AFROEUROPA IN CONVERSATION WITH CARYL PHILLIPS

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I met Caryl Phillips in West London on the morning of 28 June 2007, knowing he had just landed after a night flight from New York and had a very tight schedule over the next days. It was quite an event to finally be able to talk to him, after months of e-mails trying to fix up some time in his schedule. We did the interview in his theatre agent's office: Judy Daish has been his theatre agent for almost thirty years, back when he was just an aspiring writer. The office was quietly buzzing with activity, surrounded by shelves with books embracing all the space. A poster of Harold Pinter hung on one of the walls of the room where we sat down for an hour and a half, before Caryl Phillps's next appointment with the Headlong Theatre (formerly Oxford Stage Company) which will soon be staging his new play *Rough Crossings*. He must have been exhausted, and he mentioned a pain in his right ear, yet did not make a single gesture of impatience or fatigue during the meeting.

After a while of listening to him, it becomes clear that Caryl Phillips is a man who has reached the point of being able to live his life as he likes: writing, travelling, investigating and embarking on projects that really matter to him. It is difficult to figure out how he has the time to write, to teach his students in Yale and to speak at the many events to which he is invited across the world each month. This time he had been asked to give the inaugural lecture at a Conference on James Baldwin at Queen Mary and Westfield College. Only an intense passion for literature and a radical loyalty to the causes that he has defended throughout his life might explain why he dedicated time to all of us during his fleeting four-day trip to London.

As Caryl Phillips has pointed out in a number of articles, since his early twenties he has realised that the British society of the 1980s in which he lived offered black people a limited range of stereotypes, and he decided not to play to these expectations (Phillips "Necessary Journeys," 4-6). Rather, as his work expresses and as he also explained in this interview, he chose to combat them. Travelling and living abroad for long periods changed his sense of those limited horizons, although he conceded in the interview that the Britain he grew up in has undergone a

profound change. What Phillips does not say is that this transformation of British society is also a result of his own writing -and its performative function, to use Mark Stein's term- and that of his generation, who have embarked in the phenomenal task of redefining "Britishness" -David Dabydeen, Joan Riley, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jackie Kay and Fred D'Aguiar to name a few. It was also a consequence of the political and literary activism of the 1980s, and prominently the activity of the recently deceased John La Rose, whose legacy includes New Beacon Books and the George Padmore Institute which holds a unique archive with documents from the period in which the "rebel" generation of non-white British citizens led an organised struggle to fight for their rights (White et al.). Black and Asian writers began to be published and brought to the attention of mainstream criticism in journals such as Wasafiri, created by Susheila Nasta, which in 2004 celebrated its 20th anniversary with the publication of a book containing some of its interviews (including one with Caryl Phillips). These writers and a number of intellectuals, trade unionists, social workers and many anonymous people have made Britain -and London in particular– more like a home for many of us, including Southern Europeans who have come later and have not been made to feel like foreigners. This is not to imply that Britain may have become some kind of paradise, particularly for refugees and asylum seekers, as Phillips's novel A Distant Shore (2003) suggests.

I had many questions to ask Caryl Phillips but, as a woman reader and writer, I had a burning one regarding the construction of female characters in his fiction, with their unforgettable entity and dignity (which is not to say they are likeable or role models in any way). The portraits of Martha and Joyce in *Crossing the River* (1993), of Eva in *The Nature of Blood* (1997) or Lottie and Ada in *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) strike the enquiring reader as a rare departure from the objectifying gaze of a number of male authors, in the context of currently fashionable acts of aesthetic violence in contemporary art and culture. I knew of his admiration for Angela Carter and his moving acknowledgement of her writing and her own 'necessary journeys' away from certain elements of the 'Judeo-Christian' tradition and the burden on European narratives of

women and their sexuality. Perhaps one of Phillips's unique qualities is his way of interrelating different forms of sexual prejudices and racism – something that few mainstream male authors and artists have taken on at a deeper level (certainly Baldwin, as Phillips explains; among his British contemporaries one would think of Hanif Kureishi).

