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Artistic Performance and the Crossing of Boundaries in Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark*

In his 2005 novel *Dancing in the Dark*, Caryl Phillips explores the difficulty of crossing the colour line in early twentieth-century America. Through a fictional account of the life of the vaudeville entertainer Bert Williams, he examines the frustration experienced by performers who were trapped in racial stereotypes. This article focuses on the notion of performance as a way of understanding the narrative techniques used by Phillips to express Williams's incapacity to escape the racial discourse of his time and transform his art into a valid form of black cultural expression.

The crossing of boundaries is one of the most persistent themes in the fictional and nonfictional works of Caryl Phillips, a writer whose personal and professional experience has led him to explore questions related to migration in both a historical and a contemporary frame. Born in the Caribbean island of St. Kitts and raised in Leeds, where his parents moved when he was a baby, Phillips has spent his life within a space defined by the four points of what he has termed "my Atlantic home," namely Africa, Europe, North America and the Caribbean.¹ Beginning with his first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), which revolves around the emigration of a family moving from the Caribbean to Great Britain in the same way that his own family did in the 1960s, Phillips has often used the context of the Atlantic slave trade or its aftermath to examine the complex ways in which forced or willed migrations in different historical periods have created a complex network of distinct but interrelated "crossings." He has used the forced migration of the slave trade as a defining paradigm for the many other forms of movement and displacement generated by slavery and colonialism.² This point of view is clearly illustrated by a passage from one of the essays published in the author's latest collection, *Colour Me English*, an essay entitled "Necessary Journeys," in which Phillips places his own journeys alongside those of some of the writers and historical figures with whom he is concerned. At the end of the essay he says,

The gift of travel has been enabling for me in the same way that it has been enabling for writers in the British tradition and in the Caribbean tradition, many of whom have found it necessary to move in order to reaffirm for themselves the fact that dual and multiple affiliations feed our constantly fluid sense of self. (131)

Dancing in the Dark represents a departure from earlier representations of diasporic crossings to the extent that it focuses exclusively on the American context of the early twentieth century in a fictional recreation of the life of the entertainer Bert Williams.

1. Phillips used this expression in a talk he gave at the British Council in Paris during a colloquium entitled "Multiculturalism in French and British Writing" (28-29 April 2000, published as "The 'High Anxiety' of Belonging" in *A New World Order* 303-9). On this occasion, he began his talk by quoting a famous line from Robert Frost's poem "The Death of The Hired Man": "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in" (Frost 28).

2. The most direct statement of this relation can be found in an essay in the collection *Colour Me English* entitled, "Water," in which Phillips says, "Water, to a large extent my life has been determined by a journey across water. An actual Journey. Across the Atlantic Ocean. I cannot remember the journey that I am speaking of. In all likelihood it occurred some time in the eighteenth century. Seventeen hundred and something. I was captured and sold into the custody of an Englishman" (163).

Although the life of Bert Williams fits the pattern of migration described above to the extent that Williams migrated from the Bahamas to the United States with his family at the end of the nineteenth century, his life and career reflect the crossing of another invisible but pernicious boundary, that which W.E.B. Dubois designated as the most important problem of the twentieth century, namely “the color line.”³ The intellectual and cultural environment surrounding the novel concerns the emergence of African American forms of entertainment in the early twentieth-century, just before the period of artistic revival and renewal known as the Harlem Renaissance. Williams’s relation to the colour line represents one of the most dramatic consequences of slavery, for it involves the invisible boundaries that defined the lives of black people in America long after the visible borderline of slavery had been abolished. In attempting to cross the symbolic line that kept black entertainers confined to well-defined roles inherited from the minstrel tradition, Williams discovered how deeply ingrained were the distinctions of race and colour inherited from the slave trade. His story therefore creates a contrast with Phillips’s evocation of “our fluid sense of self” in the passage quoted above, for the picture that Phillips paints of the entertainer is one of confinement, entrapment and a terrible redundancy generated by the repeated performance of a degrading image.

