

Linking Legacies of Loss

— Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural
Empathy in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground*
and *The Nature of Blood**

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TRAUMA STUDIES, AN AREA OF CULTURAL INVESTIGATION that came to prominence in the early-to-mid-1990s, prides itself on its explicit commitment to ethics, which sets it apart from the poststructuralist and deconstructive criticism of the 1970s and early 1980s in which it has its roots. Standing accused of irrelevance or indifference to 'real-world' issues such as history, politics, and ethics because of its predominantly epistemological focus, this earlier 'textualist' paradigm was largely eclipsed around the mid-1980s by overtly historicist or culturalist approaches, including the New Historicism, cultural materialism, cultural studies, and various types of advocacy criticism (feminist, lesbian and gay, Marxist, and postcolonial). Trauma studies can with some justification be regarded as the reinvention in an ethical guise of this much maligned textualism.

Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures in trauma studies (along with Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra), counters the oft-heard critique of deconstruction and poststructuralism outlined above by arguing that, rather than leading us away from history and into "political and ethical paralysis,"¹ a textualist approach can afford us unique access to history. Indeed, it makes possible a "rethinking of reference" which aims not at

* This is a revised version of an essay published under the same title in *Studies in the Novel* 40.1–2 (Spring–Summer 2008): 191–202.

¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996): 10.

“eliminating history” but at “resituating it in our understanding, that is, at [...] permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not.”² By bringing the insights of deconstructive and psychoanalytic scholarship to the analysis of cultural artefacts that bear witness to traumatic histories, critics can gain access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation. Caruth insists on the ethical significance of this critical practice. She claims that “the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand” a “new mode of reading and of listening”³ which would allow us to escape the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience. In “a catastrophic age” such as ours, according to Caruth, “trauma itself may provide the [...] link between cultures.”⁴ With trauma forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, so the argument goes, listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community.

Remarkably, however, trauma studies’ stated commitment to the promotion of cross-cultural ethical engagement is not borne out by the founding texts of the field (including Caruth’s own work), which tend to marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of currently subordinate groups both inside and outside Western society. Instead of promoting solidarity between different cultures, trauma theory risks assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities as a result of this one-sided focus. For trauma studies to have any hope of redeeming its promise of ethical effectiveness, traumatic metropolitan or First-World histories must be seen to be tied up with histories of colonial trauma. Attempts to give the suffering engendered by colonial oppression its ‘traumatic due’ have been made in recent years by several postcolonial critics, who have suggested theorizing colonization in terms of the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualizing postcolonialism as a post-traumatic cultural formation,⁵ as well as by scholars working in the fledgling field of

² Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.

³ *Unclaimed Experience*, 9.

⁴ Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. & intro. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995): 11.

⁵ See, for example: Linda Hutcheon, “Postcolonial Witnessing – and Beyond: Rethinking Literary History Today,” *Neohelicon* 30.1 (2003): 13–30; Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998); and David Lloyd, “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2.2 (2000): 212–28.

comparative genocide studies, who have challenged the notion of Holocaust uniqueness by situating other – mainly colonial – atrocities in relation to the Holocaust.⁶

In the field of literature, the work of Caryl Phillips deserves special mention in this connection. In his novels *Higher Ground* (1989) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Phillips excavates histories of both black and Jewish suffering: all of his protagonists are struggling with traumatic memories of racist or antisemitic violence and oppression. However, Phillips does not treat these individual histories in isolation but lets them address one another. As a result, his work resonates with Caruth's understanding of history and trauma as inherently relational: "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, [...] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."⁷ In this essay, I will probe the nature of this implication by focusing on the aforementioned novels' management of empathy, a concept that plays a crucial role in much recent work on trauma and witnessing.

Many theorists agree that an appropriate response to accounts of trauma must involve empathic identification with the witness, but they also insist that this empathy must be checked. Dominick LaCapra has coined the phrase "empathic unsettlement"⁸ to denote the desired type of affective involvement, which he distinguishes from "self-sufficient, projective or incorporative identification."⁹ Empathic unsettlement means feeling for another without losing sight of the distinction between one's own experience and the experience of the other: "it involves virtual not vicarious experience – that is to say, experience in which one puts oneself in the other's position without taking the place of – or speaking for – the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates [sic] the victim's voice or suffering."¹⁰

⁶ See, for example: A. Dirk Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36.4 (October 2002): 7–36; David Moshman, "Conceptual Constraints on Thinking about Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3.3 (November 2001): 431–50; Dan Stone, "The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond 'Uniqueness' and Ethnic Competition," *Rethinking History* 8.1 (March 2004): 127–42; and Jürgen Zimmerer, "The Birth of the *Ostland* out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination," *Patterns of Prejudice* 39.2 (2005): 197–219.

