

Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*: Discourses in the Past and Readers in the Present

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When asked in an interview about his tendency to write novels that are set in the past, Caryl Phillips explained that he is “deeply committed to the notion of ‘history’ being the fundamental window through which we have to peer in order to see ourselves clearly”.¹ In his novel *Cambridge* (1991), he explores the foundations of our postmodern world through the window of past discourses, in this way offering present-day readers his own insights into the experience of cross-cultural encounter and the management of human otherness.² By re-activating two opposed discourses from the nineteenth-century, one that resisted cultural exchange by dividing the world into “us” and “them”, and one that pursued a sense of belongingness, he can be seen as presenting postmodern readers with a dichotomy which affected the conceptualization of ethnic otherness in the past, and as challenging them to re-assess today’s discourses on the same topic. In the world of so-called globalization, are there still those who think in terms of an “us” and a “them”? Or can at least the readers of a postmodern novel form some kind of community that is not only large but non-hegemonic? My suggestion will be that Phillips, by encouraging his readers to relate to the intertextualities and multi-voicedness of past kinds of writing, is engaging in a new kind of literary community-making precisely by drawing on the “discontinuities, alternatives, and contradictions” of cultural memory.³

¹ Interview, “A Conversation with Caryl Phillips, author of the novel *A Distant Shore*”, in *ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes*, November 2003.

² Caryl Phillips, ‘*Cambridge*’ ([1991] New York, 1993). Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

³ For literary community-making, see Roger D. Sell, “What is Literary Communication and What’s a Literary Community?”, in Sonia Faessel abd Michél Pérez (eds), *Emergent Literatures and Globalization: Theory, Society, Politics* (Paris: In Press Editions, 2004), pp. 39-45, esp. 42. For cultural memory, see Roger D. Sell, “Literature, Cultural Memory, Scholarship”, *REAL:*

By dividing *Cambridge* into five parts in varied voices, he exposes readers to disparate points of view and contrasting discourses. The novel evolves around a core story in which the Englishwoman Emily Cartwright, daughter of an absentee plantation-owner, travels to the West Indies to inspect the family property. While there, she witnesses a number of internal conflicts on the plantation, which culminate in the killing of the plantation manager Mr Brown, with whom she has become romantically involved, at the hands of Cambridge, a slave. Placed within the framework of a prologue and an epilogue that are narrated in the third person by an external narrator, the first and the longest section of the novel is narrated by Emily herself. In part, it tells of her sea voyage to the West Indies and, in part, of her stay on the family estate on the unidentified island, at some time between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1834. A second and shorter section of the novel comprises an account of events by Cambridge, who writes his testimony while waiting to be executed for the killing of Mr Brown. This is followed by a third section written in the sensationalistic style of a planters' newspaper, which recapitulates the climactic events of the novel only very briefly. The two main parts by Emily and Cambridge create the main communicational dynamic of the novel, since they present readers with different perspectives on the society and also on the main characters themselves. Juxtaposed to the short news clip which, as Paul Sharrad notes, would have been the only public text to survive from such an incident,⁴ the two main narratives also convey something of the subjectivity of human experience that lies behind documented history.

Apart from the prologue and epilogue describing Emily's sentiments before and after the period described in the novel, the three other sections imitate nineteenth-century styles of writing. More particularly, they re-create genres of nineteenth century writing that discussed, or were written in, the colonies. By writing the novel's two main narratives as a journal and an autobiography, Phillips is able to develop a sense of intimacy and immediacy between his readers and the story's characters, and his replication of period genres also lends a sense of authenticity, his

Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature, 21 (2005), 349-364, esp. 358-9.

⁴ Paul Sharrad, "Speaking the Unspeakable: London, Cambridge, and the Caribbean", in C. Tiffin and A. Lawson (eds), *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality* (London: 1994), pp. 201-217, esp. 206.

stylistic and rhetorical verisimilitude doing much to convey the ethos of the world he delineates. By drawing from the traditions of travel writing and slave narratives (as well as those of planters' newspapers) he ventriloquizes the colonies' own literary production.