The idea of performance can be a useful paradigm for examining *Dancing in the Dark*, a novel which might seem to bear little relation to works in which Phillips addresses the physical migration related to slavery, in the light of the barriers that race has placed between black Americans and their desire for personal and cultural fulfilment. Through the frame of the novel, Phillips lays bare the paradoxes of racial stereotyping in the life of Bert Williams, a man who believed that theatrical performance could be performative in the deepest sense of the term, allowing the black man to cross the invisible barrier separating him from whites in public life.⁴ It is not a question of discussing the novel as a performance in itself, but rather of looking at it as a work of fiction which, in its use of the novel as a form to examine the world of entertainment, creates a meaningful tension between theatrical performance and language, thus throwing into relief the gap between the reality of racism and the discourse of equality which Blacks were attempting to elaborate through art.

The novel as a genre often achieves its effects either by simulating the techniques of other artistic forms or by exploring the distance which separates it from them. African American writers have often attempted to exploit the relationship between music and fiction as a way of overcoming the many forms of distance imposed by language and writing. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1953) is an interesting example of this, as is the poetry of Langston Hughes. Anyone who has read *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* remembers his remarks about the contradictory relation between the joyful music of the

3. “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (W.E.B. Dubois 54).

4. I am using the word “performative” here in the way that it was originally used by linguists to indicate the possibility of having an impact on the world through language. More recent critical theories, in particular discussions of gender, have used it to describe the ways in which gender is performed through discourses which produce individuals as gendered subjects. According to Judith Butler, the idea “that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality” (136). I will be relying on this concept further on in the article. For a discussion of Phillips’s novel specifically in terms of Butler’s definition of performativity, see Tournay-Theodotou.

slaves and their private and personal sorrow.⁵ I will attempt to demonstrate that in *Dancing in the Dark*, Phillips uses the novel and its reliance on writing to study the paradoxes of black entertainment in the African American context in a way that places performance at the silent centre of the novel, using it to suggest a self-actualization that can never be achieved, a gap between desire and fulfilment that can never be closed. Rather than attempting to use the form of the novel to bridge the gap between language and other forms of artistic expression, Phillips, through his narrative technique, explores the tenuous borderline between the power of language to express artistic ambition and the social forces that prevent that ambition from achieving its goals. In doing so, Caryl Phillips is demonstrating the shifting and uncertain nature of language in ways that are reminiscent of novels like *Cambridge* (1991), *Crossing the River* (1993) and *Higher Ground* (1989), novels in which language and discourse become mirrors reflecting an endless crossing and re-crossing of time and space in pursuit of identity and self-expression.⁶

The idea of performance can, furthermore, furnish us with a critical framework that makes it possible to clarify some of the artistic issues surrounding *Dancing in the Dark*. Phillips's position in writing the novel is somewhat paradoxical, and this has been the source of misunderstanding on the part of critics. Bert Williams was a real entertainer, a man who, in the author's own words, was at one time, "the most visible, the most public black man in America" ("Michael Krasny talks to author Caryl Phillips about his latest book"). One of the things that drew Phillips to Williams was his curiosity about a man who seemed to have left no trace on the streets of Manhattan. He has mentioned the difficulty created by the fact that there was "so little of Bert Williams's private life that I could get ahold of" (Michael Krasny). From a generic point of view there is a tension, almost a contradiction, underlying Phillips's project. Although Bert Williams really existed, he has almost entirely disappeared from collective memory, as the author says himself. As Phillips mentioned in his interview with Diane Rehm, there were "no diaries, no journals, no letters," from which to construct the inner life of the artist ("Caryl Phillips: 'Dancing in the Dark,'" The Diane Rehm Show). He explained that this was part of the explanation for his decision to fictionalize the entertainer's life as "a way to approach this very private man's life" (Diane Rehm show). Generic decisions have an impact on the way works are perceived; the choice to fictionalize the life of Bert Williams has clearly had an effect on the way Phillips's novel has been received. Several critics seem to reproach Phillips with having failed or refused to try to imagine the pleasure that Williams must have derived from his highly acclaimed performances as a blackface minstrel.⁷ The misunderstanding that these comments betray can to some extent be explained by the contradiction between the choice to write about a real person and the difficulty of having access to "this very private man's life" (Diane Rehm show). When Phillips gave a talk at the University of Leeds in 2005, someone asked him why he did

5. "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness; it is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears." (Douglass 58)

6. For a discussion of the ways in which language displaces the characters in Phillips's fiction, see Birat in the list of works cited.

