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Identity, trauma and exile: Caryl Phillips on surviving

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The painful, unrepresentable event of the holocaust is one of the most salient and defining features of the history and identity of Europe. Its suitability for artistic representation has been the focus of intense debate, largely conducted within Europe (Adorno, Steiner, Ricoeur, Kertész), and fictions about the holocaust were, until recently, the domain of European (and Israeli) authors. In his novel on identity, *The Nature of Blood*, Caryl Phillips – a British author originating from the Caribbean island St. Kitts, and currently living in the USA, appears to defy this tradition and claims the holocaust as a natural subject for his seemingly disparate narratives that are also concerned with the first ghetto in Europe, the character of Othello, and Zionism in Israel. This unlikely mixture is not a mere postcolonial appropriation of metropolitan history, and cannot be explained by the mechanism of 'the empire writing back' that characterizes so much postcolonial fictions of the 1970–1990s. Rather, it explores some of the ideas developed in Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masque blancs*, which in its rhetorical linking of the holocaust with racism and imperialist repression is in turn indebted to Jean-Paul Sartre.

The difficulty in representing the event of the holocaust is unmistakably tied up with the history of Europe, differentiating it culturally and historically from other nations and continents. Its suitability for artistic representation has been the focus of intense debate.[1–3] The repository of memoirs, poetry and fiction about the holocaust is largely confined to Europe, and as is not uncommon with the nature of trauma, includes very recent contributions by first generation authors such as Imre Kertécz. However, the exclusivity of this theme that both can and cannot be represented has, with the passage of time, been questioned by various authors. A small canon of writing has emerged with novels focusing on postmodern questions such as the story and rewriting of history, memory, truth, trauma and identity, all of which are centred round the holocaust.[4,5]

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One such novel invites a postcolonial reading of the *shoah*, by mixing the narrative of a female survivor of the death camps with other histories of exile and racism in the history of Europe. It sits uneasily with the paradigm of postcolonialism in literature as 'the empire writes back', where the stories of the past are used in a strategy of appropriation and subversion.[6] *The Nature of Blood* (1997), by Caryl Phillips, is concerned with the politics of belonging and of identity in such different cases as the first ghetto in Europe in 15th-century Venice, the Shakespearean character of Othello, the holocaust, and Zionism in Israel. This is a novel that both asserts and queries a shared European identity, based on a collective memory. The boundaries of such an exclusive European identity are tested against the idea that in the end, the collective memory of the holocaust is shared and recognized in a wider sphere.

Thus, *The Nature of Blood* crosses more than one border: it calls for a redefinition of post-colonialism in literature, and it gives rise to questions about the uniqueness of European identity, by calling attention to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in sharing and cultivating a collective cultural memory. In a perfect *mise en abyme*, the novel therefore becomes an example of the themes it explores, one's sense of self in a racist culture, and the problems involved in compartmentalizing cultures. Phillips retrieves the debate on racism and colonialism that raged in Europe in the decades after the war, reviving Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masque blancs* (1952). This seminal work by a psychiatrist from Martinique established links between racism, imperialism, and the holocaust.

Born in 1958 on the tiny Caribbean island of St. Kitts, Caryl Phillips moved with his parents to Britain when he was just one year old. After his graduation from Oxford he travelled through Europe, in an attempt to assess a distinct European identity and 'solve the conundrum of what it felt like to be both of, and not of, Europe' (Ref. 7, p. 132), which resulted in his book *The European Tribe* (1987). He has lived for more than a decade in New York, but continues to cherish his 'attachment to Europe' (Ref. 7, p. 133) and his latest novel, *A Distant Shore* (2003),[8] is even set in Britain. This diffused geographical triangle of life and work in different global locations, with its loops in time and memory, is characteristic of the postcolonial diasporic identity. But to Phillips, it is the modern *condition humaine* that affects us all: 'These days we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid. Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions' (Ref. 9, p. 6).

