

The Exhausted Intertext as Cultural
Memory: Erased and Displaced
Identities in Caryl Phillips'
The Nature of Blood and *The Lost Child**

ROBERTA GEFTER WONDRICH

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

A consideration of Caryl Phillips' profile as one of the most important contemporary writers in English today should mention Pieter Vermeulen's remarkable synthesis of "the vast scope of Phillips's imagination and archival labour" (Vermeulen 2019, 38). As his work has constantly focussed on issues of belonging, origins, displacement, some of his most significant works weave together different narratives set in different places in Europe and abroad and at different moments in time, dramatizing the condition of unbelonging and identitarian loss (and particularly of the African diaspora and the slave trade) with recognizably postmodernist and postcolonial novelistic strategies. His preoccupation with racial and religious difference, identitarian precariousness and the historical process of the construction of nationality is pervasive, and very subtly articulated in his entire career through the expression of "some specific forms of double consciousness" which Paul Gilroy identifies as a

* This research essay pertains to the Department of Humanities' common project "Transformations of the Human", within the frame of the specific project "Identity and Diversity of the Subject in Natural and Social Contexts: a Historical and Philosophical Approach – Part I: Human Diversity in Context", coordinated by Cinzia Ferrini.

requirement of a Black and British cultural identity (Gilroy 1993, 1). Two novels in particular, marking his earlier and most recent output, probe into the aporias of historical and societal identity in the present through some recurrent tropes and figures, and remarkably engage with the canonical intertext and two of the greatest traumas of modern history: colonial slavery and the Holocaust. These are the ambitious historical novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which features a rewriting of *Othello* and two narratives of the Jewish diaspora set respectively in the fifteenth century and 1948, and the recent *The Lost Child* (2015) which combines a sort of prequel to *Wuthering Heights*, a biofictional dramatization of Emily Brontë's last days and an ill-fated love story between a black Caribbean and a middle class English woman in 1960s England.

Featuring a section which reads as prequel of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the eccentric, anti-normative most celebrated English mid-19th century romance, *The Lost Child* explores the potential and the limits of both the source text itself and of its protagonist, the dark Heathcliff, as an icon of otherness and contested identity, while also drawing from and recreating other literary and non-literary sources such as a short story by Jean Rhys, a police story of the 1960s English Midlands and many pop songs of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Brontë's masterpiece is, in fact, a crucial intertext which was both formative in Phillips' literary *Bildung* and a key text in late twentieth-century literary dramatizations of British identity. Emily Brontë features in the opening and penultimate chapters of the novel, in the context of the Haworth household, and embodies a sort of unifying, although deeply troubled, authorial consciousness.

As Françoise Král suggests, the prequel as a contemporary fictional genre is not only to be considered as a critical reappraisal of official history, but also of a personal and authorial reception of the source text, "of one's memory and understanding of the canonical texts one has grown up with" (Král 2019, 53). This essay considers precisely this comprehensive – both subjective and cultural – understanding of the canonical intertext as both a tribute and an act of emancipation (Král 2019, 53). It examines this key aspect through the complexity of Phillips' rewritings of *Othello* and *Wuthering Heights* in the context of his exploration of a problematic notion of transnational and transhistorical identity.

Both novels interweave different narratives of unbelonging (a distinctive trope in Phillips' work, as mentioned above) and the search for an impossible rootedness, and dramatize racial, ethnic and religious difference as an existential plight produced by colonial history and its traumas. This is a core concern of Phillips', as a novelist and an intellectual, who repeatedly thematised such identitarian difference as deeply distressing and disabling for his protagonists, who ultimately fail in their struggle to come to terms with it and reach out to a deeper human connectedness with their families and social environment.

As a “novelist who engages with Britain’s past and sense of identity as with the collective amnesia which has often characterised fictional as well as historical delineations of the British landscape” (Král 2019, 53), Phillips uses issues of race, exile and identity in the multicultural world of the past and the present as conduits for a radical meditation on the human condition in history.

1. RACE, IDENTITY AND CULTURAL MEMORY THROUGH THE INTERTEXT IN *THE NATURE OF BLOOD* AND *THE LOST CHILD*

This essay investigates how Phillips’ literary agenda thrives on the traditionally problematic connection of the intertextual engagement with the source text, mainly through forms of novel expansion¹ and rewrites – specifically the prequel and the biofictional – as a subtle, sophisticated critique to the idea of the intertext itself as a matrix of cultural memory.

The conventional notion of the postcolonial rewriting of the canonical text – be it a prequel, sequel or coquel – has been largely conceived in ethical and ideological terms as a counterdiscursive strategy which has been represented as a “rerighting” of the Eurocentric, andro-centric, metropolitan imagination underpinning colonial and non-colonial literature, to quote Chantal Zabus’ influential formula (Zabus 2006). Moving away from conventional literary strategies of counterreadings of master plots, Phillips’ fiction foregrounds a far more complex, searching and at times ambivalent engagement with his intertexts and his cultural background, and he does so in an only apparently less ambitious form in his penultimate novel to date, *The Lost Child* (2015).

Significantly, in two different stages of his career, Phillips has considered two key figures of ‘the other’ in the English canon, both of which embody some of the most recurrent dark sides of his main characters. Othello and Heathcliff are displaced, other, and ultimately self-consciously destructive characters, and they refract that constellation of Phillips’ contemporary subjects which feature the traditional figures of the orphan, the outcast and the exile who get lost or remain adrift in environments which disown or erase their identitarian heritage and their possibility to belong. The intertext is thus not primarily a cardinal feature in the construction of the new text as the object of a revisionist process – postcolonial/postmodern/neo-historical –, but rather a matrix, where hints and elements of ambiguity, instability and ambivalence are retrieved, amplified and transfigured to produce a critique of the displaced history of oppression and amnesia of the West.

¹ See a recent overview of the phenomenon in Anglophone literatures in Parey 2019, 10.

