

# Diaspora in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the river* (1993) and *A Distant Shore* (2003)

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## Resumo

*Investigam-se no contexto da literatura caribenha os dois tipos de diáspora, ou seja, a antiga que compreende os escravos e os trabalhadores asiáticos contratados, e a moderna que abrange os refugiados, o tráfico de mulheres e imigrantes procurando trabalho. Os romances *Crossing the River* e *A Distant Shore*, de Caryl Phillips, publicados respectivamente em 1993 e 2003, tratam dos dois tipos de diáspora. Enquanto a primeira analisa as diferentes trajetórias de um ex-escravo estadunidense repatriado à Libéria e de uma mulher negra em sua viagem ao oeste dos Estados Unidos, rumo à liberdade, a segunda discursa sobre os problemas diaspóricos de um Africano contemporâneo que foge de seu país para afastar-se da guerra civil e para achar emprego num país democrático. Os resultados da pesquisa mostram que numa economia transnacional as pessoas da antiga diáspora tendem a encontrar a liberdade e a subjetividade mais do que aquelas envolvidas na diáspora moderna. Nesse último caso a frustração e a solidão são factíveis.*

Palavras-chave: romance caribenho; Caryl Phillips; diáspora; subjetividade; hibridismo.

### Problems in the Caribbean novel

The peculiar nature of colonization of the Caribbean islands and northern South American mainland has produced an equally idiosyncratic novel and thematics. Different from the typified settler and invaded colonies, the Caribbean has been characterized by double-invasion colonization (ASHCROFT et al. 1991). This involves not only the extinction of the native Arawak population and its culture in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but its replacement by Negro slaves and later by indentured labourers from Asia in the subsequent centuries. The analysis of the contemporary novel in the context of culture in the English-speaking Caribbean area, including Guyana in South America, is becoming more important as the colonial experience recedes while migration and communication networks are intensified.

The West Indies has never been a traditional colonial territory with clearly distinguished economic and political relations between two different cultures. Native culture there was none. The aboriginal American civilization had been destroyed. Every succeeding year, therefore, saw the labouring population, slave or free, incorporating into itself more and more of the language, customs, aims and outlook of its masters. It steadily grew in numbers until it became a terrifying majority of the total population. The ruling minority therefore was in the position of the father who produced children and had to guard against being supplanted by them. There was only one way out, to seek strength abroad. This beginning has lasted unchanged to this very day (JAMES, 1992, p. 306).

Actually many Caribbean writers have chosen to live abroad, especially in the former colonial centres of power or in the United States. Perhaps Guyanese Edgar Mittelholzer, Trinidadian Samuel Selvon, the Barbadian George Lamming, Guyanese Wilson Harris, Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid, Dominican Jean Rhys, Kittitian Caryl Phillips and others have felt "the threat to failure, the need to escape" (NAIPAUL, 1975, p. 45), because of the underlying borrowed culture and a sense of deep displacement. In fact, the Caribbean novel may be best understood when its African-Asian roots and its diasporic nature are acknowledged.

However, unstable identity, uncertainty about the past, insular isolation, dense populations, resistance to the formation of groupings or federations or even of common culture, have made the Caribbean writers concentrate on the power of language. It is true that language, albeit non-unambiguously, creates a sense of one's identity and may be a counterforce against the colonial centre and its exigencies. It is also true that

the best achievement of Caribbean writers has been in literature, mentioning in a special way, its prose fiction, which has challenged the monolithic stance of the British canon. Rhys's and Lamming's rewriting of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, just to mention two instances, is revealing and trend-bearing. "Young black cultural practitioners and critics in Britain are increasingly coming to acknowledge and explore in their work this 'diasporic aesthetic' and its formations in the post-colonial experience" (HALL, 1993, p. 402). The best portrayal of the Caribbean writer has perhaps been given by Markham:

Few West Indians are so self-contained as to regard the island/territory of birth as fulfilling the sum-total of their aspirations. [...] Simply to go to school or to work elsewhere constitutes leaving some of your emotional credit in that place – which you will call on from time to time. We must stop being on the defensive about this, and learn to exploit its possibilities. After all, the geography of most Caribbean poets' lives suggests dual or multiple citizenship. [...] We are multi-national; cosmopolitan – some of us multi-lingual in ways that encompass and extend beyond the standard-English nation language debate and have residences on earth that defy the makers of treaties and the laws of immigration (MARKHAM, 1989, p. 18).

It seems that due to these particularities Caribbean writers have built a 'Black Atlantic' (GILROY, 1993), or rather, an intercultural and transnational formation which links black communities across the sea, while acknowledging their differences. The ambiguous multi-cultural links and non-affinities between the Caribbean and Britain, the United States and African countries are enhanced in the massive migration of Caribbeans after World War II, during the 1960-1970 Independence years, and the kerbings imposed by the British government to all Commonwealth members in the 1980s. Although conspicuous in their literary achievements, the striking ambiguity of the Caribbean writer has been described by Dabydeen (1984, p. 9): "'England' is our Utopia, an ironic reversal, for Raleigh was looking away from the 'squalor' of his homeland to the imagined purity of ours, whereas we are now reacting against our 'sordid' environment and looking to 'England' as Heaven".

The aim of this paper is to analyze the representation of diaspora and displacement in the novels *Crossing the River* (1993) and *A Distant Shore* (2003) by Caryl Phillips (born St. Kitts in 1958). Always triangular, linking Africa, the Caribbean islands and Britain/United States, Phillips's narrative shows not only the havoc of displacement throughout the historical

slave period but especially present repercussions in the Negro descendant's identity. An investigation of this particular type of dislocation, physical and subject-harrowing, will ensue.

