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“Creative Biography”: Fiction and Non-fiction in Caryl Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives*

This article explores the relationship between fiction and non-fiction in Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives*. Through examination of the questions raised by differing reader expectations related to fiction and biography, a critical frame for understanding the way in which Phillips combines fictional and non-fictional approaches in this hybrid work is proposed, relying partly on Paul Ricoeur’s ideas of narrative identity and witnessing.

For writers concerned with the effects of slavery, naming has become a synecdoche for the processes of depersonalisation associated with human bondage. As a theme, it has also been used to signify historical loss: the impossibility of restoring the names of most of the slaves, and by extension the absence or loss of historical records relating to slavery. The idea of historical loss is central to the writing of Caryl Phillips, whose novels and essays revolve around questions of belonging, race, identity and span, both in terms of time and space, the entire region involved in the slave trade and its multiple consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. Phillips is particularly famous for novels like *Crossing the River* which juxtapose narratives concerning people affected either directly or in oblique ways by the fragmentation, dispersal and dispossession produced by the slave trade. He has also written non-fiction, in particular essays, articles and book reviews, on a wide variety of subjects, many of which concern black writers and performers from the Caribbean, Great Britain, Africa or the United States. A number of these essays have been gathered in *The European Tribe* (1987), *A New World Order* (2001) and most recently in *Colour Me English* (2011).

What I am concerned with studying in this article is the relationship, in Phillips’s work and career, between fiction and non-fiction as ways of addressing the issues of identity and dispossession as they were raised by slavery and its aftermath, and through the contemporary repercussions of these phenomena in the areas of the world that were involved in the triangular trade. The proper name, which identifies a person as an individual, can serve as a frame through which to consider the impact of Phillips’s choice to use real historical figures as the subjects not only of his essays, but also of certain of his fictional works. I consider this a fruitful and appropriate way of approaching the issues involved in the choice of a fictional or non-fictional approach to historical questions. Using the proper name of a historical figure has an impact not only on the reader’s attitude toward the text, but also on the way he looks at the writer and his implication in the narrative he produces. Biography, like autobiography, is based on an implicit contract between the writer and the reader in which the veracity of the account of a person’s life is at stake. Caryl Phillips is concerned with his responsibility as an author, not only to the contemporary figures of whom he writes, but in particular to the figures from the past, both known and identified and unknown, who were affected by slavery. He therefore uses three different approaches to the past. The first involves writing fictional works which present characters whose lives reproduce the experiences of people from the historical past. The second involves treating real characters and events directly, very often in essays. The third approach, which will be the focus of this

article, uses fiction to enhance the effect of non-fictional writing, a form of compromise between the two. A brief explanation of Phillips's attitude toward the writing of fiction and non-fiction will make it easier to understand why he occasionally decides to blend the two approaches.

The first approach, through fiction, is reflected in *Cambridge*, a novel narrated by a woman slave-owner in charge of her father's plantation in the Caribbean, and in *Crossing the River*, in which different narrators intervene: a former slave who has returned to Africa and exchanges letters with his former master, the captain of a slaving vessel whose ship's log is reproduced, and a British woman who had an affair with a black American G.I. during World War II. *Higher Ground* uses the same type of technique: one of the narrators is an interpreter in a slave fort on the west coast of Africa. This technique involves treating the historical past by analogy; the reader is invited to compare the fictional situation with real incidents from the historical past. In these novels, Phillips tries to imagine the type of crisis or dilemma that a person might experience in relation to a particular historical situation.¹ While this method gives Phillips the freedom and flexibility to explore character and inner states of consciousness, it does not entirely answer his need to address the gaps in the historical records caused by the absence of people whose names have disappeared or were never recorded. Imagination does not fulfil the need to confront people with the historical reality of the losses related to slavery. In an interview published on the website *Ashcanrantings*, Phillips deals with this question explicitly in talking about another of his non-fiction works, *The Atlantic Sound*, in which one section is devoted to an African named John Ocansey. In the late nineteenth century, Ocansey was sent to Liverpool by his father, a merchant in the Gold Coast who dealt primarily in palm oil, to inquire about the ship that he had ordered from a company in Liverpool. Although Ocansey wrote a book about his experiences, which Phillips consulted in doing his research, Ocansey's name is unknown to most people. Phillips says:

We are encouraged to view history as an extended interview with the "winners." Well, some of the so-called "losers" have an equally valid, and important, point of view as well. (Rhyne)²

Talking about a real historical figure, as he does in *The Atlantic Sound*, allows the writer to put names on black people who experienced slavery or, as in this case, the effects of Britain's domination of West Africa. In the book, Phillips describes John's feelings and reactions, bringing his narrative closer to a fictional account in order to flesh out the facts of the story. In this way he attempts to reconcile the need for historical accuracy with the desire for emotional authenticity. Much of Phillips's writing, be it fiction or non-fiction, corresponds to a desire to make history real and to acquaint people with

1. In an interview published in *Ariel*, Phillips insisted on the importance of character and voice in his novels. In referring to his novels he said, "They are based on character, they are not, as I said, principally based on ideas; in some sense they are nineteenth century. I want to hide behind the people. I don't actually have a desire to be visible as an author. I want to be invisible behind my people because it's as though I feel entrusted with their lives" (Eckstein 37).

2. The vision of writing, both fictional and nonfictional, as a way of questioning the distinction between famous historical figures and anonymous ordinary people, an approach suggested to some extent by new approaches to history, has become a common preoccupation of the postmodern novel. See for instance Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, in particular Chapter 7, "Historiographic Metafiction: 'The Pastime of Past Time'" and Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*. Brian McHale refers to Stanley Elkins's remarks about "official history": "What is official history the history of? Of the winners, says Stanley Elkin, of the male sex, says Grass" (90).

dimensions of the past which have long been ignored. Both his fictional and his non-fictional works are based on extensive historical research.

One of Phillips’s more recent works, *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), furnishes an interesting example of the way in which he brings together history and fiction in order to rescue historical figures from oblivion. *Foreigners* is, according to the dust jacket, “a hybrid of reportage, fiction and historical fact.” It contains three sections. The first is a fictionalised account of the final years of Francis Barber, who was Samuel Johnson’s Jamaica-born black servant and inherited a considerable amount of money from him at his death. The second section is a non-fictional account of the life of Randolph Turpin, a black British boxer who in 1951, at the age of twenty-three, defeated Sugar Ray Robinson to become middleweight champion of the world. The third section, entitled “Northern Lights,” uses a variety of voices, including the author’s own, to tell the story of a Nigerian man, David Oluwale, who in 1969 was found dead in the River Aire in Leeds. While the first section, entitled “Doctor Johnson’s Watch,” makes considerable use of fiction to re-imagine events, the section devoted to David Oluwale is essentially non-fiction and attempts to piece together the circumstances surrounding Oluwale’s life and death on the basis of the information Phillips was able to gather. The account of Turpin’s life, entitled “Made in Wales,” is a straightforward non-fictional text, including at the end an account of Phillips’s conversation with Turpin’s two daughters. An examination of the relation between fiction and non-fiction in the first and final sections of *Foreigners* makes it possible to elucidate the questions raised by Phillips’s aesthetic choices and the impact they have on the reader’s perception of the text.

The first question underlying Phillips’s choice of dealing with real persons is one of form. The choice of a fictional or non-fictional approach, and in particular the way that the work is identified by critics and readers, will have a considerable impact on its reception. In an interview with Bénédicte Ledent about *Foreigners*, Phillips, in response to a question concerning the book’s “hybrid, almost unpindownable nature,” answered that he tried “not to worry about labels,” and that he would describe the book as “nonfiction,” but that he had “dispensed with the division between fiction and nonfiction on the header pages” of his books (Schattelman 188). However, given people’s “urge to label” he says, “‘creative biography’ might be a suitable label for *Foreigners*” (Schattelman 188).³ A glance at some of the reviews of the book shows that the question of form and genre is not a trivial one. Adam Goodheart in his review for *The New York Times* called the book “a kind of allegory”: “Although presented as a novel, it’s really a set of freestanding profiles, only lightly fictionalized at most [...]” Vincent Carretta in *The Washington Post* called it “a triptych of fictionalized biographies.” Matthew Cheney in his review entitled “No Direction Home: The Novel as Betrayal” begins his article by saying “Ours is a hybrid age, an age of mixing cultures and histories, an age of migrations and transmigrations.” He goes on to say:

3. Phillips’s use of the term “creative biography” suggests Brian McHale’s use of the term “creative anachronism” in *Postmodernist Fiction* to characterise the way in which postmodern novelists reconcile fiction with the representation of the historical past by attributing contemporary attitudes to real or imagined historical figures, as John Fowles does in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (McHale 84-96). However, in *Foreigners*, Phillips essentially restricts his fictionalisation of Francis Barber to the “dark areas,” “that is, to those aspects about which the ‘official’ record has nothing to report” (McHale 87).

