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## Looking Beyond, Shifting the Gaze: *Writers in Motion*

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### Itinerant Writers and Authentication

At the beginning of *An Unfinished Journey* (1986), Trinidadian-born Shiva Naipaul (1945-1985), who in the 1980s decided to write on Australia, tells us about the “curiosity teetering on suspicion” that usually meets “itinerant writers” when they set out to address a country or a society that is not obviously part of their ethnic or national background.<sup>1</sup> In a humorous but sensible tone, the prematurely deceased author views the cross-examination triggered by what some regard to be an unexpected artistic choice as an invitation “to categorise, to reduce to the abstractions of convenient, easily digested formulae an unprocessed and incomplete experience”.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, for him, the question “But do tell me why you chose [...] Australia of all places?”<sup>3</sup> is just a variation on the awkward but standard “Where’re you from?”<sup>4</sup> also addressed to him by two Australians on board the plane taking him to Sydney.

Without any doubt the writers tackled in this chapter, from the Naipaul brothers to Caryl Phillips (1958—) and Bernardine Evaristo (1959—), have all had to field similar queries about their origins, again and again. This might explain why these black and Asian British authors have opted to explore in their writing places that are beyond the binary identity framework imposed by colonialism — a framework which comprises their ancestral homelands, on the one hand, whether Africa, the Asian subcontinent, or the Caribbean, and on the other, Britain. After examining the general implications of such a transnational scope and a few significant examples of the genre, I will compare a selection of texts, which, in order to avoid generalisations, will be read with a view to highlighting their authors’ specific slant. The overarching argument will be that, in spite of — or perhaps thanks to — their ex-centric locations, the travel narratives discussed here have much to tell us about their authors, not only as writers in motion, but mainly as British writers attempting to come to terms with their own multifaceted postcolonial identities. One should keep in mind, however, that the works examined in this chapter are not emancipatory by default; they can

<sup>1</sup> Shiva Naipaul, “Why Australia?”, *An Unfinished Journey* (London: Abacus, 1986), 1-10; 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. See also Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 98.

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also display ambiguous overtones, as Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan have shown in their now classic study of the travel writing genre. So whereas travel narratives belong “to a wider structure of representation within which cultural affiliations [...] can be analyzed, questioned and reassessed”, they can in some cases, as we will see, also harbour “complacent, even nostalgically retrograde” values.<sup>5</sup>

British black and Asian writers are certainly not the only artists who have attempted to escape the postcolonial identitarian straitjacket whereby authors from former colonies are automatically aligned with the locales in which they have roots or where they have settled. As Sarah Brouillette reminds us, there has been a resistance to such reductive “biographical positioning” among postcolonial writers.<sup>6</sup> She gives the example of Zulfikar Ghose, who has refused in some of his writing to identify directly with his native South Asia and has focused on South America instead. This, Brouillette argues, might account for his relative absence from critical radars. She further views Ghose’s blurring of affiliative lines as a means on his part of critiquing a fashionable brand of cosmopolitanism that paradoxically goes hand in hand with an insistence on biographical “authentication”.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Caribbean Legacy of Cosmopolitanism and Travel Writing**

While some of these comments may apply to the black and Asian British literary scene, it is also necessary to look at it from a more specific perspective, one which involves cosmopolitanism too, but of a different, more benign kind than the one targeted by Ghose. In *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Barbadian George Lamming famously declares that Caribbean history, painful though it was, has made “The West Indian [...] the most cosmopolitan man in the world”.<sup>8</sup> This Caribbean legacy of multiculturalism, and the interest in foreign cultures it has engendered, might be a first way of explaining why there is a majority of artists from the region among the “writers in motion” at the heart of this chapter.<sup>9</sup> Jamaican-born Andrew Salkey has addressed this inherited sense of placelessness and adaptability in some of his work, especially his *Anancy, Traveller* (1992), a collection of stories around the figure of the legendary spider of West Indian folklore. As a trickster and a shape-shifter, Anancy is at ease everywhere and, following his forced transportation to the New World, cunningly adapts to various environments and displays in all situations a

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1998), viii-ix, viii.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Market Place* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>8</sup> George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Allison & Busby, [1960] 1984), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Exceptions to the overwhelming Caribbean presence among “roaming” writers include Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Opposite House* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), a novel with links to Cuba, and Salman Rushdie’s *The Jaguar Smile* (London: Picador, 1987), a non-fiction book about Nicaragua.