### Diaspora and displacement

Diaspora is the free or forcibly displacement of peoples from their homeland into new regions. Colonialism triggered both types. Millions of European colonizers and settlers migrated to the colonies (particularly to the New World) for a variety of reasons, especially land and trade (SEED, 2002). Millions of natives were made slaves and involuntarily transported to plantations as a solution for the scarce labour force of the region in producing foodstuffs for the populations in the power centres (THOMAS, 1997). After the abolition of the slave trade in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the transportation of thousand of Chinese and Hindus to the Caribbean also constitutes a source of worldwide dispersing of populations. The formation of the Caribbean population and the neighbouring coastal South American mainland occurred by intensive diaspora movements throughout 500 years of history. Another type of a recent and socially important diaspora movement is the outgoing of Caribbeans and Africans to the metropolitan centres. Although this voluntary diaspora has been greatly limited in the 1980s, there are now substantial "hybrid" communities of Africans and Caribbeans respectively in Britain, Canada and the United States (FARRELL, 2000).

The terms *diaspora* (from Greek *diásporā*, dispersal) and *displacement*, underlying the experience of dislocation, refer to Heidegger's *unheimlich* and *unheimlichkeit* – or the sense of not being at home and even feeling strange and uncanny. In the case of voluntary settlers and colonizers, non-colonized space has to be transformed into a colonized site, with all that this implies in language, invention of terms, revision of the original landscape, necessary processing of a different mentality. This process, imbued with colonial hegemonic practices, influences a post-colonial culture, or rather, it is the start of a culture which is neither a repetition of the mother country's nor a strict adaptation to the local native one. A diasporic identity may thus produce a positive hybridity.

In native peoples who were not physically displaced by colonisation, another type of dislocation has taken place. Their culture has not been totally annihilated but displaced to the lowest degree and hierarchized, while the Western variety has been imposed through a hegemonic religion, education, administration and justice. Although these colonized peoples remain in the same territory as their ancestors have done,

personal dislocation and collective denigration have wrought havoc in the erstwhile cohesive community.

On the other hand, in the case of forced and modern diasporas (the former caused by slavery and the latter by modern civil wars, as those in Liberia, Rwanda, Nigeria, and by job-seeking activities), the dissolution of the displaced subject is deeper and more extensive. In the context of a hegemonic and patriarchal environment, a new landscape, a different language and a new labour system are enforced. Family members are dispersed, concepts are disrupted and culture is imploded. Rootlessness predominates, albeit flimsy and elusive memories (frequently religious and cultural) of the past and of home may still be extant. However, in the course of time, Negro slaves and their descendents in the Caribbean, Brazil and the United States restructured new and powerful cultural forms through which they built a new identity and subjectivity. If the above forms began to be constructed in the past, a similar severing from roots and a reconstruction are on the way in the modern diaspora communities. Representation and imitation in post-colonial writing "hinge on the act of engagement which takes the dominant language and uses it to express the most deeply felt issues of post-colonial social experience" (ASHCROFT, 2001, p.5).

The place from where the colonial subject has been evicted connotes the sum total of his history, language, culture and experience. It may not necessarily mean a physical space but an environment (the family, the clan) in which s/he is culturally integrated. Through European colonialism and other causes triggering the diaspora, the subject's notion of place is disrupted and s/he doesn't belong anywhere. The more immaterial the colonial subject of space, the profounder his/her diasporic unrootedness is. For the displaced person home is "no longer just one place. It is [a series of] locations [...]. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become (HOOKS, 1991, p. 148). The empowerment of the displaced subject (slave, migrant, emigrant, indentured labourer) lies in the fact that it is "a way of transforming global discourses of power by being 'at home' in them whatever local appropriations that may entail" (ASHCROFT, 2001, p. 197). This is the reason why Spivak (1996) distinguishes between the old and new diasporas respectively of the pre-transnational and transnational world. The former "were the result of religious oppression and war, of slavery and indenturing, trade and conquest, and intra-European economic migration which, since the nineteenth century, took the form of migration and immigration into the United States". The latter comprise "Eurocentric migration, labour export both

male and female, border crossing, the seeking of political asylum, and the haunting in-place uprooting of 'comfort women' in Asia and Africa" (SPIVAK, 1996, p. 245). *Crossing the River* portrays the first type of diaspora and its repercussions in the contemporary world of fragmented human beings; *A Distant Shore*, with its constant forward and backward movements, represents the new diaspora, highlighting too the fragmentation of the modern Negro and the frustration brought about by contemporary society. Thus Phillips portrays and enhances the diaspora through fragmentation at the textual and thematic levels. The past is remembered in a fragmentary way, characters live fragmentarily and the stories are developed by the interlacing of fragments. This "chaotic" fictional world with all its indeterminacy is left to the reader to sort out the gaps, silences and absences.

### **The fabula of *Crossing the River* (1993) and *A Distant Shore* (2003)**

As in all his other five novels, Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993) and *A Distant Shore* (2003) deal with the African diaspora and the effects of dislocation, displacement of Negroes by slavery or war, products of colonialism and Western hegemony, past and present. The novels are supplemented by travel essays (*The European Tribe*, 1987; *The Atlantic Sound*, 2000) on racism and the slave trade.

*Crossing the River* comprises four great narratives of different eras in African-American history and diaspora, spanning in all over 250 years. The prologue narrates the harrowing experience of an 18<sup>th</sup> century African father who sold his two sons and a daughter, now called Nash, Martha and Travis, into slavery. In the first narrative Nash Williams, a former slave, the property of Edward Williams, is repatriated to Africa in 1834 as a Christian missionary. In Liberia he desperately tries to convert his African brethren but the pull of the native calling is too strong. The rootlessness and his lack of belonging caused by the dual identity, the weather, the language and the hard living conditions in Africa make Nash feel as a stranger in his ancestors' land. Gradually he leaves the Christian tenets and returns to polygamy and animistic worshipping. When Edward Williams goes to Africa to meet the long lost Nash, he realizes his mistake. "Perhaps, thought Edward, this business of encouraging men to engage with a past and a history that are truly not their own is, after all, ill-judged" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 52).

