denominator, which valorises intra- and trans-national kinships and formations. The concept of diaspora, he claims, "should be cherished for its ability to pose the relationship between ethnic sameness and differentiation: a changing same" (Gilroy: xi). As Mellino explains, Gilroy rejects both essentialist pan-Africanism, founded on a quasi-ontological view of black identity, and the anti-essentialism of more recent critical positions within the postcolonial paradigm (Said, Bhabha and Spivak) that, by deconstructing the idea of cultural subjectivity – and consequently of black subjectivity, too – and by working on the idea of difference rather than similarity, have proved ineffectual in tackling racial discrimination (Mellino 2003: 9). The black Atlantic is therefore a delocalised, hybrid, cosmopolitan space where the black diaspora can consider itself a "community" with its inner particularities, similarities and discontinuities and with specific modes of expressions and cultural production, particularly visible in black music. It is therefore "a non-traditional tra-

dition, an irreducibly modern ex-centric, unstable and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding" (Gilroy 1993: 198).

Phillips' imaginary "Atlantic home" reminds us of the delocalised space Gilroy calls "black Atlantic". However, the lyrical mode used by Phillips in describing this place, has nothing of the assertiveness and actuality of Gilroy's concept. Rather, it conveys a sense of nostalgia and displacement. It reveals, in fact, the "anxiety of belonging" announced in the title of the essay and conveys the need to compensate a lacking or ambivalent sense of "home". His disillusion and frustration lead him to seek a consolatory refuge, a projection of a desire of belonging, which is however a non-place, as these lines indicate:

> My continued sense of alienation in a British context is hardly original. The roots are racially charged, but others have felt similarly excluded on grounds of class, gender or religion. […] Some people have little choice but to live in this state of high anxiety. Some others make plans to leave. I have chosen to create for myself an imaginary "home" to live alongside the one that I am incapable of fully trusting. My increasingly precious, imaginary, Atlantic world (Phillips 2001: 308).

Phillips seems pervaded by that sense of social insecurity that characterises first-generation immigrants and persists in their children, as described in "Rude Am I in Speech". His uneasiness is also analysed in psychological terms in the same essay and defined as an ambivalence that can appear "at best cranky" or "at worst paranoid" (309) to people with an established home and sense of belonging. Such a plural notion of home, identity and belonging is therefore invested with a negative connotation: it is a compensatory measure to trauma, dislocation, and deprivation.

Many other forms of discrimination and marginalisation occur within a country like Britain that cultivated "the mythology of homogeneity" (Phillips 2001: 288), based on class, accent, gender, sexuality, religion, or culture (Phillips 2001: 290-291). This concept is forcefully reiterated in the introduction to *Colour Me English* (2011), when Phillips reflects on the reasons behind the act of the four British Muslim suicide bombers. He narrates the story of his Muslim schoolmate Ali – another outsider like him, harassed and bullied at school – whose situation was aggravated by his smaller build and stature, and, most of all, by his different religion and culture. Ali could have easily been one of the bombers. Phillips also points to the current rise of nationalistic parties in most European countries, aiming at re-defining a nation (white, Christian, European) within the boundaries of each nation-state. Muslim religion is depicted by them as a reactionary, monolithic creed, without nuances of belief or practice, and Muslims as a separate and antisocial community. In actual fact, he continues, the vast majority of Muslims in Europe have never followed a rigid interpretation of sharia and are therefore willing to conform the practice of their faith to the basic human rights, as they are understood in the West. Writing ten years after his lyrical search for a refuge in the "Atlantic home", Phillips' conclusion is more confident and constructive:

> Successful integration does mean that immigrants adapt to the new country, but it also means that the new country adapts to them. It demands that the residents cultivate

the capacity – and courage – to change their ideas about who *they* are. […] Europe is no longer white and never will be again. And Europe is no longer Judaeo-Christian and never will be again. There are already fifteen million Muslims in the European Union, and the figure will grow. All of us are faced with a stark choice: we can rail against European evolution, or we can help smooth its process. And, if we choose the latter, the first thing we must remind ourselves of is the lesson that great fiction teaches us as we sink into character and plot and suspend our disbelief: for a moment, "they" are "us" (Phillips 2011: 15-16).

