

Caryl Phillips



**COMMONWEALTH ESSAYS AND STUDIES**

Vol. 40, N°1, Autumn 2017



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# “The River That Does Not Know Its Own Source Will Dry Up”: Caryl Phillips’s Musicalized Fiction



The article seeks to give an overview of Phillips’s musical prose and to gauge its emotional impact on the readers. It concentrates on three novels by Phillips: *The Lost Child* (2015) where music is thematically present, *The Nature of Blood* (1997) which stylistically approximates music, and *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) which relies on both forms of relations between music and literature.

Anne Whitehead suggests that “postcolonial novelists seek to rescue previously overlooked histories and to bring hitherto marginalized or silenced stories to public consciousness” (82). This statement encapsulates the political agenda of Caryl Phillips’s literary texts. As he himself points out, “in a situation in which history is distorted, the literature of a people often becomes its history, its writers the keepers of the past, present and future” (*European* 99). Phillips maintains that it is the role of the poet to give voice to those who have been historically silenced, for, he states “it is the poet who will lend dignity to the people” (*Colour* 53) and “you’ll always listen to the poet before the politician” (Jaggi 80). In the epigraph to his first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), Phillips employs a passage from T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding” (*Four Quartets* 58, qtd. in Phillips, *Final* n.p.), which suggests that history is cyclical, and the past is never truly past, but continues to permeate the present:

A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails  
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel  
History is now and England

This epigraph sets the overall tone of Phillips’s *œuvre*, and testifies to his commitment to giving voice to a painful past in order to illuminate the problems of the present and stimulate historical consciousness. Using an approach that is reflected in the Yoruba saying, “[t]he river that does not know its own source will dry up” (182), which he quotes in his novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Phillips stresses the importance of acknowledging the past and one’s origin, for without remembering those, one is doomed to be lost. In this regard, Phillips enables those who have been silenced to have a voice, weaving their stories into the present to preserve their memory, and to suggest a profound connection between seemingly remote historical traumas.

Phillips significantly chose in Eliot a poet who consciously worked upon the language of music and its relation with poetry. Music has also shaped Phillips’s literary texts, at once thematically and formally. Not only does his work include countless explicit references to music in titles and scenes involving musical performances. The writing itself also contains formal musical structures and sonic effects which enable the story of those who were silenced by history to resonate. In *The Music of Poetry* (1942), Eliot outlined his idea of poetic musicality: it is a pattern of sound which generates a supplementary layer of meaning (Prieto 10), a definition that can also apply to Phillips’s musical prose. Phillips resorts to a musical language to illuminate the lives of those who

have been forgotten; his obsession with form bears on questions such as how to mirror traumatic experiences or how to make excruciatingly painful lives audible. Literature is not the only art which has enabled him to give a voice to his marginalized characters. What I would like to demonstrate in this article is that music too is central to his artistic undertaking. In an interview Phillips states that he has

always regarded black musicians as the vanguard of African diasporic creativity. They gave [him] the most cultural strength. The other side of this, which has become more important to [him] as a writer, is technique. [He has] seen the way in which music often begins with one theme and then develops it. (Bailey Nurse 60)

Surprisingly, although the musicality of Phillips's writing has been mentioned in passing (Ledent and Tunca xiv) and the author himself has declared that his only model, if any, was music (Clingman 108), a detailed study of what exactly characterizes this musicality or what purposes it serves has yet to be undertaken. This essay examines the process at the heart of Phillips's fiction, whereby he musicalizes his prose, both in terms of content and form. It will also seek to shed light on the effects that Phillips's creative prose can have on the reader. His musical writing indeed generates an emotional immediacy which ensures that the readers will remember the voices of Phillips's characters, as the writer's craft urges them to listen to his characters' stories.

Before discussing what roles Phillips's musicalized fiction fulfills, it is necessary to attempt to define what musicality is. Broadly speaking, musicality in fiction is "a quality in literature denoting a substantial analogy to, and in many cases an actual influence from, the art of music" (Frye x, qtd. in Wolf 51). Musicality thus suggests a kind of "musico-literary" intermediality. In order to specify various forms of relation between music and literature, I rely on the work of Emily Petermann and Werner Wolf, two Word and Music Studies experts. While Emily Petermann in *The Musical Novel* focuses on the formal aspects of the musicalization of a text, in *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* Werner Wolf differentiates between two forms of "musico-literary" intermediality: thematization (on the level of the story wherever music is discussed, described, listened to) and imitation (linguistic means or literary techniques that imitate or evoke music). This bipartite approach is helpful in distinguishing the different techniques Caryl Phillips deploys to musicalize his prose, even if it needs to be pointed out that these two aspects are not mutually exclusive, and often co-exist, sometimes even overlapping. In a single passage from Phillips's fiction, each of these categories – thematization and imitation – can be present to some degree, although one of them will tend to predominate.