The second narrative involves Martha during the pre- and post-Civil War period (1861-64) and the abolition of slavery in

the United States (1865). Martha Randolph is going west, to California, to begin a new life after the horrible experience of slave-life. "War came and war went and, almost unnoticed the Union topples [...] I was free now, but it was difficult to tell what difference being free was making to my life" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 84). Martha experiences the psychological damage caused by the breaking down of the family, constantly menaced by selling, hiring and killing of its members. Destroyed twice, first when her family was broken up by sale by auction of her daughter Eliza Mae and her husband Lucas and later by the murder of her new husband, Chester, Martha is "assaulted by loneliness and drift[s] into middle age without a family" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 79), dying on the way to what she was thinking would bring her happiness. "All her belongings dangled in a bundle that she held in one hand. She no longer possessed either a husband or a daughter, but her memory of her loss was clear" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 78).

While the third narrative is the 1752 log book of Captain James Hamilton, or rather, a chronicle narrating the steady accumulation of human livestock slowed down only by prices and death, the fourth narrative deals with Joyce, a white married English woman, who, in the context of World War II, falls in love with a black U.S. serviceman called Travis and dreams of a home for both. The reader expects to find the life history of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Travis, the third child sold into slavery. However, the author narrates the uneventful life of Joyce from 1936 to 1963 and only in the April 1943 entry the name of Travis is mentioned as Joyce's lover and father of her son Greer.

The Epilogue is a world wide vision of the African father who sold his children. Temporal and spatial considerations are now nil and the human experience of the Negro in Brazil, Santo Domingo, the United States, Trinidad, with his culture, his music, his dances and his multi-varied language resounds in the memory and in the life of African descendants, the countless and nameless members of contemporary diaspora.

*A Distant Shore* narrates another displacement story. The novel is divided into five parts: Part One is Englishwoman Dorothy Jones's homodiegetic narrative telling the reader her past history and her present state of mind after her messy divorce, her liaisons, her high expectations when she makes an acquaintance with an African illegal immigrant Solomon and the deep frustration on Solomon's murder by racist thugs. Part Two is a third person narrative on the African Gabriel Bartholomew in an English prison cell with flashbacks on his life in the war-striven country, his enrolment as a soldier, his frustrated ethical stance in war, the murder of his parents and sisters, his flight to Europe, the help he receives from a

social worker Katherine and a migration lawyer and his final release from prison. The Third Part is a third person narrative continuing Dorothy's story: Dorothy's childhood, her rowdy marriage with Brian, her attempts to be appraised by married men and her disappointment with such liaisons, the harassment charges by Geoff Waverley and her decision for early retirement and finally her deep frustration on her sister Sheila's death, even though the two were never intimate. Part Four returns to an autodiegetic Solomon riding on a truck to a new home in northern England. Mike, the driver, introduces him to a family where he feels safe. They are extremely mindful of his woes and, most important, they are not biased against blacks as the rest of the town is. Although Solomon receives threats and is lampooned by simple people, he feels Dorothy's approach and comprehension as extremely healthy and humane. In fact, the meeting of the white woman and the black man brings a last chance of redemption for both since it is perhaps the only uncompromising relationship that either has ever experienced. In Part Five the narrative consists of Dorothy's stream-of-consciousness while she is in a home recovering from bouts of madness. Solomon's murder and consequently her abandonment are the straw that shatters her personality and her life. Says Dorothy summarizing her life:

Abandonment is a state that is not alien to man. That throughout the ages people have voluntarily or involuntarily left behind people in their lives and gone on to higher and better things. There is nothing unusual about this (PHILLIPS, 2003, p. 208).

### **Eastward: Like wind-driven seeds**

Nash Williams has to be analyzed as the prototype of the African diaspora in the United States and the diaspora of the American Negro in Africa, his own "homeland". Two different types of diaspora may be contemplated. Although the boy sold by his father on the African shores to slaver Capt. James Hamilton in 1752, narrated in the third part of the novel, is definitely not the ex-slave and missionary Nash Williams who was repatriated to Liberia ("I was fortunate enough to be born in a Christian country", PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 21), the silence of the text with regard to his ancestors in Africa and in the United States is highly significant. There are indeed no references to his father and only scanty mention of his aging and illiterate mother. The only father he acknowledges is not the biological one, but who bred him up on the plantation and gave him the English family name. His brother and sister vanish from his narrative. The only people with the same surname are other non-blood related slaves to whom the plantation



owner's surname was added, as if they formed a family. In Nash Williams's correspondence the terms father, brother, brethren, home, love are "religious" terms referring to the Williams's "community" in bondage working in the United States.

The absence of Nash's (hi)story in his account characterizes the classical diaspora of modern slavery ranging from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Diaspora-based homelessness explodes the tribal and community identity cherished in Africa and highlights the fundamental non-communal attitude and non-subjectivity experienced in the United States and elsewhere. Such non-identity is reinforced by religion and culture ingrained in the ex-slave. No mention is made of the African religious stance of his ancestors, its practices, its beliefs and morality. Other African religious customs have been obliterated definitely, together with the centuries-old culture coupled to them. Nash's memory has been circumscribed and truncated within the few years of his own conscious life. Or rather, the young ancestor's memory and history, charged with African culture, have been blurred from the time of this child's arrival in the United States to the time of his descendant's (Nash) coming of age and living in a Christian country. In these intermediate one hundred years another identity is formed, diametrically and positively opposed to the original, and seemingly no overt trace is left of the former. Memory, built and cultured by the European slave master, limits itself to a time and space-bound alien culture (the "Christian" U.S. of the 1830s), as if it were one's ancestors', going back into history to time immemorial. The African memory with all its underlying culture is not only blurred but seen as something to combat and eradicate from the memory of others. Nash Williams's memory is so much the Christian memory that no "Prospero" is needed to supply it with a pre-Christian and a pre-slavery past as the former Duke of Milan furnished his daughter with. The present Christian memory is sufficient to identify and subjectify Nash and make him act accordingly.