The conjunction of Caryl Phillips's profound explorations of Black Atlantic literary geography –to use Paul Gilroy's terms to refer to the historical and cultural connections between Europe, Africa and the Americas— with a strikingly original sense of experimentation in narrative structure create a strong tension in his work. His writing has the power to challenge knowledge and perceptions, to expose tacit prejudice and dismantle comfort zones and to affirm the existence of silenced lives—many of them lost in the attempt to form part of a European (or American) society that persists in keeping in place the impediments to make sure things stay unequal.

Indeed, it is still not quite mainstream to celebrate one's African belongings in Europe, and the past, no matter how mythological ("Egyptian" or "Ethiopian") and legendary it may appear to be, offers no better possibilities: Europe seems unable to acknowledge Africa's past civilisations unless they are "written" somewhere, as Wole Soyinka ironically commented in his lecture "On Civilisation" on the 7 July at the 2007 London Literature Festival when he reflected on the archaeological excavations and the management of Africa's sites and treasures. Caryl Phillips's investigations and travels to a number of African countries –one may read about his conversations with writers in Sierra Leone ("Distant Voices," 7-9) on their struggle to survive, his journeys across the slave forts of Ghana or about his own enjoyment of the beauty of the Kilimanjaro ("The height of obsession," 5-7)— come across as a harmonious affirmation of his love of the continent and his friends there and of his own African diasporic belonging within his larger triangular voyage across the Atlantic.

Spain, where the *Journal of Afroeuropean Studies* was born a year ago, may become a privileged space for the re-configuration of a positive and plural African and European hybrid identity. Unfortunately at the moment it is no exception in the landscape of the crude realities of racism

against black people in Europe and in a more peculiar way, we seem to be strikingly oblivious of our African and Afro-Hispanic connections. In an early book, The European Tribe (1987), Phillips has written about his perception of African Spain and I had the opportunity to ask him to elaborate on his impressions. In Andalusia he writes about a conversation with some young boys, who ask him for cigarettes in a street in Tarifa (Cádiz). Then they compare their skin to his: one of them shows him the arm of the smallest boy in the group and states "un negro," and another one observes "Dos negros. Un negro grande y un negro pequeño" and they all, including the narrator himself, burst out laughing. Then Phillips notes: "The boy was not black, just the possessor of a slightly tanned skin, centuries of Jewish, Gypsy, Moorish, Arab and European blood surging through his young veins." ("A pagan Spain," 29). Caryl Phillips's books give us back new images of who we are, with the constant acknowledgement and celebration of our hybridities. These are the questions addressed in this interview.

To read more on Caryl Phillips in English see Benedicte Ledent's (2002) work *Caryl Phillips*. To read more in Spanish see Graham Huggan (2004) "Shakespeare poscolonial y la novela contemporánea sobre el Holocausto" in Ángeles de la Concha (ed.) *Shakespeare en la imaginación contemporánea: revisiones y re-escrituras de su obra.*

CARYL PHILLIPS – INTERVIEW

MV: The first time you wrote a story, you were nine years old; in your own words, "(...) the son needs his father's attention and so he writes a story. The story includes the words *glistening* and *glittering* which have a glamour that the son finds alluring..." (Phillips "Growing Pains" 22-23). Tell us more about your love of writing, and how it all began. What was the next piece of writing? At what point did you decide to become a writer?

CP: It was at a young age that my writing got the attention of a parent. When you discover that you're reasonably good at something, whether its football, running, etc., as a kid you want to do more of it because it gets people's attention. Throughout my teenage years, I had a feeling that I wanted to do something with the arts, probably with the theatre. Judy Daish, whose office we are in now, was my first agent. I knew the theatre better than anything else, and when I was about 20 I began writing for the theatre because it was the form I understood best. But secretly I'd always wanted to write novels.

