

## On writing, reading, interpreting (and Pan Africanism): an interview with Caryl Phillips

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### ABSTRACT

Caryl Phillips is one of the most thought-provoking creative voices of contemporary Anglophone literature. His publications, which include novels, essays, anthologies, plays as well as a number of screenplays, have achieved public and critical acclaim not only for the reflections they invite on issues of displacement, identity, belonging, and otherness, but also for the use of narrative techniques that often present the reader with discontinuous narrations, fragmented accounts of events, and multiple perspectives. The interview that follows, originally conceived as a conversation on the novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997), has unexpectedly broadened to take on wider issues such as the author's stance on Pan Africanism, intertextuality, character formation, and his perception of critical work.

### Keywords

intertextuality, writing techniques, Pan Africanism, diaspora, Caryl Phillips

I met Caryl Phillips in Caen, on May 23, 2017 on the occasion of a conference on “Caryl Phillips – Inhabiting the voids of history.”<sup>1</sup> My original intent was to interview Caryl Phillips about *The Nature of Blood*, which is at the core of my current research. As a matter of fact, every answer gave rise to more questions and led to interesting digressions.

Caryl Phillips was born on the Caribbean island of Saint Kitts, grew up in Leeds, England, studied at Oxford and currently lives in the USA, where he is a Professor of English at Yale University. Phillips's numerous publications include novels, essays, anthologies, plays that have been performed in theatres, on television and broadcast on radio, as well as a number of screenplays. In his works Phillips covers issues of displacement, identity, belonging, and otherness along with the triangular Atlantic trade which triggered the African diaspora. He challenges the readers of his novels by presenting them with discontinuous narrations, fragmented accounts of events, and multiple perspectives.

Scholar Bénédicte Ledent defines “the structure of *The Nature of Blood* (1997) as a labyrinth where characters are trapped in a kind of existential maze and involved in a quest for its centre.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, it is possible to argue that the novel embodies a distinctly non-linear understanding of Western history, in which the jumbled recounting of events frees readers from prevailing and often-repeated chronological accounts of what happened. The expectation of familiarity dissipates, and a fresh reading of history becomes possible. The stories occur

over a large span of time, between the 15th and the 20th century, and in the multistrand narrative, themes, characters, and incidents resonate against one another. Phillips seems to invite readers to draw connections between the gaps in the flow of stories in order to reveal recurring patterns and cycles in seemingly discrete, isolated events in Western history.

However, readers who are familiar with the writer's novels soon realise that there is a new element in Phillips's recurring concern about the triangular trade which involved Europe, Africa and North America: in *The Nature of Blood* the narrative develops in a geometrical shape that involves Europe, Africa and, rather than North America, the Middle East. This new geographical setting allows Phillips to focus on the Jewish diaspora. He shifts his reflections from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, but a different scenario does not necessarily imply different actors.

Great Britain's entry into World War I was in large part motivated by the British government's intention to protect its Empire from the rising supremacies of the United States and Germany and to expand its dominion in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the war, the southern half of Syria referred to as Palestine was mandated to Great Britain. The European power's presence in the Mediterranean area persisted during World War II.<sup>3</sup> The British army participated in the liberation of Jews from the Nazi death camps, but, immediately after the end of the conflict, it went on to impose restrictive immigration quotas of Jews to Palestine and organised detention camps on the island of Cyprus.

Phillips's novel not only revisits the British Empire's behaviour in the conquered territories of Palestine, but it also examines the issue of diaspora, namely the African and the Jewish diaspora, two of the most widely studied and debated diasporas in human history and both still ongoing. To address this issue and the intersection of the two diasporas, Phillips relies on one of the minor characters in *The Nature of Blood*, Malka. She is a young Ethiopian black Jewish woman and through her soliloquies the unbalanced relationship between white and black peoples, despite their shared religious traditions, emerges. Phillips seems to encapsulate in Malka both the African and the Jewish diaspora along with post- and neo-colonial circumstances and questions. It can be argued that in *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips multistrand narrative echoes the multi-faceted reality of much of Western history (especially the historical events that occurred as a direct and indirect result of European colonialism). Malka reflects this refracted reality: she inhabits the intersection between Jewish and African diasporas, between citizen and foreigner, between kinship and otherness. The character embodies these complex, intertwined layers of history while highlighting the fact that the process of discrimination still operates in our contemporary societies.

**Maria Festa:** My first question is on intertextuality. For avid readers who are also writers, intertextuality can be unconscious and unintentional. You are a voracious reader. In your novels, you make clear references to various authors and their works. Do these references

represent a form of praising? Do they symbolise your intent to 'write back to the author' as some postcolonial writers, like Achebe for instance, did in their works?

