**ariel: a review of international english literature**
Vol. 48 No. 3–4 Pages 77–101


# Caryl Phillips and the Heroic

Ulla Rahbek

**Abstract:** This article explores the notion of the heroic in fictional and non-fictional work by Black British writer Caryl Phillips. It uses an ambivalent Caribbean longing for heroes as a point of departure from which to discuss hero-theory and its applicability to the types of heroes found in Phillips' writing. It focuses in particular on *The Final Passage* (1985), *Crossing the River* (1993), *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), and *A Distant Shore* (2003) in its elaboration of the characteristics of a Phillipsian heroic and how and where to locate such figures. Qualities such as dignity, courage, no-saying, and global ways of being and seeing emerge as heroic traits, apparent also in Phillips' essays in *A New World Order* (2001) and *Colour Me English* (2011).

**Keywords:** Caryl Phillips, heroic, heroes

This essay argues that the notion of the heroic offers new ways of reading characters in Caryl Phillips' oeuvre. Typical interpretations of Phillips' characters focus on their victimised status and the deprivation of their agency. The heroic functions not only as a classification or identification of characters but as a lens through which they can be read, focusing in particular on who they are and what they do in Phillips' textual universe. A heroic perspective is mindful of both ontology—of questions of being in the world of the narrative—and action. Indeed, the heroic perspective corresponds to a way of reading characters that specifically examines what a character does in conspicuous situations and is composed of the interplay of three aspects: the centrality of dignity, a changing status quo, and an innate, or imposed, loneliness. The essay focuses on four characters: Madison Williams in *Crossing the River* (1993), Judge

Julius Waties Waring in *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), Carla in *A Distant Shore* (2003), and Leila in *The Final Passage* (1985). Phillipsian heroes are sometimes at the centres of their narratives, but are more often minor characters found in the textual margins. Phillips' inclusive and democratic vision allows for the heroic to manifest in characters who are male and female, young and old, and white and black.

Discussing ideas of heroes and the heroic in the twenty-first century may raise suspicion about the mental maturity of scholars who choose to explore such topics, Dean A. Miller writes in *The Epic Hero* (vii). Contemporary hero scholars typically find themselves "rooted in ambivalence," to echo Lucy Hughes-Hallet's caveat in *Heroes* (3). Evidently, an interest in the heroic is suspect and foolhardy, and often aligned with a history of elitism, fascism, and Eurocentrism. So why pursue such a topic? And why do so in a postcolonial context, through an exploration of the heroic in Phillips' writing? In his reading of *In The Falling Snow*, Gordon Collier proposes that Phillips "has acquired a cosmopolitan's clarity of vision [but that] this has come from a deep awareness of the value of his Caribbean 'roots'" (398).

This perceptive insight functions as my point of departure in this essay. I include thoughts on Phillips' "vision," inspired by Collier's and Alan McCluskey's observations on his cosmopolitan values. I also explore Phillips' descriptions of the role of literature and his elaborations on inspirational heroic figures. These insights into Phillips' ideas on life and writing affect my reading of his characters. I am interested in how his ideological persuasion and views on literature influence the way he represents characters and the way his characters can be read.

I begin the essay with the Caribbean longing for heroes and the heroic and Phillips' response to this call, but go on to show that the exploration of Phillips' democratic outlook and catholic collection of heroic figures points to what Collier labels Phillips' cosmopolitan clarity of vision.[1] While the motivation for Phillips' inclusion of heroic characters may derive from his Caribbean roots, the heroes in his works are universal.

Among Caribbean intellectuals there is an interesting ambiguity regarding the heroic that can be put to work productively considering

Phillips' expressed interest in ambiguity and ambivalence.[2] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, for one, bemoans the lack of focus in the Caribbean education system on what he calls "our own national heroes, our own slave rebels—the people who helped build and destroy our society" (*History* 263). Furthermore, in the essay "Timehri" (1970), Brathwaite complains that West Indians were "denied history, denied heroes" (46). This denial is turned on its head in V. S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* (1962), in which Trinidadians "lived in a society that denied *itself* heroes" (43; emphasis added). In *Caribbean Discourses*, Edouard Glissant suggests that the absence of heroes noted in contrasting manners by Brathwaite and Naipaul "contributes to a community's affliction with a paralyzing *sense of powerlessness*" (67; emphasis in original). He suggests that the Caribbean in many ways occupies an aporetic position when it comes to heroes: "Other people's heroes are not ours; our heroes, of necessity, are primarily those of other people" (Glissant 69). This conundrum of a lack of heroes and an adoption of heroes who are not one's own helps explain the profound Caribbean ambivalence with heroes identified by Phillips, Brathwaite, Naipaul, and Glissant. It is as if Phillips prompts us—from his narrative position in the wings—to rethink the problematic and tarnished notion of the hero.[3] It also becomes apparent that, for Phillips, it is not helpful to only reinstate Caribbean heroes—his outlook is transnational and global, a suggestion that is developed in the layered perspective of reading the heroic undertaken in this essay. Thus, the heroic characters discussed here are not only Caribbean, but also from the United States and Britain. Before I elaborate further on Phillips' unique and personal inflection of the heroic, however, I need to define the term—and this is not an easy task.

In *Heroes: From Alexander the Great to Mae West* (2008), Paul Johnson admits that he is "trying to approach the subject of heroism not so much by definition as by example" (xiv).[4] He nonetheless suggests a definition of the hero through recognisable characteristics. The contemporary hero, he writes, manifests "absolute independence of mind" and acts "resolutely and consistently" and "with personal courage at all times" (265). Indeed, Johnson concludes that courage

is emphatically "the one indispensable element in heroism in all its different manifestations" (266), a central heroic trait that appears in most hero studies.

