An Outstretched Hand: Connection and Affiliation in Crossing the River

ABIGAIL WARD

No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things.

Caryl Phillips's Crossing the River (1993) is a fragmented novel, split into four distinct parts, with a framing epilogue and prologue set in a transhistorical mode. Letters and diary entries within the sections are often non-chronological and incomplete, and each story tells a tale of broken familial bonds. Slavery, Phillips seems to suggest, is a fractured and untotalizable past. However, despite such fragmentation, I contend that Crossing the River traces, in Edward Said's terms, the ‘connections between things’; more specifically, the unexpected connections between people, centuries, countries and histories made possible because of the transatlantic slave trade. In the above quotation, Said indicates that, while differences will always exist between traditions, habitations, languages and cultural terrains, survival is enabled by tracing the affirmative connections between these different elements.

Within Crossing the River the importance of connections is slowly revealed as we follow the fortunes of three children sold into slavery. Over two hundred and fifty years, the survival of these allegorical figures depends on their ability to forge bonds with others. Unlike Phillips's earlier novel Cambridge (1991), which covers a relatively short period of time between the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of the slaves in the nineteenth century, Crossing the River spans two and a half centuries, and its subjects range across the globe. The novel moves from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Africa, through nineteenth-century America to Britain during, and after, the Second World War. With reference to Said's The World, the Text, and the Critic (1984), I shall illustrate that although it is impossible to restore the original familial connections or erase the past of slavery, there is the possibility of creating new connections in the form of affiliative bonds. In this essay I explore the failure of filiation in Crossing the River before showing how these affiliative bonds may, with different degrees of success, enable the survival of Phillip's disparate characters.

The prologue reveals the voice of a guilty African father: 'a desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember ... And soon after, the chorus of a common memory began to haunt me.' If the plural voices of Cambridge suggest a history of slavery comprising different overlapping stories and lives, then, in Crossing the River, additional histories are simultaneously articulated to create a polyphonic, intertwined chorus of a common memory. Phillips's use of 'haunt' stresses the insistence of the past to be resurrected; it would seem that what has happened cannot remain buried, but somehow exists in the present in different forms. In Crossing the River the father is haunted by memories of the past and the moment of separation from his children. His voice is interspersed with other apparently irreconcilable voices, such as that of the slave captain of the third section of the novel, James Hamilton. This conjunction recalls Said's advocacy of 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories': 'three children only. I jettisoned them at this point, where the tributary stumbles and swims out in all directions to meet the sea. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl.' The same intertwining device occurs in the other stories; Phillips implies that we should think not of separate black and white accounts of the past but of a connected — yet fragmentary — narrative of slavery which interlaces all these histories.

My primary focus will be on one of the more critically neglected sections — Hamilton's acquisition of slaves. I shall look at this alongside the longest final section, Somewhere in England, as these are the parts of the novel that best enable a critical discussion of slavery and the repercussions of this past. The relationship between Joyce and Travis is a bond made possible only by slavery; were it not for the actions of men like Hamilton who transported African slaves to the Americas, Joyce and Travis would not have met. I suggest that the critical neglect of the Hamilton section, in particular, is largely due to Phillips's compassionate portrayal of a slave-ship captain; this is a challenging and complex representation which resists conventional categorization along racial lines of black victim or white figure of blame. Crossing the River may be a novel about slavery and its continuing legacies, but it is not simply an accusatory novel. I would therefore strongly contest the claim of the anonymous writer in The Economist that it is a novel of 'saintly blacks
and sinful whites'. I argue that instead of gesturing towards a literature of recrimination and retribution, Phillips's novel envisages a meeting between black and white people; an acknowledgement and understanding of the past of slavery which rejects a rhetoric of blame.

It is important to note that Phillips dedicates his book to 'those who crossed the river', which acknowledges all the people - black and white - that journeyed across the Atlantic and other 'rivers', both literal and figurative. In fact, and quite crucially, in the epilogue, the 'children' include Joyce, who is white: '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' (p. 237). There are those who read Crossing the River as solely 'black history', but it is possible to see Phillips as transcending racial categories in the novel in order to explore a past, and a future, that comprises black and white peoples.