⁷ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 24.

⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001): 41.

⁹ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 2004): 135.

¹⁰ LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 135.

Jill Bennett relates LaCapra's notion of empathic unsettlement to Bertolt Brecht's critique of identification, and specifically of art that induces what Brecht termed "crude empathy": i.e. "a feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other's experience to the self."¹¹ Bennett analyses contemporary trauma art which in Brechtian fashion seeks to negotiate a balance between encouraging audience identification and thwarting it through the deployment of strategies of estrangement. The empathic connections engendered by these works are seen to combine affect with critical awareness, resulting in encounters of an expropriative kind, in which the space between self and other is not eradicated but "inhabited."¹² I argue that *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* go some way towards redeeming the ethical promise of trauma studies by promoting such a critical and self-reflexive empathy as conducive to the establishment of a truly inclusive post-traumatic community marked by openness to and respect for otherness.

I will proceed by briefly analysing some of the textual strategies Phillips adopts for 'managing' empathy – in the double sense of succeeding in eliciting an empathic response and of controlling or limiting empathy. I will focus mainly on the latter aspect – the attempt to rein in empathy – as that part of the equation seems to me to have been relatively underexplored in the existing criticism. I want to start with a quotation from a survey article on Phillips's work up to *Higher Ground* which was published in *World Literature Today* in 1991. The authors of the article, Charles Sarvan and Hasan Marhama, conclude their detailed analysis of *Higher Ground* by praising the imaginative feat performed by Phillips in this – his then latest – novel, which

shift[s] from the days of slavery somewhere on the coast of black Africa to a contemporary maximum-security prison cell in the USA and then to a Polish Jewish woman suffering incomprehension, loneliness, and a breakdown in Britain during World War II.¹³

Crediting him with achieving "a wonderful broadening out of understanding and sympathy," Sarvan and Marhama describe Phillips thus:

¹¹ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2005): 10.

¹² Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 105.

¹³ Charles P. Sarvan & Hasan Marhama, "The Fictional Works of Caryl Phillips: An Introduction," *World Literature Today* 65.1 (Winter 1991): 40.

a writer who can penetrate the inner being of people vastly different from himself in time, place, and gender, yet people very much like us all in the common and eternal human inheritance of pain and suffering.¹⁴

In their humanist–universalist view, *Higher Ground* represents a triumph of the sympathetic imagination, which is seen to successfully extend the writer’s and the reader’s ethical horizon to include racial and gendered others that may previously have been beyond it. What the novel allows us to understand, according to Sarvan and Marhama, is the essential sameness underlying superficial differences between ‘them’ and ‘us’: we are invited to recognize their pain and suffering as “very much like” our own, as part of our common human destiny.

It is easy to see what gave rise to this reading of the ethical dimension of Phillips’s work – a reading which I hope to expose as ultimately flawed. In both *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips records the experiences of a wide range of characters who are all victims of racism or anti-semitism. The former novel is aptly described on the book’s dust-jacket as “a haunting triptych of the dispossessed and the abandoned – of those whose very humanity is being stripped away.” It features the story of an unnamed African who works as an agent and interpreter in a British slave-trading fort on the west coast of Africa in the late-eighteenth century (“Heartland”); the story of Rudy Williams, a young black American detained in a high-security prison for armed robbery during the 1960s (“The Cargo Rap”); and the story of Irina, a Jewish refugee from Poland who escaped the Nazis on a children’s transport to England, and Louis, a West Indian man Irina meets hours before he is to return from London to the Caribbean, disillusioned with British society (“Higher Ground”). *The Nature of Blood* follows an even more winding path through space and time, exploring the Nazi persecution of the Jews of Europe through the story of Eva Stern, a young German Holocaust survivor; retelling the story of Othello, the Moorish general brought to Venice to wage war against the Turks; recounting the story of a blood libel and the ensuing public execution of three Jews in a town near Venice in the late-fifteenth century; and following the life of Stephan Stern, Eva’s uncle, who left Germany in the 1930s to help found the state of Israel, where in his old age he has a brief encounter with Malka, an Ethiopian Jew suffering racism at the hands of her white co-religionists.

