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The Fictions of Diaspora and Caryl Phillips's Diasporic Fiction

In 1996, Grant Farred wrote: "The most interesting diasporic development has been the recent trend toward return by blacks to the now sovereign Third World as a respite from metropolitan racism" (29-30). In his travelogue *The Atlantic Sound* Caryl Phillips notes that, in 1986, the African-American Jew Kohain Halevi led a group of 25 diasporic brothers and sisters on a one-week trip to Israel, where they were denied entry, detained, and finally "deported" (2000, 202).¹ Kohain had to locate the promised land elsewhere. In Ghana, he founded a tourism company, which offers tours including "a visit to a local village, a trek in the Kakum National Park, a lecture by Kohain, and the opportunity of participating in the 'thru the door of no return' ceremony" (AS 199), held in a slave fortress on the coast. As a part of a chaotic Panafest, this ceremony of no return invokes the spirit of God and the ancestors, and "welcomes the 'family' back home to the dungeons" (AS 129), excluding a white woman. A dreadlocked sister, whose dress sports the words "One Africa", preaches: "Though we were carried far away to strange lands, we return home. [. . .] The water that divides us is not as strong as the blood that binds us. We know you're with us, God, because no people on the face of the earth have ever gone through this" (AS 219). In order to construct their identity, these African-Americans employ the rhetoric of race, family, Pan-African culture, and the Jewish diaspora. Their inverse racism, directed against the white woman, simply reverses that of the Israelis, with whom they identified but who in turn rejected them. Their idea of "home" and African culture clashes with that of the local inhabitants, who fail to understand "the rich people who have come late" (AS 199). A poor Ghanaian Phillips met would do anything to leave his promised land for better opportunities abroad, and their African-American brothers and sisters certainly return to Babylon in spite of having gone through the ceremony of no return. The site of slavery is turned into a tourist attraction with the promise of spiritual healing of the inner wounds that African-Americans received in the US (AS 215). The questionable myth of the chosen people does not only serve to establish their unique status, ignoring its Jewish origin, but also entails that God ordained slavery as a punishment for the disobedience of his commandments, and that He will lead those in the diaspora back home to His Kingdom on earth (AS 207-209), which is nowhere visible to Phillips. He concludes *The Atlantic Sound* with the statement: "There were no round-trip tickets in your part of the ship. Exodus. It is futile to walk into the face of history" (AS 275).

In his travelogues *The European Tribe* and *The Atlantic Sound*, Phillips comments on African-American diaspora fictions with ironic detachment, but he also expresses his interest in the connections between the Jewish and the African diasporas, which he

1 I will use the following abbreviations for references to Phillips's texts: (AS) *The Atlantic Sound*, (ET) *The European Tribe*, (HG) *Higher Ground*, (NB) *The Nature of Blood*, and (NWO) *A New World Order*.

pursues in his novels *Higher Ground* (1989) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997). These texts place "the Holocaust of European Jews in a provocative relationship with the modern history of racial slavery" (Gilroy 1993, 217). Phillips's fragmentary and juxtaposed fictionalized histories revise both the linear master narrative of European progress and civilization and the cyclical histories of the Jewish and the African diasporas, as he states in an interview with Ivan Kreilkamp:

The subject of my books tends to be the whole question of broken or diasporic history, of interpretation of personal history and how that relates to the larger official history that's been given. In other words, it's an attempt to reinterpret, and put together, through different voices, a different kind of view of the world, a different history. (Kreilkamp 1997, 45)

Both novels deal with the profound disintegration and dispersal of families, the isolation and suffering of individuals from the pain of loss, betrayal and abandonment, and their will to fight and to survive in the face of physical persecution and the nightmare of memories (Swift 1991, 103).