Hero studies have a long genealogy. However, because Phillips' heroes are not heroes in a traditional sense there is no need to discuss the work of established hero scholars such as Fitzroy Ragland, Joseph Campbell, Otto Rank, or Vladimir Propp. Instead, and perhaps somewhat perversely in this postcolonial context, I want to engage with Thomas Carlyle's 1841 book, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. While the study is admittedly full of problematic statements, its observations on the figure of the hero are surprisingly suggestive, even in a postcolonial context. In common with most hero scholars, Carlyle devotes time to both expected and unexpected heroes. He does not discuss literary characters, as I do here, but historical figures. For Carlyle, the hero is a great man who does important work and is thus worshipped both for what he is and for what he does. In this way, Carlyle unites the two most conspicuous gospels of the Victorian age: work and the great man. The work of a hero, he argues, is "a *making of order*" (203; emphasis in original), an ability to create concord out of discord or order out of chaos. This is the true work of the "great *silent* men" (224) and makes these noble men heroes to the common people. The hero, we learn, possesses such enviable and inspiring traits as valour, sincerity, originality, and dignity. The latter attribute is important to note, since I suggest that although Phillips' heroes do not fully meet Carlyle's definition, Madison, Judge Waring, Carla, and Leila all value and protect their dignity. Furthermore, Carlyle suggests that the hero also has the faculty of a unique insight into things: "A Hero . . . has this first distinction . . . the Alpha and Omega of his whole Heroism, That he looks through the shows of things into *things*" (55; emphasis in original). This is another aspect of heroism that resonates with the way I read these four characters. Each possesses, in various ways, the ability to see beyond the surface reality of the narrative and question the state of affairs to which they are exposed. There is thus not only a specific way of being and doing but a particular way of seeing associated with the heroic.

For the purposes of this article, however, one of the most useful explorations of the heroic is Iain Pears' essay, in which he contrasts Wellington the gentleman with Napoleon the Romantic hero. Like traditional hero scholars, Pears relies on a list of characteristic attributes to try to define the hero. He writes that heroes have a specific destiny allotted to them and are seen as "preordained for great things" (226); they "leave everything changed after them" because "[t]he hero is a man who upsets the status quo" (227); they enjoy charisma and uniqueness and "inspire love and loyalty" (227); they embody individualism; and they are human meteors who "burn quickly and die young" (229). This list sums up much of what the scholars mentioned above have to say on the topic. The pithy definition Pears constructs of a hero—"[t]he hero is a man who upsets the status quo"—is worth bearing in mind, as it helps to formulate the heroic perspective from which I read Phillips' characters (in spite of Pears' gender-specific view). Heroes' ways of being, seeing, and doing result in change. In that manner, at least, they have much in common with their Victorian predecessors.

Indeed, as a preliminary general statement on the typical Phillipsian hero, I suggest that his heroes have an inner strength that does not reveal itself in bombast or eloquence but in small acts with large repercussions and few words with many reverberations. Phillips' fictional heroes tend to upset the textual status quo, both through what they do—their actions or work—and who they are. A reading of characters through a heroic lens should thus pay special attention to how characters are represented and how they act in given situations. Self-worth and courage are traits associated with the heroic character. As a matter of fact, references to dignity are so conspicuous in Phillips' writing and so central to my understanding of the heroic that I need to dwell on this trait.

Phillips' understanding of this quality comes close to Charles Taylor's elaboration on what he calls "the politics of recognition" (1994). For Taylor, recognition—the act of knowing again and acknowledging—rests on an acceptance of "the equal dignity of all" human beings (37). This is linked to the notion that all human beings are "equally worthy of respect" as "rational agents" (41). Wole Soyinka's insight into dignity

in his *Climate of Fear* (2004) supports Taylor's perspective. For Soyinka, dignity is a central human attribute, not "as some mystic endowment, but as a product of social interaction" (92). Thus, dignity is profoundly relational. It is foregrounded in Phillips' writing in encounters and conversations, however painful or tortured, as is illustrated in my analysis of the four figures on whom this essay focuses.

The typical characters of Phillips' narratives—slaves and former slaves, as well as Jewish, white working class, and female characters who battle psychological challenges—have usually been denied dignity or have felt it compromised. They have often not been recognised as fellow human beings of equal worth in social relations, but rather have been misrecognised, which, as Taylor insists, "can inflict harm" to such a degree that it leads to a "reduced mode of being" (25). If dignity is understood as a sense of self-worth, a possession of agency, and an innate value that is a consequence of human interaction, then it is possible to argue that part of Phillips' moral vision is the restoration of dignity to characters who are bereft of it. The characters who are read as heroic in his writing insist on their inherent worth through actions or manners of being. In different ways, they fight against the compromising of their dignity, demand to be acknowledged, and request to be seen as worthy of respect. The trait thus seems to come with a moral code, whether this is expressed as a "no" to degradation (as in Madison's case), a "yes" to doing the right thing in an impossibly complex situation (as in Judge Waring's work), simply acting in accordance with one's inner ethical persuasion (as in Carla's act), or a "no" to a destructive pattern and a "yes" to friendship and acceptance (as in Leila's characterisation). The result of dignified actions is often, but not always, loneliness, as exemplified by Phillips characters who find themselves in situations of profound (innate, self-imposed, or externally imposed) isolation. Yet this solitary state also provides the strength characters need to perform actions that change the status quo of society at large or of the immediate social environments in which they are placed. It is in *The Atlantic Sound*, to which I return later, that the Phillipsian notion of heroic dignity is crystallised as "dignity in loneliness" (Phillips, *Atlantic* 25).

I will now draw attention to hints in Phillips' essays as to how and where he might locate figures that I interpret as heroic. In *The European Tribe* (1993), a young Phillips travels around Europe to test the continent's hostility to those perceived as other or stranger (102), and while visiting the original Venetian ghetto he ponders Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: "Shylock has always been my hero. He makes it uncompromisingly clear that he wants nothing to do with Christians beyond his business. . . . He is advocating separatism, and . . . there is a time when such a debate is necessary. . . . Shylock is doing [Antonio] a favour, while showing him where the power lies" (55). While Phillips might be using the label "hero" in the traditional sense of "protagonist," the attributes that make Shylock heroic in Phillips' reading of this complex character—integrity, steadfastness, and an unwillingness to compromise his dignity—are central to his own constructions of the heroic.