Among the distinctive traits of Phillips' literary agenda and his specific use of intertextuality the question of race is constantly present as part of his conception of identity in history, hence developing both in a transnational and transhistorical perspective. In the two novels considered in this contribution, this bond is central and confirms the continuity not only of this concern but of his literary politics in joining different cultural and historical dimensions. Phillips' writing constantly dwells on how race is a permanent marker of difference which defines the racial other as outsider. However, his protagonists, especially the female ones, are above all social and cultural misfits, who progressively lose themselves, adrift in a hostile or unsympathetic human environment. In his pamphlet-travelogue *The European Tribe*, published in 1987, Phillips famously wrote: "the Jew is still Europe's nigger" (*ET* 53). The connection between the history of the Jews in Europe and the history of the Blacks is a structuring one in Phillips' work, a powerful ideal link which probes deep into the question of identity in the European and transatlantic world and which seems to suggest a metonymical rather than metaphorical view of history (Craps 2008, 198). As Ann Whitehead points out in her study of trauma fiction, Phillips may have referred to Paul Gilroy's analysis and advocacy for dialogue between black and Jewish cultures in turning to Renaissance Venice as his fictional setting, a choice which allowed him an intertextual use of Shakespeare's black and Jewish protagonists, Othello and Shylock (Whitehead 2004, 103). Moreover, the Mediterranean setting of most of the novel (Venice, Cyprus and Israel), can be read in the light of a parallel with the Caribbean as a space of transit, heterogeneity and archipelagic/labyrinthine nature, a Mediterranean – and its Europe – as historically failed, according to Ledent (2001, 193).

For biographical reasons, the history of the persecuted Jews in fact figures so prominently in his work as it provided a "prism" (Craps 2008, 199) to the young writer growing up as a black child of Caribbean origins in the 1960s Midlands, in the face of the public amnesia that surrounded the history of British slavery. Having arrived in England from Saint Kitts as a very small child, his whole heritage as a second-generation immigrant was of no avail to him when he made his way to Oxford, so that, in search of historical and identitarian mainstays, Phillips turned to Jewish history, which proved inspirational to his own predicament. This happened not only in the years when the whole of Europe was addressing the incommensurability of the Holocaust, but also because of the silence under which the condition of the first and especially second generation of black immigrants was treated in Britain at the time².

² Several critics underlined this context, and notably Clingman 2009, 170.

The figure of the survivor from the Holocaust is already present in an earlier novel, *Higher Ground* (1989) in the character of Irina, a Polish Jew living in England. Moreover, the Jewish-black association also proved to unravel a personal connection, as Phillips revealed to have had a Portuguese Jewish grandfather who never acknowledged his grandchildren. This autobiographical detail clearly strengthens the subjective and personal commitment to the thematic cluster of displaced racial and cultural identity in Phillips' work, where, nonetheless, what counts primarily is not so much race but the condition of being an outsider (Clingman 2009, 76), as his characters invariably prove in their different conditions of suffering and discrimination.

The Nature of Blood inaugurates Phillips' ambitiously disjointed polyphony of storylines and narratives, which he resumes in *The Lost Child* and which is a significant constituent of the use of intertextuality in his literary agenda. It has four major narratives which constantly intersect, at varying length, challenging the reader to follow the protagonists' brooding and parallel undoing. The framing narrative, which opens and closes the novel, is that of Stephan Stern, a Jewish doctor who left Germany for Palestine before the war and who, in the Israel of the 1990s, encounters a young woman, Malka, an Ethiopian Jewish immigrant who remains an outsider because of her ethnicity. The most prominent narrative, related mainly in the first person, concerns his niece Eva Stern, a survivor from Bergen-Belsen who had been forced to become part of a *Sonderkommando*, charged with the task of burning bodies. The narrative covers her life in Germany in the mid-Thirties, with her family history recalling that of Anne Frank's, her liberation by English troops in 1945 and her suicide, further to her mental breakdown and sentimental delusion for a married British soldier. A third narrative, written mainly in the third person in a more factual style, recounts the blood-libel execution of some Jews of Portobuffolè, near Venice, in the late fifteenth century. It is a harrowing tale of injustice and sacrificial violence, which cannot fail to evoke the themes and motifs which run through *The Merchant of Venice*, in its treatment of law and its critique of justice.

The fourth and most openly 'literary' narrative is a sort of 'coquel' revisitation of Othello's story in Venice, which describes him as a psychological and emotional outsider the nation-state. In the opening page of *The Nature of Blood*, the question of belonging is framed in the context of the Jewish nation-building struggle: a little boy asks one of the protagonists, the Jewish doctor Stephan Stern, who left Germany before the Nazi deportations to the camps started, to found a new nation-state in Palestine: "Tell me, what will be the name of the country?"; the country of origin is, in fact, as in Stephan Stern's words, "A world that I can never put down to rest" (NB 11). The fundamental questioning of the idea of nation as belonging, rootedness, identity, constantly resonates in this early novel through

its polyphonic structure, but the novel also dramatizes “the violence of memory” (NB 33) which haunts Eva Stern’s life as a survivor of the camps, and who no longer can use the word “home” (NB 37).

