

Between Memory and History: *Crossing the River* as a Polyphonic Archive of Diasporic Identity

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Abstract

Crossing the River (1993) by Caryl Phillips has been the subject of numerous research studies that celebrate the novel for its portrayal of slavery, the Middle Passage, its vocal/choral nature, vocal plurality, and hyper-textuality, as well as its archival memory. My paper analyzes the novel using Paul Gilroy's project of the 'Black Atlantic' as the main lens of analysis, integrating the ideas on the archive by Derrida and the vocal features of the novel in my discussion, presenting how the vocal nature and plurality of the novel help in developing an archive of what Gilroy calls the 'Black Atlantic'. Though scholars have read the structure of the novel as paradigmatic of Gilroy's theoretical model, my study is unique in its métissage of the framework of 'Black Atlantic' and Derridean concept of 'Archive' with the vocal elements in discussion of Phillip's novel, e.g., the voice of the guilty father figure, the popping in and out of voices of the slave trader and the father, the multitude of voices of the African diaspora, along with the references to music and the drum beating, all contributing to creation of a polyphonic archive of the diasporic identity.

Introduction

Crossing the River (1993) by Caryl Phillips, a classical text in postcolonial literature, combines four discrete narratives of different eras in African American history to form a poignant meditation on the hardships and perseverance of people torn from 'home'. Three of these stories are of African Americans 'sinking hopeful roots into difficult soil': Nash Williams, a former slave 'repatriated' to Africa in 1834, is a Christian missionary in the rough, new country of Liberia; Martha Randolph, an elderly woman, set free after the Civil War, heads west, hoping to find the husband and daughter sold many years before; and Travis, a black U.S. serviceman stationed in England during WW II, falls in love with a white, married Englishwoman Joyce, and dreams of a home for the two of them away from past trials. The title story concerns James Hamilton, a 17th-century British slave trader, who, in letters home to his sweetheart and entries in the ship's log, chronicles the steady accumulation of human livestock, slowed only by high prices and death.

Phillips' novel has been hailed as a classic postcolonial text by scholars and critics and thus has been the subject of a vast body of research studies that celebrate it for its portrayal of slavery, the Middle Passage, its vocal/choral nature, vocal plurality, and hypertextuality, and archival memory, etc. Moreover, most scholars have discussed the novel in terms of the concept of 'Black Atlantic' by Paul Gilroy. For many critics, the novel presents "a strong vocal presence of [its] characters, with many utterances, voices, sounds, and music". Various interpretations read the novel as "fragmented, polyphonic narrative" inviting "the readers to listen to unheard voices from the past, a reading which is also encouraged by the novel's decidedly aural and musical nature, particularly perceptible in its prologue and epilogue" (Ledent 11). The polyphonic and vocal nature of the novel is very much evident as we see the prologue and epilogue full of voices, references to various musical

albums, Jazz, and voices of the several figures of African diaspora, all amalgamated with the voice of the slave trade owner in the consciousness of a mythical African father figure. Apart from the prologue and epilogue, the four narrative sections of the novel also contain more than four voices, thus giving the novel an overall vocal and musical nature.

In the prologue and epilogue, Phillips talks about ‘the chorus of common memory’, and ‘the many tongued chorus’ that the guilty father is always listening to over the span of about two and a half centuries. Also, the novel presents four distinct sections, each section voicing various ‘children’ of the mythic African father figure. Building on the various interpretations of the novel just hinted above, I argue that Phillip’s project in the novel seems to be creating in the form of this novel a polyphonic archive ‘of common memory’ of the diaspora scattered temporally and spatially. In my argument, I would also be pointing to the interesting fact that this archive/archival memory is ‘common’ as Phillips presents ‘white’ voices among the voices of the diaspora, provoking a ‘common’ future for the diaspora and the white world. In my opinion Phillips attempts to create an archive of ‘common memory’ fairly successfully by archiving the various voices that speak of not only the trauma of ‘crossing the river’ and the diaspora experience, but also the ‘white’ voices involved during and after the origin of diaspora, in a cinematographic fashion where various voices pop up and blend with the next emerging voice before diminishing to the background. In doing so, Phillips links the diaspora through the focal point of origin, i.e. the African father figure, creating an Africa which is geographically or politically metaphorical, instead of insisting on a return to Africa advocated by movements like negritude, Africanism, Pan-Africanism, etc. As Goyal reaffirms that Phillips’ “novels explore new ways of representing a transnational black imagined community outside of Afrocentric or nationalist modes of thought” where he “aims to bypass not only racist narratives of nation but also Afrocentric ones” (Goyal 206). Thus, Phillips seems to be striving to establish an archive of voices of the diaspora, but one that is based on a transnational black diaspora community, rather than a racial, ethnic or nationalistic one.