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worldly-wise mind.<sup>10</sup> But there might also be a less positive side to these travelling writers' sometimes obsessive need to engage with other cultures, one which still relates to their complex backgrounds but has more to do with their sense of not belonging in Britain than with a sense of rootlessness inherited from history. The consequence of such a feeling of exclusion can indeed result for the artist, especially when foreign-born, in an imperative to sort out this identitarian predicament or, as St Kitts-born Caryl Phillips puts it in his first travelogue, *The European Tribe* (1987), to "reconcile the contradiction of feeling British while being constantly told in many subtle and unsubtle ways that I did not belong".<sup>11</sup> What better way of doing this than looking elsewhere and comparing one's sense of domestic outsidership with what is taking place in societies outside one's immediate national or cultural remit? The reflections generated by Phillips's wanderings around the old continent in the 1980s not only allowed him to take the full measure of its colonial legacy of racism but also to maintain that, for all their invisibility, black people were "an inextricable part" of Europe, and as such had a moral right to be heard and participate in its future.<sup>12</sup> Such an inherently protesting tone explains why this book has been described by Holland and Huggan as a form of "*counter* travel writing" because it questions, if only in its title, "the privileges that accrue historically to the genre".<sup>13</sup> Recently, Phillips has revisited this early essay and concluded that were he to make the same journey again today, he might very well "arrive at basically the same conclusions", in spite of the dramatic changes that have taken place on the continent.<sup>14</sup> Testifying to Phillips's ongoing sense of realism, this pessimistic comment nevertheless also demonstrates how pioneering and perceptive his provocative travel essay was, and still is, in a Europe that, he writes, "has chosen either not to see us, or to judge us as an insignificant minority, or as a temporary, but dismissible mistake".<sup>15</sup>

While Phillips is possibly one of the most conspicuous representatives of this cosmopolitan streak among contemporary postcolonial British writers, he is neither the first not the only one to step outside his identity comfort zone in search for answers to what he has called the "high anxiety of belonging".<sup>16</sup> An early example of this approach, and possibly a model for Phillips's European travelogue, is that of Jamaican Claude McKay's *A Long Way from Home* (1937), a narrative that takes its author to Russia, France, and Morocco and is written in the tradition of African American autobiographies "in which more intimate aspects of the autobiographer's personal experience are subordinated to social commentary".<sup>17</sup> This combination of a personal quest with the examination of larger societal questions in the

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Salkey, *Anancy, Traveller* (London : Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Caryl Phillips, *The European Tribe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Caryl Phillips, "Revisiting the European Tribe", *Wasafiri*, 29.3 (2014); 4-7; 6.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, *European Tribe*, 128-9.

<sup>16</sup> Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), 303-9.

<sup>17</sup> St Clair Drake, "Introduction" in Claude Mc Kay, *A Long Way from Home* (London: Pluto [1937] 1985), ix-xxi; x.

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context of travelling can be found in several books published over the years by peripatetic black and Asian British writers, always providing challenging reflections on their own brand of Britishness. One example is that of Andrew Salkey's diaries, both *Havana Journal* (1971) and *Georgetown Journal* (1972), which take the author, as a visitor curious for Otherness, to other Caribbean societies than the one he grew up in. Interestingly, his encounters with Cubans and Guyanese people trigger thought-provoking considerations about class and race but also about Caribbeanness and literature, and shed light on the writer's own complex identity as a British intellectual of Jamaican descent born in Panama.

### Focus on Three Travel Writers

The two Naipaul brothers, Shiva and V. S., are also well-known practitioners of the travel narrative genre. Both have written books that look beyond the Trinidad of their birth, the India of their ancestors, and the Britain where they live, and which, as such, can provide us with insights into their own sense of being in the world.

