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**Radical dislocation, multiple identifications,  
and the subtle politics of hope  
in Caryl Phillips's novels**

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I hear a drum beating on the far bank of the river . . . A many-tongued chorus continues to swell. And I hope that amongst these survivors' voices I might occasionally hear those of my own children. My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. My daughter. Joyce. All. Hurt but determined . . . There are no paths in water. No signposts. No return. A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my beloved children . . . But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved.

Epilogue, *Crossing the River* (1993)

This essay examines all of Caryl Phillips's novels to date with the aim of showing that, notwithstanding the low-temperature prose and emotional restraint, these are deeply political works that vibrate with an intense, but muted, emancipatory politics. Phillips rejects simplistic political solutions; superficial reading of his works might well induce gloom, even apathy. Following the sociological/cultural studies frame established by Stuart Hall, I suggest that the concept of multiple identifications, forged in radically dislocated settings, helps us to see that Phillips has evaded the trap of identity politics. Phillips's innovatory use of historical materials to create fragments of stories, his use of utterly diverse points of view, his characters' various identifications, and his refusal to provide answers, all combine to open each novel to politically progressive readings. As Bénédicte Ledent has pointed out, Phillips's now large body of work, may be seen as an extended form of 'writing back' on itself, as he repeatedly interrogates, and moves on from, his earlier work (2015, 85); in my view this adds to their political saliency. Even the novels which take a more conventional form and seem furthest from 'politics' (*The Final Passage*, *A State of Independence*, *In the Falling Snow*, *A*

*View of the Empire at Sunset*) exhibit a subterranean trope of freedom. *Foreigners: Three English Lives* – imaginative history or three novellas? – express political concerns. Nigerian-British David Oluwale — incarcerated, persecuted, drowned — was not, as a lazy reading might suggest, the ultimate victim; in Phillips’s account he fought back every inch of the way.<sup>1</sup> I suggest that, in every work, powerful feelings, sometimes alluded to in the stories, are evoked by the deliberately dispassionate narrative style. Emotional complexity propels the subtle politics of Phillips’s novels. The starting point for this argument is Phillips’s persistent focus on the effects of crossing continents.

### **On the move**

Phillips either puts migration across oceans at the heart of each book, or provides us with characters whose lives elsewhere are a key to their current experience. At the risk of labouring this point, a very brief resumé of the novels will set the scene. In *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018), the heart of the story that Phillips tells about the writer Jean Rhys is her birth and childhood in Dominica, her transplantation into England, and her longing to go back to the Caribbean. In *The Lost Child* (2015), one of the narrative drivers is the lives of the two children born to Julius Wilson and Monica Johnson. Julius ‘originated in a part of the world where decent standards of behaviour and respect for people’s families were obviously alien concepts’ (22), according to Monica’s father. We learn through Julius’s interactions with the lightweight, politically aspiring Dr Lloyd Samuels, that this alien part of the world was a Caribbean island which readers probably suspect to be small. With the lightest of touches, Phillips shows how the lives of Julius and Monica’s two sons are repeatedly marked by the consequences of their skins being brown, as well as by their poverty. Opening and closing this book is a woman, probably once an African slave, and her child of mixed parentage. *In the Falling Snow* (2009) likewise does not put geographical movement at its centre, but foregrounds the overseas’ origins of its principal character, Keith Gordon. Serious readers of Phillips’s oeuvre will immediately imagine a transnational past for Keith Gordon, because we will guess that ‘a man like him’, who (even in the early 2000s) attracts ‘curious half glances’ in a leafy London suburb is black (*In the Falling Snow*, 3). The assumption is soon confirmed.<sup>2</sup> In Phillips’s first two novels the central characters are migrants of Caribbean heritage, none of whom is settled comfortably either in their small island or in England.

Keith's ethnicity is not portrayed as the root of his angst, but many will read him through their knowledge of Phillips's preoccupation with the psychic and social disturbances provoked by migration. Keith's life exhibits his sometimes conflicting identifications: as a black man, as a father, estranged husband, suspended worker and putative writer. Somehow his migrant past propels these complex positions. *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) is set almost entirely in the United States (with a brief excursion to England) but the sense is inescapable that it all went wrong for Egbert Austin Williams the moment his ambitious, adventurous, proud father took him as a boy from the Bahamas to the USA. The stage act of Williams and Walker, the 'two real coons', is often on tour, but in this book it is the voluntary movement from a predominantly black country to a predominantly white one that underpins Williams's fate. Usually, Phillips confronts transplantation head on. In his first two novels, the approach is conventional – the characters are people who are migrating, settling, unsettling, returning. In *The Final Passage* (1985) Phillips explored the migration of Michael and Leila (holding her small baby) from a small island in the Caribbean to London sometime in the 1950s. In his second novel, *A State of Independence* (1986) Phillips takes Bertram Francis, a black Briton, back to the island that he left twenty years before, when he was nineteen. Both books allow Phillips to examine life in a small Caribbean island sometime in the 1950s and then at some time in the 1980s, and he depicts the emotional turbulence that accompanies migration.

