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**“Encountering Chapter One”
Caryl Phillips in Conversation
with Bénédicte Ledent**

First Eccles Centre Plenary Lecture at the 43rd
Annual Conference of the Society for Caribbean Studies

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Bénédicte Ledent: Good evening. My name is Bénédicte Ledent, from the University of Liège in Belgium. It's my pleasure and privilege today to be chairing this plenary in which I'll be in conversation with Caryl Phillips. Before I introduce him, I would like to thank the organisers of the 43rd Annual Conference of the Society for Caribbean Studies, particularly Pat Noxolo, and the Institute for Black Atlantic Research at the University of Central Lancashire, who are hosting us here in Preston, and the Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library, which is sponsoring this event.

Caryl Phillips' impressive literary career started almost 40 years ago with three stage plays, the first of which, *Strange Fruit*, premiered in 1980. This play is now being performed again at the Bush Theatre in London, to much critical acclaim. It's a text of great emotional and political power which deals with the inter-generational tensions within a one-parent family of Caribbean descent, living in England in the 1970s. It contains, in a nutshell, several of the universal themes that Caryl Phillips has addressed again and again in the 11 novels that he has published to date: not only race, gender and class, but also how migration and the past inform the power dynamics in the family circle and in society in general. Caryl Phillips' novels cover a wide-ranging variety of contexts, including the Caribbean migration to England, the Transatlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, and the life of such famous figures as Bert Williams and Jean Rhys. Besides stage plays and fiction, he has also published five volumes of non-fiction, numerous essays, and is the author of many radio plays and scripts for television and the cinema. In addition to this thematic, generic, spatial and temporal scope, he stands out among his contemporaries for the elegance of his writing, the audacity of his formal choices, his empathetic approach to the complexities of the human condition, and his perceptive and relentless exploration of our globalised world. You can recognise all these qualities in his latest novel, *A View of*

the Empire at Sunset, which was published in 2018, and which we will be discussing further in the interview. This fiction is an imaginative rendering of some episodes in the life of Jean Rhys, starting with her childhood in her native Dominica and ending with her last visit to the Caribbean in 1936. It's a novel of extraordinary psychological depth and, like other works by Caryl Phillips, it not only bears re-reading, but begs such a practice from its readers because it's only then that you can grasp all its subtle layers.

I'm very grateful to Caryl Phillips for agreeing to answer my questions today. Please join me in thanking him for taking part in this conversation.

[Applause]

Ledent (cont): Caryl, in the context of the 43rd Annual Conference for the Society for Caribbean Studies it seems appropriate to focus this conversation on the Caribbean dimension of your work. You were brought up and educated in England, where you arrived with your parents when you were just four months old. However, you were born in St Kitts, a small island in the Caribbean with a population, if I'm not mistaken, of less than 40,000 people. So, my first question is: how has your birth in St Kitts affected the writer that you have become?

Caryl Phillips: Well, first, thank you to the Eccles Centre. Thank you to Alan Rice, who is an organizational powerhouse. Thank you, Béné, for doing this interview. And thank you to Pat Noxolo for the invitation to take part in this Caribbean conference. I grew up in Leeds and I remember being about eight or nine and the school teacher coming in to the classroom and saying, 'Was anybody here not born in England? I don't imagine anybody here was not born in England but I have to ask'. I gingerly put my hand up and said, 'I was born in St Kitts', and she looked at me rather quizzically and she then wrote down something on a piece of paper that no doubt went straight to the Home Office.

I was aware from a very early age that there was a difference between myself and my brothers – who were all born in England – by virtue of the fact that I was born in a place that I could neither see nor imagine. In this sense, the Caribbean had a powerful effect on me. I didn't know what to make of it, but I never viewed it as any kind of romantic refuge, which was surprising, given the degree to which I felt an 'outsider' in Leeds. Remember, I grew up in the most parochial county in England - Yorkshire; at the time, a very inward-looking, reactionary place. It was a county that you couldn't play cricket for unless you were born there. When they did change that stipulation, the cricketer who first came as an 'overseas player' to play in Yorkshire was Richie Richardson, who's an Antiguan, and he pretty much had a nervous breakdown; the atmosphere affected him very badly.

