

“History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”
(Joyce, James. *Ulysses*, 34)

1 In this essay I investigate Caryl Phillips’s novel *The Nature of Blood* and its fragmented History. The alternative narration of main historical events, the fragmented accounts of events and multiple perspectives characterise the novel and seem to mirror Phillips’s approach to and understanding of History. Furthermore, Phillips’s peculiar writing style seems to invite readers of *The Nature of Blood* to question their knowledge of the main historical events depicted in the novel. He also provides the opportunity for “Travelling furiously across borders and boundaries” (*A New World Order* 5) through the act of reading. This invitation can be interpreted as opening onto a journey that allows both author and readers to cross physical and political edges and frontiers in the attempt to aim at a better understanding of the world they live in as well as their own lives, or in Phillips’s words: “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.” (“Color Me English” 16) (*author’s emphasis*) In the following pages my intent is to provide an analysis of Stephan Stern’s character. Stephan may initially appear as a minor character; but in truth he represents the core of the whole narration and offers, at the same time, a fresh and a new understanding of History. In my study of *The Nature of Blood*, I am deeply indebted to Michael Rothberg for his “multidirectional” vision of History. Although he deals with the concept of “memory as *multidirectional*” (Michael Rothberg 3) (*author’s emphasis*), memory and History are closely connected, and my purpose is 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 History along with the attempt to widen Rothberg’s reflections on *The Nature of Blood*.

2 According to the online *Oxford Dictionary*, History is a “continuous, typically chronological, record of events.” As a common rule, this means that History is characterised by a sense of continuity, which, in turn, offers the possibility of tracing events on a time-line, and this time-line allows the majority of us in the West to familiarise ourselves with the past easily. Nevertheless, this view of History is not universally accepted. Like Phillips, other intellectuals reject traditional, single-narrative interpretations of History that also create the appearance of stability, permanence, and sequence. Michel Foucault, for instance, argues against the so-called ‘evolutionary myth’ that is often associated with the explanation of the natural course of past events. He raises objections to the unquestioned assumptions according to which History would be a cluster of orderly sequenced data or a mere bond between human beings and the past. Foucault invites us to look at History as a complex combination of cause-and-effect patterns. (Caruso 104-105) Consequently, it can be inferred that Foucault’s interest in establishing connections among events that occurred in the past – not necessarily in chronological sequence or limited to specific locations – also offers the opportunity to draw parallels, anticipate circumstances and possibly avert past mistakes.

3 In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips seems to endorse Foucault’s multi-perspectival approach to History. Phillips provides evidence of the existence of such links. His effort is particularly visible in the characters of Stephan, Eva, and Malka. Moreover, readers deal with multi-layered characters and the associations or relations among characters and stories become clearer as the novel reaches its final pages or after a second reading of the text. The individual stories evince the repetition inherent in apparently distinct historical events – such as slavery, discrimination, racism – and hint at a possible comparison between the experience of African victims of the Atlantic slave trade and that of European Jews deported to concentration camps. What is more, in this novel, Phillips’s reflections shift from Africa, which was at the centre of the European colonial expansion and of the slave trade, to Europe, where the prejudice against Jews originated, to be magnified across the centuries and culminate in the murderous master race ideology of the German Nazis.

4 *The Nature of Blood* challenges readers by presenting them with discontinuous narrations, fragmented accounts of events and multiple perspectives, as if to suggest a fragmented identity evident both in Phillips’s characters and in himself.¹ The multitude of personalities which participate in the narration are in some unspecified way related to one another. The connections emerge indirectly, as Phillips does not make them explicit, and it is always up to readers to establish them. Furthermore, Phillips’s elusiveness in describing his characters bewilders readers who cannot help but develop controversial views of the fictional beings.

In reference to this strategy, Bénédicte Ledent defines the author as “a master of ambiguity” (Ledent 1) and, ambiguities emerge in *The Nature of Blood* as well: Stephan, for instance, reveals contradictory facets of his personality, as it will be emphasised later on in this essay.

