

‘Distant noises of other voices: a collection of Caryl Phillips’s radio plays’

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Caryl Phillips is one of the most respected Anglophone writers of his generation. Born in the Caribbean (St Kitts), raised in England and now Professor of English at Yale University, he is internationally known as a prolific essayist, a published playwright for the stage and an award-winning novelist with eleven novels to his name. What is less commonly acknowledged is that he is also an accomplished radio dramatist. Nine of his radio plays were broadcast by BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 between 1984 and 2016. His very first play, *The Wasted Years*, is the only one among them that is in the public domain. Aired when its author was only twenty-six, it was one of the winners of the Giles Cooper Awards, a prize sponsored by Methuen and the BBC, and as such it was included in an anthology entitled *Best Radio Plays of 1984*, a volume containing six scripts selected for their strength and inventiveness.¹ The typescripts of Phillips’s other eight plays have remained unpublished to this date, in spite of their undeniable quality and originality. They have only been accessible via their author’s papers, which are housed by the Beinecke Library at Yale University -- with the exception of his latest radio play, *Somewhere in England* (2016), which is not yet part of these archival holdings.²

It seems important to make all these radio plays available to a large readership, for, even if they might be regarded as ‘minor’ pieces for generic reasons, they are creative works in their own right and constitute an integral part of Phillips’s literary universe. As these radiophonic texts contain in a nutshell the author’s hallmark mix of formal audacity and sharp social criticism, they are most likely to be of interest for newcomers to his work. Yet, these plays also represent invaluable resources for the growing body of Phillipsian scholars, because they offer compelling points of comparison with the rest of Phillips’s writing, both thematically and formally, and can therefore help to grasp the full scope of this writer’s literary achievements.

The nine radio plays in this collection are presented chronologically, according to the dates when they were first broadcast, which provides an idea of the development of Phillips’s radiophonic art over more than thirty years. What is striking is the impressive consistency of his output for radio: except for *Writing Fiction*, a radio play broadcast in 1991 and focusing mostly on the mid-life crisis of an English writer with a waning reputation, all the texts relate to the existential predicament of displaced individuals and are linked in one way or another to

the African diaspora. Among the nine plays, it is also possible to distinguish three more specific, yet interconnected, thematic clusters.

The first group, which includes *Crossing the River* (1985), *The Prince of Africa* (1987) and *Somewhere in England*, testifies to Phillips's long-lasting interest in the aftermath of the slave trade and slavery and how this historical episode has radically and irrevocably shaped the world in which we live. Very much like his 1993 novel *Crossing the River*, these three plays powerfully remind us that 'There is no return'³ or, to borrow the words uttered by a character from *The Prince of Africa*, that 'Our past and present and future are inextricably inter-woven' (91). These historical plays also confirm that the fates of Black and white people are intimately linked in the wake of the Middle Passage, and it is therefore not surprising that even if they concentrate on the African diasporic experience they should also include well-developed white characters, for example the crew in *The Prince of Africa* or Joyce, the English lover of black GI Travis, in *Somewhere in England*.

A second thematic strand emerges in *A Kind of Home: James Baldwin in Paris* (2004), *A Long Way from Home* (2008) and *Dinner in the Village* (2011), three fictionalized biographical narratives focusing on artistic figures from the African diaspora -- respectively James Baldwin, Marvin Gaye, and Richard Wright and C.L.R. James. As the titles of the first two plays indicate, their protagonists are plagued by a sense of unbelonging, in constant search for a place that they can call home. This interest in the life stories of tortured artists with irreducibly complex identities also pervades Phillips's non-fiction and fiction, most notably his latest novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018), which dramatizes episodes in the life of famous writer Jean Rhys, a white creole from Dominica.

The other three plays, *The Wasted Years* (1984), *Writing Fiction* (1991) and *Hotel Cristobel* (2005), can be brought together as well, in spite of their different settings and contexts. Sensitively evoking the quandaries of individuals in crisis at the end of the twentieth century, these texts focus respectively on a teenager from a migrant family settled in England, a writer faced with declining fame and the absurdities of the English literary scene, and three emotionally scarred individuals interacting in an island of the post-independence Caribbean. These radio dramas display an extraordinary capacity on their author's part for acute social observation, combined in the latter two plays with touches of humour that are rather unusual in Phillips's fictional world, with the possible exception of his film script *Playing Away* (1987). In 1984, a critic described *The Wasted Years* as 'socially conscious drama at its best'⁴ and this most fitting depiction of Phillips's first radio play can undoubtedly extend to *Writing Fiction* and *Hotel Cristobel* as well, as they also address issues linked with race, class and gender.

It is clear from this brief thematic overview that this body of work is bound to prove a treasure trove for anyone who wants to further explore Phillips's deeply humane and politically radical fictional imaginary. However, it is perhaps on the formal level that his radiophonic production is likely to help scholars and students working on his fiction to get an even better insight into the specificities of his writing. What follows will specifically focus on Phillips's approach to characterization and his use of experimental narrative techniques, which seem to display genuine kinship with some features of radio drama as a genre.