#### *Of "Full-Blooded" Indian Ancestry: Shiva Naipaul*

Shiva Naipaul's last, posthumous book is a collection of essays that is partly devoted, as mentioned above, to his visit to Australia. He also has an earlier travelogue to his name, *North of South: An African Journey* (1978), where he recounts his tour of eastern Africa. In his short introduction he explains how this volume, "whose nature and purpose might so easily be misunderstood", arose from his "own concerns — or, if you prefer, obsessions" with politics, colonialism, its impact on identity, and "the relationship of black and white and brown", as he wrote to his English publisher in the early stages of the project.<sup>18</sup> In these preliminary intentions Shiva Naipaul seems animated by a desire to come to a personal understanding of other peoples, and eventually of himself, as a man who had "inherited no culture; no particular outlook; no particular form. [... who] was nothing" when he left his native Trinidad at the age of eighteen.<sup>19</sup> The final product, however, does not live up to these worthy expectations, for, to quote Tom Odhiambo, Shiva Naipaul's African travel piece "follows faithfully in the footsteps of those Western writers [...] preceding it who had constructed an essentialised Africa using images of absence of progress, degeneration and primitivity".<sup>20</sup> Shiva Naipaul's dependence on colonial prejudices to represent the continent results in a binary vision, dismissing blacks and whites as enemies who "deserved each other" for, he writes, "Civilized man, it seems, can no more cope with prolonged exposure to

<sup>18</sup> Shiva Naipaul, *North of South: An African Journey* (London: Penguin [1978] 1980), 13, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Odhiambo, "Holding the Traveller's Gaze Accountable in Shiva Naipaul's *North of South: An African Journey*", *Social Dynamics*, 30.1 (2004): 51-68; 53.

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the primitive than the primitive can cope with prolonged exposure to him".<sup>21</sup> This embittered conclusion, which conveys Shiva Naipaul's distrust of cross-cultural relationships but also his realisation of the marginalisation of Indians, and therefore himself, in the black versus white confrontation, is compounded by the fact that Africans in his book are not really given a chance to speak for themselves. Such an imposition of voicelessness seems to be in contradiction to Shiva Naipaul's indignation in *An Unfinished Journey* where he deplores the "Great Australian Silence" that was enforced by white settlers on the Aboriginal population.<sup>22</sup> At the same time he advises the indigenous Australians "to break free from the sublimated racism that would imprison people in their imagined essence", for, he concludes, "Racial metaphysics is a cul-de-sac".<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, he applies this reflection to himself as well and offers a frank but ironical appraisal of his own identitarian quandaries:

I am, after all, a man of "full-blooded" Indian ancestry. Should I therefore put on a dhoti? Should I take myself up to a cave in the foothills of the Himalayas and surrender myself to the contemplation of the transmigration of souls? After a century of separation from the motherland, a century of confusion and disintegration, my racial essence has offered no clues to the dilemmas I have had to face.<sup>24</sup>

While the younger Naipaul brother's ambiguous travel narratives may be an index to his own development from a rather binary view of history in *North of South* to a subtler vision in *An Unfinished Journey*, they also point to the difficulty of achieving self-knowledge, especially as a diasporic individual, and they are suggestive of an unresolved tension. As a traveller in search of self-definition he is indeed divided between a genuine desire to "clear up misconceptions" about the postcolonial world,<sup>25</sup> and a tendency to regard his subjects with some contempt, an attitude that often translates into a scathing tone reminiscent of that adopted by his elder brother in his own travelogues.

In an essay from *An Unfinished Journey*, entitled "My Brother and I", Shiva Naipaul comments on his relationship with his more famous sibling and expresses his objection to being regarded as his double, in a form of "doppelgänger absolutism", adding: "Our being brothers is interesting. But it is not intrinsically so. In the end, it is the work that matters, not the relationship".<sup>26</sup> This remark about establishing problematic genealogical connections in the literary field should alert us to the danger of placing writers together because of their common origins; it also highlights the need to look at the texts themselves instead of banking on biographical clues. So even if it can be said that the two brothers' tone is at first sight strangely similar in its bluntness and disregard for political correctness, it is nevertheless necessary to take a closer look at some of the texts where V. S. Naipaul discusses his interest in societies that are not part of his own heritage, as these can enlighten

<sup>21</sup> Naipaul, *North of South*, 347.

<sup>22</sup> Naipaul, "Flight into blackness" in *Unfinished Journey*, 11, 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Stuart, "Introduction" in Naipaul, *Unfinished Journey*, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> Shiva Naipaul, "My brother and I" in *Unfinished Journey*, 28, 29.

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us about his sense of himself as a British writer of Indo-Trinidadian descent.