The idea that identity is tied up with a negotiable sense of belonging (it is not self-evident where one belongs) has provided the central theme – with many variations – in the work of Caryl Phillips. As with other post-colonial authors, his work has evolved from the narrative of descent and genealogy, through an exploration of subjects unmistakably bound up with colonialism and imperialism

(slavery, indentured labour, emancipation), into the wider areas of identity and the ethics of good citizenship. His writing is distinguished by the abandonment of the autobiographical in favour of forays into history and geographical spaces that are not recognizably his own. Throughout his writing career, Phillips has employed with remarkable ease a convincing female perspective or voice, as if to underscore the insight that opening a window into otherness brings. As a humanist, he is interested in the hidden connections that make for similar experiences across history or the world, which he appears to associate with an intellectual and cultural position to be found both in Europe and the Caribbean. He discards the more obvious or facile classifications and affiliations such as race or class to be found in the United States and deplores the American vogue of 'black essentialism' or the 'world of rap music that is imbued with the crotch-clutching swagger of racial posturing', arguing that America, especially, 'needs individuals whose vision is inclusive, culturally based, and who vigorously reject the self-righteous discourse of racial entitlement' (Ref. 9, pp. 14–16).

The perspective on otherness, hidden connections and the forgotten fragments of the colonial past have resulted in fictions of a 'patchwork' nature, a series of fragmented and apparently unrelated narratives, whose internal connections are only gradually revealed. These jostling stories have become Phillips' signature, but are, also, a general feature of writing from the Caribbean, they provide a postcolonial statement about, in the famous words of Derek Walcott, our 'shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary,' which are lovingly assembled into 'the cracked heirloom whose restoration shows its white scars' (Ref. 10, p. 262).

The Nature of Blood: related histories, histories of relation

Four storylines merge and mingle in *The Nature of Blood*, apparently unrelated at first, but with echoing themes. Without any clear textual markers distinguishing these stories, they are like a maze, an effect that is further enhanced by oblique, slightly distorted references to known facts and data. The novel starts with the narrative of Stephan Stern, a pioneer in Palestine, who shortly after the war prepares Jewish refugees, dispossessed and dislocated, in a Camp in Cyprus for their stay in a new country, to be called Israel. In a few brief, contemplative sentences, Stern explains how he cannot feel much at home in his new country, hoping that the young Moshe, who listens to him, will in time. Stern has fled his country more than a decade before, and after a brief spell in the United States has been involved in the underground preparations for what is to become the state of Israel. The exact location of his origin is never specified, although a brief reference to a famous singer 'Lenya' who is spotted by his brother (who had stayed on with his daughter) in a coffee-house just a week before she will leave for America, designates it as Berlin. The real Lotte Lenya left Berlin in September 1935,

together with her husband, the composer Kurt Weill, from whom she had then been divorced.

The names of place and character offer just a shimmer of anchorage in history. Moshe's name invokes Dayan of course, the Israeli defence minister who clandestinely fought for the State of Israel before it came into being; but he is too young to be the boy Stern meets, and it is Stern himself who shares a past of underground warfare in Palestine with Dayan. Stern is a symbolical character, one of the novel's samples of the displaced. In his new country, he does not belong, but his old country had become a dangerous place. He misses his wife and daughter in America, and his brother and nieces in his home country, who he believes to have died. He frets for snow, seasons, certainty, and is plagued by memories: 'Memory. That untidy room with unpredictable visiting hours' (Ref. 11, p. 11). Yet here he is, painting the prospect of a new land, Israel.

After only nine pages the storyline switches to the deeply moving monologue of Eva, a death camp survivor, and unsurprisingly as it turns out, is one of Stephan Stern's nieces. Her troubled narrative starts when she is being liberated by the English. It is clear that she is on the verge of a complete breakdown, the trauma of loss has wreaked havoc on her memory and sense of reality. She concentrates on the minute details of a day-to-day present, ignoring and repressing the past. One fantasy seems to keep her alive: that her mother still is with her. In this respect Phillips follows the conventions of holocaust literature quite faithfully, as it is, in particular, in women's memoirs that the fantasy prevails of the mother who has returned from the dead or has never died at all (Ref. 12, p. 24). She refuses to be liberated and sees the ironically named British officer Gerry (a pun on Jerry, the name for 'German' that emerged from World War I), who takes an interest in her, as her enemy who forces her to give up her very last bit of certainty, her home in the camp, where she belongs.

