

Introduction

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Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life began with a conference held on 1-2 December 2006 at the University of Liège in Belgium to celebrate the silver jubilee of Caryl Phillips's writing career. The idea of an event on this author had been in the air for quite a while. Since the early 2000s, many were those who believed that the time had come to pay homage to a writer who, by virtue of his creative vigour and political depth, had become one of the major literary voices at the turn of the twenty-first century. The year 2006 seemed to provide the ideal opportunity to carry out this long-standing project, as it marked the twenty-fifth year of a remarkable literary journey which had begun in 1981 with the publication of Phillips's first play, *Strange Fruit*. The call for papers for "Caryl Phillips: 25 Years of Writing" met with an enthusiastic response, so that more than fifty participants from all over the world, either confirmed critics or younger scholars, gathered in Liège over two days to discuss Phillips's work, both formally and informally. They also had the chance to hear the writer deliver what appeared to the audience on that day to be one of his most beautiful texts, "Colour Me English," which is included in the present publication.¹

Our aim in putting this book together is at least twofold. On the one hand, this volume is meant to commemorate the event held in Liège, not only for those who attended but also for those who were unable to be present. On the other, it also aims at providing wide-ranging, though not exhaustive, coverage of Phillips's multi-faceted work, testifying to its impressive scope, to the moving resonance of its themes, and to its formal inventiveness. The texts collected here, it is hoped, signal more than the sum of their parts: they also constitute a tribute to a versatile and prolific artist who in thirty years has published four stage plays, five works of non-fiction, nine novels, as well as innumerable scripts and articles on a wide variety of topics. Phillips is a writer who has kept bringing newness to his work while remaining true to a vision of the world that combines profound emotional authenticity with sharp social awareness.

¹ "Colour Me English" is the title essay in Caryl Phillips's eponymous collection (London: Harvill Secker, 2011): 3-17.

One gets an idea of the remarkable consistency of Phillips's work, but also of its development, if one briefly compares his first novel, *The Final Passage*, published in 1985, with his latest, *In the Falling Snow*, released in 2009. The former addresses West Indian migration to England in the 1950s through the experience of a young woman named Leila, while the latter focuses on contemporary England and the mid-life crisis of a Briton of Caribbean descent called Keith. Even if the books are set in different periods, they are thematically close. Like most other novels by Phillips, they engage with such topics as identity, exile, or loneliness and provide insight into what divides human beings, be it class, gender, or race. The novels also display a similar high degree of linguistic craftsmanship, a similar predilection for ambiguity, and similar care in their characterization and their examination of their protagonists' development, even if they apply their very own distinctive narrative strategies. Finally, both are also deeply fascinated with the past – what Phillips has called “the back story” – and how it shapes the present. As he explains, “To understand where you are now you have to understand the back story [...]. I've been playing with the idea of what constitutes the end and the beginning, how things keep coming back round, since my very first novel.”²

Clearly, *The Final Passage* and *In the Falling Snow* are part of an ongoing and subtle exploration of what makes us who we are, and how we came to be that way. What, then, separates the two books? One way of addressing this might be to recall Phillips's literary production between 1985 and 2009, and all the subject-matter that it covered over that time-span, whether slavery, the African and Jewish diasporas, or the black presence in Europe, to mention just a few. Quite significantly, in Phillips's latest novel, Keith's cultural and existential baggage seems much heavier and bulkier, and perhaps also less clearly labelled, than Leila's in *The Final Passage*. The family history of the young Caribbean woman who arrives in England with her husband Michael and her baby boy Calvin remains, until the end of the novel, much of a mystery to her; her identity is basically dual, shaped mainly by the Caribbean where she was born and spent much of her life and, to a lesser extent, by England, the disappointing ‘mother country’, where she has chosen to settle but which she might be about to leave at the end of the novel. Keith, by contrast, seems to have a more complex, though also partly hidden, heritage. His composite genealogy, embodied to some extent in his own mixed-race son Laurie, includes England, the Caribbean, Europe, but also the African diaspora at large, a “black cultural heritage”³ which he indirectly explores by trying to write a

² Anita Sethi, “Home and Away,” *The Independent* (22 May 2009), Arts and Books: 26.