That emphasis on the reluctance to compromise one's sense of self recalls Phillips' encounter with "[t]he emotional anguish of [Richard Wright's] hero, Bigger Thomas, the uncompromising prosodic muscle of Wright, his deeply felt sense of social indignation" and how that encounter led Phillips to his vocation as a writer ("*Native Son*" 18–19). Phillips suggests that he is especially drawn to Wright—who he presents as an inspirational hero—because the American writer addresses problems to do with non-white people in a global context and thus eschews the noose of tribe, "race," or other socially restrictive categories (20–21). Ultimately, however, Phillips is attracted to Wright because Wright leaves his native land for France "with chin held high" (27). Wright emerges as heroic for Phillips because he embodies dignity, agency, self-representation, integrity, and control. Furthermore, the global context of Wright's concerns aligns with the type of writer Phillips envisions himself as being, as he admits in his essay "Necessary Journeys." In it, he comments on the kind of writer he wanted to become (in contrast, perhaps, to the kind of writer he was expected to become): "I was more interested in writing about the human heart than I was in addressing 'issues'—black or otherwise" (126). Phillips' profound interest in the human heart is evidenced in his privileging of

a diverse cast of characters—black and white, female and male, young and old, fictional and "real"—and his tolerant, democratic vision. In fact, Phillips' heroes suggest a profound departure from the Victorian celebration of the great man toward an understanding of the heroic as a suitably diverse and inclusive twenty-first-century perspective on characters that is indicative of the "cosmopolitan's clarity of vision" that Collier notes and which underwrites all of Phillips' narratives. There is no typical and recognisable classic Hero as such in Phillips' oeuvre. Instead, there are characters who manifest heroic traits through their ways of being, seeing, and doing in a messy world of "plurality in action" (Phillips, "Colour" 16). Phillips' construction of heroes is emphatically not restricted by "race," class, gender, or other any other (social) category. In *Materiality and the Modern Cosmopolitan Novel*, McCluskey reads Phillips' work as expressive of "cosmopolitan thought" in its "aspiration toward an inclusive, humanistic, and cosmopolitan vision that attempts to transcend fixed categories of identity and belonging" (21–22). I argue that what McCluskey calls Phillips' "values of inclusiveness, conciliation, and egalitarianism" (23) also affect Phillips' representations of the heroic. In fact, "fixed categories of identity and belonging" are destabilised, democratised, and thus transcended through Phillips' comprehensive gallery of characters and his open-minded attitude toward them in his writing. This authorial outlook inevitably affects a reading of those characters.

The first character I read from a heroic perspective is one of literature's fascinating "no-sayers." No-sayers come in many shapes and sizes and say no for many different reasons. They especially stand out in opaque and elliptical texts that foreground the ambivalent and uncertain. Toward the end of the section of Phillips' *Crossing the River* titled "The Pagan Coast," Madison Williams emerges as a noticeable and heroic figure. Since the traits and actions associated with the heroic are most conspicuous in encounters and should be understood as relational, it is necessary to devote some time to the character of Edward. It is in Madison's meeting with him that I read heroism into Madison's actions.

This story centres on the tortured soul of plantation owner Edward, who has freed his slave, Nash, and sent him to Liberia as a missionary.

After losing touch with Nash, whose letters to Edward are intercepted by his increasingly deranged wife, Edward decides to travel to Africa to find Nash. To do so, he needs the help of Madison, another former slave who has been allowed to settle in Liberia. Madison is a "strong, proud man" with a history of rejecting Edward's "overtures towards him" (Phillips, *Crossing* 45). The story's first encounter between these characters takes place in a bare room in a house in Liberia. Madison is unsure about whether he really wants to witness what he calls "this spectacle" (64) of a guilty and mentally muddled man desperately holding on to the last vestiges of power.

On the first night of the expedition, Edward and Madison seek shelter in a small hut. In the tense atmosphere, many things are left unsaid and the two characters rely on a visual economy of seeing, gazing, and looking. The narrator refers to Madison's "scornful glare" (59) and his choice to "ignore" Edward or "look hard" at him (65). Such descriptions attest to his unwillingness to compromise or soften in the face of weakness. The supposedly civilised, Christian gentleman traveller Edward fixes his eyes on his former slave and watches his "dark, glistening, sweat-filmed skin" (67). Edward goes to his "semi-clad" (68) former bondsman with a two-fold desire: he wants Madison's body and he wants Madison to help him take Nash's children back to America in order to civilise them. In a complete reversal of the typical master/servant dialectic, Madison "stare[s] directly" into Edward's face and simply says "No" (68), thus upsetting the fragile status quo. Edward is left speechless, only to view Nash's children with disgust the next morning. His revulsion contrasts starkly with his earlier desirous embrace of Madison. The episode can be read as an instance of Madison resisting what Robert Young calls the "colonial desire" at the heart of racism: the ambivalent double gesture of attraction and repulsion that is manifested in Edward's ambiguous response to Madison, on one hand, and Nash's children, on the other. Edward suddenly realises that he is alone—"He had been abandoned" (Phillips, *Crossing* 69)—and reduced in status to the same level as his former slave, or perhaps even worse. Madison has become his superior, as he nonchalantly ignores Edward and refuses to look at or talk to him.

The last words of the section are "Madison turned away" (70). Madison does not share the pity felt by the other natives, who do not know the strange white man and are unfamiliar with Edward and Madison's complicated and intertwined history. Madison is, of course. But like most of Phillips' characters, he is as inscrutable as the African landscape is to Edward. Read from the perspective of the heroic, he leaves a hero. He keeps his integrity and protects his dignity by courageously refusing the white man's sexual advances as well as his desire to civilise. His simple and unequivocal "No" upsets the status quo of the narrative and locates power in his resistance to all that Edward represents. Madison is not persuaded by Edward's discourse or softened by his debased state. He does not accept the rules of the civilising mission and does not want to have anything to do with his former master. Nor is he attempting to hold on to some veneer of so-called civilisation. He is a black man who masters the situation in which he is placed. He is a hero. And he survives.