### *V. S. Naipaul's Exceptionalism*

Like his younger brother, V. S. Naipaul (1931-2018) wrote non-fiction about travelling to Africa, but his posture comes across as more confident than Shiva's. An interesting example is his essay "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro", which was published as one of the two narratives making up *Finding the Centre* (1984) and relates the Nobel Prize-winner's short stay in Ivory Coast, at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> According to the foreword, the account of this visit "shows this writer (...) travelling, adding to his knowledge of the world, exposing himself to new people and new relationships" but, as is the case with his brother, these opening remarks are rather deceptive.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the text does not reveal the traveller's thirst for newness as much as his obsession with the idea of Africa as a place imbued with magic, and as a society viscerally attached to the "realm of the spirit", whereby, in the older Naipaul's book, it is refused access to reason and modernity.<sup>29</sup> Instead of trying to meet locals, V. S. Naipaul spends much of his time with expatriates, who more often than not come up with statements that confirm his own antiquated and biased vision of the place that, he claims, he is trying to get to know. For example, he is told about "severed heads" allegedly used in the context of sacrifices, and he hardly questions the veracity of this urban legend with Conradian echoes.<sup>30</sup> But, as David J. Mickelsen rightly points out, the outcome of V. S. Naipaul's disquisition on Ivory Coast is "autobiographical rather than anthropological"; that is it reveals more about its author than the society he describes.<sup>31</sup> This confirms the close links that bind travel writing to life-writing, two genres which, in Bart Moore-Gilbert's words, "traditionally involve personal quests, whether literal or metaphorical".<sup>32</sup> With this in mind, it is interesting to focus briefly on the expatriates mentioned by V. S. Naipaul, who, he writes, "are not unlike myself. They were trying to find order in their world, looking for the center."<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, what the author says about one of them, Janet, could very well apply to V. S. Naipaul himself. Of Guyanese origin, Janet is black, beautiful, and classy, and speaks unproblematically of herself as "someone 'from England'".<sup>34</sup> Significantly, like V. S. Naipaul in a sense, "she had no anxieties about 'belonging'", the only certainty being that she does not belong to barbaric Africa or to the equally problematic Caribbean, but to the civilized

<sup>27</sup> V. S. Naipaul, "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" in *Finding the Centre: Two narratives* (Harmondsworth: Penguin [1984] 1985), 73-160.

<sup>27</sup> V. S. Naipaul. "Author's foreword" in *Finding the Center*, 9-12; 10.

<sup>28</sup> Naipaul, "Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro", 130.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>30</sup> David J. Mickelsen, "V. S. Naipaul's 'The crocodiles of Yamoussoukro'", *World Literature Written in English*, 27.2 (1987): 269-74; 269.

<sup>32</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation* (London: Routledge, 2009), 83.

<sup>33</sup> Naipaul, "Author's Foreword", 10.

<sup>34</sup> Naipaul, "Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro", 123.

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world.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, in his travel writings, V. S. Naipaul claims for himself a form of exceptionalism that separates him from people of African descent, unless they are of a sophisticated kind, like Janet. This contempt is particularly visible in the way he represents some African American women visiting Ivory Coast: "They had also come to Africa as to the motherland. They were ill-favoured, many of them unusually fat, their grossness like a form of self-abuse, some hideously bewigged, some dumpling-legged in short, wide, flowered skirts. They were like women brought together by a common physical despair".<sup>36</sup> While this quotation betrays V. S. Naipaul's profound disdain for women, it also conveys his irritation at African American returnees who visit their ancestral continent in the hope of civilising it.

### *Caryl Phillips's Engagement with Returnees*

Caryl Phillips has expressed a similar exasperation at the cultural arrogance of African Americans and Jamaicans going on a pilgrimage to West Africa in *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), a book-length essay where he explores the notion of "home" by visiting Liverpool in England, Elmina in Ghana, and Charleston in South Carolina, three places historically associated with the slave trade but not always recognised as such today. After attending a Ghanaian cultural festival celebrating "the arts, creativity and intellectual achievements of the Pan African world"<sup>37</sup> Phillips lashes out at

People of the diaspora who expect the continent to solve whatever psychological problems they possess. People of the diaspora who dress the part, have their hair done, buy beads, and fill their spiritual "fuel tank" in preparation for the return journey to "Babylon". They have deep wounds that need to be healed, but [...] Africa cannot cure. Africa cannot make anybody feel whole. Africa is not a psychiatrist.<sup>38</sup>

Although Phillips's observations, like Naipaul's, are critical of certain manifestations of pan-Africanism, they do not make fun of the physical features of his targets. Indeed, his remarks focus on what the returnees do rather than what they look like and, by implication, Phillips's less essentialist comments do not suggest the same desire as Naipaul's to mark himself off from all people of African descent whom he meets during his visit and who do not display evidence of what he regards as civilisation.