Yet the discursal verisimilitude is not total, and it might even be truer to say that Phillips is offering a *semi-imitation*. He uses modern spelling; he leaves out dates from the travelogue; and at times he alleviates the cadence of period writings with more present-day rhythms. These stylistic choices reflect the fact that this is a contemporary novel written for a contemporary readership, and they may also seem to shorten the chronological distance between readers and the novel's characters, so making the subject matter that much closer as well. To use Roger D. Sell's term, the novel as a whole can actually take on a mediating role, helping to "ensure that the flow and growth of cultural memory is genuinely communicational". As the fictional but authentic story narrows the gap between contemporary readers and communities in the past, "readers in some particular here-and-now" can more easily "read their way into author- and reader-personae created in a different—either very different, or more subtly different—there-and-then, personae whose continuing human potential will in this way be re-released".⁵ Phillips zooms his readers' historical consciousness in and out, as it were, alternating between, on the one hand, the framework of the prologue and epilogue in present-day style and, on the other hand, the period-style narratives, and also carefully signposting further temporal transitions within the lives and memories of the narrators themselves: "She [Emily] remembered. England. The truth" (p. 4); "She remembered. Walking up to Hawthorn Cottage. With her friend. Stella. Dear Stella" (p. 184). As the novel's characters move through time, readers are exposed to particular human subjectivities which are interwoven with the formalities of socially established genres. While addressing his readers as in their own present, Phillips prompts them to an empathic understanding of otherness, which can only deepen self-understanding as well.⁶

⁵ Sell, "Literature, Cultural Memory, Scholarship", pp. 359, 360. Cf. Sell's discussion of the social function of Fred D'Aguiar's fiction (*Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* (Amsterdam, 2000), pp. 268-270).

⁶ Cf. Sell's discussion of proliferating contexts of reading (*Literature as Communication*, pp. 119-145).

In the narrations of both Emily and Cambridge, some readers will detect traces of English travelogues and slave autobiographies that were written by a fair number of real-life individuals during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Emily's narrative, Phillips borrows scenes and phrasing from the journals of Lady Nugent, Mrs Carmichael, and "Monk" Lewis,⁷ and from Janet Schaw's travelogue in particular.⁸ These echoes carry with them the values and ideas of that earlier time, which readers today may well contrast with their own thought-world. Cambridge's narrative, similarly, draws on slave narratives, autobiographies, and other literary works by African-Britons such as Ignatius Sancho, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugoano. For readers who spot this, it can suggest a connection between the narrative persona of Cambridge and the writers of emergent black British literature whom Phillips has discussed in works of non-fiction.⁹ Following the genre conventions of accounts by other, non-fictional black Britons who made their way to freedom, Cambridge's story of his capture, the exceptional circumstances of his journey, his religious awakening, and his assimilation into British society seems partly formulaic.

Yet as Bénédicte Ledent notes, in Cambridge's story the generic conventions of slave autobiographies are also subverted.¹⁰ Phillips does not have Cambridge progressing simply from slavery to freedom. Instead, once he has attained a state of freedom and cultural assimilation, this is taken away from him, as he is forced into slavery and cultural oppression. The reversal of generic tradition seems almost to throw in doubt the genuineness of the schemata cultivated by Cambridge's predecessors. After all, to read a contemporary text which envisions the past is inevitably to enter into an *assessment* of the past, as the text will consciously be drawing attention to selected features of history, and leaving others out. In *Cambridge*, the ventriloquistic recreations of period attitudes, prejudices, and conflicts is also a process of criticism.

⁷ Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 29 (1993) 34-47.

⁸ Elizabeth A. Bohls, "The Aesthetics of Colonialism: Janet Schaw in the West Indies, 1774-1775", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1994) 363-390, esp. 390.

⁹ See Caryl Phillips, *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging* (New York 1999) and *A New World Order: Essays* (New York, 2002).

¹⁰ Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* (Manchester, 2002), p. 98.

As Evelyn O'Callaghan has observed, by weaving into the two main narratives both fiction and extracts from historical texts Phillips seems to question "the very possibility of definitive historical construction".¹¹

The complexity of the characters' own approach to otherness is signalled from the outset. Phillips portrays protagonists to whom a contemporary reader can immediately relate, because they reflect on issues that are still highly topical in the postmodern world. Not least, for instance, there is the question of sexual equality. In revealing Emily's sentiments on the position of women in English society, and on the standard notions of how women ought to behave, Phillips invites readers to see her as an individual who is discontented with the narrow role assigned to her sex, and thereby as a postmodern woman *in spe*. In the prologue Emily is said to view marriage as just "a mode of transportation through life", while her father contemptuously thinks in terms of "petticoat government" (pp. 3-4). In depicting her as so clearly defined by the then current conceptions of gender roles, the novel implicitly appeals to a very different, postmodern view of individual autonomy:

