

“The Whole Root Is Somewhere in the Music”:
Jazz, Soul, and Literary Influence in
James Baldwin and Caryl Phillips
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Abstract: This article discusses the contemporary British Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips and the twentieth-century African-American writer James Baldwin within a comparative framework that speaks to the expanding issue of international (and transnational) American literary influence. Baldwin has frequently been cited by Phillips as a major literary source, but the nature of this influence can be difficult to frame. The article is interdisciplinary in nature and takes its theoretical framework not from narrative theory but from music theory. Issues of creative repetition in black music and rhythmic counterpoint in jazz are suggested as models that can be applied to a relationship of literary influence. The article applies these issues to close readings of Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” (1957) and Phillips’ *In the Falling Snow* (2009), focusing on the musical structures, themes, and motifs that permeate both texts.

Keywords: James Baldwin; Caryl Phillips; literary influence; jazz; blues; soul; *In the Falling Snow*; “Sonny’s Blues”

In his 1987 collection of essays, *The European Tribe*, British Caribbean novelist Caryl Phillips describes the European home of his literary mentor, the African-American essayist and novelist James Baldwin. Phillips visited Baldwin in the early 1980s as the older writer was coming to the end of his literary career and before Phillips would find literary fame with the publication of the 1990 neo-slave narrative *Cambridge*. For Phillips, the luxurious house in St. Paul de Vence, France served as an imaginative icon of isolation:

Whenever I arrive at the tall iron gates separating James Baldwin from the outside world, my mind begins to wander. The gates remind me of prison bars. I wonder if Baldwin has been in prison, or whether this exile, his homosexuality, or his very spacious home are the different forms of imprisonment. My mind becomes supple, it feels strong and daring, and although the questions and thoughts Baldwin provokes are not always logical, I have always found that there is something positive and uplifting about his presence. Baldwin, unlike anybody else I have ever met, has this ability to kindle the imagination. (*The European Tribe* 39)

The quotation raises two interesting questions for scholarship both on Baldwin and on Phillips. First: the image of the prison, when related to Baldwin, seems potentially illuminating if also potentially problematic—why should Phillips speculate, for example, that exile, luxury, or homosexuality should be viewed as “imprisonment” for the black American writer? Second: how should we conceptualise the (“supple,” “illogical,” “uplifting”) influence that James Baldwin has on a young writer from outside of an American or African-American context?

Though the second of these questions strongly suggests the necessity of reading Baldwin in a comparative light, the writer, until relatively recently, has been underdiscussed by comparativists or by comparative Americanists. Much scholarship on his oeuvre centres on the literary models and other sources—whether white or black—that contributed to the making of Baldwin as an artist, but notably few critics have extended this treatment beyond the borders of American literary history. Baldwin as a source for other writers remains a much underdiscussed figure, though efforts to consider the writer outside of an American context have emerged in recent years. In this article, I hope to address these two striking oversights by placing the Phillips-Baldwin dialectic within a comparative framework that speaks to the expanding issue of international (and transnational) American literary influence.

There is an obvious and very striking juxtaposition within Phillips’ image. The two figures follow very different trajectories: social, sexual,

or identitarian “imprisonment” for Baldwin, creative liberation for Phillips. The image produced thus forms a challenging model for literary influence. Whereas traditional models associate literary influence with power and authority, Phillips’ image suggests a reversal—one in which the influential writer is consigned to a form of metaphorical powerlessness at precisely the moment when he or she actuates artistic potential in another author.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the Baldwin-Phillips relationship with reference to the two writers’ central preoccupation with black music. Music, primarily jazz, soul, gospel, and the blues, forms an enabling rubric in the work of both writers. Through a comparative reading of Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” (1957) and Phillips’ *In the Falling Snow* (2009)—a reading that will focus on the musical structures, themes, and motifs that permeate both texts—the article will suggest a different model of literary influence. It is a model of imprisonment for the influence and liberation for the influenced that is best located not within a traditional understanding of literary influence studies but within black musicology.

“The Blind Men’s Versions of the Elephant”

Caryl Phillips is one of a number of young writers who, reaching maturity in the 1970s and ‘80s, began to seek out America as a cultural icon beyond the focus of either his West Indian background or his British upbringing. He has described his search for a literary and cultural frame of reference as follows:

At that time I looked for people who could help me to understand what was happening amongst my generation, you know, what was happening on the streets. I wasn’t going to find any clues in V. S. Naipaul, for instance. I mean, he’s a Caribbean author, sure, but he’s a Caribbean author whose sensibility was such that he was never going to help me understand what was going on with the police, what was going on with unemployment, what was happening in terms of migration, what was happening in terms of social insurrection. So I looked to the

United States and to what was happening in black American society. (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 130-31)

Phillips' striking repetition of the phrases "what was happening" and "what was going on" here, and their (apparently) logical conclusion in "black America," seems to place a "natural" aura of cultural significance around African-American experience. In contrast, when speaking of the literary influences that significantly shaped him, Phillips occasionally dismisses Caribbean writers as comparatively provincial. He felt that George Lamming was similarly irrelevant: "Lamming's fiction, like V.S. Naipaul's, tended to be rooted in an exotic geography I didn't recognize" (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 48). Furthermore, while he considered Caribbean writers as inapposite, he saw British writing as aloof and out of touch. "The situation in England," according to Phillips, "bespoke an urgency that the literature wasn't mirroring" (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 48). Phillips is frequently disdainful of the now redundant "old certainties" of Europe (qtd. in Adesokan 134); he prefers to position himself as a writer of the multicultural Black Atlantic. And yet, as Akinwumi Adesokan has argued, "Phillips defines his own intellectual trajectory against the racial and national culture of black America" (134). He attains his "pluralistic" understanding of identity only through his immersion in African-American art, music, and literature.

