

"Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories": Cross-Culturality in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*

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Part of my title is taken from Edward Said's already much quoted and debated study, *Culture and Imperialism*. One of Said's points is that, in contradiction to the monolithic and binary colonial ethos that prevailed for centuries, the empire is a quintessentially cross-cultural and hybrid domain. Thus, far from occupying distinctly separate terrains, colonizer and colonized – their histories intertwined by imperialism – have since their encounter inhabited overlapping territories.

Aware of the dangers of a dogmatic, totalizing or one-sided charting of those fluctuating and interactive zones, Said invites us to take up a globalized and contrapuntal view of the colonial experience that, in his words, "get[s] beyond the reified polarities of East versus West"¹ or South versus North, for that matter. Indeed,

so vast and yet so detailed is imperialism as an experience with crucial cultural dimensions, that we must speak of overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and the peripheries, past as well as present, and future: these territories and histories can only be seen from the perspective of the whole of secular human history.²

Wilson Harris is another champion of cross-culturality, possibly less publicized but nonetheless more original than Said. Both in his critical writing and his fiction Harris has articulated one of the most sophisticated visions of cross-culturality to date, of which I will only outline some very general features.³ Well before it became a buzzword in literary criticism, Harris had given prominence to cross-culturalism in his novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960). For him, cross-culturalism "can no longer be evaded because the whole world has been built on it for centuries".⁴ In addition, he warns of the dangers of what he calls "perverse cross-culturalism",⁵ i.e. a militant one-sided cultural assertion which excludes the other, much as the former colonizers used to, and entails a destructive blindness to what Harris sees as the essential multi-dimensionality of being.

Much of today's post-colonial fiction can help us to see imperialism and its aftermath from the "perspective of the whole of secular human history", as Said puts it. Contemporary Caribbean literature, in particular, abounds in such novels. Two novels by Caribbean-born British-based writers, Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991), address slavery dialogically and explore what has been called the "woven complexity"⁶ of colonial societies. They do so, however, without yielding to what Said calls "a rhetoric of blame"⁷ or, to use Wilson Harris's formulation, without "following] the course of self-righteous deprivation".⁸

Phillips's recent novel *Crossing the River* (1993)⁹ also seems to meet some of the suggestions of globality and many-sidedness proffered by Said and Harris in regard to cross-culturality. My intention in discussing this novel is three-fold. First to analyse Phillip's cross-culturality, especially its ambivalence; secondly, to examine how it is conveyed; and finally, to discuss briefly its political and artistic implications.

Although the fragmented and intricate narrative of *Crossing the River* can hardly be rendered through a summary, an outline of its plot(s) helps to identify its main concerns. It opens with an African father who remembers that, 250 years before, he sold his three children, two sons and one daughter, to an eighteenth-century slave trader whose voice, printed in italics in the text, strangely intermingles with his own. Ever since this "shameful intercourse" (p. 1) that initiated the African diaspora, the guilt-ridden father has been haunted by the "chorus of a common memory" (p. 1):

For two hundred and fifty years I have listened to the many-tongued chorus. And occasionally, among the sundry restless voices, I have discovered those of my own children. My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. Their lives fractured. Sinking hopeful roots into difficult soil. For two hundred and fifty years I have longed to tell them: Children, I am your father. I love you. But understand. There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. [...] You are beyond. Broken-off, like limbs from a tree. But not lost, for you carry within your bodies the seeds of new trees. (pp. 1-2)

The four narratives making up the novel match four of the voices heard among the "many-tongued chorus" that accompanies Africa's dispersal into and meeting with the West. Each voice speaks its own particular language.

The first section, entitled "The Pagan Coast", tells the story of Nash Williams, a nineteenth-century emancipated slave who is sent to Liberia by the American Colonization

Society to convert the African population. At first determined to enlighten the inhabitants of this "land of darkness" (p. 25), Nash gradually loses his civilizing zeal when his former master, Edward, also his surrogate father *and* lover, fails to answer his letters full of devotion. This Conradian tale closes with Edward voyaging to Liberia and journeying inland, upriver, to visit the settlement where "his" (p. 14) Nash has recently died after going native.