A woman might play upon a delicate keyboard, paint water-colours, or sing. [...] A woman must run the household, do the accounts, command the domestic servants, organize the entertaining, but her relations with her children were to be more formal. (Hence the governess and the nursemaid.) (p. 3)

At points like this, Emily's underlying desire for self-determination creates a connection between herself and the contemporary reader, a relation which would have been unlikely to arise if she had embraced her own time's conventions more enthusiastically. At other points, Phillips suggests that the limited self-government of women was part of a system parallel to the one which subjected the slaves, whose cultural identity, and whose descendants' cultural identity, are just as much a postmodern issue as that of the position of women.

Phillips uses Emily's journal to re-surface a past discourse which made a dichotomy between Europe and the rest of the world. In this way he can suggest what might happen when individuals have to re-negotiate their fixed values and attitudes under the pressure of ideological change. Her journey to the plantation also, perhaps, allows him to filter in his own view of European imperialism, since her thoughts about cross-

¹¹ O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction", p. 39.

cultural encounters may well prompt postmodern readers to reflect on their own attitudes towards prejudice and hostile fears of difference. After all, the ideal of individual sovereignty is an abstraction which calls for concretization, and questions can still arise as to just how concrete it has become in the world of today. At first Emily hopes to persuade her father to accept the “increasingly common, although abstract, English belief in the iniquity of slavery” (p. 8). Yet at the same time she is still uncertain whether “lordship over one’s own person is [indeed] a blessing far beyond mere food and shelter” (p. 8), and when faced with a human otherness which seems to threaten her own sense of the natural order she adopts a position of European authority. Quite rejecting her elevated ideals about universal human values, and taking on an identity which, as Elleke Boehmer might say, assumes “a distinction of the self from what is believed to be not self”, she opposes a European individuality to the colonial subordinate, differentiating and downgrading the Afro-Carribbeans while validating her own colonist supremacy.¹² Her fledgling attempt to romanticize the African diaspora by describing how “[t]he torn roots of these *children of the sun* has [sic] occasioned the stain of *the institution* to mark first their native soil, and then bleed across the waters to deface the Americas” (p. 16, Phillips’s italics) may well goad readers into asking themselves whether exoticizing discourses based on a dichotomy of primitivism and civilization might not still have some influence even in the present phase of so-called globalization.

Some readers may spot that the scene of Emily’s arrival on the West Indian island is a pastiche of Janet Schaw’s account of her arrival in Antigua, with her clear indications of the colony’s social and racial hierarchy. One of Schaw’s key passages as far as *Cambridge* is concerned is the following:

No Lady ever goes without a gentleman to attend her; their carriages are light and airy; this of Mr Halliday’s was drawn by English horses, which is a very needless piece of expense; as they have strong horses from New England, and most beautiful creatures from the Spanish Main. Their Waggons which are large and heavy, are drawn by Mules, many of which passed Mrs Dunbar’s window, with very thin clothed drivers, nothing to their bodies, and little any where, which deserves the name of clothing. The women, too, I mean the black women, wear little or no

¹² Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 79, 81.

clothing, nothing on their bodies, and they are hardly prevailed on to wear a petticoat.¹³

As Keith Sandiford points out, this shows that Schaw, like her Scottish hosts, defies creolization; her discussion of the differences between her Scottish friends and the Afro-Caribbean population, together with her references to the physical signs of imported cultural dominance, is her attempt to prove that Europeans maintain a permanent cultural purity.¹⁴ And although, in Phillips's adaptation, Emily's observations focus mainly on particular people and the physical surroundings, her cultural ideology is indistinguishable from Schaw's.