Although Crossing the River is a text rife with broken familial bonds, we subsequently see an emergence of new, non-familial connections. In The World, the Text, and the Critic, Said writes that 'childless couples, orphaned children, aborted childbirths, and unregenerately celibate men and women populate the world of high modernism with remarkable insistence, all of them suggesting the difficulties of filiation'. The apparent 'difficulties of filiation' are not merely traits of 'high modernism'; we can find evidence of almost all the figures listed by Said in Crossing the River, where slavery and its aftermath have, it seems, led to problems of filiation. Edward and his wife are childless and Martha is looking for her daughter. Hamilton is searching to retrace the last movements of his late father in Africa, though his desire to trace his family connections contrasts ironically with his role as a slave-trader. Finally, Joyce has an abortion, loses both parents through different wars, and is eventually persuaded to give up the child she has with Travis. Phillips's portrayal of 'families' in this novel as fragmented might suggest his dissatisfaction with the concept of the stable family unit. The families he presents span centuries, yet none fit the standard Western representation of the 'nuclear' family, whether due to war, plantation slavery or (in the case of Edward) perhaps sexuality. The disruption of the stable family unit, one could argue, is one of the legacies of slavery although, as I explain, in this novel it is replaced with affiliative 'families'.

Aside from the guilty father of the prologue, one of the first characters we meet who is suffering the effects of broken familial bonds is Martha, journeying across America to join her friend Lucy and find her daughter. Yet, there is a simultaneous realization of the impossibility of this task, as her encounter with an anonymous white woman reveals: 'the woman stretched out her gloved hand and Martha stared hard at it. Eliza Mae was gone. This hand could no more lead her to her daughter than it could lead Martha back to her own youthful self' (p. 75). This movement pre-empt the epilogue's conclusion that 'there is no return' (p. 237). The past cannot be undone, and so Martha's imagined familial reunion will remain only a dream.

Soon it was time for Martha to leave, but her daughter simply forbade her mother to return east. Martha, feeling old and tired, sat down and wept openly, and in front of her grandchildren. She would not be going any place. She would never again head east... She had a westward soul which had found its natural-born home in the bosom of her daughter. (p. 94)

At no point in the novel do we find the kind of utopian 'return' or resurrection of filial relationships projected in her dream. The closest Phillips allows us to get to this moment of meeting is in the final section of the text, though, as I shall discuss later, this is, in many ways, a far from utopian reunion.

In the section entitled 'Crossing the River', we encounter broken filial bonds in James Hamilton's search to retrace his father's last steps, but it is arguably in 'Somewhere in England' that Phillips explores in greatest depth the figure of the absent father. Wartime is clearly a period for absent fathers, as Joyce tells her friend Sandra: 'I pointed out the obvious. That this is a war. That if Tommy [Sandra's child] ends up without a father, he won't be the first and he won't be the last' (p. 157). Travis's death means that he, too, briefly becomes an absent father, before Greer is given up for adoption. Similarly, Joyce's father died during the First World War, and she records searching for his name, lost among the many others, on the town's war memorial: 'occasionally I've found my dad on a bronze plaque, near the Town Hall, but his name is scattered among the names of hundreds of others. This is merely a place to find him, but not to discover him' (p. 133). We can see here the impossibility of knowing her father; the war memorial may list the dead, but that is all it does - his name is indistinguishable from the numerous names of other men. The anonymity of the soldiers mirrors the anonymity of the slaves in Part Three of the novel, and here Phillips perhaps raises the problem of memorials to the dead; monuments to slavery, like war memorials, are not places to 'discover' the dead. Instead, Phillips's imaginative exploration of slavery in novels like Cambridge or Crossing the River arguably suggests an alternative means of discovering this past.
If filial relationships are impossible, Said proposes the development of affiliative bonds, borne out of the pressure to produce new and different ways of conceiving human relationships. He asks, 'is there some other way by which men and women can create social bonds between each other that would substitute for those ties that connect members of the same family across generations?' In *Crossing the River*, we can see a similar substitution of familial bonds with affiliative connections: 'social bonds' constructed between biologically unrelated people. However, these bonds may not necessarily prove positive or equal, as in the case of Edward and Nash. Their relationship is clearly not filial, despite the paternal vocabulary. According to Edward, his yearning for Nash is for the 'unconditional love of a child' (p. 55), though the 'child' in question is an adult, and no kin of Edward. Said has stated that 'affiliation sometimes reproduces filiation', and this section of Phillips's novel (as well as Joyce's transition to 'daughter' in the epilogue) provides an imitation of a paternal relationship.