Such an age deserves hybrid forms to explore the life it breeds and to delve down into the sources of its textures. The hope is that those forms will express more than can be expressed otherwise and will point toward truths invisible to less eclectic lenses. (25)

While he considers Phillips's oeuvre "difficult to box up with convenient labels," Cheney concludes that *Foreigners* "is too schematic in its juxtapositions, too purposeless in its hybrid forms, to present a coherent vision," and therefore not as thought provoking as Phillips would have wished it to be (28). While none of the reviewers questions the accuracy of Phillips's research, they do seem to call into question the effectiveness of his choices concerning the form of his narratives. Matthew Cheney considers that "the various juxtapositions within *Foreigners* seldom produce any emotional connection to the situations" (28). Goodheart feels that the book "fails to satisfy as either storytelling or history."⁴ The question of an "emotional connection" is particularly important, for it encapsulates the challenge facing the writer, who must respect historical facts while endowing them with an emotional impact in order to make his characters both credible and moving.

Writing, particularly biography, involves a simultaneous construction of the self and the other, the self through the other, the other through the self. Approaching Caryl Phillips's essays as a form of "serial autobiography," as Louise Yelin does in her article "Plural Selves: the Dispersion of the Autobiographical Subject in the Essays of Caryl Phillips," constitutes one approach for dealing with the way in which the writer attempts to come to grips with his own identity in writing about others.⁵ Yelin also evokes the notion of the "relational self" used by Smith and Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (64). This term is somewhat misleading, for it glosses over an implicit contradiction. The self is, by definition, anything but relational. It is stubbornly specific and self-absorbed. It enters into relations with others through protocols and codes of linguistic, social and cultural interaction. Philippe Lejeune examines in *Le Pacte autobiographique* the conventions through which an autobiography constructs the self as an "other" through the relation that it establishes between the author as narrator and his role as character. Looking at the writer's relation with real people through the perspective of biography implies a different critical frame and another set of expectations. The contract between author and subject that underlies the biographical genre relies on veracity in a way that distinguishes it from autobiography. If the subject of biography is living, any perceived deviation from the truth can result in litigation. While the way in which Caryl Phillips talks about real people in his essays, even people like V. S. Naipaul, with whom he does not always agree, is not of a nature to get him into trouble, examining his treatment of real people through biographies that are to some extent fictional makes it possible to imagine a different set of questions about the relation between self and other. It might appear that biography as a genre implies an effacement of the self in a relation that gives priority to the other.⁶ However, the fact that Phillips tends to prefer

4. It should be pointed out that the view expressed by Carretta, a well-known specialist of African-American history and particularly of the slave narrative, is not at all critical. Carretta begins his article by saying that "Readers familiar with Caryl Phillips's award-winning novels know how skilfully he combines fiction and history to convey the complex nature of racial, national and personal identities in modern Britain."

5. Yelin borrows the term "serial autobiography" from Leigh Gilmore ("Endless Autobiography?") Yelin describes the "Northern Lights" section of *Foreigners* as "a version of what I call the autobiography of the other, its protagonist a figure who, Phillips says, 'has been ever present in my life'" (70-1).

6. The complex relation between author and subject in biography is evoked by François Dosse in an article dealing with the pertinence of Paul Ricoeur's notion of "narrative identity" in discussions of autobiography and biography.

fictionalised biographies to purely non-fictional forms shows to what extent he feels the need to use his imagination, a dimension of his self, in order to create a credible portrait of the other. From this point of view, it is legitimate to explore the modalities through which he mobilises his self in the creation of others. Of particular interest is the constraint, or pressure, created by the fact of addressing real subjects, and the way in which these very constraints are transformed into narrative opportunities.⁷

If the writing of autobiography implies, as Lejeune has pointed out, that the author, the narrator and the character are identical, biography places a particular responsibility on the narrator by conflating him with the author. The voice of the biographer is his own. In several of his interviews, Phillips has addressed the question of his position as biographer or novelist in the narrating of the stories he tells in *Foreigners*. He has been quite explicit about the degree of his implication and the difference between his approach to Francis Barber and the treatment of David Oluwale:

I was going from the position of being a novelist where I was hiding in the first section to emerging gradually so that I am speaking directly by the end of the book. (“Caryl Phillips in conversation with Ian Buruma” n.p.)