With the aid of my gentleman companion, I stepped aboard a carriage belonging to the estate. The carriage was light and airy and drawn by English horses. This seemed to me a needless expense, for I knew that in these parts they were blessed with perfectly serviceable horses from New England. I noted the difference between this carriage and those preferred by the negroes, whose carriages were large and heavy and drawn by mules. I further noted that the negro men wore thin-clothed apparel which left scarce anything to the imagination, and that their women wandered hither and thither barely stirring to cover their bodies. Certainly most had nothing about them more substantial than a petticoat. I imagined that in such heat as this clothing would indeed become burdensome, so I did envy the negroes their ability to dress without concern for conventional morality. However, on first encountering such a manner of display it is difficult to disguise one's revulsion. (p. 21)

A reading of the two passages indicates that, in his adaptation of Schaw's account, Phillips re-articulates the typically colonial attitudes and prejudices. Carriages, horses, and clothing are similarly loaded with cultural meaning, and the depiction of the townscape functions as a similar act of categorization, marking the boundaries between the island's European and African populations. The European-styled carriages are status symbols which reinforce European cultural hegemony, whereas the heavier wagons denote social inferiority. The description of imported horses as an unnecessary luxury connotes, especially in contrast with the local mules, European economic and

¹³ Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776* (Lincoln, 2005), p. 87.

¹⁴ Keith Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 112.

cultural superiority. Having compared her father's marriage arrangements for her with "the rude mechanics of horse-trading" (p. 4), Emily's discussion of the superior English horses also encapsulates her awareness of her own position as a powerless object of trade between men. Like Emily, the horses have symbolic value as carriers of English culture within the exotic colony, as when she confides to her journal that "[f]rom this moment I would be entering a dark tropical unknown. The noble English horses edged forward with an unconcerned surety of step" (p. 22), a juxtaposition which creates a clear association between the horses and her own role as "an ambassadress of grace" (p. 4). Equally significant borrowings from Schaw are the notion of a gentleman companion as a guarantor of a lady's propriety, partly as a way of hinting the impropriety of the Afro-Caribbean women, and the note of Afro-Caribbean clothing, a passage bringing in further allusions to impropriety and immorality, even if Emily immediately realizes how practical light clothing would be.

Although the passage in Phillips is easy enough to read, it is obvious that here, as in so many other places, only an initiated readership, only readers who detect the correspondence between the passage in *Cambridge* and that in Schaw's journal, will appreciate the intertextuality. The original 1934 edition of Schaw's travelogue is relatively unknown, and until 2005, when it was reprinted, was difficult to obtain. We might well conclude, then, that beneath the level of writing that is open to a general heterogeneous readership Phillips is also communicating with a small group of scholars in a code that is recognized only by those who are as deeply immersed as the author himself in past discourses. At points like this his textual strategy appears to be polyvocal rather than monologic.

On the other hand, the cultural differences involved here are hardly of a kind to lead to serious disagreements and conflicts of interests between one group of readers and another. The point is rather that the shades of variation between one grouping and another within a large and heterogeneous literary community can sometimes be very fine. On the whole, Phillips seems to be expecting that all his readers, whatever their own degree of expert knowledge, will agree that the discoursal divisiveness of the past was humanly damaging, even if they themselves still represent many different sociocultural formations in the present. When, for instance, Emily's journal constructs binary oppositions

between Europeans and the rest of the world, Phillips seems above all to be leading his readers—any readers at all, that is—towards a fuller understanding of her situation. He is not simply pursuing a re-enactment of past ideological formations, but is attempting to bring different kinds of discourse into relationship. Readers who can see Emily's unease with otherness (as it threatens her view of the natural order of the world) and her vulnerability (as a woman in a male-dominated colony) are thus much more likely to empathize with her, albeit without actually condoning her adoption of the planters' prejudices. When she criticizes abolitionists in England—"Such untravelled thinkers do not comprehend the base condition of the negro" (p. 86)—her remarks can be read in the light of her own insecurity in a very foreign world. Phillips does not pass judgement on individuals caught up in plantation society, but rather positions himself as a mediator between opposing discourses, by resurfacing some of the ambiguous convolutions that always underlie human beings' contacts with the human other.

Having established Emily as a complex individual who is sympathetic but prejudiced, humane but unreliable, he then introduces the character of Cambridge to challenge her narrative. Not only does the novel describe the period of Emily's stay on the plantation from the point of view of a plantation slave. It actually refutes her contemptuous description of Africans as "negro stock" (p. 38), mainly thanks to the insight offered into Cambridge's remarkable life as an African-Briton prior to his bondage on the Cartwright estate. Because readers have already caught glimpses of the character after whom the novel is named, first when Emily tells how he is flogged by the plantation manager for disobedience, and then when she says he was ordered to guard her door at night-time after her alarm at the display of witchcraft by Cambridge's own wife, Christiania, and also because they already know that he has been hung for the killing of the manager, they are now likely to expect a slave autobiography of a fairly conventional kind. But Cambridge's opening words, "Pardon the liberty I take in unburdening myself with these hasty lines, but thanks be to God for granting me powers of self-expression in the English language" (p. 133), immediately suggest that his account will serve as a corrective, as was indeed Phillips's