After 40 pages the narrative thickens and this monologue is again interrupted by the dry and factual account of historical events in Portobuffole, a small town near Venice where, in 1480, some Jewish inhabitants were persecuted for the alleged ritual murder of a young boy during Passover. A long history of pogroms is merely suggested by these two juxtaposed accounts, confirmed when yet again Eva's voice takes over, as if to stress the result of all this. More clearly now, her narrative is not restricted to her personal account, the suffering of one victim, but widens to encompass all victims of the holocaust by a deliberate inter-textuality with other memoirs and diaries, most notably that of Anne Frank (again, the reference is oblique and does not fit neatly: like Anne Frank, Eva has a sister called Margot, but now it is Margot who likes the movies and has a boyfriend called Peter). A third theme is added to the themes of diaspora and persecution: the ghetto. Eva's account traces the forced move of her family to a restricted area, the ghetto of the city, which in turn is interspersed with the historical account of

the ghetto's archetype in Venice. Soon after the persecution of Servadio, Gioacobbe and Moses in 1480, the Venetian Senate creates the world's first ghetto on one of the city's islands, accessible by one bridge only (and closed at night), ostensibly to protect Jews from the Christians, so that they can continue the vital practice of banking (a profession forbidden to Christians).

So far, the novel is consistently concerned with the somewhat archetypal fate of Jews throughout history, predominantly in Europe. Such a history may call for despair and outrage, but adds little to what is already known or felt about the holocaust. Indeed, the explicit references to historical studies, as in the case of Portobuffole and the ghetto, or the more implicit inter-textual references to holocaust ego-documents in Eva's narrative, call the point of yet another novel on the holocaust into question.

But then the story tips over yet again. Enter Othello, the world's most famous black character on stage, not now the well-meaning but naïve Shakespearean victim of Iago's vicissitudes, but a lost man, an *arriviste* who succumbs because of his own ambitions and forgetful adaptation. The Venetian Senate has invited this eminent general for his superior strategic advice. He establishes a living, visits the ghetto and learns the customs of the Venetians, carefully observing the way they dress and behave, ordering the tailor-made trappings of the Venetian nobleman. Against this background of a considered attempt to become part of Venetian society, he then falls in love with Desdemona. The twist is, however, that this man has a background. In his home country in Africa he is married and has a family. He is prepared to forsake that past and marry again so as to become further assimilated into Venetian society – a clear example of marriage as a social contract. But it does not work out as he had intended. Repelled, Venetian society ostracizes the big man, although he keeps his position, and in the process of this Faustian plot, Othello loses his sense of identity. He is reprimanded by the narrator/author in a rare moment of intervention:

> You are lost, a sad black man, first in a long line of so-called achievers who are too weak to yoke their past with their present; too naïve to insist on both; too foolish to realize that to supplant one with the other can only lead to catastrophe …. My friend, the Yoruba have a saying: the river that does not know its own source will dry up. (p. 182)

Self-betrayal, or the betrayal of one's identity, becomes the theme that is superimposed on the themes of diaspora, persecution and the ghetto. The example of Othello sheds another light on the unmooring of identity in the quote from *A New World Order*: 'These days we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid. Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions' (2001, 6). Othello's mistake is that he wants to assimilate so badly that he becomes ashamed of being a 'Moor'. Unlike Stephan Stern, he conveniently forgets his wife

and children, his home country, his own race and sense of self. He suppresses the vexing questions.