The paternal relationship between, in this case, former master and slave, or colonizer and colonized, is complicated by the implication of a sexual relationship between the men. Having received little communication from Edward, Nash's letters to his 'dear Father' divulge that he feels like an abandoned son. Like the father of the prologue, Edward is also, perhaps, a guilty father: 'it occurred to him that perhaps the fever, the sleepless nights, the complex welter of emotions that he had been subjected to since his arrival in Africa were nothing more complex than manifestations of a profound guilt' (p. 52). This guilt, possibly arising from having sent Nash to Africa (where he dies shortly before Edward's arrival) and also from their implied sexual relationship, has, it would seem, an imperfect mirroring in the fourth section, in Joyce's decision to give up Greer for adoption - a point that will be considered later. I would also argue that there is a simultaneous mirroring between Nash and Greer as both come to terms with, and so acknowledge, the past. For Nash, Liberia is an awakening from the 'garb of ignorance' (pp. 61-62), a phrase which describes his identity as an American. Here we can see the effect of Nash's crossing of the river, in his growing resentment as he comes to terms with his various exploitations. Nash records his anger at America's continuing involvement in the trade; yet his anger is also personal - directed at Edward for exploiting, and then abandoning, him: 'perhaps ... you might explain to me why you used me for your purposes and then expelled me to this Liberian paradise' (p. 62). Nash may ironically suggest he has found 'paradise' on the other side of the river, but it is at the cost of painful self-discovery. In this part of the book, affiliative relations are not shown to be always positive, as it is only by rejecting the relationship with Edward that Nash is able to cross the river, or arrive at an identity that is independent of Edward and awake to his previous manipulation.

Affiliative bonds can also be found in 'West', the second section, which examines another connection between black and white people. Though the relationship between Martha and the white woman that offers her shelter is less exploitative than that between Edward and Nash, its uncertainty is manifested in the gesture of an outstretched hand: 'after countless years of journeying, the hand was both insult and salvation, but the woman was not to know this' (p. 75). Despite the ambiguity of the gesture, and the two women's prescribed historical roles ('perhaps this woman had bought her daughter?', p. 74), a connection is nevertheless forged and, for a while, their lives come together. The woman may not know Martha's name, as we do, but then neither do we - nor, it would seem, Martha - know hers. She is just as anonymous; a benevolent, almost allegorical, white figure.

If the bond between Martha and the white woman may seem to be an unlikely one, the third part of *Crossing the River* demonstrates another apparently unusual connection between Hamilton, as a white slave-ship captain, and the children of the prologue. This encounter between black and white characters is arguably the crux of the novel: the transaction upon which the book rests. As if to emphasize the point, this section is positioned at the centre of the novel, and is named 'Crossing the River'. Phillips acknowledges in the opening page his reliance on the journal of the slave captain John Newton in order to write this account, and the historical note at the beginning of this section (p. 97) is important, in suggesting its emulation of a historical record. Phillips inserts frequent ellipses into the journal entries, which suggests, firstly, that the source may have been edited, but also that the history of slavery is fragmented and incomplete. In these gaps we can perhaps sense the unspoken or previous manipulation.