When asked by interviewers about how the characters in his novels take shape in his mind, Phillips has consistently answered over the years that he first needs to hear their voices to be able engage with them. It is 'the one thing that's *absolutely* necessary', he recently declared.⁵ And indeed his novels are replete with the (often inner) voices of marginalized or damaged individuals who have been left out of traditional historiography. The connection between novel writing and audio drama is easy to make if one recalls that it too basically relies 'on the human voice rather than visual identification'.⁶ This has several implications that can be illustrated through the radio plays collected in this volume and which by extension can apply to Phillips's fiction as a whole. To start with, this vocal dimension creates a unique closeness between the characters and the readers because the latter are, as it were, spoken to directly. This produces a form of intimacy that in turn generates a non-judgmental understanding on the part of the reader and promotes a form of affective communication with the protagonist that is absent in the narrative universe of the play or the novel. The disembodied voices of the children sold into slavery in the radio play *Crossing the River* are a good example of how such intimacy can be achieved. A similar sense of intense closeness is equally perceptible in *Writing Fiction* when one is given access to Lawrence Wilson's writer's notebooks, or in the voice-over passages in *Somewhere in England* in which Joyce confides her emotions.

The centrality of the vocal at the expense of the visual also makes for elliptical and economical narratives where many elements remain implicit. The numerous short scenes that make up *A Kind of Home*, but also the other biographical plays by Phillips, are an example of this concision, which obliges readers to use their imagination and transforms them 'into active makers of meaning', to use the words of William Stanton in relation to the listeners of radio drama.⁷ What matters in such a context is not so much the plot, the storyline, but what the characters have to say about their suffering and their painful groping towards an understanding of who they are. This is confirmed by a note dated May 1985, found in Phillips's archives, in which he outlines the rationale behind a project of radio play set in the hold of slave ship (untitled at that stage, but presumably materialized in *The Prince of Africa*):

I see the play as an essentially more 'reflective' than 'dynamic' piece of drama. The impact of such a huge crime seems to me better dealt with through voices that search for meaning and definition, rather than voices that are bound by the parameters of a rigid adherence to exposition and denouement.⁸

Clearly, such a statement captures the essence of the radicality of Phillips's characterization, which is to a large extent inherited from the practice of the radio dramatic genre.

The same can be said of his approach to form and structure. Radio drama is known to be a fluid medium that makes it possible for narratives to move smoothly and quickly across time and space. Such flexibility is particularly noticeable in Phillips's most experimental texts for radio, *Crossing the River* and *The Prince of Africa*. In the former, the triangulation between Africa, the Americas and England creates what Suzanne Scafe has called a 'dreamscape of topographies and histories that are at once discontinuous and overlapping',⁹ resulting in an economical but nuanced coverage of some two hundred years of history. Likewise, *The Prince of Africa* opens with a character generically called 'African', who is successively on board of an eighteenth-century slave ship, enslaved on a nineteenth-century New World plantation and migrating from the Caribbean to England in the twentieth century. But Phillips's more conventionally structured radio plays, too, abound in flashbacks and flashforwards as well as in sudden changes of scenes, which are the narrative reflections of a world literally shaped by dislocation and instability. One can find in *The Wasted Years* constant temporal shifts that make it possible to alternate between the experiences of the first and second generation of Britons from the Caribbean while in Phillips's formally more conservative biographical radio plays chronological disruptions help to shed light on the nature of the protagonists' malaise. Unsurprisingly, the majority of Phillips's texts for radio also contains various references to crossings of the Atlantic, a symbolic space that is crucial in any evocation of the lives affected by the original transportation of slaves across the ocean.¹⁰

'I learned a lot about what was possible in the form of the novel from "experimenting" in radio drama',¹¹ Phillips said in an unpublished online interview conducted in 2013. One of the things that his fiction owes to the subversive temporal and spatial shifts that are possible in radio drama is undoubtedly the fragmented form of his many-layered novels and the comparative logic that underlies them. His fiction often puts past and present side by side, with a view to showing, as he also does in his book-length essay *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), that 'the past surges like a mighty river... It empties into the present'.¹² Likewise, Phillips's

travelling texts create resonances and invite comparison between characters with very different backgrounds who do their best to survive in the face of traumas brought about by mankind's eternal tendency to reject the Other.

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¹ Caryl Phillips, *The Wasted Years, Best Radio Plays of 1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 85-141.

² Caryl Phillips Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

³ Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 2.

⁴ John Wain, 'Towny smartiboots', *The Listener*, 22 March 1984.

⁵ Maria Festa, 'On writing, reading, interpreting (and Pan Africanism): an interview with Caryl Phillips', *From the European South*, 3 (2018), 125-132 (128).

⁶ Leslie Grace McMurtry, *Revolution in the Echo Chamber: Audio drama's past, present and future* (Bristol/Chicago: Intellect, 2019), 5.

⁷ William Stanton, 'The Invisible Theatre of Radio Drama', *Critical Quarterly*, 46(4), 94-107 (95).

⁸ Caryl Phillips Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁹ Suzanne Scafe, 'Home/lessness, Exile and Triangular Identities in the Drama of Caryl Phillips', in Mary F. Brewer, Lynette Goddard and Deirdre Osborne (eds), *Modern and Contemporary Black British Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 62-76 (70).

¹⁰ There are no real allusions to journeys across the Atlantic in *Writing Fiction*, with the exception of one of the minor characters, called Rudy, who mentions that his mother came to England from the Caribbean.

¹¹ Email to Bénédicte Ledent, 20 July 2013.

¹² Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 220.