

Is Counter-Discursive Criticism Obsolescent? **Intertextuality in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground***

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Of all the many elephant traps lying ahead of us, the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality.

Salman Rushdie¹

Counter-discursive criticism dominated the study of new literatures for many years, as the critical work of Helen Tiffin, for example, testifies; an important and necessary stage in the development of post-colonial criticism, it reached a peak at the end of the Eighties with the publication of *The Empire Writes Back*.² Recently, however, some discontent has been voiced with this prevalent reading-practice because of its tendency towards generalization. Elleke Boehmer, among others, has objected to its specific "emphasis on textual resistance."³ Similarly, Frank Schulze-Engler affirms at the end of a well-argued article that the New Literatures in English are "far too complex to be reduced to one cultural strategy only."⁴ Taking my cue from these assertions, I would like to show, through a reading of Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* (1989),⁵ that the counter-discursive paradigm can be reductive if used as the only method of approach, because it views the post-colonial condition in exclusively confrontational terms, therefore ignoring whole layers of meaning. In that perspective, then, intertextuality, among other features, is not regarded as a cross-cultural and thus potentially enriching process, but merely as a site of struggle.

Higher Ground is a puzzling novel, composed of three narratives with apparently little in common except the suffering of their displaced protagonists. "Heartland," the opening section, takes place in an African trading fort at the end of the eighteenth century and offers a fascinating anatomy of colonialism and slave-trading. Its narrator is a nameless African working as a factor and interpreter for the white slave-traders. He is torn between his feeling of estrangement from his fellow Africans and his mistrust of his white employers. "The Cargo Rap," the second panel of the triptych, is made up of letters written in the late 1960s by Rudi Williams, a young black American, from the high-security prison where he is in detention for armed robbery. His correspondence shows the destructive effects of solitary confinement. The

main character of the third section, "Higher Ground," is Irina, a Polish Jewess who emigrated to England shortly before World War II to escape Nazism. Some twenty years later, after a failed marriage and years of depression, she is utterly lonely, "shipwrecked but alive" (182).

If read carefully, however, these stories evince subtextual unity: tropes such as (un)naming and captivity bind them to one another beyond narrative borders. Language, too, provides a complex metaphorical tie. It functions within each story as a double sign of alienation and power, not only inhibiting genuine communication between cultures, generations, and sexes but also equipping the characters with tools to control their fate, though more often simply to survive.

The intertextual echoes in the three stories display a similar paradox. They are part of the novel's revisionary strategy, contributing to the dismantling of all monolithic discourses, not only that of empire. For instance, the three novellas pastiche the literary genres – slave narratives, prison memoirs and stream-of-consciousness biographies – that are often regarded as counterpoints to the "monumental histories, official discourses and panoptic quasi-scientific viewpoint" of the West.⁶ Yet intertextuality in *Higher Ground* is far from being exclusively oppositional. By integrating not only the European canon but also Afro-American and Caribbean classics into the text, it is suggestive of Phillips's cultural plurality. These references to previous writing also work along supplementive lines, compensating for the novel's enigmatic fragmentation.

I would therefore tentatively add that the counter-discursive paradigm seems to have lost some of its relevance for migrant writers who, like Phillips, are at a crossroads, both inside and outside several literary traditions. Very much like the term "Third World," the notion of counter-discourse relies primarily on a dichotomous epistemology and implies setting up borders – an idea Phillips forcefully resists:

I think there is an increasing responsibility upon us: to define and challenge, to debunk, destroy, get rid of the terms such as Third World, because they introduce an idea of an Other, and once you start defining yourself by identifying who you're not then you're already tip-toeing down the road towards a very ugly type of totalitarianism.⁷

Although the political agenda of migrant writers remains deeply engaged with issues of power and marginality, their diasporic aesthetic entails less adversarial impulses towards the West, since they are, in a sense, also part of it. For them, intertextuality is therefore not so much a subversive gesture as an "act of rhetorical self-definition"⁸ – what Henry Louis Gates calls

"signifyin(g)."

