

Tracking the Routes of Trans-Atlantic Identities. Fictions of Memory in Caryl Phillips' *The Atlantic Sound*

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The question. The problem question for those of us who have grown up in societies which define themselves by excluding others. Usually us. A coded question. Are you one of us? Are you one of ours? (Phillips 2000: 124, italics in the original)

The "problem question" Caryl Phillips refers to in the above-quoted passage from his travelogue *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) arises in a seemingly innocent exchange between the author and a fellow traveller on a flight to Accra, Ghana. "Where are you from?", "Where are you *really* from?" (*ibid.*: 125, italics in the original) is what the polite stranger inquires, but his simple query is met with annoyance and perplexity. The British-Kittitian writer's reluctance to answer the question is certainly connected to the complex nature of an explanation which would have to refer to his immigrant background, but would not be limited to that, or to his being a fragment of the much broader diasporic, transnational community that Paul Gilroy identified as the *Black Atlantic* (1993). "*The question*" (*ibid.*, italics in the original), Phillips explains, has to do with how identities are negotiated, how borders between "selves" and "others" are drawn, and how discriminatory patterns based on concepts such as "ethnicity" or "national identity" are put in place. It also concerns the intra- and extra-psychic dynamics that allow individuals and communities to come to terms with their tangled, composite past, as well as to identify certain places as special repositories of their collective memory, or even as "home". As the conversation continues, Phillips struggles to give a straightforward answer, and his interlocutor, who seems in no doubt that Africa is "home" to anyone with a black skin, feels somehow entitled to reply in his place: "Does he mean, who am I? Does he mean, do I belong? Why does this

man not understand the complexity of the question? I make the familiar flustered attempt to answer *the* question. He listens, and then spoils it all. “So, my friend, you are going home to Africa. To Ghana’. I say *nothing*. No, I am not going home” (*ibid.*: 125, italics in the original).

While “home” figures prominently as a site of epistemological and semiotic crisis throughout the whole of Phillips’ work, in *The Atlantic Sounds* it also becomes the structural pivot around which the accounts of his journeys on the trail of the so-called “triangular trade” is organized. Significantly, Phillips’ silent but unfaltering claim that he is “not going home” (*ibid.*) does not only deny his travel companion’s assertion, it also contradicts the progression inscribed in the titles of the three main sections of the travelogue – “Leaving Home”, “Homeward Bound”, and “Home” – and, most blatantly, it negates the directionality declared in the title of the second section, from which the extract above is taken. The following analysis of Phillips’ travelogue will argue that these discrepancies are the sign of the conflicts of memory, which the author expounds in his exploration of the cities which stood at the vertexes of the profitable commercial route which supplied American colonies with African Slaves and fuelled the economic expansion of Western powers. The book, as a matter of fact, deals with how, at the turn of twenty-first century, societies involved in the deportation and enslavement of millions of Africans in the period spanning from the early sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century were grappling with their history in the private and in the public space, and raises questions as to how different nations elaborate their past, what kind of stories they tell themselves and expect their citizens to commit to. Phillips examines how, while socio-cultural concepts shape individual memories, the memory which is represented by media and institution must be actualized by individuals, as members of different communities of remembrance.

In *The Atlantic Sound*, *home* also emerges as a discrepant concept due to the fact that collective and individual memory are addressed not just as a reconstruction of past experiences in the present but rather as performative practices which are rooted in imagination. Phillips, in other words, undertakes an investigation on the subject of Cultural Identity and representation which, to quote Stuart Hall’s seminal essay on *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, takes into account how identities “far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [...] are

subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (1994: 225). Home and memory, in other words, are presented not as immutable, but rather as dynamic, dialogic processes which take place “differently”, which may imply significant conflict and even contradictions. The brief exchange reported above springs precisely from the dissonance between different epistemological viewpoints of the memory of the Black Atlantic. The talkative passenger thinks of memory and identity as anchored in a persistence in time which goes well beyond the short-term memory of individuals, epochs and cultures. In his view, Africa may be expedient for the construction of cultural spaces for remembrance which may be justified by the ideal continuity of people descending from common ancestors. Similarly, “home” is the place where the memory of the individual meets with the memory of those who are no longer here. Phillips’ literary endeavour, instead, shows that remembering is a form of travelling, and travelling is a way to come to terms with the different, linguistic constructs through which individual and collective subjects mediate their past through the filter of their present. Home emerges from the text not as a space of stability and reconnection, but rather as a space for deconstruction and interrogation, where readers’ assumptions about identity and alterity may be destabilized.