In *The Nature of Blood* and *The Lost Child*, Stephan Stern and Julius Wilson, the male characters who single-mindedly pursue an ideal commitment to the idea of the nation and nation-building, and who therefore conceive of identity in essentialist terms, are responsible for the bereavement of their families, as they intentionally abandon their wives and children. Significantly, though, they are not beset by guilt, and this betrayal of family and origins is shared in by the black general himself in *The Nature of Blood*, who, hired by the Venetian Republic which employed foreign commanders to prevent uprisings from the Venetian military, reveals he has left his wife and son in Africa, where he had been of royal blood. Upon discovering the obscurity and complex social rituals of Venetian society, he becomes aware of his foreignness and loneliness in that elusive city-state of “overwhelming beauty” (NB 121) where “(S)uddenly the world was muffled in mist” (NB 117), and he feels unable to sustain the pressure of finding himself in the “underworld” of the Jewish ghetto. Ultimately, he realises that his marriage to Desdemona will definitely cut him off from his past and his country and lead him to “a quality of isolation [...] never before experienced” (NB 159). The loss of identity as a condition of otherness in a society which is only apparently hospitable to foreigners, while it actually exploits them for exclusively financial and political purposes, is dramatized in the Shakespearean narrative of *The Nature of Blood* in the only passage where Othello, now in Cyprus, is polemically addressed by the authorial voice in the second person, in tones of indictment, for having relinquished his past, and thus his true identity:

And so you shadow her every move, attend to every whim, like the black Uncle Tom that you are, Fighting the white man’s war for him/wide-receiver in the Venetian army/The republic’s grinning Satchmo hoisting his sword like a trumpet/you tuck your black skin away beneath their epauletted uniform, appropriate their words (Rude am I in speech), their manners, worry your nappy wollen head with anxiety about learning their ways, yet you conveniently forget your own family, and thrust your wife and son to the back of your noble mind. O strong man, O strong man, O valiant soldier, O weak man. You are lost, a sad black man. [...] My friend, the Yoruba have a saying: the river that does not know its source will dry up. You will do well to remember this. (NB 180-181)

The scene closes on the black general before he is reunited with Desdemona, leaving the reader in anticipation of the ensuing fatal error whereby the tragic hero kills his innocent beloved, as well as in doubt as to the possibility of an alternative, though hardly plausible, ending. The authorial voice chastises the weakness of Othello as the mimic man, now turned into “a figment of the Venetian

imagination" (NB 182), a subaltern subject whose personal memory has been displaced and written over by his assimilation, thus exposing the effaced history of the African as Other. This is one of the most avowedly ideological passages of Phillips' early output, and possibly too conspicuously so in the already ambitious narrative orchestration of the novel. Despite this formal flaw, it persuasively proclaims the intertextual-transtextual project and palimpsestuous quality of *The Nature of Blood*, and reclaims the Othello myth as part of an ongoing discourse on identity in a national and transnational context, which finds a modern counterpart in the character of Stephan Stern, haunted by the memories of his abandoned wife and child fifty years after.

On the whole, I agree with Stef Craps in viewing the structural use Phillips makes of intertextuality (not only, of course in *The Nature of Blood*) as the key feature of his approach to the core question of identity, of historical and cultural memory and amnesia, of racial and religious difference. The intertext as hypotext and as the product of an ongoing blending of different textualities, in fact, also signals Phillips' critical remove from the historical reality he tries to represent, in all its cogency and unspeakable traumatic legacy (Craps 2008, 199-200). It proclaims his creative attempt to mediate, articulate and renew such representation (where the very notion of 'representation' is, of course, inherently problematic), in spite of the shortcomings and inherent liabilities that are entailed by literary ventriloquism as a cultural practice widely adopted by neo-Victorianism and other contemporary trends of literary rewritings and expansions.

The metaphor of ventriloquism is thus suggestive of the complex attempt to restore agency to marginalized and silenced subjects of history³, as would be the case with the victims of the historical traumas considered in these two novels. Yet literary ventriloquism implies itself a form of cultural power, which is all the more evident when engaged in re-voicing submerged or elided individual and communal histories of violence. As critics have repeatedly pointed out, Phillips' output has been consistently concerned with this "narrative reclamation/adoption of absent stories, the unvoiced accounts of orphans and stolen or denied children of Empire" (Ledent & O'Callaghan 2017, 2) through a recurrent address of the literary canon and of European literature at large.

The Nature of Blood is thus not a consolatory narrative, nor a monitory, ideological pronouncement against totalitarianism by a talented young writer. As Stephen Craps remarked, in reworking the Anne Frank's story by partly weaving it into the character of Eva Stern, but complicating this character into a morally

³ See, among others, Widdowson 2006. About the forms and strategies of literary ventriloquism in neo-Victorianism, see Davies 2002.

dubious one, who had been part of a *Sonderkommand*⁴, Phillips also foregrounds that dimension of ambivalence and moral complexity which is irreducible in any fictional revisitation of the traumas of history, thereby evading the risk – and the temptation – to seek comforting narratives which aim at the empathetic reviving of sacrificial figures. The question of race as central to the nexus between the exploration of identity and the use of the English literary canon is also central to Phillips' penultimate novel to date, *The Lost Child*, where the male protagonists are all deeply affected by their racial hybridity in their identitarian plight.

The novel is structured in ten chapters framed by the neo-Victorian narrative inspired to Emily Brontë's last days of life and by the reimagined Heathcliff story of *Wuthering Heights*. The opening chapter begins in Liverpool and depicts the agony of a slave woman who has been abandoned to her lot by an Englishman who will later turn out to be Mr. Earnshaw, and the father of her child, the Brontëan Heathcliff. The second and penultimate ones complete the intertextual construct of the novel, as they focus on Emily Brontë's agonizing longing for her brother Branwell, who in her reverie she identifies with Heathcliff, her fictional creation. The third and last chapters narrate the slave woman's death and little Heathcliff's forced homecoming with Mr. Earnshaw, bound for his new house in the moors, which the readers recognise as *Wuthering Heights*. The other main storyline, set in the Midlands and London from the 1960s to the 1970s, deals with the tormented life of Monica Johnson, a middle class only daughter who falls in love with a young Caribbean immigrant, Julius Wilson, has two children and tries to survive the breakup of their relationship and his abandonment once he decides to pursue his decolonizing nationalist commitment back home. Lonely and destitute, she spirals into mental alienation and finally commits suicide after her younger son disappears, abducted by a local paedophile. The novel thus clearly builds on a postcolonial contemporary revision of the character of Heathcliff as Mr. Earnshaw's illegitimate son of mixed blood, born of a former slave in the foremost world slave market of the eighteenth century, the city of Liverpool, following a critical interpretation of Heathcliff's 'otherness' that was inaugurated by Susan Meyer's study on "reverse imperialism" in *Wuthering Heights*⁵. It also resonates with Terry Eagleton's interpretation of little black Heathcliff as a figure who represents the impoverished Irish children who had arrived in Liverpool in 1845, at the time of Branwell Brontë's visit to the city, Emily's lost, deranged brother with whom the novel's Byronic hero has "a strong kinship" (Eagleton 1996, 3). Heathcliff as racial other becomes the key figure of

⁴ The special units of deported, mostly Jewish, who had to collaborate with the Nazis inside the camps. Phillips had already dramatized the ambivalence in the victims of the horrors of history in the character of an African slave who is spared his life but made complicit in the slave trade.