I would like to examine three of Phillips's novels – which have never been analyzed through a musical lens – based on Wolf's classification: *The Lost Child* (2015), where music is present thematically; *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which stylistically approximates music; and *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), which is both thematically and stylistically related to music.<sup>1</sup> My intention is to give an overview of Phillips's musical prose in these three texts, showing how he gives voice to his characters' stories in a way that sets up a resonance with the reader.<sup>2</sup> Although explicit references to music may not directly contribute to the musical quality of Phillips's prose, they provide a context that helps

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1. I do not deal with *Crossing the River* because I have extensively analysed the presence of music in the novel in an article entitled "Remembering Beyond Words: Jazz and Musicality in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993)."

2. I am referring here to the average reader, who does not have a particular knowledge of music.

to illuminate the effects in terms of sound of stylistic devices such as chiasmus, anaphora, and the repetition of phrases with variation. In his exploration of how language imitates and thematizes music, Wolf suggests that none of his individual criteria have “a decisive value individually. Their significance rather depends on a cumulative effect” (Wolf, “Can Stories Be Read as Music” 216, qtd. in Prieto). Wolf asserts that the integration and cooperation of these different types of musical influence enhance the power of literature. One can say, then, that explicit references to music create an atmosphere in which the reader is more attuned to the potential for language to embody music itself.

The first novel I will examine through Wolf’s binary typology is Phillips’s latest novel, *The Lost Child* (2015), which confirms the author’s inclination to use popular music to give voice to those who have been historically silenced and to elicit empathy in his readers.<sup>3</sup> The narrative weaves together different family stories within the same location, the Yorkshire Moors. The text explores a series of themes including loneliness, poverty, madness, and, most importantly, orphans and outcasts haunted by their past. Phillips imagines Heathcliff as Mr. Earnshaw’s illegitimate son by a former enslaved woman. He provides a portrait of the Brontë family and then moves, at the core of the narrative, to 1960s Britain when Monica Johnson is about to be estranged from her father because she is dating a foreigner. The reader follows Monica through her descent into isolation when she loses her two sons, Ben and Tommy.

In what follows, I will concentrate my exploration of thematic musicalization on the sections from the novel devoted to Monica and her sons, since they contain a plethora of musical references but also use music as an element of interaction between the characters. However, I am not arguing that music is only thematically present in this novel. The very beginning of *The Lost Child* contains some formal features of a musical novel. Notably in the first few pages there are some sonorous effects and numerous repetitions with variation. The section which emphasizes the power of sensation deals with Heathcliff’s mother, a former slave: “[s]he disturbs no one [...] [s]he is a woman in debt [...] she is a diminished woman [...] [s]he wants to tell the man [...] [s]he wants to tell him” (3), “[t]he sailors don’t see me; they never see me” (6, my emphases). However, only a very attentive reader or a connoisseur of Phillips’s writing would notice the effects mentioned above, which include repetitions with variation (a woman, a diminished woman; tell the man, tell him; don’t see me, never see me) and alliteration (disturbs, debt, diminished). The formal imitation of music is much less present and striking than in other Phillipsian novels, which is why I have chosen to only deal with the thematic aspect of *The Lost Child*.

In the long section “Childhood” where Monica’s eldest son, Ben, is the main protagonist, each chapter heading relates to a popular song that he associates with particular moments of his life. By referring to what Gérard Genette has called the “paratexts” of a literary work (qtd. in Wolf 56), which are the elements that surround a text such as a preface, the author’s name, the title, Wolf defines references to music in chapter-titles as paratextual thematization. However, naming chapter-titles after songs is not the only kind of thematization that occurs in *The Lost Child*. As Wolf points out “[t]he most obvious possibility of introducing music into a work of literature [...] is intratex-

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3. Empathy is a feature which has been clearly analysed by Kathie Birat in an article entitled “Embodied Voices: Literacy and Empathy in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*.” Birat examines the way Phillips tries to elicit empathy in his readers and how he manages both to seek and to defy their emotional response.

tual thematization. In fiction this type appears on the level of story wherever music is discussed, described, listened to or even composed by fictional characters” (56). In the sections devoted to Monica, Ben’s mother, several passages discuss her talent for the piano when she was a child. She wins prizes at festivals but then the more her father’s pride increases, the less she feels interested in music (*The Lost Child* 20, 40, 41). We are also told that when her father is attempting to reestablish some form of communication with her, he “tried in earnest to engage with his daughter on a wide range of subjects, including music, but she was impossible to reach” (55). At this stage in the narrative Monica is left alone with her two sons. Music in general seems to irritate her, perhaps because music is the first means by which Monica met her husband Julius, at a Christmas dance (25) and because a musical background is also present when Monica first realizes that their marriage has no future. Music becomes a source of tension between Monica and her spouse: Phillips represents Monica and Julius arguing about jazz. This quarrel highlights the crisis the couple is undergoing and Monica’s belief that Julius does not care for their son, Ben:

His laughter seemed to bubble up from deep inside, and it was punctuated with his constant repetition of “Oh, man, you’ve got to hear this.” Jazz was a new passion of Julius’s, although he had balked when she called it a passion.