Travelling figures in the text as part of a process of deconstructive cultural critique which starts from the personal experience of the author, but then embraces the plurality of the Black Atlantic in order to foster a much more general reflection on how subjectivities are shaped in diasporic contexts. In the book’s prologue, titled “Atlantic Crossing”, the author is shown travelling back from Guadalupe to the United Kingdom on a Banana ship, in an attempt to repeat the journey undertaken by his parents when he was only four-months-old. The premise on which the following travel-accounts are based is that repetition is always coupled with difference. As Phillips puts it:

As I look at the white cliffs of Dover I realize that I do not feel the sense of nervous anticipation that almost forty years ago characterized my parents’ arrival, and that of their entire generation. I have not travelled towards Britain with a sense of hope and expectation. I have travelled towards Britain with a sense of knowledge and propriety, irrespective of what others, including my fellow passengers might think. (*ibid.* 21-22)

The text represents travelling backwards as a hermeneutical endeavour which is rooted in the awareness of the emotional, cognitive and cultural changes brought about by time and context. Parallely to that, the epilogue of *The Atlantic Sound* is titled “Exodus”, showing that, at the end of his homebound journey, the writer has fully embraced the provisional quality of each mnemonic construction of home, and that the sense of “knowledge and propriety” (*ibid.*) is disassembled and recomposed into a poetic language striving to convey the predicaments and the omissions that are also part of the dynamics of remembrance.

This reading of Caryl Phillips’s *The Atlantic Sound* thus combines a discussion on travelling as an epistemological tool with a reflection on literature both as a means of representing memory and as a central instrument through which memory cultures are shaped. As V. S. Naipaul once put it, “[a]n autobiography can distort; facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies. It reveals the writer totally” (2002: 184). The words of the British-Trinidadian Nobel laureate suggest that fiction is paradoxically closer to truth than non-fictional genre inasmuch as its constructiveness is openly declared, and not hidden by the unsubstantial “pact of truth” which, according to Philippe Lejeune’s study of autobiographical writings (1975), ratifies the identity of the name appearing on the cover of a book and the narrating persona. Similarly, in *The Atlantic Sound*, the relationship between fictions of memory and truth is very subtle, because memory is, by definition, a fictional, language-mediated reconstruction of the past. Although travelogues are usually classified as non-fictional pieces of writing, the essay will show that Phillip’s text deals with fiction on at least two different levels. Firstly, fiction emerges as part of complex practices through which people make sense of their everyday life and of their imaginary relationship with their communities. *The Atlantic Sound* tackles the question of how institutions and state apparatuses fashion narratives and promote certain politics of remembrance to cope with a controversial history and with the traumas of the past. Phillips questions, for example, how Liverpool, Elmina and Charleston, three centres each with a different historical and socio-political relationship with the triangular trade, construct their politics of remembrance around their “sites of memory” (Nora 1984: 92), i.e., those sites and objects (monuments, museums, cemeteries, archives, etc.) which have been selected for the consolidation, preservation, and

transmission of collective memory. He also discusses how people commit to these sites, and how they negotiate their own identities through public rituals involving media, politics and, in some cases, nationalistic bias. Secondly, *The Atlantic Sounds* also deals with how fiction may cast light on memory counter-cultures and provides tools for the representation of the liminal, interstitial spaces of memory, i.e. those spaces which escape official narratives but which, nonetheless, allow for a better understanding of the *Black Atlantic* in terms of processes of becoming and identity dynamics. The text fictionalizes the experience of hybrid subjects from different historical moments and cultural backgrounds who do not completely fit in with official narratives of identity, also casting light on the personal and emotional side of their disconnection from memory cultures. Therefore, the fictionalization of memory serves the purpose of bringing the “sites of memory” into life in such a way that that may reveal the cross-cultural aspect of slavery and its aftermath, and the impossibility of drawing clear-cut categories.