³ Caryl Phillips, *In the Falling Snow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009): 95.

book on black music. For all these differences, Phillips's characters in both novels fail to successfully communicate with others and they suffer from the same sense of forlornness. This is exemplified by comparable scenes where the characters are caught “in the falling snow,”⁴ an element symbolizing their displacement as well as the coldness, both real and metaphorical, that England represents. Through Leila and Keith, therefore, Phillips tackles the same universal themes, such as displacement and family relationships. Yet the increased complexity of Keith's background and experience is a measure of the way the writer's palette has expanded in the twenty-seven years that separates the two stories, and of the way he has become even more keenly aware of the convolutions of human life, which he expresses in each new book with increasing technical sophistication.

We hope that the title that we have chosen for this volume goes some way towards capturing the sense of “changing same”⁵ that can be regarded as one of the defining features of Phillips's oeuvre so far. “Writing in the key of life” encapsulates its comprehensiveness, the fact that it touches ceaselessly on major social issues and goes to the heart of the human condition, not just the postcolonial one. At the same time, as a reference to Stevie Wonder's 1976 masterpiece album *Songs in the Key of Life*, this title contains further allusions – which we will briefly explain at the risk of being accused of choosing a title that “signal[s] [our] cleverness before the piece has even begun,” an annoying academic habit denounced by the protagonist of *In the Falling Snow*.⁶ The most obvious of these allusions is to Stevie Wonder himself, a major source of artistic inspiration for Phillips, as shown in the title of his fourth novel, *Higher Ground*, which is an echo of Wonder's 1973 song of the same title from the *Innervisions* album. Phillips has repeatedly said how influential Wonder – together with Marvin Gaye and Curtis Mayfield – had been on his own development as a black boy growing up in Britain, and later as an artist.⁷ In a 2002 interview with Charles Wilkin, for example, he declared:

[When I was] growing up in Britain during the seventies [...] I looked for people who could help me to understand what was happening amongst my generation, [...] what was happening on the streets. [...] I looked to the United States and to what was happening in

⁴ See Caryl Phillips, *The Final Passage* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985): 204; Phillips, *In the Falling Snow*, 320-21. Incidentally, Vivien, one of the characters in *Strange Fruit*, recalls a similar scene where she sees snow for the first time just after being victim of a racist attack. Caryl Phillips, *Strange Fruit* (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1981): 52.

⁵ See Deborah E. McDowell, “*The Changing Same*”: Black Women's Literature, Criticism and Theory (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995).

⁶ Phillips, *In the Falling Snow*, 106.

⁷ See Caryl Phillips, “Preamble,” page 9 below.

Published in: *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. by Bénédicte Ledent & Daria Tunca (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2012), pp. xi-xxi.

Status: Postprint (Author's version)

black American society. And it seemed to me that the people who had the strongest narratives and the most profound insights were people like Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye and Curtis Mayfield, artists who were writing music that was not just passionate, but music that actually was incredibly socially engaged.⁸

But “writing in the key of life” is also suggestive of music in general, a genre that has had a decisive impact on the form of Phillips’s writing, as the author himself acknowledges when he speaks of his almost obsessive relation to Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony.⁹ And, indeed, the lyrical beauty, the almost chorric arrangement and symphonic structure of the author’s fictional texts testify to the musical quality of his prose. This is an exciting aspect of Phillips’s work which still needs to be fully explored. However, as this volume shows, his writing has otherwise given rise to a multiplicity of responses, which bodes well for the future of Phillips scholarship.

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Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life is divided into two parts. The first, “Caryl Phillips: 25 Years of Writing,” takes us back to the eponymous 2006 conference and contains contributions whose oral quality has in most cases been deliberately preserved to allow the reader to share in the unique atmosphere of convivial debate that prevailed during the symposium. “Oxford,” PETER H. MARSDEN’s brief introduction of Phillips, refers to the university attended by the writer in the 1970s, while also playfully alluding to his novel *Cambridge* (1991). Marsden’s humorous subversion seems befitting here, for shortly before the conference, Phillips’s oeuvre, with its characteristic exploration of deep-seated racial and social prejudice, earned him an Honorary Fellowship from The Queen’s College in Oxford. This recognition from the Establishment is greeted by Marsden with enthusiasm and a sense of light-hearted revenge. PHILLIPS’S own response to his success has always been notoriously discreet. Well aware of the debate prompted by his circumspection, the writer decided to share extracts from his private notebooks as a prelude to his lecture. These diary entries convey his continued interest in identity, his love of music, and his attempts to cope with artistic fame. The keynote address that follows, “Colour Me English,” starts with the