But Phillips wants the reader to look beyond, and go deeper than the vicissitudes of personal life examined in these early novels. The next three books adopt a very different mode of story-telling which allows him to both narrow down and open up the question of what happens to people when they are uprooted and transplanted. This technique – telling a series of stories between one set of covers where each voice is quite different from the other – burrows the reader into the minutiae of the narrator's life, but resolutely refuses to provide closure or narrative coherence as conventionally understood. This shifting of ground, both geographically and emotionally, is politically provocative. In *Higher Ground* (1989) the three stories take us from a West African slave port in the early part of the nineteenth century, to an American prison in 1967, to England in the 1940s and 1950s, with recollections of Poland in the 1930s. In each, the protagonist's loss of a previous place, and fear of the next place, is one source of the narrative drive. In *Cambridge* (1991) the reader is placed in one spot (a sugar plantation staffed by slaves in a small Caribbean island in the nineteenth century) but both

narrators are perpetually attempting to come to terms with their relocation. Emily Cartwright, in her 30s, has suddenly arrived from England, while David Henderson, known as Cambridge, has only a dim memory of his African origins but can never forget that he is in, but not of, this island. *Crossing the River* (1993) recalls *Higher Ground*'s form by setting the first part in 'the pagan coast', West Africa, the second in America, the fourth 'somewhere in England' in the 1930s and 40s, while the third is the captain's account of an eighteenth-century slave ship's voyage. As Andrew Warnes has pointed out in an essay on *Crossing the River* and *A Distant Shore*, Phillips's challenge to conventional literary form links him to other diasporic writers who aim to upset the status quo, both in art and in society (2007, 36-7). 'Crossing the river' is the title of the captain's terse description, in letters to his wife and entries in the ship's log, of the voyage and the trade in Africans' bodies. The captain's description is emblematic of Phillips's persistent focus on moving, crossing over, being somewhere else, perhaps – but not certainly – reaching 'higher ground'. Because the captain's log centres on the mechanics of white-skinned people capturing and brutalising dark-skinned people, we never lose sight of the racism at the root of these crossings. So in these stories we move away from simple 'loss' and fumbling efforts to reconcile with the new place. Instead we meet the bitter reality of being ripped from one location and dumped in another: the reader is forced to confront the material reality of slavery and its dire consequences. Phillips then examines another type of genocide. *The Nature of Blood* (1997) explores in horrific detail<sup>3</sup> Jews being transported into the camps, then moving to England or to Israel, a country whose name some do not yet know. The book's coda refers to the 'rescue', and removal to Israel, of Ethiopian Jews in the 1980s. With *A Distant Shore* (2003) Phillips picks up his abiding theme of England and the people who call themselves English, but in each of the five sections, geographical movement is foregrounded because it is the presence of attractive men from distant shores – Gabriel/Solomon and Mahmood – that temporarily animates Dorothy's life. England is the fixed setting for *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007) but here we meet black British citizens – Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin and David Oluwale – whose family genealogies, including their origins 'abroad', have played out in quite different ways. In *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) Phillips turns his attention to a character who is nominally white, Gwendolyn Williams (eventually known as Jean Rhys), but Gwendolyn's misery is inseparable from her status as

an outsider in Europe, partly because she grew up in the West Indies, and then as a ‘white nigger’ when she makes a brief return to Dominica.

Thus in every book, the close focus on very different lives, in utterly different locations and historical periods, disrupts our reading, and opens us to the psychological, social, cultural, economic and political threats that arise from forced migrations, whether these are imposed by the slave system, anti-Judaism, economic exploitation, or war. In the case of Gwendolyn Williams, migration is probably forced by her colonial parents’ effort to install Englishness in their daughter. Phillips’s focus on the existential effects of these forcefields, and his refusal to simplify them by offering conventional political ‘solutions’ (political militancy, changes of government and such like), make these novels politically stimulating. Migration and un-settlement is the context in which Phillips does his political work.

### **Located/dislocated**

One way of summarising the challenges that flow from migration is to examine whether or not the person ever feels ‘at home’. Phillips’s novels are so usefully disturbing partly because none of his characters ever fully experiences belonging. Even those who might be assumed to be ‘at home’ – because of their economic security and power – are not. In an obituary, Lawrence Grossberg (2014) said this of Stuart Hall: ‘It is hard to place Stuart geographically. He was born in Jamaica but as he repeatedly said, he never went home — that is the life that he chose not to lead. He lived his life in Britain and devoted himself to its culture and politics, but as he repeatedly said, he never felt completely at home there.’ This applies to almost every one of the characters Caryl Phillips presents to us in his novels. Grossberg continued: Hall’s ‘brand of contextualism—conjuncturalism—sees contexts as complex relations of multiple forces, determinations and contradictions.’ Phillips’s novels exhibit just that way of thinking about the contexts in which his characters make their lives.

Phillips presents those in positions of power – the new Governor in *Higher Ground*, Emily in *Cambridge*, Edward Williams in *Crossing the River* and Dorothy Jones in *A Distant Shore* – as rooted in their specific context, and deeply unsettled. Even Dorothy – supposedly privileged by her Englishness, her whiteness and her middle-class status, living in the

heartland of people like her – is out of joint and open to people from elsewhere. In her final location, for the mentally distressed, she says ‘This is not my home’ (312). But, like all of Phillips’s characters, she was never truly at home even before she reached the institution: psychological and sociological comfort and security had eluded her.

A newspaper’s review of *In the Falling Snow* had the headline ‘Dislocation, dislocation, dislocation’ (Tayler 2009), even though the reviewer never alluded to the issue I am discussing here. (Probably, the sub-editor was punning on a popular British TV property-buying programme at the time called ‘Location, Location, Location’.) The reviewer failed to point out that Keith Gordon appears in the novel as a man whose psychological and cultural location is not secure. As he walks in the suburbs in the opening pages referred to above, as the reader imputes to him the troubled past of African and Caribbean people in Phillips’s other novels, as each personal encounter goes awry, readers experience him as a dislocated soul. Quite literally, he is not ‘at home’ because he has had to move out of his marital home. But, compared to figures in earlier novels, Keith is relatively insulated from the trauma of migration by his achievement of some social status in England’s class structure (precarious though that status is). Mr Johnson, father to the deeply disturbed Monica in *The Lost Child*, might seem, like Dorothy Jones, the most contextually secure of the white English. Yet he too is thrown out of joint by his daughter’s decision to abandon the secure future he had imagined for her by having sons with a black man.