In the same discussion he explains that Barber “didn’t write anything” and was therefore “very imaginatively reconstructed” (n.p.). He also explains his use of a fictional approach by the fact that he “didn’t have the raw materials to work with and it was the late eighteenth century” (n.p.). He therefore invents a voice, that of a man who describes himself as “little more than a minor literary wit in London society” (3) and who, as a participant in “Dr Johnson’s wider circle,” wishes to write a biographical sketch of Barber’s life for *The Gentleman’s Magazine*. This invented voice, like all first-person narrators, reveals as much about himself in his telling of Francis Barber’s life as he does about Barber. Like other narrators found in Phillips’s fiction, he describes blacks through the language and attitudes of the time and place he inhabits. He explains:

[...] I had formed a favourable opinion of the sooty fellow as one who remained quietly devoted to his master while exhibiting some occasional exuberance of personality such as one might reasonably anticipate from a member of his race. (6)

From the way he speaks, with distance and circumspection, one can deduce the difference between this fastidious man and Johnson himself, whose “fierce voice” he hears in his mind admonishing him for his concern with the small number of people present at the funeral of “England’s great lexicographer” (9). His discourse is marked by a liberal use of modals, the conditional tense and verbs implying hesitation, a sign of his reluctance to commit himself to Barber in the way that Johnson had done. One element that clearly emerges through Phillips’s use of the narrator’s point of view is Johnson’s total faith in his servant. The following passage, in which the narrator contemplates the idea of becoming involved in Granville Sharpe’s projects for the abolition of slavery, is revealing in this respect:

Dosse mentions in particular Roland Barthes’s assertion that “every biography is a novel that does not dare to say its name” (my translation). He also mentions the collection created by Jean-Bernard Pontalis, “L’un et l’autre,” which involved asking a writer to write about his favorite hero and which revealed the intersubjective nature of biographical writing (“La biographie à l’épreuve de l’identité narrative” n.p.).

7. The “narrative opportunities” referred to here suggest the view of reality as essentially discursive which is the basis of the postmodern approach to the historical past (see Hutcheon 119).

Having recently retired from my commercial business in the City, where *I grew to despise* the vulgar rapacity of the sugar and slave men of the West Indies, I had recently *begun to contemplate some involvement* in the Province of Freedom – Mr Granville Sharp’s scheme for resettling blacks on the west coast of Africa in an efficiently managed colony – as a way of honourably investing my money for profit and charitably passing my days. This being the case, my ageing mind *was forever returning* to the disturbing image of poor Francis Barber all alone in Westminster Abbey, and I *finally understood* that *before making any decision* about my own future philanthropic investments *it might profit me* to revisit the past and *try to discover* what had become of the forlorn negro. (14, my emphasis)

The narrator goes to the town of Lichfield in search of Barber, and, unable to fall asleep at the inn where he has taken a room, thinks back upon Johnson’s relationship with his servant. The marks of hesitation in his discourse disappear as the narrator gradually evokes the reactions of the young Barber. Imagining Barber’s first encounter with Johnson, he thinks:

The scars around this man’s throat were terrifying and formed a red lumpish collar, and young Francis found it difficult to tell when Johnson was speaking to him or simply muttering to himself, for there seemed to be little division between the two modes of expression. (25)

The reader finds himself absorbed in the narrative of Barber’s relation with Johnson, unimpeded by the diffident and distanced tone that had characterised the narrator’s initial remarks about the Negro servant. The same change in tone can be observed when he encounters Barber’s wife and finds himself “trying to imagine this Betsy in her full glory a quarter of a century earlier” (37-8). The narrator thinks back to their meeting and marriage, allowing himself at times to imagine Betsy’s thoughts. These changes of tone mirror the dilemma of the author, torn between his desire to enter the minds of both Barber and the anonymous “literary wit” and his need to respect the historical facts. The vivid imagining of the narrator, when he enters the minds of people whose lives he does not really understand, casts light on his own dilemma and on the multiple constraints related to slavery. It also reveals the power of narrative to create a bridge between self and other through the construction of the narrative self in its relation with others. This is the argument developed by Paul Ricoeur in *Soi-même comme un autre*, in which the philosopher distinguishes between identity as *idem* (the same) and as *ipse*, or self, a distinction which allows him to view autobiography as a narrative construction of the self in its encounters with others.⁸ The same logic makes it possible to see the biographer’s imaginative reconstruction of his subject (other) as simultaneously a construction of himself.