In sum, though not properly a fictional text, but rather a hybrid text which mixes autobiographical account, travel narrative, fictions, pastiche and, at time, poetry, *The Atlantic Sound* will be addressed as an example of “fiction of metamemory” (Neumann 2008; Nünning 2007). As Neumann (2008: 138) wrote, fictions of metamemory engage with an “ethics of remembering” which is basically an “ethics of aesthetics”: “It combines the ‘what’ of remembering with its ‘how’, thereby establishing an ongoing dialogue with the past in light of its present representation”. Self-reflexivity, as the following analysis will show, is a central feature of a text which engages not only in questioning the limits of memory, but also in disrupting what Neumann calls the “mimetic illusion” (*ibid.*) of remembering. Differently put, rather than mimetically reproduce a history of the Black Atlantic, *The Atlantic Sound* engages in a very provisional, incomplete attempt to explain the processes through which memory is shaped, deconstructed, and recreated.

1. Politics of remembrance in the Black Atlantic

Thinking of the *Black Atlantic* in terms of “memory cultures” necessarily implies reflecting on the spatial practices in which remembrance is inscribed. As Assmann (1999) and Calzoni (2007) remind us, the idea that space may function as a concrete support to the art of remembering has been a central cultural trope ever since the invention of *ars memoriae* in Classical antiquity and has gained ever more complex connotations across the centuries. Assmann argues that changes in theories of memory are strictly linked to the material supports, metaphors and mediators of memory, and space plays a privileged role among them. Along similar lines, Paul Gilroy’s spatial concept of the Black Atlantic originates from a struggle against the oblivion of the plurality and compositeness of Atlantic cultures and from the need to redefine modernity in the light of the complex “processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents” (Gilroy 1993: 2). Nevertheless, in the light of the displaced, hybrid history of the African diaspora, the interrelations of space and memory can be read as sites of deep crises. If, on the one hand, Gilroy’s emphasis on hybridization and reciprocal transformation criticizes and disrupts the narratives of the Third World’s passivity, thus acknowledging the latter as an active producer and contributor to the production of culture, on the other hand the Black Atlantic is presented as a fractal, rhizomatic space. Gilroy’s drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizome – in itself, a geographical metaphor for mapping non-hierarchical thought and for privileging the multiple over the one or the dual – signals that he understands the Black Atlantic as a space of continuous transformation, which constantly reinvents itself and speaks differently according to different times and cultures. Since the rhizome is “an assemblage of connected multiplicities, without center or origin, and is always in process of becoming” (Sprouse 1994: 83), space inevitably functions as an extremely polysemous, unstable and not-completely intelligible mediator and metaphor of memory. It is not reducible to the distinctiveness of a single place, but it is always rooted in the connections of a multiplicity of places and of their intertwined histories.

Reading the history of displacement, diaspora, and the power asymmetries that have characterized the Black Atlantic through the spatial metaphor of the rhizome

requires emphasising the interconnections of remembering and forgetting. The rhizome is not only defined by what Deleuze and Guattari phrase as principles of *connection*, *heterogeneity* and “multiplicity”, it is also a space of “cartography”, “decalcomania” and “a-signifying rupture” (2004:12-13). The two French philosophers lean on the principles of cartography and decalcomania to dismantle the rigid scheme of filiation that was implied in the observations made by the traveller in the short passage which introduces this essay, and to replace it with a process of continuous “becoming-other” – i.e. not just imitating, but absorbing the codes of the “Other”, and letting “Self” and “Other” undertake a process of reciprocal de-territorialization and re-territorialization. By the same token, identity – including that of the author and first person-narrator – is presented in *The Atlantic Sound* not just as a mere consequence of genealogy, but rather as the result of the interaction with multiple Others. Phillip’s persona is that of a traveller whose complex cultural perspective has been shaped by his previous journeys and stays across different cultures: the composite space of the Caribbean of his birth, the Africa of his forebears, the Europe of his formative years and the USA which, as the text briefly mentions, he elected as a provisional home. The Deleuzian principle of “a-signifying rupture” reminds us, instead, that if identities are built around nets of relations, the sudden and abrupt cutting of all ties – emotional, national, cultural, political, economic, and so on – does not endanger further possibilities for action. It is part of the vital strength and of the resilience that characterize survival and movement.