But what exactly does he say no to? I want to read Madison's refusal in tandem with Frantz Fanon's exploration of the discourse and psychological effect of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Madison says no to, and rises above, "the absurd drama that others have staged around" the black man (Fanon 197)—the absurd drama of racism and civilising missions, slavery and alleged freedom, and the complex dialectic of desire and disgust. It is productive to read Phillips' no-sayers from a Fanonian perspective. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon memorably writes that "it will be understood that the first impulse of the black man is to say *no* to those who attempt to build a definition of him. It is understandable that the first action of the black man is a *reaction*" (36; emphasis in original). Madison's denial of Edward's requests is a forceful reaction to and rebellion against Edward's attempt to maintain the fragile status quo of an already deteriorating institution (his crumbling slave plantation and fading sense of superiority), in a different place and different circumstances. Madison refuses to be defined by this institution and its racist raison d'être.

Fanon's *Black Skin* also explores the effects on the black body of being over-determined from without and being constructed out of existing

folklore, fairy tales, and fabricated histories. In order to free himself from the arsenal of complexes he describes in the text, the black man must learn to say no. Fanon concludes: "I said in my introduction that man is a *yes*. . . . *Yes* to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity. But man is also a *no*. *No* to scorn of man. *No* to degradation of man. *No* to exploitation of man. *No* to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom" (222; emphasis in original). Phillips' Fanonian no-sayer Madison says no to being degraded, exploited, and scorned. He, too, wants "to be a man among other men" (Fanon 112). By saying no to "the history that the others have compiled for [him]" (Fanon 120), Madison says yes to freedom. The reader does not know where this will take him, only that it will not lead him back to Edward. According to Phillips, Fanon "was arguing for human dignity and racial origins were a subsidiary issue" ("Introduction: The Gift" 133). It is possible to read Madison's "no" as a plea for human dignity that sees beyond "race"—the dignity that Edward refuses to recognise in Madison, as a fellow human being rather than a former bondsman, and the dignity that has been eroded within him.[5]

As noted earlier, the protagonists are not often the heroes in Phillips' textual universe. That is also why characters that can be read as heroic are sometimes overlooked. Yet, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, "what is relegated to the margins is often, as we know from deconstruction, right at the centre of thought itself" (4). In an essay in *A New World Order* devoted to Naipaul, Phillips is characteristically drawn to Naipaul's father rather than the "protagonist," V. S. Naipaul. Phillips comments on the letters written between father and son: "The real hero of these letters, in the end, is the father, Seepersad Naipaul. By turns naïve, desperate and irresponsible, he believed both in literature *and* in people. He was determined *and* generous. He was ambitious *and* sympathetic" ("V. S. Naipaul" 218; emphasis in original). Of interest are the words after the three italicised *ands*: (belief in) "people," "generous," and "sympathetic." These values are often associated with heroic characters in Phillips' texts. Moreover, the narratives almost seem to resist these (typically minor) characters' heroic endeavours—the reader has to locate heroic characters and the work Phillips has them do. Reading *The Atlantic Sound*, however, is a different experience. Here, it is easy to locate the heroic Judge Julius

Waties Waring (1880–1968). He is constructed out of Phillips' reading of a real-life person, is filtered through Phillips' ideological outlook, and emerges as a Phillipsian hero.

*The Atlantic Sound* is a travelogue-cum-essay that pivots on the quintessential Phillipsian themes of home and belonging. Judge Waring's story takes centre stage in the third section, titled "Home." While the judge is a real-life character, he is presented to us through Phillips' narration and poetic intervention; he is invested with Phillips' admiration and cosmopolitan vision and, possibly, read and represented from Phillips' own heroic perspective. The judge's story becomes more than just a biographical sketch and the judge more than just an interesting historical figure. Waring's history is one of increased awareness of social injustice; Phillips uses his story to sketch the history of the city (Charleston, South Carolina) that both produced the judge and that tries to forget a past of racial exploitation. Through a mixture of history, biography, and personal observations, Phillips presents the judge, Charleston, and poetic evocations of two central locations in the city—Sullivan's Island, "The Black Ellis Island" (*Atlantic* 207), and Magnolia Cemetery, where the judge and his Northern wife lie buried. Phillips is especially interested in Judge Waring because of his transformation from Southern gentleman to advocate of African-American civil rights.[6] Linked to this personal development is his defection from his first wife, a Southern belle, to a divorced woman from the North. Judge Waring thus offends his fellow Southerners on both accounts, and his act upsets the equilibrium of his surroundings. On the topic of Judge Waring's reputation in Charleston, Mr. Wilcox, the lawyer Phillips speaks with as he traces the judge's story, explains:

> 'You see the only time he raised people's ire was when he decided to change the system and let anybody vote.' 'Anybody?' I ask. 'Sure, anybody. Nobody in the south agreed with him, although I suppose people in the north were probably in favour. But letting anybody vote was not the way we did things down here. That particular legal decision caused more problems for him than the second marriage ever did.' (181)

In short, the judge upsets the status quo. This act takes courage and dignity and leads to ostracism and loneliness. But the judge feels that he cannot behave otherwise; he has to act in accordance with his integrity and changed political beliefs. That uncompromising undertaking, however, turns the judge into a traitor in the eyes of the average Southerner. As the lawyer continues to talk about the late judge, Phillips thinks: "Mr Wilcox knows full well that a great deal of the responsibility for disrupting the 'natural order' of life in the south lies with his 'friend' the judge. He knows full well that his 'friend' the judge is considered by many, including Mr Wilcox, to be a 'traitor'" (182). The disruption of the natural order of life in the South speaks to the radical change produced by the Judge Waring's work. It turns him into a traitor to those who oppose change and a hero to those who support reform—those who, like Phillips, read his story as one of "morality and conscience" (183). While the Victorian great man, as expounded by Carlyle, was worshipped because he restored order and consequently became heroic to the common people, the opposite is the case with the judge. He may be read as Phillips' reconstruction of the nineteenth-century heroic figure more in tune with his own cosmopolitan values. He creates disorder by upsetting the Southern status quo and is reviled by his peers. In Phillips' perspective this is a heroic act. The judge can thus be read as a contemporary variation of the heroic great man.

