

Lose Your Father

Long-Suppressed Voices in Caryl Phillips's *Strange Fruit(s)*

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“Stranger” is the X that stands in for a proper name. It is the placeholder for the missing, the mark of the passage, the scar between native and citizen. It is both an end and a beginning. [. . .] And the longing and the loss redolent in the label were as much my inheritance as they were that of the enslaved.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

In July 2019 I attended a performance of Caryl Phillips's play *Strange Fruit* at the Bush Theatre in London. My colleague Bénédicte Ledent and I were on our way back to Belgium after having participated in the annual Conference of the Society for Caribbean Studies in Preston, Britain. The Kittitian–British novelist, essayist and playwright Caryl Phillips had been attending the same conference and he had suggested that Bénédicte and I stop in London overnight and see his play so we could spend a last evening together before parting ways.

Attending the conference in Preston had been planned well in advance—

the play. Memory hardly bothers with plans, though; it has its own way of accenting life and reshuffling experience. Thinking back to July 2019, I can remember the play in vivid detail, as if it has been burnt in my mind—less so the conference. At first, I thought that the impact of *Strange Fruit* had something to do with the fact that I had been unprepared. As many critics have remarked (Ledent 2006; 2015; Unigwe 2012; Scafe 2014), Phillips’s novels are well-known, less so his plays. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, before the lights were dimmed at the Bush Theatre, I neither had read *Strange Fruit* nor had the faintest idea of its storyline. Then again, knowing *Strange Fruit*—or even writing *Strange Fruit*—proved an insufficient bulwark against the blow that the performance delivered that night. For upon exiting the Bush Theatre, I was not the only one to take refuge in perfect silence. Neither Bénédicte, who specializes in Phillips’s work across genres, nor Phillips, who wrote the play at the young age of 21, could utter a single sound. After a few minutes, Phillips [also known as “Caz”] broke our stunned silence and conjured a few words that finally imprinted meaning on our speechlessness: “I had the impression of being assaulted.”

Assault. The word perfectly captured what we had just experienced. It was not enough to say that we had been moved. We had been assaulted. And neither Phillips’s intimate knowledge of his own work nor Bénédicte’s extensive knowledge of Phillips’s drama had prevented them from being assaulted as well. Arguably, *Strange Fruit* had taken a life of its own and it was now punching its way onward, if such a thing can be imagined. Not only was the play punching past its unprepared audience; it was also punching past the specialized knowledge of the critic and the intimate knowledge of its own creator, who, in middle age, had just been knocked out, or so it seemed, by his early work.

I started to think about the relation between knowing, not-knowing, and the ways in which some “punching acts”—by which I mean “infra” or hitherto hidden knowledge suddenly forcing its way into the open with a bang—jolt you forward and backward, as if such “acts” had the potential of performing an affective archive by relaying voices long forgotten or suppressed and unlocking a network of associations that had lain dormant and half-claimed until then. *Strange Fruit*. The Jamaican poet and essayist Kei Miller writes that sometimes, “names recall the past back into the present” (2013, 76). Accordingly, the title of Phillips’s first play instantly recalls a song by Billie Holiday about the horrors of

lynching in the American South of the 1930s. But there is much more to it than just that. For the moment the play “recalls” the song “into the present,” to borrow Miller’s phrase, it becomes apparent, in turn, that the song is remarkably ill-suited to encapsulate the main concern of the play, which mostly revolves around the “dilemma of intergenerational communication” (Phillips 2007/2011, 99) in a single-parent family of Caribbean immigrants in 1980s Britain. And yet, for me, such an obvious dissimilarity between Phillips’s play and the Billie Holiday song is even more powerful. Indeed, this tension creates a subterranean force field, one that could be likened to Roland Barthes’s “punctum” because it “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the audience]” (Barthes 26). On the other hand, such a “sting” (Ibid.) can also be seen as a raging signifying machine with “a power of expansion” (Barthes 1980/1981, 45). For Barthes, the punctum “produc[es] an agitation [. . .], a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (19).