MV: You worked in Edinburgh as a stagehand, and had three plays produced: *Strange Fruit* (Sheffield Crucible Theatre, October 1980), *Where There is Darkness* (Lyric Theatre Studio, Hammersmith) and *The Shelter* (Lyric Theatre Studio Hammersmith, September 1983). You have written that you did not have second or third productions, which meant that you did not have an audience. You were play writing at a time when the second generation of black British people were deeply involved in the changes of the eighties and the nineties. Other non-white writers had the same negative experience and also left the theatre for the world of the novel and scriptwriting. As you note in this article, twenty years later the third generation of non-white playwrights (Kwame Kwei-Armah and Roy

Williams) are finding an audience –Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003) was staged at the Almeida, which is an absolutely mainstream venue. What has changed in Britain and what are the conditions for this to happen now, that did not happen to you and other writers of your generation who started out writing for the theatre, like Hanif Kureishi?

CP: Well, I did have second productions; I didn't have many, but I did have a few. But generally you are correct: there was not a large audience for a young or black playwright because your colleagues were people like Harold Pinter. I didn't expect to have Pinter's large productions or audiences, but something more than just small or relatively small productions that disappeared. This is not good for a writer who wanted to reach a large audience.

What has changed? Britain has changed. And I think that Britain has a much more conscious sense of itself as a multicultural, multiracial country, so a story which involves black faces and white faces seems to be not so much a pioneering thing now. I wouldn't say it's mainstream, but it's certainly not exotic and not on the fringes. I think this next generation of playwrights are very good and they're very fortunate that they're writing in a different time.

MV: Tell us about the importance of travelling in your mid twenties, when you had decided you wanted to be a writer. In the first sentence in your article "Necessary Journeys" you say: "Twenty years ago, in the autumn of 1984, I was travelling by myself in Morocco and Spain" (2004: 4) As you explain, you are within a long tradition of writers from Britain, who sought to define themselves by "travelling and encountering strange others who might, to some extent, affirm their sense of their own place in the global scheme of things" (4). Other British writers like Stephen Spender and George Orwell travelled and also spent a significant amount of time in Spain. Is there anything about Spain that comes across as a strange Other and allows you Northern European writers to know more about yourselves?

CP: The early generation of British writers who went to Spain – Robert Graves, Spender– did so because it was cheap. It was incredibly cheap and warm and you could live in Spain and write and work and feel

connected to a very powerful culture, a very European, but different culture. These writers wanted to get away from Britain but they also wanted to be embraced by a culture that was attractive and had a very powerful sense of itself. I think that my reason for travelling to Spain was different: when I was in Spain, or when I am in Spain, particularly in Southern Spain, I feel Africa; Spain is culturally influenced by North Africa in a way that Germany and Sweden and Holland —and even other Mediterranean countries such as Greece and Italy— are not. And, like most African countries, Spain was physically occupied. People always say, "Anything South of Madrid is Africa;" well, it's true: I feel Africa.

MV: The European Tribe (1987) ended on a critical note about Europe's "absence of self-awareness", which you see related to "a lack of a cogent sense of history." What was your impression about Spain's sense of its Afro-European identity and history?

CP: In denial.

MV: What about Spanish attitudes towards contemporary Africa?

CP: Oh, hostile! Hostile and stupid. I mean, look at your former Prime Minister and his position on Iraq. He seems to have made a real attempt to position Spain as a Western European power, but this flies in the face of any understanding of Spanish history. Look at the geography of Spain and its history as an expansionist country to the Americas. It's a strange attempt to behave with an almost Germanic sense of order and discipline. Spain was not formed by that, Spain was formed in the crucible of a certain adventuring, buccaneering chaos, in fusion and confusion. The very strength of Spain is the impurity, the mixing –that's the strength of this country, that's what makes it interesting. To try to behave as if "we're not that close to Africa" or "we're just the same as everybody else in Europe"... look at bullfighting, the Moorish tradition, flamenco, the siesta: there is nothing Western European about these things!