There is no sense of African homelessness in Nash in his pre-African period. The United States are his country, the Christian religion is his religion, his cultural background is that common to the plantation, town, the multi-ethnic group and family in which he was born and bred. The non-conscious cultural vacuum has produced two factors: a non-critical stance to slavery, even a certain justification, and an acquisition of the European superiority which makes it mandatory to annihilate other "inferior" cultures. Actually Nash sees suffering, inherent to slavery, as a blessing because of the

fortitude and stability of character it produces. "I have found since my arrival in Africa that many of your master's ways and fashion, burdensome though they were while in America, have served to form the basis of my character and have enabled me to survive this seasoning period with relative ease" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 20). Further, the Christian religion has sublimated his concept of pain and sorrow, actually seen as non-existent when analyzed and evaluated *sub specie aeternitatis*. Neither is there any questioning of the legitimacy of the master's "coloured property". On the contrary, slavery is seen as a civilizing condition which helps the African shed his "robes of ignorance which drape the shoulders of [...] blacks" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 21).

The second factor reveals the superiority that pervades Nash as a Christian and as a missionary in Africa. The tragic annihilation of Nash's ancestral culture is so deep and his adoption of the European hegemonic position so overwhelming that he adopts the strategy of the master narrative to judge, condemn, counsel and transform the Other. Nash's power position is revealed when he writes that many U.S. ex-slaves in Liberia have

a tendency for lying about and doing nothing [...], stealing [...] like the natives. [...], dance to the discordant tune of drunkenness, [...]. So I beg of you servants to pay attention, attend school, and seize the opportunity to learn [...]. If they should refuse to attend school or heed your words, you must punish them (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 18-21).

This power attitude makes him feel to be somewhat immune to tropical diseases and to the general trend to relax in morality and religiousness with which many have been contaminated.

The diaspora experienced by Nash in his African homeland is rife with problems. Historically the United States founded a "colonization society" in 1816 and sent 86 Negro ex-slaves to Africa in 1820 who, with others following in the subsequent years, were the first to inhabit the state of Liberia, not without terrible hardships (THOMAS, 1997). Phillips places the arrival of the fictional Nash Williams to Africa in the 1830s and his letters, all except one unread by his former master Edward Williams, reveal his voyage to the heart of darkness. Ranging from September 1834 to October 1842 the five letters may be seen as a portrait of the effects of the diaspora in the U.S. and of homelessness in one's own supposed country. However, Nash's aim was not merely that of a liberated slave returning "home" to Africa; Nash's was a vital experiment to transmit the Christian faith to African natives by Negro missionaries from the U.S. It was not just a repatriation of

Negroes, but the double job of eradicating the heathen religion and preaching the Christian God as the true one. As if preparing for a battle between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, Edward writes to his ex-slave in Africa that "our whole experiment depends greatly upon your success" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 11). As may be surmised, the experiment goes beyond the religious stance and pervades the colonizing culture, or rather, it marks out "the superiority of the American life over the African" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 27). In the 1839 letter Nash once more insists on the Americans' great aim, or rather, "to fuse into their [natives'] souls the values of American civilization with which their good masters laboured to anoint them" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 31). So that the Christian religion would be hegemonic in the African continent too, the second diaspora, different from the vast silence in the first, is described in great detail by the naïve Nash in his letters.

At the start Nash's overt aim is religious and his enthusiasm and optimism do not decrease by health problems and tropical diseases, the difficulty of learning the local African language ("their crude dialect" 23), the hard work of tilling the soil, the lack of guarantee of a good harvest, and the perils with wild animals. However, the ideology underlying the religious position is deconstructed by a firm attitude in organizing life according to American standards and customs. Following the American trade experience, Nash discovers the importance of being a landowner, selling his farm surplus, and adopting a sort of strict labour-regime on his farm, albeit unlike that in U.S. plantations. After praising the success of another repatriated "brother" who is managing a farm with the help of some "two dozen Congo boys", he writes that "yesterday I moved amongst the natives who labour about my land. They are good workers, although they require a stern and watchful supervision" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 27). When he asks Edward Williams for "good white shirting, shoes, stockings, tobacco, flour, port, mackerels, molasses, sugar, [...] bacon, [...] nails" and other items, he is trying to reproduce not only the city of God on earth but American society too, with all its commodities, on the African continent, even though he professes the contrary (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 25). In fact, when Nash sees himself with two tasks, the building of God's kingdom and the development of his own piece of land, the latter is given priority and the former becomes very close to being a secondary issue. "Since receiving the land, I have not had the opportunity of doing much, but I have made some significant improvements" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 23). The price list that Nash Williams mentions in his 1839 letter is a definite proof of the capitalist entrepreneur analyzing costs, benefits and profits. This is

supplemented by the educational items he asks for and the subjects he teaches to the natives. A proposed school education based on the Bible, dictionaries, history, geography and arithmetic will surely reproduce the American educational system in foreign, differently cultured people. It has the false pretension that the American type of education is politically neutral and essentially applicable to serve the African natives.

Further, Nash, the "repatriated" man, hierarchizes the colonial subjects and the Others (African Negroes), who are different from him (a "white" man). Since the dignity of the human person, negated in the U.S., is bestowed upon him ("I am *Mr Williams*", PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 33), the othering of the non-American is clear. Africa is now "this land of darkness", harking back to Prospero's definition of the othered Caliban, Liberia is a "dark and benighted country", the African language is a "crude dialect", the village is "heathen", the natives are "savage", "superstitious" and "much-maligned", the intense heat makes the American Negroes turn native, denoting apostasy and immorality. It is unbelievable, he argues, that "these people of Africa are called our ancestors" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 32). Henceforth Nash's narrative develops into the ideological stance of a master narrative. Besides civilization, "truth" becomes the paradigm of the non-native, American Negro or European, and, consequently, a dictatorial manner of exercising authority emerges.