5It can be argued that *The Nature of Blood* is Phillips’s most elaborate and challenging novel hitherto. It does not provide a table of contents.² Upon opening the book, readers do not receive information about the structure of the narration, or hints about the plot. Consequently, the narration is not organized into chapters: it is an aggregate of historical occurrences and situations that occur over a large time span between the 15th and the 20th century where themes, characters, and incidents resonate and echo one another. Then, the fragmented nature of the narrative flow represents pieces of History that are scattered across the above mentioned time-line, and the consequent gaps in the narration simultaneously challenge the readers’ knowledge of History. These missing pieces in the story (and in History) require of readers that they fill the empty spaces through the means available to them, such as memory, mental association or human empathy, and thus participate in a new understanding of the past. Another important trait of this fragmentation is the fragmentation of the narrating voice. The novel is marked by the diversity of (mostly) first-person narrating voices, so much so that on a first reading, it gives the impression of being a disjointed stream of consciousness³: the thoughts and feelings of the characters are presented as they occur and leave readers wondering who is talking, if the different events are related. However, characters are granted introductory presentations. At first, the narrating voice provides general details about his/her *persona*, or about the described fictional human being, to switch then progressively to the official presentation letting readers know the character’s name, age (sometimes), and place of origin. This being said, as characters represent historical fragments, in order to discern pieces of a non-linear History, readers have to extrapolate from the individual narratives the points they have in common and which make connections available. In addition, the narration of these historical events is crucial to view and examine History afresh in the way suggested by Foucault. Furthermore, through this narration, we receive evidence of the fact that some historical events exhibit the tendency to occur at irregular intervals.

6Despite the centrality of the characters’ personal histories and of their experiences, I propose to read *The Nature of Blood* as a novel which has History as its central topic. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing to consider Eva’s and Malka’s accounts. Eva Stern is a German Jew who survived the Nazi death camps. When her first person singular voice is first heard, she is “twenty-one years old.” (35)⁴ She informs readers of her life in details. She is a *Sonderkommando* during her internment and paradoxically she escapes death in the camp only to commit suicide later on in London. She is one of the victims of History as well as embodying the long-lasting prejudice against Jews. Shaul Bassi’s study on Jewish ethnicity reminds us that the first documented instance dates back to 1144 in England (Bassi 111) and, in the novel, Phillips also illustrates this deeply-rooted prejudice through the omniscient narrator who informs readers about the tragic events that occurred in late medieval-early modern age Europe:

The Jews had first begun journeying to Portobuffole in 1424, many of them migrating from Colonia in Germany. Back in 1349, the Christian people of that region had suddenly become incensed and irrational from fear of the plague, and the Jews began to suffer as this Christian hysteria manifested itself in violence. Eventually the Jews could take it no more and they barricaded themselves into their large synagogue, set fire to it, and recited moribund prayers to each other as they waited for the end. (50)

7What happened in Colonia in 1349 eerily replicates the crimes committed against Jews during the Second World War. The scene of the Jews who “barricaded themselves into their large synagogue, [and] set fire to it” is replayed several years later:

Today, they continue to burn bodies. (I burn bodies.) Burning bodies. First, she lights the fire. Pour gasoline, make a torch, and then ignite the pyre. Wait for the explosion as the fire catches, and then wait for the smoke. Clothed bodies burn slowly. Decayed bodies burn slowly. In her mind she cries, fresh and naked, please. Women and children burn faster than men. Fresh naked children burn the fastest. (170)

8This memory, resembling an instructional manual ‘checklist’, is Eva’s. She informs readers of her traumatic life experience in the camp. In the passage, the verb “to continue” along with the repetition of the phrase “burn bodies”, which is strengthened by the alliteration of the sound “b”, as well as the relentless acceleration of the extermination indicated by “burn slowly”, “burn faster”, “burn the fastest” suggest a procedure through which death becomes “routine” (168) for a *Sonderkommando*. In addition, Eva’s invoked ‘request’ – “fresh and naked, please” – redirects readers to Portobuffole when the Venetian court sentenced three Jews to death because they “had killed an innocent Christian boy named Sebastian New. They had dared to make a sacrifice in the Christian town of Portobuffole.” (59) On the basis of such accusation “a fire will be set under them, reducing their bodies to ashes” (151), and like Eva who “cries” for a faster burn, “Servadio, had also begged his companions not to drink, despite the fact that they were tormented by thirst. Although he did not tell them, he was also thinking that their bodies would burn more easily if they were dried up.” (152)