The first part of *Higher Ground*, "Heartland", might have served as Phillips's retort to a Ghanaian teacher, who praised missionary schools and argued that the memory of slavery was no major concern in Africa because "those sold into slavery were not always that good, and in some respects they got what they deserved" (AS 148). For Phillips, the African responsibility for slavery and the diaspora begins at home, in the heartland of Africa, when African chiefs sold their fellow human beings into slavery. The protagonist and first-person narrator, who was captured and now serves the slave traders as a translator, already has an inkling of the diaspora in their fortress. He is separated from his family and does not belong to his white masters. Upon his resistance to a white soldier, who rapes his beloved and destroys his fresh bond to an African, he and his girl-friend are sold into slavery. The translator gains a belated insight into his betrayal of his own people, but he joins the rebellious chorus of his fellow slaves during the Middle Passage. They promise themselves from the depth of their souls that they will return to their people and reclaim the lives that have been stolen from them (HG 60). The present tense of the story reveals that the narrator keeps his memory alive (Sarvan/Marhama 1991, 38). However, their separation upon arrival in the US, the slave's last sentence as well as the following story, which seems like an incremental repetition of his captivity, belie his hope for return: "My present has finally fractured; the past has fled over the horizon and out of sight" (HG 60). Whereas this slave shares the dream of return with his unfortunate fellows after the loss of his family, his 20th century descendant loses his family by his insistent appeal to return to Africa because they have accepted their position in the US.

The second part of the novel turns to the US in the 1960s. Rudy Leroy Williams, after committing a petty crime, is imprisoned for an indefinite time, suffers as a result of being separated from his parents, his young girl-friend and their daughter. He decides to resist the authorities' attempt to humiliate and tame him by his self-discipline and self-education. His letters to his family and his lawyer express his desire for emotional support, but at the same time they give evidence of his pride and dignity. The prisoner stresses his mental growth and liberty and assumes a missionary zeal in his attempt to

re-educate his family in order to rid them of their slave mentality, their "mental lethargy and internal colonization" (Schäffner 1998, 111). The reader can infer from Williams's letters that his addressees do not respond to his exhortations and his desire for a meaningful dialogue (HG 84) due to his challenging and antagonizing stance. The missing answers to Williams's letters stress his isolation and invite the reader to respond to his dramatic monologues and to fill the gaps he left in his letters for fear of censorship.

Williams clearly presents himself to his Defence Committee as a representative of the African diaspora, giving as his name: "Homo Africanus", his occupation: "Survivor", and his age: "200-300 years" (HG 91). He claims that he was born a slave in the plantation society of the contemporary US (HG 71), and repeatedly compares the prison to a Nazi concentration camp (HG 69, 72, 76, 127), with one racist difference: "For white prisoners Belsen is a summer course in racialism" (84). His subjective conflation of disparate historical events expresses his agony and links his present American situation to African slavery in the previous part of the novel and to the European Jewish holocaust in the subsequent part of the novel. However, Williams's narrow point of view must not be identified with Phillips's, whose delineation of the Jewish diaspora and its concomitant despair goes beyond the mere parallel of the camps. The concentration camp serves Williams as an image of the ultimate form of enslavement and traditional slavocracy. His prison symbolizes the American "dystopia" (HG 139), which contradicts American versions of their promised land (HG 121, 162). In order to redefine himself and to resist humiliation, the prisoner reverts to militant left-winged Muslim Afrocentrism and attacks Christianity and capitalism. However, he also turns to aggressive racist and misogynist arguments in order to build up a new identity as a superior and paternalistic African, who justifies his atavistic, possessive attitude towards women by "the law of the tribe" (HG 86), "natural law" (HG 144), or the law of blood (HG 160-161). Phillips balances the man's gain against the woman's loss in his Afrocentric reconstruction of a diasporic community.

Williams calls for an essentialist Pan-African identity on the basis of race and soul (HG 70). He shares Garvey's call for African pride and Zionism but deplores his failure to organize a mass exodus to Africa (HG 123-124). His own version of liberation is modelled on the revolutionary struggle of the African colonies for freedom in the 1960s, and the African-American return to their mother-country Ghana (HG 70): "We must flee and burn bridges behind us as we leave. We are Africans" (HG 106). The retrospect of this novel from 1989 marks his trust in the rise of Africa in the late sixties and in a mass return as delusive, because his political heroes Nyerere and Kenyatta promoted the ruin rather than the welfare of their countries (Sarvan/Marhama 1991, 39). His last letter to his dead mother reveals the dramatic split between the collapse of his sanity under repression, his awareness of the present misery, couched in the terms of slavery, and his strong will to survive and to return to his mother as "a whole, honorable, and clean man" (HG 172). There is a certain tragic grandeur in Williams, in his admirable struggle to "survive with the will to begin again and go on" (HG 97), and his insight into the magnitude of his decline and fall (HG 162; Ledent 2002, 65). However, Williams's dogmatism and militancy antagonize his

family and increase his isolation in prison. Phillips does not share, but explores, Williams's dogmatic, essentialist Afrocentrism as a subjective reversal of racism and a rejection of repression.

