

Caryl Phillips



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## Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* and the Chorus of Archival Memory



Starting from the vocal nature of *Crossing the River*, this article looks at Caryl Phillips's archives housed at the Beinecke Library and thereby attempts to retrieve the voices that did not make it into the book, but which are nonetheless important pieces in the writer's imaginative universe. This article will refer to three thematically linked radio plays as well as an early draft of the third section of the 1993 novel.

*Crossing the River* (1993) is one of Caryl Phillips's most popular books. Shortlisted for the famous Booker Prize and awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1994, it has also been extensively discussed and analysed by critics, and has now become a classic text of postcolonial literature, as its inclusion into the English Agrégation programme in France testifies. Over the years *Crossing the River* has given rise to a number of readings – a vast majority of them relating to transatlantic slavery, the diaspora and the ensuing issues of belonging and unbelonging. However, a constant in the various existing interpretations is that this fragmented, polyphonic narrative invites the reader to listen to unheard voices from the past, a reading which is also encouraged by the novel's decidedly aural and musical nature, particularly perceptible in its prologue and epilogue (see Mascoli). Kerry-Jane Wallart rightly argues in an essay dealing with performance in *Crossing the River* that this “extreme emphasis on the theme of the voice has suppressed its intense inscription within the body” (177). Still, it remains difficult, if not impossible, for the critic to ignore the strong vocal presence of the novel's characters, as well as the “myriad sounds and utterances, including music, emanating from the historical experience of slavery and colonialism,” which Jee Hyun An has brought together under the term “soundings,” expressive, for her, of countermodernity (157). These “soundings” include the voice of the guilty African father who, in the eighteenth century, sold his offspring into slavery; the voices of his three children, Nash, Martha and Travis, who are now spread over time and space; and even the voice of the slave trader, Captain Hamilton, who bought these children from their father and transported them across the Atlantic to the New World. But the choral nature of the novel does not stop here, for other voices can also be heard in the text: that of Edward, Nash's American master, but most notably that of Travis's white English wife, Joyce, who eventually becomes one of the African father's children too, albeit metaphorically. To these more or less audible presences, one should add the voices of “the many-tongued chorus of the common memory” (Phillips, *Crossing* 235) that frames the novel and comprises the “haunting voices” (236) of various other members of the African diaspora, both anonymous and famous, including, just to give a few examples, James Baldwin and Marvin Gaye, two figures who played a determining role in Phillips's artistic career. Finally, one should not forget the novel's intertextual voices, whereby, as Phillips declares in an interview, “a lot of the people whose work I've enjoyed have made their way in” (Davison 94). One can think of Toni Morrison. Her influence is made explicit in the epigraph to *Crossing the River*, “For those who crossed the river,” which echoes that of *Beloved* (“Sixty Million and more”), but it is also implicit in some sections of “West” where Martha

has visions of her daughter reminiscent of what happens to Sethe in Morrison's text; Joseph Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* unmistakably looms over the novel's first section "The Pagan Coast," which, like the famous novella, deals with a metamorphosing journey inland (Najar), and finally the slave trader John Newton, mentioned in the acknowledgements, whose journal is extensively ventriloquized by Phillips in the section entitled "Crossing the River."

Among the critics who address the novel's vocal features, Alessandra Di Maio insists on the plurality of the different voices in the novel and demonstrates how their communal storytelling, which "sing variations on a single, complex theme – that of slavery" (451), ensures a form of survival and partakes of the deeply democratic nature of the narrative, which, she argues, stands in opposition to the "substantially monologic form of the canonical European novel" (452). Another commentator, Gilbert McInnis, focusing on the novel's postmodern narrative strategies, reads the book in terms of hypertext, a technique whereby the historical archive is reworked so that "the 'collective' marginal voices move to the center" and "the individual 'dominant' voice is moved to the margin," a calling into question of established order that has been contested by several critics who claim, in the words of Yogita Goyal, that the novel still "privileg[es] the master's discourse" (20). Building on these notions of vocal plurality and hypertextuality, which are nevertheless part and parcel of the novel's epistemological architecture, I argue in this essay that Caryl Phillips's own archives – by which I mean his own creative texts and not the historical or literary documents that he has used to write his novel and which he partly alludes to in the epilogue – can be made to join the "chorus of a common memory" (Phillips, *Crossing* 1) that frames the novel, becoming thereby a kind of archival memory. Phillips's archives are made up of voices that are marginal since they did not actually make it into the book itself but they can nonetheless, hypertextually, enable us to further explore Caryl Phillips's imaginary, particularly in relation to the themes and characters present in *Crossing the River*. These unheard voices, most of which are to be found in Phillips's papers housed in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, are important pieces in the writer's diasporic puzzle, where, it is well known, the unsaid is usually as important as what is explicitly expressed.