⁵ See Meyer 1996, Chap. 3.

the disruptive, othering absent presence of British imperialist slavery in English literature, and the novel further enlarges the resonances of Brontë's source text in encompassing the Black Atlantic and its disseminated history of loss, human, racial, cultural, geographical.

While the eighteenth century mixed blood child is recognisably an embodiment of alterity, the two boys who grow up without a father, witness their mother's progressive derangement and undergo the ordeal of foster parenting, embody the precarious, unacknowledged condition of the first generation of Black British of Caribbean origin who simply could not belong in the England of the 1960s and 1970s. In *The Lost Child* perhaps the most explicit representation of the young boy's displacement as the son of a black man and a white English woman occurs when he arrives in the new school, where he is the only black boy, looking "pathetically out of place" (LC 115) and realizes he will not be part of that social environment:

"my name is Tommy Wilson"
 "And where are you from, Thomas?"
 "I'm from England." His fellow pupils release a volley of scornful cackling that threatens to swell into hysteria. (LC 117).

The dialogue subsumes identity, race, nationhood and belonging in the painful exclusion which represents the common fate of all the lost children of the novel, the half-blood child/little Heathcliff and the two brothers, who, like him who nurses the slave woman, are also forced to become caregivers to their ailing mother (especially Ben, the smartest and older). The tripartite narrative layering, thus, eventually pulls the strings of the novel's intertextual coherence, where each protagonist's plight is reflective of the others'. Far from finding its main significance in the mere re-righting of Brontë's masterpiece through the adoption of a combined biofictional and prequel narrative, *The Lost Child* is, among other things, an accomplished postcolonial text in its ideological and cultural assumptions, since the postcolonial in Phillips always intersects with other dimensions, which enrich its significance.

It resonates with historical trauma, primarily the Holocaust, migrancy, Jewish and African diaspora and the experience of bereavement, even familial and societal. The lost, orphaned and 'other' child of the occluded history of British slavery is then the unifying figure (significantly silent, although presented as intelligent and alert) who foreshadows the other lost children of the Empire, adrift in search of a home where they can belong. The novel unfolds this accretion of affinities through a narrative poetics that weaves together fiction with the biographical and the intertextual in a very knowing, apparently contrived but ultimately effective way. Even if not so immediately rewarding upon first reading,

in fact, *The Lost Child* reasserts Phillips' taking a stance against interpretation as authority-driven and ideologically inflected, as it avoids any slippage into new stereotypical re-uses of the source text, and resonates through a kind of long haul effect. It is actually one of those novels which "gain(s) richness and power with re-reading" (Attridge 2015, 16) and may constitute an adequate example of that "act" of reading/ act of literature theorised by Derrida and Attridge (Attridge 2017, "Introduction"). It is therefore rather in this perspective – that of the literary text as an event, rather than a self-contained object – that I consider these two novels as able to unfold their most authentic value, and Attridge's conception seems to validate the complexity as well as the possibly intentional flaws of these texts' address to their readers.

2. RENEWING, REVOICING THE INTERTEXT: A MULTIVOCAL, DISJOINTED UNITY

Phillips' narrative strategy in both novels is again worthy of consideration at this point, before probing deeper in his use of intertextuality in the last two sections (§§ 3, 4). While in the earlier *Crossing the River* or *Higher Ground* the different storylines or narrative layers were kept distinct and told sequentially, both *The Nature of Blood* and *The Lost Child* display self-standing discrete units, with some relevant differences: in *The Nature of Blood* the narrative sections follow in an almost seamless flow, but they often interlace through very short passages, while in *The Lost Child* the three stories are organized in ten chapters, and each reconnects with the previous one. Furthermore, in *The Lost Child*, as mentioned, there are also other voices which contribute to the disorienting polyphony of the novel; not a jarring cacophony but, rather, a kind of palimpsestuous layering of heterogeneous voices including pop songs from the 1960s and early 1970s⁶. Thus, third and first-person narration mingle in a narrative texture which connects different temporal and historical plans and different locations (late fifteenth-century Venice to early 1990s Israel, eighteenth-century Liverpool to 1970s Midlands) in novelistic formats which do not strive to achieve final closure or attain a higher coherence through specific devices such as leitmotifs. Rather, as Stephen Clingman remarked, Phillips' "writing raises disruption to a highly structured principle" (Clingman 2009, 76). Thus, significantly, it is the disruption of the very *lives* that are narrated which is foregrounded by the shifting, intentionally confusing unfolding of the narration, which clearly engages

⁶ A device which had been successfully employed in the early 1990s by the Irish novelist Patrick McCabe in his *The Butcher Boy* (1992) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (1995), which are also centred on the progressive mental derangement of the protagonists.

the reader in a modernist, “writerly [...] act of literature”⁷, in Derek Attridge’s words. This disjunctive, erratic quality of Phillips’ narrative structures is thus effective both at the level of reading the individual narrative strains and of the interpretive challenge of assembling and combining them into a further act of reading.