Whereas Williams can emancipate himself to some extent from the slave mentality in the prison camp, the last part of the novel proves that the exodus from the diaspora does not necessarily entail liberation from the terror of the past. A Jewish father hopes that God will lead his family to Zion but prefers to send his daughter Irina to Great Britain before he and his family are deported and killed by the Nazis. In England, the survivor is haunted by the perpetual nightmare of the loss of her family: "She could not afford a memory-haemorrhage, but to not remember hurt" (HG 180). In contrast to Williams, who can create an inner space of freedom for some time, she has "nowhere inside where she might curl up" (HG 213). Her attempt at integration in society after ten years of treatment in a mental asylum is not successful. She loses her husband, her baby, her job, and her sanity once more because, as Phillips comments elsewhere, "[s]he's been sucked up into a vacuum of the nightmare of trying to survive as a displaced person" (Bell 1991, 602). Her failed attempt to commit suicide perpetuates her suffering, "for ever lost without the sustaining love" (HG 218) of her family or a vengeful God (HG 176). The ending throws a shadow of doubt on the two African protagonists' hope for escape and return in the face of terrifying circumstances. Bénédicte Ledent praises Phillips's polyphony in the assemblage of individual voices, his integration of otherness and cultural plurality (2002, 78-79). The isolation of the individuals and their dismembered lives are re-membered in stories that can be shared by others (Ledent 2002, 78). The stories are related by the common topic of suffering and the struggle to survive in the diaspora, but disappoint any hope of redemption through suffering and a better future elsewhere. Thus, Phillips deconstructs the cyclical myth of the diaspora, which ends with regeneration in a new homeland. The next novel proves more explicitly that the African appropriation of Zionism is bound to fail as the Jewish myth of the return from the diaspora founders on the rocks of reality.

Bénédicte Ledent maintains that *The Nature of Blood* reveals "a much bleaker note" (2002, 135) due to Phillips's concentration on pervasive tribalism and evil (2002, 135). She is right when she claims that as ever with Phillips, "the characters' spatial and temporal dispersal is counterpointed with a complex network of correspondences" (Ledent 2002, 136). I would add that the aesthetic fragmentation of his latest novel to date mirrors not only the exiles' disruption of existence but also their cognitive confusion due to the discrepancy between their anticipation and their experience of reality. In addition, the aesthetic fragmentation results from the impossibility of narrating a coherent and parallel Jewish and African history, and, according to Phillips, is meant to convey the disruption of diasporic existence to the reader (Kreilkamp 1997, 45). A terrible irony prevails in the repetition of history, and Phillips adds to the diasporic defeat of the hope for a better future in *Higher Ground* the disenchantment after the arrival in the promised land in the later novel. *Higher Ground* counterbalances the uses of race for the purpose of discriminating others and of constructing a positive diasporic identity. *The Nature of Blood* foregrounds the

connection between blood and bloodshed as the consequence of the European racial discrimination of Jews and Africans, which is extended to the discrimination of Africans by Jews.

The stories of Jews and an African in Italy in the fifteenth century prefigure the future in this revisionist fictional history. In order to escape from pogroms in Germany, a group of Jews burned themselves in their synagogue, horribly foreshadowing the holocaust that would annihilate those who stayed behind. Other Jews fled Germany and settled in the democratic Republic of Venice. At Passover, their descendants celebrate the exodus from Egyptian slavery. The mythological construction of their identity as survivors lulls them into a feeling of happiness and comparative safety in their new homes (NB 52, 57-58). However, Venice betrays their trust because racist citizens maintain that Jews were dispersed because they shed Jesus Christ's blood, and that they have to shed blood again in order to return and be free (NB 104). Prominent Jews are accused of having killed an imaginary beggar boy with the symbolic name of Christian New in order to drink his blood, and they are finally burned at the stake. Their Republic of Venice turns out to be another Babylon, in which history is repeated. The chosen people seem to be forever damned according to this almost cynical version of history, because their enemies pervert the Jewish cyclical myth of the escape from the diaspora into a pretext for their persecution. The diasporic hope for a utopian future changes into a present dystopia for the Jews.