⁸ Caryl Phillips, “Interview with Caryl Phillips,” by Charles Wilkin, WINN FM, 23 December 2002 (Basseterre, St Kitts), in *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, ed. Renée T. Schatteman (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009): 130-31.

⁹ Caryl Phillips, “‘Other Voices’: An Interview with Caryl Phillips” (October 2001), by Stephen Clingman, in *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, 108-109.

Published in: *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. by Bénédicte Ledent & Daria Tunca (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2012), pp. xi-xxi.

Status: Postprint (Author's version)

recounting of a childhood memory which led the young Phillips to realize that not only race and class, but also culture and religion, serve as factors of exclusion in British society. His essay then develops into a thought-provoking critique of Europe's attitude towards its Muslim citizens, and concludes by highlighting the role of literature in the promotion of tolerance. The responsibility of the writer, a theme that runs implicitly through Phillips's entire essay, is precisely what lies at the heart of KIRPAL SINGH'S address. Examining the Caribbean-British writer's long-standing ethical and political commitment, Singh emphasizes the potential of the author's work to initiate a process of healing in a world marked by violence and oppression. A salient point in this discussion is the understanding of history's intricacies, which Phillips endeavours to convey to us all.

Such understanding is above all acquired through a careful interpretation of the author's rich opus, as shown in the second and largest part of the volume, which contains twenty-two critical essays and is divided into five sections. In the first, "Autobiography, Fact, and Fiction," RENÉE SCHATTEMAN'S opening essay reminds us that interviews can be an invaluable source for gaining a fine appreciation of Phillips's artistic project. She underscores the remarkable consistency of the writer's reflections in conversations over the years, and presents a panorama of the themes that have been recurrently addressed in his exchanges with critics, journalists, and fellow artists. If interviews can be considered enlightening exercises in self-definition, LOUISE YELIN argues that Phillips's autobiographical pieces, which are dispersed throughout his work, conceal the writer's "plural selves." She offers an analysis of the versatility with which the author employs the autobiographical mode in his texts, among these being "Northern Lights," the final section of his volume of fictionalized biographies, *Foreigners* (2007). BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT tackles this book from a different angle, taking as a point of departure a question that has intrigued Phillips critics for years: namely, whether the writer has an optimistic or a pessimistic take on life – a discussion evoked both in Phillips's own piece and in Schatteman's essay, and mention of which will not have escaped the initiated reader. In her analysis of *Foreigners*, Ledent attempts to discern how the author's hopeful or fatalistic stance impinges on his representation of his three protagonists. The final essay in this section, by JOAN MILLER POWELL, concentrates on two other works in which Phillips skilfully combines fact and fiction: *The European Tribe* (1987) and *The Atlantic Sound* (2000). Exploring the multiple formal strategies to be found in these books – most notably as they relate to the tradition of travel writing – Powell posits that the narratives partake of a type of "hybrid inventiveness" that reflects the writer's exploration of issues such as displacement and identity.

The next section, “Caryl Phillips and the Other Writers,” probes Phillips’s – sometimes or, indeed, often ambiguous – literary relationships with other authors and their work. Concerns with fact and fiction are not entirely left behind here, for JOHN MCLEOD’s examination of Phillips’s writerly connection to the Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul proceeds from the Kittitian author’s struggle to reconcile Naipaul’s talent as a novelist with the Nobel Prize laureate’s far less admirable personality. McLeod sounds the nature of Phillips’s ambivalent link with Naipaul, filtering the commonalities and divergences in the two men’s approaches to writing through an analysis of Phillips’s early novel *A State of Independence* (1986). The echoes between Phillips and another West Indian Nobel Prize-winner, Derek Walcott, constitute the subject of MALIK FERDINAND’s piece. Putting the younger writer’s *A New World Order* (2001) side by side with the older poet’s *What the Twilight Says* (1998), Ferdinand considers both collections of essays as reflections of their respective authors’ attempt to define Carribeaness, and he concludes that, in spite of their individual traits, the two artists share strikingly similar visions. A marked resemblance also characterizes “Heartland,” the first part of Phillips’s novel *Higher Ground* (1989), and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). IMEN NAJAR performs a close reading of these two narratives, emphasizing intertextual motifs relating to the representation of fear, and builds on her findings to delineate the terms of Phillips’s nuanced response to the Polish-born novelist.