In other words, the following comparative discussion of the novel together with its own archival traces relies on a methodology that borrows its principles from the structural logic of the novel itself. Not only is *Crossing the River* built around historical and literary archives, in the sense that it rewrites and echoes other narratives, as mentioned above, but it is also based on an inclusive weblike network linking all the children of the African diaspora to each other through the figure of the African father as well as through their common experience of displacement and separation. In so far as "[h]ypertext is a manifestation in textual and rhetorical form of network organization" (Bass 662), *Crossing the River* can thus be regarded as hypertextual in nature. Moreover, since the novel is marked by a form of indeterminacy, it demands from its readers a reading strategy informed by what Randy Bass has called, in a more general context, a "rhetoric of *association*" (662-3, italics in original), whereby meaning is created through comparisons between the different characters and stories within the text.

I would like to suggest that the meaning of the novel can equally be enhanced or deepened if one brings into one's reading of it other relevant characters and stories created by Phillips that can be found in his own archives. Among the texts that I would

like to examine here in conjunction with the published version of the novel are two early radio plays by Phillips broadcast in the 1980s, entitled *Crossing the River* and *The Prince of Africa*, which are both thematically linked to the history of slavery and by extension that of the African diaspora, and an early draft of the third section of the novel entitled, like its published counterpart, "Somewhere in England," as well as a radio play adaptation of this section which was aired on BBC Radio 4 in December 2016. As already suggested, my intention is to see how these documents relate to the novel's final published version. Such a comparative, genealogical reading will allow us to imagine what the book would have been like if the author had made different narrative decisions, notably in regard to the prominence of Joyce's voice in the last section of the novel, at the expense of Travis's which is all but absent from *Crossing the River* even if the drafts of the novel held in Phillips's archives and the later radio play testify that the writer had extensively researched and imagined the character. *In fine*, what the following analysis will also confirm is that *Crossing the River* is part of a coherent body of work which, in spite of the formal and thematic uniqueness of each of its pieces, does acquire even more solidity when regarded as a whole which then becomes more than the sum of its parts. This remark also applies to *Crossing the River* itself, which is made up of several narratives that could be read individually but whose significance is heightened when read in the light of the entire book.

Caryl Phillips's radio play entitled *Crossing the River* was broadcast in 1985. Here is how Phillips described it in an interview with Maya Jaggi, which was conducted when the eponymous novel came out in 1993:

The radio play lasts 11 minutes. I wrote it in 1984 or 1985 for Radio 3, and it explored the guilt of a father who has sold his children into slavery. It was just voices, a strange haunting piece which I'm not sure many people understood. I met one of the actors in the Bush a year later and he asked me what the play was about, so I realised there was room to develop this theme. When I started to think about the novel the structure of the play, which was fragmented yet held together by the father's guilt, appealed to me. I thought, let me clarify this. ("Caryl Phillips talks to Maya Jaggi" 25)

Here Phillips presents his novel as an attempt to elaborate on the earlier radio play. However, it is also important to consider that the 1985 script was a catalyst for the structural audacity of the later fictional text. As Phillips confirmed in private communication, the radio play "provided [him] with a laboratory to work out some ideas that eventually fed into the fiction," as if the radio play had been a formal and thematic stepping stone for the novel, what a painter would call an early sketch.