MV: I love the closing words of "Necessary Journeys": "The most dangerous thing that we can do to ourselves is to carelessly accept a label that is offered to us by a not always generous society that seeks to reduce us to little more than one single component of our rich and complex

selves. Somewhere between Morocco and Moscow the truth of this struck home, and by the time I returned to Britain I was ready to begin" (6).

The struggle against those labels and stereotypes is a central concern in your fiction as well: in your writing black essentialism, contemporary music and the demands of capitalism –for example in the contradictions you highlight in Marvin Gaye's life and work, in Spike Lee's cinema, or certain productions of gangsta rap... In your last novel, *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) the two actors, George Walker and Bert Williams are aware that they are playing with those stereotypes and are, at the same, time prisoners of them. In what ways do you think this burden of non-white people –including that funny category of "white-other" Southern Europeans— is being made to fit a particular pattern and perform accordingly in the US and in the UK? Does it affect writers as well in the sense of having particular demands on the part of their agents and publishers?

CP: Those kinds of stereotypes still exist. If you look at contemporary music and how black people are packaged in contemporary music –in Britain or America most popular black music is labelled gangsta rap or hip hop– all the stereotypes are there. But you don't have to be a musician to fall into a stereotype; you don't have to be black for society to stereotype you: it stereotypes women, it stereotypes working-class people, and it certainly stereotypes non-white people.

I was in my doctor's office in New York on Monday and one of the doctors came out, looked at me and said "Are you a dancer?" I'm older now, but when I was younger I would have been annoyed and upset about this. I've been going through this for years, but younger people still have to deal with it, not just because they're non-white, but because they are women, or because they are Muslim. It's just how society likes to categorise people —if you are non-white the chances are that you're going to be categorised with more vigour in Europe still, even though things *have* changed.

It's important to remember that these stereotypes still exist. Whether trying to get a job, buying a ticket to go somewhere, hailing a cab—if you don't *look like* you fit *into* this place then you are treated in a

different way. And some people —I suppose this is what *Dancing in the Dark* is about— figure out that they will be rewarded if they embrace not fitting in, if they play to the stereotype. Some people can say "That's what they want, they're going to pay me, I don't care;" other people say "No, I'm gonna fight it, I'm gonna fight it with my pen" as an academic, or as a writer, or as a politician or a social worker.

It's easy to think about stereotypes very simply in terms of race, but one has to remember that stereotypes exist for all sorts of people in society. There is not a woman in any society, certainly in any Western society, who has not at some point felt extremely angry because of how she has been treated by a man, whether it's been in the shop, or whether it's been applying for a job or trying to open a bank account; it's just not a level playing field. When you throw in the question of class, and when you throw in the question of race, and these days, when you throw in the question of religion, it's still problematic for many people. And I should also say, because I'm going to give a talk later today on James Baldwin, sexuality.

MV: Yes, this is a question you raise when you quote Baldwin (speaking to a journalist) speaking about his feelings about the connectivity between race and sexuality: "The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they will have to mature on the level of sexuality." Can you tell me more about this interrelation between race and sexuality?

CP: There's a deep connection between race and sexuality because there are stereotypes tied into them: some races are supposed to be more highly sexualised than other races. You only have to look at the history of America in the last two hundred years: the history of slavery and the fear of black sexuality. The fear of black *male* sexuality in particular is absolutely rampant in American society. People are *frightened* of black male sexuality and people are *fascinated* by black female sexuality. With this fear comes prejudice and exploitative behaviour.

