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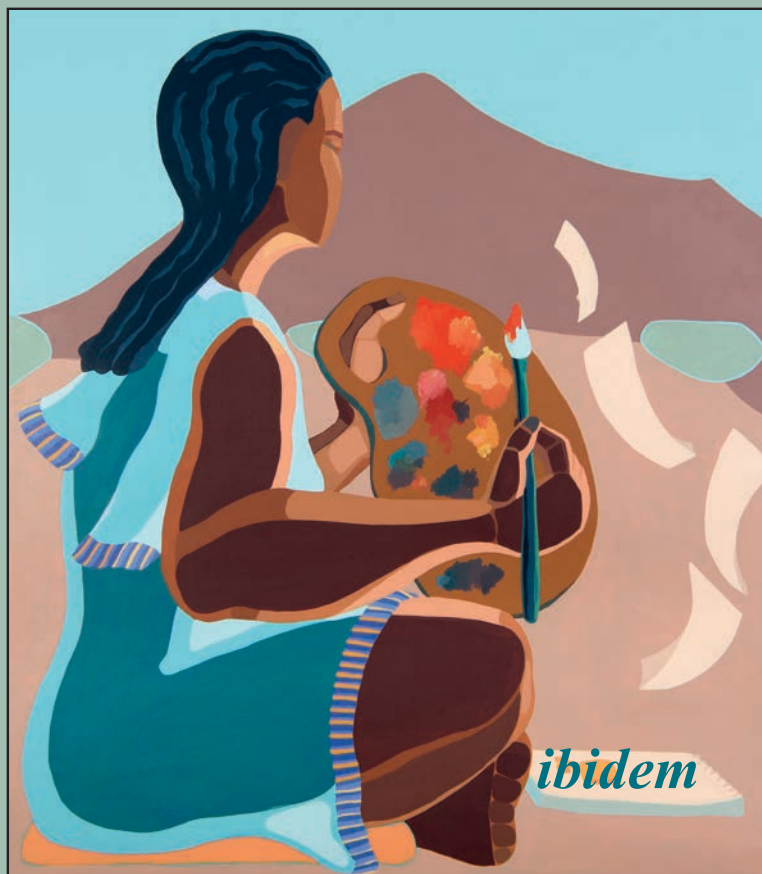
STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Volume 20

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Maria Festa

# History and Race in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*



**STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES**

Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

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Caryl Phillips's  
*The Nature of Blood***

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Maria Festa

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CARYL PHILLIPS'S  
*THE NATURE OF BLOOD*

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Maria Festa

## Introduction

Liverpool [...] It is disquieting to be in a place where history is so physically present, yet so glaringly absent from people's consciousness. But where is it any different? Maybe this is the modern condition.

– Caryl Phillips (*Atlantic Sound* 93)

This study of Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997) aims to provide a holistic reading of the multiple stories that are presented in the novel. This wide-canvas view of the seemingly disparate, disconnected threads in the text allows for underlying thematic and historical parallels to emerge and reveal themselves in ways that may not have seemed obvious on a first reading of the novel.

Phillips is one of the exponents of postcolonial and Black British literature. His commitment to his quest for identity and the feeling of belonging extends into other artistic fields such as theatre, radio, television, film, articles and essays. Phillips's refined, multifaceted erudition which emerges discreetly from all his work along with his varied interests and inquisitive mind stimulate readers' intellectual curiosity. In his autobiographical essay "A Life in Ten Chapters" from *Color Me English: Migration and Belonging Before and After 9/11*, Phillips, referring to his younger self as "the student," explains how an observant former teacher dissuaded him from pursuing a career in psychology:

Dr Rabbitt informs the student that he has passed the first part of his degree in Psychology, Neurophysiology and Statics, but he reassures the student that at nineteen there is still time for him to reconsider his choice of a degree. Does he really wish to pursue psychology? The student patiently explains that he wishes to understand people, and that before university he was assiduously reading



Jung and Freud for pleasure. His unmoved tutor takes some snuff, and then he rubs his beard. So you want to know about people, do you? He patiently explains to the student that William James was the first professor of psychology at Harvard, but it was his brother, Henry, who really knew about people. The student looks at Dr Rabbitt, but he is unsure what to say. His tutor helps him to make the decision. 'Literature. If you want to know about people study English literature, not psychology.' (110-11)