7. Certain reviews of the book reveal a misunderstanding of the relation between author and subject. Brooke Allen in *The New York Times* regretted Phillips's failure to represent the joy Williams must have felt "in the act of performing." Likewise, Claudia Roth Pierpont in *The New Yorker* says, "It would have added immensely to the novel if we were, in fact, permitted to glimpse Williams's art, or to get some sense of the pleasure it must at times have given him" (3).

not simply substitute a fictional character for Bert Williams, thus giving himself complete freedom to imagine the man and his life and thoughts. Phillips answered that since Williams really did exist, he felt that he “had a responsibility to make him somewhat visible again” (McLeod 111). This choice seems to suggest that for Phillips, whatever fictionalization he creates in the life of his character must respect the constraints and possibilities that characterize a particular time and place in American history. He has therefore created a kind of artistic double bind, attempting to fictionalize the life of a man whose real life seemed to defy fictional treatment. This paradox can also be understood in artistic terms by relating it to the problems posed by performance. In order to explore Phillips’s fictional treatment of the life of Bert Williams, I will rely on two different notions of performance that have been used in discussions of African American literature, Houston Baker’s idea of “cultural performance” as he defines it in his work *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* and the idea of performativity as it has been used by Judith Butler in relation to gender. These two approaches, one of which emphasizes the subversive potential of artistic performance, the other placing specific limits on the notion of agency and the power of individual expression, should make it possible to better understand Phillips’s artistic exploration of the dilemma faced by Bert Williams in the early twentieth century.

The performances of Bert Williams took place in a particular context in which race relations played an overpowering role. As Nathan Huggins points out in *Harlem Renaissance*, “The theatrical stage itself, more than any other cultural phenomenon, opens a perspective into the pathology of American race relations. It exposes the white-black dependency which has defined race relations in the United States and which persists despite all reform” (245). Huggins analyses the difficulty for blacks of developing forms of theatre that would project a positive image of black culture rather than playing on negative stereotypes. He is not the only scholar who has analysed the history of black theatre and one can question certain of his hypotheses, but some of his ideas deserve consideration. He points out that, unlike the Jews who as immigrants developed a Yiddish theatre, the blacks had no “alternative culture” from which to draw specific models. He also explains that the tradition of the blackface minstrels went back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, thus hindering the development of what he calls “Negro ethnic theatre.” Seen in this perspective, the minstrel tradition “provided a ready avenue to commercial success for those blacks willing to accommodate themselves to it. And the very powerful hold it had on American imagination and emotion narrowed the limits of social tolerance for black deviation” (248). It is also important to understand that the blackface minstrels were created by white circus performers who blackened their faces in the early nineteenth century.⁸ When later on black performers corked their faces, they were in a sense putting on a mask that had been created by someone else. Bert Williams and his partner George Walker stepped into this tradition when they arrived in New York and became the most successful vaudeville team in the town. They initially presented themselves as “The Two Real Coons” with “George as the comedian and Bert as the straight man” (29). They both refused blackface makeup, hesitating to acquiesce to what seemed to be a degrading stereotype. But with the passing of time, it became clear to both that George was not comfortable with his comic role and, as Bert later

8. Huggins considers that this practice was not necessarily inspired by black models and that the stereotype of Jim Crow “is clearly a part of the backwoods and river tradition” (248-9).

explained to his wife, "it made more sense to both George and myself that we exchange roles, so I became the clown and he became the straight man, and right away the laughs came more easily" (35). Bert goes on to confess that "I tried the makeup and became someone else" (35).