In the context of dismissed photographs of Black subjects scattered across the diaspora, Tina Campt advocates a practice of engaging with these images through sound—a practice of “listening to [. . .] photography” sharing commonalities with Barthes’s punctum since it entails “looking beyond what we see and attuning our senses to the other affective frequencies through which photographs register” (Campt 2017, 9). Similarly to Campt’s “listening practice,” the Bush Theatre’s performance of *Strange Fruit* and the obscure Billie Holiday connection have awakened in me a desire to “listen” to the “affective frequencies through which the play register[ed],” specifically, to attend to what Campt, after Fred Moten, calls “felt sound” (2017, 7). This is a form of “infrasound” that is felt through “vibration and contact” (Ibid.) and, I would like to add, around punching acts as well. Arguably, I had already started to attune myself to *Strange Fruit*’s “felt sound” when I found myself in a bookstore the morning following the Bush performance, sleepwalking my way to an essay (initially published in *The Guardian* in 2007 with the title “Blood at the Root” and then republished in 2011 in the collection *Color Me English* with the title “Strange Fruit”) in which Phillips comments upon his 1981 play in relation to his first trip to the American South in 1983. Long before the 2019 Bush performance, *Strange Fruit* had, then, already returned to Phillips—in the very landscape of the Billie Holiday song.

Interestingly for my purposes, Phillips's essay "Strange Fruit" riffs on another punching (or beating) act—namely, Billie Holiday's use of the song "Strange Fruit" in the late 1930s as "a hammer with which to beat what she perceived to be ignorant audiences" (2007/2011, 102) at Café Society, a venue in Greenwich Village that was the "only integrated night club in New York City" (101) at the time. Phillips's depiction of Lady Day's "revolutionary" (102) resolve to treat her mixed audience at Café Society to the uncomfortable horrors of lynching instead of "entertain[ing]" and "serv[ing]" (102) them, as Black singers were expected to do, is compelling. And so is Phillips's unpacking of the genealogy of Billie Holiday's punching act, which morphs, in the essay, into a dialogue between different American figures, both known and unknown, across racial lines. This interracial dialogue connects the Jewish American schoolteacher and trade unionist Abel Meeropol, who first wrote the poem "Strange Fruit" in 1937 after having seen a photograph of the bodies of the Black teenagers Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith "hanging limply from a tree" (100), to Lady Day, who met Meeropol and performed his song at Café Society with her eyes closed, as if "she could see the two teenagers" (102). It also connects Meeropol and Lady Day to Lilian Smith, a white Southerner whose bestselling novel, *Strange Fruit*, was banned in the 1940s because it depicted the taboo of interracial sex and romance in the American South at the turn of the twentieth century.

Still, as I further elaborate in the second part of this article, the gist of Phillips's essay lies elsewhere. For his belated 2007 unpacking of the American genealogy of Billie Holiday's punching act moves across time and space, retroactively illuminating the relation between knowing and not-knowing that had presided over the creation of Phillips's *Strange Fruit* in the Britain of the late 1970s—a paradoxical relation that I unpack in this article and that finds itself embedded, as I finally argue, in the storyline of the play itself. After all, what's in a name? And what's in a punch? Or rather: What affective archive and suppressed voices coalesce around the name "Strange Fruit" in and around Phillips's first stage play, voices that might have lain dormant for decades until they get (belatedly) released by a punch?

A "domestic drama" or "kitchen sink play" (Ledent 2006, 192–93), Phillips's *Strange Fruit* is rooted in Britain. Both specifically and indistinctively, it is set in "ones of England's inner-city areas" that is "not a ghetto" but is "hardly

suburbia” (Phillips 1981, 7). In a rather claustrophobic way, the whole action is confined to one living room, which is “cramped, but comfortable and tidy” (7), as Phillips states—twice—in the stage directions. The play mainly focuses on the conflict taking place between Vivien Marshall, a Caribbean-born matriarch and overworked teacher who is ominously anonymized as “Mother” in the stage directions, and her two sons, Alvin and Errol, who, as young children, trailed after their mother from the Caribbean to Britain and grew up fatherless in the wake of their migration. The two brothers are about to organize a strike with the Black community of their neighborhood and resent their mother for refusing to unite and, more generally, for “avoid[ing] the issue of black identity” (Schäffner 1999, 66).