¹⁴ Sarvan & Marhama, “The Fictional Works of Caryl Phillips,” 40.

Both novels invite the reader to detect thematic connections between the discrete narratives about disparate characters in different times and places which they juxtapose. In the case of *Higher Ground*, which consists of three clearly demarcated, ostensibly self-contained novellas, the book's subtitle, *A Novel in Three Parts*, encourages the reader to read the three sections together and to uncover parallels between the lives of the individual protagonists. In *The Nature of Blood*, which has no subtitle, it is the extremely fragmented structure of the text that prompts the reader to look for connections between the different stories. The narrative strands that make up the novel are not divided into clearly marked sections or chapters, as in *Higher Ground*, but merge and mingle at an ever-accelerating pace. In the process of disentangling these closely interwoven story-lines, the reader cannot help but reflect on what it is that unites them.

The numerous words, phrases, motifs, and themes that echo from one narrative to another in both *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* have been discussed at length by other critics. Rather than rehearsing them here, I will content myself with giving just a few examples of links between black and Jewish experience from the two novels. In *Higher Ground*, one of the themes connecting the enslavement of Africans recounted in the first section, the plight of black convicts in 1960s America explored in the second section, and the Holocaust and its aftermath examined in the third section is that of physical and/or psychological captivity. The connection is made explicit by the protagonist of the second section, who, in letters to his relatives and would-be legal representatives, constantly filters his own situation through the prisms of both the Holocaust and African American slavery. Rudy repeatedly uses Holocaust terminology to describe his own experience of incarceration, calling the prison in which he is kept "Belsen,"¹⁵ referring to the wardens as "the Gestapo Police,"¹⁶ and wondering, while being held in solitary confinement with twenty-four-hour light, whether "in Nazi Germany they used to keep the lights on as a form of torture."¹⁷ He also employs images of slavery to depict his detention, and black US citizenship in general, as similar states of imprisonment. For example, he regards the USA as a "plantation society"¹⁸ in which emancipation is yet to happen. Having been released from the maxi-

¹⁵ Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground: A Novel in Three Parts* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989): 69, 84, 145.

¹⁶ Phillips, *Higher Ground*, 127.

¹⁷ *Higher Ground*, 72.

¹⁸ *Higher Ground*, 67. The word "plantation" also appears on page 90.

mum-security wing into the main prison population, he writes: “Restrictions still apply, but to me they are as welcome and as liberal as the emancipation proclamation that we have yet to hear.”¹⁹ Rudy’s current predicament and the past experience of slavery are linked most memorably in the deranged letter to his dead mother with which this section ends, which brings prison life and plantation atrocities together in an hallucinatory fusion.

In *The Nature of Blood*, the parallels suggested between different characters are even more numerous and conspicuous. For example, the experience of the black Ethiopian Jew Malka in the 1980s is subtly connected with that of the white German Jew Eva in the 1930s. Their departure from their respective homelands is described in strikingly similar terms. Malka speaks of being “herded [...] on to buses” and being “stored like thinning cattle” on the Israeli embassy compound, where she and the other Ethiopian Jews were left to “graz[e] on concrete” before being air-lifted to Israel.²⁰ This image of people treated like cattle uncannily recalls Eva’s description of the crowded boxcar trains in which she and her parents had been forced to travel, like animals, to the concentration camp.²¹ Moreover, Malka and Eva both meet with prejudice and suspicion in the foreign country – Israel in the case of the former, England in the case of the latter – in which they try to rebuild their lives after their respective ordeals. Two other characters whose life stories closely parallel each other are Stephan Stern and the African general whom we recognize as Othello, though he is not actually named as such in the text. Both characters leave behind their homeland, a wife, and a child to start a new life in a different country. Each passes through the island of Cyprus, on the border between the East and the West, and forms a romantic attachment across the colour line. Moreover, each is deluded by a naive idealism: Stephan is disappointed to find that the new homeland for which he had fought as a young man and which he had imagined as a haven for “the displaced and the dispossessed”²² is not free from exclusionary practices, and Othello similarly underestimates the forces of nationalism and racism militating against his dream of being accepted into Venetian society and beginning a “new life of peace,”²³ although he, unlike Stephan, does not quite seem to have realized this yet when his narrative suddenly breaks off.

¹⁹ Phillips, *Higher Ground*, 147.

²⁰ Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997): 200.

²¹ Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, 156–57, 161–62.

²² *The Nature of Blood*, 5.