"West", the second and shortest part, focuses on Martha Randolph, a former slave turned frontierswoman in the American Wild West. While stranded in Colorado Territory on her way to California and about to die of cold, she is patronizingly put up in a derelict cabin by an apparently well-off white woman. She recalls her life made of heart-rending partings and hopeful journeys West and remembers "through some atavistic mist" (p. 73) the African beach where she was sold into slavery.

The next section "Crossing the River" is devoted to James Hamilton, the English captain who bought the three children in 1753. Containing both his dispassionate logbook and two ardent letters he sends to his wife, the text reveals a Janus-like personality. Hamilton is at once ruthless towards his crew and the slaves he regards merely as goods, yet also capable of genuine filial and marital love.

The last and longest section, entitled "Somewhere in England", comprises journal entries covering in jumbled fashion some twenty-five years in the life of a twentieth-century Englishwoman called Joyce. Vulnerable and generous, she is left alone during the Second World War when her selfish husband is jailed for black marketing. She then meets Travis, a black GI stationed in England, and her compelling story ends when years later the eighteen-year-old son she has had by Travis and given into the care of the County Council as an orphan comes to visit her.

The cross-cultural vision suggested in *Crossing the River* immediately strikes by its ambivalence, one might almost say fluidity. That cross-culturality is an ever-evolving process in which fixity and an assertive homogeneous identity have no place is exemplified again and again, not only in the novel's multi-focused narrative but also in its meaningfully polyphonic and open-ended structure. Cross-culturality is not a mosaic of different, strictly delimited areas but an uninterrupted and always incomplete process of fusion. As Harris puts it, "There is no formula for universality":¹⁰ nor is there for cross-culturality, one might add.

The multiple physical and cultural passages experienced by all the characters constantly challenge the roles traditionally imposed upon them by class, race, gender or nation. As each metaphorical river-crossing leads to a new translation of the self, we are made to ponder upon the subjectivity, relativity or inadequacy of such categories. "Here, in the

crowns colony of Sierra Leone, he was British. There [in Liberia] he would be nothing" (p. 16) says a character in "The Pagan Coast". The crossing of man-erected barriers does indeed annihilate one in the eyes of others or make one different. Black slaves who cross the Missouri turn into free men.

The text raises many more challenging questions on the mutability of identities as nothing is simple and clear-cut in the cross-cultural dimension. Black American settlers in Liberia are called "white men" (p. 32) by the local population. Similarly, black pioneers in the American West are seen by Indians as "dark white men" (p. 91). The slave trader Captain Hamilton is regarded by his peers as "a slave to a single woman" (p. 109). And in spite of racial and cultural appearances, Joyce, in the last story, is as much of an outsider in the Yorkshire community where she lives as the black American soldiers posted there. Beyond the incapacity of language to apprehend the cross-cultural complexity to the full, these examples suggest that there is in each man a plurality of interacting selves, a concept akin to what Edouard Glissant has described as "l'identité rhizome".¹¹ The cover illustration of the paperback edition of *Crossing the River* also alerts the reader to this essential multi-dimensionality of being. It represents three faces, two of them black, the third white, interlocked into one head. One can assume them to be Nash, Martha and Joyce whose experiences merge across time, race and gender. This picture is reminiscent, albeit at a less complex level, of Titian's painting "Allegory of Prudence" which depicts, among other things, the three ages of man and which has been used by Harris in the elaboration of his own cross-cultural vision.¹²

In spite of the often unrealized multiplicity of being, however, the novel reminds us that genuine cross-cultural exchanges cannot be taken for granted. Men are indeed captives in "the prisonhouse of natural bias",¹³ prisoners of the roles imposed upon them by the code of colonial behaviour and its corollary racism. Since it views blacks as "naturally" inferior to whites, the colonial code indeed precludes humans from meeting on equal terms and taints whatever contacts they may have. Very much like Nash's Christian god who "promises to be a God of all nations, provided they obey and dutifully serve Him" (p. 26), many white men will patronize black people as long as they agree to submit to their authority.

