

RETURN OF THE DIASPORA ‘NATIVE’ IN CARYL PHILLIPS’S *A STATE OF INDEPENDENCE*

Thomas Bonnici
Universidade Estadual de Maringá

ABSTRACT. Transnationalism has not only caused an outgoing movement from ex-colonial places to the industrialized metropolises but has provided means for the diasporic subject or descendants to return “home”. Problematizing the terms diaspora, diasporic subject and home, current British “Black” literature focuses on the representation of the ex-colonial subject coming face to face with her/his own cultural roots. Caryl Phillips’s *A State of Independence* (1986) shows Bertram Francis, an expatriate from a fictional St Kitts, returning to the Caribbean. He encounters the island on the eve of its independence from Britain, but transferring its future into the hands of the U.S. and a corrupt elite class. Although Bertram seems bewildered, he is engaged in intervening on its Black community to transform it into an autonomous, albeit culturally different, locus within a multicultural world. It seems that by highlighting a sympathetic but critical engagement with the Caribbean British Black authors are underpinning a leitmotif against racism, neo-colonialism, and a different meaning to globalization.

Key words: British “Black” literature; Caryl Phillips; culture; community; transformation.

Returning Home

The diasporic subject’s returning home has always been problematic and fiction has always represented it either as traumatic or consciousness-raising. According to Safran (1991) one of the conditions constituting the diasporic subject is the idealization of the putative ancestral home and the thought of returning to it when conditions are deemed favourable. This is especially true when displacement occurred neither because of traumatic (wars, genocide) nor disastrous events (natural upheavals), but due to opportunity-seeking diasporas (labour migrants and skilled professionals) within the globalization context. Since the nation is construed on familial and domestic metaphors, a return is always characterized by the vocabulary of kinship which may be either referred to as the motherland or the home to denote something to which one is naturally tied. In fact, “home” is the embodiment of the nostalgically evoked tradition, common culture and communal past. On the other hand, the here / home double gaze either of the diasporic subject or first generation subject is both ambivalent and sceptical. In the case of the diasporic subject who left his birthplace some time ago and now lives in a foreign country, the latter is always a place where s/he is never fully accepted in the host

society, while “home” is constantly imagined and idealized to the point that subjectively it turns out to be different from the actual place. Levy’s *Small Island* presents a Caribbean couple, Hortense and Gilbert, who migrates from Jamaica to Britain and is constantly harassed by the here / home dichotomy: if Britain is the mother country, supposedly capable of welcoming them in her bosom, Jamaica’s culture and tradition are strong within them and they will not relinquish their island home without great loss. The Bengali Samad Iqbal and the half-Jamaican Bowdens in Smith’s *White Teeth* seem to be almost integrated in British life but links are still strong with their mother countries. On the other hand, the irregular immigrants Gabriel, Said and Bright in Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* know that, although rejected in the former colonial metropolis, they do not want to return to their home. Returning home literally means a death sentence. Although not for the same reasons, a similar abhorrence for his Arab desert home is experienced by Abdul in Gordimer’s *The Pickup* (2001). His return home from South Africa is just a strategic step towards “freedom” to an industrialized country and countless job opportunities.

Extra-regional Caribbean Migration began with the famous 1948 *S.S. Windrush* voyage to Britain which heralded the emigration movements in the 1950s and 1960s. After entry restrictions of Commonwealth Caribbean migrants to the UK were enforced, movements to Canada and the United States started in about 1962. However, it is common for migrants to return to their Caribbean country of origin for regular visits or for retirement. In fact, since the 1980s, perhaps due, albeit not exclusively, to increased facility for travel, many Caribbeans maintain a home base in two countries between which they move with varying frequency (Byron, 1994; Thomas-Hope, 1999). With these factors in mind Hall (2003) underscores the linkages at the national and the family levels, the consolidation of networks and experiences, and socialization in a transnational environment in his theorizing on diaspora, multiculturalism, race and postcolonial studies.

The representation of returning home is not a novel idea in fiction. In the context of Afro-American people it has been recently revived in literature not as a viable proposal to go back to Africa but as a bridge between African cultures and people of African descent in the Caribbean, South America and the United States. The epilogue of Phillips’s *Crossing the River* (1993) evokes the beating of drums on the faraway shores and the “many-tongued chorus of the common memory” in Santo Domingo, Trinidad, Brooklyn, São Paulo, London, Rio de Janeiro. However, in many homecoming novels,

such as Samuel Selvon's *Moses Migrating* (1983) and Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* (1985), the voyage back home is a harrowing experience since it causes an epiphanic awareness of facts in the protagonist that s/he did not expect to find in his/her country. Accepting the fact that the Caribbean diaspora seems to be endemic, Cohen (1997) concludes that interest in return, physical or symbolical, is high among Anglophone Caribbean diaspora people, not only in the case of the intelligentsia but especially among the people seeped with Garveyite and Rastafarian idealism (Appiah & Gates, 1997). Perhaps the Guyanese writer Melville (1991, p. 149) gave the best description to this attitude when she wrote: "We do return and leave and return again, crisscrossing the Atlantic, but whichever side of the Atlantic we are on, the dream is on the other side."