At first glance the Jews' fate seems to be far different from that of a privileged African in Italy. The nameless moor, who once had been a slave and was recently called to Venice in order to serve as a general but waits for employment, fails to realize that his own position may be linked with that of the Jews. He is free to roam the maze of the enchanting city by day and night, while the Jews are mostly confined to their cramped ghetto. The African does not take the taboo on intimacy between Jews and Christians as a warning against wooing and marrying the daughter of a senator. The African, whose royal blood is invisible, is silently despised by the Venetians for the visible difference of his skin. His secret marriage with the Venetian beauty does not establish him in the heart of the new community according to his desire (NB 145) but leads to an open racist attack. Only the Venetian need of the general in the war against the Turks seems to protect him from further harm. The African collaborator is alienated from both his host community and his home country, where he left a wife and a child. The open ending of this story suspends the Shakespearean tragedy and does not exclude any possible future except one, in the words of the African: "To turn back is impossible" (NB 160). Phillips rewrites the Western history of Venice as a model of democratic, artistic, and capitalist achievement. For him, racist Venice symbolizes the irrationality in the modern, instrumental exploitation and (ab)use of others. Neither the imposed segregation of an "other" community in the ghetto nor the individual attempt at integration protects the outsiders from discrimination, but they have nowhere else to go. The moor has an ally in his white Christian wife, but the fate of some prominent Jews should warn him that his importance to Venice will not facilitate his establishment of a safe home in a supportive community.

The Nature of Blood expands a note in *The European Tribe* about the historic link between the Jewish ghetto in Renaissance Venice and fascist Germany, the deportation of two groups of Venetian Jews to concentration camps in 1943 and 1944 (ET 52). Phillips's coverage of the Jewish holocaust and the struggle for a new home in Israel varies and extends both the exiled Jewish girl's experience in *Higher Ground* and the persecution, escape, and death by fire in the earlier Jewish history depicted in this novel. The diaspora inevitably results in the disintegration and loss of the family. The Jewish family who cooperate with the Germans and intend to hide in cover until the storm blows over is deported and killed. Their younger daughter Eva Stern survives the concentration camp, but is haunted by intolerable nightmares and commits suicide because she finds herself in a deadlock due to her survivor's symptoms. She suffers from her loyal commemoration of her deceased family and is unable to complete her mourning in order to move on (NB 157). Her uncle Stephan Stern opts for underground resistance and becomes a prominent fighter for the new state of Israel, but he nevertheless loses his wife and daughter, who decide to flee to the US for fear of the Germans and distrust of the Arabs. The narrative frame initially delineates a British camp in Cyprus, which serves as a bottleneck to channel Jewish refugees to Palestine and recalls the exterior form of Nazi camps, and finally depicts the lives of refugees in Israel decades later. At the beginning of the novel, Dr. Stephan Stern "prepares" the Russian Jew Moshe for Israel with idyllic visions of the promised land while secretly harbouring resentments against refugees, "the refuse from old Europe" (NB 11). In Cyprus, Stern "watched as Europe spits the chewed bones in our direction. (The flesh she has already swallowed.)" (NB 12). He seems to be afraid that the promised land is becoming a dump for wasted human beings. Stern's thoughts echo racist stereotypes of the African cannibal, which he projects upon Europe, but also recall the Western Jews' discrimination of poor Eastern Jews. The end of the novel affirms his racist aversion, now directed against African Jews. Dr. Stern, in his seventies, survived a heart attack, which symbolizes his survival in spite of the broken heart resulting from the loss of his family. The old man, who harboured and disseminated utopian visions of return, now shares the disillusionment "of the displaced and the dispossessed" (NB 5) who hope for a new beginning. He is still alone and suffers because of the lack of a sustaining community, but he resents the African Jews in his country, who live in cramped apartments in bad areas which resemble ghettos. The analogy between his Zionist ideology of blood and soil and that of his foremost enemies has not escaped the critics' notice (Ledent 2002, 143). The last sentence of *The Nature of Blood* reverses the hopeful ending of *Crossing the River*, where the symbolic African father dreams of cross-racial brotherhood and embraces both his descendants and their white friends (1993, 235-237): in a daydream, Stephan Stern is left "alone on the bench, his arms outstretched, reaching across the years" (NB 213). However, the arms of this falling star of Israel will remain empty because his former family is forever gone and his botched attempt at intimacy with a young African Jewish woman reveals that he is unable to form new attachments. Thus, the struggle for a new nation state fails to provide a new home, and recent developments in Israel and Palestine dismantle any delusions about a safe haven in the promised land.