The ethical imperative to remember is ever stronger if we consider that, besides being a space of connection and transformation, the rhizome always runs the risk of becoming a “non-place” of memory (Calzoni 2007). There is no record of the millions of African lives lost on their Atlantic journey, and for those who survived the crossing, it also meant the cutting of cultural, social and linguistic ties¹. The

¹ By referring to the rhizome as a model to narrate the Middle Passage, the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant compares the slave-ship both to a womb and to a stomach, devouring people and throwing them into what he calls a “nonworld” (1997: 5). What produces the shift from a state of nonworld to a state of humanity, in Glissant’s view, is the possibility of establishing new bonds, an activity that he sees as never-ending. Moreover, he stresses that the outcome of this voyage into the abyss will be “all humanity” – thus implying that this bond will not be an exclusive one, but that the boats will continue to connect Africa to Europe and to the giving shape – in a most conflictual and painful way – to a modernity that is ever more hybrid, syncretic and plurivocal.

questions that Caryl Phillips raises in his journeys to Liverpool, Elmina and Charleston also concern the inadequacy of the languages of memory to deal with the rhizome as a deeply *opaque* space (to use an adjective that is particularly dear to the Martinican writer, philosopher and cultural theorist Edouard Glissant), a space marked by oblivion, by difference, by the mutual untranslatability of cultures, as well as by a continuous process of evolution, hybridization and metamorphosis.

Phillips shows that, as institutions necessarily have to promote politics of remembrance, the latter are not always able to reflect the complexity of the Black Atlantic. The “sites of memory” which in the three cities he visited in the late 1990s were erected to come to terms with their past, are shaped by social values, historical views, and possibly future expectations. In other words, they are not only mnemonic devices, committed to the remembrance of a traumatic past, but they are also highly ideological apparatuses at the service of national identity constructions, which are exploited both to consolidate communities and to indicate the directions in which societies should go. Phillips observes that they seem to promote narratives of identity based on rigid distinctions between *se/ves* and “others” and are functional to selective procedures in which facts are erased, manipulated, and presented in such ways that national politics of representation may benefit from them.

Between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the three cities remember the slave trade differently while they enact different race and identity politics. While in Charleston the memory of the past is marginalized and hidden, as it is still too close to unresolved social tensions, in Liverpool memory is preserved and celebrated in museums and archives, but these institutions do not seem to serve active politics of remembrance. On the contrary, they are relegated to the sphere of historical or scholarly interest, so that they lose their “place in life” (Assmann 2010: 103), and they signal an imaginary break within past and present. As the writer visits the Maritime museum, for example, he cannot but notice that the history of Liverpool’s role in

the triangular trade is dealt with from a distance². The museum is a sort of heterotopy (Foucault 1967), a place outside the flux of life which is perceived as “other”, and visited by schoolchildren who are too young to understand or by those who, like the elderly couple he describes with a touch of irony, symbolically pay their due to the shame of the past, and make sure that Phillips may hear their contrite comments. Liverpool is thus represented as a city which feels compelled to remember, but at the same time would prefer to turn a blind eye to his past. While its most prominent buildings testify of past wealth and power, the story of the city’s connection with the slave trade and with Charleston, the most important slave port in the USA at the height of the triangular trade, is somewhat hidden. The chapter also mentions that a black community has been established in the city since the peak of the triangular trade, and has been there for over two centuries, yet it is still perceived as an immigrant community, and is not completely integrated into the social fabric. Therefore, the lack of awareness of the past is transformed into social conflicts and lack of inclusion.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, we find the city of Elmina, which adopts a twofold strategy to deal with its past aimed not at remembering, but rather at selecting and manipulating memory. On the one hand, fortresses like Elmina are transformed into powerful symbols that attracts thousands of tourists from all over the world, lured by the idea of undertaking their own, personal journey across the Atlantic to find reconciliation with their past and reconnect with their ancestors. Rituals like “Panafest”, a cultural event that regularly takes place in Ghana and is attended people by African descent from all over the world, serve a Panafricanist rhetoric that should strengthen bonds of solidarity and fraternity. Contrarily, Phillips shows that these rituals serve to exorcise the local population’s feelings of guilt and shame for their complicity with one of the greatest tragedies in human