The essay analyzes the position of the returnee Bertram Francis in Phillips's *A State of Independence* (1986) and his negotiation with "home" as a diasporic place.

Encounters

Caryl Phillips's second novel *A State of Independence* narrates events experienced by returnee Francis Bertram in his Caribbean island "home" on the eve of its independence from Britain after an absence of twenty years in England on a frustrated scholarship enterprise. Bertram seems to revolve around three encounters, namely, with his mother, with his former schoolmate Jackson Clayton and with his former girlfriend Patsy Archibald. These meetings reveal the protagonist's condition as a diasporic returnee. In the first place, Bertram's roaming to and from the capital and his visits to his mother's house, to the bar, to the hotel, in the countryside, in the streets of Baytown are typical of the diasporic subject returning home. The narrator reveals Bertram's ambiguous state of mind through words and expressions ("don't know"; "wondered", "uncertain", "no idea", "unsure"; "confused"; "unclear", "mystified"; "assumed") that indicate a not-at-home-ness as a consequence of his dislocation from the margin to the imperial centre twenty years ago and from the imperial centre to the margin, with the consequent contrasting awareness of the difference between the two dates (Ashcroft et al. 1998). In the second place, Bertram become gradually aware of the underlying "life-lie", the unrecognized and unconscious self-delusion that he may contribute towards the "independence" of his island home. However, the harshness of reality brings him to the conclusion that, as a returned diasporic Caribbean, he simultaneously belongs and does not belong to the place. In fact the three encounters

occur when Bertram is in a state of uncertainty and confusion due to the ambiguity of his condition.

Independence! What Independence?

Uncanniness, proper to Bertram, seems to be due to the returnee's feelings that he has betrayed the people of his island home when he left for Britain twenty years ago to take a scholarship and also to the fact that the islanders, those who stayed, look upon him as a black Briton and a stranger. In Bertram's case the alleged betrayal is compounded by his failure in the scholarship and by not keeping in touch with anyone in the Caribbean, especially his mother and brother. The encounter is brought to a pitch when his mother accuses him that, in the long run, he opted for the British metropolis and shunned home. "England has captured your soul" (Phillips, 1995, p. 82). She also chides him because he has abandoned her and his brother in the Caribbean. "Bertram, for no matter how hard you might think [the] [business opportunities in the island] be, they can't be no harder than you make it for Dominic and myself when you abandoned us here and go about your own selfish matters in England'" (Phillips, 1995, p. 84). Although he refuses to accept such an accusation and rebuts that the metropolis has culturally taken him over, his strutting along the roadways leading to the interior and through the streets and haunts of the old colonial town somewhat belies his statement that he is the "same fellar" (Phillips, 1995, p. 85). Although Bertram does not assume the function of the British citizen in the colonies described by Spivak (1985, p. 133) as "consolidating the self of Europe by obliging the native to cathect the space of the Other on his home ground", he is very close to an overreaching attitude because of his Britain-earned money and his "experience" in the metropolis. In her answering back his mother, however, cynically nips in the bud his naïveness and his alleged pretension of independence.

His mother began to smile. And then she laughed, at first with confidence, then with more control as though unsure if the fragility of her body could support too much humour. 'So that's what England teach you? That you must come home with some pounds and set up a business separate from the white man?' [...] To him her laughter was simply the cackle of ignorance, and he felt obliged to educate her. [...] 'And what white man has Leslie Carter [the local bar owner] ever worked for? If you take a walk up the ghaut in your smart English suit and tie, you going see him bent double like a tree in a high wind over the same

counter you left him behind. Is that what you mean by progress?" (Phillips, 1995, p. 50-51).

It seems that at this moment Bertram's life-lie begins to shatter. He perceives that what happened in Britain during his 20-year sojourn, or rather, his foiled effort in trying to understand "a people who showed no interest in understanding him (Phillips, 1995, p. 151), is repeating itself in his country. The torture of adult indifference defined by Lamming (1992) provokes the Garveyite idealism of independence from the white man, ridiculed by his mother in the quote above. The starting point of Bertram's dim awareness of his futility in the Caribbean occurs in the crude dialogue with his old mother and will be reinforced by his encounters with Jackson Clayton and Patsy Archibald.