Commenting on Nancy Medina’s recent staging of the play, the reviewer Yosala Olorunshola notes that “the unnamed ‘inner-city’ context in which [the single-parent Marshall family] exist[s] leaves them inside but on the edges of society, almost submerged” (2019, n.p.). This sense of inhabiting a “submerged” and unstable domestic space is reflected spatially at the Bush, as the acting area consists in a sunken square in the middle of the front room operating as a destabilizing gravitational force field. Symbolically, the square causes the characters to endlessly climb up and down a few steps or address one another while being precariously positioned on the raised edges of the pit, as if they were resisting the abyss. Olorunshola remarks that “the same shape (i.e., the square) could belong to a boxing ring . . . or even a cage, visual echoes that threaten any sense of easy domesticity” (n.p.). But Medina’s “boxing ring” in the Marshalls’ front room also represents Vivien’s embattled subjectivity. In the stage directions, “Mother” is described as a character who is “immaculately turned out” and who “both thinks and acts thoroughly” (8), yet one who is riven by an almost imperceptible sense of despair and impending doom. Oddly enough, well before the action starts, Vivien already intuits that her world is about to fall apart: “She *knows* that most of what is going to happen is inevitable so she prepares for the worst” (8; emphasis added).

The start of the play dramatizes Vivien’s relationship with her younger son, Errol, a pan-Africanist whose white girlfriend, Shelley, has just learnt that she is pregnant and is uneasy about sharing the news with her abusive boyfriend and her own dysfunctional family. In Act 2, Alvin, the older brother, returns

from his first trip back to his native Caribbean, and he belatedly understands not only that “Mother” has cut off his brother and himself from their Caribbean family, but also that she had lied about their father and the circumstances of their departure as young children from the Caribbean to Britain. The intergenerational rift between Vivien and her two sons is exacerbated by an intragenerational one, as the two brothers cannot communicate about their crushing experiences of growing up Black in a racist Britain, except by misdirecting rage toward one another. Alvin’s and Errol’s lack of communication takes a turn for the worse as, upon his return, Alvin reveals to his brother that he could find neither their father’s grave in the Caribbean nor his cricket gear, which, as their mother had told them again and again, was supposed to be “on display in some sort of cabinet in the Civic Hall” (63). Unable to stomach the news that his dad was not the revered “star fucking West Indian cricketer” (73) that he thought he was and that their ancestor’s grave is probably unmarked in the Caribbean, Errol knocks Alvin out at the end of Act 2 and gives his elder brother a symbolic “blackened” (75) eye.

Clearly, Vivien, Alvin, and Errol “[tear] each other to pieces” (Phillips 1981, 99) along inter- and intragenerational lines, but also along the perceived impossibility of “getting some kind of truth out of [one another]” (99). Symbolically in that context, it is only when “Mother” reveals to Vernice, her next-door neighbor and childhood friend, the backstory of her first memory of snow in Britain—that of being spat upon and “punched in the face” by whites (51) after having accidentally found herself in an upper-middle-class neighborhood—that she is called by her name, Vivien, for the first time in the play (see 52). In other words, “Mother” gets individualized at the only time she lets go of her show of stoicism and discloses the heinous, racially motivated assault that has stood buried, for decades, beneath her defensive investment in white respectability. Undoubtedly, *Strange Fruit* features an uneasy repetition between Vivien and Errol across the generations, more specifically between the mother’s and the son’s traumatic reactions. While “Mother” is too traumatized to fully realize what having been punched in the face by whites truly means, namely, her rejection by racist Britain, Errol’s knocking out of his brother signals his unresolved shock upon learning that his dad “probably died a tramp and a broken man” (84) in the Caribbean. Both knowing and not-knowing those

unassimilable truths, Vivien and Errol further immerse themselves in compensatory fantasies—respectively, the illusion of a meritocratic Britain and the myth of “an amorphous, homogeneous Africa that has absolutely no bearing in reality” (Unigwe 2012, 238). The play ends tragically, as Errol “embarks on a fool-hardy mission of violent resistance” (Scafe 2014, 64) and prepares to leave for an abstract Africa, together with Shelley, who, he thinks, will give birth to “a leader in the promised land” (96). Critical of his brother’s delusional grandiosity and his habit of scapegoating his white girlfriend, Alvin cannot stand his mother’s lies and trauma-induced escapism either. At his own admission, by the end of the play, Alvin is “going under” (88), caught as he is between a brother “who is too busy playing black” and a mother “who is too busy playing white” (88). After a last-ditch attempt at begging Vivien to give him “answers” about their family history and her lived experience of Blackness that do not merely boil down to “clichés for the white boy” (87), Alvin finally decides to pack his bags.