Besides, men seem wont to "keep themselves to themselves" (p. 134) as the American soldiers spontaneously do in the small Yorkshire village where they are stationed. On both sides of the racial divide, then, there is an innate reluctance dictated by fear to cross the river to meet the other, which might explain why, in "Somewhere in England", war-stricken English people reject, with the same vehemence, black soldiers and child evacuees. The war

indeed exacerbates group identity and nationalism, which automatically devalues the alien other: "one Englishman is worth two Germans, four French, twenty Arabs, forty Italians, and any number of Indians" (p. 164), Joyce reads between the lines of the English press in June 1940.

As the African father puts it, "sinking hopeful roots into difficult soil" (p. 1) is a painful experience requiring courage and determination. Undoubtedly, it takes exceptionally open-minded people, like Joyce, to go against the grain of human meanness. For instance, nowhere in her account of her meeting with Travis does she mention that he is black. Such genuine colour-blindness, Phillips has explained in recent interviews, is both "a strength and a weakness".¹⁴ Her naivety makes her "vulnerable", says Phillips, because the "world isn't like that. You want to hug her and shake her by the shoulders at the same time".¹⁵ At the other end of the human spectrum, some characters seem unable to exploit the cross-cultural potential they are presented as having. This is the case with James Hamilton, whose diary is ironically featured in the chapter entitled "Crossing the River", in which the selling of the children covers a mere three lines. Unimaginative and so rational that he is unable to conceive that "the warring passions of love and hatred" (p. 119) can coexist in the same person, he seems to suffer from emotional frigidity. Hence his inability to feel for others. Like Herbert, Joyce's one-time lover who left her while she was pregnant, James Hamilton "had no idea of what it was like to be anyone but himself" (p. 195).

The cross-culturalism presented in *Crossing the River* is also steeped in the very ambiguity and paradox of its origins. Initially brought about by the shameful deed of the father who "soiled [his] hands with cold goods in exchange for [his children's] warm flesh" (p. 1), it thrives in contexts of dislocation and dispossession, whether the colonization and evangelization of Africa, the Middle Passage and slavery in the New World, the decimation of Native Americans in the Wild West or the Second World War in Europe. Therefore, the jubilant and celebratory tone of the novel's Epilogue in which anonymous and famous children of the African diaspora, among them Joyce, the white woman, sing in a climatic choral finale, may appear incongruous if approached rationally.¹⁶ Asked to comment on the ending of the novel, Phillips answered:

I perceive an annealing force that comes out of fracture. [...] I have seen some 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.¹⁷

This bringing together of survival and cross-culturality appropriately sends us back to Said who writes, in the concluding paragraph of *Culture and Imperialism*, that "Survival in fact is about the connection between things".¹⁸

Finally, the family trope around which the novel is built also partakes of this ambivalent cross-cultural vision. In *Crossing the River*, the family is primarily a site of fracture and most characters are "emotional" pioneers in search of the father who has "forsaken" (pp. 42 and 73) them. Slavery has caused the radical disruption of family ties over the centuries: Martha is brutally separated from her daughter Eliza Mae when they are auctioned after the death of their master; more than a century later – things have only changed slightly – Joyce is forced by social pressure inspired by racism to put up her son for adoption. Yet such fractures mean that surrogate ties, very often of a cross-cultural and ambiguous kind, are woven to replace the genuine ones. Edward Williams is a father to Nash, even if a domineering one. In Martha's dreams of reunion with her child, her lost daughter bears the name of her former mistress Cleo, reflecting thereby the link between the two in her unconscious. And even Greer, Joyce's son, might take his place in a cross-cultural web spun between himself, his natural mother and his prospective adoptive parents.¹⁹ Although those new bonds only imperfectly compensate for the original loss, they nonetheless exist and very often manifest themselves in the love/hate dimension of colonialism that James Hamilton's lack of intuitive imagination obstinately rejects.