Phillips has explained that this “imaginative reconstruction,” which corresponds to the mystery of a black man’s private experience of England in the eighteenth century, was necessitated by the fact that Barber did not write anything himself, and that what we know about Barber has been learned mostly from James Boswell (“Caryl Phillips in Conversation with Ian Buruma” n.p.). In the case of David Oluwale, the subject of “Northern Lights,” the third section of the book, this absence of self-expression is

8. “L’ipséité ne se construit donc pas dans un rapport analogique d’extériorité à l’autre, mais dans une implication, une véritable intrication à l’autre. C’est le sens donné au titre même du livre d’un soi-même ‘en tant que...autre.’” (Selfhood is not constructed through an analogical relationship of exteriority with respect to the other, but through an implication, a veritable intrication with the other. This is the meaning given by the title of the book to the self ‘as an... other.’” (Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* 14, my translation)

even more dramatic, for Oluwale became known only after and because of his violent death. There is no possibility of imagining what might have been running through the mind of this man who arrived in England from Nigeria in the late forties as a stowaway, was briefly placed in a prison in Leeds upon his arrival, worked in a foundry, was confined for eight years in a mental hospital and after his release repeatedly sent to jail for a variety of offences until he was pushed into the River Aire by two policemen in 1969. Phillips pointed out in an interview that Oluwale’s case was a “well-known and historic case in Britain” and that “it haunted me as an eleven-year-old because the man was black and there was a very strange heightened racial tension in Britain then” (“Conversation: Caryl Phillips and Abdulrazak Gurnah, with Radhika Jones”[n.p.]). He also mentioned that when he began asking people about David Oluwale, “it was astonishing how many people remembered the climate and the feelings but nobody knew anything about this man.” Phillips set about tracking down everyone who was still alive who had known Oluwale and wrote what he called a “long essay” that he described in the following way:

The essay is made up of me interviewing people, talking to people, and then occasionally my voice comes in and then I’m also trying to tell the history of the city that I grew up in [...]. (“Conversation: Caryl Phillips and Abdulrazak Gurnah, with Radhika Jones”n.p.)

The essay is in effect composed of the voices of witnesses speaking about David, various texts taken from books, newspapers or official records, some of them signed by prison officials, policemen or doctors. There are also passages in which a voice, presumably that of Phillips, addresses David directly, or tells the history of the city of Leeds. From this description, it is clear that the relationship between Phillips and his subject is, in this case, very different from the one found in “Doctor Johnson’s Watch.” On the one hand there is a man who has been all but forgotten, except for the traces he left in local memory, and on the other hand a writer with a vast experience of reading, thinking and writing about the predicament of black people both in the past and the present. Talking about a real person in this case creates a particular obligation on the part of the writer to speak in his own voice and his own name, in part because of the fact that unlike famous slaves like Gustavus Vassa or Frederick Douglass, who are referred to in the essay, David Oluwale was never able to make a name for himself through his own will and volition. Any desire to fabricate on the part of the writer, even with the intention of defending his subject, would be a violation of the specific type of silence that surrounds David Oluwale. In terms of the relation between author as self and subject as other, the self that is constructed in this type of situation can only be a searching self, an investigative self, one that emerges through research and the writing of the life of the other. In his interviews, Phillips has referred to the pleasure he finds in researching his subjects and the difficulty he sometimes encounters in moving from the research phase to the moment of writing.⁹ This remark attests both to his concern for historical veracity and to his discomfort with the transition from the research phase, in which the self is both present through intellectual curiosity and absent in the sense that it has not yet been obliged to make aesthetic choices, to the construction of a coherent but necessarily limited narrative.¹⁰

9. <<http://www.kqed.org/a/forum/R510170900>>.