BL: Did your parents talk to you about St Kitts?

CP: No, because, like most first-generation migrant parents from wherever, they wanted to protect their children. They didn't want to talk too much about the home country, for they didn't want their children to be confused. That's part of the paradox of being a first-generation migrant who is also a parent: you want your children to assimilate into the country, and you want your children to feel proprietorial ownership of the society in a way that you don't. But you don't want to burden them with the idea that they have *two* homes. So, my parents were quite careful, I think, about telling me that if anybody called you – not if, when – when anybody called you a 'nigger' or told you to 'fuck off back to where you come from', you must tell them you're from England: tell them you're from here; tell them that this is your home; be very insistent about that. So, they didn't offer me the possibility of my building up a picture of another *home* by saying, 'Well, these are some photographs of St Kitts; this is what your grandparents look like; this is the house in which you were born; this is

what it all looked like.' They didn't give me the succour and comfort of an alternative world because they were very determined that I should fight the good fight, if you like, on English soil.

BL: You had a chance to go back to your birthplace just after your first play *Strange Fruit* had been produced in 1980. What effect did this visit have on you and your creative imagination? How formative was it to go back at that stage?

CP: I went back to the Caribbean for the first time when I was 22. I'd written a play in 1979 and I promised myself that if it got produced then, with the money that I might earn from the play, I would take myself and my mother back to the Caribbean; and so that's what happened. The Sheffield Crucible produced *Strange Fruit* in the autumn of 1980 and that Christmas my mother and I went back to the Caribbean. And I remember my mother's panic very well. As the British Airways jet landed in Antigua and we prepared to change to get a much smaller plane to St Kitts, she began to talk. She effectively unleashed a torrent of words. But it was too late, because in 20 minutes time we were going to land in St Kitts and I was going to be confronted by the reality that she'd held from me for 22 years. So, I knew before we landed in St Kitts that this visit was going to be important. Two weeks later, the night before we left St Kitts, I was upset because I now understood that it was necessary for me to come to terms with this place – this small island of my birth. In fact, I would never be able to write with any conviction until I did so. After all, this was the place that all four of my grandparents came from; this was the place that my parents came from; this was the place where I was born; this was Chapter One. I could sit in London or Leeds and imagine Chapter One, but I'd just encountered Chapter One and I didn't understand it. So, I knew I would have to come back to the Caribbean, and to St Kitts in particular. In order to understand myself I had to understand this place. And,

of course, I had to understand who I was in order to write properly. This being the case, the trip to St. Kitts in December 1980 was probably the most important journey I've ever made.

BL: A turning point. And at the end of the 80s, you actually lived in St Kitts for a couple of years. Was this longer stay different from the first shorter visit you had made?

CP: Yes, every year between 1980 – when I first went there – and 1988, I would try to travel to St Kitts at least once or twice a year. I was there in 1983 when St Kitts became independent: I was standing right by the flag when the Union Jack came down and the flag of St Kitts went up, and I saw how bored Princess Margaret looked! I was five yards away from her and she couldn't have looked more disinterested if she'd tried. I was there at the first playing of the St Kitts national anthem; my cousin wrote it. I soon discovered that nearly everybody was my cousin! During those years I would find any excuse I could to go back to St Kitts. As I said, I was there in 1983 for independence because I was the BBC correspondent. Strangely enough, if you look in the archives you'll discover that I even wrote the report of the independence celebrations for *The Times* newspaper. I would do anything then to make some money so I could buy a ticket to return; basically I was hustling! I was doing what most writers have to do when climbing the lower slopes of their careers; hustle. However, towards the end of the 1980s, I realised that I wanted to go back to St Kitts and try and live there for a more protracted period of time. In Britain, Mrs Thatcher had been elected Prime Minister for the third time and it struck me that this was getting a bit silly. I also felt that I was becoming too visible in Britain. I was in danger of being on the media speed dial. If anybody threw a bottle or a brick in Brixton or in Toxteth or in Tottenham the BBC would call me to see what I thought of it. I knew what I thought of it, but I felt in danger of becoming something other than a writer. So, I just