**Caryl Phillips:** I think it is probably more an attempt to engage with, and somehow destabilize, the English canon. If you can engage with it, but also make people try and see it in a new way, thus destabilizing it, you are inevitably taking away some of its authority. The key authors in English literature have a tremendous hold on the imagination of British people and I am attempting to adjust the strength of that grip by suggesting that their canonical work is, in a sense, a part of my work. In this sense it is conscious, I don't think it is something that authors have done frequently in English, but they have done so in other languages, the French for example. Of course, in recent times, Coetzee has done it in English. It's a way of making the reader see things afresh, which is after all what literature is, a way of making you see the world anew. In this instance, part of what the reader is looking at anew is the so-called 'canon'.

**MF:** May I define *The Nature of Blood* one of your most challenging novels?

**CP:** Do you mean formally?

**MF:** Yes, I do.

**CP:** Probably. When I delivered that manuscript to my publishers in America, I think they were kind of horrified because the two books that had come before, *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, had sold a lot of copies. To look at it from a strictly commercial point of view, which I don't, I had an audience. I had people waiting for the next book, and I think I surprised my so-called audience with this book, because a lot of people found it challenging and I couldn't (or wouldn't) make the connections that the form and structure demands. I feel sure publishers wanted another book that was formally, and in terms of subject-matter, in the tradition of *Cambridge* or *Crossing the River*. But, you know, I've never really worried about how many books I've sold. I actually don't know how many copies a book sells, and I don't care. I'm not interested if I sell ten or if I sell ten thousand. Obviously, I would prefer to sell ten thousand, but I don't really care, because the hard thing – the important thing – is to write the book, and when I write a book I just hope that somebody will want to publish it and thereafter somebody might read it. If I had written *The Nature of Blood* before *Cambridge* and before *Crossing the River* I think I might have had some problems getting it published.

**MF:** In *The Nature of Blood*, the British Empire seems to be the intended target or, better, the addressee of the novel; is this perception correct?

**CP:** Well in some way, I think that everything I ever write is addressing British imperial notions of colonial history – a history that excludes me – so I think I am always trying to be a little bold and say “look at me, look at me over here, you know my story matters too, my experience

matters too.” I think that there is some aspect of that in everything I write, but I never begin a story actually *thinking* that way. I always begin and pursue a story thinking of the characters, I never think of the themes. Themes are what other people tell you about when they are trying to work out what’s going on in the novel. I just think, well I have got this character called Eva and I have got this other character called whatever he or she is called, and I’ve got to make them reveal the story and grow. Literally that’s all I ever try to do, I let the characters lead. However, inevitably if you publish a number of books, people are not stupid, and they can see thematic links from one book to another book. In this sense themes are present, I can’t say they don’t exist, but I can definitively say I am never thinking of them too consciously while I am writing a book.

**MF:** This leads me to my next question, about characters. In your novels the words employed to present and describe a character turn her/him into a real human being and not simply a fictional one. You reveal characters with common imperfections and weaknesses and this in turn allows your reader to better identify with them. How does a character take shape in your mind?

**CP:** Slowly, really slowly. I don’t even know I have a character fully realised until I hear the character’s voice. The key element is the voice; when I know exactly how a character speaks, what words they use, for instance would they ever swear? Furthermore, what words would they *never* use because they might consider those words to be too vulgar? When I can answer these questions then I am beginning to really understand a character. I need to *feel* the rhythm when they’re speaking. I need to know if they have an accent. Once I can hear the voice then I know that I have a character, but I also have to know a lot that’s never in the book. If you were to ask me a series of questions such as what car do they drive? In fact, do they drive a car? And if they do drive a car, what colour is the car? What make is the car? I would have to be able to tell you the answers to these questions. I have to know the characters well enough to know irrelevant things, such as where would they go to shop for clothes? Would they ever consider buying clothes from a second-hand shop? Would they consider spending three hundred Euros on a pair of shoes? What would they say to somebody who would spend three hundred Euros on a pair of shoes, or would they even talk to such a person? I need to know the answers to these *irrelevant* questions even if the specifics never find their way into the book. However, the one thing that’s *absolutely* necessary is hearing the voice.

**MF:** In *The Nature of Blood*, Stephan Stern joins Zionism for the cause of the ‘Promised Land’. Have you inserted him in the narration as a probable counterpart of Pan Africanism? Moreover, in your travel book *The Atlantic Sound*, you dealt with Pan Africanism. Has your view on Pan Africanism changed in the meanwhile?