### *V. S. Naipaul and Caryl Phillips on South Carolina*

It would be interesting to pursue the comparison between these two key figures of postcolonial travel writing in Britain by examining their respective approaches to the south

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 123. Note how this phrase echoes Phillips's own "high anxiety of belonging", which conveys a form of apprehension that V. S. Naipaul does not seem to share.

<sup>36</sup> Naipaul, "Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro", 157.

<sup>37</sup> Phillips, *Atlantic Sound*, 133.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 172-3.

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of the United States, in particular to Charleston, a place that they have both visited and commented upon and which, on the surface at least, and unlike Africa for Phillips, does not directly relate to the authors' roots, in spite of the city's often concealed Black Atlantic identity. Putting side by side these two commentators' impressions of Charleston can provide us with a clearer sense of their use of the travelogue genre as a tool for personal quest and for the exploration of general issues relating to society and identity, while at the same time enlightening us on the differences that may exist between their world visions

V. S. Naipaul writes about the capital of South Carolina in *A Turn in the South* (1989), a book that is devoted to the racial questions plaguing the south of the United States and is obsessed with the irrationality that, for Naipaul, characterises the actors of the historical drama that still shapes the former slave states. The second chapter of *A Turn in the South* focuses on Charleston. In typically Naipaulian fashion the author's main informant is a white man, Jack Leland, a descendant of an old Charlestonian family that is now impoverished but looks with nostalgia to the splendours of the past, to a time when it owned plantation houses and the human "cattle" that went with them. Significantly entitled "The Religion of the Past", the chapter is essentially made up of Leland's explanations about life in the area, then and now, but with surprisingly few interventions from Naipaul himself, even when Leland's statements are clearly racist. We are told, for example, of Leland's ancestors' generosity to the newly arrived slaves, whom they "kindly" helped to adapt to their new surroundings by asking an older, trusted slave to "present the new life to [them] as one of ease and plenty", which in Leland's mother-in-law's terms "showed the trouble planters went to, to make things easier for their slaves".<sup>39</sup> Should Naipaul's lack of reaction to such pronouncements be viewed as reserve or silent approbation? If Naipaul does not openly question Southern prejudice, he nonetheless registers black people's "spectral presences",<sup>40</sup> "the lack of reference to Negroes" in white Charlestonian society,<sup>41</sup> but does not do anything to remedy this invisibility or silencing, for example by making sure that he also interviews someone from the black community (which he does in other parts of the book). One feels that here Naipaul is almost sorry for the embattled white people who, another white informant tells him, "have this terrible burden of an alien population in their midst", a remark that has been uttered with variations by chauvinist politicians elsewhere, including Britain.<sup>42</sup> What is interesting in Naipaul's perception of the American South is that it mirrors his own vision of a racially and socially divided society, which is past-oriented and scared of mixing.<sup>43</sup> The historical links between Charleston and the Caribbean, especially Barbados and Trinidad, that Naipaul uncovers on his visit to the South recall for him the place he was born

<sup>39</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *A turn in the South* (New York: Vintage [1989] 1990), 82.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Lewis, "Slavery, Memory, and the History of the 'Atlantic Now': Charleston, South Carolina and Global Racial/Economic Hierarchy", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45.2 (2009), 125-35; 125.