Far from a mere display of formal adroitness and artistic sophistication, this structure openly proclaims both the inevitability (i.e. the historical dissemination) of individual, isolated and plural existential narratives and the imperative of connectedness, affinity and refraction through the cultural and literary endeavor. It should be remarked how this achievement has the tangible effect of sacrificing a more appealing and immediate form of readerly experience, a *plaisir du texte* targeted at a wider readership, for an experience of re-reading, as illustrated. Furthermore, the very texture of both novels, fractured and inconsequential as it is, argues for a revision of the more conventional and widely practiced uses of intertextuality and trans-textuality, and notably of the rewritings of the source text in postcolonial and contemporary writing, and rather gestures towards a radical questioning of its cultural influence as perceived so far.

In other words, particularly in *The Lost Child*, the storylines and the figures of the intertext, Emily Brontë’s unique masterpiece, are extricated, ‘exhumed’, from their fictional unity and weaved into a construct where they are revived in an attempt to connect collective amnesia and cultural and personal memory into a fluid new fictional creation. However, and this is my further point, the very frame and texture of this novel proclaims not only the fragmentation, the occlusion and dispersal of memory – as in the case of Monica’s lost half-blood children and of her own descent into madness – and not only the ultimate consumption and exhaustion of the hypotext/intertext as a matrix of collective cultural identity, but also its generative and disseminative potential. Although, as Ledent remarks, “Phillips’ historical fictions (like *Cambridge*) write to and, in the sense of a palimpsest, over texts from the colonial narrative archive” (Ledent 2017, 6), *The Lost Child* does not gather its main momentum by offering a counter-discursive prequel to the canonical masterpiece, but rather in slowly unfolding its creative blending of storylines and the genealogies they stand for, along the lines of a palimpsestous achievement⁸. It is in this sense, in fact, that the critical

⁷ This is what a literary work is: “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or act-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read [...]” (Attridge 2017, 59).

⁸ I am using the term and concept of intertextuality as commonly understood, but also in the Kristevian sense of a deeper and more far-reaching complexity of relations that pertain to the genotext as compared to the pheno-text. However, I think that Phillips’ work, and particularly the two novels I have considered, in their creative treatment and relational reading of historical and literary

and revisionist practice of rewriting which also extends to incorporate parts of the canonical writers' biographies becomes what Laura Savu identifies as "a sign of cultural renewal rather than a symptom of exhaustion" (Savu 2009, 242). Or, rather, that exhaustion becomes itself productive.

3. *THE NATURE OF BLOOD, THE LOST CHILD AND THE EXHAUSTION OF THE INTERTEXT: A 'PLACE OF VULNERABILITY'*

Phillips' recurring use of intertextuality and his turning to the canon of both English and Caribbean literature – as in his most recent biofictional treatment of Jean Rhys' life in *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) – address the identitarian dimension of literature in relation to the inevitable ideological limitations of the English canon as failing to foster a sense of identity for his generation and his ethnicity, that of the Black Britons. Ever since his early output, Phillips has always experimented with other intertexts, initially aiming at what Fernando Galvan defined as an attempt to rewrite some aspects of the African diaspora:

– the middle passage, the difficulties of cultural assimilation etc. – from the perspective of a few canonical works such as Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Interesting Narrative Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, Written by Himself* (1780 Ctrl) in *Cambridge* (1991)⁹.

He also drew on the historical reports on the Portobuffolè story and Anne Frank's *Diary* in *The Nature of Blood*, on *Wuthering Heights* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and "Let Them Call It Jazz" in *The Lost Child* and, again, on Jean Rhys' life and masterpiece in the most recent novel to date, *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018). His fascination with artists' or authors' lives was bound to lead him to engage with forms of biofiction, like other prominent contemporary novelists who have increasingly turned to this genre. Stephen Clingman recently analysed Phillips use of the literary life – fictional or authorial – through the prism of biofiction, putting "the biofictive in conversation with the biopolitical" (Clingman 2018, 2). However, in applying the notion of the "postcolonial biofictive" as "a form

sources, offer an interesting example of "palimpsestuous" writing, a term first coined by Gerard Genette in *Palimpsestes* (1982) and further developed by Sarah Dillon's *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007) in mutual elucidation with other critical concepts, and in its encompassing relation to intertextuality itself, as "a more compelling figurative and theoretical metaphor of the text". Dillon states that, "according to its logic, the concept of palimpsestuousness overwrites Kristeva's 'intertextuality', and palimpsestuous textuality provides a new and more apposite name for that permutation of texts in, on, and as, the space of textuality." (Dillon 2007, 86). Other critics such as Ledent use "palimpsestuous" referred to Phillips' work as a current term.

⁹ Galvan 2005, 245-262, 245 and *passim*.

of epistemology” (Clingman 2018, 5), Clingman seems to use the term as mere combination of the fictional and the biographical, without specifically considering that the biographical in biofiction is always recognizably referred to a specific historical/biographical subject, rather than to human lives which become objects of textual recuperation and reinvention. His idea of the biofictional as a way of understanding the self of figures “who are altogether unknown” (Clingman 2018, 6) is, in fact, not aligned with the current debate on biofiction¹⁰. This conception of biofiction referred to Phillips’ novels should rather be reintegrated in a more encompassing conception of the intertext and intertextuality, where the fictive is indeed composed of both autobiographical and biographical elements (as in the centrality of Emily Brontë’s figure). I would then rather opt for a blending and combination of the intertext, the fictive and the biofictional and (and under) the umbrella-term of *life-writing*, in order to probe into the possibility that Phillips should be now, in this mature phase of his career, exploring the possibility of the definitive exhaustion of the intertext along the lines of the conventions of postcolonial rewriting¹¹. An exhaustion which can be regenerated through the insertion of different combinations of the fictive and the historical-biographical, and does not conceal the metaliterary quality of its undertaking.

Phillips intertextual strategy and poetics have become increasingly complex over the course of his career, and continue to pay tribute to one of the earliest, foundational postcolonial writers: the half creole-half Welsh novelist Jean Rhys, whose complex relationship with both the Caribbean and Britain is a common concern. (Ledent 2019, 3). Both Buonanno and Ledent have established that there exists an intertextual relationship between Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the novella “Voyage and the Dark” and Phillips’ early fiction, a relation “which is of the allusive and affiliative type rather than the derivative or counter-discursive one” (Ledent 2019, 6). Phillips’ homage to Rhys, now further attuned in the biofictional mode in his most recent *A Picture of The Empire at Sunset*, is also confirmed by the intertextual links that Giovanna Buonanno perceptively detected between Monica Johnson and the protagonist of Rhys’ short story “Let Them Call It Jazz”, Selina Davis.