Thus, at the beginning of his career Phillips turned not to the British tradition or to the Caribbean one but to James Baldwin, who articulated his sense of "what it meant to be a black person in an urban setting" (qtd. in Stein 96). Baldwin's cityscapes were seen as the locus of cultural relevance in Phillips' literary universe during the racially contested 1970s and '80s in Britain: "Black Americans wrote about the urban experience I understood, and they were angry. Angela Davis, Jimmy Baldwin: they were more in tune [than were British or Caribbean writers] with what I was going through" (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 48). He describes Baldwin as the "most important single literary influence" on him and attributes that influence to both his life and his work (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 25).

The issue of James Baldwin's influence on contemporary world literature should perhaps be contextualised here. Baldwin, it seems, is a writer

who inspires other writers. Chinua Achebe was only one of numerous observers to remark upon the extraordinarily personal and widely divergent reactions to Baldwin's death in 1987:

Since James Baldwin passed away in his adopted home, France, on the last day of November 1987, the many and varied tributes to him, like the blind men's versions of the elephant, have been consistent in one detail—the immensity, the sheer prodigality of endowment. (118)

Over twenty years after his death, James Baldwin continues to be an impressively tractable source of literary influence for young writers from marginal backgrounds, within and (especially) beyond America's borders. His relevance is truly transnational, and in an era in which American Studies has itself turned transnational, we find in Baldwin a fascinating case study. Apart from Caryl Phillips, a short sampling of writers from various international backgrounds who find in Baldwin "something that kindles the imagination" would also need to include writers from Pakistani (Mohsin Hamid), British-Asian (Hanif Kureishi), Scottish (Andrew O'Hagan), Nigerian (Chris Abani), and Irish (Colm Tóibín) contexts, to name only a few (Naughton 131–45).

Many of these writers have written on Baldwin and together their critiques begin to form a basis for comparative analysis of the writer. A quick survey of their essays points to the gamut of possible comparative frameworks of analysis. While Phillips commends Baldwin for articulating "what it felt to be a black person in an urban setting" (qtd. in Stein 96), Chris Abani reads him in race-neutral terms as a writer of "the quiet human moment" (Tóibín and Abani). Mohsin Hamid notes the "not inconsiderable inspiration" he took from reading Baldwin's novel, *Another Country*. Kureishi describes Baldwin as "perhaps [his] greatest inspiration," and he models his seminal essay "The Rainbow Sign" on Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, which he describes as "all anger and understanding"; Kureishi identifies Baldwin as a pluralist visionary of a transnational future (Kureishi 8).

The transnational dimensions of the writer, suggested by global writers he has influenced, have become the focus of recent scholarship

on Baldwin. James Campbell's *Exiled in Paris* (1994) offered an early foundation for considering Baldwin as a writer of nascent transnationalism, Magdalena Zaborowska's excellent *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: The Erotics of Exile* (2008) refocused this project, and the recent edited volume, *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (2011), has further extended Baldwin analysis into increasingly global paradigms. Such volumes share an impulse both to (re)interpret James Baldwin and to expand the framework of this interpretation. In 2000, Douglas Steward wondered if Baldwin's posthumous position in criticism had not become that of a figure capable of "enabling an unrelenting critique of power in [all of] its multivalent national, racial, and sexual articulation" (94). Though we may take issue with this version of Baldwin as some kind of antidote to "power" in its manifold (cultural, historical, literary) manifestations, we must still be struck by this testament to his posthumous literary relevance. The transnational aspect of this literary relevance (or influence) seems to be the most promising direction for forthcoming Baldwin criticism.

The Problem of Literary Influence

In speaking of influence in this way, the intention is not to follow traditional literary historiography, producing a model of appropriation in which literary "relations [are] built on dyads of transmission from one unity (author, work, tradition) to another" (Clayton and Rothstein 3). As a discipline, literary influence studies has a distinctly nineteenth-century aura (Ashley and Plesch 2). According to Louis Renza, it is a method that "performed a conservative cultural function," reinforcing a canon of "classics" that is based on a model of exclusion (Renza 186). Though the study of influence was defended in Harold Bloom's seminal *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom himself draws criticism on similar grounds for upholding ideologies of "author" and "authority" while ignoring extraliterary influences on and "culture-specific ideological circumstances" of the text (Renza 193, 197).

Influence study seems strangely anachronistic in the wake of Kristevian and Barthesian theories of intertextuality and the Death of the Author respectively. Moreover, the study of race in literature should

be particularly vigilant in guarding against the ideological function of canon building. However, within the discipline of African American studies, literary influence has re-emerged as a viable object of study. Tracy Mishkin, who edited the volume *Literary Influence and African American Writers*, began this work of critical recovery, contending that models of authorless intertextuality need not supplant the analysis of literary influence. Mishkin further questioned the notion that anxiety and conflict should be considered the primary modes of literary influence. Even before this volume, feminist and African-American critics had in various ways challenged such prescriptive formulations. Mishkin calls for a “more balanced view of the many types of interaction between authors” (16). “It is time to stop taking overgeneralized, negative approaches for granted,” she writes, “and, instead, to listen to what the authors have to say” (10).