On discovering this rather short (it is only 12 pages long) and slightly impressionistic radio play, the reader familiar with the novel *Crossing the River* is struck by a simultaneous impression of *déjà vu* and strangeness. Like the 1993 text, the radio play indeed focuses on three characters, Ben, Will and Sarah, two boys and a girl from Africa, who, like Nash, Travis and Martha in the novel, bear Westernized names, the trace of their tragic displacement and of their passage into another cultural sphere. The dramatic narrative also relies on a well-known scenario: the three characters have been sold by their destitute African father to a slave trader; they "cross the river. Together. Two men and a woman" (2) and end up, decades or centuries later, in America, Britain and the Caribbean, each speaking in the language fitting their current locale and epoch. But their profiles are quite different from their fictional counterparts: Ben, very much like Bert

Williams in Phillips's novel *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), is an African American minstrel who blacks up to please white audiences; Will is a twentieth-century young man who lives in Peckham, a London neighbourhood known for its crime scene, and has problems with the law; and Sarah, as a slave on what is probably a Caribbean sugar cane plantation, is raped by white men and is separated from her baby daughter, Mary, who is then left to die. Clearly, these three characters are much more archetypal figures than the three children represented in the novel, who are pioneers of sorts, not the type of black persona that usually features in traditional historiography and literature. The three siblings in the radio play, by contrast, correspond to more common black profiles: while Sarah is presented as a sexually abused black woman seemingly resigned to her fate – “After the man had finished I stood up. I knew it would be easier a next time. I knew a next time would soon come” (2) – her two brothers stand for the traditional opposite pair that, in the United States, pits Malcolm X and Martin Luther King against each other: Will is a macho, violent misfit who rebels against the society in which he lives while Ben is something of an Uncle Tom, a performer ready to compromise with the white world.<sup>1</sup> That Phillips replaced these rather predictable black personas with unconventional, more ambiguous ones in the novel may convey its revisionary intent, which as he explained to Maya Jaggi, means “[subverting] people’s view of history by engaging them with character” and “[looking] at that history from a different angle – through the prism of people who have nominally been written out of it, or have been viewed as the losers or victims in a particular historical storm” (26). The change in the protagonists’ profile might also have another explanation: that Phillips is particularly attached to the overarching, almost mythical narrative, which, in both the radio play and the novel, includes the “shameful” transaction (Phillips, *Crossing* 1) between the African father and the European slave traders, the ensuing forceful transportation of the children from their native land to the New World, and the ongoing sufferings of their diasporic existence. The lives that make up the body of the novel are by contrast almost interchangeable in their horror, and, for all their singularity and unconventionality, keep a representative value, as also suggested in the novel’s epilogue which, in a few short vignettes, evokes the experiences of three other children of the diaspora (without taking Joyce into account) whose voices emerge through the narrative crevices:

In Brooklyn a helplessly addicted mother waits for the mist to clear from her eyes. They have stopped her benefit. She lives now without the comfort of religion, electricity, or money. A barefoot boy in São Paulo is rooted to his piece of the earth, which he knows will never swell up, pregnant, and become a vantage point from which he will be able to see beyond his dying *javêla*. In Santo Domingo, a child suffers the hateful hot comb, the dark half-moons of history heavy beneath each eye. A mother watches. Her eleven-year-old daughter is preparing herself for yet another night of premature prostitution. (235-36)

Such life stories bear in the present the burden of their painful past and might have replaced, in yet another version of the same overarching story, those of Nash, Martha and Travis.

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1. This is a usual opposition in Caryl Phillips's writing; see for example George Walker and Bert Williams in *Dancing in the Dark* or David George and Thomas Peters, two characters from Phillips's play *Rough Crossings*. About *Rough Crossings*, see John McLeod.



In spite of its limited scope and its economical language – the three characters express themselves in short, simple sentences – it is worth pointing out that Phillips's radio play entitled *Crossing the River* can also be made to work as a thought-provoking, imaginative complement to the longer text in the sense that it fills some of the gaps in its narrative, demonstrating that the difference between the two works is more a question of focus or degree than one of spirit. In the radio play, unlike the novel, the voice of the father is not heard at all. However, the three children are made to dialogize about what happened to them in the past and their alternating responses to their father's action fit their respective personalities: while Sarah conveys her commiseration for her father whose crops failed because of the drought, soft-hearted Ben is proud of the man who, he says, "wants me never to forget the family name" (10) and Will angrily concludes that "he let them take us. I can never forgive him. Never" (11). We get nothing of the kind in the body of the novel, where the three children are not given a chance to express themselves on what their patriarch did to them, nor communicate with each other, which makes the private disruption caused by the trade all the more visible. In the novel, the only references to the "shameful intercourse" (1) occur in Martha's narrative, when she very succinctly recalls "Through some atavistic mist [...] a smooth white beach where a trembling girl waited with two boys and a man. Standing off, a ship" (73), and of course in Captain Hamilton's log, where the infamous deal is evoked in a mere two sentences "Approached by a quiet fellow. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl" (124).<sup>2</sup> This is in line with the novel's more subdued narrative mode, where the father's guilt expressed in the prologue and the epilogue prevails over any possible response on the part of his progeny, signifying that they are cut off from each other and made voiceless as a consequence, even if their father manages to hear their voices in the novel's final pages.