Literature as a highly sophisticated laboratory for observing human nature can also be envisioned as a space where all sorts of disciplines intersect and where convergence, divergence as well as unexpected mixtures can occur. In this way, literature becomes a place of inquiry that encourages the development of ideas, reflections and investigations arising from our primordial attempt to understand the world we live in. In addition to this notion that literature reflects, absorbs and explores influences from a variety of fields, Phillips confers it the supplementary feature of social activism:

As long as we have literature as a bulwark against intolerance, and as a force for a change, then we have a chance. [...] literature *is* plurality in action; it embraces and celebrates a place of no truths, it relishes ambiguity, and it deeply respects the place where everybody has the right to be understood. (*Color* 16; emphasis in the original)

The assertion that "literature *is* plurality in action" opens up and encapsulates an additional dimension of literature. The understanding of literature as a space for exploring ideas and human behaviour has been enlarged to include the belief that a novel, for instance, can also be an

active “force for a change,” for conceiving and making us realize a society without prejudice is possible. *The Nature of Blood*, even more so than any of Phillips’s other artistic productions, epitomizes “the place where everybody has the right to be understood.”

Phillips’s deep political/humanist convictions are matched by a writing style and narrative choices that, without ever tilting into overstatement or self-conscious formal gymnastics, quietly challenge the reader to question some of the assumptions they may have about storytelling:

I am not a novelist in the postmodern tradition who makes himself visible to the reader and orchestrates the narrative from the centre of the stage. I like to hide in the wings and turn the stage over to my characters. An occasional whispered prompt is all that I permit myself. (Phillips, “Fire” 177)

*The Nature of Blood* is no exception and Phillips does turn the stage over to his characters. They have democratic opportunities to reveal, introduce and provide details about themselves. The storytelling is delivered with an elaborate narrative structure in which individual stories are routinely interrupted only to be returned to later in the novel. Furthermore, the heterogeneous circumstances of the multiple stories resonate with one another, overlap or cross each other to form gradually recognisable emerging patterns and common traits. This complex framework develops, in readers, the habit of constant re-evaluating and reflecting on what came before (both narratively and historically). Perhaps as a gesture of empathy with his, at times, disoriented but inquisitive audience, Phillips offers occasional whispered prompts. These are incorporated in the narration in the form of encyclopaedic entries on the topics of suicide, the Jewish ghetto in Venice and his adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* (cf. 2.1.2.3; 2.2; 3.2.).

Phillips affirms that “in the case of *The Nature of Blood*, [he] was reasonably sure that the novel was going to be principally concerned with the Holocaust, but armed only with a general knowledge of the subject [he] felt that [he] had to become more familiar with history” (“Fire” 176). Phillips succeeded in “becom[ing] more familiar with history” to such an extent that Western history itself emerges as the central concern and focus of the narrative and the common denominator tying the heterogeneous accounts of events together. On another occasion Phillips goes into detail about his novel and seems to confirm the shift from a specific concern with the Holocaust to include events that pre-date as well as continue beyond the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany:

The novel is, both directly and indirectly, about blood. About Europe's obsession with homogeneity, and her inability to deal with the heterogeneity that is – in fact – her natural condition. The practice of using blood as a barometer of acceptability is very deeply ingrained in the European consciousness [...] wherever one looks in European history, blood has been used as a pretext for the persecution of those whose faces do not fit on the canvas upon which the national portrait has been painted. (“Blood” 168-69)

In *The Nature of Blood* Phillips has broadened the scope of his exploration of his fragmented identity and permanent sense of “I feel at home here, but I don't belong. I am of, and not of, this place” (*New World Order* 4) to focus on the actor – Europe – that over the ages has played a crucial role in the economic and political structures of Western and non-Western societies. Furthermore, Phillips exposes the irony behind Europe's morality. He points his finger at Europe's “inability to deal with heterogeneity.” He delves into history and cannot help but notice that the vital element held in common by members of the

human race – blood – has been used as an instrument to legitimize exclusion and social injustices. This unavoidably has led to the creation of the figure of the Other: the individual or group arbitrarily assigned to a place at the bottom of the race/class hierarchy and tasked with enduring the greatest prejudice, exploitation, persecution in deeply unequal, stratified societies. Phillips with his Afro-Caribbean origins and British education examines the past of Europe, this continent that self-anointed itself the bearer of civilization and culture, as an alternative method of coming to terms with the issues of identity and sense of belonging. For the reasons given above and due to his acute awareness of British society's hesitant, limited acceptance of his place in a Western society, Phillips opted to write the novel in a non-European country in the hope of thus attaining distance and objectivity that would not otherwise have been possible:

I can write in Europe, but my writing is always in danger from my environment. [...] Bangkok is not Europe. [...] Both culturally and physically, I have no connection to the country, or the people. I am a foreigner in the most radical sense, and this sense of alienation frees me to concentrate on my work. [...] The novel I was working on is about Europe. It is a novel about the Holocaust. But not just this. The primary obsession was the Holocaust, which is – at least in my mind – related to my secondary obsession: race and faith as seen through the prism of sixteenth-century Venice. Othello's Venice; Shylock's Venice. To write this book I needed to be in Bangkok. I needed to be far away from Europe. ("Blood" 167-68)

It is interesting that just as Phillips felt he had to temporarily move to a modern non-European city to write about the European past, the novel he writes about the Holocaust in the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties is largely set centuries earlier or decades after the event in

countries where extermination camps did not exist. It is as if only by stepping away from the time and place of the events of his "primary obsession" is he able to gain a wide enough perspective to fully understand them. The novel initially lets the story of the genocide of European Jews and other ethnic, social and political groups by the Nazis during World War II be told by its characters. Then, Phillips skilfully introduces other narrating voices, from Ethiopian Jews in Israel to sixteenth century Venice, and parallels with the Atlantic slave trade slowly begin to surface. It can be argued that Phillips's "primary obsession," even more than the murder of six million Jews in Nazi death camps, is the enduring fixation by a white, Euro-centric dominant class on some perceived Otherness attributed to different groups in its midst. In the late eighties, in the attempt to lessen "the tension between [himself] and [his] environment" (preface, *European Tribe* ix), Phillips travelled around Europe and "jotted various thoughts about a Europe [he] feel[s] both of and not of." He embarked on a journey into history rather than touring the natural, architectural and cultural sites that draw visitors to European countries. During his European travels he also visited Poland and the sites of the death camps:

The next day Januesz drove me the thirty-five miles to Auschwitz. If there had been an airlink from Auschwitz to London, I would have taken it and flown home. In Auschwitz-Birkenau [Birkenau], the largest of the 5,000 camps, 4 million people were killed, 10,000 a day. The size of the figures was beyond my comprehension. At least the Atlantic slave trade had some vestige of logic, however unpalatable. Auschwitz transcended the imagination. (Phillips, "How much more" 97)

Upon his return to London, he "soon discovered that rather than solving the question of what Europe means to [him], the best [he] could hope for was that the experience might better define the parameters of

[his] ‘problem’” (preface, *European Tribe* ix). To a certain extent, *The Nature of Blood* reflects his travel around Europe and his attempt to probe the intricacies of his “‘problem.’” By delving into Western history Phillips is also looking into the roots of his fragmented identity.

In relation to his “secondary obsession: race and faith,” Phillips (“Blood” 168) is drawn to the Jewish and African diasporas. Religion is at the core of the mass migration of the Jewish people after the period of Babylonian exile, whereas “race” – identified as difference in skin complexion – is at the core of the mass displacement of Africans as a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade. In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips retraces the Jewish diaspora from fourteenth-century Colonia, Germany, where “Christian hysteria manifested itself in violence” (50) towards Jews until the nineteen-eighties. Phillips alludes to the two diasporas through the stories of his immigrant African characters and through the similarities that become subtly but undeniably apparent to the reader between the two major displacements of human populations in Western history.

The peculiarity and intricacy of the narrative challenge readers’ knowledge of the events described. The diverse narrative strands and settings in the novel allow for, maybe even invite, different interpretations. However, in order to investigate the complex, multi-layered events portrayed in *The Nature of Blood*, I have opted to focus on the historical dimension of the novel. With this in mind, I have singled out four characters – Stephan, Eva, Malka and the African General – whose individual lives are traversed and deeply affected by extraordinary historical circumstances. This selection helped scaffold my reading of the novel, as well as of history, but most importantly, it provided a clear direction in my research.

This study has been divided into three parts plus an appendix that contains a conversation with the author that occurred in Caen, France, in May 2017. The first part introduces the author, his work, his characteristic writing style, his approach to literature and his alternative

understanding of history as far as is required for the purposes of this study.