At 7 p.m. departed this life Edward White, Carpenter's Mate, 7 days ill of a nervous fever. Buried him at once. Put overboard a boy, No. 29, being very bad with a violent body flux. Have now 3 whites not able to help themselves ... (p. 116)
'Crossing the River', furthermore, serves as a reminder of who exactly crossed the river, or the Atlantic. We can see from the above quotation that the middle passage was also gruelling for white people, who died alongside the slaves, though they at least are named rather than numbered. In addition, Phillips includes at the start of this section a list of crew members and their fates; another stark reminder of the white alongside the slaves, though they at least are named rather than numbered. The deaths of slaves and crew are all related to the reader in a dispassionate log, as are Hamilton's acquisitions of slaves: 'was shown 11 slaves, of whom I picked 5, viz., 4 men, 1 woman' (p. 105). Moreover, these staccato entries are important in illustrating Hamilton's conflicted character, contrasting markedly with the passionate, heartfelt letters to his wife:

I confess that, when alone, the recollection of my past with you overpowers me with a tender concern, and such thoughts give me a pleasure, second only to that of being actually with you. I have written myself into tears, yet I feel a serenity I never imagined all I was able to call you mine. (p. 110)

Hamilton's letters are written in flowing, eloquent, and romantic language, full of hyperbole and sentiment. They demonstrate his loneliness and capacity to love, thereby humanizing and complicating his character; in so doing they pose a testing juxtaposition. Phillips has created a multidimensional and intriguing character, arguably indicative of the complexities of slavery, where ordinary men, often with wives and families, became embroiled in the trade. The association with Newton also demonstrates the ambiguous position of Hamilton, as Newton evolved from being one of the more notorious slave captains to a determined speaker against the slave trade. While Hamilton's letters evince his potential for compassion, he cannot relate this kindness to the ship, and the slaves, reached their destination. The stark list of crew members predicts the anonymous listing of the dead on the war memorial in 'Somewhere in England'. Here, too, in the crew list, we encounter a place to know, but not discover, these men.

While this third section of the novel may seem incongruous, in that it is not the 'voice' of one of the children, it is linked to the others, not only in the figure of the absent father, but also in the sale of the three children to Hamilton. Furthermore, we might think of Said's advocacy of reading 'contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts'. The dominating discourse in the history of slavery has chiefly been the voice of the wealthy, white male; in this case, arguably represented by the narrative of Hamilton. Yet, even the accounts that have survived, such as the journal of Newton, provide a very one-sided view of these men. It is therefore necessary to read Hamilton's log alongside his letters in order to better understand the complexity of the man, and of the other narratives in the novel.

Phillips suggests, then, that the various histories articulated in Crossing the River need to be read together in any attempt to come to terms with the complex history of slavery and imperialism. Hamilton's voice is also part of the novel's 'chorus of the common memory'. If 'Crossing the River' is the 'moment', or a microcosm, of slavery, then we see the continuing legacies of this moment in each of the other sections. For example, Nash and Martha were both slaves in America; again, as a direct result of the slave trade. In the last part of the novel, the relationship between Joyce and Travis, as I have indicated, is made possible precisely because of slavery; like Nash and Martha, Travis is a black American.
However, the prejudice and racism encountered by Travis and Joyce towards their relationship can also be seen as a legacy of this past. Slavery therefore both enables and hinders their relationship, and their child Greer is also bound to this past.