In Medina’s staging of the play, snow falls on Vivien as she takes sleeping pills and prepares to die in the wake of her two sons’ departures—a visual cue building bridges between Vivien’s suicide in the present and the racially motivated assault that marked the moment when she started clawing even more desperately at the myth of a meritocratic Britain. Signaling both trauma and escapism, snow haunts back Vivien in her last breath. Clearly, Vivien’s silence about her lived experience, including her unhappy marriage in the Caribbean to a high-profile cricketer who collapsed mentally in the wake of racial discrimination, leaves Errol and Alvin empty-handed, all the more so because the memory of their father is only mediated by Vivien’s mystifications, which stem from her need “to rationalise and justify to herself her decision to emigrate and break out of her marriage” (Schäffner 1999, 65). Frédéric Lefrançois (2017) suggests that the resounding silence around Vivien’s decision to leave her alcoholic husband behind and to cut off her family in the Caribbean is perceived as a parricide by the sons (see 48), who find themselves doubly orphaned on a symbolic level. Not only are they rejected by racist Britain, but they are also treated as “leper[s]” (80) by their family in the Caribbean, who resent “Miss Chalkie” (79) for cutting them off, as Alvin has just come to realize during his first return to his native island. Vivien’s symbolic parricide is

compounded by the fact that she told her sons that their father died of cancer before they emigrated to Britain, even if Alvin's point-blank questions in the wake of his trip to the Caribbean force her to backpedal and disclose that her sons' father passed away recently (see 81). Vivien's belated revelation that she, indeed, obliterated her sons' father for seventeen years before his actual passing in the Caribbean offers an interpretative key for analyzing scenes riffing on the trope of the dead father. Geoffrey Hartman (1995) remarks that the "knowledge of trauma" (that is, the "knowledge which comes from [trauma]," 537) manifests itself via two contradictory elements. The first element is the "traumatic event, registered rather than experienced," which "seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness" and "falls directly into the psyche" (537). The second element pertaining to the knowledge stemming from trauma is "a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split [. . .] psyche" (537). Making it clear that traumatic knowledge is "a contradiction in terms" (537), Hartman remarks that such a knowledge is "as close to nescience as to knowledge" (537). As the critic explains: "there is an original inner catastrophe whereby/in which an experience that is not experienced [. . .] has an exceptional presence" (537).

Hartman's remarks about the "perpetual troping" of the memory of an event that was "registered rather than experienced" illuminate Phillips's weaving of the motif of the dead father into passages dramatizing the relation between knowing and not-knowing—or between "knowing" and a knowledge that can only manifest itself as a perpetual troping of inaccessible and repressed memory. In the opening scene of *Strange Fruit*, Vernice turns to Vivien to ask her for advice about her daughter Charmain, who has shut down and stopped talking to her, in the hope that her friend, a teacher who "is use to kids playing up and thing," might "get some sense in [Charmain's] damn head" (Phillips 1981, 11). Even if the two female characters are both Caribbean-born widows, the scene opposes Vivien and Vernice on every level. While Vernice uses Creole English and repeatedly asserts a position of not-knowing ("me ain't know" on pages 12 and 13), "Mother" employs Standard English and stages herself as the one in the know, condescendingly explaining Charmain's trajectory at school by using acronyms that are bound to be lost on her next-door neighbor: "well, you *do know* that they've moved [Charmain] out of the GCE into the CSE