Beyond theoretical or ideological concerns, any effort to rehabilitate literary influence study must equally overcome methodological challenges. Anand Patil has outlined the “limits of the literary influence study,” which “lacks definite methodology in general” (21). In making this observation, however, Patil neglects to outline precisely what this “definite methodology” should entail. Indeed, it may well be that the imposition of some overriding methodology that could be applied to various models of literary influence in different contexts would only lead us back to the outmoded version of literary influence study that upholds canonical models. It is notable that one of the shortcomings of Mishkin’s efforts to make the case for the validity of influence study in African-American literature was, in the words of one reviewer, that her volume was “less a ‘theory’ of influence” than a “pragmatic critique of the overgeneralizations implicit in other theories” (Hutchinson 523).

The problem of literary influence, it seems to me, becomes most acute when we view it as a discipline with an absent or deficient methodology or as something necessarily at odds with theory. In music theory, however, we find a fluid model of influence that is methodologically grounded and therefore more sustainable. We may be reminded here of Jean-Philippe Rameau’s observation that music “influences me despite myself” (qtd. in Christensen 416). Indeed, music has traditionally

served as a figure or trope to denote irresistible influence. In examining the structures behind the seemingly organic influence of music and extending these structures to the analysis of literary texts, we begin to arrive at the comparative model that best defines the Baldwin-Phillips relationship.

Applying models of musical appropriation to literary texts may be the only method with enough scope to encompass the rich and very diverse influence exercised by the iconic James Baldwin. Baldwin's writing, as he acknowledged on more than one occasion, aimed to replicate the sources and structures of black music. Reflecting on his years starting out as an essayist and novelist in Paris, Baldwin said: "I'd been involved essentially in language or rhetoric or in music, in a way, because I think *the whole root is somewhere in the music*. . . . it's a curious process . . . which carries you . . . simultaneously back and forward in time" (qtd. in Murray & Maguire 44–45; emphasis added). Baldwin's image of music's diachronic movement ("simultaneously back and forward in time") is suggestive of the larger framework of Signification, or "tropological revision," whereby a specific trope is repeated with difference between two or more texts (Gates xxv). Moreover, his location of "the whole root" of black art "somewhere in the music" points us towards a more active understanding of influence, appropriation, and repetition.

The process of tropological revision is crucial to understanding much of black art. This is especially true of black music, in which motifs of repetition and revision or refrain, far from creating "dyads of transmission" that reinforce author, authority, or canon (Clayton and Rothstein 3) actually form the basis for fluidity and creativity. The blues idea of "worrying the line," as outlined by Sherley Anne Williams in "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry" (1977) serves to illustrate the point:

Repetition in blues is seldom word for word and the definition of worrying the line includes changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, repetitions of phrases within the line itself, and the wordless blues cries which often punctuate the performance of the songs. (127)

Thus, repetition itself becomes an art form—one which enables movement between and beyond registers (“stress and pitch”), sequence (“word order”), and language (“wordless blues cries”). It becomes an art form within an art form. It can take place within genre (“blues”), within the song, within performance, even within the repeated line itself. Moreover, as Baldwin’s idea of literature’s “rootedness” in music suggests, tropes, refrains, and influences are frequently transmitted between artistic modes.

“Baldwin,” according to Scott Saul, “never displayed any technical familiarity with jazz music” (73). Nonetheless, jazz (as well as blues, soul, and gospel) infuses much of his fiction and nonfiction. His fascination with jazz culminated in the astounding literary depiction of the jam session at the end of “Sonny’s Blues,” which will form the basis of my reading of that text. Yet his was not a formal understanding of the music: it was engrained not in the music’s structures and construction but in its far-reaching transformative artistic potential. In this sense alone, Saul writes, the writer “did claim the jazz aesthetic for himself” (73). What attracted him was jazz’s almost anarchic potential to move beyond its own form; thus, he could claim, for example, Miles Davis as a literary influence every bit as important as Henry James (Saul 74).

This anarchic potential, according to Gayl Jones, finds its ultimate expression in the antiphonal jam session. Spontaneous improvisations symbolise a jazz motif which “offers a metaphor for freedom of movement—spatial, temporal, and imaginative” (Jones 121). There is a certain heroism for Baldwin in the attainment of such freedoms. From the 1950s and ‘60s onwards, the radically experimental Bebop described in “Sonny’s Blues” gave way to the “risk-taking spirit of postbop jazz” (Saul 65) and ultimately to the uninhibited risk-taking of free jazz—described by Karen Omry as a “violent interruption” of our “aesthetic sensibility” (138).

However, even as it dismisses formal elements such as blues structures, chord progression, and recognisable tonality, even as it “violently interrupts” the musical tradition, jazz is working within the model of tropological revision. Amiri Baraka commented on this seeming anomaly, defining free jazz experimentation not as “new music” but as a “noble and defiant return . . . to the nonchordal screams, rants, and hollers of

the early blues” (Scott 113). In the final pages of *Blues People*, Baraka writes:

The implications of this music are extraordinarily profound, and the music itself, deeply and wildly exciting. Music and musician have been brought, in a manner of speaking, face to face, without the strict and often grim hindrances of overused Western musical concepts; it is only the overall musical intelligence of the musicians which is responsible for sharpening the music. It is, for many musicians, a terrifying freedom. (227)

The model suggested here of both a return to roots and a “terrifying freedom” will be explored in my comparative reading of Baldwin and Phillips. To return to the quotation at the beginning of this essay—in which Phillips combines images of prison and separation from the outside world with references to Baldwin’s ability to connect with him as a younger writer—what I find in studying Baldwin’s influence on Phillips is something similar to this simultaneous “rootedness” and “freedom.”