Phillips has created an archive of voices of the black diaspora who are scattered temporally and spatially. Unlike the archons of the past, Phillips does not include his own voice while archiving the voices; it is the diaspora itself that speaks in the archive, and Phillips reduces his role to merely an accumulator of the various vocal fragments that the diaspora has produced over the course of two and a half centuries. Using the mythical father figure’s point of view who listens to the voices and thus renders the voices audible to the readers, Phillips distances himself from the role of the archon, and thus abandons the hermeneutic right the archons of the past used to have. However, what Phillips does is amalgamate the voices of the black diaspora with those of the white men involved in the slavery trade across the Atlantic, the figure of James Hamilton and his logbook, and also the white Englishwoman, Joyce, whom Travis marries. In order to avoid a racial or national overtone, Phillip places the voice of Hamilton and Joyce in the center of the narrative, a move for which he has been often criticized as ‘privileging the master’s discourse’, and presents Hamilton, the slave trader and owner of hundreds of slaves, as a slave as well, guilt-ridden. The voice of Edward also takes the central place in the first part of the novel, who is also guilt-ridden and finally abandoned by his slave, just like the way he had abandoned his slave, Nash. Thus abandonment, which comes as a major thematic concern in the novel, rendered more effective by the abandonment of his children by the guilty father, and the recurring lament of ‘Father why thou has forsaken us?’, is something that Phillips himself does with the idea of return to Africa, saying that ‘there is no return’. Hence, the archive Phillips creates is an archive not of the precolonial origins of the diaspora or one that ushers the idea of ‘return’, rather one that highlights the continuity, fluidity, and metissage of the diaspora with the world. This archive, as Derrida explains, is in itself a ‘commencement’, a beginning of a sort of cosmopolitan archive that sits well with what Phillips and Gilroy believe and advocate.

It is the mythical father figure who hears all the voices, from across the river, and he seems to be the archon of the voices, not Phillip. The use of the father figure serves many purposes for Phillips. It not only becomes the focal node linking all diaspora voices, it also takes the responsibility off the shoulders of Phillips to act as an archon with a ‘hermeneutic right and competence’ to interpret the archive, saving him from becoming a

perpetrator of 'archival violence' Derrida mentions. This is an interesting move by Phillips as he comes out to be and not be an archon at the same time. Phillips gathers the vocal fragments of the archive, but it is the father who listens to them, and we listen to the fragments through his ears. It is also worth noting that the father is still waiting for the drum to be beaten across the river, and the chorus to swell, pointing to a future that is desired but one which has not been achieved yet. The fact that Phillips wants to create an archive of voices using text as a medium is very interesting, as Phillips is using literature/fiction as the archiving medium. Merely referring to the polyphonic, or vocal nature of Phillips' novel is not to give credit to the actual magnanimity of his project of creating an archive of voices. Creating such an archive, Phillips wants the world to focus on the now and future, rather than excavating a precolonial past on racial, ethnic or nationalistic grounds that is against the democratic and cosmopolitan spirit Phillips and various other scholars believed in. Thus, Phillips' archiving project comes out to be a novel one as it seems to link past and present, and point towards the future, and bears important implications for the future of the African diaspora, rather than pointing to some precolonial roots and history. In short, Phillips' archive points to the future, rather than the past.

Another aspect of the novel that adds to its archival nature is its intertextuality and hypertextuality. Ledente briefly alludes to the matter referring to an interview of Phillips where he mentions various works making their way in to the novel, e.g., Toni Morrison's *Beloved* from where the epigraph "for those who crossed the river" is borrowed, as well as in some parts of the section 'West' of Phillips' novel "where Martha has visions of her daughter reminiscent of what happens to Sethe in Morrison's text" (Ledente 12). Ledente also refers to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which "unmistakably looms over the novel's first section "The Pagan Coast," which, like the famous novella, deals with a metamorphosing journey inland (Najar), and finally the slave trader John Newton, mentioned in the acknowledgements, whose journal is extensively ventriloquized by Phillips in the section entitled "Crossing the River" (Ledente 13). Intertextuality of *Crossing the River* is testified by Goyal as well when she states that Phillips' novel is "[r]eminiscent of recent "neo-slave narratives" by such writers as Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Fred D'Aguiar, and Charles Johnson, among many others" (Goyal 207). It seems evident that *Crossing the River* carries within itself an archive of other literary texts, giving itself a subtle intertextual nature. Thus, in its rewriting and echoing other literary and historical texts, remarks Ledente, that this novel achieves an archival nature. Moreover, apart from being "built around historical and literary archives" the novel performs "an inclusive weblike network linking all the children of the African diaspora to each other through the figure of the African father as well as through their common experience of displacement and separation" so that this network of voices takes the shape of a polyphonic archive that is also connected with a cross-referentiality that is a characteristic of historical archives (Ledente 13).