**CP:** My feelings on Pan Africanism haven’t changed. In many ways they are similar to how I

feel about Christianity or religion in general. It is very hard to be too critical of something that enables people to survive the many problems of life. If people believe in a system that enables them to wake up in the morning and function as normal human beings, and such a belief system enables them to be kind to others and enables them to have a positive vision of the world, who am I to object? Pan Africanism is not something I personally believe in. I like the idea of unity, I like the idea of people having more in common with each other, but some ideas feel a little idealistic to me. Pan Europeanism hasn't worked, as we've just been reminded with Brexit, and Africa is much, much bigger than Europe. How are all the African diasporans of the world – be they from the Caribbean, or Brazil, and so on – supposed to seriously think they are going to have any meaningful interaction with each other around the idea of a mythical and often ahistorical notion of Africa? In truth, it is a nice idea but when you examine it closely there are many, many problems. And that's how I feel about religion too. It is a nice idea and it enables people to live, and so on. I'm not criticizing it, but when you examine it really closely there are some glaring illogicalities. Coming back to Pan Africanism, we have to accept that race – being of the African continent – constitutes just one element of our identity and so to base much of one's life decision-making process around this element is somewhat reductive. To do so misses out so many other things...

**MF:** As soon as the character of Stephan took shape in your mind, did you see Israel as a probable counterpart of Africa?

**CP:** Yes, I was aware of the multiple ironies of placing Africa next to Israel. In other words, what it means to try and build a society and a sense of self around one construct of identity which, as I've said, seems to me to be too narrow a way of looking at oneself and society. People are more complicated than just what religion or what ethnicity they are. It's complicated. One may argue that what the Pan Africanist movement tried to do, the Israelis have pulled it off. But is it successful? Well, it enables some people to get through the day, but I have been to Israel a couple of times, I didn't feel comfortable and left the country early. I simply didn't like the idea of a state where identity was principally built around just one thing. I saw young Israeli children carrying machine guns, who were militarized, and I thought, "no, don't do that to the children, don't do that to them. This is not healthy."

**MF:** To you, is the act of writing a means of establishing a sort of one-way communication channel with your readers? Or, is it a tool that is able to confer a voice to your thoughts, reflections and feelings with the intent to budge awareness in readers? Sometimes people tend to be lazy, and for those individuals your novels become synonymous with effort and commitment. Is it something that you require from your readers?

**CP:** I just think that we've become very lazy as a society in the last twenty years or so because of social media and because of the Internet. We don't even spell properly anymore because

of texting, and we don't have the same attention. That said, I can only be true to a certain form of literature which may be perceived by some people as being challenging and difficult, but if people feel this way they don't have to read the books. If they don't want to spend the energy or make the effort, then so be it. Hopefully, if they do read the work and expend the energy they will get something out of it. When I was a student I remember reading challenging work and thinking, "damn, this is hard going. I'm not having a lot of fun with this," but eventually I got something out of it. Does it mean that it was pleasurable? Not always. But if you're looking for an easy ride, then you wouldn't buy *The Nature of Blood* or *The Lost Child*. To my mind the reader has to make an investment; the reader has to pay attention and contribute. If the reader doesn't want to do this and they simply want to be entertained, then they should read something else. After all, there's nothing wrong with doing that.

**MF:** What does writing mean to you? Is it something in your DNA?

**CP:** Well, I'm not sure it's in my DNA. I think I only write because I have something to say and I've always thought to myself that when I don't have anything to say I won't write because there are already too many people out there writing books. I took up writing because I *felt* strongly that I had something to say, but I know the price of saying that 'something'. It has involved spending long periods of time by myself writing, so sometimes I just think I would like a different type of life, a more well-balanced type of life.

**MF:** I would like to go back to your characters. Earlier, you stated that before introducing a character to the reader you have at first to learn as many details as possible about him/her. Somehow, it seems to me that you intentionally leave the reader the possibility to formulate his/her own judgement on the fictional human being. Take *The Lost Child*, the character of Monica's father: he is so human, he has more flaws than virtues, he is strict, square minded, but at a certain point you seem to raise the possibility he could have been a paedophile.