Nowhere is this "signifyin(g)" intent clearer than in "Heartland," a story reminiscent of classic slave narratives. Like these traditional tales, it indicts slavers, exposes their barbarism, and, to a certain extent, illustrates the link between literacy and freedom, although we do not know for sure that the narrator has become a free man even if the act of writing presupposes as much.⁹ Yet, unlike most tales written by liberated slaves, "Heartland" does not cover the whole life of an individual (employing the conventional incipit "I was born"), but concentrates on the actual "heartland" of the narrator's experience of enslavement. One can therefore say that the narrator, like Equiano, a well-known slave narrator, is truly "master of his text"¹⁰ on two grounds. He dissociates himself from accounts of slave-trading written by whites. But, more obliquely he rejects the closure involved in the pattern of traditional slave narratives, as well as the formal constraints that were very often imposed by the Abolitionist movement.¹¹

In addition, like Wilson Harris's eponymous novel, "Heartland" can be read as an artistic response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in that it focuses on a metaphorical journey into the self.¹² Phillips also re-enters Conrad's discursive field by choosing a "native" as narrator, one of those eclipsed in almost all accounts of the slave-trade written by whites, including Conrad's. However, he eschews the facile solution of using an African narrator posing solely as the victim of the vicious slave-system. By foregrounding an ambiguous viewpoint, that of a collaborationist (or, in Conrad's ironical words, "one of the reclaimed," "an improved specimen"¹³) and by thus exposing the human complexities of the slave-trade, Phillips initiates a disruption of the polarizations on which imperialist ideology used to rest. In so doing, he is not so much writing back to *Heart of Darkness* as going beyond the "frontier" at which Conrad stopped.¹⁴

The other African characters, both positive and negative, are part of this ambivalent re-writing of Africa. As is often the case with women in Phillips's fiction, the girl epitomizes positive forces. Embodying the qualities of "self-control" and "inner stillness" (29) that the narrator attributes to his people, she represents the native population as a whole, a kind of "soul"¹⁵ of the land like Kurtz's African mistress. The villagers, on the other hand, have been infected with European greed, a corruption crystallized in the "Is there anything else?" (35) pronounced by the Head Man on his daughter's return after being abused by a trader. Did he expect some trinkets in exchange for his daughter's violation?

Further Conradian echoes are to be found in Phillips's equally complex portrayal of the white slavers. The Governor and Price stand for the complementary, though at times conflictual, aspects of colonialism, respectively represented by "the Bible and the gun" (76).

The Governor clearly stands for its idealistic strand and sees his mission in Africa as a civilizing one, even though material profit and a yearning for the exotic are not alien to his undertaking. His resemblance to Conrad's accountant is striking. He arrives at the dark, smelly fort, "His tunic [...] freshly laundered, his shirt impossibly white, his nails manicured, his hair neat" (11-12), with the romantic notion of seeing Africans "in [their] primitive state" (12) and a wish to leave the comfort of Europe "to draw deep on the original air" (12). The other white "representative," Price, whose name reflects the venality of the colonial system, personifies its exploitative and bestial streak. Nothing can come in the way of his lust for power, whether financial or sexual. Famous lines from Conrad's novella – "Anything – anything can be done in this country. That's what I say; nobody here, you understand, *here*, can endanger your position"¹⁶ – resonate in his speech to the Governor on what he perceives to be the "natural order" guiding white people's life in Africa: "We stand," says Price, "at the edge of the world. The rules that bind normal men have no place in this land" (31).