Yet, in typical Phillipsian fashion, things are more complex and ambivalent than that. The conversation with Mr. Wilcox ends with a sudden insight: "And then it strikes me. They may dislike Judge Waring because of his legal pronouncements. They may even dislike Judge Waring for dispensing with his first wife, a South Carolina belle, and marrying a northern divorcee. But they dislike him most of all because they can never totally dismiss him" (Phillips, *Atlantic* 182). The man is simply too important, both because of who he is and the work he has accomplished.

Phillips explores how, in the early 1950s when Judge Waring was an old man, he voluntarily exiled himself to the North. Phillips' comment on this move links up with the major theme of the book and of many

of his novels: "[Judge Waring] was painfully out of tune with his home, and he decided that he had no choice but to leave. It was simply too burdensome to be among those who openly hated you in a place you called 'home'" (205). Home is indeed a slippery and suspect signifier for a character who has made himself unpopular through his stubborn ways. In Phillips' reconstruction of this figure, Judge Waring is a man of uncompromised dignity and, viewed through a heroic lens that is fine-tuned to courageous acts upsetting the status quo, emerges as a hero in the story. At great personal expense, he refuses to act according to the expectations placed upon him as a Southern gentleman.

At the end of the chapter devoted to Judge Waring, Phillips visits Sullivan's Island, where more than thirty percent of Africans landed in America as slaves, and pays his respects at Magnolia Cemetery. These visits are part and parcel of his construction of the judge as a heroic character and can be read as an homage to a half-forgotten hero. Phillips is profoundly moved and disturbed by his visit to Sullivan's Island and in a long prose-poetry sequence describes the "secluded cove . . . [as] a perfect place for 'seasoning' slaves" which sits jarringly next to "[p]rivate summer houses with manicured lawns and securely moored fishing boats" that belong to the Charleston élite (207). This is an "eerie and troubled place" that represents "[a]n arrival in America" for the South's black population (207). Although he finds no monument or plaque honouring this momentous influx, Phillips' poetic evocation of his encounter with this place can be read as a discursive monument that honours the setting and the people who arrived unwillingly and were subsequently forced to make a home in an inhospitable place. The passage also doubles as a verbal plaque devoted to Judge Waring. It is immediately followed by the verbatim reproduction of a speech given by the judge to a naturalization class in 1951 and Phillips' visit to Magnolia Cemetery.

In the talk, Waring evinces a cosmopolitan and global outlook on life that no doubt appeals to Phillips.[7] Waring tells his listeners: "You . . . have come here from various countries. You have brought to us ideas that must help us. The different countries of this globe can all contribute and help us in these United States. . . . What we have that

is good has come to us from other lands" (qtd. in Phillips, *Atlantic* 207–08). This speech forms a bridge from Sullivan's Island, the place of arrival for African-Americans, to Magnolia Cemetery, the judge's final resting place. Waring and his wife have been buried in Charleston, the judge's "home." Phillips notices that husband and wife both died in 1968: "She did not want to live without him" (211). He admits that he finds it hard to leave their grave as he points out that their tombstone and its surroundings make a scene that is both elegant and simple, but "heart-breaking in its loneliness. . . . The Judge and his wife are positioned in Magnolia Cemetery as if to confirm the fact that they were outcasts" (211). In what can be read as Phillips' "praise song" for Judge Waring, this heroic character is invested, even in death, with "dignity in loneliness" (25).

The third example of a Phillipsian hero I want to explore is Carla, a minor character in *A Distant Shore*. As in many of Phillips' works, the narrative is fashioned around two intertwined protagonists, Dorothy and Solomon, who become the central DNA of the novel as they move around each other in a helical manner and their stories become increasingly interconnected.[8] This structure can easily seduce the reader into not noticing minor characters such as Carla, the daughter of a single mother and career woman who sends her reluctant child to learn how to play the piano under Dorothy's tutelage in order to keep the child out of trouble. Carla's friends are the skinheads of the village, so Carla does not initially seem like a character who will have a positive effect on the events of the book. Before exploring what I read as her heroic work, which comes at the end of the actual plot, but quite early on in the narration of the story, I need to trace small acts of kindness that happen earlier in the narrative and set the stage for Carla's more profound intervention.

The novel follows an African asylum seeker, Gabriel (who becomes Solomon), on his journey from Africa to Britain. As Solomon tries to make his way to the north of England, he hitches a ride with the kind and lonely Irishman Mike. Mike invites Solomon into his lorry and recognises a fellow human being in the black stranger. His act of quotidian friendliness and hospitality speaks to the same kind of ethical outlook

that characterises Judge Waring. Mike asks Solomon his name and where he is from, a modest performance of humane communication that acts as a reminder that the bleak novel contains moments of kindness that should not go unnoticed. However, they do not change the status quo in the same manner as Carla's actions. Mike's kindness leads Solomon to Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, another representation of ordinary British people. They too invite Solomon in and encourage him to stay with them. Mr. Anderson, perhaps surprisingly, is not unduly fazed to see "a foreign person having crossed his threshold" (Phillips, *Shore* 277). On the contrary, his hospitality is an attempt to acknowledge that stranger and make him feel safe. Mr. Anderson also tries to make sense of the hostility to which Solomon is exposed. When the former's house is defaced by racist graffiti, Mr. Anderson tries his best to explain twenty-first-century British racism and prejudice to Solomon: "'People think that other countries should take you first because we've done our bit. . . . Some folks think these things. That you just want an easy living, or that you have too many children. They think you don't really want to work. It's in their heads and it makes them mad.' 'Who put it there?' [Solomon asks]. . . . 'I don't know, Solomon. I really don't know'" (289). This unanswered question follows Solomon to the village where he settles in his own bungalow and meets both Dorothy and Carla. Furthermore, this unresolved piece of conversation haunts the rest of the story and attests to the discourse that Carla has imbibed and which she begins to question and react critically to.