Caryl Phillips's fictional recreation of Bert Williams takes root in this complex cultural context and uses it to dramatize the entertainer's life. Underlying the story is the conflict between two visions of black entertainment, one of which views it as the perpetuation of a deeply-ingrained stereotype through the blackface tradition, the other seeing in it the possibility for developing forms of artistic expression that would generate positive images of black cultural performance. This was, to some extent, the debate that underlay the relationship between Williams and his partner George Walker. I am borrowing the term "cultural performance" from Houston Baker, who uses it in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* to describe the way in which W. E. B. Dubois's book *The Souls of Black Folk* went beyond a simple discussion of black culture to give that culture what he calls "a tangible form" (64). Dubois's discussion of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, according to Baker, makes the singers' performance "re-sound" in the context of the early twentieth century, overstepping the invisible line that prevents black culture from actually being heard as culture (68). I do not subscribe completely to Baker's optimistic reading of the mastery that Blacks acquired over the perception of their cultural productions.⁹ However, Baker's point of view represents one of the critical perspectives used in talking about black culture and makes it possible to envision the notion of performance positively, in contrast to the notion of performativity, which sees social behaviour as an unconscious and all-encompassing performance. What merits consideration is the way in which the contradiction brought to light by these opposing views of black cultural performance becomes part of the narrative strategy of Phillips's novel, thus reflecting the shock waves created by cultural and social tensions in the lives and minds of the characters.

The most useful aspect of Houston Baker's analysis of black cultural performance is the notion of form. He says:

When I use the word "form," I do not want to invoke a distinction between form and content and spring the metaphysical trap privileging a primary order of form as an abiding and stabilizing presence. For me, "form" has the force of a designated space – presumably, that between traditionally formulated dichotomies such as self and other. (16)

In other words, Baker sees form as a set of relations between the different elements involved in artistic representation, not a specific structure or a set of rules. By defining form in this way, he seeks to place it outside the black/white dichotomy, among others. He seems in addition to be suggesting that culture, as a "designated space" can become the locus of a renegotiation of the relation between self and society, a position which seems to be in contradiction with Butler's view, which does not recognize the agency of the self as a subject.¹⁰ While this is an extremely bold gesture on Baker's part, it

9. Baker considers that Bert Williams, like other black vaudeville performers, "effectively subverted minstrelsy through their original and energetic 'plays' within the form" (111-2, n. 30).

10. The notion of the "subject" is central to Butler's discussion of the performative nature of gender: "The domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended" (2).

provides a critical frame for examining the notion of artistic form as an activity that is not coextensive with all other forms of social behaviour. It is this question of performance versus performativity that underlies Phillips's fictionalization of the life of Bert Williams. The terrible paradox of black minstrelsy lay, of course, in the way it made any attempt to step out of the black/white dichotomy, upon which it relied for its meaning and appeal, extremely difficult.

The debate surrounding black culture at the beginning of the twentieth century revolved to a great extent around the notion of form, and clearly the definition that Baker is contesting is one which did not see black culture as what he calls a "designated space" produced by African Americans in their relation to their own experience. One of the most interesting aspects of W.E.B. Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is the attention that he devotes to black music, placing it on an equal footing with education, religion and craftsmanship as a form of cultural expression. In cultural terms, the dilemma produced by what he called the "double consciousness" of black people, "this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (45) was, for the black artist, an inability to find forms of expression acceptable to a double audience. In relation to the black musician he says:

The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. (46-7)

In creating a fictionalized version of the life of a black minstrel performer, Caryl Phillips has in a sense entered a dialogue, or rather a conversation about form, which of course continues to be pertinent at the present time. He uses the novel as a form, the formal aspect of the novel, to create a "designated space" according to Baker's definition, in which to explore the paradox of black performance in its relation precisely to the double consciousness of which Dubois so famously spoke. Two of the poles that define this space are language and performance in their antithetical and to some extent irresolvable tension. In his fictionalization of the life of Bert Williams, Phillips poses the question that underlies the man's life and the silence that followed it: to what extent is theatrical or vaudeville performance a language capable of articulating black experience and giving it a cultural status?¹¹ In order to understand Phillips's narrative approach to his subject, it is important to maintain a distinction between the notions of performance and performativity. Phillips is concerned with exploring the possibilities that artistic expression may offer for escaping from the performative trap, for exercising some artistic control over one's individual and collective identity. It is this tension which can help us to understand Bert Williams's artistic hopes and simultaneously the reasons for his ultimate failure. For Phillips the novelist, this contradiction will be revealed through the use of language as both a vehicle for personal desire and the expression of the inevitable link between private and public discourse.