10. Phillips has been criticised for the way he uses historical events and documents by two critics. Marcus Wood (53-6) has questioned the way he changed factual elements of John Newton’s log in *Crossing the River*, thus tampering with facts that “demand to be left alone in their terrible integrity” (56). Timothy Bewes (49-72) considers that he often

The idea of witnessing, as it is examined by Paul Ricoeur in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, can be useful in understanding how Phillips shapes the material testifying to the life of David Oluwale into a narrative with an emotional resonance that is greater than the sum of its factual components. Ricoeur's analysis of the role of witnesses is integrated into a discussion of questions relating to the writing of history and therefore takes into account the narrative dimension of testimony and the necessity for a witness of respecting the borderline between fact and fiction (204). Ricoeur also insists on the implication of the witness in his testimony as the very condition of his credibility. The act of bearing witness obliges a person to name himself and also to narrate his own life as the context of his testimony.¹¹ The witnesses whose testimony is included in *Foreigners* tell their own stories in their attempt to reconstruct the presence of David Oluwale, thus demonstrating the embedding of all lives in other life stories. The woman who remembers seeing David when she was a young girl comments on her own situation in evoking her relationship to Oluwale, for she explains that as a Christian "I knew that it was taboo for a young girl like me to talk with a man" (169). Although she explains that "David wasn't a West Indian like us," she ends up by saying "as a devout Christian girl I just wanted to give him respect" (171). The multiple facets of her own identity mirror the difficulty she experiences in situating David Oluwale. In the same way, the Nigerian man who worked at the foundry with Oluwale describes his own trajectory as a stowaway in talking about his relation with David. In the process, he establishes both the similarity and the difference between himself and Oluwale for he explains that David "wasn't able to think around a situation and do something else," a colloquial reiteration of Glissant's idea of diversion as a way of deflecting a direct confrontation with racial prejudice.¹² The man explains that:

David needed somebody to sit down and tell him what was happening to him. Some of us nearly went mad in England because the environment was new. We spoke the same language and we thought everything would be okay, but we soon found out. David really was a smart cat who could always think fast if he had to, but he was a loner who wanted to do everything by himself. (191)

Clearly Phillips must have simplified and modified some of the testimony in order to clarify its relation to David's story, but he cannot be accused of tampering with the past. He allows David Oluwale's story to emerge along the borderline between the points of connection and similarity that the witnesses express and the nodes of difference and divergence, for it is at these points that David's own story reveals its incomprehensibility. Each testimony produces both a part of the explanation and a portion of the mystery surrounding David's fate. There is an effect of overlapping and repetition in this process which may be seen as the reflection of the author's own perplexity with regard to his subject but also as a strategy for revealing the impossibility of establishing a linear narrative of any person's life.¹³ However, Phillips's use of testimony can also be seen

fails to establish an emotional connection between his own "shame" as a witness to the atrocities of the past and the horror of the events themselves.

11. "Du même coup, l'autodesignation fait affleurer l'opacité inextricable d'une histoire personnelle qui a été elle-même 'empêtrée dans des histoires'" ("By the same token, self-designation brings to light the inextricable opacity of a personal story that has itself become 'entangled in stories'" [205, my translation]).

12. For Glissant's definition of diversion, see *Caribbean Discourse* 19-26.

13. This effect has been noted by Joan Powell Miller in her discussion of *The Atlantic Sound*, which displays the same hybrid nature (102).

as exploring the conditions for the emergence of a narrative of multicultural identity, a subject to which Phillips returns repeatedly in his interviews and essays. Ricoeur sees the testimony of witnesses, in all of its forms and contexts, as the basis for the creation of a social fabric in which it becomes possible to communicate as human beings. In a particularly laconic expression, Ricoeur says that “reciprocity compensates for the impossibility of substituting one individual agent for another” (207, my translation).¹⁴ In other words, verbal exchange evens out the disparities of point of view and circumstance and makes social life possible, accommodating both assent and dissent. This is essentially the power of Phillips’s use of witnessing. The incomplete account given by the witnesses reveals both the desire for a coherent narrative and the impossibility of constructing one. It shows the specificity of David’s personal form of resistance, but also the failure of the community to produce a social fabric capable of preventing the indiscriminate harassment of individuals. If one places the idea of witnessing in the context of the idea of the “relational self” evoked above, it is clear that the self must both listen and speak in order to establish this relation, but in the case of “Northern Lights” the author speaks essentially by placing differing but converging testimonies side by side, creating the possibility for a social conversation without imposing it.