**CP:** It seems to me that Monica is going through more than just the normal adolescent 'I-need-to-break-from-my-parents' kind of rebellion that most of us go through. Furthermore, there seems to be something slightly sexually repressed about her father. You didn't get the idea that he is having a particularly jolly sex life with his wife, so I began to think about this guy. He looks to me like the type of man who might have a hidden agenda. He's just one of those guys that on the surface seem very conventional, but if you scratch a little bit you might find something else. Now we don't know if Monica's suspicions are real, but that's the thing about fiction, we can make up our own mind. Personally, I think it's quite possible that he made some kind of unpleasant overture to one of Monica's friends. He's the kind of man that might have done that, but it's not clear that he did. As you know, you can't prove most of these allegations, a teacher making a pass at the student is hard to prove because there's only two people, nobody else is in the room, and it becomes his word against her word. It's often the same with

similarly serious allegations such as rape: there are no witnesses, so you have to look and make a decision about the characters. Who do you think is believable here, what's likely, what's possible? Well I think it's a similar situation that we have with Monica's father. Monica has an oblique, vague feeling, but whether it's plausible or not, whether it's believable or not just depends on your reading of Monica's father. One might read him as an absolute creep, or else just think 'oh, come on, the guy is a bit square, where's the evidence that he is some kind of sexual predator?' So you can read it whichever way you want depending on, of course, who you are or what life experience you bring to the novel.

**MF:** This implies that leaving things hanging is intentional, isn't it?

**CP:** Yes, I can't solve it, because that's how it is in life. I mean if Monica was saying, "he murdered somebody," these kinds of allegations are usually resolved one way or another. You know, you're guilty or not guilty. It's like a traffic ticket for speeding, you're guilty or not guilty. Evidence is produced and it's often difficult to argue against it. One of the reasons why issues of sexual harassment are so difficult is there are usually no witnesses. With Monica's father we just don't know, no evidence is presented, but my sense is Monica has a strong feeling, and anything beyond this depends on how you perceive of both Monica and her father.

**MF:** And he is someone who has also difficulties in engaging socially.

**CP:** Yes, which may well be why he would do something like that – pick on a young person who has little power – and proceed on the basis that they won't say anything because they're frightened to report him. If he is a man who has difficulty engaging socially he might do that rather than doing the normal thing which is to say to your wife, "I don't know if this marriage is working, we need to..." or conversely saying to his secretary "do you want to go to the motel tonight?" Making a pass at a young girl, who has no power in his eyes, might be his way forward. You know, men can be creepy like that.

**MF:** Out of curiosity, scholars always perform a sort of autopsy on your works. Why are you not interested in their analysis?

**CP:** Because it doesn't help me to write. It's not because I don't think their analysis is valid or insightful or worthwhile, I'm grateful that people read the work and want to write about it critically, but scholarly work doesn't help me to write another novel and if it doesn't help me write another book then I don't have to read it. I know that some writers read feedback looking for praise and in the hope that people say nice things about them, but when people don't say nice things those writers have got to read that too otherwise it is not fair to just read the good things. Were I to choose to read the bad reviews *and* the positive feedback, then I would just be riding a kind of roller-coaster. To my mind it's pointless and actually distracting. Obviously, without criticism literature would be a lot less rich. After all, writers need feedback, you need

people to take the work seriously, but you've got to be sensible and give scholars the room to work freely. The last thing a scholar or a critic needs is somebody telling them, "no, you got it wrong." Actually, they didn't get it wrong, it's their interpretation and so did they get it wrong? I have a chance when I'm writing a book to have it all my own way and to arrange things how I want, but when I've handed over the book to somebody, whatever emotions or critical response it provokes is beyond my control and it's not for me to worry about this. I know it's a strange analogy I'm going to make, but when Beethoven finished the Fifth Symphony it's thereafter none of his business whether people listen to it and cry every evening, or whether they listen to it and throw up because they hate it. It's not about Beethoven anymore; it is about the work. Now, if he needs to know how people feel about his work in order to know how to write the Sixth Symphony, then fine! Personally, I don't feel involved in a book once I've finished it, therefore why am I going to try and disturb scholars, or myself, by worrying about their interpretation of something that is finished and behind me? If critics want to check with me, like you're doing, and other people have done in the past, fine, I will often have a chat about the work. But I would never say, "no, you're absolutely wrong." I might say "no, you thought that this idea emerged out of that, but no, I wasn't thinking of that," but I don't think I would be dismissive or overly-defensive.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The conference was organised by professor Françoise Kral in the framework of the Agrégation d'Anglais 2017-2018. The Agrégation d'Anglais is the French civil service exam that English majors take to be certified to teach English in French universities or high schools. This exam requires the study of set literary works by English-language authors, as well as humanities topics of importance to the English-speaking world. The official programme 2017-2018 also includes Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> See Ledent, Bénédicte. 2002. *Caryl Phillips*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 187-188.

<sup>3</sup> See Hart, Alan. 2015 [2009]. "Zionism: The Real Enemy of the Jews. Sionismo: il vero nemico degli ebrei." In *Il falso Messia*, edited by Diego Siragusa, vol.1, 113-137. Milan: Zambon Editore.

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