There are a number of ways in which the formal aspects of *Dancing in the Dark* transform language into a tool for exploring the tension between cultural performance

11. In his conversation with Michael Krasny, Phillips points out that Williams did not want to become a spokesman for black people in the sense of pushing for social change. He explains that a lot of the criticism directed at Williams by other blacks was caused by his attitude. In Phillips's words "he felt very much I am just a performer, stop trying to make me a representative of all African American people" (Michael Krasny).

and performativity in the career of Bert Williams. The novel is told in the words of an extradiegetic narrator who focalizes alternately on the thoughts of the four main characters involved, Bert, his wife Lottie, his partner George Walker, and Walker's wife Ada. Occasionally the words of the characters are imagined, but focalization is much more prevalent than dialogue. Texts from the shows in which Bert Williams performed, words from songs and actual or reconstructed newspaper articles enhance the impression of a narration that circles around its subject, approaching it from different angles in an attempt to grasp the nature of Williams's life in the absence of his own words. This impression is also linked to the presentation of the novel as a series of vignettes focusing on the thoughts of the characters, the space between the texts further emphasizing the difficulty of generating a continuous narrative. This in addition gives the novel a curious, almost photographic quality, as if it were composed of a series of snapshots upon which the narrator is commenting, an impression which is reinforced by the narrator's frequent use of the present tense.

The most meaningful tension created by the form of Phillips's novel lies in the representation of the relation between public and private experience. The performative view of identity calls into question the distinction between private and public experience by considering that all behaviour can be read according to criteria which make it transparent to the critical gaze. Judith Butler refers to the way in which Michel Foucault "challenges the language of internalization as it operates in the service of the disciplinary regime of the subjection and subjectivation of criminals" (134). This view questions the distinction between the inner and the outer, between the private and the public, which is fundamental to the belief in artistic creation as a form of agency. In *Dancing in the Dark*, Phillips is attempting to explore the problematic boundary between the private and public dimensions of the entertainer's life as a way of representing both the power of his artistic vision and the weight of a public discourse that made his failure inevitable.

The author himself has insisted on the very private personality of someone who was for a time the most public entertainer in America. The question of public and private experience points up a generic paradox related to the fictional and biographical dimensions of the novel. While a biographer uses the facts of a person's life to nourish an imaginative recreation of private experience, a novelist explores private thoughts and feelings. In *Dancing in the Dark*, Phillips attempts to reconcile both the biographical and fictional impulses by exploring the way in which the public facts of race relations in the early twentieth century affect his characters' thoughts and feelings. This is achieved by the use of indirect discourse. It is the extradiegetic narrator who explains the thoughts and feelings of the characters, making explicit their inner thoughts in a way that may seem to rob them of both intimacy and initiative. The verbs of knowing and perception used by the narrator appear to create a veil between the characters and the reader. An example from a passage describing the team's trip to England shows the effect that this produces:

Bert stands on deck and continues to look at his partner, but sadly he *understands* what George *thinks about* him. His comic timing, his wide range of facial expressions, his much-admired technical skills – he *knows* that his partner respects these well-honed talents, but he also *knows* that his partner longs to say, "Bert, you look and act like a nigger and we colored Americans no longer recognize you for we are trying to move on." (100, my italics)

The reactions of all the characters are presented in the same way, reinforcing the misunderstandings that develop between Bert and his partner George and between Bert and his wife Lottie. The distance imposed by the narrator is in a sense simply an extension of the unbridgeable gap between the characters. In this way, the interiority of the characters and its exteriorization by the narrator become confused.