Such is the conclusion when the novel is finished. In the middle of the novel, however, as the narrative continues to thicken and the pace of alternation of the different storylines quickens, the more abstract, philosophical focus on identity is drowned in the unbearable mental and physical suffering of the Jewish protagonists. There are no textual markers to distinguish the sudden transitions between narratives, and stylistically they grow more closely together. One ghetto leads to another, and the smell of the *auto-da-fe* of Servadio, Gioacobbe and Moses in 1480 spills over into the smell of the cremation ovens that puzzle Eva as she arrives at the camp. Thus, all characters appear to be caught in a continuum of dislocation, separation, pain and death, as if trapped in a nightmare outside history, but located in Europe.

Eventually, it is at Europe's borders that salvation from death can be found, although the promise of these places outside Europe is fragile. The three men from Portobuffole die in flames, accused of ritual murder. Eva finally picks up the courage to leave the camp and travels to London, under the impression that Gerry will marry her. This comes to nothing, she collapses, and commits suicide in the mental asylum to where she was brought. Othello, on the other hand, suffers only from humiliation and the loss of selfhood and ends up awaiting further orders in Cyprus, the symbolic station of transition on the edge of Europe. Stephan Stern returns later in the book, no longer serving in Cyprus but now a pensioner in contemporary Israel. His memories haunt him, but there is some hope when he has a brief, surprising affair with Malka, a young Falasha from Ethiopia, who lives as an outcast in this new country that is riddled with racism. Stern carries the dominant perspective of insight that comes with age and realizes that 'to remember too much is, indeed, a form of madness. And he understood that people are not made to live alone, neither when things are good, nor when they are bad' (p. 212). He carries on, neither ignoring his past like Othello, nor letting his memories threaten his sanity, as with Eva, recognizing both self and other.

In the end, it is unclear whether this humanist proposition is derived from an idea about a specific European collective identity, or whether this is a universal condition. With the explicit, disconcerting parallels between the history of the holocaust and the formation of ghettos in general – Malka lives in the typical urban ghetto of the modern metropolis – or between anti-Semitism and racism against blacks, Europe is turned into a model of the world, or of mankind. But the narrative intensity of Eva's monologue prevents the holocaust from becoming a mere metaphorical platitude, and serves as a reminder of what a *European* collective identity cannot, may not, suppress as part of its cultural memory, if the other is seen, if there is to be hope for the idea that 'people are not made to live alone.'

Fanon and the other

Problematic as the parallels between the collective history of Europe and of the world in general may be, they come from a respectable source. In his essays, Phillips has at several points acknowledged his debt to Frantz Fanon, whose seminal *Black Skin, White Masks* originally appeared in French in 1952. An expatriate from Martinique, Fanon lived and worked in Paris, and later became involved in the Algerian insurrection and struggle for independence. Like Phillips, he negotiated the triangle of different locations and affiliations. Fanon was among the first to picture in abstract, psychological terms the effects on identity of the colonial experience. Closely affiliated to the other intellectuals in Paris, Fanon shares many ideas on the self and the 'other' with Sartre and Lacan, but his revolutionary insight was to extrapolate their ideas into a radical and thorough postcolonial critique of relations between colonial subjects. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, the frequent comparisons between anti-Semitism and other forms of racism are striking. They serve as a rhetorical strategy, to support a parallel, or clarify a difference, and structure the argument about the relation between self and other in the colonial experience. The issue of anti-Semitism was of course topical after the war. Fanon often refers to Sartre's *Refléxions sur la question juive* (1946), as if taking his cue from there: 'Jean-Paul Sartre has made a masterful study of the problem of anti-Semitism; let us try to determine what are the constituents of Negrophobia' (Ref. 13, p. 160).