The most acutely dislocated are the Africans who have been captured and transported. Nash Williams’ story in *Crossing the River* exemplifies the most radical type of dislocation readers witness in Phillips’s novels. Nash was born in America, where he spoke English and was instructed in Christianity, was then transferred (‘free’) as a missionary back to an African village (with its own incomprehensible language). Nash stayed in that place, attempting to put his master’s wishes into effect, but failed, and finally adopted a different position within the local culture. Ultimately, he chose ‘freely ... to live the life of the African’ (62). Readers should not impute too much hope in that, since there is no sense that his final role provides a happy state of affairs for Nash. This final location does not relieve his anguish. In another vivid portrait of a highly educated and intelligent African (in *Higher Ground*) the locations move from a slave fort on the coast, where the African has had some status as an interpreter, to a village nearby. Here trauma is induced when the African rescues, and falls in love with,

an African village woman who has been sexually tortured by one of the white officers in the fort. The African's punishment is to lose his slightly elevated status and to be sold and transported as the most menial form of slave. This is the endpoint of this story, so the most radical uprooting (being forcibly taken out of Africa) is not explored; the power of this narrative lies in the sexual and psychological disruption the older African man experiences when he encounters the young African woman. This dislocates him emotionally. Then he is physically dislocated by transportation on a slave ship.

The amount of work Phillips puts into depicting white people who cross over implies that his primary interest is in the complex fates of all migrant peoples, rather than just the many situations of black people. He suggests that psycho-socio-cultural boundaries are as important as geographical borders. In *A View of the Empire at Sunset* Gwendolyn's contemporaries at boarding school call her 'West Indies'. It is left to the reader to decide if the men she attracts are aroused simply by her beauty or by the cultural difference with which her Caribbean childhood marked her. An extraordinary tirade from her lover's cousin indicates that she is positioned at least by him as an exotic threat. An early enquiry into white people's crossings is Irina/Irene's tale (*Higher Ground*), where he begins a theme later explored in detail in *The Nature of Blood*, the persecution of the Jews. Irina's Polishness, and then her Jewishness, are lightly sketched, but readers learn that she has fled as a young woman to England as Nazis got closer. In a boarding house in England, Irene (as she is now called) is experiencing mental health problems, a psychological dislocation which seems linked to her forced migration. She is drawn to Louis, a recently-arrived migrant from the Caribbean, but their brief encounter works out for neither of them; Irene is destined for the hospital and Louis is going back to his island. With Joyce in *Crossing the River* Phillips provides a more detailed account of a white woman's dislocation as she slowly falls in love with Travis, a black American soldier, in a small rural town in the north of England. Geographical movement is far less important in this story than her journey away from her small-minded, small shop-owning husband towards a cultivated, big-hearted black man. Just as he narrates Dorothy Jones' sexual and emotional encounters with men whose skins readers will presume to be dark, Phillips presents Joyce's crossing of a cultural boundary in the most matter-of-fact terms. Neither Joyce nor Dorothy are disturbed by the difference these men's skins represent. Their dislocation lies not so much in their own lives as in the minds of others.

‘I knew what they were thinking’, writes Joyce, (*Crossing the River*, 202)). In *The Lost Child* Phillips characteristically places the white woman, Monica, as *blasé* about the brown skin of the man (Julius) whom she approaches with a view to having a relationship. Her discomfort around her children is fleetingly alluded to — her 14 year old notices that she is ‘abashed’ in public with her sons beside her (176) — but it is not entirely clear if this is because of their colour. For the issue with Monica has been touched on from the start: there is ‘stuff going on in [her] head’ (26). As with Dorothy’s story in *Crossing the River*; Monica’s increasing problem with her ‘nerves’, and eventual breakdown, is not predicated in this novel on the vicissitudes of racialised lives; it seems that these women were searching for something in a man who happens to be black. Nevertheless, readers who are themselves living within cultural milieus where black-white sexual relations are still rare, and possibly frowned upon, might well be thinking on the same lines: they, perhaps, will be disconcerted and even dislocated as they read stories about sex across borders where some taboo remains. Those familiar with the vagaries of sexual life across the skin boundary will perhaps be more intrigued to find that, in Phillips’s novels, the real issues are much deeper than colour.

### **Multiple identifications**

In an essay partially titled ‘The Dis-ease of Multiple Identities’, Chika Unigwe stated that ‘Phillips’s works have mainly been steeped in the exploration of (issues of) identity, of isolation, of belonging and unbelonging’. She added that the play she examined, *Strange Fruit*, showed that ‘migration should transform the migrant without annihilating him, so that he is able to carry his multiple identities with ease’ (Unigwe, 236, 245). The concept of ‘multiple identities’ seems to have become a form of shorthand for the adoption of an ‘anti-essentialist’ theoretical starting point. The move (in post-structuralist thought) from a static notion of identity to ‘multiple identities’ was valuable in undermining the essentialist, and conservative assumption that humans have unified, unchanging inner selves, structured for life by their biology or their culture. One effect was to widen the field of human agency, improving understanding of the many terrains on which people take political (and other types) of action. Phillips’s novels exhibit ‘anti-essentialist’ analysis and its political implications are being discussed in this essay. But the strong version of that theory, where ‘the subject’ is considered to be ‘multiple and contradictory [. . . ] and precarious’ (Mouffe, 33-4), is not fully

borne out in Phillips's work. The people Phillips offers to the reader may exhibit contradictory aspects to their characters, particularly in their emotional and sexual lives. Phillips frequently represents mental illness, perhaps to investigate the most uncertain aspects of identity. Examples include Irina/Irene in *Higher Ground*; Eva Stern's 'Mama' delusion when liberated in the concentration camp in *The Nature of Blood*; Dorothy Jones hospitalised from 'stress' in *A Distant Shore*; Monica Johnson's 'kind of madness' in *The Lost Child* (170); David Oluwale's incarceration in a mental hospital in *Foreigners*. Even here, Phillips takes the remarkable and hopeful step, only elaborated in some types of psychological theory, of showing these characters as functioning rather effectively while also having unusual mental episodes. To describe their subjectivities as precarious is to undervalue these people's resilience, their ability to make their way in their complex many-sidedness, as people who are deeply uncomfortable but capable. To adopt Unigwe's term, mostly they are not 'annihilated' (though, crucially, David Oluwale was, in real life, and Monica dies young, in unexplained circumstances). To describe people's deep subjectivities, and their subject positions (what others call 'identities'), as multiple or precarious oversimplifies the richness of the resources humans deploy as they cope with the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. It is more useful – both as a tool for analysing Phillips's characters, and as a means of understanding society – to think in terms of people with a 'community of selves' (Butt, 133) or as performing 'multiple identifications' (Hall).