On the other hand, Nash, as a cultural hybrid, is both here and there. The first diaspora, forced upon his ancestors, produces the enslaved man, the tutelage on the white master, the ingraining of American culture and the ideological stance of its right to globalization. The first diaspora deprives the Negroes of their liberty and their subjectivity. Although strongly symbolical and theoretically viable as a redress for past wrongs, repatriation to the continent of their ancestors, however, initiates the hybrid dilemma. In the course of time, harking to the Congo journey in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, or to the interiorization of Adam and Tashi in Walker's *The Colour Purple*, Nash moves further inward to the African hinterlands and, consequently, to a more native sort of life. He has still the American ideology of entrepreneurship, labour, business-mindedness and profitable activities. In his 1840 letter he mentions the great variety of vegetables, crops, animals he raises and his endeavour to export the surplus, success in perseverance, hard work and sound realistic administration ("[My success] is to be found in the maxim that it is several years before farm land will pay", PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 35). Although still somewhat imbued by the religious spirit developed by Europeans in the United States, the missionary

enthusiasm diminishes and success in farming and making money gets the upper hand and his constant attention. Juxtaposed to this "American-type" success, the African diaspora develops the native condition in him. He is not afraid to insist on his adopting a "native style of living", which may be taken as uncivilized by American-born Negroes. Nash confesses that this second facet of hybridity has "caused some offence to those who would hold on to America as a beacon of civilization, and an example of all that is to be admired" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 40). The process of turning native involves the rejection of an American Negro woman whom he has taken as a wife, his marriage to a native woman who, in the African manner, does not shun to take care of his child from a former marriage, the adoption of the traditional extended family and the patriarchal hegemony ("This family, above whom I reign as head"), and then his further marriage to two other female natives. Professing love for Africa, "the bosom of liberty", he criticizes the slave trade and American slavers who still trade in human flesh, in spite of British vigilance, and the ruses and wily manners of other European slavers to escape boarding and expropriation of their human cargo. Nash feels that the continued slave trade is "a disgrace to our dignity, and a stain on the name of our country" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 41). An ambiguous hybridity flourishes when such indignation is concomitant to his former praise of slavery which, as a blessing in disguise, civilized diasporan Africans in the U.S.

The deeper Nash goes into Africa, the more conscious he is of his subjectivity. The 1842 and last letter to Edward Williams who received it in Monrovia (significantly the only one his former master actually received), is a document evidencing a further distancing away from the American "civilization" and the right to be Other and to exist as such. The African type of family with its polygamy and numberless children, the study of the African language, the tribal gathering, the pride of having a heathen family which, nevertheless, is friendly to Christians, the praise of the women's generosity of heart and dedication to their male family head is laid bare. Nash acknowledges that his transformation from a "good Christian coloured gentleman" into "this heathen whom you barely recognize" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 61) will surely shock an American citizen, but he feels safe in declaring his freedom in Africa which was denied to him in the U.S. The criticism he launches against his country's policy with regard to slavery and to the lack of freedom in America speeds and enhances his desertion (he now refers to "your America") from America, the land of diaspora, and a commitment to Africa which "open[ed] up my eyes and cast off the garb of ignorance which had encompassed me all too securely the whole course of my life" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 62).

In contrast to what actually Edward Williams found in Nash's native village which the narrator describes from an American point of view, Nash's hybrid stance in his new diaspora reveals his *anagnorisis*: he is now deeply aware of his freedom, his Africanization which includes his happiness in a simply agricultural life, his living as a simple member of a tribe without any authority ("[I] shall never again occupy a position of authority in any settlement of which I am part") and the futility of the Christian religion and its missionary stance. Although in theory he may still be a "Christian", he acknowledges that the suspending of his faith and the freely chosen life of the African are the most coherent attitudes he takes in his African diaspora.

The American or Eurocentric representation of Liberia, specifically the village inhabited by English-speaking Americans and, further inland, Nash's compound, given as a pretentiously objective master narrative, portrays poverty-stricken people, dirty huts, intermingling of people and animals, squalor, idleness, desolation, decay, disorder, foul air. This is typical of European narratives from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, through which Europeans found a pretext to other the natives and predispose them for slave labour in a metropolitan-centred economy (COETZEE, 1988). The master narrative, informed by Edward's reactions of revulsion, disgust, hopelessness and abandonment, goes so far as to compare this horrible state as something worse than "the worst-run plantations in his native America" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 67). However, seen from the emigrant American Negroes' point of view, disorder and madness may be detected in Edward since he cannot appreciate freedom in the Other.

In colonial history the European settler has always kept himself aloof from the natives who were regarded as uncivilized, childlike, lazy people. However, the same European settler was sometimes confronted with another settler who turned native by adopting the local customs, speaking the native dialects, participating in native ceremonies and, obviously, lapsing from European behaviour. Kurtz in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1902) and McKinnon in Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997) are landmarks in literature. Although Nash Williams is not a European settler but an ex-Negro slave sent to Liberia and thus, at least theoretically repatriated to his homeland, he is expected by his American patrons to keep his Christian religion and background, differentiate himself from the native Africans by shunning their polygamous marriage system, their heathen ceremonies, their wild lore and savage customs, and a herald for the white men's entry into a highly potential trading place. Nash's hybridity becomes a

threat to the American self. In the American's opinion, the cultural diversity Nash adopted contaminates him with native practices and makes him lose his distinctness as an American. This is especially true when we consider that in the European and the American mentality the hybrid is imagined deep in sexual transgression and in interracial sexual miscegenation. As a reaction, the American Edward did not cry "The horror! The horror!" but tried to sing a soundless hymn which, the natives judged, was inspired by evil spirits and by madness. On the other hand, the narrative makes it clear that the "degenerated" Nash, although gone totally native and living in "squalor" and "seedy" places in deepest Africa, has become aware of the terrible injustices committed by the white man and has shown his preference to freedom. The diasporic and hybrid Nash becomes a threat to the white man since his new life questions the essentiality of the white man's religion, the benefits of the white man's civilization and the motivations of his whole life. The diaspora bore fruit. On the material plane, deterioration seems to break down and totally marginalize the Europeanized Negro; on the spiritual plane, the Negro in his diaspora has gained true knowledge and freedom, unknown to him under the white man's regime.