There are several remarks that can be made about this technique and its effect on the way the reader perceives the novel. First of all, it obviously underlines the incompatibility of language and action. Underlying Bert Williams's desire to perform is the belief that his performances will contribute to articulating not only his personal desires, but the aspirations of an entire race:

Sometimes Bert will sit out with George and smoke a cigarette and plan what their next move might be, and occasionally they are joined by the industrious Will Cook and his impatient partner, Paul Dunbar. All four of them believe that legitimate musical entertainment is the way forward for the colored man, and they spend their days writing songs and sketches and their nights speculating about the future. (40-1)

His performances, however, far from allowing him to express the creative possibilities of his people, simply reinforce a misunderstanding, since the audience is not interested in knowing someone they already know, someone they recognize, recognition simply meaning "to know again":

The first time he looked at himself in the mirror the predicament was clear, but just who was this new man and what was his name? Was this actually a man, with his soon-to-be-shuffling feet, and his slurred half speech, and his childish gestures and his infantile reactions? Who was this fellow? Sambo? Coon? Nigger? However, the audience never failed to recognize this creature. That's him. That's the nigger! He looks like that. And that's how he talks. And he walks like that. I know him! I know him! (57-8)

The question Bert asks himself about his identity is essentially redundant, since he has already answered it by stepping into a role that he did not create himself. The two potential meanings of recognition, one of which implies admiration, the second simply the idea of seeing someone again, cannot be reconciled.

A second effect of this narrative technique is to blur the boundary between public and private discourse, emphasizing the social construction of the distinction between the two. The most insidious dimension of racism and segregation is the way it affects people's self-perception, causing them to internalize the colour line. Early in the novel Bert explains to Lottie, who is not yet his wife, why he and his partner George exchanged roles, Bert becoming the clown and George the "straight man." The narrator explains: "He is tense and eager that none should overhear, but there is nobody else in the park" (34-5).

Ironically, it is not the fact of being overheard that will determine the effects of this exchange on Bert himself, but rather his internalization of the public expectations of the audience. The way in which the word "performance" is used by the narrator serves to emphasize the gradual confusion between the man's public and private lives. The word "performance" and other related terms like "role" and "routine" are used both literally and metaphorically. When Bert comes home after a performance, Lottie listens to her husband undressing in the dark, thinking:

She knows the routine. First the socks, and then the shirt, and then he will stand and remove his pants, careful to fold them neatly and drape them over the back of a chair,

and soon after he will slide into their bed, but there will be no touching. [...] And Lottie will lie next to him and stare at the ceiling and plan their escape from this hotel and the dull routine that is already threatening to choke the life out of their young marriage. (49)

At another moment Lottie thinks:

However, her disconsolate days, and lonely nights, begin to trouble her for she is incapable of fully inhabiting this new role of wife and lady of the house if her husband is reluctant to take up his part. (109)

If Bert Williams is unable to clearly distinguish between his public and private roles, the same misperception affects the people around him. The use of internal focalization and free indirect discourse makes it difficult to determine whether the choice of words reflects the thoughts of the characters or those of the narrator, further emphasizing the shifting boundary between inside and outside, private and public spheres, for the characters do not appear to possess a specific language in which to address themselves or in which to express their aspirations as a group. Ultimately words cannot be used by the characters to define themselves, for, as Toni Morrison has often pointed out, definitions belong to the definers, and in the early twentieth century, these were white.¹² The social dimension of language is poignantly expressed by Ada in thinking about the park about which Lottie has told her:

It would be an exaggeration to call it a park, but that's what Lottie called it when she bragged about how her always-attentive Mr. Williams escorted her there to relax. [...] A queer-shaped quadrant with a single flower bed, but coloreds were permitted to sit in this park in the middle of New York City and contemplate their day, their life, their predicament. Ada sits by herself, her damp dress clinging to her sides, and she stares at the near-horizontal branches of the solitary tree that suggests the name "park" might not be a misnomer. (21-2)

Words are useless in Bert Williams's attempt to redefine himself and black culture generally-speaking through his performances precisely because of the antithetical relation between speech and performance. By accepting to blacken his face and play the clown, Bert Williams has sidestepped or overstepped language, increasing the gap between gesture and word. Although he is convinced that he can always "reclaim" himself simply by removing the burnt cork from his face, what happens when Williams is faced with a movie camera rather than a live audience reveals to what extent he has become dependent on audience response for his own self-definition:

When the projection is completed, and the lights are turned back on, he scans the room with a smile upon his face, but it soon becomes apparent that he is the only one who is smiling. Five weeks later they premiere the motion picture at a location in Brooklyn, but he is advised that it might be better for all concerned if he does not attend. And so he waits to hear the news of how his audience have responded to the film, and the single word "riot" floats back to him. They are angry because he has chosen not to cork his face. Why else would they respond like this? (191-2)

The very success of Williams's blackface performances reveal to what extent they can never be used as a form of discourse, a way of overcoming the misunderstanding upon which they are based.

12. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the narrator points out that, when a slave tries to talk back to his master, the master simply beats him "to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (190).

The main effect of Phillips's use of internal focalization in telling Williams's story is to underline the way in which language contributes to the social construction of identity. The process is cumulative, for it is by the very redundancy of the language used to express the characters' thoughts and feelings that it ceases to function as a clue to their personal perspective and becomes a mirror in which their private thoughts become mere reflections of public convention. As a novelist, Phillips is relying on the traditional function of the novel as a medium for exploring the confrontation between personal reflection and public action. In blurring the boundary between private and public uses of language, he both elicits and subverts traditional expectations about language as a means of expression capable of empowering individual subjects.

In *Dancing in the Dark*, Caryl Phillips uses language and discourse in the same way he has used it in other novels, as both part of the represented world, but also as an element of representation itself. Hidden beneath the layers of carefully reconstituted forms of discourse that one finds for instance in *Crossing the River* lie the multiple misunderstandings generated and perpetuated by slavery and its aftermath. Phillips is a master in the art of using words to show how language cuts both ways, plunging those who believe in its power ever deeper into darkness. It is thus that Nash, the former slave sent back to Africa within the context of The American Colonization Society, will in a letter to his former master, designate himself as a foolish child and sign his letters, "Your humble servant" (28). In the same way, Emily Cartwright, the woman sent by her father to take care of his Caribbean plantation in *Cambridge*, uses metaphors like "mother tongue" (29) and "sister island" (90) without realizing that far from empowering her by grounding her authority in the family structure, they only serve to point up her own powerlessness in a family dominated by her father. Just as the characters of *Crossing the River* are to some extent trapped by the cultural connotations of the words that they use, Bert Williams proves unable to transform his performances into a language for articulating a new concept of black identity. This should not be seen as a failure on the part of the performer, or of the novelist who recreates him. It is, on the contrary, a sign of Phillips's sensitivity to the ways in which race permeates both the private and public spheres, often crippling individual efforts to shift or overstep racial boundaries. Phillips, in examining the futility of Bert Williams's attempts to become visible as an artist through a type of performance that essentially reinforced existing stereotypes, is not simply attempting to study the effects of race from a performative point of view. Performativity constitutes a critical frame that makes it possible to read different forms of social behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, using a common denominator. The advantage of this approach is to reveal patterns that are not visible on the social surface of language. However, it should not be used to read literature as a mere extension of social discourse, as a mirror of its own critical approach. Art, if it has any meaning, constitutes an attempt, however quixotic, to plunge beneath the surface of social discourse. Phillips, in fictionalizing the life of Bert Williams, is trying both to identify a language capable of bearing the weight of Williams's desire and distance himself from that language in order to understand its fallibility. He is attempting to explore the conditions and limits of Williams's attempt to create an opening in the wall that racial stereotyping had constructed around black artists. The language through which the narrator reveals Williams's entrapment in patterns he cannot control serves at the same time to reveal the desire and expectation which is the driving force behind all language. This shadow,

this underside of language that determines its power while limiting its effects is the subject, as we have seen, of much of Phillips's fiction.

Phillips's approach to Bert Williams dramatizes the nature and limits of black performance at a particular time, while also respecting the nature of African American social life and the pressures expressed by the language in which the characters both think and speak. *Dancing in the Dark* can thus be seen as an act not only of remembering but of commemoration, inviting the reader to discover Bert Williams through a language that he inevitably shares with the lost performer, but which will never give him as reader total access to the man behind the mask.

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