To hang on to the important aspects of the post-structural position, while avoiding the notion that all humans are pointing themselves in all directions all at once, I adopt Stuart Hall's 'strategic and positional' concept of identity, and his preference to replace the concept of 'identity' with 'identification'. The concept 'identification', with its origins in Freud, allows us to insert questions of agency and politics into the discussion of identity. Hall refuses to revert to a notion of agency that rests upon a 'centred author of social practice' (Hall, 2, 6). Politics in the current era of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman) builds from fluid social movements composed of people who play with several subject positions and move between and across political mobilisations that rise and fall as the issues change. In these movements, assumed structural foundations (e.g. race, class, gender) are supplanted by an emphasis on intersectionality (stressing the interactions between, for example, 'race', class, gender, sexuality). (Examples of these kinds of social movement include Occupy versus the 1%, the

#BlackLivesMatter protests against police killings, anti-fracking campaigns, and #MeToo feminist actions.) Just as these movements eschew leaders and permanence, they fix their subjects only temporarily. As we shall see in the discussion below of Black Power in *Higher Ground*, Rudi's deep essentialism, his certainty that he is centred, is one of the reasons why readers, in the main, will not identify with him, even though they might come to understand why his circumstances, combined with his reading, lead him to that position.

The most obvious way in which Phillips's characters display their multiple identifications links to their mixed attitudes to 'home'. Returning to a pervasive theme in all his work, Phillips makes 'HOME' the title of section two of *The Final Passage*, while 'GOING HOME' is the final section's title in *The Lost Child. A View of the Empire at Sunset* opens with 'Going Home' and section 2 is called 'Home'. The final section 'A Now Empty World' start with 'Home'. Leila and Michael in *The Final Passage* cannot wait to leave home. Their identification with their Caribbean island is, in their imaginations, replaced by other identifications, the nature of which become increasingly ambiguous. Phillips rejects the 'mother country' cliché. Of course, many first generation West Indians in Britain do remind those whites who will listen that the talk they heard (from their white teachers and colonial administrators) was about Britain configured as The Mother Country. They often know more British history than most Brits. But they say this more to explain their disappointment when they got to the UK than to suggest that they had completely identified with Britain. As John La Rose pointed out: 'We [West Indians] did not come alive in Britain' (Harris). A monologue by Michael's grandfather in *The Final Passage* sets out the predominantly economic motivation for migration. Many English-speaking West Indians travelled for work to many other places as well as, or instead of, Britain. Grandfather pithily explains the political-economic implications of this: 'In Panama, an old, old man, he can barely pick up an axe, he tell me that the economics of the world be soldered with my sweat' (*The Final Passage*, 41). If there was an identification with Britain among the first generation, it was soon quelled, and anyway it was one of several identifications, the most important of which, I suggest, was waged work and the improved standard of living that was expected to result. Motivation to migrate was gendered. Some West Indian women were recruited directly to work in Britain, particularly in the Health Service, but many migrated because of their relationships with men who sought work in Britain. This is one reason why Leila in *The Final Passage* came to

England. Leila identifies strongly with her child (husband Michael apparently does not) and her role as a mother. In *A State of Independence* the perils of going back home after many years in Britain are set out: Bertram wants to identify with the island of his birth, but nothing goes well; there is no sense that he identifies with Britain ('A big rich country like that don't seem to have make any impression on me', *Independence*, 85); and while he wants to identify with his mother and rebuild that relationship, the prospects are not good.

Similarly complex identifications provide the richness in all of Phillips's stories. To exemplify the point that he is as interested in white people as he is in black, I want briefly to examine his whitest of all whites, the English woman Dorothy Jones in *A Distant Shore*. Dorothy is initially placed as a retired schoolteacher. Teaching might well have been her principal identification, and retirement can provoke the adoption of new positions, including private piano teaching, but in these opening pages readers also learn that she has been married, divorced and bereaved, all of which signal the fluctuations in important relationships, and consequent challenges to anyone's subject position. Dorothy's identification signalled at the start of the book is with her father, whose class politics are voiced, and whose pipe and tobacco pouch signify (hopefully) a benign form of patriarchy. Dorothy provides a good example of why Phillips's characters are more usefully read through the concept of multiple identifications rather than multiple identities. While Nash Williams might be seen as someone who holds several rather different identities as his life unfolds (American-African, 'free' and Christian; 'the African', still marked with his origins), Dorothy maintains two principal identity positions (white, female) and then puts herself into a series of situations in which new identifications emerge. Mainly, these are situations in which new positions are pulled into play by new relationships. Her encounter with Solomon – 'my knight in shining armour' (*A Distant Shore*, 19) – is platonic, confined to revealing conversations. 'I had a feeling Solomon understood me' (312) hints that this was an emotionally profound, brief encounter. There is no hint that her relationship with Brian, her ex-husband, stirred any part of her body or soul. When she seduces Mahmood she enjoys being desired, and at first the sex is good, but conversation goes nowhere, so this identification seems mainly with her, and his, body. For Mahmood something else seems to have happened: 'You understand Mahmood' (259) he says, sometime after he has summarily rejected her. Her seduction of Geoffrey provides Phillips both with an opportunity to hint at his critique of political

correctness, developed in *In the Falling Snow*, and a means of reinforcing Dorothy's defiance of conventional expectations placed on a 55 year-old middle-class English woman: her sexual identification is unmistakable. In case anyone might accuse Phillips of thinking that this type of identification is fixed, Dorothy's sister Sheila moves from straight to gay, while Sheila's partner Maria moves from gay to straight. Nothing is static in Phillips's novels. The people in these books are always on the move – geographically, sociologically and mentally – but they never forget. And because they act out their mobile, multiple identifications with intelligence and vigour there is always the possibility of political change. In developing characters who are, mainly, resilient, complex, stoical agents with many parts to their identities, inflected but not determined by the deeper structures of 'race', gender and class, Phillips also offers the reader a glimpse of hope.