Obviously, the family is as much a central element in the radio play as it is in the novel, but once again there are some differences between the two texts that cannot but raise questions for the careful reader, especially in their possible connections with gender. The novel very much focuses on the disruption of family life caused by the slave trade and slavery, and it presents surrogate parenthood as a sometimes ambiguous alternative to the dismemberment of the original family unit under the pressure of the slavers' greed or of racism, which makes it possible to include Joyce, the white English woman, into the novel's closing chorus made up of the children of the African diaspora. However, very little is said in the fiction about the original African family, apart from the fact that the father sold his children into slavery; he is therefore endowed with a sort of legendary status that keeps him at a distance from the narrative core. The radio play briefly evokes Sarah's separation from her baby daughter after she has crossed the Atlantic, but apart from this it mostly concentrates on the African family which is none the less dysfunctional for being apparently whole. This perspective prevents a mythical reading of the African father, in spite of his virtual absence from the play, and of his children, who interact not always peacefully and whose relationships are affected by gender-related issues. Sarah, for example, mentions that "a daughter is nothing to a father" (1), whereas her brother Will tells her, in his typically radical way, that "women can never know the ways of men. Never. Never" (7) and makes fun of his sister because

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2. These two sentences also appear on page 1 of the novel, in italics, intertwined with the African father's voice.

she cried when she underwent circumcision. More than being just squabbles between family members, these elements are revealing because they give a realistic dimension to the interaction and the communication failures between the three children and their father (“nobody listens” says Sarah [12]). Such passages also open up the possibility of raising questions about the gender dimension of the African diaspora, a topic only tangentially addressed in the novelistic *Crossing the River*, so much so that gender approaches to this text have been relatively few and far between. Among various topics, it would be interesting, for instance, to ponder on the complete invisibility of the mother of the three children in both texts, even if her absence is obliquely mentioned in the radio play when Sarah says, in a rather paradoxical, even shocking, statement, that “The ship made a loving movement. Like a woman rocking a child. And the sea spoke to us. Telling us to have no fear” (3). Here the sea is a reassuring, soothing motherly element, even if, at the same time, it carries the fateful slave ship, and it represents a welcome alternative to the “patriarchal lineage” which, for Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “is evidenced in Phillips’ literary text [the novel *Crossing the River*]” (217) but also dominates most narratives of the Black Atlantic. Sarah’s isolation in the radio play makes such a gender-inflected reading all the more urgent.

The dramatic *Crossing the River* does not contain any information about the Middle Passage itself, apart from a painfully evocative statement by Sarah who says, “We crossed the river. [...] In a ship that stank of the vomit of a million sick” (2). The novelistic *Crossing the River* does not describe the crossing of the Atlantic either, since Captain Hamilton’s log stops when his ship has just left the coast of West Africa. In this regard, Phillips’s radio play, *The Prince of Africa*, which was broadcast in 1987, can provide a few hypertextual “thumbnails” or imaginative padding for the reading of the novel, even if this text is less directly similar to the novel in terms of characterization and setting. *The Prince of Africa*, the script of which is 58 pages long, mostly takes place on a slave ship of the Royal African Company at the end of the eighteenth century and explicitly anatomizes the mechanics of the trade in a concise and nuanced manner by analysing the interactions among the members of the crew and the slaves in the hold, two groups that in Phillips’s typically ambiguous approach are shown to be internally divided. Two of the major characters are Captain John Winston, who is full of doubts about the trade, and a generic figure called “African” who deplores, in words that echo those of the novel *Crossing the River*, that “water has no paths and we may never find our way back home” (9). Travelling in space and time, “African” describes himself as “Marooned in the West” (1) and repeatedly expresses his anger at its “undigested semi-suppressed, woefully ignorant sense of history” (57), a form of historical amnesia that the 1993 novel openly sets out to address. In addition, one of the bottom lines of the African’s experiences in the West is that “Our past and present and future are inextricably interwoven” (46), a line which again encapsulates the rationale of the novel. Reading *A Prince of Africa* in conjunction with *Crossing the River* therefore promotes a more informed critical response to the fiction, and vice versa.