The second part analyses the characters of Stephan, Eva and Malka, and the last section deals with the Jewish question. I argue that Stephan's narrative operates as a frame, while his character functions as a narrative hub in the text. The frame can be interpreted as a closed border that contains the fragmented stories; the hub can be viewed as the focal point through which the fragmented stories pass. If we adhere to Phillips's understanding of history as a non-linear record of events, Stephan becomes a point of convergence from where multiple connections among historical events radiate. Stephan is also a thematic hub, an entry point to a discussion on Zionism, the subsequent comparison with Pan-Africanism as well as the British political involvement in Palestine. Historical data and perspectives are based on Alan Hart's *Zionism*; Stephen Howe's *Afrocentrism*; the conversation "Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures" between Joseph-Achille Mbembe and Sarah Balakrishnan.

The second character, Eva, personifies the violence inflicted on Jews by the Holocaust. Her fragmented, bewildered narration shows her deeply traumatized state of mind. Her vivid accounts of events along with the omniscient narrator's reports that fill the gaps in Eva's reminiscences portray the atrocious persecution of European Jews by the Nazis. My analysis of Eva follows the locations where the events occur: Cyprus, Bergen-Belsen and London. Cyprus is the first setting of the novel. In the aftermath of World War II, the Mediterranean island replicates the reality of another form of confinement. Due to British policies in regard to the settlement of Jews in Palestine, the survivors of the Nazi death camps are enclosed in British detention camps before boarding the ships that will take them to the "promised land." Giorgio Agamben's study of concentration camps and the inclusion-exclusion relationships that occur in this particular context constitutes the basis for my comparison between German and British camps and my attempt to provide Eva with, in Phillips's words, "the right to be

understood” (“Color” 16). Ironically, Eva’s silence and need to be alone is respected and met with examples of empathy while she is detained in Cyprus, something which does not happen when she arrives, as a free person, in London. I rely on trauma studies to try to interpret Eva’s behaviour and thoughts, specifically on Sigmund Freud and his first theories of recovery from trauma, along with current theorists such as Judith Lewis Herman and Sophia Richman who promote the practice of the autobiographical process. As is the case for Eva, this practice allows the individual to go through his/her past experience privately and in any moment that feels safe for this kind of unpleasant examination of painful experiences. Through her soliloquies, Eva provides details about her *persona*, simultaneously attempting to come to terms with her traumatic experience and regain a sense of continuity and wholeness. The section devoted to Bergen-Belsen deals with the shocking reality of the death camp. Eva manages to depict her life before and during her confinement, even though her fragmented thoughts sometimes appear, on first reading, random and elliptical. Nonetheless, the omniscient narrator’s voice takes over every time the character seems unable to describe details or feelings that are likely to deepen her profound psychological wound. The omniscient narrator’s voice, for instance, meticulously describes “the process of gassing” (176) when Eva, whom we learn “burn[s] bodies” (107), remains silent about her forced membership to a *Sonderkommando* aiding with the disposal of gas chamber victims.

Zygmunt Bauman and Elias Canetti provide valuable insights into the ideology and practice of the Nazis in their goal of creating a *judenfrei* Germany. Bauman puts forth the argument that the Holocaust was a product, rather than an aberration, of a highly regulated, stratified civilization.<sup>1</sup> Canetti illustrates the survivor’s sense of shame and guilt

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph-Achille Mbembe in his essay “Necropolitics” offers a further consideration on the matter. He starts with the assumption that colonial imperialism is at the origin of Nazi extermination camps whereas the systematic, industrialized procedure of putting Jews to death is a consequence of technological development that allowed the In-



along with the importance for the individual of being addressed by name. Their argumentation contributed to better comprehending Eva's reminiscences, and revealed stimulating new perspectives on a topic which European readers might feel they were already quite familiar with.

The last location, London, manifests itself as an unwelcoming city, although Eva envisions it as home. The words employed by Eva to describe the London taxi driver's unfriendly manners at the end of the ride echo the feeling of rejection experienced by the former colonized people who felt they belonged, as children of the British Empire, to their "mother country" and consequently expected to be accepted as "one of [their] own kind" (65).