“Monica, jazz is the only category of music that you can really study. It has a theoretical intent.”

She had looked at him but didn’t want to argue. Perhaps he had forgotten, but once upon a time she had been regarded as musically proficient. [...]

She had been waiting a long time for them to perhaps turn a corner in their relationship, but she now realized that they both were navigating a long, hopelessly unforgiving bend, and she was tired.

“Julius, please give Ben a kiss.”

“Jesus, you act as if I’ve forgotten my own son.” He looked at her as though she disgusted him. “Just let me finish listening to the music, okay?”

“And could you please turn it down? You’ll wake him up”. (40-1)

Like everything in Phillips’s prose, his references to music are ambivalent: Monica meets Julius at a dance and realizes their marriage is over against a jazz background. If music causes tension and arguments between Monica and her husband, it also represents a bone of contention with her son. Indeed, even when her husband Julius has left, Monica also has to ask her son to turn down the transistor because the sound of it annoys her: “Ben, can you turn off that radio now? It’s doing my head in. We *have* got a telly, you know. [...] Go on, turn it off, for heaven’s sake” (171). The section “Childhood” is entirely centered on Monica’s firstborn child, Ben. Music highlights the crucial moments of Ben’s existence and enables him to survive the difficulties of his life. For instance, when Ben is fostered by the Gilpins, he wishes his foster mother would ask him to turn the record player down, as his mother used to, as a sign of attention and a confirmation that he matters:

Mrs. Gilpin let me know that she didn’t much care for my Gary Glitter single. Too much shouting, she said, which made me play it even louder in the hope that she might ask me to take it off. But she never did ask me to take it off, and eventually I realized that she never would, and so I started to play it quietly. (178)

It is in the “Childhood” section focusing on Ben that what Wolf calls intratextual thematization really stands out. There, Phillips uses identifiable songs, which draw his readers more directly into the novel and facilitates their identification with his character:



“All the Young Dudes’ [...] was a pop song that sounded like something you’d play at a funeral. [...] The song was always snaking through my head, rolling around from one ear to the other” (170); “[t]he summer before I went to university was the hottest on record, and Abba were at number one for nearly two months. Even now when I hear the song, I start to sweat” (187). These two quotes are stimulating because by naming a real piece of popular music, Phillips invites a response from his readers, who can relate the song to their own memories and experiences, just as Ben cannot help but associate Abba’s song with the hot weather of the summer of 1976.

While Wolf’s categories of thematization and imitation reveal the different ways in which a novel can be musical, it is also crucial to ponder how the use of music might affect the semiotic functioning of the text (Prieto 20) and the readers’ interpretation of it. In the “Childhood” section, each chapter, named after a popular song, contextualizes the memory associated with this song. Significantly, out of the sixteen songs presented in this section, seven occur during Ben’s time in foster care. It is as if music was a support for Ben during the hardest moments of his young life: when he and his brother are fostered by an unfair, prejudiced woman, when his mother’s mental health deteriorates, when his brother disappears, when he returns to foster care and when his mother kills herself. Another example of the occurrence of music coinciding with affect and traumatic moments is when Ben faces racism in his own foster family:

[My foster sister’s boyfriend] asked me if I could tell him what the lyrics of that Pluto Shervington meant. No, I said, I couldn’t. I hadn’t got a clue. [...] Helen tried to suppress her giggles, but she wouldn’t meet my eyes. Tell me something, why are your lips so fat? And it’s like you’ve got wool on your head instead of hair. [...] Jesus, you look like a fucking burned sausage. (184)

One cannot but wonder about music’s role in Ben’s character development. Does music enable Ben to survive the hardships of his life? Does he find refuge in listening to it? In an interview, Tanya Agathocleous asks Phillips if art is an escape and/or a way of survival especially in Ben’s case since both his mother and brother die, and he is thus the only “survivor” of his family. Phillips explains that “the pop songs that structure [this section] and anchor Ben’s memory become the only kind of stepping stones by which he can understand his growth or his development. Without those songs, it’s just utter chaos” (n.p.).<sup>4</sup> Phillips thus clearly establishes a link between music, memory and emotional involvement. In *The Lost Child*, meaningfully, all the episodes in which music is used thematically concur with key moments of the characters’ lives: when Monica’s father tries to bond with his daughter, when Monica meets her husband, when she realizes that as a couple they have nothing to offer each other anymore, when Ben is sent to a holiday camp and his brother is bullied, to mention just a few. Clearly, Phillips uses music to emphasize the most important moments or relations in his characters’ existence.