In a short text entitled “Water,” published in *Colour Me English*, Phillips discusses the genesis of his novel *Crossing the River*. This essay clearly refers to the significance of his fifth novel for him as an individual, but also for him as a member of the African Diaspora, in words that strangely echo the two radio plays that I have just referred to, even if Phillips does not directly mention any of them:

Water. To a large extent my life has been determined by a journey across water. An actual journey. Across the Atlantic Ocean. I cannot remember the journey that I am speaking of. In all likelihood it occurred sometime in the eighteenth century. Seventeen hundred and something. I was captured and sold into the custody of an English man. A slave ship captain, acting on behalf of a company whose headquarters were probably located in Liverpool, or Bristol, or London. And, thereafter, I began my long-forgotten journey. Chained and manacled in the hold of a ship. No longer a son, or a brother. A husband or a father. I was simply an object of commerce who, upon my arrival in the Americas, would be once again sold, this time into a life of unrewarded labour. I am not complaining. These are just facts. But, mercifully, as I said, I cannot remember the journey. (163)

In this text Phillips also explains that the original idea for his 1993 novel was the presence of the segregated American army in England during the Second World War and that the first protagonists that he had in mind were a Yorkshire woman and the black GI she falls in love with, to whom he added other characters to make up what he calls a “rainbow collation of people” (“Water” 165). In the final version of the novel, however, the black GI, now called Travis, is not really given a voice and his narrative is told through that of his English wife and the mother of his child, Joyce, who is the first-person narrator of the entire section devoted to their story. Travis’s fictional invisibility, or inaudibility, could of course be regarded as the mere reflexion of the black absence in the history of the West, as conveying an age-long black disempowerment. At the same time, Travis’s disappearance also raises questions about the rationale behind Phillips’s decision and, unsurprisingly, he has been asked by several interviewers to explain this choice. Here is, for example, what he told Maya Jaggi about it:

I tried to find a voice for Travis. I travelled down south during the research, drove round Georgia and Alabama for days in search of Travis. I couldn’t find him anywhere, but I wasn’t prepared to invent a voice. It just wasn’t working, and if it’s not working, I don’t care about balance for the sake of balance. You approach it through the route that seems to you to cut through to the truth. One thing I know is that Joyce was speaking to me forcefully, powerfully, in the dialect I grew up speaking, which is Yorkshire. I understood that intuitively. (27)

One cannot but admire Phillips’s artistic integrity and his refusal to bow to political correctness or predictability, which would have implied a black focalizer for “Somewhere in England,” instead of a white one (see Clingman 111-3). There might also have been on Phillips’s part an unconscious desire to make sure that England was included in the African Diaspora, rather than simply the USA, which was a more predictable piece in the Black Atlantic puzzle in the 1990s, at the time when the novel was written.

Be it as it may, it is nevertheless enlightening to know that Phillips had started to imagine the character of Travis, as can be seen in the drafts of the novel that are housed, as mentioned before, in the Beinecke Library of the University of Yale. It is not possible to carry out a complete genetic analysis of the various manuscripts of the novel in this article. What can be done instead is concentrate on one of the early drafts so as to get a glimpse into how the black GI comes across in Phillips’s initial imagining of the section “Somewhere in England,” which, in the 55-page version that I use, is divided into 29 scenes, alternating between third- and first-person narratives. Significantly, in this early account, even if a few scenes are seen from Joyce’s point of view, she does not visibly have a name, which might suggest that at that stage Phillips had not a fully clear idea of her personality, or at least that the presence of this girl from Sheffield was