### **The politics of hope**

Phillips's novels are deeply political not because his key characters take overtly political stances (except once: Rudi Williams), but because in these novels 'power' is at the centre of every story, and significant change takes place each time power is in play. Among the few who mention politics in connection with Caryl Phillips, Andrew Warnes makes the excellent point that Phillips attempts to 'ascertain whether the novel can still be at least potentially democratic, inclusive, egalitarian'. Warnes cites Ralph Ellison's belief that 'the novel is a "function" of democracy and should "project a vision of the complexity, the diversity of the total experience"'. He continues: 'Phillips tries to breathe life back into the heteroglossia, to retrieve the "maximum freedom" of the Ellisonian novelist' (Warnes, 34).<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the power of one so-called race over another, the power of men over women, and the perpetual (often surreptitious, always rooted in the everyday) resistance by the oppressed are major themes in every one of Phillips's novels. Hope – a sense of possibility that conditions can, and will, change for the better – is conveyed around the edges and in the gaps of the power struggles within each novel. This is not to claim that Phillips is an optimistic, political writer. His *oeuvre* is too complex to allow such simple labels. In *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, for example, he deliberately avoids including Gwendolyn Williams's transformation to Jean Rhys, a transition from chorus girl to acclaimed writer. The act of writing can be understood as an act of hope — that act, for Gwendolyn/Jean, is only hinted at in this book. Phillips

leaves the politics of this book to the explicit reference in its title to the British Empire and the fraught, racialised life of a colony, while the novel's references to the exclusions and reductions to which Gwen is subjected reassert Phillips's unwavering commitment to the dignity and rights of outsiders.

*Higher Ground* (1989) is the only novel that foregrounds explicitly political argument.<sup>5</sup> *Higher Ground* is the first fictional work in which Phillips experiments with multiple voices, presenting seemingly disconnected narratives. Using this technique he can offer in this novel one storyline, 'The Cargo Rap', carefully specified as taking place in 1967 and 1968, in which the narrator is an overt advocate of what at the time was called Black Power, without suggesting that this is a figure of any more importance in the novel than the other (quite different) people whose lives are set out within these pages. Black Power, a generic term for an important social movement of revolutionary African-Americans, seized headlines in the USA from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. In clear reference to George Jackson's *Prison Letters*, published in 1970, Phillips creates Rudolph Leroy Williams<sup>6</sup> as he writes a series of letters to his mother, father, sister, two female supporters, and one to 'Brothers and Sisters'. Brimming with braggadocio and pain, these are ostentatious expressions of the learning Rudi is undertaking in the 'concentration camp' (jail, and America). In solitary confinement, Rudi devours the work of Marx, Lenin, Marcus Garvey, Fanon, Richard Wright and Malcolm X as well as the lives and works of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Phyllis Wheatley, Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King. He excoriates the 'slave mentality' of the 'niggers' that populate America. He argues that what is needed is 'Garvey-ism, a new and modern phase of it . . . Today's Black Star Steamship Company will be an airline' (*Higher Ground*, 152). In referring to Garvey, Phillips positions Rudi on the 'nationalist' wing of American Black Power, and he later echoes its most famous advocate, Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture), when Rudi expresses 'deep suspicion' of the motives of the white woman who offers to be his lawyer, suggesting she should really be supporting white radicals rather than black (*Higher Ground*, 159; Carmichael and Hamilton).

Contemporary, radical readers will find it hard to like Rudi. We might admire his intelligence and his reading. He might arouse our sympathy. He has been sentenced to eight years for stealing a few dollars from a shop's cash register; he has been parted from his daughter in infancy; he is desperate for the love of his mother and the admiration of his father

and sister — while struggling to hold body, mind and soul together in the utterly dehumanising conditions of ‘the camp’. But he is arrogant, didactic, cruel, sexist and homophobic. All of these characteristics are to be found among politicians of all persuasions, but Rudi is more distasteful because of his essentialism, expressed in his plaintive insistence that he is ‘full and whole’ (161), ‘a whole, honorable and clean man’ (172). Rudi’s African nationalism will be contrasted by some readers with the other major tendency within Black Power, enacted by the Black Panther Party after the split with Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael, and by Malcolm X in the short time between leaving the Nation of Islam and his assassination (Marable). In the UK, this anti-nationalist strand of Black Power was best expressed in the 1970s by the groups that formed the Race Today Alliance (RTA), inspired by CLR James and George Padmore (Alleyne, Bunce and Field, McLeod). While it stressed the autonomy of the black movement, the RTA proclaimed the future unity of the working class, whatever its colour, and was supportive of women’s and sexual minorities’ autonomy. Here Phillips exhibits his unusual approach to dealing with politics: it is to be absorbed by reading between the lines, by reflecting on the absence of what normally passes for political commitment. Thus the text does not reveal whether or not Phillips has a high regard for the Jamesian/Race Today version of Black Power, but readers are unlikely to enthuse over the nationalist version.