I think the same connection is true in Europe. I got into trouble a few years ago in Holland and Belgium for some interviews in which I said

that, as far as I was concerned –I was joking but I was also partly being serious— the only real way to solve the issue of racism is for people to sleep with people who don't look like them. That is the final taboo: "Mum, this is my husband-to-be, he's called Mohammed" or, "Mum, I'm going to marry this woman, she's called Fatima." People are okay if different races work together, but they don't like it if you bring them home and say that they are going to be part of your family and that the children are going to be a mixture of races. That is the final taboo and the link between sexuality and prejudice: it's the fear, the deep fear of miscegenation, which I think is the fiction that has underpinned so much of the racism and prejudice that exists today. It's a real fear, particularly in Europe, but also in America, of this rather stupid word *purity* being corrupted. A *loss of purity* is what people feel without actually realising that there is no such thing as 'purity'.

MV: In your essay on Baldwin and his novel *Giovanni's Room* you point out the courage of this American writer in defying sexual and racial categories. In what ways do you think we can continue learning from Baldwin's identity politics today?

CP: Baldwin didn't have any identity politics. He was a black American who came to Europe to try to free himself of the political and racial problems of the United States of the time. In Europe he could be free, like so many black Americans who came to Europe, they could be free in Europe in a way which is often confusing for non-white Europeans, because they're still getting hell here. Baldwin came to Europe as a black American, and as a black American in Europe you are excused from a lot of the prejudice and a lot of the difficulties that would face a Moroccan or an Algerian or a Nigerian or a Ghanaian or an Angolan. You are free of that because you are American, and then you are black. Those were the paradoxes of freedom for him in Europe, and for other black Americans, that don't exist for black Europeans.

Baldwin didn't have any programmatic scheme for doing what he did; he was simply trying to free himself –like all writers– so he could sit in judgement on himself and see himself clearly. He couldn't do that in America, he had to come here, to Europe, to be free.

This act of freeing oneself works very differently for European blacks. It's very different for James Baldwin and Josephine Baker, and Chester Himes...

MV: Your article in *A New World Order* on Spielberg's film *Amistad* highlights the responsibility of the writer in her or his research when fictionalising an event of the past, especially if those films or novels are used as educational materials containing the "truth" of the matter. Your own book *The Atlantic Sound*, with the five sections or travels from Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, to Liverpool in Britain, then to Ghana and finally to Charleston in the South of the United States, seems to have a phenomenal amount of research in terms of history, people's stories and your own observations in each one of the journeys. Can you tell me about your own research when you wrote The *Atlantic Sound* (2000): What did you read before and during each of your five journeys, did you visit archives or libraries, who did you talk to?

CP: I did a lot of research, and each section had a different genesis. When I went to Ghana, for instance, I didn't do much research in advance, I just took notebooks and I made a few phone calls when I arrived. I asked a few questions, and had somebody plug me into this person, Kofi Anyidoho, who helped me navigate things, but I didn't know exactly what I was going to do –I just started to write.

I had absolutely no idea why I was going to Charleston. I drove to Charleston from New York –I just got into my car and started to drive. I had my then-assistant with me, and before we left I asked her to photocopy as many books and articles as she could on Charleston, and she drove while I sat in the passenger's seat and read the material. I came across the story of the judge and when we were close to Charleston I said to her 'You know what? Before we go into the hotel let's go to the graveyard; let's try and find this graveyard and go there'. Later, at the hotel, I got on the phone and called the city archives and a local museum and I said 'I need to find as much as I can about this judge', and an hour later I said to my assistant, 'Okay, I'm gonna take this place and this place, and you're gonna go to this place and this place, and we'll meet later in

the day. See what you can find.' I *knew* that there was something strange about Charleston and I wanted to write about it.

As for Liverpool, I just thought, 'You know, I want to write about this guy John Occansey, but let me go to Liverpool as well, and see what happens when I'm talking to people.'

MV: Is John Occansey someone whose story you found in an archive?

CP: Yes, I think he was mentioned in a history book. I had read a paragraph about him, and I thought 'Okay, I have to find more', and then I realised that he had written an account of his life. I wrote to a librarian in Ghana, and I paid him to photocopy what they had in their archives and mail it to me in America, so I was able to read John Occansey's own words about what had happened to him.