thought, between rampant Thatcherism and excessive visibility, I should leave. I was also trying to write a novel at that time called *Cambridge*, which is deeply set in the fabric of the Caribbean – I thought I should go and live in St Kitts for a couple of years and so I did.

BL: Would you be able to say what kind of impact this longer stay had on your writing. It was not just thematic, was it?

CP: No.

BL: It's also your world view that was affected by your stay there, don't you think?

CP: Well, living in the Caribbean enabled me to begin to feel comfortable with the reality of the region. Throughout the 1980s, like a lot of black British people, or diasporan people, my relationship to the Caribbean was somewhat tangential. I'd go there, I'd be walking down the street, but I'm walking a bit too quickly, and the locals are thinking, 'Ah, English'. Also, I'm dressing slightly differently, so they can tell I'm some kind of stranger. I was always eager to feel a sense of comfort and belonging, but I didn't know the names of the trees, and I didn't know the names of the fruit. I refused to fake a Caribbean accent because that's just vulgar; that's ridiculous. But if I'm going to belong, let alone write about the society, I knew I would need to know what sugar cane looks like. I would need to know something about the different types of palm tree. I would need to know what a mango tree looks like; that's what a guava looks like; that's what a hibiscus is, you know. And you only get that by protracted exposure. You don't get that by two weeks on the island with a return ticket. You get that by making an investment. The Caribbean is not there to solve the psychological problems of diasporan Caribbean people who visit for a short-term fix of 'home'; that's not the role of the Caribbean. The Caribbean has its own problems. I knew I would have to make an effort to learn what things were called and make an effort to invest in the region in a

way which you don't if you have that return ticket tucked away in your back pocket.

BL: And what about form? Do you think that living in the Caribbean somehow impacted the structure of your writing and in what sense?

CP: I was already a little bit suspicious of narrative structures which suggest unity and belonging; structures which effectively move along with a kind of Dickensian sense of confident belonging. I'm an immigrant, and therefore my identity – like so many other people's identities – is fractured across national, cultural and racial boundaries. I can't write singular narratives which suggest unquestioned participation in the manner of a Jane Austen or a George Eliot or a Thomas Hardy; notice I didn't say Conrad. I can't do that because that doesn't represent me. So, I have to look to narrative forms that suggest both unity and fracture; both cohesion *and* dissonance. I was doing that before I went to live in the Caribbean. But living in the Caribbean enabled me to see bridges and tunnels between the Caribbean and Britain, the Caribbean and Canada, the Caribbean and the United States, and, obviously, the Caribbean and Africa, and the Caribbean and Madeira – which is where my mother's father is from – and the Caribbean and India, which is where my father's mother is from. These bridges and tunnels feed into the structure of what I write and how I think and how I conceive of form as a novelist. My sojourn in the Caribbean at the end of the eighties convinced me that the only way for me to write was to not be afraid of discontinuity in narrative form.

BL: Sure. Now, I'm going to quote you...

CP: Uh-oh.

BL: An article you published in 1997 – and the title is quite telling, it is 'More to the Caribbean than Beaches'. In that article you wrote: 'The Caribbean offers the quintessentially postmodern, multiracial, multicultural model that Europe

and the United States are now grappling to come to terms with.' My question is, do you think that the Caribbean can be a form of social lab, able to teach the West how to deal with multiculturalism? And in that case, isn't there a danger in idealising the Caribbean in that way?