Phillips presents issues that are deeply political by revealing the power struggle in the everyday lives of his characters. Keith Gordon’s story (*In the Falling Snow*) exemplifies the banality of ‘politically correct’ power in British local government, when he finds himself suspended from his job because of an allegation of sexual harassment, subjected to a Kafkaesque enquiry, and then he resigns, although that might not be the end of it. But the power relations that attract deeper interest are those between Keith and his son Laurie, and between Keith and his father Earl. As with the father-son relations in *Dancing in the Dark*, readers are required to think about male power in the family partly because Phillips portrays it so quietly. (In *The Lost Child*, readers witness ambiguous forms of patriarchal power in both Monica’s father and her husband.) Readers of *In the Falling Snow* know where each party stands: Keith wants to connect with his son, and while Laurie is somewhat distant, he does not reject his father — even though, as Keith notes, ‘Sons can be unforgiving towards those who they believe have hurt their mothers. He knows this from his own life’ (166). Keith is very distant

from Earl – he asks him ‘Do you want a son at all?’ (266); the use of the present tense here shows that the implication is not ‘Did you want to be a father?’ But in the magnificent final section of this book Earl speaks – with the intense, vernacular, political, proud, intelligence of first generation migrants from the Caribbean – and Keith listens, readers will probably suspect, with gratitude. The father-son power relations in *Dancing in the Dark* are even less pronounced. Bert Williams’s father is horrified by his son’s ‘coon’ act; Bert knows his father’s criticism and understands it (his stage partner has a similar critique); but the father never imposes his will and Bert never offers his plausible justification (that he is an entertainer, perfecting his art) to his father. Neither rejects the other. I detect hope for reconciliation between fathers and sons in these passages.

Phillips handles racial politics without flinching from its barbarity but without rhetorical flourish. For the past 50 years or so, the term racism has been used when one individual or population group has the power and tools to abuse or oppress another group, where those groups have different skin colours. In the modern world, when it came to be assumed that skin colour signified distinct racial groups among humans, racism has described the subordination of dark-skinned peoples by white-skinned peoples; a synonym might be white power. The most cursory reading of Phillips’s work reveals his focus on racism, with its subtle expressions in thoughts, glances, offhand remarks, as well as its most foul forms: rape (Price’s rape of ‘the girl’ in *Higher Ground*) and murder (of Solomon in *A Distant Shore*). In Phillips’s first two novels (1985, 1986) and the late ones (2007, 2009) the racism trope is more or less incidental (almost absent in 2015, and given a new inflection when, in 2018, his central character is seen as white, but marked by her geographical origin). In the middle period novels the misery of slavery, post-slavery migrations and genocide is so pronounced, the bleakness so intense, that the spirit of affirmation (arguably the bedrock of emancipatory politics) seems to have been eliminated. In searching for shafts of light, I acknowledge the darkness at the heart of most of Phillips’s novels, and I might be accused here of reading against the grain.

Nevertheless, I suggest that Phillips develops our understanding of racism in two, progressive, directions. Firstly, he presents a black character (Rudi) with negative (racially stereotypical) attitudes towards other blacks and towards whites, thus freeing us from the chestnut of British 1980s ‘race awareness training’ that black people cannot be racist because

they lack power. Since racial essentialism lives on – particularly in the Afro-centrist branch of politics – this is an important and daring stance. Secondly Phillips investigates the phenomenon that David Nirenberg usefully calls anti-Judaism. This is a type of praxis in which one group invents racial categories such as ‘Aryans’ and ‘Jews’ and applies power and technology in its attempt to exterminate the other. Tackling this topic in such detail, with the same emotional force readers witness in the novels that start from slavery, Phillips not only extends the discussion to white-on-white racism, unusual in itself, but requires readers to consider the parallels between anti-Judaism and anti-black racism. No simple homology is asserted, but Phillips makes the important political move of directing attention to the depredations of the abuse of power whoever is the perpetrator, whoever is the victim. The politics of ‘race’ is moved on by Phillips to the politics of power.

In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips’s extended account of the consequences of anti-Judaism, readers can search out the glimmers of hope that even this, the most macabre of all his novels, reveal. Rosa’s appearances in the novel are brief, but the importance of her remark must be stressed: “‘It is not hopeless,’” snapped Rosa. “‘If we do not fight, then we have lost.’” Despite the danger of her marriage to a member of the Jewish resistance, Rosa says ‘Eva, I have made my choice. I have no regrets. Truly, no regrets’ (66). In similar vein, Eva and Margot’s much-loved Uncle Stephan leaves their country to fight with the Jewish underground army in Palestine. Palestine represents hope for the Jews just as Africa represented hope for the Garveyites and their latter-day supporters in the USA, Jamaica and Britain. Yet Phillips is typically cautious as he voices this optimism:

Apparently, we have wandered long enough. We have worked and struggled too long on the lands of other peoples [. . .] After hundreds of years of trying to be with others, of trying to be others, we are now pouring in the direction of home (45).

In case ‘apparently’ was an insufficiently strong caveat, Eva continues: ‘Neither Margot nor Mama are in Palestine. There is no need for me to go to Palestine. But, like them, I have feelings. I understand the passion that they must feel’ (45). Eva states that her hope for the future is ‘To marry. To have two children’ (86); more specifically: ‘I want to live to love. To believe in something. To believe in somebody’ (180). Thus ‘home’ is not necessarily a

country. Eva's suicide blots out her fantasy that Gerry can mend her broken heart 'a little' (48), so Phillips cannot be accused of romanticizing the power of love, but it is a theme which ripples through every book and it always carries its promise, not always fulfilled, that 'better must come', as Delroy Wilson and Michael Manley once put it.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, love, sexual pleasure and the emotions these provoke among people of all skin colours are the most hopeful themes in several of Phillips's novels. In *Higher Ground*, the love 'the African' experiences for 'the girl' provokes the kind of transformation that has to take place for political agency to be possible. He says:

It has often occurred to me that I might have forfeited the right to the emotion of love by virtue of my present situation. I know now that this is not the case. That I can care, that I have the capacity to touch and feel tender . . . makes it possible for me to rediscover some form of self-respect (46).