From the beginning of 'Somewhere in England', it is immediately clear that Joyce does not 'belong' within the small village community. She is a threat to the villagers because obviously different; her lack of prejudice and friendly nature contrasts her to the others. She values her difference and is pleased to be told by Travis that she is unlike the others: 'I guess you don't act like them in someways. Can't say how exactly, but just different. Inside I was smiling. That was just what I wanted to hear.' (p. 163). Joyce is also, presumably, unique because she is what several critics have called 'colour blind' — it is some time before she reveals that Travis is black. As a newcomer from the town, she is further alienated towards their relationship can also be seen as a legacy of this past. Slavery

...
would never call me mother' (p. 223). This is a key encounter in the novel; it is significant that the chapter ends with a note of painful tentativeness—a hope (but not certainty) for a future of reconciliation and understanding. Joyce cannot be absolved of the guilt of giving up her child for adoption, but is also not blamed by Phillips for her act: "the silences had become more awkward, but at least they remained free of accusation" (p. 223). I have already mentioned Edward's guilt concerning Nash, and implicit in all these 'silences' is, perhaps, a historical guilt which spans back to earlier rejections by white people; specifically, the refusal of plantation overseers or owners to acknowledge the children that were the product of their sexual union with slaves. In the case of Joyce, however, this acknowledgement is made, if somewhat late: 'my refusal of plantation overseers or owners to acknowledge the children accusation' (p. 223). I have already mentioned Edward's guilt concerning Nash, and implicit in all these 'silences' is, perhaps, a historical guilt which spans back to earlier rejections by white people; specifically, the refusal of plantation overseers or owners to acknowledge the children that were the product of their sexual union with slaves. In the case of Joyce, however, this acknowledgement is made, if somewhat late: 'my refusal of plantation overseers or owners to acknowledge the children accusation'.

In Crossing the River, the way in which, despite the fundamental disruptions incurred by diaspora, connections can still be made. In the epilogue, Phillips ventriloquizes Martin Luther King:

I have listened to the voice that cried: I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. (p. 237)

In Crossing the River, this dream is at least partly realized, in the bonds forged between black and white characters. Greer may not be able to call Joyce's house his 'home', but he is invited to sit down with her as they begin to construct their new relationship. In each of the stories, the children are striving for survival through affiliative bonds—through their determined attempts to connect with their surroundings. As Phillips states:

I have seen connectedness and 'celebrated' the qualities of survival that people in all sorts of predicaments are able to keep hold of with clenched fists. I didn't want to leave this novel as an analysis of fracture, because I felt such an overwhelming, passionate attachment to all the voices, and I kept thinking it seemed almost choral. These people were talking in harmonies I could hear.

As with Said's contrapuntal reading, the emphasis is on consonance—counterpoint which is nevertheless harmonious. While Crossing the River comprises different voices, all are part of the 'chorus of a common memory' and linked by affiliative bonds. If the various families are fragmented in this book through slavery and its repercussions, Phillips intimates the necessity of creating new affiliative relationships. These connections fall not just between people and races, but also, as I have sought to show, between centuries.

In Crossing the River, survival is made possible not only by 'clenched fists' but also, as we have seen, by outstretched hands. This gesture first occurs when the white woman reaches out to Martha, but can also be found on a metaphorical level in Joyce's refusal to treat Travis differently on the grounds of his skin colour. It is important to recall that the gesture is not an attempt to return to the past, for as the epilogue moves forward...
concludes ‘there is no return’ (p. 237). Crossing the River, while acknowledging the past, does not gaze only backwards, nor does it dwell on the politics of blame, concluding with the confirmation that the children ‘arrived on the far bank of the river, loved’ (p. 237). Instead, it points quite determinedly to a shared future in which all are invited to ‘sit down together’, irrespective of race. Through Phillips’s refusal to be lured into writing a literature of blame or recrimination, his novel becomes a hand outstretched towards people like the African father, Edward or Hamilton. Phillips neither demonizes nor blames them, and in not doing so makes the greatest outreaching gesture of all.

NOTES
2. Caryl Phillips, Crossing the River ([1993]; New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 1. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
5. Numerous historians have written about the impact and legacies of slavery on family life. See, for example, Herbert Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom (New York: Pantheon, 1976); and Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1982).
8. Equiano also records how the white crew were often treated harshly by the captain: ‘one white man in particular I saw ... flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast that he died in consequence of it’. See Equiano’s Travels, ed., Paul Edwards (Oxford: Heinemann, 1996), p. 24.