“Living with Sound”: “Sonny’s Blues”

“Sonny’s Blues” traces a trajectory from familial fragmentation and generational misunderstanding to mutual recognition based on family, vocation, and tradition, and it frames this narrative through musical discourse. At one point in Baldwin’s story, we are told that living with Sonny “wasn’t like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound” (126). We are also told that the sound of Sonny’s music “didn’t make any sense” to the rest of the house. To his brother, “his music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It sounded just that weird and disordered” (127). It is precisely this supposed “disorder” that the story strives to unravel.

Like much of Baldwin’s fiction, “Sonny’s Blues” centres on a fraternal relationship in need of reconciliation. The story begins as the unnamed narrator (older brother) reads with incomprehension a news article about Sonny’s (the younger brother’s) arrest for drug pushing. Though instantly signalling his incredulity, the narrator quickly acknowledges that it was not that he “couldn’t believe it” but rather that he had refused

to believe it—that he “couldn’t find any room for it anywhere inside [himself]” (104). Again, the inability to know the reality of Sonny’s life is mirrored in the text by a failure to understand the music (jazz or bebop) that Sonny embodies.

The “weirdness” and “disorder” of Sonny’s music signal nothing more than the narrator’s intransigent refusal to listen. The “sound” that Sonny personifies is the sound of bebop—a then radically experimental jazz form characterised by its “infamous rhythmic unpredictability” (Cook and Pople 399). At the start of the story, as the younger brother announces his intention to become a jazz musician and identifies Charlie Parker as an icon, the older brother reacts with a mixture of ignorance and contempt (121). He admits that he has never “listened” to Parker’s playing. And yet, as Baldwin is at pains to point out, this sound surrounds all life in Harlem. Earlier in the text, we find the narrator over-hearing some local children at play:

I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself. . . . One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds. (105)

As Richard N. Albert, amongst others, has noted, the “complicated” whistling and “bird” simile are highly evocative of Parker’s intricate jazz solos (180). The suggestion of contrapuntal interplay involved in a tune that “hold[s] its own through all those other sounds” is also highly evocative of the collective interplay of jazz performance. Sonny’s explicit reference to Charlie Parker, or “Bird” (“Sonny’s Blues” 122), therefore, instantly evokes a music that should not sound “weird and disordered” to Sonny’s listeners. Rather, this music is a form of the blues that is a vital and sustaining element of their life praxis.

Sonny, however, embodies this element in a manner that is too direct for his listeners, and the potential for musical communion breaks down. The sound of his blues is as terrifying as it is uplifting. At the beginning

of his story, Sonny has struggled with a music that others fail to understand. At that point in the text, he remains “all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own” (126). Later, however, the family does find a way to share that vision. The relationship between the two brothers transforms when the narrator goes through the loss of his young daughter: “my trouble,” he notes, “made his real” (129). Indeed, the description of the narrator’s trauma seems to echo with his description of Sonny. The daughter’s death is registered as a series of sounds:

Isabel says that when she heard that thump and then that silence, something happened to her to make her afraid. And she ran to the living room and there was little Grace on the floor, all twisted up, and the reason she hadn’t screamed was that she couldn’t get her breath. And when she did scream, it was the worst sound, Isabel says, that she’d ever heard in all her life, and she still hears it sometimes in her dreams. Isabel will sometimes wake me up with a low, moaning, strangled sound and I have to be quick to awaken her and hold her to me and where Isabel is weeping against me seems a mortal wound. (129)

The thump, the silence, the scream, the low moan all seem to be registered in a blues idiom, and the sequence or progression of these sounds seems to come from the same source. One sound leads to the next in a necessary chain. The child’s scream echoes in the mother’s dreams, and in turn her low moaning culminates in a loving embrace that acts as an emotional salve even as it registers as a “mortal wound.” It is almost as if the initial sound of the child’s pain creates a blues line of suffering that Baldwin’s text repeats with difference or “worries” (Williams 127).

Here is the significance of the narrator’s description of living with Sonny as “like living with sound” (129). It is the sound of the blues, a sound that, in Paul Gilroy’s terms, inscribes “narratives of love and loss” in a music that records and transcodes its “broken” rhythms (201, 203). For Gilroy, this type of narrative is associated most forcibly with the blues:

The stories which dominate black popular culture are usually love stories or more appropriately love and loss stories. . . . [N]arratives of love and loss systematically transcode other

forms of yearning and mourning associated with histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable terror. (Gilroy 201)

Black music, characterised for Gilroy by “its broken rhythm of life” (203), becomes a perpetual transcoding machine. As the musician encodes his pain in musical performance, the audience must somehow hear the pain behind the song and participate in that fractured history.

Alan Rice has described the “jazz aesthetic” as the “mode most appropriate for the telling of stories from deep in the past,” which the black writer is apparently “only just now (at the very moment she does it) telling out loud” (177). “Sonny’s Blues” builds towards what Ralph Ellison would term a “true jazz moment” within a text that ultimately must be structured through music. The “true jazz moment” is defined by Ellison as an act of “individual assertion within and against the group”—the performance of identity “as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (234).