CP: I have no idealisation about the Caribbean at all. What you have throughout the islands, is people thrown together from different backgrounds who have been forced to get on in some way. And it's been – and it continues to be – problematic. It's involved genocide; it's involved huge amounts of prejudice and racial and social inequality. It's not too different from what you have in the United States of America. However, unlike the United States – where there was 3,000 miles, if you like, for people to move around and find corners in which they might sequester themselves and pretend that they'd found the New World – the Caribbean islands are *small* and people have been forced up against each other in a way they haven't been in the United States. So, I think there are things about the problems of simply living together that one can learn from looking at the Caribbean that people in places like the United States might do well to take note of. I'm not an idealist and I'm absolutely not a romantic, but Trinidad looks more like the real world to me than anywhere I've ever seen in the United States. I know how riddled Trinidad is with problems of corruption and violence and drugs, but the fusion of culture that you see in Carnival, in the music, it's healthier than anything I've ever seen in the United States. The only places in the United States which come close to it are, of course, those places that many people in the United States view with suspicion; those ports of impurity, New Orleans, Provincetown, Miami and San Francisco, to name a few. These are cities that people in the United States often feel most uncomfortable about because they are the places in which so-called impurity leaks into the United States. But those places remind me of

the Caribbean more than anywhere else; they represent fusion. So, I think there is a lot we can learn from the Caribbean about people coexisting and making new cultures; making new forms. When I think of Trinidad I think about Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, Peter Minshall, Earl Lovelace and Derek Walcott, who loved Trinidad and had his theatre there. So, there's plenty about the Caribbean that I feel very positive about. But I'm not a romantic about it because I've spent way too much time there to imagine that it constitutes some kind of rosy alternative to the rest of the world; I don't think it's that simple.

BL: Yes, I know that your commitment to the positive values of the Caribbean, its diversity, openness and ability to transgress has not blinded you to the 'weaknesses' of the place. To take the example of your first two novels, they're really critical of the neo-colonialism, the sexism, the philistinism that is rife in the Caribbean. What were the local reactions to these early publications? If you take *A State of Independence*, for example, it's pretty critical, isn't it, of political life in the Caribbean?

CP: Yes.

BL: Was it a problem?

CP: It's going to sound like I'm being disingenuous, but I actually don't care too much about the response to my writing, critical or otherwise. I haven't read a review since 1987 so I don't actually know what the feedback is. Of course, I worry that if I start to care too much about the feedback then it might begin to affect what I can imagine.

BL: Sure.

CP: I'm really not interested in the kind of two thumbs-up affirmation that you might get on Amazon. What I care about is trying to imagine with freedom, and without worrying too much about whether this person or that person agrees or disagrees with me. I just don't think that that serves

any purpose. You can only do what you can do as a creative person; you see and therefore you have to write. If you don't see and you don't feel, then you probably shouldn't write because it's too hard. It's not easy to write a book; it requires some sacrifice. I have students and others who come to me and tell me they want to be writers, and I never ask them, what it is they want to write about. I always ask them what they're prepared to give up to write, because that's the only thing that matters; what are you prepared to give up? The first thing you're going to give up is a certain degree of security and a certain degree of comfort. And certainly financially it is not a particularly politic move. But in order to write you have to have seen something and felt something enough to want to connect with it and understand it better. The late, but I thought great and terrifically underestimated American short story writer, Grace Paley, said, 'You write what you don't know about what you know', and I've always thought that was a beautiful definition of trying to write. You write what you don't know about what you know. What are people going to say in response to what you write? Who knows. But you can't actually censor yourself before you write, otherwise you won't do it. You'll start to worry. I used to have a contract with *The Guardian*. I stopped a few years ago because they said, 'Well, we're going to introduce a comments thread', and I said, 'I don't much care what people think about what I've just written. Why would I be interested? That's their opinion and they're welcome to their opinion, but I don't want to interact with their opinion.' They said, 'No, that's what we do now: we have a comments thread and we monitor it so nobody can be rude'. Right, that's good, I thought, but maybe it's a generational thing and I'm just an old geezer who's stuck in his ways, but I think you write and then you hand it over to the readers. There's no 'conversation'.