While Solomon encounters hospitality in his engagement with Mike and the Andersons, the village becomes an increasingly inhospitable place for him. The racism that seethes under the surface of the story finally erupts when Solomon is brutally killed and thrown in the dirty canal that runs through the village. Carla's skinhead friends kill him and she witnesses the murder. She is expected to keep silent about it but her conscience leads her to confess what she has witnessed to Solomon's friend, Dorothy. While Solomon and Dorothy both label themselves cowards at different times in the novel (297 and 311)—Dorothy even rails at what she calls a genetic stain of cowardice (229)—Carla does the right thing, a courageous and dignified reaction to a reprehensible act.

She is thus emphatically not a coward, and the narrative encourages us to see her as a contrast to Dorothy (at least in this sense), even if she witnessed the murder without intervening.

Solomon and Dorothy are also united in the common feeling of shame, as is demonstrated when they discuss the racist letters that Carla's friends have sent to Solomon. Nevertheless, they never move beyond that paralysing emotion. They never react to or do something about this example of blatant racism. It seems as though shame becomes especially paralysing when coupled with cowardice. Carla, however, rises above the very human emotions of pusillanimity and follows an ethical imperative. She refuses to fall victim to peer pressure and instead behaves morally. When she knocks on Dorothy's door, Dorothy immediately notices Carla's "sad eyes" (52), which she keeps firmly fixed on Dorothy. Carla admits that simply being there is tantamount to betrayal of her skinhead friends: "I really shouldn't be here. Paul will kill me if he knows I'm here. . . . They'll kill me, Miss, if they find out I'm here" (52–53). Yet she feels she must be there because her friends are "out of order" and their behaviour has to stop. Carla takes responsibility for her deed. When Dorothy says, "But Carla, they murdered him, and you helped" (55), she does not try to dodge the accusation. Her response is not ambiguous, but rather a manifestation of utter clarity: "I know, Miss," Carla says (55), and cries as she promises to go to the police and tell them everything. She feels she has no choice, not because she has confessed to Dorothy, but simply because it is the moral thing to do. Her last words underscore the simplicity of an act of heroism: "I will, Miss. I told you, I promise" (55). The repetition of the first-person pronoun, married to the active verbs "will," "tell," and "promise," forces itself into the events of the novel and upsets the status quo of the village, although this story is left out of the narrative.

Carla's heroic act doubles as a refusal to take part in the performance written for her as a potentially delinquent and immoral youngster who embodies the ills of society. Carla demonstrates a moral backbone and dignified agency that the novel celebrates, but in such a muted way as to go almost unnoticed. The minor acts of kindness forge a path of humanity and hospitality in a racist and unfriendly England. Her

deed of honesty and responsibility materialises out of the mixture of cordiality and hostility at the heart of the novel. Carla was involved in the hateful act yet is willing to atone for her actions. This takes courage and a kind of moral insight that attempts to create order out of chaos. In a novel peopled by cowards and self-proclaimed cowards, unselfishly telling the truth in order to make things right at great personal cost is indeed a heroic act.

The last character I will explore through a heroic lens is Leila from Phillips' first novel, *The Final Passage*. The novel's epigraph is from T. S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding," and it encourages us to enfold history into the story of protagonist Leila's passage to England. "[H]istory is a pattern / Of timeless moments," Eliot writes. C. L. Innes picks up this cue and suggests that Leila—and readers of the novel—perceives of her life in the Caribbean "as a series of timeless moments, without a pattern" and that living in England is also "a meaningless and patternless series of timeless moments" (25). However, it is possible to turn this suggestion on its head and propose that, for Leila, her existence in the Caribbean and England is not patternless. There is, in fact, a noticeably destructive pattern in the novel that pivots on the reiterated words "nothing" and "nobody." Re-reading Leila from the perspective of the heroic allows for a focus on agency, resistance, and radical change in this sequence of negation. Toward the end of the novel, Phillips suggests that Leila begins to work against the nihilistic system that almost, but not quite, obliterates her. It is nihilistic in the sense that it sees no intrinsic value or meaning in life. However, if the reading of Leila shifts from emphasising a negative downward spiral of nothingness focused on the protagonist's breakdown, the lack of communication, and the loss of self to a more positive and empowering investment in what I call the "somethingness" of friendship and safety, Leila emerges as a heroic figure. Bénédicte Ledent holds that the bleakness—a destructive and nihilistic pattern—"co-exists with and is thus mitigated by a few elements suggestive of rebirth" (21). A heroic reading foregrounds precisely these narrative elements.

The story opens with Leila's attempt to forget her husband Michael's treatment of her: "Nothing was allowed to remain in focus" (Phillips,

*Passage* 16), she convinces herself, because she only wants to exist in the present and look to the future. Her former boyfriend, Arthur, who has travelled to the US to study, sees the Caribbean island as "a land of nothing" (80). Michael, too, wants to escape because "[t]here's nothing here for [him] to do, nothing. . . . Nothing, man!" (53). Like John Osborne's character Jimmy Porter, Michael looks back in anger and his fury negatively affects his relationship with Leila. Yet when he asks her why she always cries she whispers that it is nothing. Indeed, as if to emphasise the pattern of nothingness that characterises the novel's most noticeable discourse, Leila soon learns that "no matter what she said or did Michael had decided to give her nothing in return, except for his anger or his all too familiar silence" (164).

This damaging way of seeing the world infects Leila, too. Michael's mistress, Beverly, is "nothing" (56) to him and a "nothing woman" to Leila (60). She notices that Beverly and Michael's son has his father's eyes, "eyes that said nothing" (63), without reflecting on where these calamitous ideas come from. It is Millie, Leila's friend, who exposes the cowardice at the heart of the discourse of nothingness. She goads Leila, telling her: "[Y]ou too damn scared to come out and admit when you done something wrong or when you make a mistake" (60). Millie's call to action is an attempt to encourage Leila to break the degrading cycle of negativity, but it takes migration to England, her mother's death, and Michael's departure from her life for her to change her status quo.