Phillips’s novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997) is another interesting text to turn to in my exploration of the presence of music in Phillips’s novels. *The Nature of Blood* shares several similarities with *The Lost Child*. Firstly, the narrative is also structured around different stories: that of Eva, a Jew who survived the Holocaust; her uncle Stephan,

4. Phillips seems to confirm the important role of music in jogging Ben’s memory in the opening of Ben’s section in which Ben significantly repeats the word “remember” seven times in less than four pages (137, 138, 140) and resorts to a musical language by repeating the word remember with slight variations: “I remember,” “what I do remember,” “I don’t remember,” “I also remember.”

who abandoned his family to help establish the state of Israel; Othello, newly arrived in Venice; the persecuted Jews of Portobuffole and Malka, an Ethiopian Jewish girl resettled in Israel. The central motif of this novel is man's inability to accept the other/the social outsider and the inhumane treatment imposed on the latter throughout history.

Music is present in both *The Lost Child* and *The Nature of Blood*. However, in *The Nature of Blood* musical descriptions only appear towards the end of the novel when another dance, which enables two individuals to meet, takes place. Music is here merely a background for the social activity and opportunity for encounters that dance provides. In this scene, Stephan Stern, who has settled in Israel and is now elderly, dances with Malka, the Jewish Ethiopian refugee, to ease his loneliness:

this woman, who nobody asked to dance, simply sat as though she was indifferent to people's attitudes towards her. Once more, the music stopped and partners were hastily exchanged, and he watched as, again, this woman was ignored. [...] Eventually, he found the courage to cross the floor and ask her to dance. [...] People were watching. He steered her backwards and into the cluster of dancing couples,<sup>5</sup> in the hope that they might attract less attention if they could edge their way towards the middle of the floor. However, her dancing seduced his attention with its grace and surety of step, and he soon forgot his cowardly plan. (200, 201, 202)

This passage encompasses the socio-political dimension of rejection. Malka is an Ethiopian Jew who came to Israel as a refugee; however, it is clear here that she is not welcome in the country, not even for a dance since the reader later learns that “[t]he manager had informed her that, if nobody danced with her this time, then she would not be allowed back” (204). This is ironical since it is also said after this scene that the mayor of the town where Malka's family was first placed had asked specifically to be sent only “those who could sing and dance, so that he might form a folklore group for tourists” (208). As above, music (songs) and dance are associated. In other words, on the level of music too Malka is confined to the role that Israeli society wants her to perform. She is welcome to dance with “her community” for tourists' entertainment but she is not encouraged to dance and mix with white Jewish people. What could appear to be an innocent dance becomes a way to denounce Malka's exclusion from society which is made even more explicit when she later claims “I went to your university – I am a nurse – but I cannot find a job. This Holy Land did not deceive us. The people did” (209).

Another example of music's inability to transcend political and racial issues occurs in the novel when an anonymous voice compares Othello to black men who the unnamed narrator considers to be traitors.<sup>6</sup> As Graham Holderness pointed out, Othello is here associated with the jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong (119-20) who is explicitly mentioned by his nickname Satchmo<sup>7</sup>:

5. Phillips uses the same phrase in *Crossing the River* when Joyce and Travis dance for the first time: “he steered me backwards and into the space that was the dance floor” (162-3). Even if the two stories are set decades apart, dance is presented as a way to ease loneliness and to socialise. Dance also enables mixed couples to meet and start a relationship; one can think of the examples of Julius and Monica (*The Lost Child*), Joyce and Travis (*Crossing the River*), although this is not really the case in *The Nature of Blood*.

6. According to the unnamed narrator, Othello “tuck [his] black skin away” (181), he was “too weak to yoke [his] past with [his] present” (182) and it “can only lead to catastrophe.” The Yoruba saying mentioned in the paper's title and discussed at the beginning of it is quoted in this passage which foreshadows Othello's tragic death. Phillips highlights again the importance of acknowledging the past and one's origin.

7. Satchmo is one of Louis Armstrong's nicknames, which was conceived when the editor of *Melody Maker* mispronounced Satchelmouth in 1932. “As a child he had several nicknames – Dippermouth, Gatemouth, Satchelmouth – each of which referred to his prominent oral cavity” (Cogswell n.p.).