<sup>41</sup> Naipaul, *Turn in the South*, 104.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



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in, which, he concludes, “came to nothing” because “the slave-owners or their successors had finally to go”.<sup>44</sup> In other words, “looking beyond” is also for Naipaul a paradoxical chance to reconsider his native land. As Arnold Rampersad points out, in *A Turn in the South* (with, he adds, the possible exception of *The Middle Passage*), “Naipaul has never been closer to home in his travel writing.”<sup>45</sup>

In his review of Naipaul’s *A Turn in the South*, Caryl Phillips regrets the limitations of his elder’s approach to the South, which he finds uninspiring and “wistful”.<sup>46</sup> Predictably, the younger writer’s account of his visit to Charleston in his *Atlantic Sound* projects a more ambiguous, less static image of the capital of South Carolina, one in which the slave past still plays a significant role but which also gives us a glimpse of a less racially divided present and future, where young white and black people, “dress[ed] alike”, attend the same African and Caribbean art festival.<sup>47</sup> If the difference between the two perspectives, Naipaul’s and Phillips’s, might in part be due to the fact that the former’s trip to the South took place some ten years before the latter’s, it should mostly be linked to Phillips’s narrative focus: a controversial figure from Charleston, Judge Waties Waring, who died in 1968 (and is only given a passing mention in Naipaul’s account).<sup>48</sup> Coming from a privileged Charlestonian background, very much like Naipaul’s interviewees, Waring, together with his wife Elizabeth, a liberal divorcee from the North, was socially ostracised by his community because of his rulings in favour of equality between blacks and whites. As a man able to go beyond “the prejudices of his birth and status”,<sup>49</sup> this judge provides Phillips with an interesting entering wedge into South Carolinian society, for it allows him to challenge its apparent stagnancy while also enabling him to express his own faith in human beings’ ability to overcome the injustices inherited from history and to evolve towards a fairer world. Which is not to suggest that Phillips’s view is unquestioningly optimistic, for it is important in this respect to register the many questions that remain in his text, most notably concerning the motivations underlying the close friendship between the judge’s wife and a black woman, Ruby Cornwell, who also features among Phillips’s informants. What is certain, however, is that unlike Naipaul’s view of the American South, which, in line with his own conceptions of identity, is essentially inward-looking and imperialist in spirit, Phillips’s is more open and testifies to what Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund have defined as travel writing’s potential for “transformative dialogue, one that is rooted in one place but that opens up to other places for the future”.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>45</sup> Arnold Rampersad, “V. S. Naipaul: Turning in the South”, *Raritan*, 10.1 (Summer 1990), 24-47.

<sup>46</sup> Caryl Phillips, “The Traveler Grows Wistful on His Last Turn: *A Turn in the South* by V. S. Naipaul”, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 March 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Phillips, *Atlantic Sound*, 211.

<sup>48</sup> Naipaul, *Turn in the Sound*, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Phillips, *Atlantic Sound*, 192.

<sup>50</sup> Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund (eds.), *Postcolonial Travel Writing Critical Explorations* (Basingstoke:

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## Travelling Fiction

This chapter has so far concentrated on non-fiction, which is the predominant genre in which black and Asian British writers, overwhelmingly male ones too, have explored territories located outside the binary framework of postcolonial identity.<sup>51</sup> Yet black and Asian British fiction has also been the site of such spatial and cultural “transgression”, keeping in mind that overlaps between non-fictional and fictional writing are not uncommon when writers “look beyond”. An early example of this would be Jan Carew’s *Moscow in not my Mecca* (1964), a novel which tells the story of a Guyanese student sent to Russia on a scholarship provided by the Communist Party. Echoing its author’s own experience as a West Indian scholar in Prague in the late 1940s, this text offers a reflection on the racism experienced by black men outside the colonial context and dismantles the myth of the Communist brotherhood that had encouraged them to go and live beyond the Iron Curtain.<sup>52</sup>

Unsurprisingly, some of the writers discussed above have also written novels expressing their interest in how societies outside their obvious lineage can provide a foil to their own identity dilemmas. One thinks of V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* (1979), a novel with Conradian ramifications taking place in post-independence Congo and reflecting some of the neo-colonialist ideas that the author had already put forward in his essays on Africa, as suggested earlier in this chapter.<sup>53</sup> Caryl Phillips too has written novels set in countries to which he is not historically linked, but which can play a meaningful part in his ongoing study of displacement and his creative exploration of the rejection of one human by another. This is the case of *The Nature of Blood* (1997), a structurally daring novel which juxtaposes stories taking place in Germany, Italy, and Israel and which allows Phillips to explore Europe’s age-old fear of the Other that resulted in the Jewish Holocaust.<sup>54</sup>

## Transcultural Flows in Evaristo’s *Lara*

This chapter concludes by focusing on Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* (1997, revised 2009), a novel in blank verse exploring its eponymous heroine’s complex transnational heritage, which, very much like the author’s, includes German, Irish, Nigerian, and Brazilian roots.<sup>55</sup> Lara has to face racism in her native London, where even one of her closest friends, a white girl called Susie, asks her “Where’re you from, La?”<sup>56</sup> In response to this question (which, as

Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 10.