9The journey of the African diaspora is one of the key themes in the work of Phillips’s literature. Sometimes it can be implied, as is the case in *The Nature of Blood*, at other times it is explicated and detailed. An example is provided in his novel *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, where the narrating voice suggests that the unnamed female character was a former slave: “On her journey to the Indies it was the rats that had inspired the greatest fear, for they fed with conviction and grew huge and profited handsomely from their passage. The human cargo was chained and manacled in the hold ... Soon they were too nauseated to eat, and most were too grief-stricken to cry, and she lay surrounded by the doleful mourning of those who rotted in the darkness.” (*The Lost Child* 5)

10The above extract allows one to make an analogy between the deportation of African people from their villages to the Americas and the deportation of Jewish people to the death camps, as the omniscient narrator recounts in *The Nature of Blood*: “After three days of travelling, clamour had finally given way to silence and people were beginning to doze off (155) ... Lying in straw sodden with faeces and vomit, all classes and social distinctions had disappeared. She watched as a young boy, like the rest of them crazy with thirst, licked the sweat from his mother’s fevered arm.” (161)

11Furthermore, the above analogy leads one to Malka, whose story is mostly recounted by the omniscient narrator. Malka is an Ethiopian Jewish woman who like all the individuals from her African village “*thanked God for returning ... to Zion.*” (201) (*author’s emphasis*). However, the Ethiopian Jews’ relocation to the ‘Promised Land’ is a duplicate of another displacement: “*I ask you, is this home? ... You say you rescued me. Gently plucked me from one century, helped me to cross two more, and then placed me in this time. Here. Now. But why? What are you trying to prove?*” (208) (*author’s emphasis*)

12The subject pronoun “you” in the last question seems to be History, i.e. the History of white colonial Europe, and the phrase “*gently plucked me*” once again reminds readers of the slave trade. A sense of irony emerges from the oxymoron “*gently plucked*”, to “pluck” is a verb we more commonly associate with fruit or inanimate objects, and its use in the above passage offers evidence that like Africans, the Ethiopian Jews are considered inferior. In addition, this relationship ‘superior-inferior’/‘civilized-savage’ once again recalls the dehumanization and abduction of black Africans during the slave trade.

13The image of black people as being inferior and uncivilized is still at issue in a Western culture that is based on inclusion and exclusion, as pointed out by Frantz Fanon in his essay “The Fact of Blackness”. Fanon stresses this fact in the following statement that sounds like a warning: “You come too late, much too late, there will always be a world – a white world between you and us.” (Fanon 339) Furthermore, in *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha supports Fanon’s thought by emphasising that in modern times, “the figure of the ‘human’ comes to be *authorized*”, but a black human being still is “a member of the marginalized, the displaced, the diasporic.” (Bhabha 339) In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips provides evidence of the ongoing practice of treating a particular ethnic group in society less fairly than others. Malka personifies both the African and Jewish diaspora. Through the character of Malka, Phillips seems to underline the fact that the process of discrimination still operates in our contemporary societies. According to Isabelle Hesse, “Phillips shows that any form of belonging always results in the majority creating a social hierarchy, which [as a consequence] excludes the minority.” (Hesse 896) As a matter of fact, in relation to unjust attitudes towards ethnic groups that are perceived as diverse, it may be worth remarking a recent action based on prejudice along with the so-called ‘fear’ of miscegenation that would give birth to a crossbreeding society instead of a society based on distinct social groups. In 2013 global headlines reported

that the Israeli government had injected African immigrants with birth control without their consent. Ethiopian women were in effect subjected to forced sterilization.⁵

14 Many scholars have already dealt with *The Nature of Blood* offering different analyses and perspectives. In this essay, my attempt is to provide further focus on Stephan Stern. His narrative operates as a frame, while his character functions as a hub. The frame can be interpreted as a closed border that contains the aforementioned fragmented stories; the hub can be viewed as the focal point through which the fragmented stories pass. If we accept Foucault's suggestion regarding the understanding of History, the hub – or Stephan – becomes a point of convergence from which multiple connections among historical events radiate. Only on rare occasions does Stephan recount his story directly. Readers have the opportunity to know him through the voices of Eva and the omniscient narrator who fills the gaps in the narrative flow. Stephan is the first character we are introduced to, but his identity emerges only from his niece's reminiscences of her adolescence:

And then we saw the photographs of Uncle Stephan. He was tall and strong, and he stared confidently into the camera with his soft eyes. ... I was about to speak, when I felt the outside of Margot's shoe scuff my ankle, and I knew that I should not comment upon these photographs. Five of them spread across two pages. Uncle Stephan. Always on his own. Always staring directly into the lens of the camera. Always standing.