Intertextual references in the puzzle-like epistolary narrative of "The Cargo Rap" are undisputedly counter-discursive in tone. Yet they mostly come out for their adjunctive role: they deepen one's understanding of the central character's painful identity-construction. Very much like Rudi's speech, which ranges from the conversational to the very bookish, the literary intertext of "The Cargo Rap" is wide-ranging, bringing together vernacular genres, like rap, and more scholarly texts, like black liberationist writing. These two poles of black culture, described as respectively "outside" and "inside" the academy,¹⁷ have sometimes been viewed as mutually exclusive. Rudi's philosophy, however, seems to validate an integrative approach. Besides, his identity is not an abstract absolute but an empirical construction:

I am entering a very important phase of my development as I try now to marry my political reading with the African-American experience. I feel like a chemist holding two semi-full test tubes, I have to decide which to pour into which. Either way there will be a reaction of some kind, perhaps a loud fizzing, perhaps an explosion, as a new substance is born. (79)

In keeping with his eclectic combination of literary modes, his development is an unpredictable chemistry-like process. As in a scientific experiment, not only the ingredients but also the conditions in which it is carried out determine the final result.

I will only comment on four of the various genres of the Afro-American tradition upon which "The Cargo Rap" draws: biographies and rap, on the one hand; militant writing and

prison memoirs, on the other.

What Rudi calls "a little cargo rap about the children of Africa who arrived in this country by crossing the water" (154) is his "singing," rap version of the life-stories of eleven famous black figures, among them Toussaint l'Ouverture and Marcus Garvey. These personalities are part of Rudi's existential heritage; by telling their story, then, he also "[writes himself] into being."¹⁸ Unlike the history taught by his former black teacher, Mr Wilson, celebrating "black people's contribution to the building of a house they are not allowed to dwell in" (102), Rudi's biographies challenge the status quo and wittily plead for an alternative perspective on history. Yet the hopeful message they convey, that "anything can be achieved given the right mental attitude" (118), is sadly contradicted by his own experience. Also, in spite of his refusal to be a "hagiographer" (121), his accounts of these famous people's lives are not without their own form of bigotry. His Utopian view of Africa is but one example, all the more incongruous to the reader of the Nineties as (s)he is aware of the sorry state of democracy in places like Ethiopia, or in Ghana, to Rudi "the mother-country of African independence" (70).

The combination of historical biography with rap operates at the intersection between textuality and orality, which is also the crux of Rudi's alienation. The main characteristics of rap seem to confirm the spirit and tone in which his letters were written, although they do not actually affect their formal aspect. Rap is a hybrid, multicultural, grassroots poetic and musical form, relying on repetition, pastiche and linguistic inventiveness. If one keeps in mind the fact that the rapper is, like Rudi, "an artisan of words"¹⁹ and that justice is seen by urban rappers as "but another name for young-black-male victimization,"²⁰ one realizes that the generic reference to rap is part of the novel's accretive process of characterization.

Radical texts by Malcolm X, Fanon and other theorists of Black Power constitute yet another source of intertextuality in Rudi's story.²¹ No doubt they contribute to its authenticity of tone: his letters faithfully echo their militant pan-Africanist rhetoric. But, more importantly, they show that humans are the bearers of a cargo of texts that shape their lives, not necessarily in an antagonistic way. Prison writings by black convicts are another type of literary allusion. *Soul on Ice*, written from prison by Eldridge Cleaver, is one of the many possible sources for Rudi's epistolary memoirs.²² Charles Sarvan and Hasan Maharma have also pointed out the striking resemblance between Rudi's missives and the letters of George Jackson.²³ However troubling, these similarities make sense only insofar as they enlighten the reader about Phillips's narrative options, especially his choice of a supposedly negative character, almost a stereotype: the black urban youth as criminal offender. As in "Heartland," he seems keen to

reveal the hidden face of the cliché, for his use of the prison narrative points to the deep humanity of its protagonist, who stands out not because he is an unreformable criminal but because he is a suffering, developing individual who commands respect.