MV: In *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) Ghana seems to be a central place, and it is also present in your next book, A *New World Order* (2001). Ghana's debates and coming to terms –or not coming to terms— with the past comes across, in a way, as disappointing or superficial. At one point you've had enough and you say that you are "panafested," although at the same time, this journey does become revealing of your belonging. I am thinking of your memory of Elmina castle, which you recall at the end of *A New World Order* as one of the most beautiful buildings you have seen in your life, and yet so loaded with a history of death. When did you decide to travel to Ghana for the first time? Have you gone back again?

CP: I first went to Ghana in 1990 because the British Council in Ghana asked me to come and do some teaching at Legon and then travel to Cape Coast and Kumasi and lecture there. I was very happy to go to Ghana and I had a fantastic time; I made friends who are still friends to this day, and I travel there often. In the last five years or so I have started to take groups of American students there each year; I teach a course about the literature of the middle passage –we read Kofi Anhidoho, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor and some African American writers– and at the end of the course, I take the students for ten or twelve days to Ghana to visit the slave forts and Accra.

MV: What is that experience like, when your American students go to Ghana?

CP: It's very moving for them and for me to see the ideas I teach about -loss, the conversation between Europeans and Africans failing, how the conversation failed, and why it's never been resolved- come to life. I take them to the place where the conversation failed for the first time. The conversation was fine when it involved trading for goods. But once those dungeons, which used to hold goods, were converted into places to hold human beings, then the question of guilt and responsibility and shame and fear and distrust began to grow between the Africans and the Europeans. That's what I mean when I say that the conversation failed. We can look at William Faulkner's literature, at Conrad's; we can look at Baldwin, we can look at Toni Morrison, we can look at Ama Ata Aidoo; we can look at all sorts of literature that deals with this conversation; we can look at how blacks are related to whites etc., but it's only by taking the students to Africa, that they experience this failure emotionally. Standing in Elmina or in Cape Coast, the students feel that this history is real: these places were corrupted. It's important for the students to learn this, but it's also important for me to be reminded myself.

MV: Some of your novels are absolutely experimental in their structure: Crossing the River consists of four 'novellas', and so does The Nature of Blood; each is in turn structured around memory, journals, letters... Discontinuities in history seem to make sense in these loosely connected stories in your novels. Who did you learn from in terms of narrative technique? How does this connect with your sense of your multiple belongings to Europe, the Caribbean, the US and Africa?

CP: I didn't learn narrative technique from one person in particular, but from many people. I don't read others and think 'Oh, I want to do that'. I like Faulkner, but I don't want to write like Faulkner; I like Kapuscinski – the Polish writer— but I don't want to write exactly like him. From reading, you get a bit from here and a bit from there, but I've never sat down to write a book and thought 'Okay this is the form and the structure, because what I want to write is like that book'. I've never done that because I've always thought I had to invent the form to suit the narrative. Each book is

a thematic struggle with character and language, but it is also a formal struggle to find the right form to express what I'm trying to express. Often, my themes are geographically diverse, and it's a struggle to try and hold together those elements, which you've identified: Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, the United States. All of these disparate elements come into play, which means there can be nothing predictable or stable about the form. The form is going to change depending on the subject matter, and depending on the characters.

I was thinking this morning, when I went out walking, 'What would have happened if I were still living in England? What kind of a writer would I be? Would I be the same kind of writer? Would I be a different type of writer?' I think the one thing that would be different would be the form, it would be a lot more stable; it would be a lot more predictable, just as one's life is if you're not always running between airports and zipping around. Without this, your life gets a particular rhythm and a particular form, but my life isn't like that and I don't think my heritage is like that either: it's hybrid and it's confusion, and it's order imposed upon chaos, so that's how the form of the books have to be —order is imposed upon an essential, underlying, chaos...