BL: Sure, and it's great that you are both appreciative and critical of the Caribbean without paying attention to

the way people react. I'm going to ask you a question that ties in with that. You frequently go back to the Caribbean. No later than last May you attended the Bocas Festival in Trinidad, for example. Do you think that Caribbean society has changed a lot since the turn of the 21st century, and has St Kitts changed since you lived there in the late 80s? What is different, what has changed?

CP: Well, I lived there again from about 2004 to 2007. I had a house in St Kitts, and I also taught at the University of the West Indies in Barbados, at Cave Hill, for a couple of years. The thing that concerned me the most was tourism. If you become dependent upon tourism to drive your economy, you are giving up your hostages to fortune in a way that is almost suicidal. I also worried about crime. Is the Caribbean any different in terms of corruption, violence and drugs, from the rest of the world? Probably not. Have these problems increased in the last 25-30 years? No doubt about it. After all, where you have drugs, you have crime; and where you have crime, you have murder. The murder rates in the Caribbean per capita are huge; they're out of proportion to the rest of the world. So, I'm not the first writer, or the first creative person, to point this out. Derek Walcott spent years talking about what was going on in St Lucia, in terms of the government basically 'selling' the Pitons. Edwidge [Danticat], as well, can be quite critical when she talks about Haiti. And Jamaica Kincaid has been very forthright in her opinions about Antiguan society. It's obvious that there are deep-set problems in Caribbean society, but to be honest I don't think that they're that much different from the problems that exist in other parts of the world. But these problems concern writers, they concern artists, of course, because part of the job of an artist is to see and to comment. Part of the problem that the Caribbean faces is that so many of their creative people – painters, poets, artists – have one foot outside of the region. So, it's often difficult to sit down and talk with

local people about how to constructively address these issues. I've tried this with a Prime Minister of St Kitts, and with various politicians and other community leaders, but it's difficult when they're looking at you and they're thinking, 'But you're about to go back to New York or London or Toronto in a minute and I have to stay here.' And they have a point. It's difficult to be too dogmatic with one's criticism because when somebody says, 'Well, I'm sorry, but it's more important for us to have a hospital than an arts centre,' you can't really argue with that, because it is more important to have a hospital than an arts centre. Ideally, of course, you'd like both, but it's not as simple as one would like it to be.

BL: Sure, sure. From the present, let's go back to the past. In the 1990s you were editor of the *Faber Caribbean Series*, which published Caribbean texts, including some texts from the Dutch, French and Spanish-speaking Caribbean translated into English. The series unfortunately stopped after a dozen volumes had come out. Could you tell us what had motivated this project, and maybe why it stopped? Did this have anything to do with the lack of interest on the part of the publishing industry in the Caribbean?

CP: Well, what motivated it was my own feeling that to understand the Caribbean properly it made no sense to look at it just through an Anglophone lens. You had to look at it through the lens of the Francophone Caribbean, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and also the Dutch, you know, Curaçao, Aruba, Saba. I had a very close friend called Antonio Benítez-Rojo, who was a Cuban writer, and he and I used to teach together at Amherst College in the early 90s. Antonio and I would meet at 5 o'clock in the afternoon at a particular bar in Amherst and drink rum and chat. He used to be in charge of Casa de las Américas in Havana, before he defected, and we would talk about [George] Lamming, we would talk about [Édouard] Glissant, we would talk about [Aimé] Césaire, you know. And I realised –