Interestingly, all three authors considered in the section on literary relationships – Naipaul, Walcott, and Conrad – are migrant writers. This further evidences, if need be, the pervasive influence of diasporic voices and themes on Phillips’s work. Such topics are indeed addressed, if only obliquely, in all of the contributions to the volume so far, and the next section, devoted to “Diasporas,” offers an even closer examination of Phillips’s poetic of displacement. Echoing Kirpal Singh’s earlier essay, STEF CRAPS points to the centrality of ethics in the writer’s fiction, and further asserts that Phillips’s repeated imaginative re-creation of the Jewish experience alongside that of the African diaspora makes his work challenging material in the context of trauma studies. Craps suggests that the establishment of such bold parallels between diasporic peoples could easily degenerate into an unethical appropriation of another people’s suffering, but he demonstrates how Phillips avoids this pitfall in *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* (1997) through his use of specific textual devices. Representations across the boundaries of race are equally important in *Crossing the River* (1993), whose intricate workings FATIM BOUTROS proposes to unravel in his essay. Introducing the concept of “bidirectional revision,” Boutros successively tackles the different sections of the novel and argues that the narratives work both “retroactively,” in that they

Published in: *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. by Bénédicte Ledent & Daria Tunca (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2012), pp. xi-xxi.

Status: Postprint (Author's version)

invite the reader to reassess his or her prejudiced conceptions of the past, and “proactively,” as they have a potential bearing on the future. The combination of journeying and remembrance found in *Crossing the River* is also present in *The Atlantic Sound* and *A New World Order*, two volumes of essays which provide the focus for ABIGAIL WARD’s article. Ward first considers Phillips’s pieces around his lifelong passion for football, and examines how conceptions of ‘home’ and British identity are articulated in these texts. She then pays attention to the writer’s account of his travels on both sides of the Atlantic, and concludes by reflecting on the significance of crossings and crossroads in Phillips’s perception of his own identity. The central position occupied by the Atlantic Ocean in the author’s works leads WENDY KNEPPER to devise a “theory of seascapes.” She first of all demonstrates the relevance of this marine metaphor to navigating the intertwined geographical and historical networks that inform Phillips’s *The Atlantic Sound* and some of his other books, and subsequently assesses the manner in which his fluid vision apprehends the global and local cultural formations of the contemporary world. The map of diasporic connections laid out by Phillips in his non-fictional works may be said to testify to his continual engagement with the migrant’s predicament. Such is CHIKA UNIGWE’S suggestion in her study of *Strange Fruit* (1981). Indeed, this essay detects in Phillips’s first play, which records the responses of a Caribbean mother and her two sons to British society, many of the concerns that underlie the writer’s later work, not least an uneasy sense of (un)belonging captured by Unigwe under the evocative designation “dis-ease.”

The British setting of *Strange Fruit* was to reappear in different guises in Phillips’s subsequent works – for instance, in the two novels briefly compared in the opening paragraphs of this introduction, *The Final Passage* and *In the Falling Snow*. Also featuring prominently among the narratives at least partly set in Britain is *A Distant Shore*, arguably one of Phillips’s most convincing interrogations of “Britain and Its ‘Others’,” hence the title of the next section which deals almost exclusively with this 2003 book. The first contribution, by ALESSANDRA DI MAIO, draws the reader’s attention to the novel’s development of two relatively under-explored literary themes: namely, African civil wars and the black presence in Britain. Di Maio contends that, even though a large portion of Phillips’s narrative is set in contemporary Europe, an informed reading of the text can only be achieved if its African components are also given due attention. The pertinence of this two-pronged approach is then demonstrated by means of an analysis of some of the novel’s structural, metaphoric, and thematic patterns. The crucial importance of the interplay between Europe and Africa in *A Distant Shore* is also underscored by SANDRA COURTMAN, who deciphers the narrative