These two women, who both have been lent an empty flat by a male friend, are ostracised by their priggish English neighbours for their apparently

¹⁰ Biofictions should not aim to restore or complete the truth of a life, nor of a biographical intertext, but they can aim to create a possible, alternative and yet not unrelated world. As Michael Lackey, one of its leading theorists, argues, “biographical novelists invent stories that never occurred in order to answer perplexing questions, fill in cultural lacunae, signify human interiors, or picture cultural ideologies” (Lackey 2016, 14). This tension between the supposed and deconstructed truth of facts underscores all accomplished biofictions.

¹¹ Phillips himself seems to authorise this readjustment of the biofictional into the other, more encompassing category, in a recent interview. See Ledent, Phillips & Tunca 2019, 3.

unconventional behaviour, which ends up with Selina being imprisoned and Monica drifting even further into loneliness and isolation (see Ledent & O’Callaghan 2017, 6; Buonanno 2017, 101). Phillips draws from Rhys a type of female protagonists who – much like Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as its most famous model – are displaced, lonely, and destitute women, astray in a hostile or unsympathetic environment, and who eventually succumb to mental derangement. This is a fate common to nearly all of Phillips’ female protagonists, starting with Leila in *The Final Passage*, his debut novel, Irina in *Higher Ground*, the slave “crazy” woman, Heathcliff’s mother, and Monica in *The Lost Child*. The theme of mental derangement and illness, which has long been a pervasive presence in Caribbean literature through “various forms of mental illness, breakdown and psychopathology” as remarked by Ledent, O’Callaghan and Tunca (Ledent, O’Callaghan & Tunca 2018, 2), connects the poetics of identity in *The Lost Child* with Rhys’ work. In the novel all the three female protagonists – the slave woman, Emily Brontë and Monica – undergo a form of mental instability and emotional collapse, which the reader is made to follow through an increasingly erratic language, syntax, and style, so that they become not only a suggestive metaphor of the individual’s dislocation in relation to the imperial and post-imperial reality, but a highly functional formal device of the novel, which seem to pay tribute to the late modernism of Rhys’ work. Clearly, mental derangement stems from the isolation, helplessness, oppression and desperate resistance endured by women in a patriarchal and racist social context related to the Caribbean; the opening section introduces the theme through the slave woman, the most forlorn and abused character, to renew it in the character of Monica, the late twentieth-century, educated and apparently emancipated white woman. Significantly, her precariousness and vulnerability, as a daughter, woman, wife and mother, is induced and caused by her association with the Caribbean Julius, who in his turn grows estranged from her and caught up in his nationalist political obsession. Therefore, this association between insanity and the twentieth-century Caribbean/black Atlantic seems to trace the progress of the insanity trope full circle in the novel, reversing the terms of the late eighteenth century miscigenation between the unnamed slave woman who becomes Mr. Earnshaw’s lover and little Heathcliff’s mother.

Overall, then these ‘meta’ – critical and partly biofictive – intertextual politics that revolve around the authorial figures of Emily Brontë, Jean Rhys, and, through Rhys, indirectly to Charlotte Brontë, ultimately do not aim at rewriting the source text/s through the format of the prequel, sequel and coquel (or better, make use of these forms to supplement it), but rather incorporate them into a prismatic narrative structure where the text and its characters reverberate through other, *different* stories, in their turn narrated through interrelated but

discrete units. The metacritical quality of this novelistic construction thus emerges from the reiterated impossibility of closure, and through the partial disavowal of that ‘revoicing’, the act of restorative ventriloquizing that is present in both *The Nature of Blood* and *The Lost Child*, best exemplified in the story of Tom, the killed, silenced lost child of the Moors. None of these characters, who, as seen, are narrated through multiple voices and points of view (third omniscient person, first or, notably the second person in *The Nature of Blood*) are ultimately granted “redemption” or “reconciliation”¹². Their voices are testimonies of sort, incomplete, unanswered, inconclusive, erratic, often disoriented, as are their vulnerable, precarious lives. This is a constant of Phillips’ literary agenda: Phillips asks readers to acknowledge the vulnerability of his characters, and hence creates the premise for an ethical encounter, practicing what Jean Michel Ganteau has named a (literary) “ethics of vulnerability”¹³. Thus, as Bénédicte Ledent remarked, Phillips turns his gaze to “the pathologized human products of racial and cultural contact, those creolized and miscegenated, often illegitimate, children of empire, in most cases unwanted and unacknowledged, who are still wandering in search of a textual home” (Ledent 2019, 7). I would argue, however, that the idea of a textual ‘home’ is profoundly and intentionally problematic at this stage of Phillips’ artistic maturity. Unbelonging, the impossibility to belong, the perennial condition of displacement of the precarious lives that people his works is, in fact, claiming it but impossible to accommodate in a textual home, or, at least to find a definitive, restorative settling.

4. A CREATIVE AND INTENTIONAL FAILURE: *THE LOST CHILD* AND NARRATIVE HOSPITALITY

Phillips’ creative work has always been centred on the dimension of failure: failed integration, failure in achieving belonging and rootedness. *The Lost Child* is also, in a way, a novel about failure, as it contains interlacing narratives of defeat, which is the common lot of all the protagonists, with the exception of the autobiographical Ben, who makes it to Oxford. Moreover, the sadness of tone, the gloominess of the domestic interiors, the material and inner squalor and contextual drabness of its sections at times seem intentionally to underplay – and hence to undermine – its literary and novelistic charm. This is a novel which almost seems to lay emphasis on its sombreness of tones and its hopelessness,

¹² Bénédicte Ledent uses these terms in relation to the elegiac quality of *The Empire at Sunset* (Ledent 2019, 11 (author’s version), 66).