² In the light of persisting cultural and social issues, the relevance of Phillips’ critique of politics of remembrance cannot be underestimated even twenty years after its publication. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the city of Liverpool and its cultural institutions have done much in the direction of redressing the memory of their traumatic past. The *Slave Trade Gallery*, which opened in 1995 in the basement of the Maritime Museum, became the *International Slavery Museum* in 2007 and occupies an entire floor. It makes an effort to bring to light a more complex narrative, highlighting various counter-histories of resistance. At the same time various grassroots initiatives have developed to expand awareness both in educational institutions and in the general public.

history, and they also contribute in creating new, “othering” strategies within a community that falsely promotes itself as homogeneous.

“Homeward Bound”, the chapter on Elmina, shows how the production of memory may take the twisted form of “consumerism of memory”, and those who participate in the ritual of Panafest are shown as active consumers of deceptive fictions of identity. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall reminds us that, when the term “black” was coined as a way to refer to the common experiences of racism and marginalisation it provided a powerful organizing category around which new politics of resistance could be promoted. On the other hand, by suppressing the singularity of cultures, traditions, and ethnic identities, “[t]he struggle to come into representation was predicated on a critique of the degree of fetishization, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject” (Hall 1995: 223). Along these lines, pseudo-authenticity is sold to trusting tourists who buy trinkets and souvenirs or attend performances in languages they do not speak and have no means to understand. Oversimplified language is found in the publicity material that Phillips reports receiving in London: Panafest is advertised as “the biggest gathering of the African family to celebrate our cultural unity. Artists and intellectuals of Africa and the diaspora are gathering together as a family in Mother Africa, in order that they might celebrate their values” (*ibid.*: 143). In fact, Phillips argues that Panafest is functional to the creation of strategies of exclusion based on essentialist concepts of identity. As it tries to promote a “pure”, a historical notion of Africa, it also hides the fact that no culture exists in isolation, and minimizes the role of hybridization, transculturation, and cultural exchange in the forging of Atlantic cultures. Its rigid idealism certainly contrasts with the motley crowd that attends it and conceals and denies difference in ways that the author does not hesitate to describe as (self) deceptive. Tourists, in other words, are treated as rich foreigners to exploit: their own cultural compositeness is hidden behind a mask of silence while they buy into cathartic rituals which are not based on spiritual communion, but rather on the circulation of money and merchandising.

The controversial words of Mohammed ben Abdallah, one of Ghana’s most authoritative playwrights and an active promoter of Panafest, are quoted directly to unveil the hypocrisy of the double-standards that Panafricanism applies:

'You must not be too romantic about slavery. It was a terrible thing, but I still maintain that many of the Africans who left were not good people. Today we have a real problem though. A serious problem. We have to decide what to do with these forts. They contain a lot of our history, but they are in ruins and Ghana does not have the means to restore all of them. There is some renovation, in the hope that they can be made presentable for tourism, but renovation is not restoration'. (*ibid.*: 148)

Ben Abdallah readily draws a clear line between those who have stayed in Africa and those who were deported (whose descendants, as a matter of fact, he considers "Africanized", but not fully "Africans"), and even claims that the latter "got what they deserved", as "[t]he people running the forts were people of God, for after all Cape Coast Castle was the site of the first missionary school" (*ibid.*). In his view, the castles were the site of someone else's Holocaust ("For us, they do not mean the same thing as they do for you people", *ibid.*: 149) and, consequently, it should be America's responsibility to take care of them. He also speaks in favour of renovation of the "sites of Memory" of the African diaspora, although, as he puts it, he is not concerned if "renovation is not restoration" (*ibid.*: 148), but rather a process of modification and destruction of history. Ghanaians, he claims, should not be held responsible for the slave forts since the history of the diaspora is not "their" history, and their only concern should be how to profit from foreign tourism.