The Nature of Blood met with controversial reactions because, according to a quotation from an interview with Phillips, "Jewish Holocaust survivors and their heirs are proprietary over the rights to the narration of their community's tragedy" (Kreilkamp 1997, 44). These antagonistic reactions, however, reassert a position that Phillips specifically argues against, i.e. a segregationist and absolutist identity policy based on an ethnocentric perspective on the history of a people who are supposed to be singular.

Phillips's travelogues and diasporic fiction dispel the myths of diasporas, especially those of a return to the promised land and the construction of a utopian community based on a mutual race, soul, religion, culture, or even history. His novels complement his travelogues, which also connect the present and the past of Africa, Europe and the Americas, because his fiction explores gaps in official versions of history by creating fragmented, subjective perspectives *in* the past. Phillips is not interested in a competition between Jews and Africans for the world's greatest martyr (Gilroy 1993, 217). He establishes a "*correlation based on affinity*" (Sternberg 2001, 193), but does not short-circuit their histories by "too-quick diasporic equivalence" that Clifford criticizes in theories about diasporas (1994, 324). Phillips juxtaposes fragments of diasporic histories and universalizes "the oppression of ethnic groups" (Schäffner 1998, 120) without erasing the differences between them. His parallel establishes the "Holocaust and slavery as defining events of modernity and as catastrophes that, in their traumatic effects, ineluctably divide subjects from their histories and thus from themselves" (Yelin 1999, 392). His juxtaposition of diasporas helps to put the African suffering on "the ethical agenda of the West" (Gilroy 1993, 216) along with the Jewish plight. His representation of historical circumstances creates an understanding of the Jewish construction and the African imitation of a diasporic myth, but also warns against its shortcomings and dangers. The mythical construction of history and identity is a "survival matter" (Okazaki 1991, 47) because it provides self-esteem and hope for the future, but is also ahistorical and self-defeating because it legitimizes suffering as a divine decree and holds out the illusion of redemption and the future return to an ideal home. His fragments about the exodus from one diaspora into another suggest the repetition of the same with a difference, and reject both the Western history of linear progress and the diasporic myth of cyclical regeneration. The existence in a preliminary diasporic home becomes a permanent condition. The Caribbean author uses contemporary Israel as a warning against African-Americans' Zionist aspirations for homecomings, which "are, by definition, the negation of diaspora" (Clifford 1994, 307) but, in reality, displace others and cannot leave the sufferings of the past behind.

Phillips not only undermines the diasporic myth of history but also that of the dispersed people's collective identity. He does not believe in a shared identity of passion against repression because of diasporics' various positions due to their social status, economic interest, political or historical awareness. He questions the essentialist foregrounding of race as the major feature of discrimination or ethnic identification, the "fantasies of belonging and alienation with a presumed authenticity which is underscored by the figment of the pigment" (NWO 93). He genders diasporic experience in opposition to many theories of diaspora (Clifford 1994, 313) and points out the

discrimination of class and race between and within diasporic communities. Thus, he criticizes the self-righteous and self-elevating perspectives of people in the diaspora and reveals multiple links between themselves, their oppressors, and other so-called "ethnic minorities". Phillips foregrounds negative encounters and parallels between diasporic groups and their host cultures but also describes positive if difficult or tenuous relationships between individuals of different affiliations, above all white women and coloured men. Phillips pays almost as much attention to conflicts between individuals and their communities as to those between diasporic groups and their host cultures, and records many specific similarities and differences between parties in particular historical situations. Rather than assume a collective identity, Phillips, like Clifford, stresses an infinite process of multilateral identifications (Clifford 1994, 306, 320-321).

Phillips opposes the simple parallel between diasporic groups as much as the radical difference between "indigenous" and diasporic cultures. He favours a lateral and decentred version of diaspora (Clifford 1994, 306), which privileges transnational, transracial, and transcultural interconnections rather than the rigid dichotomy of home and exile. The Caribbean heritage of racial and cultural multiplicity, which encompasses racial, religious, linguistic, political, and continental differences (NWO 130-131), serves as a model for fruitful diasporic dynamics. The diasporic individual, Ledent argues, acquires multiple loyalties (2002, 174-175), but she neglects the pervasive sense of alienation as an undercurrent in transcultural diasporic experience. In *A New World Order*, Phillips asserts his ambiguous position in the US, Great Britain, Africa, and the Caribbean: "I recognise the place, I feel at home here, but I don't belong. I am of, and not of, this place" (2001, 1, 2, 3, 4).

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