²³ *The Nature of Blood*, 174.

In establishing links among the narratives, *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* appear to invite the reader to recognize a common human essence which persists across space and time. Differences between people which may seem profound are revealed to be only skin-deep. The equation between different historical experiences which the novels appear to put forward can be interpreted as evidence of Phillips's adherence to the confident humanist universalism attributed to him by Sarvan and Marhama. Further evidence may be found in the apparent ease with which the author inhabits the minds and voices of his characters, often using first-person narration and internal focalization. It seems as if neither chronological or spatial distance nor race or gender difference are allowed to set limits to the power of the sympathetic imagination, which enables Phillips to go inside the characters, no matter how deeply they may be traumatized, without meeting any obstacles. Yet, the inaccessibility of one's innermost experience to outsiders is repeatedly remarked upon by the characters themselves. Eva, for example, reflects, with reference to Gerry and the other British soldiers who have liberated her: "But he can never understand somebody like me. None of them can."²⁴ And similarly, with reference to the people who pass her by in the village square near the newly liberated concentration camp: "They cannot know what I know. They can never know what I know."²⁵ Fearing that communicating her experience to others cannot but result in distortion and trivialization, Eva reverts to silence in an effort to keep her inner reality inviolate from the world. The medical expert who treats Eva in the British hospital, and whose voice interrupts her narrative on three occasions, regrets his lack of knowledge of his patient's closely guarded interiority. Having only outward symptoms to go on, he did not consider her to be "a serious problem" and failed to identify her as a suicide risk.²⁶ Eva's insistence on the need to protect her secret inner world against uncomprehending outsiders resonates with the conviction voiced by one of the Jewish money-lenders about to be put to death in late-fifteenth-century Venice that "they [the Christian majority population] will capture only the outside of our people, but not their souls."²⁷ Remarkably, however, literature apparently manages to bridge the divide between the outside and the inside and to penetrate the souls of people who have lived through various

²⁴ Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, 43.

²⁵ *The Nature of Blood*, 46.

²⁶ *The Nature of Blood*, 187.

²⁷ *The Nature of Blood*, 182.

historical catastrophes. After all, Phillips's novels allow the reader to enter the minds of the characters, offering him or her a glimpse of what otherwise remains "secret and inaccessible."²⁸ Again, the suggestion is that it is possible, through the imagination, to feel one's way into others and to recognize a basic continuity of human experience.

Read in this way, *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* lay themselves open to the kind of criticism that LaCapra, Bennett, and other trauma theorists have levelled at unreflective attempts to empathize with victims of trauma. Rather than leading to an ethical encounter, they argue, uncritical or crude empathy leads away from it insofar as it appropriates the experience of the other, reduces it to familiar frames of reference, and thereby violates its singularity. Phillips has, in fact, been accused of doing exactly that in a rare scathing review of *The Nature of Blood* by the English writer and critic Hilary Mantel. Mantel finds it objectionable that a black male British writer should assume the voice of a white female Jewish victim of the Holocaust, in a novel, moreover, that juxtaposes and thereby supposedly equates black and Jewish suffering:

This is the devil's sentimentality: it is demented cosiness, that denies the differences between people, denies how easily the interests of human beings become divided. It is indecent to lay claim to other people's suffering: it is a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism. The heart may be pure, but more than heart is needed: good motives sometimes paralyse thought.²⁹

Other critics, including Bénédicte Ledent, Wendy Zierler, Anne Whitehead, Helge Nowak, and Stephen Clingman, have explicitly or implicitly sought to refute Mantel's accusation in their work. Ledent points out that, by taking on the voices of Jewish, female, and/or white characters, Phillips denounces what she calls the artistic ghetto of authenticity.³⁰ She quotes from a review of *The Nature of Blood* in the *New York Times* which commends the author for his refusal to conform to the dictates of identity-politics:

in taking the Holocaust as his subject, and in writing much of the novel in the voice of a white Jewish woman, Mr. Phillips also challenges the current literary tribalism, pervasive in this age of identity politics, that would mark off

²⁸ Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, 73.

²⁹ Hilary Mantel, "Black Is Not Jewish," review of *The Nature of Blood*, by Caryl Phillips, *Literary Review* (1 February 1997): 40.