In Ghana, differing from Liverpool or Charleston, memory is exhibited, celebrated, shared, and even experienced by visitors who, despite ben Abdallah's revisionist and condescending attitude, are deeply, emotionally involved with their past. Nonetheless, the three cities' official politics of remembrance are denounced as highly selective and hypocritically divisive. Phillips' attitude towards the way institutions deal with memory is both critical and ironical. As López Ropero remarks, "the travelling persona that Phillips projects [...] often seems aloof and elitist, slipping into gestures that we may associate with colonial discourse" (2003: 56)³. In *The Atlantic Sound*, this may easily be perceived in his criticisms of the limits of institutional discourses, and way users of these discourses are described

³ It could also be argued that Phillip's reference to his own autobiographical self may be read in terms of what Stuart Hall (1994: 230) calls "positioning", i.e. the strategic assertion of a position of enunciation which gives meaning to what is said, but which is, nonetheless, determined by specific, circumstantial conditions.

as uncritical and uninformed. Nevertheless, the Spanish scholar also claims that views of Phillips as a “mere Victorian seeing-man” (*ibid.*), fail to acknowledge his concerns with neo-colonial tendencies in the so-called post-colonial world. These concerns may well be read in Phillips engagement with memory, metamemory and fiction. Neocolonialism and totalitarianism are denounced as strictly intertwined in the very politics of remembrance promoted by institutions. Nevertheless, as the following section will show, the narratives institutions promote are always exceeded by the practice of memory, and by the counter-narratives produced by those who do not completely fit in.

2. Memory as practice. Interstitial spaces of remembrance

“Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways the property of others”, Michel de Certeau (1984: xii) famously wrote in his seminal work *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Similarly, Caryl Phillips seems to suggest that the memory of the Black Atlantic is not only inscribed in abstract, institutional narratives, but also actualized by individual practices and counter-narratives. In other words, the plurality and compositeness of hybrid subjectivities always exceeds the preestablished role of passive consumers of memory. In accordance with de Certeau’s claim, *The Atlantic Sounds* shows that dealing with individual practices does not equal adopting an individualistic perspective, but rather acknowledges that “a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse, and that each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact” (*ibid.*).

In *The Atlantic Sound* traveling emerges as a way to explore the incoherent, fragmentary linguistic constructions through which the memory of past traumas may come into being without following a single path. Phillips manipulates different narrative modes in order to come to terms with the memory of the Black Atlantic as a rhizomatic space, and the way these modes are intertwined and mixed may give an idea of the incomplete, fragmentary nature of remembering. Travelogues are by nature hybrid genres, as the account of the travelling authors’ journeys may include heterogeneous materials – in this, specific case, newspaper articles,

letters, poems, courtroom accounts and interviews. Also, in *The Atlantic Sound* the borders between truth and invention are occasionally blurred, and Phillips' search for new ways to convey the memory of the Black Atlantic resorts to the conventions of fiction and poetry. In order to address the interstitial spaces of memory, the author chooses to talk about the lives and experiences of people who have conflicts of identity, who do not conform to the rigidity of the identity discourses of the societies they live in. He explores their narratives of identity in the light of their complex "positioning", i.e. the strategic assertion of a position of enunciation which gives meaning to what is said, but which is, nonetheless, determined by specific, circumstantial conditions (Hall 1994: 230). By doing so, Phillips investigates how identities emerge as a product of arbitrary and contingent relations, rather than of fetishized conceptions of race. In other words, he explores how the complexity of the transcultural relations that have been shaping the Black Atlantic since the sixteenth century affected the lives of individuals from the distant or not-so-distant past, or of contemporaries he meets on his journey, who act, in their own specific ways, as mediators of memory.