Throughout the narrative, Leila longs for intimacy and a conversation with her mother, but neither woman is willing to offer anything. Typically, "Leila said nothing" (196) and thus no exchange ensues. Her mother dies in Britain and they never manage to have a proper dialogue. However, Leila draws the strength from her mother's tombstone that enables her to embark on a course of action that transforms the status quo of nihilism that has dominated the novel and her way of being in and seeing the world around her. On the novel's last pages, Leila emerges from her breakdown, pregnant with her second child and alone, yet with a new resolve. She undergoes a kind of cleansing ritual, "leaving behind" her husband, England, and all white women, including her friend Mary (197–99). In a rebellious gesture, she burns everything that

reminds her of England and feels cleaner for it. Her decision to return to the Caribbean island can be read as a Fanonian "yes" to life, love, and generosity (Fanon 222). Leila wants to go back to something and somebody—to "safety and two friends" (Phillips, *Passage* 203). Millie and Bradeth offer her a welcome and a thus a home, because, as Millie insists (providing one of the few powerful definitions of the troubling signifier "home" in Phillips' writing), "home is where you feel a welcome" (115). Homecoming also seems to suggest an acceptance that a personal history of friendship, tolerance, and sympathy is also located in the Caribbean. Reading Leila from the perspective of the heroic emphasises the yes-saying discourse of something and somebody that undercuts and interrupts the nothing discourse that dominates the narrative and allows for a reading of Leila's last gestures as heroic. Returning "home" breaks the passive cowardice that has characterised Leila and allocates an active agency and dignity that enable her to profoundly change her worldview. Moreover, by providing the reader with a female-centred, perhaps even feminist, narrative and with a female and Caribbean heroic protagonist, Phillips seems to critique the male-centred writing of his Caribbean predecessors witnessed in, for example, Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* trilogy or E. R. Braithwaite's *To Sir, With Love*. Their visions are firmly gendered: their protagonists are male and the heroes they imagine are male, too. I argue that Phillips' cosmopolitan outlook is not confined by gender, "race," or class. Entering the Caribbean Leila into a gallery of heroes accentuates Phillips' egalitarian and contemporary vision, which can be understood as a critique and transcendence of the male-centred Caribbean legacy from which he writes.

As my exploration of the heroic in Phillips' textual universe demonstrates, his heroes are characters who refuse to be swayed by the ruling ideologies or subdued by society's expectations of them. Often they are like impenetrable fortresses in their enigmatic silence, which allows them to survive with courage and dignity while keeping strength, spirit, integrity, and vision. Some heroic characters possess a kind of groundedness, and by that I mean a psychological state of resting secure in yourself and possessing an uncompromised dignity (as seen with Madison and the judge) rather than belonging or feeling at home in

some physical place. This groundedness also makes it possible for the characters who enjoy this psychological state to exorcise the ghosts that haunt and taunt the characters who do not. These are the ghosts of painful individual memories, survivor's guilt, or imprisonment, loss, abandonment, or impending madness that characterise so many of Phillips' (less heroic) characters. In Phillips' fictional world it is often impossible to lay these ghosts to rest. More often, the ghosts are stronger than the characters. The heroic characters who have the most inner strength and are best fitted to carry their psychological burden—those who manage to cope with memories of a life of loss—leave the textual universe and thus frustrate the common ending in Phillips' narratives of death or mental breakdown.

Looking at Phillips' texts from the perspective of the heroic, it is noticeable how some major and many minor characters are constructed as heroic both for what they do and who they are. However diverse, they are linked by integrity, dignity, and a broader outlook on life than the merely local and individual. Indeed, they profoundly attest to the kind of writer Phillips set out to become—a writer whose major interest is "the human heart" (Phillips, "Necessary Journeys" 126). Thus, Collier is right when he insists that Phillips developed a cosmopolitan's clarity of vision from his local Caribbean roots. His interest in the heroic may have been inspired by the Caribbean musings on heroes and heroism with which I began this essay, but it has broadened into an inclusive and democratic viewpoint. While the heroic is traditionally bound up in explorations of the actions of great men, this is emphatically not the case with Phillips' characters. The heroes who emerge from the texts share qualities of dignity and courage, but the "work" they embark on operates along many different trajectories and often leads to or exacerbates an ontological state of loneliness. Some characters turn their backs on the roles assigned to them in society, which they see as repressive or detrimental to their psyche (Madison, Carla, and Leila), and some are heroes in a more traditional manner, since they do important work that literally helps to change the status quo (as in the example of Judge Waring), but all upset the existing state of affairs, albeit in profoundly different ways. Heroic characters upset the

narratives by acting in unanticipated ways, and this may be Phillips' way of encouraging readers to rethink the notion of the heroic.

In the essay "*Fatheralong* by John Edgar Wideman," Phillips introduces the idea of "narrative baton-passing"—passing stories from father to son. According to Phillips, Wideman argues that without this transfer, "African-American identity will never achieve dignity and resilience" (Phillips, "*Fatheralong*" 64). Phillips picks up and expands on this idea in his essay "Shusaku Endo: Confessions of a True Believer," in which he concludes that a "literary baton-passing" creates a "rainbow coalition" of unlikely writers. The gift that Endo passes on is his ability to "dignify ambiguity" ("Shusaku" 213–14). This is high praise indeed from a writer whose "literary project" could also be said to do the same. For Phillips, this baton-passing emerges out of a Caribbean longing for its own heroes. It is, however, given a humane and cosmopolitan contemporary spin in his rich and varied literary universe.

## Notes

1 I focus only on four characters in this essay, but it is possible to productively read, for example, Eva in *The Nature of Blood*, David Oluwale in *Foreigners*, or John Ocansey in *The Atlantic Sound* from the perspective of the heroic.

2 In the conversation about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* between Achebe and Phillips on which the essay "Chinua Achebe: Out of Africa" pivots, Phillips insists that he has "always believed that Conrad's only programme is doubt" ("Chinua Achebe" 203). Furthermore, in his essay "Colour Me English," Phillips ends with an eloquent celebration of the "moral capacity of fiction to wrench us out of our ideological burrows and force us to engage with" the constantly changing world (16). Literature can do this, he writes, because it is "plurality in action: it embraces and celebrates a place of no truths [and] it relishes in ambiguity" (16). Thus, Phillips' own programme can be said to be one of doubt, and his narratives certainly relish in ambiguity. Ambiguity is, by definition, neither good nor bad (or perhaps both good and bad).