through an examination of its intertextual connections with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a text that has clearly exerted a key influence on Phillips, as already shown by Najar's discussion of *Higher Ground*. Courtman shows how Phillips deconstructs the image of Africa as the 'dark continent' and how, through the unmasking of colonialist ideologies, he simultaneously contextualizes Africa's present struggles and sheds light on the mechanics of exclusion in contemporary Britain. This very sense of exclusion, experienced by the two main characters of the book, Dorothy and Solomon, provides the basis for THOMAS BONNICI's reading of the novel. His is a related yet slightly different view, since he argues that race works as a metonym for all types of rejection in *A Distant Shore*, and that what ultimately binds the protagonists is their common sense of postmodern *Unheimlichkeit*. PETRA TOURNAY-THEODOTOU also broaches the tension between inclusion and exclusion in the narrative, most notably by paying attention to Phillips's allegorical treatment of space. The possibility of such an interpretation is briefly touched on by some of the other contributors, but Tournay-Theodotou develops the idea into a detailed interpretative model around the figure of the stranger and of Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined community." The framework thus established is then used to decode some of the novel's recurrent thematic motifs, including the integrity of the body and the obsessive concern with politeness. The latter theme is brought to the fore by CINDY GABRIELLE, who adopts a different stance towards the protagonists' demonstration of 'good manners'. Examining how the expression of decorum correlates with notions of so-called 'civilization', she exposes the deception that lies behind the mask of respectability worn by some of the novel's characters. Other types of disguise are scrutinized in the next section, entitled "Race and Masks." Combining the themes of race and gender, LUCIE GILLET uncovers the remarkable continuity that exists between *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore*, despite the apparent rupture suggested by the novels' dissimilar settings and time-frames. Gillet analyses Phillips's characters and use of language, thereby uncovering the subtle parallels that he establishes between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century forms of racial and gender oppression. Equally subtle is the writer's treatment of race and masks in *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), which the next three contributions in the volume all address in different ways. TSUNEHICO KATO concentrates on the dilemma faced by Bert Williams, the historical figure whose life is fictionalized in the novel. Kato contextualizes the predicament of this black entertainer, who performed in so-called 'cork face' on Broadway at the turn of the twentieth century, and shows how Phillips depicts the man's attempt to come to terms with his unwilling perpetuation of a black stereotype. ITALA VIVAN examines Williams's plight from a Freudian perspective, viewing the character's

disguise as a manifestation of the ‘uncanny’. Her psychoanalytical reading underlines the many references to mirrors and ‘doubleness’ in the book, and reveals this ambiguity to be the source of Williams’s anguish. Mirror images also feature in DAVE GUNNING’S essay, although his analysis probes the performative aspects of Williams’s transformation. Gunning compares *Dancing in the Dark* with another novel that foregrounds the performance of race, Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001), and proposes to read the narratives as respectively “concentric” and “centripetal,” metaphors which aptly capture the writers’ divergent approaches to racial representation. Phillips’s treatment of race, this time explored from a more expressly formal angle, is also central in GORDON COLLIER’S examination of *In the Falling Snow*. Carefully unravelling the narrative’s “textual architecture,” Collier demonstrates how the strategic alternation between “revelation and concealment” crucially shapes the way in which the reader apprehends the characters’ diverse backgrounds and relationships with each other in this complex and elusive novel.

While the essays contained in this volume illuminate different facets of Phillips’s versatile artistic production, it is almost inevitable that, in a book presenting such a large number of articles on the work of a single writer, the arguments developed by the authors independently of each other should occasionally overlap. These sporadic convergences hold their own interest, for they are indicative of the consensus that is currently emerging around some of the major issues in Phillips’s writing. In this “many-tongued chorus”¹⁰ of critical voices, however, each individual follows his or her own score in an attempt to capture precisely what it means to be, like Phillips, writing in the key of life.

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Published in: *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. by Bénédicte Ledent & Daria Tunca (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2012), pp. xi-xxi.
Status: Postprint (Author's version)

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