¹³ See Ganteau 2015, 3.

and which does not valorise its rich literary allusiveness through the often rewarding apparatus of textual allusiveness that is proper of literary rewrites. Rather, it posits the two references to the main source and to the biographical figure of the Brontës' family as a conduit, an introductory and functional part of the overall narrative in its orchestrated interpolations.

The figure of the lost child is a significant development of the idea of the orphan figure, almost a foil to it, and has figured prominently in contemporary fictions, but it is also a functional component of Phillips' literary allusiveness in dealing with the issue of unbelonging and displaced identity. It also renews Phillips' abiding ethical concern with the experience of the loss of the self in the encounter with the other that he had already explored in *The Nature of Blood*, as Ledent perceptively observed nearly two decades ago: "Losing oneself to find the other is what Phillips' fictions, not just *The Nature of Blood*, engage the reader to do" (Ledent 2001, 194).

The Lost Child ideally joins the little seven year old boy born of a liberated slave to Mr Earnshaw and taken by him to Wuthering Heights to the younger son of a depressed middle class, educated young Englishwoman, who disappears in the Moors in the late 1960s Midlands. But it is also, significantly, Emily Brontë's lost brother, Branwell, who prematurely died after years of dissipation, as the reader can infer when the dying Emily pines over "the boy who came from the moors, [...] the boy who went back to the moors" (*LC* 109), conflating in her reverie the imaginary little Heathcliff with the real beloved and straying brother. This expansion and conflation of the lost child figure, however, takes place in this section in coexistence and contiguity between intertextual metafiction and biographical fiction, as Stephen Clingman remarks, so that "the lost children of the novel are linked in metonymic connection" (Clingman 2018, 12). Clingman perceptively points to how Emily's delirious coalescing of her family's dramatic story and her own creative fiction in *Wuthering Heights* is revealing of Phillips' use of the biofictive (Clingman 2018, 2), although, as remarked, I would not use the term so freely. The intertextual echoes of the lost child figure are not limited to the literary, but actually stretch out to the 1960's chronicles and pop culture, as they evoke the actual children murders in the Moors/Leeds in the late 1960s and the Who's musical "Tommy", which tells the story of a disabled child abused by his uncle¹⁴.

The richness of this trope, moreover, blends the historical and the literary in relation to the Caribbean and the Black Atlantic. As Ledent and O'Callaghan have remarked:

¹⁴ See Clingman 2018, 9, who points that in the musical "Tommy", the character of "Uncle Ernie" is the correspondent of "Uncle Derek" in the novel.

from its opening, *The Lost Child* calls attention to the lost children of the first encounter of eighteenth-century northern England and the Black Atlantic, meaning formerly enslaved Caribbean people who, for various reasons, found themselves in Britain; it also tells the story of their lost children and their children's children. (Ledent & O'Callaghan 2017, 2)

The novel thus retrieves an imaginary genealogy of non-normative lost identities which were occluded with the guilty complicity of Britain in that history of the slave trade so long displaced from the literary imagination. It achieves this aim weaving literary threads that comprise the Victorian era through Brontë's masterpiece, late British and Caribbean Modernism through allusions to Jean Rhys and Marisé Condé's engaging with Charlotte Brontë's novels (in *La Migration des coeurs/Windward Heights*), and contemporary postcolonial and postmodernist poetry. In particular, the novel offers interesting echoes from the imagery of David Dabydeen's narrative poem *Turner* (1994) an example of what Gilroy defines as the "slave sublime" – where the main poetic voice and consciousness is that of another lost, orphaned child of British eighteenth-century slave trade, who himself saves and fathers a shipwrecked stillborn child. The forced "coming home" of the little boy in the closing image of the novel disrupts the possibility of closure suggested by the circular narrative pattern which inaugurates and closes the novel with a prequel-like revisiting of *Wuthering Heights*. On the diegetic level, the lonely, desperate orphan knows he is not "going home" in the rough, inhospitable landscape of the Moors, as the one and only home he had was his mother, whose wasting body has left him forever. This occurs while the reader is made to project onto him Heathcliff's progress, from his condition of beloved foster son to hated usurper, vengeful outsider and irreducible other of presumed colonial origin in Brontë's intertext. The distance and difference of this rewriting from Brontë's masterpiece, a resisting text *par excellence*, is here almost underplayed through the coincidence of the three boy figures of the novel, all of mixed blood, all doubly orphaned by the ill-fated union of their parents, all fostered by other families, all lacking any true belonging in the conflictual social environment where they are growing up. On the other hand, the ailing, desperate and abandoned slave woman of the opening chapter, Heathcliff's mother, who relentlessly slips into a wasteful consumption, foreshadows Monica Johnson's descent to hell, her mental derangement ensuing the loss of her junior son, and her final suicide. She is herself a lost child to her father (Buonanno 2017, 102), whom she tries to rebel against by marrying the Caribbean student Julius Wilson, and whom she never forgives nor reapproaches later in life.