intention.¹⁵ The antithesis between Cambridge's viewpoint and Emily's racial prejudices and misrepresentation of Africans could not be sharper. Having previously been characterized by her as an "over-confident, Bible-reading slave" with "lunatic precision in his dealings with our English words" (p. 120, Phillips's italics), he now emerges as an educated Christian with a fine mastery of the English language. Not only that, but Phillips establishes the same kind of confidentiality between this new narrator and the reader as he did for Emily herself, partly by means of a direct address to the reader which draws its formulation from slave narratives. Having used Emily's account to establish the major binary opposition which operated in the western world, the novel now uses Cambridge's narrative to collapse that divide, basically by making Cambridge a person who does not fit into such categorizations, and who actually undergoes transformations in his own life, for much of the time as a "virtual Englishman" (p. 156), and then finally back into someone who is reconstituted as an image of alterity.

The only occasion when Emily and Cambridge directly interact is described from both points of view, in this way carrying the novel's overall concern to unravel dichotomizing mind-sets. When Emily discovers that while Cambridge has been guarding her bedroom door he has taken the opportunity to read his Bible, her reaction to this evidence of his education and Christianity underlines her vehement resistance to anything which might threaten her hierarchical world-view:

I asked if this was his common form of recreation, to which he replied in highly fanciful English, that indeed it was. You might imagine my surprise when he then broached the conversational lead and enquired after my family origins, and my opinions pertaining slavery. I properly declined to share these with him, instead counter-quizzing with enquiries as to the origins of his knowledge. At this a broad grin spread over his face, as though I had fallen into some trap of his setting. Indeed, so disturbing was the negro's confident gleam, that I quickly closed the door, for I feared this negro was truly ignorant of the correct degree of deference that a lady might reasonably expect from a base slave. (pp. 92-93)

¹⁵ Phillips explained his intention in an interview referred to in Gail Low, "A Chorus of Common Memory: Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*", *Research into African Literatures* 29 (1998) 121-140, esp. 125.

So strong is Emily's fear of otherness that she closes the door, not just literally, but in a large metaphorical sense: she closes the door to communication. Then, having depicted this as her reaction to Cambridge's cultural assimilation, a circumstance which for postmodern readers can only show his eligibility in her world and thereby discredit her dehumanized picture of Africans, Phillips returns to the same scene, but from the point of view of a narrator who is desperate to find any kind of recognition for his humanity:

I assured *the fair one* that she had nothing to fear, and enquired if she were a Christian believer, to which she answered that she was. I asked from which part of fair Albion she originated, and if her father approved of the institution of slavery, to which she replied that she imagined he did, but her attitudes were her own and somewhat different. She declined to share them with me, but seemed truly fascinated by my knowledge and fluency in *her language*, the origins of which I, in turn, declined to share with her. (p. 165, Phillips's italics)

Judging from the style of written communication in these parallel passages, Phillips would probably expect readers to sympathize with Cambridge. While Emily's passage conveys suspicion, cynicism, and superiority—coupled with a shocked realization of Cambridge's level of sophistication—Cambridge's description of the incident is courteous and guileless. For postmodern readers this will strongly highlight the unacceptability of Emily's thinking, though if Cambridge's bearing towards her conveyed any of the white upper-class male's condescension towards women that is suggested by his use, in his written report, of the phrase “*the fair one*”, then her alarmed confusion was more understandable.

There are, in fact, some strong affinities between the two protagonists, which Bénédicte Ledent has described as “an unrealised community of being”.¹⁶ One theme which links their narratives is their sheer solitude as people who are left to navigate alone, among marginal positions, in an alien world. Emily is a woman on an unfamiliar tropical island and Cambridge is an African in a European world. By delineating them both as characters who are called to negotiate their identities in the face of new challenges, Phillips suggests a shared complexity of cultural identity on both sides of the divide which ostensibly separates them, though whereas Emily's narrative traces a rather smooth movement from

¹⁶ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, p. 99.

her initial abolitionist ideals towards her identification with colonialist planters, the narrative of Cambridge conveys several fairly sudden transformations of identity, which are determined by the surrounding society and signalled by the different names he goes under. After his arrival in England as Olumide, his changing status in the western world ranges from Thomas the servant, to David Henderson the lay preacher and Cambridge the slave. In fact the conflict between his own self-image as a “virtual Englishman” and the way he is perceived by society turns out to be his central problem during his time on the Cartwright plantation.