To embody such a sound is Sonny’s difficult fate. His very walk—a “slow, loping walk, something like the way Harlem hipsters walk, only he’s imposed on this his own half-beat” (131)—characterises this music. The narrator’s description of the walk is suggestive not just of the “broken rhythm” described by Gilroy but of polyrhythmic counterpoint, which is distinctive of jazz. Much of jazz theory is, in fact, based around counterpoint, where the central harmony, created by bass tones, is augmented by improvisations on the same theme. In jazz, “[t]he beauty of counterpoint lies in the interest created by the voices and the harmony that arises from them” (Berg 43). Though it is common to many forms of Western music, counterpoint is reconfigured in jazz. “Melodic counterpoint,” as has often been noted, “is not essential [or exclusive] to jazz. Rhythmic counterpoint is, on the other hand, and can be savoured in all jazz” (Carr, Fairweather, and Priestley 562).

The specifically rhythmic contrapuntal structure could perhaps be dwelt on here. If we were to translate these terms into narrative theory, rhythm would be understood as the way in which a text deals with time, the ways in which it accelerates and slows down. Gilles Deleuze defines rhythm as the “Unequal or Incommensurable, always in a process of

transcoding” (qtd. in Bogue 18). In narrative, rhythmic counterpoint—a quintessential jazz technique—undergoes multiple processes of transcoding. The rhythms dovetail to form a multiplicity of both voice and time, and the act of transcoding, as Deleuze suggests, remains necessarily perpetual. Just as the jazz collective must interpret and reinterpret the lines of their music, so the jazz listener must transcode meanings within jazz music.

The logic of “Sonny’s Blues” presages the structure of *In the Falling Snow*, in which individual narrative strands must form their own rhythm, and the individuality of each rhythm naturally builds towards a larger totality through counterpoint. Just as Sonny’s trouble finds an echo in his brother’s loss, just as that loss is figured as a sequence of sounds between three members of the same family, so must Sonny’s transcendental jazz playing build from the rhythm of individual suffering towards communal exchange.

While Sonny’s bebop produces a “rhythm” that is “infamously unpredictable,” it does so very deliberately (Cook and Pople 399). The unpredictability is “conceived as local disruptions of an unwaveringly secure underlying pulse” (Cook and Pople 399). As Charlie Parker defined it, bop was different from other music precisely because it had “no steady beat” (qtd. in Cook and Pople 399). The unpredictability, disruptiveness, and unsteadiness of this musical form all stem from its manifold beat and contrapuntal rhythmic structure. Sonny augments the general pulse of Harlem life with “his own half-beat” and thus establishes an aesthetic that is both personal and communal.

“Music is our witness and our ally,” writes Baldwin. “The beat is the confession which recognizes, changes and conquers time” (qtd. in Gilroy 203). However, this beat, this confession, must be polyphonic. These stories must be articulated together. As James Snead reminds us, the rhythm and beat of what he terms “black music” are profoundly and necessarily relational (150). According to Snead:

The typical polymetry of black music means that there are at least two, and usually more, rhythms going on alongside the listener’s own beat. . . . Because *one rhythm always defines an-*

other in black music, and *beat is an entity of relation*, any “self-consciousness” or “achievement” in the sense of an individual participant working towards his or her own rhythmic or tonal climax “above the mass” would have disastrous results. (Snead 150; emphasis added)

Snead’s model of “polymetry” forms a pivotal point of convergence between the two protagonists of this essay. Both texts attempt to draw familial narratives that illustrate a rupture within the familial group. The narrators of both texts attempt, in Snead’s terms, to operate “above the mass”—to narrate their tales without adapting to the “rhythms” of other family members. Thus, in both texts, the narrative drive is towards re-establishing this “entity of relation.” The point of this comparative reading will not be so much to show how Caryl Phillips is influenced by James Baldwin—a model of analysis that would depend on “dyads of transmission” between authors/authorities (Clayton and Rothstein 3)—but rather to show how both writers build on and revise ideas already germane in the music(s) that infuses their texts.

The Black Atlantic and Soul Music: Caryl Phillips

The intersection between musical and literary influence in these two writers is characterised by the musical forms adapted by each. Broadly speaking, our focus must shift from jazz (Baldwin) to soul (Phillips) so that we may establish the relationship between the two genres and, by extension, between the two writers. In finding this musicological language, however, we should not attempt to distinguish the two genres (or the two writers) absolutely. Examples abound of points of convergence between soul and jazz. In her study of improvisation and interaction in jazz, for example, Ingrid Monson extends her analysis to other “African American musics” (including soul), emphasising that “[w]hile the character of bass and chordal parts—that is to say, of the groove—may vary significantly . . . all of these musics tend to emphasise the off-beats” (28). Soul, like jazz, requires the musician, in Ralph Peterson’s phrase, “to absorb a large amount of rhythmic variants without being thrown” (qtd. in Monson 28). In other words, the necessity of rhyth-

mic variations cited above should apply—as Snead’s model suggests—to both genres.

What distinguishes soul music, however, is in what Gayle Wald describes as the “celebrat[ion] of individual vocal personality” (148). Soul, according to Wald, inaugurated a “new popular musical sensibility, defining a newly dynamic relationship between performer and audience,” creating a musical performance in which the singer must “touch his or her audience through the performance of emotional authenticity” (148). While one may take issue with Wald’s presentation of the “newness” of this performative dynamism—the interrelationship between performer and audience could equally be traced back (via jazz) to gospel, blues, and early spirituals—the important triumvirate of “vocal personality,” “emotional authenticity,” and “dynamism” are certainly characteristic hallmarks of soul.