Thus, I would argue that the haunting figure of the lost child finally bodies forth not only the impossible integrity, the unrestorable wholeness of the post-

imperial, post-colonial subject,¹⁵ despite the role played by an advanced but inadequate welfare system, but, less predictably and more interestingly, the impossibility of restoring a historical and cultural integrity to the canonical intertext through the literary creativeness and imagination of the “post/s”, the available perspectives of cultural revision that are inherent to contemporary literary culture. Phillips’ literary politics today engage with intertextuality and the writers of the British canon in a transnational and transhistorical perspective that knowingly disseminates the text through multiple chronological and cultural levels, and by so doing it intentionally questions the centrality of the canonical referent and forces the reader to reposition it in a web of cultural and, above all, emotional connections. This emotional, affective potential of the intertext is actually quite powerful, especially in the opening and closing pages of *The Lost Child*, where the reinvention of both Brontë’s last moments and Heathcliff’s painful ‘homecoming’, once he has lost his mother and is forced to follow his father through the rough landscape of the Moors, are among the most vibrant pages of the novel:

The stranger opened the door to his cottage and looked at the uneven apparition of man and boy that greeted him. The flustered man’s dripping clothes suggested some status in this world, but the ill-dressed child seemed adrift and lost. It occurred to the stranger that this boy might have been discovered upon the moors, a runaway of some sort, and perhaps the connection between the two had been forged in the adversity of this calamitous unrest [...] The man looked at the shivering boy; then he travelled back in his mind to his first encounter with the child’s mother. Despite her headstrong nature, it was evident to him that the woman was ill-suited to be a mother. It wasn’t her fault, but life had ushered her down a perilous course and delivered her to a place of vulnerability. At the outset, he had felt a kinship with her, although he could never be sure what her feelings were towards him, but it didn’t matter now she was woefully distracted, that much was clear, and it was his responsibility to step forward and act. It was his duty to take the scruffy lad into his care and protect him. (LC 256-257)

In the closing scene Phillip recreates the beginning of one lost child’s new life through an act of unconditional hospitality, when father and son, who have been marching in dire weather across the inhospitable landscape, are hosted by an unknown man in his house on the Moors and helped to reach home, the home the reader knows to be Wuthering Heights. Mr. Earnshaw and the little black Heathcliff are here the *arrivant*, the presence who demands and re-enacts the encounter with the other. It is thus tempting to see this allusion to the trope of hospitality through a metacritical lens which may refract the

¹⁵ In *The Lost Child* all the characters, Ronald, Monica, the parents and the two brothers experience family disruption and abandonment.

prismatic possibilities of the many intertextual and palimpsestuous layers of this novel. *The Lost Child*, as *The Nature of Blood* and Phillips' fiction to date, responds to that idea of literature as enacting a form of narrative hospitality, and involving "that particular kind of experience that, although taking a host of different forms, can be characterised summarily as an openness to otherness" (Attridge 2015, 16).

Thus, the intertext has probably been exhausted, but it is still *en route*, striving to find other textual homes.

References

Attridge 2015

D. Attridge, *The Work of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

— 2017

Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature* [1992]. New York: Routledge.

Buonanno 2017

G. Buonanno, "Exploring Literary Voices in *The Lost Child*", *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 40 (1), 95-104.

Clingman 2009

S. Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity. Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

— 2018

"Writing the Biofictive: Caryl Phillips and the Lost Child, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, first published November 2018, 1-14, DOI: 10.1177/0021989418808010

Craps 2008

S. Craps, "Linking Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Histories and cross-cultural empathy in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*", *Studies in the Novel* 40 (1&2), 191-202.

Davies 2012

H. Davies (Ed.), *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and neo-Victorian Fiction. Passionate Puppets*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

Dabydeen 1994

D. Dabydeen, *Turner*. London: J. Cape [Leeds: Peepal Press, 2002].

Dillon 2007

S. Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*. London: Bloomsbury.

Eagleton 1996

T. Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger. Studies in Irish Culture*. London: Verso.

Galvan 2004

F. Galvan, "The Search for Cultural Transformation; Caryl Phillips as a Case Study". In: J. Schlaaegeer (Ed.), *Metamorphosis, Structures of Cultural Transformations. REAL* (Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature) 20. Tübingen: Narr, 245-262.

Ganteau 2015

J.M. Ganteau, *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction*. New York – London: Routledge.

Gilroy 1993

P.Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.

Král 2019

F. Král, "Literary filiations and textual archaeology: Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child*". In: A. Parey (Ed.), *Prequels, Coquels and Sequels in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*. New York – London: Routledge, 52-62.

Lackey 2016

M. Lackey, *The American Biographical Novel*. London – New York: Bloomsbury.

Ledent 2001

"A Fictional and Cultural Labyrinth: Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 32(1), 185-196;

— 2019

"'There is always the other side, always'. Britain, the Caribbean and the Ghost of Jean Rhys in Caryl Phillips's Writing", *Wasafiri* 34 (1), 61-66. Postprint (Author's version, restricted access, courtesy of the author).

Ledent & O'Callaghan 2017

B. Ledent, E. O'Callaghan, "Caryl Phillips' *The Lost Child*: A Story of Loss and Connection", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 48 (3-4), 229-247.

Ledent, O'Callaghan & Tunca 2018

B. Ledent, E. O'Callaghan, D. Tunca (Eds.), *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature. On the Edge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Ledent, Phillips & Tunca 2019

B. Ledent, C. Phillips, D. Tunca, "'A Growth to Understanding': an Interview with Caryl Phillips about Biographical Fiction", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* [published online January 9, 2019: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418814586>], 1-13.

Meyer 1996

S. Meyer, *Imperialism at Home. Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Parey 2019

A. Parey (Ed.), *Prequels, Coquels and Sequels in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*. New York – London: Routledge.

Phillips 1987

C. Phillips, *The European Tribe*. London: Faber;

— 1989

Higher Ground. London – New York: Vintage;

— 1997

The Nature of Blood. New York: Vintage;

— 2011

Crossing the River. London – New York: Vintage;

— 2015

The Lost Child. New York: Picador;

— 2018

A View of the Empire at Sunset. London: Vintage.

Savu 2009

L.E. Savu, *Postmortem Postmodernists. The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative*. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press.

Vermeulen 2019

P. Vermeulen, "The 1990s". In: P. Boxall (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction 1980-2018*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 32-46.

Whitehead 2004

A. Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Widdowson 2006

P. Widdowson, "Writing Back': Contemporary Re-visionary Fiction", *Textual Practice* 20 (3), 491–507.

Zabus 2006

C. Zabus, "Fatal Attractors: Adam, Homer, Shakespeare, Defoe, Walcott, and Re-Righting the Caribbean", *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies, Special Issue on Derek Walcott* 28 (2), 57–72.