Foreignness or Englishness?

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Most of Caryl Phillips's novels explore, in different ways, the consequences of colonization and imperialism around the world. The writer's latest novel is no exception to the rule. *Foreigners* is set in England and examines, through the lives of its three black protagonists, the development of British multiculturalism, one of the most important results of imperialism.

Foreigners is a novel about black people in England. Each of its chapters focuses on a black British historical figure who never really managed to feel at home in England. The first section of the novel recounts how Francis Barber, Dr Johnson's black servant, moved to Lichfield after his master's death, gradually fell into alcohol and poverty, and ended up in a gloomy infirmary. Randolph Turpin, the protagonist of the second section, was once the British world middleweight champion, but he soon lost his title, started declining, and committed suicide at the age of 38. The last part of the novel focuses on David Oluwale, a Nigerian immigrant who arrived in Leeds in 1949, worked and lived in the city for 20 years, was regularly imprisoned and institutionalized, and was finally found dead in the river Aire.

Phillips does not want his protagonists to be perceived only as victims – the novel makes it clear that their stubbornness prevents them from adapting to England – but it is in the end English society and its discriminatory practices that are blamed for these individuals' failure to integrate. There is a pervasive irony in the novel about England's wish to drive its outsiders away while it is after all imperialism that caused them to come to England. Francis Barber is a direct product of colonization since he was brought from Jamaica to England as a slave. Turpin is a second generation immigrant whose Guyanese father came to England, willing to serve 'his' country in the First World War. As for Oluwale, he emigrated to England "to make a life for [him]self" (p. 156), harbouring illusions about England as being "the rich white man's world" (p. 156). Like many immigrants from the former British Empire, Oluwale feels British and is indignant at discrimination against black people in Britain.

All this might suggest that a change in England's attitude is necessary; that the English should not only welcome black heroes like Randolph Turpin, but also all the other black newcomers in their country. The novel does not minimize the difficulty for England in adopting such an open-minded stance; the reluctance to acknowledge the 'Englishness' of the newcomers is understandable because it implies an enlargement, and thus also a shattering, of England's own identity. But *Foreigners* calls attention to the fact that England has become a multicultural society in the course of the past decades, not to say centuries, and that this plural society will not work unless all the white English people accept that change.

In this respect, the novel's hybrid form is significant. *Foreigners*' three chapters are very different from each other in terms of language and style: the first part is written in an imitation of eighteenth-century language, the language of the second section often evokes a newspaper report or a biography, and the third chapter is made up of various styles. This divided structure might reflect the fragmentation of the characters' identity, as well as of England's sense of self. The narrators are also different in every chapter and this shifting of perspectives might reinforce the idea that everybody, black and white, is involved in English multicultural society. Indeed, if the protagonists of the three chapters are black, the narrators telling their stories often belong to other parts of English society. While the teller of the first chapter is a white friend of Samuel Johnson, the omniscient narrator of the second section might stand for the whole of England, who identified itself with Turpin in his moment of glory. As for the chapter on Oluwale, it involves many different narrators (black and white, male and female) that might allude to the chorus of voices of which Britain is made up.

Hybridity is also suggested by the mixture between fact and fiction in *Foreigners*. Phillips's use of

historical references within a novel serves to illustrate the argument that history is itself a fiction, which can be reinvented. This is what Phillips does in *Foreigners*: he revives the psychology of his characters, thereby undermining the idea that history can be reduced to facts. Furthermore, by focusing on three black British historical figures, Phillips calls attention to black British history, which has too often been silenced in white historical reports. In the second part of the novel, the reader learns that a statue of Turpin was erected in Warwick in 2001, which might testify to an official acknowledgment of a black man. But the narrator later tells us that there are only two statues of black men in England. This recognition of a black man in England, all the more spectacular as it is so unusual, then further underlines the absence of recognition of the great majority of blacks in England. Phillips's latest novel is an answer to this non-acceptance and non-existence; it legitimizes black British history by bringing it to the fore while – in the case of Barber's narrative at least – white British history seems to remain in the background.

Foreigners is a novel that retraces the history of black people in England and that acknowledges their 'Englishness'. The subtitle, *Three English Lives* – that only appears in the British edition – is crucial to the message of the book. The novel is not so much about 'foreigners'; it rather tells of '*English* lives' (italics mine).

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