³⁰ Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* (Contemporary World Writers; Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002): 150.

black experience as the domain of blacks, restrict the telling of women's lives to other women, and leave the Holocaust to the Jews.³¹

Ledent considers Mantel's criticism of Phillips's assault on literary tribalism to be evidence of the critic's narrow-mindedness and obliviousness to artistic freedom. Having traced the origins of the accusation to the doctrine of political correctness, Ledent voices her suspicion that "it could well be fuelled by racial bias too": after all, a black writer receives censure for conduct which is considered acceptable when displayed by white writers like Thomas Hardy, Tolstoy, or Shakespeare.³² Anne Whitehead similarly finds an insistence in Phillips's work that "authorial identity places no restrictions on the fictional or historical imagination."³³ Citing Salman Rushdie's claim that "literature is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups," she also interprets Phillips's literary ventriloquism as a salutary and unproblematical attempt to move beyond identity-politics.³⁴

While I agree that Mantel misses the mark in her review, it seems to me that she does express a legitimate concern, albeit one that does not actually apply to Phillips's work.³⁵ As I see it, her fatal flaw is not a dubious attachment to old-fashioned identity-politics but, rather, a failure to fully appreciate the self-reflexiveness of the text she reviews, causing her to misdirect her criticism. I argue that, for all their impressive ventriloquizing, Phillips's novels do, in fact, acknowledge limits to empathy. In this respect, my rebuttal differs from that offered by Stephen Clingman, though he, too, questions Mantel's reading skills rather than her politics. Clingman paraphrases Mantel's accusation, which he uses as the point of departure for his thoughtful reading of *The Nature of Blood*, as follows:

³¹ James Shapiro, quoted in Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 150.

³² Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 151.

³³ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004): 105.

³⁴ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 105, quoting Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands" (1982), in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta/Penguin, 1991): 15.

³⁵ Nowak similarly claims that Mantel's caveat "has to be taken seriously" and that her reproach is "misdirected in the case of *The Nature of Blood* and its author"; Helge Nowak, "'Naturally, Their Suffering Is Deeply Connected to Memory': Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* as a Grand Narrative of Racism and Xenophobia," in *Xenophobic Memories: Otherness in Postcolonial Constructions of the Past*, ed. Monika Gomille & Klaus Stierstorfer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003): 128. However, it seems to me that Nowak's defence, which proceeds mainly by invoking Phillips's credentials as a long-time critic of colonialism and antisemitism in the tradition of Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon, sidesteps a key issue Mantel raises: namely, that noble and altruistic intentions can backfire.

there is an intellectual slackness in *The Nature of Blood*, she claims, which generally she ties to a stylistic slackness – a lack of fully imagined reality or voicing in the novel.³⁶

Clingman sets out to prove this claim wrong by performing a sophisticated close reading of the novel, which is meant to show that this supposed “lack of fully imagined reality or voicing” is in fact non-existent. The reality and the voices which Phillips presents, so Clingman argues, are a lot more “fully imagined” than Mantel gives the author credit for, which is why her criticism is unfounded. In my opinion, however, this reading overemphasizes Phillips’s devotion to perfecting the art of narrative polyphony at the expense of textual signs which complicate the pursuit of imaginative identification, inviting critical reflection on the potentially harmful consequences of the drive to fully imagine another’s reality or voice.

As I do not have enough space here to develop a detailed reading of either *Higher Ground* or *The Nature of Blood* (let alone both novels) which would bear out this claim, I will limit myself to a few moments in the texts where what I have called the ‘management’ of empathy is particularly evident, in the hope that this cursory sketch will give some indication of the direction in which a more full-blown reading might go. While I will mainly focus here on Phillips’s representation of Jewish characters, I should make it clear that I do not regard the challenges faced by a contemporary black writer in representing black victims of slavery or racism as being categorically different from those he or she faces in representing Jewish victims of persecution. Indeed, I agree with Clingman that we should guard against the notion that there is “some simple and undifferentiated continuity of ‘blackness’ or of the black experience across the ages” which a black writer would have immediate access to by virtue of being black.³⁷ With this caveat in mind, let us return now to the story of Rudy Williams, and particularly to the conception of history implicit in his account, which appears to be fundamentally metaphorical in nature. As we have seen, Rudy understands his own situation in terms of the historical experiences of Holocaust victims and African-American slaves. He regards history as a hall of mirrors, a walk through which affords one endless possibilities for self-recognition. Rudy’s connection to the Holocaust and slavery clearly involves incorporative identification or crude empathy, as he is

³⁶ Stephen Clingman, “Forms of History and Identity in *The Nature of Blood*,” *Salmagundi* 143 (Summer 2004): 147.