MV: One of the surprises in reading your novels is the way you construct female characters. The women in your books might just as well have been imagined by a woman author. I love two of your characters in particular, both in *Crossing the River*: Martha ("West") and Joyce ("Somewhere in England"). They both pay a high price for the choices they make, in their limited scope: they both lose a child and Martha loses her own life in her search of her daughter. What women have you learned from –whether in history or literature or real life— that have allowed you to create these characters?

CP: Obviously imagination, but you never know where your characters come from; you never know where your particular aesthetic empathy comes from, you don't know why you feel closer to this character as opposed to that one. I was brought up by my mother, a very strong, smart woman, and I must have learned something from her.

I think people absorb a lot of what they can write about, or what will become the subject of what they're going to write about, when they are very young and it gets into their DNA and becomes how they see the world. My parents divorced when I was very young and my mother brought me up. I saw the struggle and the difficulty of being a single woman in a society that, as I mentioned earlier, is not a level playing field. I had the chance, at a very early age, to watch somebody struggling with aspects of society that interacted with her gender and with her race. So I've always been interested, not in a schematic way, but in an unconscious way, in the notion of the price that women pay as they navigate their way through society, either in a purely domestic way or in a professional way, or both. I find my imagination often drifting towards that struggle, as much as anything else.

MV: I have a question on the father's silence in your novels. The overarching narrator in *Crossing the River* has abandoned –sold– his beloved children; at a different level, Dorothy and Sheila's father in *A Distant Shore* is also absent in a way, trapped in his aspirations to belong to the white middle class and so never acknowledges them... and they in turn will be abandoned by their partners. All these characters who have been let down by their fathers have a tragic ending. Can you imagine a novel where a father does talk to his children, and what would these characters be like?

CP: Well, I guess you'd have to wait until I write another novel, because that's what I'm thinking about now.

MV: Is that in your next novel?

CP: Well, I haven't written it yet, but that question is in my head because that's a very difficult conversation for most people; it's a very difficult conversation for immigrants particularly, because there tends to be a big gap between the first generation and the second generation.

Occasionally, a mother can help bridge that gap. It's very hard for a father. I heard a poet the other day in Jamaica. He read a very powerful poem that concluded with his father saying to him —the poet had never got on with his father—'Well, the thing is you may think you know better, but I've been black for sixty years and I'm tired, it's now your turn, and now

that you're a father yourself, you have to explain to your son what this is all about'. I think these conversations between father and sons, particularly between black fathers and sons, they either don't happen or they happen in a very difficult way or, as this poet was suggesting, perhaps it's only when you become a father that you really understand the difficulty of communicating with your child and future generations. How do you explain the sort of indignities that you've had to put up with and that you're perhaps still putting up with? How do you protect your child against that? And I think there's a great deal of shame and a great deal of hurt and a great deal of anger which goes into that. In *Crossing the River* that voice is about a certain shame and hurt and anger, so I think it's there, but I don't really have the answer yet.

MV: This is a question about communication in the worlds your characters inhabit. In *A Distant Shore* Solomon –the African refugee– and Dorothy –the English teacher– are neighbours, yet they can never help each other because no one knows the important things about the other; it is Dorothy really, who in her reserve, makes it impossible for both of them to help each other. I remember Rohinton Mistry commenting on the scene his novel *A Fine Balance* when the heroine breaks the caste barrier that separates her from her tailors, and she takes them into her house: he says that when these barriers do not fall down, then situations become "perverse" in a way. Is the tragic ending of your novel about lack of communication? Is this something that happens in British society as well?

CP: In most societies, I don't think people know how to talk to each other. I don't think Britain is any different from most Western societies in that people don't talk to each other. People exist in a small bubble; they find it hard to break out of themselves and communicate. One of the great miracles of the modern world, I think, is that anybody is able to fall in love with anybody else because we're all so damned self-obsessed. It's increasingly difficult, I think, for people to reach out: you don't have to meet physically now, you just log online and look at a photograph and say, 'Oh, hell, no!' You don't have to have human contact, you have virtual relationships now. We have drama that is reality-based drama: it's not to do with imagination; it's just about humiliating people. One of the great

things that I admire about Dorothy in *A Distant Shore* is that she found the courage to talk to this man, and he found the courage to talk to her because in the world in which we live, people look at others from behind the curtains, and then they google and try to find out something about them, without speaking to them. To me, it is increasingly important that we talk to people, take a chance, give ourselves to the possibility of meeting people. But I think the trend is moving in the other direction: the trend is text messages, e-mail, google, MySpace, Facebook . . .