And so you shadow her every move, attend to her 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 woolen 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 arm, O valiant soldier, O weak man. (181)<sup>8</sup>

In this quotation, Phillips combines what Wolf has called thematization and imitation, since music is used here both thematically and formally. On the one hand, thematically speaking, Phillips refers to Louis Armstrong, who according to Holderness, “was attacked by critics for playing to segregated audiences, and is here caricatured as a grinning black clown performing [...] to propitiate the white masters” (119-20). However, Holderness strongly disagrees with such a comparison. He explains that Armstrong contributed significantly to civil rights causes and that “Phillips might also have mentioned in the cause of drawing his elaborate parallels between black and Jewish experience, the fact that Satchmo always wore the Star of David, in gratitude to the Jewish immigrant family who lent him the money to buy his first cornet” (120). On the other hand, a formal examination of the musicality of *The Nature of Blood* through the techniques that are usually deployed to musicalize prose, and which will be identified in the next paragraph, reinforces and builds upon my close readings of music’s thematic presence in the text. Phillips introduces in this passage a series of interesting formal features: wordplay and slashes which evoke poetry or lyrics and emphasize rhythm. Petermann argues that in musical novels “[w]ordplay is often prominent, serving yet again to foreground the sounds of the words used and remind the reader of the auditory element of language, which it shares with music” (130). As Holderness cleverly points out, the pun “O strong arm” is reminiscent of “Armstrong” (120). Phillips resorts to a creative language to celebrate the power of sensation. In regards to the verse layout, Julie Sanders claims that it recalls both jazz lyrics and Shakespearian verse, as well as the rhythms of contemporary rap (145). Sanders’s assertion that Phillips uses a vivid spectrum of formal influences in this passage certainly confirms Phillips’s unique ability to bring dissonant cultural forms into harmony, evidenced here by his mixing canonical British texts with a wide range of music, including rap. Linking Phillips’s text to rap (as a genre not as a performance) reaffirms his political commitment to giving a voice to underrepresented people since rappers are considered “black poets of the contemporary urban scene” (Baker xi) and often voice a series of socio-political issues. One may claim that the following comment by Chloé Nuttall Musson in relation to *Crossing the River* and rap also applies to the previous passage of *The Nature of Blood*:

Phillips celebrates the voices of those that were marginalised and does so in a form that gestures to a musical genre with the same premise. Thus he connects his own literary endeavour with the oeuvre of his musical contemporaries, gesturing outwards to the larger black creative landscape (291).

Let us now take a closer look, in *The Nature of Blood*, at the techniques deployed by Phillips, which correspond to Wolf’s imitation category, to musicalize his prose. In order to do so, I will rely upon Emily Petermann’s *The Musical Novel: Imitation of Musical*

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8. To clearly identify Phillips’s writing strategies of music, I have highlighted the explicit musical reference by using bold type (for music as a theme), while the wordplay on Armstrong is underlined (for music in writing style).

*Structure, Performance, and Reception in Contemporary Fiction* in which she outlines three different ways of imitating music: sonic effects in prose (alliteration, rhyme, meter), structural patterns (the riff, the Call-and-Response pattern, chorus) and the performance situation where repeated lexical items are used. I have selected the most representative passage of *The Nature of Blood* which resorts to these techniques, without however containing thematic allusions to music or dance. The scene occurs at the beginning of the novel and includes Stephan Stern, Eva's uncle, waiting in Cyprus to be taken to Israel:

I could smell food and **I now wanted to eat**. Not this food. **I wanted to eat** the food that my wife would cook for me when I came home from university at the end of the day. [...] In the old country. Before Palestine. Before America. [...] And now. Fruit on the trees. An army. Beautiful women. A new country to build. After **two months in Cyprus**, I was leaving at dawn. **To go home**. **To go** where? **Away** to the south. **Away** to the east. How much should I tell this boy? Truly I felt ashamed, for **I had not described my country**. **I had described the** country that might be his. The country that might belong to his children. The country that might belong to his children's children. My country? [...] I was hungry. **I want to eat** now, but not in Cyprus. And not in the new country. How could I explain? Imagine any day of my old life. Walking on stone. Solid and secure. But now I walk on boards. Will they snap beneath my feet? A new world of boards. No stone. Nearly eleven years in Palestine. **Two whole months in Cyprus**. Boardworld. (*The Nature of Blood* 9, 10, 11, my emphases)<sup>9</sup>