The Eagle versus the Lion

Twenty years before, under the supervision of Father Daniels, the English vicar, Bertram won the scholarship to study Law in England, whereas Jackson, his rival, whose ambition was to head the local youth cricket team, stayed on the island. The current encounter between Bertram and Jackson contrasts the successful and experienced stay-behind Caribbean politician and the qualm-ridden, Garveyite-self-reliant diasporic subject. The former is currently deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture, Lands, Housing, Labour and Tourism and, of all jobs, a used car salesman. He is described as a ruthless man, with "an almost perverse familiarity with power" (Phillips, 1995, p. 110), who "spurt[s] blood on anyone who comes near him" (Phillips, 1995, p. 84). Already described by Fanon (1990), he is the comprador-bourgeoisie class colonial subject who learnt the rules of the game from his colonial mentors and will replace them and their ideology on independence. From Jackson's point of view Bertram is the fossilized diasporic subject, out of touch with the Caribbean problems, still thinking unrealistically on black self-sufficiency in Garveyite terms.

Jackson immediately tells Bertram that the island is currently closer to the U.S. than to Britain. Bluntly Jackson tells him that the Caribbean island is "living State-side [...] under the eagle [since] England never do us a damn thing except take, take, take (Phillips, 1995, p. 112). This statement shatters Bertram's concept of the island's economic independence which he had earlier expounded to his mother. "The only way

the black man is going to progress in the world is to set up his own shops and his own businesses independent of the white man. There is no way forward for us if we keep relying on him, for we going continually be cleaning up his shit, and washing out his outhouse” (Phillips, 1995, p. 51). Except when on retirement, Jackson continues, the returnee does not fit anymore since the former condition of the island of birth and the current one are completely different. ““You barely back here and you want to invest in the place you remember, not in the place that is”” (Phillips, 1995, p. 112). Besides, the mentality of the modern Caribbean subject is totally antagonistic to that of the diasporic subject. In Jackson’s view, this boils down to the fact that Bertram’s money and his enterprising spirit are useless: (1) the Caribbean returnee is “British”, hopelessly demonstrating a different tradition and ideology; (2) living in Europe does not qualify anyone for “superiority”, least of all the right to intervene in a place that has “changed”; (3) “independence” is a mere label in the modern world and the shifting of vested interests is the norm and “ethically” acceptable; (4) the Garveyite ideology is routed by the save-yourself opportunistic attitude of the corrupted Caribbean elite; (5) the colonial-bred socially stratified society (and unjust situation) has to remain and the differences between country-dwellers and town-dwellers are essential for the maintenance of the status quo. Needless to say, these points flashing into Bertram’s mind for three days on end make him question his idealism and transform him into a rather bleak person on the “state of independence” he has come to achieve for himself and his country.

The returnee’s awareness that his island home has changed and at the same time has remained the same colonial shuttlecock between the political world powers is demonstrated by several symbols that the narrator spreads throughout the narrative, particularly the cane cutters and the cable TV worker. The cane cutters and the sugar mills constitute the economic substratum of the Caribbean islands within the capitalist system envisaged and built by European powers from the 16th century up to the present for their metropolises’ accumulation of capital. Conversely, they also form a symbol of the submissive and the different other within the means of production. This is compounded to the fact that the island (modelled on St Kitts) focussed in the novel is so small (almost a prison) and so deficient in resources, both human and material, that it may have been fated to lie at the chain’s end of the capital-labour system. In this context no redemption or relief is possible and their option is either diaspora or conformity in staying put.

Bertram looked at the cane cutters, who were now free for the day but still walked like condemned men with neither hope nor desire, their arms swinging loosely by their sides, as if they had just witnessed the world turn a full circle, knowing that fate no longer held any mystery for them” (Phillips, 1995, p. 18).

This state of living, contrary to all theory of grappling with history and to change, and precisely opposite the “state of independence”, may be perceived in all the inhabitants that Bertram sees or meets during the three-day roaming. This boils down to the fact that the “stay-puts” have managed to incorporate the palimpsest attitude of repeatedly erasing their subjectivity and inscribing their conformity within the context of their island home.

The derelict sugar mills seem to be the link between the overburdened slave history on the Caribbean island, the stifling colonial past in British grips and the equally tight post-Independence future under the auspices of the United States.

He contemplated the abandoned and crumbling sugar mills, modest, almost discreet reminders of a troubled and bloody history. Unsure of what they represented, nobody ever bothered to demolish them. Instead they had been content to see them either collapse into disrepair, or be converted into centrepieces for hotel complexes (Phillips, 1995, p. 157).