#### **Westward: community building**

The story of Martha (who may not be the African girl sold by her father in 1752 to the British captain and, in her turn, sold to a Virginia plantation owner) is told after the post-bellum emancipation when the protagonist is dying in Denver, Colorado, on her way to California. The narrative intertwines the report of a heterodiegetic narrator describing the last days of "Martha's" life and the autodiegetic stream-of-consciousness narration with flashbacks of her life. Unlike Nash, Martha Randolph mentions Africa and the Middle Passage in just one sentence. Her only vision of Africa is "a smooth white beach where a trembling girl waited with two boys and a man. Standing off, a ship. Her journey had been long" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 73). If there is a gap in Nash's life in the United States which may have told the reader his and his ancestors' adventures on the plantations, this gap may be filled by Martha's journey. Actually it ranges from her arrival to the New World, passing through Virginia, the crossing of the Missouri, the settling in Kansas, to her final stop in Colorado. Although Nash's eastern journey to the heart of darkness is a missionary task to civilize the native Africans, or rather, a planned continuation of slavery under disguise, Martha's journey is westward

prospecting for a new life without having to pay heed to the white man and his ways. [...] Prospecting for a place where things are a little better than bad. [...] Prospecting for a place where your name wasn't 'boy' or 'aunty', and where you could be a part of this country without feeling like you wasn't really a part (PHILLIPS, 1994, 73-4).

The forced displacement and diaspora of "the proud girl" provoke in her the right to freedom not merely from the white man's inhuman regime but from the white man himself and his culture.

Feeling herself a woman, a Negro woman, with a husband and a daughter, is perhaps Martha's survival code in the context of a white-based, African-biased country, always ready to spit on coloured people. Although not given to overworking of the sentiments, there is a deep human touch in her sentiments, especially with regard to her family and her loneliness. Her brutalized life did not extinguish her humaneness even though the white man always denied in practice the humanity of the African slave. The diaspora initiated a Negro-bonding and a community-building attitude in her. She married the Negro Lucas with whom she had a daughter, Eliza Mae, but she lost both in the Virginia auction when the former owner died and his nephew, a banker from Washington, sold the property. When she fled away from the Hoffman's who, after some time wanted to sell her to raise money for their westward journey, she regained her subjectivity and her Negro identity by running away and establishing herself, with a Negro friend Lucy, at a restaurant and a laundry in Dodge on the Arkansas river, the frontier town on the Santa Fe Trail, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century wagon and trade route between Independence, Missouri and Santa Fe, New Mexico. During her ten years in Dodge she befriended Chester, a local Negro storekeeper, perhaps a former fugitive from slave states, who helped her with the business. Actually he was her second husband, later killed in a gunfight with white frontiersmen. Her Negro-bonding was reinforced by Chester's critical approach to white men: he defended that Negroes should be property owners in their own right, that they have a right to defend themselves and that they should be treated as equals. "He sat amongst the lumber stores, merchants, watchmakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, mechanics, medical men and lawyers" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 84). In this frontier town and in Chester's company she lived in freedom, whereas the Emancipation Act didn't make any difference to her.

Although Martha was forced to leave after Chester's death, she maintained her subjectification by working among Negroes in law-abiding Leavenworth. Her search for Eliza Mae, for more freedom and financial autonomy, however, made



her think of becoming "part of the coloured exodus that was heading west" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 87). In spite of the emancipation, Negroes knew that neither the southern states nor the traditional northern ones were a place for them. Both regions were contaminated by the superiority ideology of the white man and his deep-rooted bias against the Negro. This latest Negro diaspora is called by Martha an exodus from Hell: in fact, she considers the West (California and the far-western states) a new place where Negroes and Whites could freely live together without any bias. Similar to the biblical Exodus with its long duration and hardships, the Negroes foresee the West as the Promised Land in which they could live and work in a new land, from scratch, but in freedom. Once more, Martha is a subject.

You let me work my fare out and I'll cook, wash clothes, and powerfully nurse to the sick and ailing. And I ain't fussy about sleeping on no bare ground. I done it plenty of times before, had beaten hardness of the earth for a bed and the sky for covering (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 89).

However, on the road to freedom, impaired by illness and past ailments, she is gently left in Denver to die. "I cherish these brave people - these coloured pioneers - among whom I travel" (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 92). There is a Negro-bonding in their accepting her, albeit an old woman, in their party; they understand her position when she is unable to cook for them anymore; they do not leave her on the road to die like a dog; on the contrary, they set her in the Main street of Denver, knowing that some charitable people will be at hand when she is dying. She did not set foot on the Promised Land but her continuous struggle for freedom and dignity is already an achievement.