The differences between the two narratives are just as obvious. While Emily’s account reflects her attempt to divide the world into “us” and “them”, Cambridge’s confession seems to occupy a contrary position, by challenging this division and constructing him as an Englishman who belongs to the world of the Europeans. Apart from his initial reaction to being kidnapped in Africa, he seems to have become very rapidly acculturated, bearing hardly any grudges against his oppressors. On the contrary, even during the early stages of this “Africa spoke only to me of a barbarity I had fortunately fled. To this end, I embraced this magical opportunity of improvement” (p. 143).

On the other hand, his willingness to reject his Africanness and his idealization of England can also hint that his deepest thoughts and feelings about his changing identities are not explicitly stated in his confession. At the time when he is described as writing, literacy was a privilege mostly reserved for upper-class Europeans. In consequence, the readership to whom Cambridge addresses his account would most likely have been upper-class English males, which may well have influenced the way in which he presents himself and his story, just as it did for the black Britons who were his historical contemporaries. He makes surprisingly little mention of his own native identity, and his gratitude for the many benefits flowing from his stay in England is very keenly expressed. Taking these two points together, it would seem that Phillips is prompting his own readers to an awareness of the historical situation in which the character’s scope for free self-expression was limited by the attitudes and the expectations of his reading audience. Anything they might have found offensive had to be edited out, even though Cambridge would now like his readers to see him as their peer. In this way the novel seems to evoke the silence surrounding such matters in slave

autobiographies, and perhaps to raise the question of whether there might not be analogous silences in some postmodern discourses, a possibility I hope to explore elsewhere.

Part of what Phillips seems to be conveying through the voice of Cambridge is a pioneering black Briton's "sense of both belonging and not belonging" to the European world.¹⁷ Occupying the roles of both insider and outsider, in telling his story Cambridge extricates himself from those features of his identity which doom him to an outside position, and foregrounds the features which qualify him as a Briton. When he sets off to Africa as a missionary, his zeal to belong to the western world is very emphatic: "It was God's wish that I should return to my old country with the character of a man in upper rank, and a superior English mind, inferior only to the Christian goodness in my heart" (p. 155). So blind is he to the obstacles preventing him from crossing the borders of race and class that he describes Africans as his "heathen brethren" (p. 147). To his own way of thinking, "Truly I was now an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion! Africa spoke to me only of a history I had cast aside" (p. 147). This attitude is all the more surprising when compared to his thoughts about another African-Briton, Clarence de Quincy, whom he characterizes as a fop, and whose ostentatious toadying to the whims of his patrons he heartily detests. De Quincy, he feels, is "forgetting that he was a chance-child dependent upon the bounty of Christian strangers" (p. 151), seeking to "make a figure that would obscure what he imagined to be the objectionable nature of his complexion" (152). Yet Cambridge's notion of de Quincy could be turned back upon Cambridge himself, and on his own status in English society as financially, socially, and emotionally dependent on his benefactors. Both men accept a submissive role defined by the dominant community.¹⁸ And in all this, Phillips is letting readers find Cambridge's lack of realistic self-knowledge amusing, but at the same time inviting them to consider their own sensitivity to human difference, and the extent to which a subjectivity which deviates from the social norms of its own time can be allowed to express itself.

¹⁷ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Essays* (New York, 2002), p. 252.

¹⁸ This touches on a continuing motif in Phillips's writing, which is sharply in focus in, for instance, his novel *Dancing in the Dark* (London, 2005).