by being educated by Antonio – something about the complexity of the region. I'd go back to his house – where he had Wifredo Lam originals on the wall – and I'd think, 'Why am I just seeing Naipaul, Walcott, Selvon, Lovelace, Lamming? I'm not seeing the Caribbean.' So, Antonio was amazing in terms of just opening my eyes. And as I began to travel more I made sure that I thought beyond the Anglophone world. I had friends in Martinique, in Guadeloupe; I know Maryse Condé pretty well. I went to Amsterdam and met Dutch Caribbean writers. Finally I approached my then publisher and said, 'I want to do a series where we see the Caribbean as an entity across four languages'. It's expensive to translate texts; really expensive. So, the numbers didn't really crunch, to be honest. And after four or five years the publisher developed Caribbean fatigue. But I have no regrets about the fact that we tried it; we made an effort. I don't blame the publisher. I respect the fact that they went along with it; but it's very hard to make a series like that work financially.

BL: I understand, but it was a very exciting project. Let me now ask a few questions about your more recent fiction. Your last novel but one, *The Lost Child* (2015), focuses very much on the intricate connections between the Black Atlantic and Northern Britain, notably by providing a prequel to the story of Heathcliff, the character in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. In your novel, for those who haven't read it, Heathcliff's mother is a slave from the Caribbean who is stranded in Liverpool, and his father is Mr Earnshaw, who takes the child back with him to *Wuthering Heights* when his mother dies. Could you say a few words about the links, historical or otherwise, between the north of England, where you grew up, and the Caribbean, and this novel?

CP: Well, the links between the north of England and the Caribbean are deep and profound.

BL: Yes they are.

CP: I mean, there is hardly a Caribbean island that doesn't have a Liverpool Street or a Liverpool Row; for reasons that are obvious, because of the trade. But it's not just Liverpool: it's Lancaster; it's Barrow ... It's all around us in the north of England because this is the birth place of the Industrial Revolution. Walking through the sugar fields in St Kitts one day, many years ago, I came across the small sugar cane trains that snake their way through the fields. And I'd always wondered why so many people from St Kitts settled in Leeds; I'd never really figured this out. And as I was walking through the sugar cane fields I looked at one of these trains that was parked up, and it said on the side of it: 'Made in Hunslet'. Hunslet is a part of Leeds; it's an industrial hub of Leeds. And I realised, some guy from Leeds had to come out to service this train; if they make these engines and wagons in Leeds somebody would have had to come out from Leeds to maintain the system. Eventually people in the villages will have grown to associate England with Leeds. They will know England is Leeds, so when you migrate to England and get off the boat-train your first thought might well be to go to Leeds, which is England! Of course, it's not that simple, but that's the general picture. As a colonial subject, your knowledge and your understanding is, to a certain extent, tied to where the people are coming from at the colonial centre. So, the umbilical cord between the Caribbean and England has always interested me. But then, as I travelled a little further and thought more about things, I've seen similar umbilical cords to Brooklyn, to Toronto, to other parts of North America, and to Africa. I've stood in Africa and had local people talk to me about the Caribbean. On many occasions I've passed Rita Marley's house in Ghana. So, the Caribbean's larger relationship to the world is clearly not just tied to Britain; but for me it begins with Britain and it begins with the north of England and it begins with the Brontës, who reference the Caribbean, as we know, in *Jane Eyre*, and I

think obliquely in *Wuthering Heights*. This connectivity is also there in the work of Jane Austen. It's deeply embedded in the fabric of canonical English literature, which is the subject I studied as a student ... *Robinson Crusoe* may well have been shipwrecked on an island off Tobago or on Tobago itself ... *The Tempest* ... It's all there in the literature, but – as I suggested - that umbilical cord goes way beyond just Britain...

BL: It does.

CP: ... it's in the United States, it's in Canada, it's in Africa, it's everywhere. So, I love the Brontës. I love Emily Brontë more than the others because she was the weirdest one and that makes her more interesting to me. In *Wuthering Heights* she gave the reader every possible reference to understand that there was some connection between Heathcliff and the slave trade, but she did so without telling you explicitly. My own novel was, in a way, an attempt to close the circle.

