

and sinful whites'.⁴ 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'.⁵ 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'.⁶

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 back to her daughter than it could lead Martha back to her own youthful self' (p. 75). This movement pre-empts 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?'⁷ 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.⁸

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 missing parts of this past, such as the voices, or stories, of the slaves (and of other, poorer, crew members) of whom we hear nothing. For example:

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.⁹ In addition, Phillips includes at the start of this section a list of crew members and their fates; another stark reminder of the white death toll. 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 till 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 slaves; a disjunction that renders this section particularly difficult for the reader. I would argue that the reluctance of some critics to discuss this narrative also arises from Phillips's refusal to position Hamilton within their preferred rhetoric of slavery as specifically black history.

Like Emily in *Cambridge*, perhaps, Hamilton is an unusual choice for a protagonist. In a way typical of Phillips, he returns to a character that has previously been portrayed (especially in abolitionist literature and tracts) as a dehumanized monster, and complicates this image. We realize the precariousness of the captain's life when, with crew members dying around him, he too contracts an illness. His journal ends not with his safe arrival on land, but somewhere in the ocean; the last entry reads:

Friday 21st May ... During the night a hard wind came on so quick, with heavy rain. Occasioned a lofty sea, of which I was much afraid, for I do not remember ever meeting anything equal to it since using the sea. At dawn brought the ill-humoured slaves upon deck, but the air is so sharp they cannot endure, neither to wash nor to dance. They huddle together, and sing their melancholy lamentations. We have lost sight of Africa ... (p. 124)

Hamilton is suspended in the act of crossing the Atlantic and does not, unlike the children he carries, necessarily ever reach the other side; the ellipsis trails off tantalizingly into an unsure future. This uncertainty concerning his destiny is reinforced by the crew list at the start. The column indicating the crew's fate is left blank for certain men, including the captain; we cannot be sure of what happened to him, only that 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'.¹⁰ 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 some ways. 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.¹¹ As a newcomer from the town, she is further alienated by her decision not to support Len when he is sent to prison for dealing on the black market, and by her subsequent relationship with Travis. Wendy Webster, in *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (1998) writes that 'the concept of "miscegenation" – widely used in race discourse in the 1950s – signalled not only the idea that races were biological categories marked by difference, but also that the mixing of these in heterosexual relations was deeply problematic and unnatural'.¹² As Webster states, then, those writing about race at this time were quick to seize upon what they saw as the 'unnaturalness' of mixed-race relationships. Joyce is similarly warned by the army officer: 'it's not that we don't want our men to mix with you village girls, it's not that at all. It's just that we don't want any incidents' (p. 206); for 'incidents' we can read 'pregnancies'. Len also tells her she's a 'traitor to [her] own kind' (p. 217), his vocabulary emphasizing the perceived unnaturalness of the attraction between Joyce and Travis, in crossing racial boundaries. His use of 'traitor' signals that this is, for Len, a kind of war, based on a polarized vision of black and white. However, Joyce cannot live with Travis in the United States because of the segregation laws; it would seem that their relationship is a connection that, generated by slavery, is not approved of.¹³

If the villagers are untrusting of Joyce, they also react with hostility to what they perceive as threats from 'outsiders', demonstrated with the arrival of the American servicemen. In my opening quotation, Said mentions the 'fear and prejudice' involved in maintaining the 'separation and distinctiveness' of traditions and cultures. The village landlord expected, the behaviour of the villagers towards the servicemen

demonstrates this 'fear and prejudice'. The wartime language of invasion that was, in later decades, used by Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher to depict postwar Caribbean immigrants is, in this section, employed to describe the Americans: 'it's all over the papers. We're having an invasion all right, but it's not Jerry. We've been invaded by bloody Yanks' (p. 134). It is not only Joyce and the American servicemen that are viewed with suspicion and outright hostility; the evacuated children sent to the village are also resented: 'they can bloody well go back where they come from' (p. 144), as Len asserts. This statement, of course, echoes sentiments expressed towards black men and women in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century – instructed with some frequency to go back to 'where [they] came from'.¹⁴ As Joyce describes the scene, 'before us stood a dozen frightened children, the farmers eyeing the husky lads, the girls and scrawny boys close to tears', it is also reminiscent of a slave auction – the children lined up with 'an identification tag around their necks' (p. 144). Again, Phillips is tracing connections between disparate people and times – in this case, along lines of exploitation. The 'husky lads' are viewed in terms of their physical strength, or economic value, to the farmers; slaves were similarly assessed by potential owners in terms of strength, breeding potential and other criteria. This is, it would seem, another ghost of slavery, or continuation of the past in the present in altered forms.