Halfway through *Black Skin*, Fanon states that there is no difference between colonial racism and other forms of racism. And then he says: 'anti-Semitism hits me head-on: I am enraged, I am bled white by an appalling battle, I am deprived of the possibility of being a man' (Ref. 13, pp. 88–89). As he explains in a note, he is hit by Anti-Semitism because of the collective guilt each European, and perhaps the whole of mankind, must feel after the holocaust – in other words, Fanon uses Europe as a model for a collective *universal* identity, just as Phillips does more than 50 years later. But, as Fanon explains, anti-Semitism not only involves a collective identity but his own self, as the dramatic violence of 'hitting head on' and 'bled white' indicates. He knows that racism is never confined to just one race, that anti-Semitism masks an attack against his own black self:

> At first thought it may seem strange that the anti-Semite's outlook should be related to that of the Negrophobe. It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who recalled the fact to me one day: 'Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.' And I found that he was universally right–by which I meant that I was answerable in my body and in my heart for what was done to my brother. Later I realized that he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro. (Ref.13, p. 122)

Fanon realizes that 'I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance' (Ref. 13, p. 116), but his argument rests on the assertion that the common ground of racism is defined by the necessity to project a functional Other in order to secure Western superiority and dominance. The trap for the colonial subject, or the suppressed 'Other', is that the means of escape from the racist paradigm is sought in adaptation, in dreaming of the white mask. As an example, Fanon refers to Antillean poets, whose mediocrity can be explained by their desire to 'behave' white (Ref. 13, p. 192).

Phillips' Othello commits the same error – literally scripted as the colonial Other, he is also stuck in what this novel clearly sketches as a deadening paradigm. He wears a white mask (the irony is of course that until deep into the 20th century, Othello was performed by a white actor wearing a black mask!). Just as Othello is told off for assimilating too readily, so Fanon addresses his fellow Antilleans who have learned to 'think white', who see themselves and their country as inferior and have no other desire but to escape to metropolitan France (Ref. 13, p. 19). Once arrived, they forget their Creole, speak French without a trace of accent, and start dating a nice European girl.

The question to be asked, perhaps, is whether by drawing so explicitly on Fanon, Phillips does not embrace a line of thought that has lost its topicality in the 1990s. Because of a range of social-cultural changes, masking as white does not appear to be much of an issue anymore, whereas the parallel between anti-Semitism and colonial racism is not one that is popular, say, with the supporters of Louis Farrakhan's American *Nation of Islam*. The point is, however, that with this novel an alternative is constructed that counters the movement of 'black essentialism' which for Phillips is an instance of American extremism. By foregrounding a black man who has lost his self, a paper character to boot, one who was granted a limited script but who, in the hands of his author and in an era of post-colonial rewritings, becomes less tragic and more despicable than the original, Phillips defies a lot of expectations. In the background of Othello, however, looms the sensitive shadow of Fanon, the Antillean, educated in Europe and politicised in Algeria, whose identity politics are subtle and difficult, because non-essentialist, and who claims solidarity, as we would nowadays call it, with the Jewish people.

The general train of thought in post-colonial theory and criticism is to see the question of Israel and Palestine in terms of neo-colonialism or imperialism.[14, 15] Phillips offers a radical critique of that line of thought by creating an understanding for the birth of Israel as a nation. His credentials are impeccable; Fanon is unquestionably the inspiration of a great deal of post-colonial resistance. But Phillips brings to the fore an aspect of Fanon that is often overlooked, by writing with empathy – no, sympathy – about the fate of Jews in Europe. This is the justification for creating the voice of Eva, expressing her misery in a

language so acute that even J. M. Coetzee, no small fry when it comes to expressing bleak despair, remarks that 'the corpus of literature about the camps is by now so vast, and the ground so well covered, that one would think nothing new can be said about their horrors … yet pages of Eva's story seem to come straight from hell, striking one with appalling power'.[16] What Phillips also appears to say is that Eva or Stephan are examples to be emulated when it comes to identity politics – they are, in the Jewish-American sense, more *Mensch* than Othello, not only because Othello is a fictional archetype, but also because they are complete human beings, intuitive and full of self-doubt. Their trauma is overwhelming, yet they try to carry on. In particular, Stephan Stern seems to survive because he is oriented towards the future, without forgetting the past, in the pragmatic and ethical dimension of collective memory that is discerned by Ricoeur.[17] In the sinister play on words that is evoked by the title, it is in the wake of the nature of blood that identity crystallizes.

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