<sup>51</sup> Holland and Huggan have underlined the male predominance in travel writing, pointing out that travel writing can nevertheless “transgress [...] the gender codes of heroic male adventure, clearing a space in the process for the subjectivities of women, travelers”, *Tourists with Typewriters*, 110.

<sup>52</sup> Jan Carew, *Moscow is not my Mecca* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964).

<sup>53</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

<sup>54</sup> Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

<sup>55</sup> Bernardine Evaristo, *Lara* (1997, rev. edn, Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

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suggested at the beginning of this chapter, haunts most of the texts discussed here) and propelled by a desire to put together the pieces of her personal puzzle, Lara travels to Africa then to South America in search of her father's family. However, if her trips to the lands of her ancestors are fruitful in the sense that they provide her with self-knowledge and an awareness of her Black Atlantic connections, it seems that it is a journey taken with her friend Trish across Europe and ending in Turkey, thus outside her own biographical strictures, that proves the most enlightening for her. Acquiring a better understanding of where she belongs. Lara concludes: "We become more British. Trish and I, darker with the Turkish sun, yet less / aware of race for we are simply: Ingiltere."<sup>57</sup>

Starting with its protagonist's full Yoruba name, Omolara, which means "the family are like water", *Lara* is significantly replete with aquatic images: references to rivers, seas, and islands abound.<sup>58</sup> In keeping with this central metaphor, the novel promotes a vision of identity which is fluid and refuses to be contained within traditional national and ethnic parameters, a rationale also confirmed by the novel's generic uncertainties, its protagonist's multicultural experiences, and its non-linear narrative which gives voice to a myriad of characters outside Lara. This allows Mark U. Stein to conclude that "Lara's travels are marked by [...] transformations [...] Like water, Lara is evolving, in flux. She is not *one* thing [...]; her cultural identity is relational; the tenets of constructivism are driven home by her experience".<sup>59</sup> More generally, Evaristo's novel celebrates Britain's age-old transcultural nature and thereby exposes "the fallacy of notions of original belonging and undoubted origin" which have regularly been used to circumscribe the British writers of immigrant heritage mentioned in this chapter.<sup>60</sup> Clearly, then, like Shiva Naipaul's, V. S. Naipaul's, and Caryl Phillips's writing, Evaristo's extols the virtues of reaching beyond one's limited identity framework, yet her world vision is more optimistic and more humorous than those of her male fellow writers, whose travel accounts and novels tend to look at the darker side of human nature and provide little redeeming compensation for it, especially in the case of the elder author from Trinidad. There is also something iconoclastic, almost trickster-like, in the way Evaristo's *Lara* handles the travel genre, which provides a twist on traditional travel accounts and demonstrates that form itself can be a way of looking beyond and being in motion.

If the texts discussed here, both fiction and non-fiction, are ideal means for their authors to come to terms with their own identity conundrums, they are also timely reminders for readers not only of the futility of authenticity, but also of the UK's rich cultural potential: not just because of its imperial past, it has access to incredible though

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>59</sup> Mark U. Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 86.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

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all-too-often ignored cultural and human wealth. These texts, whether of the progressive or of the more conservative kind, all provide us with what John McLeod has called, in relation to Evaristo's *Lara*, a "transcultural optic",<sup>61</sup> that is a lens through which we can better perceive the political stakes of Britain's problematic relationship with those of its inhabitants who are regarded as racially, ethnically, or historically Other. And at a time when Brexit could see Britain close its doors to the outside world, such concerns are more important than ever before.

**Erratum:** p. 2, Andrew Salkey is not Jamaican-born, as he was born in Panama, but he is of Jamaican descent.

<sup>61</sup> John McLeod, *Postcolonial London : Rewriting the Metropolis* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 183.