Resorting to fictional accounts allows Phillips to gain new insight into the everyday life of people whose story has left a relatively marginal trace in historical accounts, but which gains significance in the light of wider cross-cultural interaction processes of which they were early witnesses. In the "Leaving Home" chapter, the description of the author's visit to modern-day Liverpool is intertwined with the story of the journey undertaken by John Emmanuel Ocansey, a trader from Addah (Ivory Coast) who, in 1881, spent several months in Liverpool hoping to settle an unsuccessful business arrangement made by his adoptive father. No typographic distinction signals the change from the autobiographical narrative mode that is typical of the travelogue and the fictional mode that characterizes the reconstruction of the life of Ocansey, as if to establish a continuity between the personal adventure of the nineteenth-century African traveller and author's own exploration of the early twenty-first century Liverpool. As noted by Calbi, Ocansey is shown "ironically re-visioning the tropes through which the African 'other' is construed in the dominant, 'imperialist' European tradition of travel literature, and exposes the 'tribalism' of the metropolitan centres" (2006: 53). His narration thus contains, *in nuce*, the revision of the literary genre of travel writing

which Caryl Phillips is performing, from a post-colonial perspective, in the text. The book quotes some documents from the trial against Mr Hickson, Ocansey's commissioning trader, and the details of Ocansey's experiences in Europe can be found in an account written by the African businessman himself (Ocansey 1989 [1881]). Nonetheless, Phillips' reconstruction is characterized by fictional elements that are aimed at making Ocansey's presence more concrete and relatable. He is not only the protagonist of a story told by a third-person narrator, but also the main focalizer of his own narrative. Phillips imagines and gives voice to the outlook of an African man who came to Europe as a trained professional, and who observed the Europeans from the point of view of someone who is both an outsider and an insider. Educated in missionary schools, and well-accustomed to doing business with English traders, his observations on nineteenth-century Liverpoolian society do not only provide a glimpse of the diffidence, condescension and prejudice of late Victorian England, but also of cultural misunderstandings arising from the asymmetries of the history of the commercial relationship between Europe and Africa.

While in the narration of Ocansey's story the use of free indirect speech allows Phillips to take on the speech of the character, the stories of Reverend Phillip Quaque (1741-1816), the first African ordained as a minister in the Church of England, and of the Charlestonian judge Julius Waties Waring (1880-1968), who played an important role in the American Civil Rights Movement, are told from a more explicit narratorial distance. The detailed reconstruction of Quaque's life – his early years in England, the return to Cape Coast and the frustrations of serving as a missionary in the slave fort, where "he found it almost impossible to interest the men in Christianity, for their attention was primarily focused on their twin passions of staying alive and making money" (*ibid.*: 177) – precedes by a few pages the episode in which the narrator suddenly realises that the tourist group to which he belongs is carelessly walking on Quaque's tombstone while performing a ritual in commemoration of diaspora ("I look to my feet and realize that by my left foot there is a marble plaque. It marks the burial place of Phillip Quaque", *ibid.*: 218). The unexpected reference to Quaque after the apparent conclusion of his narrative arc creates a bitter contrast between the lively impression left by the African minister's story – which focuses on the racial

conflicts that he experienced as a man living between two worlds, the wreckage of his three marriages, and the ethical struggles that marked the life of someone serving as a man of God in a place where human rights were systematically violated – and the indifference to which a site of memory is treated – ignored and trodden on.

The sad, almost grotesque effect of the discovery of Quaque's marble plaque is opposed to that of the retrieval of the tombstones of Judge Waring and his second wife Elizabeth narrated in the Charleston chapter ("Home"). Waring's transition from a moderate to a proponent of radical change in the discriminatory racial politics still in vigour in most Southern states in the 1950s and 60s is carefully reconstructed. Phillips looks for the traces of the judge's legacy by interviewing a series of direct and indirect witnesses offering their personal perspectives on his controversial second marriage, the pressures which had arisen in the social circles of which his racial identity and professional position had previously granted him membership, and the ostracism of which he was a victim. The memory of Waring's life is shown through the passionate remembrance of those who fought alongside him and the overt disapproval of those who felt that he was betraying his own culture and ethnical belonging. His past accomplishments and the unresolved tensions of the present thus mutually enlighten each other. Phillips' finding of the judge's final resting place, hidden in a small cemetery and poorly tended, is marked by an impression of composed isolation and simplicity, and the homage the writer pays is meant to honour the memory of someone whose contribution to the ongoing battle for social justice and equal rights should not be forgotten.