As suggested above, this passage exemplifies the different techniques that Petermann identifies as representative of music in literary texts: it contains sonorous effects, a structural pattern which imitates jazz and repeated lexical items. This quotation shows how Phillips emphasizes sonority thanks to sonic effects established through poetic techniques based on repetition such as chiasmus, wordplay (as briefly discussed above), numerous reiterations of phrases or words.<sup>10</sup> These features convey the character's emotive distress and contribute to the resonance of Phillips's prose, which promotes the importance of sensation and thereby captures the readers' attention. Obviously, it is worth carrying out a close reading of the passage above to fully reveal the impact of repetition on readers: "I now wanted to eat. [...] I wanted to eat," "Before Palestine. Before America," "To go home. To go where," "Away to the south. Away to the east," "I had not described my country. I had described the country," "The country that might belong to his children. The country that might belong to his children's children." In this passage, several phrases are repeated twice, one after the other with slight changes, which could be described as repetitions with variation. These phrases illustrate a structural imitation of jazz, the riff (the replaying of a phrase with variation difference), which Petermann defines as "a linguistic phrase that is repeated in nearly identical forms" (71). To the reiteration of a phrase with variation Phillips adds a series of repeated words such as food, country, walk, world, old, new, which are not striking in themselves as they seem to belong to basic vocabulary, but which were highlighted by Sanders as refrains pervading the different sections of the novel (114).<sup>11</sup> Petermann argues that the use of reiterated individual terms "serves to sensitize the reader to a word, such that it

9. Bolded text indicates repetition of clauses or sentences and underlined text indicates repetition of a single word.

10. Repetition clearly contributes to Phillips's unique style and this is brilliantly analyzed by Catherine Lanone in "Repetition and Reckoning in *Crossing the River*."

11. The musicality of such a technique has been highlighted by Bénédicte Ledent in her monograph on Caryl Phillips (161,162).

becomes much more striking throughout the remainder of the text” (131). Moreover, by using the same lexical items several times, Phillips establishes parallels between the different sections through the outlining of similarities between the experiences of characters living centuries apart. All these repetitions create an echo in the readers’ psyche, reminding them that nothing has really changed regarding the inhumane treatment and the exclusion of ethnic minorities throughout the centuries.

To strike the reader’s ear even more, Phillips creatively plays with words and similar sounds: “Walking on stone. Solid and secure. But now I walk on boards. Will they snap beneath my feet? A new world of boards. No stone. Nearly eleven years in Palestine. Two whole months in Cyprus. Boardworld” (11). Here, Phillips uses a series of words which start with the letter s: “stone, solid, secure” and then creates a playful effect on the letter w: “walk, world, whole”; “Walking on stone,” then “walk on boards” to reach a “world of boards”; and finally a chiasmus, “A new world of boards ” / “Boardworld”<sup>12</sup> (11, my emphases). This creates a sonic pattern that generates a supplementary layer of meaning, reminding us of what Eliot claimed for his own poetry. Phillips not only inverts words but also letters: “on stone”, “no stone” (emphasis mine). In this way, he draws one’s attention to the feelings of uncertainty experienced by Stephan, as a diasporic individual undergoing the dispersal of his family. Reversing the preposition “on” to become “no” encapsulates the predicament faced by people of the diaspora, who find themselves in a situation similar to that of Stephan; he was first “solid and secure” in his country and then had to walk on boards, a material much less solid than stone. He then has to admit that there is “no stone” in his new settlement, no security in other terms. His situation has been reversed in the same way as the letters themselves have been inverted. All these effects are focal constituents of Petermann’s definition of a musical novel which includes repetition and wordplay, as mentioned above. Phillips uses the musical properties of language to capture the readers’ attention, but sonorous effects, repetitions and wordplay also force the readers to participate actively in the understanding of the textual meaning (Petermann 44) since they have to imagine explanations for such linguistic choices. The passage of *The Nature of Blood* I have just discussed is highly significant, since Stephan is questioning the new country he is going to build. The following progression reveals Stephan’s relation with this country: “A new country to build. [...] Truly I felt ashamed, for I had not described my country. I had described the country that might be his. The country that might belong to his children. The country that might belong to his children’s children. My country?” (10, my emphases). The determiners used before the word country reflect Stephan’s feelings towards the settlement of Israel: at first Stephan uses an indefinite article, it is a country among others, then a possessive determiner preceded by a negative form, which stresses that this is not Stephan’s country, then he uses a definite article, the country, which is more precise than an indefinite article and conveys his determination as a settler, and finally he uses again a possessive determiner with a question mark, which suggests that Stephan is considering this country as his. In the same vein, the repetition of the word “country” emphasizes the theme of home in relation to the Jewish diaspora.

There are other very musical passages in *The Nature of Blood* that meaningfully concur with traumatic events, including the moment when Eva arrives at the concen-

12. Phillips’s wordplay on “walk on boards,” “world of boards” and “boardworld” also hints at Tel Aviv’s boardwalk.

tration camp (162, 163, 164) and the day her new friend Bella dies there (180, 181). Eva's prose is reminiscent of her uncle's: sonority is emphasized and there are repetitions with variation. For instance, the use of a possessive adjective to claim that it was her friend Bella and not any Bella who died – "Bella is gone. My Bella is gone" (181) – reminds us of her uncle's reflection – "country [...], the country [...], my country" (10) – and possibly brings them together.<sup>13</sup> In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips successfully crafts a prose that mirrors his characters' mental state and claims the readers' attention. This is also the way he uses music in the next novel that I propose to examine, *Dancing in the Dark*.