not as fully personified as that of her black American lover. Clay Fuller, as the black GI is then called, goes back home in the South of the USA after three years spent in Europe, including England and Italy. While in Europe, he got married to an English woman who bears his child, and he intends to go back to her. These narrative elements all sound very familiar. However, Clay is finally murdered in the United States, unable to readjust to life in a segregated country, “confused” (37 & 40) as he is by his three-year stay in an apparently less prejudiced Europe. His is a tragic story, that of a man transformed by his military experience abroad. In the words of his brother Trenton, another voice in the draft that did not make it into the novel, Clay “left as one man and came back as another” (Phillips, *Draft* 52), which gives the narrative a very Faulknerian flavour, reminiscent of stories of soldiers returning damaged from the war. Having a peek into Clay’s narrative is not likely to change our reading of the published novel radically. But the benefit of looking at the draft lies in the fact that it encourages us to imaginatively flesh out Travis, which Phillips also suggests we do when he has his black GI ask Joyce in the novel “did I ever show you pictures of my home town? Or pictures of my folk?” (Phillips, *Crossing* 209).<sup>3</sup> This is very much what the draft is doing, giving us mental pictures of Travis’s life, particularly when he is on the other side of the Atlantic. It is also important to note that in the novel Phillips has Travis die in Italy rather than in the United States, which might be seen as a way of dignifying the soldier, since dying at war, in spite of the horror it involves (Phillips, *Crossing* 229), can nevertheless be regarded, as Clay himself points out in the draft, as “a form of honorable discharge” (Phillips, *Draft* 5). By contrast, Clay’s humiliating death in the United States, “snatched from [his] house by a torchlight gang, and [...] hung [...] outside the jailhouse, his body slowly twisting in the evening breeze” (Phillips, *Draft* 52), presents the young man as a helpless victim of racism only, not as an actor in a global conflict.

Recently, Caryl Phillips has written the script for a radio play based on the last section of *Crossing the River*. The manuscript of this latest production, also entitled “Somewhere in England,” will soon be part of the Beinecke archives and will be added to the already dense chorus of archival memory that accompanies the novel. What is worth noting at this stage is that, in terms of characterization, the 2016 radio play strikes a balance between the novel itself and the draft to which I have just referred. If Travis is made to die in Italy in this latest radio play, as in the novel, his voice is at least being heard. Of course this might be linked to the radiophonic medium, which relies almost exclusively on voices, as opposed to the written word for the novel, but the radio play allows us to discover more about his personality. Travis comes across here as an ambiguous figure for, if his voice is assertive and angry in his dealings with the segregated American Army, he sounds rather less confident when it comes to committing himself to Joyce. In the end, she still gets the vocal upper-hand because there is nothing much that Travis can do when faced with her colour-blind boldness. As a Black American, he “ain’t got no choice” in deciding his fate, which might be what his relative absence from the novel finally signifies for the reader, even if it has another meaning for the author of these texts.

If putting Caryl Phillips’s archives and *Crossing the River* together certainly confirms the emotional richness and the coherence of the author’s imaginary, it does not allow

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3. These questions also occur in the draft, but in a slightly different form: “did I ever show you pictures of my home town? Of my folk?” (53).

us to come up with definite answers to the many questions raised by this unusual, occasionally puzzling novel whose gaps and silences have been interpreted in various ways. Seen by some as mimetic of a broken and repressed history, they have been read by others as expressive of a universalist diasporic agenda that eventually reinstates “white subjects at the heart of narratives that, though overtly fragmented, are also structured by a containing, totalizing urge” (Goyal 21). The archives that I have used do not put an end to this debate but, by giving us access to the backstage of the novel, so to speak, they qualify some of the arguments presented by its detractors, notably concerning Travis’s quasi absence from the narrative or the lack of balance between black and white voices. They also provide us with clues that can help us to take a fresh look at the published text and tease out some of its most intriguing features, such as Travis’s quasi absence from the scene. Finally, while Phillips’s archives fill some of the blanks in the narrative, especially in relation to the three African children sold into slavery and their crossing of the Atlantic, they can also give us the necessary confidence to further imagine the complexity of characters that are depicted by Phillips’s concise and fragmented prose, for, far from revealing a lack, its superficial ellipses in fact contain a wealth of possibilities.

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