Another notable hallmark of soul, according to Gilroy, lies in its inherently internationalist tendencies. In *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Gilroy notably positioned soul within his larger cultural matrix of the Black Atlantic, a “single, complex unit of analysis” (15). This model famously organised critical focus away from “nationalist and ethnically absolute approaches” and towards an “explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (Gilroy 15). Such ideas have become so engrained in subsequent racial and national analyses that it would seem unnecessary to recount them here, were it not for the striking ways in which Caryl Phillips’ career has formed an exemplary case study of the Black Atlantic model (Adesokan 133–55). Phillips was born on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts but travelled to England with his parents while still an infant. He was brought up in the North of England before moving to London, journeying between America and Europe, returning for a time to St. Kitts, and finally “settling” (although he still retains a multiple sense of home) in New York in 1990. His identity is so bound up with transatlantic movement that he claims to have professed a wish to his lawyer that his ashes be “scattered in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean at a point equidistant between Britain, Africa and North America” (*New World Order* 304), each of these three locations reflecting a sense of both belonging and non-belonging.

In his essay “A New World Order,” Phillips describes his postnational sense of dwelling in the world:

The old static order in which one people speaks down to another, lesser, people is dead. The colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place we have a new world order in which there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none. In this new world order nobody will feel fully at home. (5)

As Gilroy has repeatedly observed, this concept of Black Atlantic “home,” which can only be understood as a form of crossing, transgressing, and exchanging, finds its most natural aesthetic representation in music. An analysis of “black music,” Gilroy claims, “requires a different register of analytic concepts” (78). In musical performance, “identity is fleetingly experienced in the most intensive ways” (78). The fleeting, yet intense sense of identity that is produced eschews the importance of territorial rootedness, and indeed, for Gilroy, music proves to be the ultimate example of an art form that “overflowed from the containers that the modern nation state provides” (40).

This extra-territorial history is one of the biggest attractions that soul holds for Phillips. Though Baldwin is acknowledged as perhaps his greatest literary influence, African-American literature was by no means his only transatlantic inspiration. Soul music, he has acknowledged, was “as important to me as any writers” (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 80):

And it seemed to me that the people who had the strongest narratives and the most profound insights were people like Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and Curtis Mayfield, artists who were writing music that was not just passionate, but music that was incredibly socially engaged. So I guess that as a young kid, part of my education was listening to that type of music and trying to understand it all by some process of transatlantic exchange. (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 131)

The process of transatlantic exchange is of vital importance to Phillips’ emergence as a writer. “My model if I have a model,” he has claimed, “is

music.” He goes on to explain that “with music, my interest was always in form” (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 108). For Phillips, musical form is characterised most notably by refrain: “It’s how you score emotion basically—how you move and keep a theme going. You keep going forward, but remind us where we’ve been; there is a variable parabola, and it rises and it falls away gently to a conclusion” (*Conversations with Caryl Phillips* 109). Again, the double movement of progress and remembrance bears a strong echo of Baldwin’s description of black music. However, Phillips’ interest in refrain suggests more than this—it is most strongly and significantly underscored by the performative dynamism of soul music, but it also bears strong traces of the jazz technique of rhythmic counterpoint that had so influenced the construction of Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues.”

Performative Dynamism and Rhythmic Counterpoint: *In the Falling Snow*

As Baldwin had in “Sonny’s Blues,” Phillips uses black music in *In the Falling Snow* as ballast for a family narrative. Phillips’ novel presents us with a multi-generational story of the West Indian experience in Britain. We find the protagonist, Keith Gordon, a British-born son of a West Indian immigrant father, having a midlife crisis. Attempting a long-cherished writing project on twentieth-century music, Keith finds himself omitting both gospel and the blues, “having finally admitted that he knows precious little about either genre” (65). His book shrinks further when he decides to also omit jazz, which he fears is too emotional and too contentious to be assimilated into his project. “[E]ven the most level-headed people,” he wryly observes, “tended to become either very defensive or unusually aggressive when explaining their convictions about jazz” (65). Keith simply does not possess similar “convictions.” The jazz that he does listen to is “light jazz”—music that is “neither too abstract nor too difficult”—because, he decides, it is “perfect for background atmosphere,” as it “never seems to disrupt” (71).

On Keith’s listening, the music becomes insipid and anaemic. The “necessary and violent interruption” of the aesthetic sensibility identified in Omry’s analysis of free jazz is totally inverted. Keith, at this point in his narrative, is not ready to be disrupted, much less to be vio-

lently interrupted. At the opening of the text, his self-narrative has stagnated. A black man living in a predominantly white, upper-middle class suburb, Keith is introduced to us as an outsider: he suspects that for many, “he simply does not belong in this part of the city” and wears dark sunglasses, so that white people do not see his eyes (3). At the beginning of the novel, he “understands the detached role that he [is] playing” (5).