Uncle Stephan was Papa's only brother. He had journeyed to the British colony of Palestine, for he wanted to defend the new Jewish settlements against attacks from the Arabs, and to prepare the land for large-scale settlement by Jews of all ages and backgrounds. However, his journey was made all the more arduous by the fact that in order to visit this so-called promised land he had to leave behind a young wife and child, and break off from his medical studies. (72)

15 Eva depicts her uncle in a few concise phrases. Stephan's aplomb is stressed by the adverb "always" along with the way he poses in front of the camera: he "stared confidently into the camera ... Always staring directly into the lens of the camera. Always standing." Furthermore, the recurrence of the verb "to stare", the noun "camera" and the adverb "always", stressing manners and duration, within short sentences confers a sort of rhythm to Eva's words. Eva introduces the relative who is regarded, if not as a disgrace, at least a failure by his family. He is just a memory confined to the past whose existence is proved by photographs that are kept in "the old photograph album. The black one with the gilt trim and the specially reinforced edges. Mama kept it on the top shelf in the drawing room, where she imagined that it was out of our reach." (71) When Eva's mother has to decide which family belonging she should bring to "the small apartment"⁶ (72) "instead of stuffing it into a suitcase or a bag, or leaving it on the huge pile of materials whose fate was yet to be decided, she set it down on the drawing-room table and dusted its cover with a cloth." (71) The description of "Mama" wiping the photo album reinforces the Sterns' ambivalent feelings towards their family member. The images of Stephan are "on the top shelf in the drawing room" and not exhibited in that same room of the house where guests are entertained, and where they would have the opportunity to find out about the hosts' background, ancestry and family through ornaments, decorative objects and pictures.

16 Stephan's brother and Stephan's wife do not comprehend nor approve of his dedication to the cause of the 'Promised Land', something which is alluded to when his niece explains "I knew that I should not comment upon these photographs." The reason for this disapproval once again lies in Eva's memories:

Papa was adamant. Uncle Stephan had given up on his medical studies, discarded a wife and daughter, and gone off to fight for what? Why create another home among these Arab people? His wife was right to refuse to uproot her life and expose her child to these barbarians. Papa and he could set up in medical practice together. The brothers Stern. They might become the richest doctors in the country. Why had Stephan suddenly become a fool who evaded his responsibilities? ... Uncle did not like being called a fool, and this epithet generally produced a vocal storm which raged and

bellowed as long as the pair of them had the energy. Had Ernst forgotten that they were Jews? That they remained the only people on the face of the earth without their own home. Did he know this? (75)

17The two brothers embrace different purposes, but they have their resoluteness in common. Papa/Ernst is a typical family man: he is settled down, is married with two children and has a respectable job. The reality of the world outside his house does not seem to be a main concern for him. Conversely, Stephan dedicates his life to the “*House of Israel*” (201) (*author’s emphasis*) and for his cause, he is ready “to leave behind a young wife and child” and accept being “always on his own.” Stephan does not hide the sacrifice required by his quest to reclaim the “troubled land. Palestine. Israel.” (3) Since the beginning of the novel – exactly on the island of Cyprus where Jewish refugees find a shelter before heading to the ‘Promised Land’ – Stephan makes his marital status explicit: “‘Do you have a wife?’ ‘No,’ I said. ‘At least, not any more. She is in America with my daughter.’” (8) The phrase “not any more” suggests a past experience, and sometimes what occurred in the past sinks into oblivion, nonetheless, he mentions such past facts on a regular basis, and occasionally without hiding his regret: “Now there will be a homeland. Yes. We can share. And so to finish my medical studies. And for some time now, simply a doctor. I never tried to find my wife and child. She wrote to me, saying that she respected my choice and she asked me to respect hers. She never wished to see me again. And now it is too late. I have let them go. Let them go.” (11)

18In truth, Stephan never says their names and this offers an indication that in some way he has managed to “let them go.”