While the family trope has often been used in the Afro-American context to support ethnocentric perspectives,²⁰ it is clear that in Phillips's novel the loose and puzzle-like image of the family is rather a metaphor for the black Atlantic culture which Paul Gilroy defines as a "transcultural, international formation".²¹ Like Gilroy's, Phillips's representation of the African diaspora in the Western hemisphere is not one marked by constrictions or closures. Rather it is distinguished by an open and catholic outlook which accommodates and, indeed, welcomes outside cultures with which it intermingles in an unpredictable pattern, as the jazzy rhythm of the concluding epilogue obviously suggests. What matters from such a perspective, then, is not so much the "pigmentation", but, as the Afro-American thinker W. E. B. Du Bois put it in an altogether different context, "The real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery",²² the suffering that binds not only the children of Africa, but also includes people like Joyce and Captain Hamilton's manhandled crew.

By re-entering European history from the point of view of those who have usually been eclipsed from it, Phillips makes a clear political gesture which challenges cultural essentialism, ethnic purity and political correctness. This slightly provocative stance was anticipated by his two previous novels, *Higher Ground* (1989) and *Cambridge*, which also explore the complex human relationships within the triangle linking Africa, America and Europe. What makes *Crossing the River* a bolder and more subversive novel, possibly, is that, unlike the other two, it clearly refutes the idea of a return to the African homeland. The "many-tongued chorus continues to swell" (p. 237). Cross-culturalism is here to stay.

In an article entitled "The Writer and His Past" published some twenty years ago, the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o defined the role of the writer thus:

He must feel himself [...] swimming, struggling, defining himself, in the mainstream of his people's historical drama. At the same time, he must be able to stand aside and merely contemplate the currents. He must do both: simultaneously swim, struggle and also watch, on the shore.²³

A third duty could be added to these. As Phillips and many others writing from the so-called margins of the empire have done, the writer should also *cross the river* of his people's historical drama and watch it from the other shore.

NOTES

1 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994, p. 48.

2 *ibid.*, p. 72.

3 For an extensive and cogent discussion of Wilson Harris's cross-culturality. see Hena Maes-Jelinek, "'Latent Cross-Culturalities': Wilson Harris's and Wole Soyinka's Creative Alternative to Theory", forthcoming.

4 *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks by Wilson Harris*, eds. Alan Riach and Mark Williams, Liège: L3 – Liège Language and Literature, 1992, p.41.

5 *ibid.*, p. 41.

6 Fred D'Aguiar, *The Longest Memory*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1994, p. 33.

7 *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 19.

8 *The Radical Imagination*, p. 47.

9 Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River*, London: Bloomsbury, 1993. Subsequent references to this edition are given in the text.

10 *The Radical Imagination*, p. 88.

11 "Rhizomorphic identity". Cf. Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, Paris: Seuil, 1981. See also Edouard Glissant, "Le Cri du Monde", *Histoire et Anthropologie*, 7 (1994), p. 4: "Je réclame le droit à l'opacité, qui n'est pas enfermement. C'est pour réagir contre tant de réduction à la transparence de modèles universels. [...] Que l'opacité, qui n'ouvre pas sur l'obscurantisme, nous soit une fête, non une terreur. Que le droit à l'opacité, par où se préserverait au mieux la diversité, et par où se renforcerait la tolérance, embellisse nos poétiques".

12 *The Radical Imagination*, pp. 76-7. See also Hena Maes-Jelinek, "'Latent Cross-Culturalities'."

13 Wilson Harris, "The Frontier on which *Heart of Darkness* Stands" in *Explorations*, Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981, p. 135.

14 "Crossing the River", Caryl Phillips talks to Maya Jaggi, *Wasafiri*, 20 (1994), p. 27.

15 Quoted in Maya Jaggi, "Spectral Triangle", *The Guardian*, 5 May 1993.

16 Yet, says Phillips, "it seemed *emotionally* correct that [Joyce] should belong with the other three kids". "Crossing the River", p. 27 (*italics mine*).

17 "Crossing the River", p. 28. Cf. the ending of Wilson Harris's *The Tree of the Sun*.

18 *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 408.

19 The novel does not say as much, of course. It is one of the many gaps in the narrative that Phillips leaves the reader free to complete as (s)he wishes. Cf. *The Adoption Papers*, a polyphonic poem written by the black British poet Jackie Kay, Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1991.

20 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993, pp. 98-9.

21 *ibid.*, p. 4.

22 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 126.

23 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Writer and His Past" in *Homecoming*, London: Heinemann, 1972, p. 39.