Irina's story, too, evokes a recurring figure in twentieth-century literature: the mentally disturbed individual to whose thoughts we are allowed access. It also brings to mind the insane white creole of the Caribbean literary tradition, particularly Antoinette Cosway of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*,²⁴ a re-working of the canonical *Jane Eyre*. Like the white female West Indian forced to migrate to the "mother country," the Jewish refugee is an outcast before arriving in England. Exile only serves to exacerbate her deeply rooted marginality. What Evelyn O'Callaghan writes about the white creole protagonist might therefore loosely apply to Irina: she "represents the 'outsider's voice,' yet this voice is an integral part of a Caribbean literary tradition."²⁵ Irina, indeed, contributes through her experience of suffering and displacement to the development and globalization of that tradition, by essence a plurivocal one.

But "Higher Ground" conjures up not so much the atmosphere of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as it does that of Rhys's earlier novel *Voyage in the Dark*,²⁶ whose protagonist, Anna, lives, like Irina, in a gloomy world of icy rented rooms and self-righteous landladies. Despite differences between their respective circumstances, the two victimized heroines display the same listlessness and resignation to their misfortune. Their vivid imagination is a further point of comparison, which manifests itself in their recurrent personifying of their material surroundings. Moreover, as their dreams and memories of a sometimes happy past merge with the bleak reality of the present, both Anna and Irina experience mental collapse.²⁷ For both of them, exile to Britain means a voyage in the dark with a painful "middle" passage from life-associated childhood into death-foreboding adulthood.

The benefit of exploring the textual interconnections between "Higher Ground" and Rhys's fiction resides not only in the fact that we are thereby provided with a conceptual tool designed to integrate Irina's tale into the Caribbean literary tradition. Nor is such an approach meant solely to provide an indication of Phillips's literary (af)iliation. Juxtaposing the two works also helps fill some of the gaps and silences of their respective narratives, thus deepening our understanding of the diasporic sensibility. Also, in a more roundabout way, much of the prolific criticism devoted to Jean Rhys's fiction can invite the reader of "Higher Ground" to read some of its motifs (the disruption of family life, for example) from a psychoanalytical feminist perspective, an approach which could unearth yet more layers of meaning than those discussed in this essay.²⁸

Even if Irina believes that books, as opposed to humans, "can neither expel nor despise you" (175), her story suggests that they can nonetheless control your life. Isn't this what *Anna Karenina* does when Irina decides to commit suicide? Like Tolstoy's passionate heroine, Irina throws herself under a train (a recurrent symbol in her life-story). Apart from shedding ironical light on Irina's suicidal resolution, since what looks like decision-making in Anna's case is only irrational impulse,²⁹ the influence that *Anna Karenina* exerts on the young woman might touch upon the cultural subservience of Polish people to Russian literature, very much as West Indians used to model their lives on the heroes and heroines of English classics. That Irina should rely on a book in taking such an important step also points to two of her weaknesses – her lack of confidence, and her inability to decide for herself what should be done and how, particularly in relation to men: "Given her past the unkindest cut of all was that in ten years [the psychiatric staff] had told her nothing about how to deal with men. They had told her nothing about how to avoid men" (201). In a way, Irina behaves towards the mental institution as a child towards her parents, expecting from them some ethical framework. *Anna Karenina*, and all books by extension, could therefore be read as parental surrogates, since Irina turns to them for referential behaviour.

By way of conclusion, I will simply quote Anne Frank, whose diary provides yet another thread in *Higher Ground's* textual web: "our lives are all different and yet the same."³⁰ While summing up the philosophy of the novel, this quotation also epitomizes the critical dilemma this paper has attempted to illustrate. The counter-discursive approach has rendered good services and is still a very useful tool to apprehend the "sameness" – that is, the common historical experience – of post-coloniality. Yet it seems that one also needs alternative approaches in order to address its growing diversity.

Notes

¹ Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992): 19.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989).

³ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995): 7.

⁴ Frank Schulze-Engler, "Beyond Post-Colonialism: Multiple Identities in East African Literature," in *Us/Them: Translation, Transcription and Identity in Post-Colonial Literary Cultures*, ed. Gordon Collier (Cross/Cultures 6; Amsterdam/Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1992): 319-28; here 327.