In order to consolidate the archival potential of his novel, Phillips employs multiple stylistic choices to present the plot of his novel, most importantly the log book of the slave trade owner Hamilton and the letters by Nash, Edwards, and Hamilton himself. Commenting on the historical and archival nature of the novel, Goyal says that "Phillips draws upon such historical records as a slave-trader's logbook, or the diary of a slave-owner's daughter, or letters from Liberia from African-American emigrants". This meticulous attention to existing historical records "ensures that his characters and setting are meticulously researched and faithful to our notions of slave culture as it existed" (Goyal 207). What Goyal misses here is the project of archiving in his novel that Phillips had undertaken, for which meticulous attention to history and historical records seems a just prerequisite in order to achieve a faithful, compelling and convincing archival status. Such attention is yet another effort on the part of Phillips to give his novel the status of an archive. In this "painstaking [strive] for verisimilitude", in these attempts "to find the exact tone of voice of someone from the eighteenth century", in this "slipping into the skin of blacks, whites, men, women with equal felicity", Phillips wants not only to "highlight the shared history of slavery and to move away from more strident nationalist narratives of blame", but also "[i]n these historicized and largely realist moments", Phillips wants to achieve an archival authenticity that also shares his vision of Africa, African diaspora, the experiences of

slavery and the global view of African future and identity, “one that is characterized by continuity and collective memory”, rather than those racial, ethnic or nationalistic ideals that championed the idea of ‘return’ (Goyal 207).

The novel by archiving voices, not only of the guilty father i.e. Africa, but also the diaspora scattered over time and space linked by their common origin, tells us that Africa is not a time or space bound place, it is its children, wherever and whoever they are, and the mythic African father figure, the image of Africa out of boundaries of race, nation and color, is listening to the polyphony of the voices of its children, waiting for it to become a symphony, and be heard across the river, and throughout the world. Goyal’s analysis follows a similar trajectory where she notes that “the novel imagines Africa solely as “a guilty father. Always listening”, as a “mythic figure”, who is responsible for “the only connection between the disparate narratives” and that is “of a common origin” (Goyal 217). It is this father figure who “functions as that of an all-knowing prophet who can perceive the mythic correspondences between various historical fragments and subsume them within his overarching vision” (Goyal 223). Thus, Goyal also remarks on the nature of the novel, although in passing, that the voices and narratives it contains are very much alike to historical fragments, or in other words the archival documents that are more or less in fragmentary form. Also, the father figure comes out to be the archon who is the point of origin as well as point of interconnection between the various fragments of voices, and it is the father figure that does the archiving, an interesting choice that Phillips has made, by listening to them in a way that makes all those spatially and temporally disjointed fragments seem continuous, and joined seamlessly. Though Goyal does not say it outright but we could infer it from what she says about the father figure.

Hence, *Crossing the River* establishes itself as a polyphonic archive of the African diaspora, amassing not only the diaspora voices but also other historical and literary narratives intertextually and hypertextually. This archive is not just an accumulation of various voices from past and present; it is a vast interlinked network of voices, although fragmented, yet in a unified form through the central node of the guilty, mythical African father figure. This archive presents itself as a one-of-a-kind archive as it not only encompasses the centuries of diaspora voices, but also hints towards a global future, one where all white and black voices merge and create a cosmopolitan world. Contrary to the conception of diaspora and diaspora-history based on racial, ethnic or nationalistic grounds, this archive brings white voices as well to the center, mixing the voice of the African father figure with white characters such as Hamilton, Edwards, and Joyce, pointing towards “the redemption of a shared and fallible humanity” (Goyal 224). The ‘commencement’ of this archive is the point when the diaspora was created by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it encompasses not only the slaves but the slave-masters as well, discouraging a ‘return narrative’ that many of the African movements upheld. That is why the Africa Phillips paints is metaphorical rather than physical, symbolized by the African father figure who himself claims that there is no return. Thus, bestowing the power of listening and narrating the voices, Phillips gives the ‘hermeneutic right’ to the African father figure, which in turn saves Phillips from committing the ‘archival violence’ that Derrida associated with archive and the process of archiving.

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