Martha's diaspora is based on the principle that there is no return neither to Africa nor to the eastern U.S., stigmatized as Hell. The experience of the diaspora and her constant yearning of freedom revealed to her the dignity of the Negro. It seems that the African diaspora and the subsequent hybridity have come to stay and a return to the past is next to impossible. It had been imposed in Nash's mind that the Negro's return to Africa would bring European and American civilization to the continent and all would share its benefits. In spite of the fact that something more than freedom from bondage was achieved, although not in the sense that white empire-building Americans expected, a return to a pre-colonial culture did not boil down to a solution for a true African civilization. In his non-fiction *The Atlantic Sound*, published in 2000, Phillips made clear the incongruency, futility and almost ridiculousness of the back-to-Africa policy. The diaspora Negro is not an African and his

present culture is now radically different from that of the natives and their culture. Needless to say, there may be sympathetic gestures and symbolical attitudes between the Afro-American and the native African but the former's return to a pre-slavery environment in Africa would be as much a violence as when his/her ancestors were displaced to the New World. In the 1960s many authors, especially Ngugi (1981), were discussing the return to tribal dialects, to ancestral customs and pre-colonial organizations as a means of counterpointing the heavy colonial burden that the white man brought with colonization on the African peoples. It was later found that such a solution was much more complex, while a positive stance for the hybrid culture that ensued was forwarded (BHABHA, 1994; YOUNG, 1995; 2001).

"Going West" seems to be a better solution. In the first place, "going West" may mean an awareness of the disguised tenderness in the slave regime. Contrary to Nash who, at first, is always praising his former owner and the civilization he represents, Martha is not to be deceived: in Virginia, the former owner would have sold all his slaves as cattle if he needed money ("Master would never have sold any of us" told to Elisa Mae at the auction is ironic); the nephew who inherited the property in Virginia sold all the slaves as he did with the animals and the furniture; the Hoffmans were neither sensitive to the cruel separation of Martha's family nor did they feel any qualms of conscience when they were preparing to sell Martha to get money. The diaspora Martha has no faith in the white man and his civilization and her Negro-bonding becomes a strategy for survival and for a hybrid civilization in one's own country.

Further, "going West" may mean shunning the American culture embodied by the Christian religion. The allurements of the African culture and its gods still fumbles in her consciousness, but no foregroundings are found to develop it.

In this Kansas, Martha sometimes heard voices. [...] Voices from the past. Some she recognized. Some she did not. But, nevertheless, she listened. Recognizing her despair, Mr and Mrs Hoffman took Martha with them to a four-day revival by the river. [...] The young evangelist preached with all his might, but Martha could find no solace in religion, and was unable to sympathize with the sufferings of the son of God when set against her own private misery. She stared at the Kansas sky. The shield of the moon shone brightly. Still she heard voices (PHILLIPS, 1994, p. 79).

While the voices from the past may be African to which the narrator attached the adjectives "dark" and "satanic", those Martha did not recognize may have been the signs of the Christian religion taught to slaves from the moment they set

foot on the New World. Once more she perceived the radical upheaval that the Christian religion might cause in her mind. The Hoffmans may have been "nice" and "religious" people, but they were the masters imbued with the white man's complex of superiority, power and endeavour to blur all that is different and non-white. Martha's solution is flight to achieve her subjectivity in work and freedom, even though the memory of loss haunts the fragmented Martha and her disrupted family.

Martha's project is not empire-building as has been Nash's at the start of his return to Africa. The family raised in Virginia, the terrible pain of its dispersal, the maturing years in Kansas with a "friendly" family, her liaison with Lucy, her living with Chester and the disappointment by his decease, her integration with a large group of Negroes on their way to California indicate not a rush for gold (empire-building), as thousands were doing at the time, but for the construction of a Negro community based on work, freedom and subjectivity. Her demise does not abolish her purpose and while she does not hinder her companions to found this utopia, they do not give up their aim. The friendship and mutual concessions between the old woman and the Negro community on its way West are a token of the success of their community building mission. Although there is no clear indication, perhaps community building is the result of the later Nash, living as a "pagan" and a "native" with his wives and children in the farthest post in Liberia. While master Edward Nash's aim in his repatriation of slaves to Africa might have been more economic and trade oriented (and thus empire-building) than he would have liked to admit, it seems that the final result of the diaspora either with Nash or with Martha boils down to a distancing from a Eurocentric-based utilization of people in empire-building and an approach to an African-based, converging efforts for community-building (GREEN, 1980; RICHARDS, 1989; KUZNETS, 1982).

### **Northward: Haven and Death**

The fragmentation of the Negro's experience in the context of the new diaspora emerges from the extreme non-linearity of *A Distant Shore*, very similar to Travis's story in the fourth part of *Crossing the River* (forthcoming in a future paper). With no fixed sequence, clear beginnings and endings, the notions of time, space and the concept of wholeness in Caryl Phillips's latest novel are disrupted, which implies in the disintegration of meaning too. Actually, "lamenting the 'loss of meaning' in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally [linear] narrative" (LYOTARD, 1998,

p. 49). In *A Distant Shore* Phillips does not create historical accounts of the past but rather uses History (in this case, a civil war, massacres in an unnamed English-speaking African country, arrests and imprisonment of illegals in England) as a backdrop against which private narratives unfold and develop a tension between History and the story of Gabriel/Solomon.

In the rambling autodiegetic story of 55 year-old retired teacher, Dorothy Jones narrates her acquaintance with the African immigrant Solomon who, at the start of the story, has already found a job in the small development estate of Stoneleigh as a factotum of its residents and after a short period is murdered by racist hooligans. Nevertheless, it is from the narration milestones placed between Gabriel's life in the African ex-colony and Solomon's short stay in the small north English town that the reader views the immigrant's diaspora. From his prison cell in London, Solomon reviews in fragments the murder of his parents, the flight from his country through the machinations of middleman Joshua, the harrowing journey by truck, plane, bus, boat and train from Africa to Europe, the haunting ferryboat trip to Dover and his imprisonment as an illegal in England. His remote past as a soldier in the civil war and the atrocities committed by his companions for political domination are then viewed. His recent past in England encumbered by his illegal status and harassment charges flashes in fragments with the appearance of a social worker, a lawyer, a generous truck driver, a middle-aged couple who accept him in their home, his struggle for valid papers and finally his job as a factotum.