In *The Nature of Blood* Phillips is working on a wide canvas. When he introduces the character of Malka he is expanding the narrative to include a non-European voice with a very different history who is both a foil and a complement to Eva and Stephan and their stories. The novel is characterised by reverse as well as parallel narratives. Similarly to Eva, Malka's thoughts are presented in the form of interior monologues. Unlike Eva, she is in her thirties and, as stated by Stephan, "belong[s] to another place" (210) – Ethiopia –. With Phillips's "secondary obsession: race and faith" ("Blood" 168) in mind, it is possible to make the case that Malka embodies the Jewish and African diaspora. In some ways the novel can be compared to a photographic film, or even to a developed print film along with its respective transparent negatives. In this analogy, Malka and Eva represent the complementary, barely distinguishable black and white images while Western history stands for the developed colour print film. Phillips appears to be saying something similar when he comments that "the canvas upon which the national portrait has been painted" has

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dustrial Revolution and continuing to advance made World War I the first global war and one of the largest wars until that time in Western history. The gas chamber is a product of what Mbembe defines as "the serialization of technical mechanisms" and "having become mechanized, serialized execution was transformed into a purely technical, impersonal, silent, and rapid procedure" ("Necropolitics" 18).

omitted faces like Malka and Eva's – "faces [that] do not fit on." – ("Blood" 169)

The utopic assumption that a shared religion overcomes differences in skin colour and origin is disputed by the treatment of Ethiopian Jews in the "promised land" and leads to the last section of the second part: the Jewish question. I begin by exploring the notion of home and the meaning attached to it by diasporic people. I also investigate the figure of the "Other," relying extensively on Toni Morrison's lectures to reveal connections between the various stories in *The Nature of Blood*. "Otherness" in Phillips's novel is an indication of perceived cultural and physical differences that invariably lead to hierarchies of power, to superior-inferior / master-servant relationships and inevitably to abuse of power by dominant groups. When Phillips juxtaposes German-Jewish Eva's story with Ethiopian-Israeli Malka's situation, with all their intersecting elements of displacement, discrimination, gender, class and ethnicity, readers are confronted with the inadequacy of simplistic, Eurocentric readings of history. Bénédicte Ledent, a major influence on the present study, declares that "*The Nature of Blood* constantly obliges the reader to find his/her way around a maze-like text" (Caryl Phillips 136). This disruption, in which uncritically held assumptions of history are eroded, is intentional. The character of Malka, whose story in some ways supplies a key that can potentially open the door out of the confining maze, constitutes Phillips' "final piece of [...] the puzzle" ("Blood" 168) that lets readers complete the larger picture connecting Jewish and African forced migrations. Malka exposes the limitations inherent in Stephan's ambitious, idealistic project to create a prejudice-free homeland for "Jews of all ages and backgrounds" (73). Her arrival in Israel is the result of an altruistic plan by the Jewish state for re-uniting the white and black siblings of Israel. In reality, the "promised land" becomes yet another example of the dominant white society that replicates the superior-inferior racist view towards its darker-skinned citizens evident in European colonies in Africa. Similar to the British Empire, which defined itself as the

“bearer of culture and civilization” to its colonies and settlements, Israel immediately sets to re-educate its newcomers who have been uprooted from their African villages in the language and Westernized ways of the country’s European settlers. However, instead of being included in the new, large, multicultural society, Ethiopian Jews are excluded from “the canvas upon which the national portrait has been painted” (“Blood” 169) and relegated to “*the edge of the city*” (207; emphasis in the original). The words employed by Malka to criticize the unrealized promise of unity and inclusion under one common religion in the “promised land” echo the feeling of rejection experienced by formerly colonised people who imagined they would be coming home to their “mother country” and subsequently discovered they were clearly not considered “one of [the host country’s] own kind” (65).

To gain a wider view on the issue of religion, I explore Judaism under the perspective of Freud’s study on *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud’s research provides an explanation of the reasons that triggered hate and persecution of the Jews from the origins of Judaism as a monotheistic religion. In this maze-like novel, “The Most Serene Republic of Venice” (48) allows readers to start noticing some of the thematic lines that will connect the various narratives that make up *The Nature of Blood*. Phillips delves into his “secondary obsession: race and faith [...] through the prism of sixteenth-century Venice. Othello’s Venice; Shylock’s Venice” (“Blood” 168). At a certain point in the novel, one of the narrating voices summarizes the prosecution lawyer’s version of the lead up to the alleged murder of a Christian child for Passover celebrations:

Everything began on a day in September during the previous year, when the Jews were celebrating a holiday known as the Feast of the Tabernacles. [...] ‘You know that, before Easter, we will need a little Christian blood for our bread. My friend,