The power of literature, and in particular of fiction, to act as a moral force against intolerance is something Phillips forcefully highlights here and in other writings and interviews. Also, what emerges in this essay is his conviction that the outsider/insider question can be overcome by valorising a fluid notion of belonging and identity: a plural sense of oneself. The same concept, which had been previously imbued with a sense of melancholy isolation and passive desire, is now articulated in a proactive approach. Phillips seems to embrace Stuart Hall's idea that "all of us are composed of multiple social identities" (Hall 1997: 57) and advocate "the politics of living identity through difference" suggested by the Jamaican sociologist (57). This means a politics that "increasingly is able to address people through the multiple identities which they have" (Hall 1997: 59). Hall suggested that complex societies in a depersonalising global world should work at the local level, activating a counter-politics that acknowledges a multiplicity of identifications and develops a dialectic between local and global (62). In a 2012 interview Phillips underlined that today younger people are able to "synthesize" many different influences much better than when he was young. And he praises the younger generation's fluidity and hybridity, which endow them with "that ability to flaunt a plural identity without apology" (Ward 2012: 645).

The endorsement of multiple identities and belonging is also implicit in Ashcroft's "transnation", a concept that disrupts notions of centre and periphery in a globalised world, surpassing terms such as diaspora, cosmopolitanism, international and transnational. According to Ashcroft, "transnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation" (Ashcroft 2010a: 73). It can be geographical, cultural and conceptual, and it is particularly visible in China and India in that a huge number of people are dislocated from their "homes" and, whether inside the state borders or outside (and all over the world), have formed transnations. As Ashcroft maintains: "This is because, most noticeably in the case of China and India, the nation is already a migratory and even diasporic aggregation of flows and convergences, both within and without state boundaries" (73).

Ashcroft studies the potentials of mobility and transitivity. This in turn offers new perspectives on notions of identity, belonging and place-making. He views the transnation as "a way of talking about subjects who live their ordinary lives in-between categories by which subjectivity is normally constructed" (Ascroft 2010a: 73) and a space which is "negotiable and shifting" (77-78). In a global world with a rapidly increasing ability to travel back and forth between "homes", mobility "*need not* be a permanent condition of displacement, loss or exile. […] The mobility and in-betweenness of the transnation injects the principle of hope" (Ashcroft 2010a: 75).

This principle of hope can also be found in *Colour Me English* when Phillips reaffirms the idea of a fluid and plural sense of self, which has been fed and sustained by travelling:

> The gift of travel has been enabling for me in the same way that it has been enabling for writers in the British tradition, in the African diasporan tradition and in the Caribbean tradition, many of whom have found it necessary to move in order to reaffirm for themselves the fact that dual and multiple affiliations feed our constantly fluid sense of self. Healthy societies are ones which allow such pluralities to exist and do not feel threatened by these hybrid conjoinings (Phillips 2011: 131).

Phillips' current condition, like that of other postcolonial writers, seems actually to embrace the concept of cosmopolitanism rather than transnation. Ashcroft defines cosmopolitanism as "an attitude of mind rather than a subject position" (Ashcroft 2010a: 76) and reconnects it more to the movement of an elite than to migratory fluxes: "[T]he person who is able to travel freely, to experience and participate in other cultures for long periods, who has the time to engage with the Other in a 'cosmopolitan' way, must inevitably be a person with considerable material resources" (76). However, Phillips' early life in Britain connects him to the mass of migrants whose stories fill the newspapers at present. He might belong to a cosmopolitan elite as a writer, but he belongs to a transnation as a second-generation Caribbean immigrant.

One of Phillips' novels, *A Distant Shore* (2003), deals with today's hotly debated question of illegal migration from Africa to Europe. Two "diverse" outsiders – a British retired teacher with psychiatric disorders, Dorothy, and a refugee from an un-named African country, Gabriel/Solomon – begin a tentative friendship, which is abruptly interrupted by the young man's murder at the hands of local hooligans. Dorothy's intervention will be decisive in convincing a girl involved in the attack on Solomon to identify his killers to the police. The novel intertwines two main plots. One follows Dorothy's story of social advancement from northern working class to bourgeoisie through high education and marriage to an upper-middle-class university mate. All her life is marked by intellectual honesty, social inadequacy and a rigid character, which make her the object of repeated "abandonments": by her husband, her two subsequent lovers (a local newsagent, Mahmood, and a supply teacher) and her school entourage. Her sense of alienation is augmented by an early retirement and the transfer to a new residential area, which worsen her fragile psychological condition. The other thread reports the narrative of Gabriel/Solomon, sent by his father to fight in a civil war, hunted as a war criminal and forced to flee his country to save his life, an enterprise in which he succeeds at the expense of the life of all his family, brutally massacred by governmental forces. Gabriel /Solomon's past is also stained with the brutal killing of his former employer Felix to get the money for his passage across the Mediterranean. Gabriel/Solomon represents one of the "ordinary" stories of genocide, warfare and escape that constitute the background of many refugees to Europe. After an imprisonment on unfair rape charges, Gabriel must change his name into Solomon. Then he is helped by an Irish truck driver, Mike, and his Scottish landlord and landlady, and will finally find a job as a caretaker in Dorothy's housing estate. These two threads of the plot intertwine against the background

of multi-cultural Britain, torn between well-meaning solidarity and xenophobic prejudice, an ambivalent legislation towards immigration and a changing collective sense of identity.