Keith’s failure to engage with the jazz tradition is indicative of a general failure on his part to meaningfully deal with his own history. Though he wants to write the history of black music—the way that “black cultural heritage is passed on from one generation to the next” (95)—the past is something that he is unwilling or unready to confront. He remembers his mother, who died when he was just six, only vaguely, and his cold, remote father, who lives in the north of England, remains, at this point in his story, a stranger to him. Keith’s failure to allow blues, jazz, or gospel to “disrupt” him is suggestive of the distance that he feels from the generation of his parents. He persistently identifies himself with the soul music of the 1970s, yet his personal isolation means that he cannot achieve the “performance of emotional authenticity” to which this music aspires (Wald 148). His writing stagnates because he insists on looking at soul in isolation and rejects the mid-twentieth-century forms that helped to give birth to this music. Similarly, his fraught and “detached” relationship with his son, Laurie, finds an echo in his refusal to listen to hip-hop, which he glibly views as “evidence of a general cultural malaise” (13). This being the case, he is forced either to listen to his own music alone or to “accustom himself to silence” when in the company of others (12).

Remembering Baldwin’s diachronic framing of black music, which he believed carried one “simultaneously back and forward in time” (qtd. in Murray & Maguire 44–45), we can see the difficulty of Keith’s position. His temporal and generational dislocation is, to a large extent, carried in the narrative by his seemingly formless ruminations on the music of his own generation. Indeed, the apparent formlessness of Phillips’ narrative was noted in several press reviews of the novel. However, this seeming absence of structure reveals the extent to which the form and structure are infused with a musical sensibility.

Two of the novel's structural anomalies serve to illustrate the point. First, and perhaps most notable, is the sharp change of pace and rhythm evident as the novel develops. Much of *In the Falling Snow* represents the internal reflections of a single character who attempts, in a self-reflective manner, to change the seemingly destructive patterns of his personal relationships while beginning the task of writing his book. As the novel develops, however, Keith's "plodding" (Tayler) self-narrative breaks into an urgent and more engaging story involving his son's entrapment in the world of South London gangs. This represents, as one reviewer put it, an "arresting change of form and tone" (Tayler). Far from being a flaw in the construction of Phillips' text, the disturbance of narrative pace is entirely appropriate, given the novel's central preoccupation with black music.

It is notable that this structural shift is coupled in the text with a second narrative departure: the novel's long lapse into unnaturally extended monologues by Keith's father, Earl Gordon. This section of the text deals with the transatlantic roots (and routes) of the Gordon family. As Earl recounts the painful story of his journey to England and of the "damn life" that he has had to live there, we have the sense that he is, for the first time, breaking a silence that has long surrounded the family. This silence, it is implied, has been learned by Earl as part of his immigrant experience in England, where, "they don't know nothing about you, or where you from, or who you be" (270). So much of the novel has been taken up with trying and failing to find the words to tell one's story (67, 87, 114, 127, 221, 272, 282, 316), but it is only now at the end of his journey that Earl can speak, and it is only as a counterpoint to the narratives of the younger generations—emblematised by Keith and Laurie—that he can be heard. Like "Sonny's Blues," the novel presupposes that painful experiences must be "performed" and "heard" in order for characters to constitute relationships based on "emotional authenticity" (Wald 148).

As in Baldwin's text—and the music that inspired it—Phillips' novel progresses diachronically with narrative tenses that can suddenly shift, depending on whose story is being told. Earl's long memoir, for instance, is recorded in an erratic mesh of grammatical tense. The following exchange between Earl and his son is an example:

“You listening to me?”

He looks down at his father’s face.

“I want to go home, Keith. I don’t mean to some stupid English house. I mean home. Home, home.” His father stares up at him. “You understanding what I mean? I’m not from here. I land in England on a cold Friday morning. It is April 15, 1960, and only three weeks before this I put my father in the ground.” (269)

Here we find multiple abrupt shifts in narrative chronology, none of which are easily signposted. Earl’s intimate and personal oral performance functions as a soul vocal and creates a new bond with his “audience” (his son, Keith). Up to this point in the text, Keith’s personal story had been narrated obsessively in the present tense—a narrative decision that, as Amy Hungerford has noted, adds a solipsistic and detached texture to the novel (169). Keith’s consistency of tense, coupled with his “relentlessly even tone,” leaves the novel in a condition of “relentless neutrality” (Hungerford 169–70). “The effect,” according to Hungerford, “is to infuse the present with an overload of portent as the tiny details pile up” (170). Yet the narrative cannot forever be buried under these details. The novel cannot sustain Keith’s temporal and emotional detachment. Earl’s intrusion into the text, which disorients our steady sense of chronology, acts as a necessary counterbalance or counterpoint.

Phillips’ narrative engagement with music has been highlighted by some of his critics. Bénédicte Ledent, for example, has attempted to “focus on the musicality of [Phillips’] writing” (160). This, she believes, surfaces in a “restless pace that quickens as [Phillips’ writing] switches from one character to the next” and through “repeated textual echoes between sections” (161). Ledent identifies such characteristics as part of a “melodious quality” in Phillips’ narratives, but it is really more indicative of rhythm than of melody.

These rhythmic narrative shifts are also very much in evidence in “Sonny’s Blues,” in which, as critics have noted, the very essence of “live” jazz performance is to access the blues as “a form which contains history” (Sherard 703). Both narratives move through multiple rhythms.

In Phillips' text, Earl Gordon's monologues, with their extended, unbroken paragraphing, short, staccato sentences, unconjugated verb structures, and abrupt chronological shifts, represent a departure from the more languid rhythm of Keith's narrative. It is a rhythmic break demanded both by Earl's idiom and by a life narrative that constitutes, what Gilroy would term, a "love and loss story" (201). In telling his story, Earl Gordon establishes this tradition for his own family and creates the possibility for transgenerational understanding between his son and grandson. *In the Falling Snow* achieves this only by insisting on the emotional "authenticity" of Earl's "performance" of his story. Phillips, here, is reaching for a "celebrat[ion] of individual vocal personality" (Wald 148).