Although Solomon's diaspora is not the direct result of slavery or forced labor, it brings forth the intertribal struggles and civil wars foregrounded in the colonial past when European nations wrought havoc in African culture and tribal systems (WESSELING, 1998). The new diaspora is the result of an expectancy by which the African immigrant perceives the distance between the backwardness and division in his own country and the tolerance in the former "mother country". Violence and war in the ex-colony are paradoxically compared with the internal "prosperity", grounded in democracy, existing in the metropolis. The idealized image of the "mother country" teems with facilities for jobs, money, better living, democracy and education. Although the plot is different, Gordimer's *The Pickup*, published in 2001, reveals Abdu's almost paranoiac expectancies which, in the long run, are very similar to Solomon's. Every effort, ranging from murder (to pay the middleman) to psychological torture on the dangerous journey, is next to nothing when compared to the bliss that will be felt on arriving in England and being received in her bosom.

However, in the new diaspora the immigrant Solomon faces bias, especially color and sexual bias (owing to his skin color Solomon was indicted for harassment of a minor as soon as he set foot on English soil), scanty legal defense and medical care in prison, a deep feeling of insignificance, persecution by innocent-looking fellows, and the consoling prize of a margin job. This universal status of the immigrant in the diaspora is confirmed by his cell mate, the Iraqi Said, who perceives the huge gap which shatters his former illusions: while on the one hand he vouchsafes "that in England freedom is everything", he immediately confesses his disappointment. "The light in England is weak. It depresses me. They have taken the sun out of the sky" (PHILLIPS, 2003, p. 71). Although Solomon experiences and acknowledges individual solidarity traits, such as that of truck driver Mike, of the Andersons who give him a home and of Dorothy who shares her solitude with him, the new diaspora depicted in *A Distant Shore* shows his deep frustration and loneliness encountered precisely in the place where the Negro expected to find solidarity and friendship. The escape from one's country lands the diasporic (wo)man in a profounder existential conflict and ambiguity than that in Africa.

Actually Solomon's diaspora as a political refugee deepens our understanding of transnationality, synonymous to the outcome of the process involving colonialism/imperialism/neocolonialism, which, in turn, fails to produce an effective civil society in the ex-colony. The lack of democracy that Solomon perceives in the military actions of his friends, their scramble for power and the full development of anarchy in the underdeveloped country indicate the perpetuation of the "colonial" status quo. Consequently the recoding of his displacement to the "mother country" as democracy, inclusion, participation and full citizenship tends to fail too and once more he is catalogued as a diasporic underclass to be exploited as an object. This is illustrated by Dorothy's description of the dead Solomon. "My problem is that my friend was found face down in this canal and nobody seems to care" (PHILLIPS, 2003, p. 42). It is an ironic proof of the internal colonization of the diasporic African in a democratic country.

As a collective issue Solomon's diaspora is doomed to failure because it fails to represent the great numbers of Third World inhabitants vying for work in Europe or fleeing from war-devastated countries. Although the African Gabriel, demonstrating a certain degree of ethical stance, is easily transformed into the Englishman Solomon with his gentleness, meekness, patience and need to communicate with others, he is merely a sign of his own diaspora and not that of diasporic

Africans. His finding of a job on the outskirts of Stoneleigh, the acquisition of citizenship and the mutual understanding through friendship are indications of subjectivity. It is, however, not the collective subjectivity needed but the individualistic and myopic seizure of citizenship without any repercussion on his fellow countrymen. The diaspora made him just a useful item.

### Conclusion

The dead end in the friendship between Dorothy and Solomon, with its doubled loneliness and suffering, symbolizes the fragmentation of the individual, Black or White, in a transnational world. Nash and Martha find the way to subjectification while traveling in opposite directions. Nash's spiritual journey to Africa leads him towards the rejection of an alien God and Eurocentric civilization. The adoption of a different cultural tradition may not be savory to the European or the American citizen but reveals to the latter that there is a redeeming factor in turning native. The objectification and the lack of freedom that Nash experienced in the United States produce radical subjectivity in an apparently disastrous diaspora. Besides, Martha's journey westward is a constant exercise in subjectivity and citizenship. Outwardly her displacement and constant homelessness results in a dead-end diaspora. This is, nevertheless, only apparent. The type of diaspora lived to the core constitutes community building and the distant, albeit practical, yearning for true freedom as a hybrid society.

On the other hand, it seems that Phillips's novel *A Distant Shore* represents the aftermath of transnational diaspora or displacement in a globalized world, whatever its modern causes. The frustration and loneliness do not belong exclusively to the Negro who willy-nilly immigrates to the former metropolis. They are also part and parcel of the modern citizen of developed countries. Although the lives of Dorothy and Solomon do not seem to meet, they are actually identical, or better, the faces of the same coin. Solomon's diaspora coincides with the "diaspora" of the white music teacher who reaches for somebody to appease her loneliness. Radically different from the old diaspora, the modern one reduces the individual to an object with no respite for any type of subjectivity and the fruition of citizenship.

### Abstract

The old (slavery, indentured workers) and new (refugees, comfort women, immigrants seeking jobs) diasporas are analyzed within the context of Caribbean literature. Kittitian Caryl Phillips's novels *Crossing the River* and *A Distant Shore*, published respectively in 1993 and 2003, deal with both types of diaspora. While the former investigates the outcome of a Christian U.S. slave repatriated to Liberia and the vicissitudes of a Negro woman on her journey west towards freedom, the latter novel develops the diaspora problems of a modern African who flees his country because of civil war and goes to England to work. Results show that in a transnational economy people of the old diaspora are more liable to find freedom and subjectivity than those of the new diaspora. In the modern diaspora unrelieved frustration and loneliness are certain.

Keywords: Caribbean novel; Caryl Phillips; diaspora; subjectivity; hybridity.

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