3 "I like to hide in the wings and turn the stage over to my characters," Phillips suggests about his own detached role as novelist ("Fire" 177).

4 Neither Miller nor Hughes-Hallett provides a definition of the hero; instead, they rely on examples to do the work of a definition. For Miller, there is an "ever shifting mobility that always makes the hero such a frustrating and difficult target to pin down" (x), and Hughes-Hallett concurs: "So what makes a hero? . . . Simple, single [answers] would be impossible" (10).

5 There are many interesting "no-sayers" in literature: think of Fanny Price saying no to marriage in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Sethe's reiterated no in Morrison's *Beloved*, or Harriet Burden's emphatic nos in Hustvedt's *The Blazing World*. There are also many no-sayers in Phillips' texts. The unnamed mother of the Heathcliff character in *The Lost Child*, for example, tries—by repeating no three times: "But no, no, no" (6)—to prevent her child from taking up the role expected of him as a black eighteenth-century boy. There is no space here, however, to explore literature's diverse no-sayers and how to interpret that explosive and potentially complex monosyllabic signifier.

6 Phillips' feelings about civil rights campaigners interestingly echo Martineau's words about "Women in the Antislavery Movement" of the 1830s: "One must experience something of the soul-sickness and misgiving caused by popular hatred, and of the awful pangs of an apprehended violent death, to enter fully into [the abolitionists of the US'] heroism" (Martineau qtd. in Yates 158).

7 Here, I mean cosmopolitan in the sense of Hannerz's "Two Faces of Cosmopolitanism," a political cosmopolitanism that tries to "come to grips with very large problems" and a cultural cosmopolitanism that enjoys "new sights, sounds and tastes, new people" (204). The judge seems to express and support what Hannerz calls a "thick form of cosmopolitanism"—a merging of the political and cultural aspects of cosmopolitanism that can inspire "a will to action" (204).

8 Other examples of what I label a "narrative double helix" include Emily and Cambridge in *Cambridge* or Bert Williams and George Walker in *Dancing in the Dark*. Phillips' other favourite structural pattern is what might be called a "narrative triptych"—three stories united by repeated phrases, ideas, and themes, as in *The Atlantic Sound*, *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, and *Higher Ground*.

## Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. 1814. New York: Norton, 1998. Print.

Braithwaite, E. R. *To Sir, With Love*. 1959. London: Coronet, 1993. Print.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *History of the Voice*. London: New Beacon, 1984. Print.

——. "Timehri." 1970. *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*. Ed. Kwesi Owusu. London: Routledge, 2000. 43–48. Print

Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. 1841. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966. Print.

Collier, Gordon. "The Dynamic of Revelation and Concealment: *In The Falling Snow* and the Narrational Architecture of Blighted Existences." *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life.* Ed. Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. 375–406. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986. Print.
Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourses: Selected Essays*. Trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1999. Print.
Hannerz, Ulf. "Two Faces of Cosmopolitanism: Culture and Politics." *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 107.3 (2005): 199–213. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
Hughes-Hallett, Lucy. *Heroes: Saviours, Traitors and Supermen*. London: Harper, 2005. Print.
Hustvedt, Siri. *The Blazing World*. London: Sceptre, 2014. Print.
Innes, C. L. "Wintering: Making a Home in Britain." *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction.* Ed. A. Robert Lee. London: Pluto, 1995. 21–34. Print.
Johnson, Paul. *Heroes: From Alexander the Great to Mae West*. London: Weidenfeld, 2008. Print.
Ledent, Bénédicte. *Caryl Phillips.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. Print.
McCluskey, Alan. *Materiality and the Modern Cosmopolitan Novel.* London: Palgrave, 2015. Print.
Miller, Dean A. *The Epic Hero*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000. Print.
Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Picador, 1988. Print.
Naipaul, V. S. *The Middle Passage*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978. Print.
Osborne, John. *Look Back in Anger*. London: Faber, 1980. Print.
Pears, Iain. "The Gentleman and the Hero: Wellington and Napoleon in the Nineteenth Century." *Myths of the English*. Ed. Roy Porter. Cambridge: Polity, 1992. 216–36. Print.
Phillips, Caryl. *The Atlantic Sound*. London: Faber, 2000. Print.
——. *Cambridge*. London: Picador, 1991. Print.
——. "Chinua Achebe: Out of Africa." *Colour Me English*. London: Harvill, 2011. 197–207. Print.
——. "Colour Me English." *Colour Me English*. London: Harvill, 2011. 3–17. Print.
——. *Colour Me English*. London: Harvill, 2011. Print.
——. *Crossing the River*. London: Picador, 1993. Print.
——. *Dancing in the Dark*. London: Secker, 2005. Print.
——. *A Distant Shore*. London: Secker, 2003. Print.
——. *The European Tribe*. London: Picador, 1993. Print.
——. *The Final Passage*. London: Faber, 1985. Print.
——. "Fire." *Colour Me English*. London: Harvill, 2011. 178–82. Print.
——. *Foreigners: Three English Lives*. London: Harvill, 2007. Print.
——. "Introduction: The Gift of Displacement." *A New World Order: Selected Essays*. London: Secker, 2001. 129–34. Print.
——. *The Lost Child*. London: Oneworld, 2015. Print.
——. "*Native Son* by Richard Wright." *A New World Order: Selected Essays*. London: Secker, 2001. 18–27. Print.

——. *The Nature of Blood*. London: Faber, 1997. Print.
——. "Necessary Journeys." *Colour Me English.* London: Harvill, 2011. 123–31. Print.
——. "V.S. Naipaul." *A New World Order: Selected Essays*. London: Secker, 2001. 187–219. Print.
Selvon, Sam. *The Lonely Londoners*. 1956. London: Longman, 1995. Print.
Soyinka, Wole. *Climate of Fear*. London: Profile, 2004. Print.
Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Ed. and Intro. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. 25–73. Print.
Yates, Gayle Graham, ed. *Harriet Martineau on Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1985. Print.
Young, Robert. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.