While accentuating Cambridge's complex ambiguity towards Englishness and Africanness, Phillips also challenges readers' sympathy for him by letting him be seen in a rather different light: not as a saintly victim, but as someone who has feelings of superiority and some harsh prejudices. On his way to Africa, fully convinced that he is now an Englishman, he is deeply upset on being kidnapped and thrown into the ship's hold with Africans captured on the continent:

That I could still make a little sense of my own native language among the many spoken gave me some comfort, but the treachery of these white men, even towards one such as I who esteemed their values, tore at my heart with great passion. That I, a virtual Englishman, was to be treated as base African cargo, caused me such hurtful pain as I was barely able to endure. To lose my dear wife, fair England, and now liberty in such rapid succession! (p. 156)

Here his greatest concern is not his physical circumstances, nor those of the other Africans, but the fact that the Englishness he has striven to achieve is disregarded: he is treated just like any other African. Paradoxically enough, he refuses to see England as the colonizing country that it really is, or to register its ultimate responsibility for his captivity. Later on, similarly, the fact that his experience of slavery is not totally unlike Emily's experience of female marginality does *not* prompt him to collate women's lives with his own. As far as he is concerned, a Christian man simply "possessed his wife, and the dutiful wife must obey her Christian husband" (p. 163). Here, then, we have a man, who is himself judged for his ethnicity, firmly failing to see the justice of the other—his own wife or a "fair one" such as Emily—being able to enjoy a human autonomy of her own. By presenting Cambridge to his postmodern readers as a character they will find substantially flawed, Phillips not only rejects the generic imperative of the slave autobiography, but also resists too facile a view of intercultural tensions in both the past and the present. Avoiding stereotypes and oversimplifications of the Africans in the novel, he portrays them in all their difficult complexity.

In conveying to contemporary readers the ambivalence of cultural encounter and dislocation in the past, Phillips indeed appeals to their knowledge and personal experience of negotiating identities in the postmodern present. After the description of the plantation manager's death, he shows how that traumatic incident led to a complete collapse of

Cambridge's contradictory identity. Having earlier harboured an illusion of his moral superiority to Mr Brown, Cambridge's self-image was already starting to crumble when, in a fit of rage, he struck the fatal blow. Phillips then has him awakening from his long dream of Englishness into the reality of his situation, so suggesting to readers just how painfully complicated an identity can be when fashioned by the pressures of the surrounding society:

I then fell to my knees and prayed to my God to forgive me for my wretched condition. I, Olumide, who had become black Tom, then David Henderson, and now Cambridge, had broken one of God's commandments. On this Christian day, and for the first time since my second unChristian passage, I was truly afraid, truly frightened of my actions and the fearful consequences of my heathen behaviour.

(p. 167)

Having lost his sense of self, and unable to come to terms with the roles and identities placed on him by the outside world, Cambridge is Phillips's way of communicating about a contemporary issue through the window of the past. Cambridge's attempt to be David Henderson has affected his judgement, leaving him unable to see himself in the way that the world around him sees him, and what also comes to the surface is the sheer conflict between Cambridge's identities as David Henderson and Olumide. When, in the final stage of his confession, he forsakes his vision of himself as an Englishman and recognizes the Olumide within himself, this brings only the most ironic kind of closure, since what he is reclaiming as his innermost self is the very identity he has fiercely sought to eliminate. This, tragically, is the end result of his attempt to accommodate different cultures and identities, a project which in the world of postmodern globalization is likely to involve each and every one of us, but which for Cambridge could offer no reconciliation between his complex subjectivity and the binary thinking of the community in which he found himself.

The final fragmentation of Cambridge's identity, and Emily's final self-alienation, starkly reveal these characters' inability to negotiate and reconcile the identities that have fallen upon them in cross-cultural contact. The sociocultural multiplicity of their own lives, in combination with society's ideological oversimplifications, is simply overpowering. Not least, obviously, the two of them never really manage to deal with each other. Although it was Emily who closed that literal door, they were

both the prisoners of their own discursal universes all along. Even though they to some extent adapted to changing circumstances, their discursal paths could only cross, and never join.

By bringing before his postmodern readers this dialogue *manqué*, Phillips can also be seen as inviting them not only to reconsider the discordant worlds of past discourses, but to try to find *each other*, as it were, despite all their remaining heterogeneities. While squarely foregrounding communicational difficulties, the novel's portrayal of communicational failure also suggests a permanent scope for effort. Although readers may well be left with a rather pessimistic view as to the chances of negotiating human otherness within any society whatever, within a multicultural postmodern ethos such pessimism may be paradoxically productive. By developing mediating voices which play between the stereotypical discourses shaped by history, Phillips creates new routes of access to the complexity of the past. And by dealing in such a head-on manner with troubling cultural memories, he can perhaps move contemporary readers to reflect on the discursal disjunctions of our own time. If the generalizing first-person plural in a phrase like "our own time" seems at all appropriate here, it could partly be because this novel has already harnessed some of the potential of literature as a community-making force in a global arena.