⁵ Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground* (1989; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990). Further page references are in the text.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993): 260.

⁷ "The Other Voice: A dialogue between Anita Desai, Caryl Phillips, and Ilan Stavans," *Transition* 64 (1994): 77-89; here 86.

⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988): 122.

⁹ For these and other features of traditional slave narratives, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr, "Introduction," in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Gates (New York: Mentor, 1987): ix-xviii. Other interesting characteristics of classic slave narratives can also be found in Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*. Among other things, Gates discusses the trope of the Talking Book, to him the Ur-trope of the Afro-American tradition, which deals with the interface between orality and literacy. In "Heartland," the narrator's inability to make full sense of the Bible, which, as it were, refuses to speak to him, could be read as an original variation upon that traditional trope.

¹⁰ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 156.

¹¹ See Betty J. Ring, "'Painting by Numbers': Figuring Frederick Douglass," in *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, ed. Carl Plasa & Betty J. Ring (London: Routledge, 1994): 118-43.

¹² One should note that less extensive intertextual allusions to *Heart of Darkness* can also be found in the other two sections of the novel. In "The Cargo Rap," for example, Rudi's blindness caused by the permanent light in his cell is reminiscent of some similar paradoxical blindness induced in Conrad's novella by the "white fog [...] more blinding than the night." Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973): 56.

¹³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 23 and 52.

¹⁴ See Wilson Harris, "The Frontier on which *Heart of Darkness* Stands," in *Explorations* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1981): 134-41.

¹⁵ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 87.

¹⁶ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 46.

¹⁷ Houston A. Baker, Jr, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993): ix.

¹⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 245.

¹⁹ Baker, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, 98. For more information on rap, see Mark Zanger, "The Intelligent Forty-Year-Old's Guide to Rap," *Boston Review* 16.6 (December 1991): 7-9, 34, and Alain Lapiower, "Le rap, 'culture d'immigration'," *Revue Nouvelle* 11 (November 1992): 85-93.

²⁰ Baker, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, 34.

²¹ For example, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, intro. Alex Haley (1965; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) provides interesting parallels with Rudi (his study of the dictionary, his sight problems, his relation to his teacher, etc).

²² Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (1968; New York: Laurel, 1992).

²³ Charles P. Sarvan & Hasan Marhama, "The Fictional Works of Caryl Phillips: An Introduction," *World Literature Today* 65.1 (1991): 35-40; here 38; *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970; Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1994).

²⁴ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, intro. Francis Wyndham (1966; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

²⁵ Evelyn O'Callaghan, "'The Outsider's Voice': White Creole Women Novelists in the Caribbean Literary Tradition," *Journal of West Indian Literature* 1.1 (October 1986): 74-88; here 77.

²⁶ Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

²⁷ Both women also have an abortion, voluntary for Anna, accidental for Irina. The termination of their

pregnancy crystallizes the failure of their new life-in-death in England.

²⁸ See, for example, Laura Niesen de Abruna, "Family Connections: Mother and Mother Country in the Fiction of Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid," in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. Susheila Nasta (London: Women's Press, 1991): 257-89; here 268-69. According to this critic, it is the absence of parental nurturing that accounts for Anna's dislocation. This can apply to Irina only with qualifications, for even if she suffers because of her parents' absence in England, the family ties at home (the mother-bond especially), used to be close and affectionate.

²⁹ Milan Kundera, *L'art du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986): 75-76; tr. as *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989): 52.

³⁰ *The Diary of Anne Frank* (London: Pan, 1979): 212. Although Anne Frank is never mentioned in *Higher Ground*, her presence is felt in filigree: Rudi calls his prison Belsen; Irina's early life strangely resembles Anne's – similar family, similar attachment to the father. In the *European Tribe*, Phillips hails Frank's *Diary* as "one of the most important books of the century" (London: Faber & Faber, 1987): 68.