Moreover, in the multiplicity of voice (counterpoint) and heterogeneity (rhythm), we find the liberational edge of both the jazz and soul structures that Phillips' text carries forward into narrative. Allowing his novel to move from traditional realist piece narrated from a single narrative point of view into a three-part counterpoint, he brings his work into the territory of music. Each of the three generational narrative strands of the text is carried forward with its own rhythm. It is only in the counterpoint of these narrative rhythms that the novel can become a single collaborative—though dissonant—(musical) performance.

The Music of Imprisonment

The structure (or anti-structure) of *In the Falling Snow* bears traces of "Sonny's Blues." In both texts, the potential of disastrous results highlighted by Snead (150) is provisionally averted, and in both cases, music is the modality through which this happens. At the end of *In the Falling Snow*, we find the protagonist back in the house of his child and ex-wife. The family have briefly come together to deal with the dangers to which Keith's son has been exposed and to ease the difficult passing of Keith's father. At the end of "Sonny's Blues," the narrator finally listens to his brother's playing in a contrapuntal jam session and finally begins to understand the significance of that playing. The performance centres on improvisation between Creole, the drummer, and Sonny on the piano. At one collaborative moment, we are told that the musicians "all c[o]

me together again” and that Sonny is “part of the family again” (141). The family metaphor indexes a greater connection between Sonny and his brother in the audience. When Creole changes the beat to a blues rhythm that “hits something” in the other musicians, the narrator acknowledges that it “hits something” in himself too, as “the music tighten[s] and deepen[s]” (141). The narrator has finally perceived just how important it is for him to listen to the “broken rhythm of life” underlying Sonny’s playing. He has finally been moved to truly hear his brother’s story.

However, both texts display an awareness of the transience of such moments. In Phillips’ novel, Keith Gordon ends his narrative with an incipient feeling of encroaching dislocation and isolation. Again, he begins to feel that he does not “belong” (313), and he resolves to return to the single-bed apartment of his secluded and solipsistic life. Similarly, isolation is never far from the communities created through performance in “Sonny’s Blues.” Towards the end of Baldwin’s story, the musician confides in his brother that some of his most desperate and isolated moments had come while being totally immersed in the act of playing jazz: “Sometimes, you know, and *it was actually when I was most out of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was with it, really, and I could play* or I didn’t really have to play, it just came out of me, it was there” (135; emphasis added). The simultaneous sense of connection (“I was in it, I was with it”) and of disconnection (“I was most out of the world”) is both a product of his heroin abuse and a statement of his existential condition. A profound sense of being alone in the world is a part of Sonny’s life, even as he is on the stage playing music that forges improvised communities.

Baldwin craved an art that was based on “creative interdependence” or the “active, actual, joyful intercourse” between the artist and society, and he believed that the “atmosphere sometimes created among jazz musicians and their fans during . . . a jam session” was its truest possible example (*Nobody Knows My Name* 25–26). However, he also acknowledged that though such communion may have been provisionally attainable, musical performance also left the jazz player in a state that he described as “ghastly isolation” (26). For Baldwin, this is the terrible

paradox of music and musical performance. In performance, the musician says for the audience “what they themselves [can] not say” (*The Price of the Ticket* 323). The musician performs a truthful, though aesthetically, version of the life of his or her audience. He or she thus enables a moment of transient freedom but does so at a terrible cost.

Music, Baldwin has said, “produces an atmosphere of freedom which is exactly as real as the limits which have made it necessary” (*The Price of the Ticket* 322). At the intersection of this freedom and these limits, we find the musical performer as a figure of isolation. Even as the musician struggles for the freedom that is created in the “true jazz moment,” there is an awful awareness that this freedom is *only* a moment—and that this freedom also contains its own antithesis. Though the ending of Baldwin’s story is typically simply read in positivist terms, such positivism needs to be tempered. The freedom indicated in Sonny’s performance remains elusive, “lurking” around both audience and performers, without revealing itself (“Sonny’s Blues” 142). “I understood, at last,” the narrator tells us, “that [Sonny] could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did” (142). Though the realisation contains the promise of freedom, it is a freedom that has yet to be—and perhaps never will be—attained. “Sonny,” in Walton Muyumba’s neat phrase, “is left between grace and suffering” (122).

In this in-between space, we find the protagonists of Baldwin’s and Phillips’ musical narratives. And indeed, it could be argued that Baldwin himself, as an icon for Phillips of both influence and, paradoxically, isolation, occupies similar conceptual territory. Phillips’ speculation, with which I began this article, on the “different forms of imprisonment” which Baldwin may have undergone (*The European Tribe* 39) is close to Baldwin’s description of the “ghastly isolation of the jazz musician” (*Nobody Knows My Name* 26). Furthermore, the concomitant “suppleness,” “daring,” and “imagination” that Baldwin engenders in the younger writer (*The European Tribe* 39) finds an echo in Baldwin’s description of the “atmosphere of freedom” that is created by the black musician (*The Price of the Ticket* 322). Like Sonny with his sidemen and with his audience, Baldwin himself inspires writers like Phillips with a vision of creative freedom that contains its own antithesis.

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