stream, which means that her chances of ending up with an HND or even a BSc rather than just an OND are greatly diminished” (12–13; emphasis added). The dark comedy of the scene is that even if Vernice asks “Mother” for help, she already intuits the reason behind Charmain’s moodiness: “me think she must be missing having a father” (11). Vivien’s remark that “it’s been eight years since [Vernice’s husband] died” and her subsequent fixation on Charmain’s school report signal that she is uncomfortable considering Vernice’s intuition. This is possibly because it hits too close to home and reflects back to her what she has tried to suppress—that her own sons must be missing having a father too, and that she was the one to cut him off as well as declare him dead for seventeen years. The paradoxical dynamics of knowledge at play in Vernice’s and Vivien’s exchange, during which Vivien uses torrents of unintelligible acronyms to obscure Vernice’s suggestion and, in fact, to deflect her own guilt about her symbolic parricide, retroactively illuminates Vivien’s sense of impending doom in the stage directions—that “she *knows* that most of what is going to happen is inevitable” (8; emphasis added). Ironically, even if Errol somewhat takes his cue from his mother by investing in compensatory fantasies to further repress unassimilable knowledge—namely, that his dad died a broken man in the Caribbean—he is able to see through the real knowledge dynamics between Vivien and Vernice, where the latter, though uneducated, allows herself to formulate what Vivien simultaneously “knows” (as suggested in the stage directions), and cannot allow herself to know. Toward the end of the opening scene, incensed as he is that his mother challenges his investment in a mythic Africa, Errol exposes Vivien’s show of competence, snapping that if “his dad was alive, he wouldn’t take all this crap from [her],” and remarking that “even [her] own next door neighbour, who can only just about do subtractions, *knows* more than [her]” (27; emphasis added). Again, Errol’s lashing out points toward the subterranean economy of knowledge at play in *Strange Fruit*, one that positions the dead father and Vivien’s perceived parricide as the silent affective archive around which characters renegotiate the very category of knowledge and “[tear] each other to pieces” (99).

In a 2019 interview entitled “Encountering Chapter One,” Phillips endorses Grace Paley’s wise-guy suggestion that “you write what you don’t know about what you know” (8). Born in St. Kitts, brought to Britain as an infant, and

raised in Yorkshire, Phillips's second-generation trajectory perfectly mirrors that of Alvin and Errol. To return to Paley's quotation, Phillips clearly "knows" firsthand what it means to grow up Black in small-town Britain and to be cut off from one's place of origins. Phillips's biographical connection with the Marshall brothers is exacerbated by the fact that the playwright was the same age as Erroll, namely, 21, when he was writing *Strange Fruit*. But perhaps the most compelling crossover between the Marshall brothers' second-generation trajectory and Phillips's life is anticipatory. As Phillips explains in "Encountering Chapter One" (2019), his plan while writing *Strange Fruit* was to use the money he would earn from the production of the play to buy his mother and himself their first return to St. Kitts. This caused Phillips to walk in Alvin's footsteps, as if the character's return to his native island in the play could anticipate the playwright's return to St Kitts in real life. Phillips's remark that his first return to his native island at the age of 22, which he perceives in 2019 as "the most important journey [he's] ever made" (6), led him to be confronted with "the [Caribbean] reality that his [mother]'d held from him for 22 years" (5) is also reminiscent of the life-changing character of Alvin's first return to the Caribbean. But Phillips's embrace of Paley's quotation about "writing what you don't know about what you know" takes on renewed meaning when reading his 1981 play in dialogue with his 2007 essay. As previously suggested, the latter does not really offer a space in which the essayist clarifies the Billie Holiday connection to his early play but rather densifies it. In fact, like the play, the essay "Strange Fruit" riffs on the relation between knowing and not-knowing in relation to long-suppressed voices and delayed moments of revelation that almost feel physical. However, what I want to show in the section that follows is that the essay ends up giving a new twist to the outcome of the play, which validates Ledent's and Unigwe's suggestions that *Strange Fruit* occupies a central position in Phillips's oeuvre (see Unigwe 2012; Ledent 2015), and, what is more, that his work needs to be read "backwards and forwards" across genres (Ledent 2015, 86)

Quite fittingly, Phillips essay "Strange Fruit" starts with the admission that when the young playwright was at work in 1979, he "knew very little about the full history of 'Strange Fruit'" (2007/2011, 99) and he had very little idea of the American network of associations that he would inevitably conjure via the phrase. Of course, as he explains, he already understood at the time that

the song's title referred to "racially motivated violence in the American South" (99). Still, back in 1979, a year when he had just "graduated into voluntary unemployment and drifted north to Edinburgh" (Phillips 2006, 38), Phillips's dogged determination to call his play *Strange Fruit* "long before (he had) put the final stop in place" (99) appeared to go hand in hand, remarkably enough, with an equally dogged determination to downplay the American associations of the name, or at the very least to leave them half-claimed and unexplored, even to himself. In that context it is striking that when the play premiered at the Crucible Studio in Sheffield in 1980, no one in Britain asked him to clarify the meaning of the title. As Phillips wryly remarks in his essay:

I don't remember doing any press interviews, so no journalist ever asked me what I intended by naming the play *Strange Fruit*. Perhaps more surprisingly, neither the director nor any of the actors ever questioned me about the significance of the title. Accordingly, I just assumed everybody understood that the play's title made reference to the dilemma of intergenerational communication and so I was perfectly content. (99)

In many ways, Phillips's "Strange Fruit" circles back to the American associations that his younger British self was hiding in plain sight in his play's title, but the essay does so, again, in a way that "signifies without specifying," to borrow Stephanie Li's words about the specificities of racial discourse in Toni Morrison's recent literary texts and Barack Obama's political speeches (see Li 2011). Although it is true that Phillips finally unpacks the genealogy of the Billie Holiday song in his essay—which traces an arc between Abel Meeropol, Lady Day, and Lilian Smith, as previously mentioned—he also refrains, initially, from inserting himself (or his work) into this network of affiliations, at least not directly. For it is via his memory of his 1983 trip to the U.S. South, specifically, that of a drive across the Alabama landscape offered by Chris McNair, the father of Denise McNair, one of the four girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing of 1963, that Phillips tentatively negotiates what could be called a Black Atlantic moment of affiliation. Ironically, this moment initially takes the form of a "slap of refused intimacy" (Sommer 1999, ix). As Phillips remembers, while being driven by McNair from Birmingham to Tuskegee in

1983, the conversation with his African American host feels, at first, “pleasant and free-flowing” (Phillips 2007/2011, 100). The drive takes a dramatic turn, however, seconds after the young Black British playwright tells his U.S. host that he had just published a play called *Strange Fruit*. The moment McNair registers the title of Phillips’s play, the African American host and grieving father turns to “his British guest” (100) and he “stares at [him]” before “look[ing] back to the road” (100). McNair’s subsequent punching act, “So what do you know about lynching?” (100), causes the young Black British playwright to “swallow deeply and look through the car windshield as the southern trees fla[sh] by” (100). And Phillips adds:

I knew full well that “Strange Fruit” meant something very different in the United States; in fact, something disturbingly specific in the South, especially to African Americans. A pleasant, free-flowing conversation with my host now appeared to be shipwrecked on the rocks of cultural appropriation. (100)

The imagery Phillips uses to describe the impact of McNair’s “slap of refused intimacy” (Sommer 1999) is highly significant. As he takes in McNair’s punching act, Phillips “look[s] through the car windshield as the southern trees fla[sh] by,” which emphasizes his position as that of an onlooker encased in, and somewhat protected by, a glass box, while “the southern trees”—the very landscape of lynching and that of the Billie Holiday song—“flash by.” On the other hand, McNair’s “slap” brings home the specificities of the American associations that Phillips had himself hidden in plain sight in his play’s title, thus extending, with a lag, an invitation to provoke the young Black British playwright to tease out his own positioning in relation to the aftermath of slavery—which is exactly what Phillips will commit himself to doing in his impressive body of work (see, e.g., Ledent 2002; Thomas 2006). Significantly, Phillips uses a shipwreck metaphor to convey his uneasiness at having claimed (or half-claimed) a connection to the Billie Holiday song, which still felt, in 1983, like “cultural appropriation.” In *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy famously posits the sailing ship as a Bakhtinian “chronotope” and “central organising symbol” (4), not only for the Middle Passage, but for the circulation of ideas among Black intellectuals between America, the Caribbean, and Europe as well.

By writing that his connection with McNair “appeared to be shipwrecked on the rocks of cultural appropriation,” Phillips subtly reworks Gilroy’s sailing ship “organising symbol,” which acknowledges cultural and personal distance between the young Black British playwright and his grieving African American host while still preserving a Black Atlantic sense of commonality between them as descendants of enslaved people who find themselves, after all, in the “same boat.”