³⁷ Clingman, “Forms of History and Identity in *The Nature of Blood*,” 149.

far less interested in entering into an ethical relationship with historical others than in appropriating their experience to bolster his own claim to victimhood. His epistolary interactions with his relatives and sympathizers, all of whom he manages to alienate by self-righteously castigating them for their failure to live up to the radical political ideals which he himself has espoused, also betray a measure of ruthlessness. In a rare moment of self-criticism and humility, Rudy admits lacking the strength to love and to be kind, which, as he points out, involves “giving up not acquiring, opening doors not closing them, reaching out not holding back.”³⁸ Through his life-long endeavour to shape both the past and the present in his own image, he has closed himself off from encounters with modes of existence and experience different from and irreducible to his own.

As if to rebuke Rudy’s self-serving and exploitative analogizing, Phillips follows his story with that of a Polish Jewish refugee who is haunted by memories of her family members who died in the Holocaust. It can be (and has been) argued that by placing stories of black and Jewish suffering alongside one another, Phillips is in fact taking a metonymic rather than a metaphoric view of history. While the latter conflates distinct historical experiences, substituting one for the other,³⁹ the former preserves the distance between them. The similarities between the narratives which Phillips juxtaposes in his novels should not blind us to the differences between them, both formal and thematic. As Clingman writes, with reference to *The Nature of Blood*,

the echoes between the stories are suggestive rather than symmetrical, [...] there are waves of connection but also of refraction, interference and shift. We might say therefore that there is a kind of oscillation and vibration among these stories – a displacement back and forth between the metonymic and metaphoric, in which the principle of recognition is at work, but not of simple reproduction or repetition.⁴⁰

It seems to me that this dynamic is at work, not only between individual narratives, as several critics have pointed out, but also in the relationship between the author and the reader, on the one hand, and the characters, on the other. To

³⁸ Phillips, *Higher Ground*, 169.

³⁹ As Bennett points out, the notion of metaphor has “proved contentious in the context of trauma imagery precisely because it implies the appropriation of another’s, quite distinct experience” (*Empathic Vision*, 147).

⁴⁰ Clingman, “Forms of History and Identity in *The Nature of Blood*,” 160.

my knowledge, the nature of these empathic connections – the primary target of Mantel’s accusation – has received rather less critical scrutiny.⁴¹

As far as Irina’s story in *Higher Ground* is concerned, it is worth noting the hesitant, indirect manner in which Phillips tackles the subject of the Holocaust. The first two stories, which are written in the first person and use simultaneous or epistolary narration, are characterized by a sense of intimacy and immediacy that is absent in the third story, which uses third-person retrospective narration. Moreover, as Wendy Zierler has observed, the Jewish narrative stands out, in that

it demonstrates a marked reticence about its very subject. Throughout “Higher Ground,” Phillips shies away from directly depicting the Holocaust, enshrouding Irene’s story in so much hazy description that one never really gets the same sense of her character and realness as one does for the protagonists of the first two parts.⁴²

While Zierler calls Irina’s story “the weakest” of the three pieces on account of its oblique and circumspect treatment of the Holocaust,⁴³ I subscribe to a more generous reading which regards its not being “fully imagined” not as proof of writerly failure, but as an implicit acknowledgement on the part of the writer of – indeed – the limits which one’s subject-position places on the imagination. The remarkable restraint which the author shows in dealing with the Holocaust stands in stark contrast – and serves as a corrective – to Rudy’s arrogation of imaginative control over this traumatic history.

In fact, it also marks a departure from Phillips’s own previous relationship to the Holocaust, which bears some resemblance to Rudy’s. As the author notes in his essay collection *The European Tribe* (1987), his interest in the

⁴¹ Critics who fail to take this metatextual dimension into account can offer only a partial rebuttal of Mantel’s accusation. An example of this tendency is Wendy Zierler:

In a scathing review of *The Nature of Blood*, the critic Hillary [sic] Mantel castigates Phillips for attempting to “lay claim to other people’s suffering” by fusing black and Jewish experience. However, by maintaining a pattern of asymmetry, Phillips brings together black and Jewish history, but also safeguards their respective integrity and specificity. He creates contiguity without direct correspondence, effecting comparison without displacement.

— Wendy Zierler, “‘My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust’: ‘Facing’ Black and Jewish Experience in *The Pawnbroker*, *Higher Ground*, and *The Nature of Blood*,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18.1 (Spring 2004): 62–63. While the points Zierler makes are all valid, it seems to me that she fails to address the heart of the matter by disregarding the imaginative links between the author, the reader, and the characters.