19At certain points in the novel, the omniscient narrator provides personal details about Stephan’s life in Israel:

Ten years ago, after his retirement, he had decided to sell his city-centre apartment, for he imagined that the profit would ease his remaining years. His new apartment ... was comfortable although somewhat noisy. ... A little over two years ago, he had nearly died. It was after his recuperation that he decided to join the club, for, with neither work nor family to occupy him, he had finally admitted to himself that he was lonely. (200)

20Readers understand that Stephan has achieved much of what he had hoped for when he left Europe, and he has earned some level of material comfort, but the condition of solitude, already alluded to by Eva, still persists. He is aware of the consequences of having chosen one path – the one that matched his ideals – rather than the one proposed and hoped for by his brother, who seemed unaffected by the rise of the Nazi party, at least until the moment he and his family had to face the reality of the concentration camps.

21The condition of being alone is the price that Stephan has to pay for his quest. However, Stephan “understood that people are not made to live alone, neither when things are good, nor when they are bad” (211) and becomes a member of a local club:

The management’s chief source of income were the men, who were required to pay an annual membership fee for their weekly flights of fantasy. Other activities were continually promised, such as outings to places of historical interest, informal dinners, and lectures by prominent speakers on issues relating to the culture and arts of the country. However, in the two years that he had been a member, he was not aware of any other club activities, beyond these weekly dances each Wednesday afternoon. (199-200)

22Despite the appealing programme – “activities... such as outings to places of historical interest, informal dinners, and lectures by prominent speakers on issues relating to the culture and arts of the country” – the real intent is to provide lonely men with “weekly flights of fantasy.” The promise of arts and culture lends a surface appearance of high-minded respectability to a club which, as the narrator clearly reveals, merely exploits the members’ longing for company for a fee:

Some of the men travelled in from nearby kibbutzim, but the majority lived in the city. They were elderly, mainly bachelors or widowers, but among them were those whose loveless marriages had long ago turned stale. A few among the young women were prostitutes, but the greater number of them were students, or unemployed actresses, all of whom were paid a small sum by the management to dance for a few hours each week. (199)

23On a “Wednesday afternoon”, Stephan meets Malka: “He had been watching her for a long time. [...] this woman was beautiful. He could not take his eyes from her.” (198) They spend the night together in a hotel room because “To his neighbours, he was a respectable retired bachelor doctor.” (204) The same apprehensiveness of being seen with a young African woman from the club and consequently judged emerges, once again, the morning after when he walks along the promenade to enjoy “a clear view of the sea”: “What are you doing in town? So early? I saw you last night. With a black woman. No, it was you. I am sure of it. He saw a bench which nobody had yet claimed ... He sat heavily and tried not to think of his wife and child. But it was useless. Every day, assaulted by loneliness. Every day, eaten up with guilt. His only companion was memory.” (211)

24In the above passage, the omniscient narrator depicts a weary, mature Stephan who “sat heavily” as if to put his body at rest from the burden of “loneliness” and “guilt”. His regret for abandoning a loving family to pursue his ambitious project haunts him, whereas the last phrase – “His only companion was memory” – allows one to draw a parallel between the earlier-used metaphor of the hub and *The Nature of Blood*. Daniel L. Schacter defines the act of remembering as “a telescope pointed at time.” (Schacter 15) Moreover, cognitive scientists compare the human brain to a computer where information is stored; this means that our subjective past experiences can be retrieved any time, and their emerging releases us from restriction of time and place. (Schacter 16-17) When memory – “the telescope pointed at time” – leads us to re-experience past events, then a different time and location overlap the actual ones. This “telescope pointed at time” can be used during the act of reading *The Nature of Blood*, whose key feature is the unconventional recounting of History and whose narrated episodes may be regarded as subjective experiences. Stephan may be compared to a human brain where the subjective experiences are stored. In this way, Stephan becomes a point of convergence from which multiple connections among historical events radiate. Through the act of reading readers can ‘re-experience’ the narrated episodes and this experience leads to the overlapping of time and location that, ultimately, turns also into training for historical memory. Moreover, this type of remembering echoes Rothberg’s suggestion in regard to memory or “memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private. [...] This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory.” (Rothberg 3) (*author’s emphasis*) The “multidirectional memory” becomes an attempt to negotiate with the past, both the individual’s past as well as the past of ethnic groups who still struggle with concepts of identity, belonging, discrimination and exclusion-inclusion: “pursuing memory’s multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction.” (Rothberg 5)