Writing about the ways in which minority writings in the Americas mobilize “unanticipated passes” (Sommer 1999, xii) and “tropes of particularism” to mark cultural distance between text and reader, Doris Sommer notes that the real point of a rhetoric of particularism is less to “hold readers at arm’s length or joke at their pretence of mastery,” than to “propose something different from knowledge” so readers are forced to “notice the circumstances of conversation” (xi). In line with Sommer’s “rhetoric of particularism,” McNair’s “slap” ultimately “propose[s] something different from knowledge” to the young Black British playwright, who finds himself compelled to clear a space that might, in turn, accommodate suppressed voices and untold stories. The very possibility of “tuning in” to McNair’s “felt sound” (Molten) by letting go of the illusion of knowledge appears to stand, in fact, at the heart of Phillips’s “Strange Fruit.” In the opening of his essay, Phillips remembers thinking that he “*knew* full well that *Strange Fruit* meant something very different in the United States” while writing his play in Britain in 1979. He then recalls moving on to believe that he had “*some knowledge* of the realities of the South, and not only from [his] reading” (Phillips 2007/2011, 104; emphasis added), after experiencing firsthand the fear and apprehension that come with being Black in Atlanta in the early 1980s, as he has just been told that the Ku Klux Klan was in the habit of “[coming] downtown for some ‘fun’” after “rallying on Stone Mountain” (104).¹ In the immediate aftermath of McNair’s “slap,” however, Phillips appears to let go entirely of his previous defensive concern with how much or how little he knows. After having confessed to McNair that his play “ha[s] nothing to do with the United States, with African Americans, with racial violence, or even with Billie Holiday” (104), the young Black British playwright intuits that the only thing that he needs to do is, in fact, “listen to *Mr McNair*” (104; emphasis added). Phillips’s essay does not make us privy to what exactly McNair tells him

about “the history of violence against African American people in the southern states, especially after segregation” (104). But “Strange Fruit” makes it clear that Phillips negotiates a new form of respectful distance with “Mr” McNair at the same time as he registers and imagines around his guest’s pain. Phillips indeed realizes that by “addressing himself to [his own] education on these matters,” McNair can only be reminded of his daughter’s passing at the hands of the Klan in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing of 1963. Even if it comes at a heavy price—that of acknowledging one’s limitations for the former and reexperiencing irremediable loss for the latter—this eventual act of recognition and connection between the Black British playwright and the grieving African American father suggests that affiliations that are negotiated within a mutual acknowledgment of loss and distance might sustain the emergence (and transfiguration) of long-suppressed voices—voices of pain, but also voices of hope.

Similarly to what happens in his early play, Phillips reshuffles here the very category of knowledge, but he does so, this time, not by dramatizing the relation between knowing and not-knowing (or between knowing and a knowledge that takes the form of a “perpetual troping” of repressed memory), but by making knowledge contingent on the “felt sound” of emotional truth. Ending with a promise of transmission across the generations, Phillips’s 2007 “Strange Fruit” reverses his 1981 *Strange Fruit*, in which Vivien’s suicide forecloses any possibility of passing on her lived experience of Blackness to her sons. McNair’s final decision to break the silence about his daughter Denise further emphasizes the suggestion that the dead father haunting *Strange Fruit* comes back to life (or to speech) in Phillips’s essay. At the end of his symbolic journey across “the southern trees,” Phillips finds himself seated in the front row of a “packed hall” in the “all-black” (100) Tuskegee Institute, as McNair, running for political office, is about to give a talk that already “sound[s] to [Phillips] like a typical campaign speech” (104). Tellingly, however, McNair appears not to be able to do a rehash of previous talks and tread the same old path of “preaching to the converted” (104). Stopping dead in his tracks while “studiously avoiding making eye contact with [Phillips],” McNair announces that today, for the first time, he is going to talk about his daughter: “You all know who my daughter is. Denise McNair. Today she would have been thirty-one years old” (104).



NOTE

1. Phillips reminisces about a similar warning in Atlanta during his first trip to the United States in 1978 in the introduction to his *The European Tribe* (1987), which makes it open for discussion whether this scene took place in 1978, in 1983 (as related in his 2007 essay “Strange Fruit”), or during both trips to the United States.

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