A second form of discourse is used in the narrative of David Oluwale, produced by an unidentified voice speaking in a tone which is not that of a reporter but of someone who wishes to fill the void left by David’s silence and provide information not included in the testimony of other people. At times this voice addresses David directly, using a rhetoric that is deliberately dramatic and poetic, repeating for instance the term “Yoruba boy” (172-3;175). This voice will later narrate the history of the city of Leeds, these passages alternating with those relating directly to Oluwale. The tone is once again dramatic, providing a contrast with the more hesitant language found in the testimony. These passages can be seen as juxtaposing the individual story of Oluwale to the history of the city, creating a counterpoint between story and history that is a common feature of postmodern literature. The narrative voice uses a language often identified with traditional views of history, emphasising ideas of growth and development and suggesting the energy underlying the ambitions of the people, beginning with the Celts, who occupied the region of Leeds. The fabricated quality of this voice can be seen in the quotation from an eighteenth-century schoolmaster who:

compared Leeds to a “cunning but wealthy, thriving farmer. Its merchants hunt worldly wealth, as eager as dogs pursue the hare; they have in general the pride and haughtiness of Spanish dons...the strong desire they have for yellow dirt (gold), transforms them into galley-slaves, and their servants are doubly so; the first being fastened with golden, but the latter with iron chains.” (196)

The narrator borrows the voice of the schoolmaster to show that the narrating of history often involves assimilating the behaviour of a group to that of an individual. This deliberate distancing of the narrative voice from the neutrality of mere reporting reflects Phillips’s desire to contrast the intentionality imposed on events by historical discourse with the silence and ambiguity that surround the real life of his subject. The “emotional connection” to the historical event is created to a large extent by the

14. “La réciprocité corrige l’insubstituabilité des acteurs.”

contrast between these two forms of discourse, neither one providing a totally adequate explanation for what finally happened.

A third function of this final section relates to the idea of commemoration and involves transforming the name of David Oluwale from the proper name of an unknown individual into a signifier with connotative properties. When one of the witnesses mentions telling the police “if they wanted another Oluwale they were not going to get one from us,” (229) he is demonstrating the way in which David Oluwale’s name has acquired a meaning which assures him a place in the memory of the city. When the mortuary attendant later refers to the identification of David’s body by saying, “There was no other conversation than someone saying ‘It’s Oluwale,’” (246) his laconic remark reveals the weight that the name in itself has acquired. Oluwale’s name is inscribed in many ways on the city of Leeds; this inscription is symbolised by the graffiti “Remember Oluwale” “on the wall by the Hayfield pub on the corner of Reginal Terrace and Harehills Avenue” (257). But it takes on narrative weight by being associated with the names of streets, pubs, prisons and hospitals that are found in the history of the city, revealing the close connection between narrative and the space in which it unfolds. Names always appear arbitrary, even if their origin can be explained. Their real meaning comes from use and context and Phillips’s use of names in “Northern Lights” recalls Walcott’s assertion in “The Schooner Flight” that “we live like our names” (353).¹⁵

While the term “creative biography” chosen by Caryl Phillips to describe what he is attempting to do in *Foreigners* may not be totally adequate, it reveals an important dimension of the writer’s interest in the fictionalisation of historical events and lives. As an examination of the literary strategies deployed in the writing of *Foreigners* shows, each attempt to reconcile the writing of biography with the creation of fiction relies on different strategies; Caryl Phillips’s search for an authentic relation with his subjects obliges him to examine the facts and opinions at his disposal, but also to explore the aesthetic and narrative options available to him in the search for an appropriate form. That he should continue to pursue the past and bring it into his fiction testifies to the centrality of loss and memory as themes in his writing.

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15. In a line taken from the poem “The Schooner Flight,” Walcott’s narrator reflects on the way that the different names given to cypresses reflect the contexts in which the trees are found. When he says, “But we live like our names and you would have / to be colonial to know the difference,” (353) he is referring to the way in which European words were used by the colonisers to replace local names, a phenomenon which represents by metonymy the process of colonisation.

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