The continuous exchange between past and present is what characterizes Phillips' search for the memory of the Black Atlantic. Phillips shows how the asymmetrical dynamics of the mingling of different cultures are not just a thing of the past but can also still be found today in the experience of some of the common people who accompany him in his journeys. Phillips does not travel alone, but he chooses as his guides individuals who are still struggling to find their place in society. Both Stephen, the twenty-three-year old aspiring documentarist from Liverpool's black community, and Mansour, the Ghanaian guide who was repatriated after a failed immigrant experience in the UK, and is now trying to

enter the USA illegally, are shown experiencing difficulties in adjusting to the context in which their lives unfold. Also, towards the end of the book, Phillips' quest for the transpersonal practices through which the Black Atlantic keeps shaping the life of different individuals caught in the in-between-ness of their composite identities, is transformed into a more sophisticated linguistic experimentation. In the final chapter Phillips juxtaposes a variety of impressions in order to construct a poetics of identity which does not strive to order facts or explain the past:

[..] The ubiquitous harmonies of black English ('Where y'all staying?') Cultural baggage. The United States in the blood of the elders. Confusion in the blood of the children. This closed society. On contact with the real world, what? The final irony of life in the great captivity. Burdensome cultural baggage. I'm sorry, sir, but this bag cannot be tucked away under the seat in the front. [..] You were transported in a wooden vessel across a broad expanse of water to a place which rendered your tongue silent. Look. Listen. Learn. And as you began to speak, you remembered fragments of a former life. (*ibid.*: 275)

The passage combines several temporalities and different voices without providing a single logical path to make sense of it. The fragmentary sentences he uses are collective utterances in which the "you" and the other deictics that Phillips use can be easily appropriated by a variety of subjects in different relations to the metamorphoses of the Black Atlantic. The language that he uses is multi-accented, and it shows that language itself may also serve as a site of appropriation and subversion. The new narrative that emerges from the last few pages of the book is broken just like the traces that the past has left, and the reader is required to make sense of it through a personal interpretative act.

3. Concluding remarks

In their essay on fictions of memory and metamemory, Vera and Ansgar Nünning argue that, among the different ways in which literature remembers, there is also a textual memory that relates to literary genres. Literary genres, in other words, should be considered as cognitive schemata and deposits of cultural memory. In this sense, Caryl Phillips' *The Atlantic Sound* should be regarded as a very

interesting manipulation of the memory-content of travelogues. A genre which, as Mary Louise Pratt reminds us (1991) is strictly connected with colonial expansion and with the imperialistic project, travel writing is often characterized by a translation of the Other into the terms of the self. Phillips operates an important subversion of this pattern by translating a personal quest for home and identity into the language of multiple Others. *The Atlantic Sound* tells a shared, intertwined history by travelling across different social spaces and juxtaposing different narratives. What is more, it displays a self-reflexive concern about the nature and the limits of representation and the way memory is actualized, re-lived, transmitted or even erased.

“Guinea,/ from your cry from your hand from your patience/ we still have some arbitrary lands”, once wrote Aimé Césaire (2017: 451), the father of Négritude and one of the most important voices in Caribbean literature. *The Atlantic Sounds* shows precisely that what we may decide to call home is in fact a plurality of arbitrary lands from which a multiplicity of dissonant narratives of home and memory may come together and complete each other. We are all hybrid subjects, products of transatlantic encounters, and consequently our paths towards memory cannot be one-directional. As Phillips phrases it in the book’s last paragraph: “Shards of memory. Careful. Some will draw blood. You dressed your memory in the new words of your country. Remember. There were no round-trip tickets in your part of the ship. Exodus. It is futile to walk into the face of history. As futile as trying to keep the dust from one’s eye in the desert” (Phillips 2000: 275).

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