25“‘The telescope pointed at time’” can also be an alternative metaphor for Phillips’s passion for literature that can be pictured as a specific type of travelling to distant places and times: “A life lived along the twin rails of reading and writing. The one informing the other. A passion for literature. Travelling furiously across borders and boundaries.” (*A New World Order* 5) This unorthodox travelling along with the metaphor of “the telescope pointed at time” may also be detected in the novel. The mental image of an ageing Stephan sitting on the bench enjoying “a clear view of the [Israeli] sea” (211) echoes the mental image that takes shape in our minds as a consequence of the omniscient narrator’s closing of the novel:

They simply saw strange Uncle Stephan staring at the yellowing grass between his feet. The sisters looked at each other, and then Margot began to laugh. ... And now he called to them, but they did not hear him, for his weary tongue was unable to bear the weight of these children’s names. ... Uncle Stephan watched as they skipped away and left him alone on the bench, his arms outstretched, reaching across the years. (211-212)

26 Both moments “on the bench” are devoted to reflections that lead to remembering. In the first extract, readers are confronted with an ageing Stephan who “tried not to think of his wife and child. But it was useless”; whereas in the second extract, readers are confronted with a young Stephan who sits “alone on the bench, his arms outstretched, reaching across the years” so as to symbolise his being open and ready to embark on a journey across time and space, and in the end this journey makes of him the point of convergence from which multiple connections among historical events radiate.

27 Through the character of Stephan, Phillips also raises the issue of prejudice. He seems to point out that, even to the smallest degree, nobody is exempted from the partiality that prevents objective consideration of a topic or situation. The evidence is given in the following passage, when the omniscient narrator depicts the morning after Stephan and Malka’s brief encounter: “In the morning, she was gone. His first thought was to make sure that his wallet was still in his jacket pocket, but he resisted this ungenerous impulse. ... But she belonged to another land. She might be happier there. Dragging these people from their primitive world into this one, and in such a fashion, was not a policy with which he had agreed. They belonged to another place.” (210)

28 Stephan’s bigotry may appear perplexing for most readers given the character’s past, particularly his involvement in the struggle to establish a ‘Promised Land’ where Jews would be free of anti-Semitism and discrimination. We would expect him to be sympathetic and understanding towards “these people”, fellow Jews, who, like Stephan, are recent arrivals in Israel. His disapproval of “dragging these people from their primitive world” echoes Ernst’s displeasure with Stephan’s commitment to Zionism. Both men go so far as to resort to the same adjective, “primitive”, to refer to what they perceive to be non-white/non-European lands: “(Why create another home? We can set up in practice together. The brothers Stern. We might become the richest doctors in the country.) ... (To this primitive British colony of Palestine? I have dutifully bought the stamps to pay for the land that you buy from the Arabs. I have done my duty. Enough of this foolishness.)” (10) (author’s emphasis)

29 Stephan and Ernst are Jews and the symbolic representatives of what is arguably the best known and documented Diaspora in human history. Jews have been persecuted, regarded as inferior, segregated in ghettos, victims of genocide, but, when Ernst defines the ‘Other’ (in this case the Arabs) “primitive”, he is adopting the malevolent attitude of the colonizer. Moreover, the same attitude towards the ‘Other’ emerges in Eva’s words specifically through the use of the noun “barbarians” (75), when she expresses empathy with her aunt’s refusal to go along with Stephan’s quest. In the above passages, Phillips implies that, although temporal, geographical and political contexts may vary, the presence of racially and culturally-based prejudice is a stubbornly recurring phenomenon throughout History. Ledent, commenting on Phillips’s works, offers one explanation for the persistence of bigotry: “however reassuring for the individual, a feeling of attachment may prove destructive in the long term, as it tends to petrify biases and turn former victims of racism into racists.” (Ledent 140) This is precisely the kind of “feeling of attachment” experienced by the ageing Stephan, whose attachment to the land of Israel he had idealized and helped build has “petrified” and has become less capable of accommodating the evolving (that is not petrified), multicultural reality of modern Israel. Similarly, Ernst, who despite being aware he is not entirely accepted as a German, has managed to develop a feeling of attachment that allows him to consider Germany “home”.