The 1807 abolition of the slave trade and the 1834 Emancipation Act in the British Empire left certain aspects of the physical structure of the slave institution intact, or rather, the plantations, the sugar mills and the slave quarters were abandoned. They could have been demolished by the ex-slaves not only as a revenge on their white owners but as an erasure of a past which was not worth re-viewing. The reason why the historical structures were left standing by the population may have been its insight that “slavery” was still extant and that the subaltern will be forever frustrated because of his / her permanent subjugation to the white man. The ruins or their appropriation by neo-capitalist procedures seems to be a depressing scar that keeps reminding present day Caribbeans that, as in the past, the present is also an illusory emancipation and independence. Beneath the flags, banners, bands, general hilarious attitudes and festivities, the same colonial strategies are at work manoeuvred not only by foreigners but, more ingeniously, by the very people of the place to maintain the island and its population within the exploitation system.

The installation of cable TV, “live and direct from the United States” (Phillips, 1995, p. 158), precisely on Independence Day is the symbol of sham independence. Dependence, however, has been intimated throughout the narrative by references to Pizza Hut, Big Burger, New Jersey-logo pirate movies, Rotary Club, Chicago Bears T-shirt, Yankee mailboxes and other U.S.-trend signs. Although pre- and post-colonial views rose before Bertram’s sight from the vantage point of a hill over the international hotel as if the country still had the opportunity to opt (Phillips, 1995, p. 128), Bertram begins to perceive that subalternity is excessively deep and that even the people have been willy-nilly induced to accept the situation as something natural they cannot escape from. Convinced that the people of his country are incapable of solving the simplest problems (“typists can’t type [...] power cuts [occur] all the time [...] the sea has sewage accidentally discharged into it [...] roads still breaking an axle every day”, Phillips, 1995, p. 132) and that improvement on his premises were impracticable (Phillips, 1995, p. 59), the barman Lonnie cynically remarks to Bertram: “If you really want to make some money in this country you best butter up your backside with some bendover oil and point your arse towards New York” (Phillips, 1995, p. 131). Lonnie is suggesting that the island’s only solution lies in being uncritically dependent on the U.S. even if one has to use spells and potions to achieve results.

A reconciliation of sorts

If Mrs Francis unfriendly attitude towards her son is a metonym of the mother country’s “rejection” of Bertram and all that he represents, Patsy Archibald’s important dialogue at the end of the narrative brings to a reasonable “conclusion” the diasporic subject’s haughty manner and assuages the guilt complex that has haunted him from the moment he feels himself an outsider. Trying to understand Bertram’s bewilderment on his encounter with the island after twenty years absence, Patsy convinces him to come to terms with his experience as a diaspora Caribbean in Britain. Although Bertram continually states that “nothing happened” in England, the narrator actually uses a vocabulary that describes the turmoil caused by the encounter between the colonial subject and the white European. Terms such as “wind”, “fog”, “frustration”, “confusion”, and “miasma” underlie the “hurricane” that the British has produced in the Caribbean mind. “He knew that to her [...] Europeans were like hurricanes, unpredictable, always causing trouble, always talked about, a natural disaster it was

impossible to insure against” (Phillips, 1995, p. 151). If the term “hurricane” was the symbol that characteristically beleaguered European colonizers in the Caribbean and connoted the uncanniness and the wildness of the place and the people (Hulme, 1981; 1986), a reverse situation is revealed in Phillips’s text. The British environment is called uncanny, the British people provoke disasters in the Caribbean subject, and the colonial encounter implodes the identity of the other. Patsy makes Bertram realize that what happened in Britain was “the frustration of trying to understand a people who showed no interest in understanding him” (Phillips, 1995, p. 151).