In this story, the age gap between the man and the girl might offend some readers, and it might inspire others. More significant, politically, is Phillips's approach to love and sex between black and white people. In referring to this theme in Phillips's work, Ledent stated 'however much social progress has apparently been made, interracial relationships remain fraught with pain and tension' (2015, 89). This is true, but in Phillips there are signs of progress. One strand in *The Nature of Blood* reworks part of the story of Othello and Desdemona, concentrating on their love and passion for each other. Phillips largely ignores Shakespeare's staging of the story (Iago, the Jew, crafting Othello's jealous murder of Desdemona). He makes no pretence that black-white love is easy. Here is a striking example of the perils that face those who want to share the same water, narrated in a modern American voice that contrasts with the dominant tone of the novel:

My friend, an African river bears no resemblance to a Venetian canal. Only the strongest spirit can hold both together . . . After a protracted struggle, most men will eventually relinquish one in favour of the other. But you run like Jim Crow and leap into their creamy arms . . . Peel your rusty body from hers and go home. No good can come from your foreign adventure (183).

Joyce's relationship with Travis – 'A good smell. I could smell him on me. I wasn't going to be alone again' (*Crossing the River*, 210) – did not work out, and readers know that Shakespeare's version of the perils of miscegenation still dominates world discourse.<sup>8</sup> Monica's relationship with Julius in *The Lost Child* soon fizzles out. But Phillips highlights another possibility when the modern American voice acknowledges that 'Only the strongest spirit can hold both together. Only the most powerful heart can endure the pulse of two such disparate life-forces' (*Nature of Blood*, 183). Most, but not all, choose people of their own skin colour. Thus, even this seemingly negative voice opens possibilities that, for example, Rudi Williams would deny. People with strong spirits and powerful hearts can, and do, break free from the hegemonic racialised discourse. In *The Lost Child* Phillips suggests just this happening in nineteenth-century Liverpool, when Joseph Earnshaw spots the 'beguiling' African woman in the street, and pursues her. She seems to enjoy his 'captivating glow upon her' (247) and their relationship is probably more than that between a woman and her client. Phillips staged racialised sexual encounters being potentially polluted by commerce in an earlier novel. The end-piece of *The Nature of Blood* captures the Jewish version of the blight of racial thought, when (white, European, Jewish) Uncle Stephan has a brief encounter with (black, Ethiopian, Jewish) Malka in Tel Aviv. Superficially, this event is a meeting between a lonely old man and a woman paid a small amount by the management of a social club to be available as a dancing partner. Stephan is mesmerised by her still, black presence and he wants to spend more time with her, to get to know her. She suggests they go to a hotel. Phillips inserts her story: her family and others were retrieved from impoverished lives in the Ethiopian desert by Israelis. In a short space of time Malka has learned Hebrew and trained to be a nurse. Migration, for Malka at least, has had its advantages and she has changed. But readers also learn that Israel needed these refugees because 'You are helping us to understand what we are doing here' (209). Malka says very little, simply taking off her clothes and getting into bed with him. This episode can be read as a tawdry financial transaction, another woman and her client, not redolent of hope for crossing sexual and racial boundaries. As though to emphasise these great divides, Malka asks him to admit that 'You do not want us here, do you?' The reader knows that Stephan is powerfully attracted because of her colour and because of some inner quality he wants to explore. His reply is quiet, but heartfelt: 'Not

everybody feels that way'. She wants him to see her naked. Stephan sees her as '[t]all, smooth and graceful . . . carved like a statue' but, instead of gasping at her beauty he says 'I would like to be your friend'. '[Y]ou *are* my friend. I have been here six years now, and no man has seen me naked. I am not that type of woman,' is her reply. 'You may kiss me if you wish, but I prefer only that. I am sorry.' (210-11). Thus she recognises Stephan's humanity and welcomes his sexual gaze and, perhaps, his lips. She leaves the next day before he wakes, and there is no suggestion that the relationship will blossom, but, in my reading, Phillips, with his trade-mark subtlety and pursuit of paradox, here explains, again, that recognition of otherness can, and sometimes does, transmute into physical intimacy and mutual regard, even when racialised structural barriers seem firmly in place.

It might be argued that because Phillips evokes spirits and hearts as the resource needed to break out of the cold, hard grip of racism, rather than ideologies and powerful political movements, he is not making 'political' novels. But politics starts, in my view, with embodied hearts and spirits set against the exploitation and oppression of the people around them. Politics is personal and passionate first, and then combines with rational analysis of the structural. Phillips's prose may seem unusually reserved for novels which, in their form and content, present the domination of one group over another, placing their moral weight on the side of those being enchained, beaten, raped, mentally suppressed and killed. This style brings even stronger attention to sentences which require us to note that whatever the degree of their 'hurt', all his characters are 'determined', too (*Crossing the River*, 237). For me, the distancing effect of the cool narrative style merely adds to the political weight of each story. The technique in the middle novels of segmenting the narrative into two, three or four voices, where each character has multiple identifications, adds to this sense of politics as developmental, 'multilogic' and episodic, where those on the higher ground may well be defeated and pushed off course. Any solutions, reducing misery and heightening joy, are temporary, since they too are subject to further navigation, steered by love and hope. To those who believe that politics is 'really' about theories, policies and conclusions, I would suggest that Phillips provides a much deeper notion of politics as a continuous, democratic enquiry into the misery and the joy of the human condition. In Phillips's novels the snow falls, many characters are dancing in the dark, children are sold or lost, there are many rivers to cross, the shore is distant, Empire continues, and readers are never sure if anyone will reach higher

ground. In *The Lost Child*, Tommy's death negates the blind optimism that proclaims children as hope. But Ben survives an absent father, a mother who loses focus, and discomfited foster care. With a girl-friend in an elite university, Ben speaks to a future with potential but without guarantees. The brown-skinned child that makes us think of Heathcliff is taken home. 'There are no paths in water ... A desperate foolishness . . . I sold my beloved children . . . But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved' (*Crossing the River*, 237).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay avoids locating Phillips's novels in his own biography, but I should note here that, following his suggestion, I have helped to form the David Oluwale Memorial Association in Leeds, UK. A garden in David's name is being built near the River Aire in the centre of Leeds, close to where David was found drowned in 1969. In a speech in Leeds motivating the idea of this memorial, Phillips referred to the memorial in Venice to its beleaguered Jewish populations. In his essay 'In the Ghetto', Phillips wrote that, for many 'the Jew is still Europe's nigger' (*The European Tribe*, 53). More information on the David Oluwale Memorial Association is to be found here [www.rememberoluwale.org](http://www.rememberoluwale.org)