*Dancing in the Dark* differs from the previous novels since it has a single narrative thread which concentrates on Bahamas-born Bert Williams and his frustrating life as America's most famous entertainer at the beginning of the twentieth century. Music is an obvious theme in the narrative; lyrics are interspersed throughout the novel and there are numerous scenes from musical performances. As a result, sonority is clearly central, as also evidenced by the fact that the verbs "listen" and "hear" appear almost 100 times in the text. The thematization of music is further contained in the alliterative nature of the title of the novel since it refers to the song "Dancing in the Dark," composed by Arthur Schwartz and performed by many black musicians (among whom the Duke Ellington Orchestra, Charlie Parker, Art Tatum and Sarah Vaughan), thus already suggesting a cultural context for the connoisseurs. From the start, then, the sonic qualities of the novel attract the readers' attention.

From the prologue onwards, the text focuses on its aural qualities through poetic techniques including rhymes and what sounds like a poetic meter: "Back then, he dressed well, he walked tall [...]. Women watched him pass **by**, his hardback carriage upright [...]; [m]en watched him too, with their collars turned **high**" (*Dancing in the Dark* 3, emphasis mine).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, "he dressed well, he walked tall" is a syntactic and morphological parallelism, establishing a regularity even on a phonetic level (-e, -a). In the same way as "black music sets up expectations and disturbs them at irregular intervals" (Snead 72), the passage above establishes, through a repeated structural pattern, a rhythmic expectation that is then disrupted to strike the readers' mind, as in:

Women watched him pass by, his hardback carriage upright, and they whispered half sentences about him from behind perfumed handkerchiefs that they held close to their full **lips**. But they never eyeballed him, for this was a man who lived beyond their **hips**, and it didn't make sense to look too interested in such a man. (*Dancing in the Dark* 3, emphasis mine)<sup>15</sup>

Again, this technique attracts the readers' attention to the part of the sentence that does not fit the expected pattern, for, as Petermann argues, unfulfilled expectation creates interest in itself, "but form and structure are required in order to establish those initial expectations" (70). It is thus the section where the upsetting of expectations occurs that

13. I am currently working on haunting memories in *The Nature of Blood* and the ability of Phillips's musicalized prose to reflect Dominick LaCapra's processes of "working-through" and "acting out." In the passage quoted above, Stephan could be said to be "working through" because his telling of the event varies while Eva is at first suspended between attempting to "work through" extremely traumatic memories and "acting them out." By the end of her tale, Eva is only able to "act out" her haunting memories since she uses the same inflexible sentences and is unable to improvise on her telling.

14. Bolded text indicates rhyme.

15. Underlined text indicates the expected pattern and bolded text indicates rhyme.

is emphasized: “and they whispered half sentences about him...”, which reveals that Bert is observed and rejected by his community since his use of blackface is met with disapproval by his black contemporaries.

Bert’s exclusion is also confirmed in another passage as he walks from Harlem, where he lives, to Midtown: “If you walk down Seventh Avenue today he is a man who never existed” (3). This sentence is reiterated with slight variations, “If you walk **down** this broad Harlem avenue today” (3) or “Today if you walk **down** this broad Harlem avenue as far as the park, and then continue walking through the park to **midtown**, he is a man who never existed” (4). Along with rhyme and meter, another poetic technique based on repetition is used here: chiasmus: “If you walk down this broad Harlem avenue today” and “Today if you walk down this broad Harlem avenue.” While drawing once again the readers’ attention to the musical properties of language, this chiasmus contributes to a sense of circling. By insisting on the word “today” and by placing it at the end of one sentence and then at the beginning of another one, Phillips seems to highlight the present moment. The insistence on the word “today” indeed suggests that nothing is different for black performers in 2005, when the book was published. In an interview,

Phillips has discussed the similarities in the ways black performers of different eras – vaudevillians and minstrel comedians like Williams, soul performers like Marvin Gaye and contemporary hip-hop stars – have packaged particular images of black manhood for white consumption. (Brooke n.p.)