The novel has received different readings. Gunning has explored the racial harassment suffered by Solomon. Britain's conditional hospitality implies his "loss of voice" (Gunning 2011: 146), a descent to anonymity and his necessary infantilisation in order to be accepted. Using Gilroy's distinction between "non-racial humanity" and "racialized infrahumanity", Gunning underlines Solomon's reduction to the infrahuman status of the refugee: not an individual human but a "being-with-rights" (144). If Gunning emphasises the defects of British multiculturalism presented in the novel, McLeod's view is more optimistic. He identifies a utopian potentiality in Phillips' work, grounded in intense moments of interpersonal communication that provide evidence of "Phillips' binocular focus upon the everyday refusals of racism and division within the grim context of stubbornly prejudicial milieu" (McLeod 2008: 14). Dorothy and Solomon's friendship is based on their impossibility of communicating with the society around. Solomon perceives her as someone he can tell his story and, in the closing page of the novel, Dorothy remarks: "I had a feeling that Solomon understood me" (Phillips 2003: 312). Another powerful encounter in the book is between Solomon and Denise, a girl abused by both her father and her boyfriend, who finds in Solomon's non-sexual embrace a protection and somebody willing to listen to her. When they are discovered asleep by her father in the derelict house where they meet, Solomon is charged with sexual assault but the girl refuses to testify against him and the case is dropped. Finally, the support given to Solomon by Mike and the Scottish couple are signs of an enlightened humanity. According to McLeod, the novel records that Britain's transformations occur mostly at the personal level: "Phillips looks to the business of everyday life for the principles of a truly progressive and transformative prospect" (McLeod 2008: 9).

As Ellis shrewdly underlines, McLeod's reading can be linked to Ashcroft's notion of transnation in "this emphasis upon new routines of everyday life as a site of struggle and transformation within a national setting" (Ellis 2013: 418). Ashcroft is, in fact, "arguing openly for a Utopian form of thinking here, what he terms an '*idea/l*'" (418). The transnation begins in these quotidian exchanges and interactions between individuals of different cultures and races within the state boundaries. In Ashcroft's terms, "it is not an ontological object, but a way of understanding the possibility of ordinary people avoiding, dodging, circumventing the inevitable claims of the state upon them" (Ellis: 418; quoted from Ashcroft 2010b: 13). Ellis' conclusion is that Phillips' novel "contains evidence of a nascent polyculturalism from which an idea/l of post-racism might be drawn" (Ellis 2013: 412).

McLeod's and Ellis' readings of *A Distant Shore* are in tune with Hall's idea that the process of change cannot but be conducted locally through a politics of "living identity through difference" (57). Despite its tragic ending, this novel also indicates the beginning of a centripetal movement for Phillips back from his Atlantic refuge to valorise the local efforts to change society from within. Contemporary societies evolve thanks to the exchange and mutual influence between migrating and local subjects. Notions of self, nationhood and nation are therefore continuously transformed and made anew, as Ashcroft's concept of transnation underlines.

Importantly, both Ashcroft and Phillips highlight the crucial role of literature in foster-

ing this process. Ashcroft underlines the utopian dimension of literature, its horizon of "absolute potentiality", and the fact that "it releases the writing subject from the myth of a fixed identity" (Ashcroft 2010a: 82). In a 2014 interview he also said that literary works have the power to produce empathy in the reader by "showing" rather than 'telling'" and that they might be more potent than theoretical discourse because they rely on the power of affect and the power of imagination (Ashcroft 2014: 136). Similar ideas are forcefully articulated by Phillips in *Colour Me English*:

> As long as we have literature as a bulwark against intolerance, and as a force for change, then we have a chance. Europe needs writers to explicate this transition, for literature is plurality in action; it embraces and celebrates a place of no truths, it relishes ambiguity, and it deeply respects the place where everybody has the right to be understood, […] in the hope that by some often painfully slow process of imaginative osmosis one might finally recognise what passed before one's eyes today, what occurred yesterday, and what will happen tomorrow, and it implores us to act with a compassion born of familiarity towards our fellow human beings, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim, black, brown or white (Phillips 2011: 17).

It is therefore the writers' duty to continue writing, fictional and non-fictional works, to participate in this process and support this vision, so that utopia can become reality.

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