An indifferent attitude towards the other is a recurring theme in current British Black fiction and harks not only to the slave period but also to the contemporary aftermath with its implications in South-North relationships. Kincaid’s *Annie John*, Levy’s *Fruit of the Lemon* and *Small Island*, Gordimer’s *The Pickup*, and Phillips’s *A Distant Shore*, to mention just a few recent novels, poignantly concentrate on the unwelcomeness and even hostile conditions, the continuous othering and the persistence of racial stereotypes in Britain and in Western society. In Bertram’s case there seems to be no improvement for the future and things will pretty be like that for the ex-colonial or the non-white migrant. Although to make matter worse he does not feel at home on the island of birth (“I don’t yet feel at home back here either”, Phillips, 1995, p. 152), the admission and assimilation of Britain’s non-acceptance of diaspora subjects and a new beginning in peace with Patsy, and, one may suppose, with his mother too, will presumably trigger an accommodation with his newly independent country. However, Bertram’s lethargy to take action and the acknowledgment of “his own mediocrity” (Phillips, 1995, p. 157) seem to indicate more frustration. Corruption and US-dependence nip the country’s development in the bud. Such disillusionment is corroborated by Livingstone’s enthusiasm for US culture and Lonnie’s pessimist reading of the island’s endemic dependence. In an essay on St Kitts-Nevis’s independence in 1983, Phillips actually doubts whether anyone “seems to be able to define the nature of this ‘new age’ [posterior to nominal independence]” (Phillips, 2001, p. 143). Patsy’s unconditional acceptance of Bertram and the open-ended narrative of reconciliation with his mother are ambivalent instances of the diasporic subject’s condition in the future.

Conclusion

Phillips's novel reveals the shattering of Garveyite idealism with which he has opened the novel and the bleak environment, consequently the future, for the Afro-descendent Caribbean subject in his/her country and in a globalized world. Contrary to Harris's pinpointing of "revisionary capacity" as one of the most powerfully revitalizing Caribbean characteristic and in spite of Bertram's symbolical spitting on the tarmac at the end of the novel, Phillips seems to deny such power in Bertram and in the Caribbean subject. Young Livingstone's opinion that the Caribbean is a "dead place" (Phillips, 1995, p. 103) and Bertram's return to mediocrity, which may actually amount to passivity and resignation, favour an attitude fraught with the subaltern's impotence within a worldwide context. Perhaps this state of mind, in part, occurs due to (1) the lack of importance given to the past, (2) the comprador mentality of the new "native" leaders pretending to act for the people's benefit, (3) the neo-colonialism and multinational capitalism, especially of the tourist industry. These three basic reasons, which have been dealt fictionally and non-fictionally with a somewhat similar vein in Warner's *Indigo* and in Kincaid's *A Small Place*, are a display of the island's situation with regard to its lack of subjectivity and autonomy. In fact, whereas the elite classes reproduce the old slavery binary system of exploiters and exploited, the people of the island accept without any significant revolt the neo-colonial situation. Perhaps this is the meaning of the destruction of the fire station, or rather, the island's community is incapable or unwilling to defend itself and, consequently, it accepts to live without the human basic needs it has always been denied. Further, the burning of the library and thus the symbolical rejection of the Caribbean multicultural past reveal the uncritical submission to homogenizing U.S. culture and the acceptance of living the mediocrity that this envisages (Ledent, 2002; Rahbek, 2004). Pessimistic as this conclusion may be, even if racist Britain has left an indelible mark of frustration in the fictional Bertram (perhaps even in Phillips) (Jaggi, 2004, p. 122), the establishment of Caribbean literature in world literature is a very positive sign of independence and subjectivity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- APPIAH, K.A.; GATES, H.L. *The Dictionary of Global Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.
- ASHCROFT, B.; GRIFFITHS, G.; TIFFIN, H. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1998.

- BYRON, M. *Post-War Caribbean Migration to Britain: The Unfinished Cycle*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1994.
- COHEN, R. *Global Diasporas: An introduction*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.
- FANON, F. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.
- HALL, S. *Da diaspóra: identidades e mediações culturais*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2003.
- HULME, P. *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- HULME, P. Hurricanes in the Caribbees: The Construction of the Discourse of English Colonialism. In BARKER, F. (ed.) *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*. Colchester: University of Essex, 1981, p. 55-83.
- JAGGI, M. Caryl Phillips with Maya Jaggi. NASTA, S. (ed.). *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 113-124.
- LAMMING, G. *The Pleasures of Exile*. Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan P., 1992.
- LEDENT, B. Caryl Phillips. Manchester: MUP, 2002.
- PHILLIPS, C. *A State of Independence*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- PHILLIPS, C. *A New World Order*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2001.
- RAHBEK, U. Caryl Phillips's *A State of Independence*: Character, Country, Conflict. In LEDENT, B. *Bridges across Chasms: Towards a Transcultural Future in Caribbean Literature*. Liège: University of Liège Press, 2004, p. 79-88.
- SAFRAN, W. Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return. *Diaspora*, v.1, n.1 (1991), p. 83-89.
- SPIVAK, G.C. The Rani of Simur. In BARKER, F. (ed.) *Europe and its Others*. Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature. Vol. 1. Colchester: U of Essex P, 1985, p. 128-151.
- THOMAS-HOPE, E. Return Migration to Jamaica and its Development Potential. *International Migration*, v. 37 n. 1 (1999), p. 183-208.