⁴² Zierler, “‘My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust,’” 61.

⁴³ “‘My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust,’” 61.

persecution of the Jews can be traced back to his experience of growing up black in Britain:

As a child, in what seemed to me a hostile country, the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them.⁴⁴

Having no access to any representations of colonialism or slavery, Phillips tried to make sense of his own history through the prism of Jewish suffering:

The bloody excesses of colonialism, the pillage and rape of modern Africa, the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas, and their subsequent bondage were not on the curriculum, and certainly not on the television screen. As a result I vicariously channelled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience.⁴⁵

Phillips's earliest response to the Holocaust, then, was one of substitution: there being no public reference points for the black experience in Britain, the Holocaust was made to fill that void. This metaphoric logic also informs Phillips's earliest literary production. As he reveals elsewhere in *The European Tribe*, the first piece of fiction he ever wrote, at age fifteen or so, was "[a] short story about a fifteen-year-old Jewish boy in Amsterdam"⁴⁶ who manages to escape transportation to a concentration camp and is saved by a farmer. When Phillips later revisits the Holocaust in *Higher Ground*, he implicitly criticizes and checks his initial impulse to directly analogize black with Jewish suffering.

At first sight, Phillips abandons all restraint again in *The Nature of Blood*, which broaches the subject of the Holocaust head-on. In this novel, the central consciousness through which he represents the Nazi persecution of the Jews is not that of a refugee who has escaped the worst atrocities and therefore has no first-hand experience of them, but that of a concentration camp inmate who turns out to have been a member of the *Sonderkommando* and thus a key witness of the horror. *The Nature of Blood* draws a psychologically convincing and deeply moving portrait of a Holocaust survivor, of which no less a writer than J.M. Coetzee has remarked: "pages of Eva's story seem to come straight from hell, striking one with appalling power."⁴⁷ This power derives at

⁴⁴ Caryl Phillips, *The European Tribe* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987): 54.

⁴⁵ Phillips, *The European Tribe*, 54.

⁴⁶ *The European Tribe*, 67.

⁴⁷ J.M. Coetzee, "What We Like to Forget," review of *The Nature of Blood*, by Caryl Phillips, *New York Review of Books* 44.17 (6 November 1997): 39.

least in part from the experimental modes of representation which Phillips employs in these sections of the novel, which register the shocking and unassimilable nature of the traumatic historical events they depict in formal terms.

Yet, while the novel appears to put the reader in close contact with the reality of the Holocaust, it continually reminds him or her of his or her, and the author's, own distance from Eva's experience through the use of intertextuality. The representation of the Holocaust that we are offered is filtered through a number of well-known literary sources, most prominently Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, allowing Phillips to self-consciously signal his historical and cultural remove from, and his inevitably mediated mode of access to, the reality he represents.⁴⁸ The author manages to estrange and unsettle the reader by departing very markedly from his source texts. In his version of the Anne Frank story, the protagonist does not die of typhus in Bergen-Belsen but survives the Holocaust, only to commit suicide in an English hospital a short time later. Eva's older sister, who, like Anne's, is called Margot, turns out to resemble the Anne we know from the diary much more closely than Eva herself. However, sent into hiding by her parents, Phillips's Margot is raped by the man who is sheltering her – clearly a very different character from the individuals who assisted the Frank family while they were in hiding. She is subsequently arrested, and dies “on a cold grey morning in a country that was not her own.”⁴⁹ As Whitehead points out, the alternative versions of the Anne Frank story which the author provides in Eva and Margot are “both aimed at revising and challenging popular myths and misconceptions” of Anne Frank's story “which highlight a consistently optimistic voice.”⁵⁰ If Eva's fate shows that “survival is not necessarily a happy ending,” Margot's fate demonstrates that “not all of those who sheltered Jews were as

⁴⁸ The Holocaust narrative in *The Nature of Blood* hardly stands alone in Phillips's oeuvre in using intertextuality to signal distance or difference. One could also point, in *The Nature of Blood*, to the Othello narrative, which rewrites Shakespeare's play, and to the story of the Jews of Portobuffole, which is based on historical accounts explicitly mentioned in the acknowledgements. In *Higher Ground*, “Heartland” echoes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Wilson Harris's *Heartland*; “The Cargo Rap” has its roots in George Jackson's prison memoir *Soledad Brother*; and “Higher Ground” appears to be indebted to Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 76–77).