Although Phillips's three black protagonists die, I would suggest that the ending of *Crossing the River* implies hope for the future in the character of Greer. As the child of Joyce and Travis, and the result of their relationship and love, he is perhaps a positive outcome of this meeting between black and white cultures. If Greer's arrival at Joyce's house in 1963 suggests a hope for the future, it does not however signify the resurrecting of familial bonds, any more than it implies that Greer has returned 'home'. This term is particularly problematic for Phillips, and the delicacy with which it is employed is illustrated by Joyce's reaction to Greer's arrival: 'come in, come in. He stepped by me, dipping a shoulder as he did so in order that we didn't have to touch ... I almost said make yourself at home, but I didn't. At least I avoided that' (pp. 231–32). The problem of 'home' and belonging resurfaces throughout Phillips's works, and Greer's arrival does not result in a joyous recovering of familial bonds ('there is no return'), but a new relationship. One that is, perhaps, more honest, and replete with an acceptance of the impossibility of changing the past. Phillips does not provide a utopian moment of meeting, but an awkward and difficult moment: 'I knew he

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 God, I wanted to hug him. I wanted him to know that I did have feelings for him. Both then and now. He was my son. Our son' (p. 224). Unlike Edward and Nash, Martha and Eliza Mae or Hamilton and his father, therefore, Joyce and Greer are reunited, though they are unable to recover the past or be mother and son, in any unproblematic way. It is, as we have seen, impossible to alter what has happened, but it is possible, Phillips seems to suggest, to forge new relationships based on honesty and understanding. *Crossing the River*, therefore, rejects an accusatory rhetoric. The author's reluctance to blame men like Edward and Hamilton, or women who have given up their children, like Joyce, ensures that the novel – like the silences between Joyce and Greer – remains 'free of accusation'.

The voices of the protagonists that comprise the main stories are just a few of the numerous diasporic voices of slavery. These voices feature both in the prologue and, more extensively, in the epilogue:

I wait. And then listen as the many-tongued chorus of the common memory begins again to swell, and insist that I acknowledge greetings from those who lever pints of ale in the pubs of London. Receive salutations from those who submit to (what the French call) neurotic inter-racial urges in the boulevards of Paris. ('No first-class nation can afford to produce a race of mongrels.') But my Joyce, and my other children, their voices hurt but determined, they will survive the hardships of the far bank. (p. 235)

The global scale of this diasporic living is reflected in references to various countries across the world and to such figures as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Miles Davis, James Baldwin, Marvin Gaye and Martin Luther King. These diasporic survivors have endured slavery and imperialism, and continue to survive (and not *just* survive) in contemporary society which is, as we have seen, infused with the ghosts

of slavery. Despite the fractures incurred by diasporic living, there remains an overwhelming sense of connectedness in the novel, though this does not arise only from these recurring hauntings of the past. I have already quoted from Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, in which he writes of the 'massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences'.¹⁵ In *Crossing the River*, we can see the existence of these overlapping and interconnected experiences, and 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.¹⁶

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

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

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* ([1993]; London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 408.
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.
3. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 72.
4. Anonymous, 'The Booker Prize – Devalued', *The Economist*, 23 October 1993, p. 108.
5. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* ([1984]; London: Vintage, 1991), p. 17.
6. Numerous historians have written about the impact and legacies of slavery on family life. See, for example, Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); and Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1982).
7. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 17.
8. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 24.
9. 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.
10. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 59.
11. See, for example, Bénédicte Ledent, "'Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories': Cross-Culturality in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 30:1 (1995) 55-62, p. 59; and Gail Low, "'A Chorus of Common Memory': Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge and Crossing the River*", *Research into African Literatures*, 29: 4 (1998) 122-40, p. 138.
12. Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. 48.
13. The fact that Joyce is not allowed to go to America with Nash contrasts with the approval wartime brides met when bride and groom were of the same race; see *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, eds, Margaret Randolph Higgonet, et al (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1987), especially pp. 11-12.
14. Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* ([1998]; London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 81.
15. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 36.
16. Maya Jaggi, 'Interview with Caryl Phillips', *Brick*, 49 (1994) 73-77, p. 76.