BL: I see, yes. I'm afraid we're coming to the end of this interview and this will be my last question. Your latest novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, published in 2018, is, as I said before, a moving account of Jean Rhys's vain search for a home and her problematic relationship with her native Caribbean. And in this novel you follow her on her only journey back to the Caribbean in 1936. You make the reader feel how cut off she was from her birthplace, while, at the same time, being completely fascinated by it, especially the landscape. So, why did you focus on that particular episode of her life? Was that visit particularly revealing of the kind of person that she was?

CP: Well, I think I'm surrounded to this day, in this room, by people who have a profound nostalgia for a Caribbean that they remember; that they perhaps imagine will be like it was when they were last there; who see it as a refuge from the nonsense that they're dealing with on a day-to-day basis in this country. And I shouldn't simply reference this country. I

might be sitting in New York and I could say exactly the same thing about being surrounded by people who are living in Brooklyn or the Bronx, who have a profound nostalgia for the Caribbean. The truth of the matter is, I'm really interested in what happens when you do go back and the place is not what it was: what do you do then? As I've said, the job of the Caribbean is not to provide a kind of psychological crucible of safety for diasporan people. So, what do those individuals, who are leaning upon the Caribbean as a place of safety and refuge, do when they get back there and find that it's full of all the ills that they think they're running from? It's full of corruption; it's full of prejudice; it's full of people who are going to treat them in a rather reductive way because they don't have the right accent, or because they think these new arrivants have got a lot of money because they've been a bus driver in England for 40 years. What do they do when the place that has been their imaginary zone of safety isn't the place they want it to be and it rejects them? This is a real problem for a lot of returnees, which is the common phrase that's used in the Caribbean these days for people who are trying to reattach themselves to the region. So, when I began to think about Jean Rhys, who is a character who has long fascinated me, I thought of her returning to Dominica in 1936 after nearly 30 years in England. I regard Jean Rhys as one of the most underrated writers in the 20th century. Because she's a woman people may have been slow to do the necessary work of fully appreciating her achievement. She's also laboured against the fact that she's white and of the Caribbean, which is simply too 'complicated' for some people to deal with; and she's also laboured against the fact that she's a modernist but she wasn't a privileged modernist, like Virginia Woolf; she wasn't a well-heeled modernist with connections. So, I've been fascinated with Rhys for a long time, but how to write about her? I think I finally found a way by asking myself a somewhat contemporary question: what do you do when you

go back to the place that you want to recognise you but it no longer recognises you because the place has changed; and actually you too have changed. So, thinking about her journey back to Dominica in 1936 enabled me to write about her, but it is a somewhat contemporary question that I asked myself. Nevertheless it's a question that bedeviled *her* life back in 1936.

BL: Thank you. This conversation could go on but I am afraid we'll have to stop. Thank you very much, Caz, for answering my questions; a lot of food for thought. Thank you.

Caryl Phillips was born in St Kitts, spent his childhood in the North of England and now lives in the United States, where he is Professor of English at Yale University. He is the award-winning author of eleven novels, four stage plays and five volumes of non-fiction, in addition to numerous radio plays, scripts and essays. All of his publications testify to a special attention to issues of identity and belonging, often in the context of the African diaspora. His latest book is *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018), a biographical novel that dramatizes, with typical psychological subtlety and formal originality, the life of Dominican-born writer Jean Rhys.

Bénédicte Ledent teaches at the University of Liège, Belgium, and is a member of the postcolonial research group CEREP (<http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be>). She has published extensively on Caryl Phillips and other contemporary writers of Caribbean descent. She has worked on several editorial projects, the latest of which are *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: On the Edge* (2018), co-edited with Evelyn O'Callaghan and Daria Tunca, and *Minor Genres in Postcolonial Literatures* (2019), co-edited with Delphine Munos. She is co-editor of the book series Cross/Cultures (Brill).

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