⁴⁹ Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, 174.

⁵⁰ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 107.

selfless in their motivations as the helpers of the Secret Annexe.”⁵¹ Phillips also undermines redemptive, ‘feel-good’ readings of the diary by radically revising its much-abused most famous line: “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.”⁵² He recasts Anne Frank’s hopeful words to convey a message of utter despair which leaves no room for recuperation: “You see, Eva, in spite of everything that we have lost, they still hate us, and they will always hate us.”⁵³ Such conspicuous departures from the original story puncture the reader’s complacency and invite him or her to confront his or her own appropriative tendencies.

Another way in which Phillips challenges popularized versions of the Anne Frank story is through his refusal to portray Eva as a saintly innocent. In the course of the novel, Eva is shown not to be above small-mindedness and to be capable of duplicity: she is prejudiced against Eastern European fellow prisoners – “the dirty, uncultivated people from the east”⁵⁴ – and forges a letter from an English soldier to get permission to travel to England after the war. While it is true to say that these imperfections make Eva an “all the more human”⁵⁵ and “less anodyne”⁵⁶ figure than the Anne Frank of popular memory, I would add that they also complicate the reader’s involvement with her. At these moments in the text, and – *a fortiori* – when Eva reveals her membership of the *Sonderkommando* (“I burn bodies”⁵⁷), the reader’s sympathies, which she quickly engaged, become confused. By depicting Eva as a morally ambivalent character, an inhabitant, even, of Primo Levi’s “grey zone,”⁵⁸ Phillips subverts easy identification and forces the reader to renegotiate his or her relationship with her.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 107.

⁵² Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, tr. Susan Massotty, intro. Elie Wiesel (1947; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000): 329–30. See Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 157.

⁵³ Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, 88.

⁵⁴ *The Nature of Blood*, 170.

⁵⁵ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 157.

⁵⁶ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 106.

⁵⁷ Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, 171.

⁵⁸ Primo Levi, “The Grey Zone,” in *The Drowned and the Saved*, tr. Raymond Rosenthal (*Sommersi e i Salvati*, 1986; London: Abacus, 1989): 22–51.

⁵⁹ Phillips often employs morally compromised protagonists – characters who defy simple categorization as either victims or victimizers – in his work. Two clear examples from *Higher Ground*, to stay with the novels under discussion, are the protagonist of “Heartland,” an African interpreter who facilitates the slave trade, and Rudy Williams, a victim of institutional racism who inflicts suffering on his family through his dogmatic

In both engendering affect and promoting critical inquiry, Phillips's treatment of the Anne Frank story exemplifies the notion of empathic unsettlement as described by LaCapra:

At the very least, empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility).⁶⁰

In fact, LaCapra specifically mentions Anne Frank in this context as “a recent figure who has been subjected to representation that attempts to bring to the reader or viewer unearned and incongruous spiritual uplift.”⁶¹ *The Nature of Blood*, as we have seen, effectively counters this tendency by thwarting uncritical involvement with the characters through the introduction of reflexive distance into the text.

In conclusion, what I hope to have demonstrated is that, by enacting a kind of empathy which combines affect and critical awareness, both *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* open up a space for cross-cultural encounters in which differences are not eradicated but inhabited. Over and against the tribalisms of racism, nationalism, and separatism, Phillips's novels propose an ethic of cross-cultural engagement that works against and moves beyond the isolation imposed by trauma. Fostering attunement to multiple histories of suffering, they allow us to envisage the formation of a transnational memory culture which could contribute to building the solidarity needed to prevent future violence.

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intransigence. In all such cases, the effect on the reader can be described in terms of estrangement, confusion, and disorientation.

⁶⁰ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 41–42.

⁶¹ *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 42 n.51.

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...Linking Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural Empathy in Caryl Phillips's Higher Ground and The Nature of Blood Fatim Boutros: Bidirectional Revision: The Connection between Past and Present in Caryl Phillips's Crossing the Identity in Caryl Phillips's Strange Fruit Britain and Its Others Alessandra Di Maio: A New World Tribe in Caryl Phillips's A Distant Shore Sandra Courtman: Dorothy's Heart of Darkness: How Europe Meets Africa in A Distant Shore Thomas Bonnici: Negotiating Inclusion in Caryl Phillips's A Distant Shore Petra Tournay's Theodotou: Strange Encounters: Nationhood and the Stranger in Caryl.