This claim can be linked to the significant phrase “he is a man who never existed,” which is repeated without any change and stresses the importance of this statement among all the variations. Bert Williams was America’s most famous entertainer at the beginning of the twentieth century and yet the narrative repeatedly claims that he never existed as a man. Only later in the novel is the reader given some clues permitting him/her to make sense of this assertion, in a passage made memorable by repetition:

**Detroit, 1896:** And the first time he looked at himself in the mirror he thought of the embarrassment and distress that this would cause his father and his heart sank. [...] The first time he looked into the mirror he was ashamed, but he understood that his job was to make people laugh so they did not have time to ridicule or hurt him. And so he made the people of Detroit laugh. No longer Egbert Austin Williams. He kept telling himself, I am no longer Egbert Austin Williams. As I apply the cork to my face, as I smear the black into my already sable skin, as I put on my lips, I am leaving behind Egbert Austin Williams. [...] As he looked at himself in the mirror he knew that he had disappeared, and he understood that every night he would have to rediscover himself before he left the theater. The first time he looked at himself in the mirror the predicament was clear, but just who was this new man and what was his name? [...] And the first time he looked in the mirror his heart sank like a stone for this was not a man that he recognized. [...] The first time he looked at himself in the mirror his heart sank. **In Detroit in 1896.** (57-8)<sup>16</sup>

Through the recurrence of the place and date (Detroit 1896) at the beginning and at the end of the paragraph a sense of circularity is conveyed once more, as in *The Nature of Blood* where characters centuries apart experience the same degrading treatment. Repetition is again at the core of this quotation where the phrase “he looked at himself

16. Underlined text indicates a set of repetitions with variation and bolded text indicates another set of repetition with variation.

in the mirror” appears six times in less than two pages, with the mirror image itself evoking the idea of duplication or visual echo. The six occurrences of the linguistic riff “he looked at himself in the mirror” are meaningful, since according to Jimoh Yemisi, jazz riffs often “resound and [...] reformulate an important concept or key idea found within the narrative” (Yemisi 37, qtd. in Walters), which in this case suggests Bert’s emotional distress when he has to put on his make-up. Because as James A. Snead asserts, the “peculiarity of black music is that it draws attention to its own repetitions” (Snead 72), such stylistic devices fittingly reflect the experience of a black entertainer.

As suggested in the lines by T. S. Eliot quoted at the beginning of this essay, “history is a pattern/ Of timeless moments,” the reiteration of the phrase “the first time he looked in the mirror” mirrors a traumatic experience, which according to Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart is timeless and not “placed in time with a beginning, a middle and an end” (177). This claim is again reminiscent of Eliot’s “East Coker” line (*Four* 23), “In my beginning is my end,” where the end merges with the beginning.<sup>17</sup> In the same way, in his account of Bert’s experience, Phillips obsessively repeats the same phrase, defying chronology. Repetition here prevents the readers from forgetting Bert’s shame and pain: “And the first time he looked at himself in the mirror he thought of the embarrassment and distress that this would cause his father and his heart sank. [...] The first time he looked into the mirror he was ashamed, but he understood that his job was to make people laugh. [...] As he looked at himself in the mirror he knew that he had disappeared” etc. (57-8). Through an anaphora, Phillips outlines when and where Bert begins to perform in blackface and, through his reflection in the mirror, how he feels about it. This scene epitomizes Bert’s tragedy. Like a persistent refrain, the reiteration of “the first time he looked at himself in the mirror” insists on the importance of that first time for Bert as it marked the beginning of his tragic alienation, not only from his father but from his community as a whole. The repetition goes on like a mantra, evoking in the readers’ mind Bert’s traumatic experience. Accordingly, the readers, like the protagonist, cannot help remembering how everything started and how Bert was ashamed of having to put cork on his face.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, musicality is inflected in different ways in the three Phillipsian novels I have just analysed. *The Lost Child* generally uses music thematically while *The Nature of Blood* stylistically approximates music and *Dancing in the Dark* relates to music in both ways, thematically and stylistically. Phillips thus deploys different kinds of musicalization, which sometimes means introducing music into the writing itself. Such a stylistic choice has a purpose: to make sure that those who were forgotten by history will be remembered by the readers who will be haunted by the characters’ resonant voices. If Phillips’s sonorous effects and structural analogies with music strike the readers, his musical techniques also leave some readers puzzled, for instance about the chronology of the events. As Bénédicte Ledent suggests, “[l]osing oneself to find the other is what Phillips’s fictions, not just *The Nature of Blood*, engage the reader to do” (“Cultural Labyrinth” 194); a musical prose is a manner of engaging and sometimes losing his readers. Meaningfully, Phillips once said that he wants to touch people with his art and that musicians have that capacity; to bring people into a beautifully devastating

17. Bénédicte Ledent discusses *The Final Passage* and T. S. Eliot in her monograph on *Caryl Phillips* (26, 29, 31, 38, 39).



world of pain (Mascoli, “Discussing Music” n.p.). Musicalizing his prose is definitely a way to achieve this goal.

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