30 Stephan’s devotion to the cause of the ‘Promised Land’ comprises some of the aims and contradictions of the “Stern Gang”⁷ as well as aspects of political Zionism. Despite its religious, non-belligerent orientation (at its heart, it is a movement that aspires to create a state based on Jewish religious values), Zionism also conducts military operation through the actions of its all-volunteer army. Stephan is a member of this army: “I, too, was in the army before I became a doctor. But, Moshe, the army is not everything. *Hagannah*⁸ is not everything. A wife and child, now that is something.” (8) (author’s emphasis) Stephan is aware of the personal trade-off that such absolute devotion to a cause entails, namely the absence of family life and loneliness. That is not to say that he questions his decision, as is evident when he declares that an army is indispensable for a legitimate sovereign political entity. In order to guarantee an independent identity and “a home”, armed force is necessary:

31 “Do you have an army?’ I had heard this question before. From others who were newly arrived and, as yet, untouched by emissaries. ... ‘Yes there is an army, and it is organized and well disciplined. It will be extremely important once we have a free country.’ ... Yes, the army. And the army will make sure that

you continue to have a home.” (7-11)

32Stephan is hopeful that the creation of Israel will encourage the return of all Jewish people who are scattered throughout the world. In reality, his idealistic vision of a homeland for all Jews becomes tainted by his racist feelings towards other Jews who do not conform to his notion of Jewishness, as we saw earlier with his views on Ethiopian immigrants. The “policy” of the state of Israel to locate and airlift Ethiopian Jews to Israel exemplified the reason why a Jewish homeland was created. But for Stephan, a white, European born and educated doctor who has internalized the old continent’s sense of cultural and racial superiority, xenophobia ultimately trumps political idealism and empathy towards darker-skinned Jews.

33Stephan’s words come at the very beginning of the novel and introduce the theme of exile and diaspora. Beth Rosenberg points out the importance of geographical spaces and boundaries when “the origin of national identity” becomes a concern for those people who are considered “illegal aliens” and the return to their homeland is denied. (Rosenberg 39-40) In a basic, pragmatic way, it is hard to define ‘home’ properly as each human being endows it with a specific meaning: home is a place, a space, feeling, practices, and/or an active state of being in the world. However, in relation to the concept of ‘home’, in his essay “Necessary Journeys (2004)” Phillips stresses the significance of time and boundaries that are attached to the meaning of the noun ‘home’: “I not only belong to the British tradition, but I am also a writer of African origin, and for African diasporan people, ‘home’ is a word that is often burdened with a complicated historical and geographical weight.” (“Necessary Journeys” 124) The concept of home is underpinned by a reflexion on belonging and identity, which are at stake for those individuals who forcedly or voluntarily travelled from their birth of place to another country. In *The Nature of Blood* readers are confronted with diasporic identities, and “the novel emerges as an exploration of ambivalent modes of belonging and exclusion.” (Rothberg 164) The young Jewish Stephan embarks on a journey that can be interpreted as a homecoming, however his European *modus vivendi* and mentality emerge as soon as he has to face a multi-ethnic reality. The modern ‘Promised Land’ portrayed in the novel echoes Phillips’s Britain in the sixties-seventies that is to say “a country which seemed to revel in its ability to reduce identity to clichés.” (“Necessary Journeys” 123) The Ethiopian Jews had been “*plucked*” from their African villages to be placed in a country that, like Britain, is based on “class-bound society, with a codified and hierarchical structure” (“Necessary Journeys” 128) This reiteration of a process of inclusion and exclusion can be detected in Malka’s words:

(The mayor of the town in which we were first placed complained. He had requested that he be sent only those who could sing and dance, so that he might form a folklore group for tourists. ... In our country, we were not used to relying on outsiders. ... Have you seen the ugly housing at the edges of the city where we live? ... My mother is tattooed on her face, her hands and her neck. She finds it difficult to leave the apartment, for people stop and stare. ... And yes, I went to your university – I am a nurse – but I cannot find a job. Four of us, we live in one cramped apartment. This Holy Land did not deceive us. The people did.) (207) (author’s emphasis)

34In the modern Israeli society, Malka, as “*an outsider*”, is able only to find a job in a club for “a small sum” of money; in return she has to offer “weekly flights of fantasy” to local lonely men longing for company for a fee.

35In his essay on “Forms of History and Identity in *The Nature of Blood*” Stephen Clingman deals with Phillips’s concern with identity. Clingman defines Phillips’s “life ... like a segment of the map of the twentieth-century migrancy with all its vulnerabilities and juxtapositions.” (Clingman 144) Some of those “vulnerabilities and juxtapositions” have been placed in the narrative of *The Nature of Blood* such as discrimination, the systematic subjugation of ethnic groups on the grounds of prejudice, and the quest for ‘home’. The marginalized conditions and the disconnected fragments recounted in the novel simultaneously underscore the fact that our History is incomplete (because it has not included the voice of the “displaced”, of the non-white) and challenges readers to cross “borders and boundaries” to engage with these very human voices. On a formal level, the novel’s disjointed stream of consciousness narrative can be read as an attempt to address this absence of the “Other” from our History. In Rothberg’s words, “*The Nature of Blood* testifies to the existence of new possibilities for thinking the relatedness of the unrelatable.” (Rothberg 164)

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Notes

1 In conversation with Stephen Clingman, Phillips admits to integrate some of his life details and experiences into the representation of his characters. He argues that it is unavoidable and, as a reader himself, he has detected the same tendency in Endo’s and Baldwin’s fictions. (Clingman 11)

2 Actually, the lack of a table of contents is a distinguishing feature in Phillips’s novels; the only exceptions are *The Lost Child* (2015) and *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018). Through this strategy, the author seems to require a more intense commitment from his readers. What might appear at first confusing and, perhaps, non-sensical, acquires meaning during the narration and definitively as soon as the reading of the novel is ended.

3 The term was originated by psychologist William James (1842-1910) who defined “the stream of consciousness” as the continuous flow of ideas, thoughts, and feelings forming the content of an individual’s consciousness. (William 237)

4 All further references to *The Nature of Blood* will be included in the main text parenthetically with the sole page number.

5 Phillips, by implication, underlines how History still denies equality, freedom and justice for peoples (African and Jewish) who embody the noun “diaspora” to the highest degree. In my attempt to support Phillips’s view on historical events that reoccur at irregular intervals, it might be worth mentioning Colson Whitehead’s novel, *The Underground Railroad*, about the life of Cora, a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. At certain points in the narration, the disturbing issue of black women’s forced sterilization emerges: “a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby.


The procedure was simple, permanent and without a risk.” (Whitehead 134) “The controlled sterilization” becomes another tool of control because “America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered.” (Whitehead 146)

6 In the attempt to escape transportation, Eva and her parents “move from our four-storey house to the small apartment from the other side of the city.” (72) They manage to live secluded for a couple of years. The indication of time is given by Eva “I lived for nearly two years in that small apartment.” (61)

7 In August 1940, in Mandatory Palestine, Avraham Stern founded Lehi, (an acronym from *Lohamei Herust Israel* – “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel”) also known as the “Stern Gang”, with the intent of evicting the British authorities from Palestine, allowing unrestricted immigration of Jews and establishing a totalitarian Hebrew republic. Stern was extremely adverse to British authorities to the point of resorting to terrorist attacks. (Hart 113-119)

8 *Haganah*: “(Hebrew: “Defence”), Zionist military organization representing the majority of the Jews in Palestine from 1920 to 1948. Organized to combat the revolts of Palestinian Arabs against the Jewish settlement of Palestine.” Entry in *ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA*, <https://www.britannica.com/>, accessed September 6, 2017.

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