<sup>2</sup> In the case of Keith Gordon, Phillips delays the revelation of the character's ethnicity. Sometimes his novels' titles frame the story quite explicitly, as in *The Final Passage*, and, perhaps, *The Lost Child*. More often, he uses titles that make the reader work hard to discern the underlying theme of the book. *Cambridge* is clearly not about the elite university town in England, but it is soon apparent that this is the name of a black servant in a small Caribbean island. *Dancing in the Dark* takes us quickly to the word of vaudeville, but the significance of the protagonist's de-linking his dark skin to any 'political' identity emerges slowly. In *The Falling Snow* leaves everything up the reader: is this Keith Gordon's wintery internal life? Does falling snow function as a metaphor for the blurred contours of his public life? *A View of Empire at Sunset* is another title which might initially puzzle the reader. There is no overt reference to the reactionary politics of the British Empire in this novel, and relatively few pages are devoted to the Caribbean island where Gwendolyn Williams was born, and to which she briefly returns. Nor does Phillips make anything of her transition to Jean Rhys, or make any reference to *The Wide Sargasso Sea*. On the other hand, the title has been chosen to push the reader into serious thought about British imperial domination of Africa and the Caribbean. The utterly deforming effect of Empire on white as well as black people is the root of Gwendolyn/Jean's melancholia. Characteristically, Phillips's politics here are subtle, and hope is buried quite deeply: the title might suggest that the sun still has not set on the barbarism of Empire, and no-one, black or white, will fulfil their potential until its ravages have been fully encountered, and healed.

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Coetzee is quoted by Stef Craps as writing in a review of *The Nature of Blood* that 'pages of Eva's story seem to come straight from hell, striking one with appalling power' (Craps, 168).

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Warnes for helpful comments he made on a first draft of this essay. Thanks too to the anonymous readers of earlier versions. Particular thanks to Bénédicte Ledent for commissioning the first version, and to Francoise Krall for the opportunity to present some of this at her conference in Caen, and for their comments.

<sup>5</sup> There is an interlude in *The Lost Child* (2015) with an aspiring Caribbean politician which bears out the reading *In the Falling Snow* (2009) that Phillips is deeply sceptical of formally organised politics.

<sup>6</sup> There is a separate essay to be written about Phillips's use of names. Irina/Irena and Solomon/Gabriel signify the fluidity of the naming process. This significance of the name is strongly made by the African in *Higher Ground* never attracting the dignity of a name. His disappointment in the Governor is poignantly expressed when he says '[F]or all his concern, for all his caring, he has not even asked after my name' (53). Eva Stern's resistance is summarized as 'But already Eva refuses to be hidden. There is no new name in my throat. Eva refuses to disappear' (*Nature of Blood*, 165). But Phillips's use of the surname Williams is perhaps the most striking. It first appears in *Higher Ground* as the family name of the young man writing to his sister and parents from prison. It might be significant that this is a Welsh name (like Phillips) which is extremely common in Trinidad, and found all over the English-speaking African diaspora. In *Crossing the River*, Edward Williams is the slave owner known variously as My Beloved Benefactor, My Dear Father and Father by his emissary Nash Williams, and Edward's other servant is Madison Williams. We assume that Rudi Williams (*Higher Ground*) is one of the descendants of those people called Williams who arrived in the USA from Britain (probably Wales) from the mid-Seventeenth Century onwards. Then we meet Bert Williams and his father in *Dancing in the Dark*. They had travelled from the Caribbean island of Bahamas to America, so must be presumed to be from families owned and/or fathered by whites called Williams when they arrived in the slave islands. As though to make sure we fully understand the white-black crossover that this name signifies, we find a (presumably white) doctor called Williams treating Dorothy Jones in *A Distant Shore*. Then we hear that Keith Gordon's aunt Leona married the son of Mr Williams the taxi driver, before they migrated to England (*In the Falling Snow*). The person who became famous as Jean Rhys, the subject of *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, is referred to by her birth name, Gwendolyn Williams. 'Williamsing' will no doubt continue for Phillips, since it would seem to be emblematic of 'the impurity of Caribbean blood, suggestive for Phillips of both "transcendence and connectivity" [that] enabled [Phillips] . . . to "transgress boundaries" . . . in particular "to easily slip the restrictive noose of race"' (Ledent (2007), quoting Phillips).

<sup>7</sup> 'Better must come' was the title of a 1971 record by the Jamaican singer Delroy Wilson. Lyrics include 'Better must come, one day/Better must come, they can't conquer me'. It was adopted by the socialist candidate Michael Manley as a campaign slogan in the 1972 election in Jamaica. Manley and his People's National Party won. 'Better must come' is also the title of a 2010 film by the Jamaican director Storm Saulter about the violent political conflict in late 1970s Jamaica.

<sup>8</sup> Racial thought and racist practice probably dates from earliest 'civilisation' but it has dominated Western discourse from the time of Chistobal Colon (Christopher Colombus). Based in an utterly spurious science of significant difference between human populations signified by skin colour, type of hair and such like, 'race' thinking has made hostility to miscegenation its primary building block. Caryl Phillips's persistent 'race mixing' trope is an example of his political stand against this life-denying ideology.