MV: I suppose you are very happy about Chinua Achebe being awarded the Man Booker Prize...

CP: Very happy.

MV: What books by African authors would you like to find in an anthology?

CP: I don't really have any favourite authors, African or otherwise. There are lots of books by writers that I like, but I would be lying if I said that I have a favourite African book, or a favourite American book. The books that I've read over the years that I admire most that are by African writers –I am a great admirer of Achebe, as you know; I am a great admirer of Soyinka's book *The Man Died* (his prison diaries); I like Coetzee's work (not all of it, but a lot of it); I like the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Tanzanian writer.

MV: What are the readings that you would consider key texts for an "Afroeuropean" audience?

CP: I would say *Banjo* by Claude McKay. I quite like *Pagan Spain*, by Richard Wright; I think he gets it totally wrong in places, but I quite like the idea that this African American writer has this romance in his head about Spain and takes off in his fancy car and starts to ride round and pontificate about Spain...

MV: ...which is everything but pagan!

CP: Precisely, but I like the attempt to engage. I like Claude McKay's book because it's a weaving of the Caribbean, Africa, and prewar Europe, at a time when barriers of race and class and sexuality collided –he was gay. His book has all the elements that are now being examined and looked at and dissected by late 20th, early 21st century

scholars of Colonialism and Postcolonialism. It's all there in *Banjo* –but sixty, seventy years ago. And I am also quite interested in how Claude McKay as a writer navigated his race, his class and his sexuality in Marseille at that time.

MV: Can you tell us anything about your new novel?

CP: Foreigners is not really a novel. It's non-fiction. The publishers want to call it a novel but it's not. It's a mixture of fiction, non-fiction and a bit of travel... it's more like...

MV: ...writing what you like?

CP: Yes. It's three narratives which really look at the lives of three different people in Britain who wanted to belong to Britain but found it very difficult to attach themselves to this society, because it's not a society that willingly accommodates outsiders very easily. In order to belong to this society (blackness in European societies) you must pass through various gates and levels of acceptability. Not everybody makes it. It's not different from America: African Americans have been in America for hundreds of years and they're still trying to make it to the centre of society, whereas people who came after them –Irish Americans, Swedish Americans, Italian Americans –all seem to have gravitated towards the centre so we might say to ourselves 'What's the problem?' The problems of belonging are more acute for some people as opposed to others. In *Foreigners* I'm trying to look at the lives of three individuals who found that passage to the centre of British life very difficult to make and all ended their lives quite sadly.

MV: Can we talk about music? You have written about some giants of American music, and I am thinking of Marvin Gaye and Luther Vandross ("The power of love." *The Guardian*. Arts 30 July 2005), both of them dead now. Who, what musicians or singers do you find inspiring nowadays?

CP: A good question. I like Mary J. Blige, and I like her last CD, *The Breakthrough* a lot. The problem with contemporary music is the same as the problem with the internet: it's all *me me me,* there's not a lot of social conscience there. I like both of Kanye West's CDs. I like Lauryn Hill's CD, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* –the title is clever, it has a social context, even in the title. I like anything that fuses social awareness with the heart,

and that understands that the heart is essentially what keeps people going, long after politics have faded. There's not as much of that today as there used to be, because it tends to be *me me me or love love love*. I listen to music assiduously because I'm always trying to figure out who's doing what. I saw a woman the other day in New York, on Tuesday night, at Carnegie Hall: Cesaria Evora. I like her. I've always been a fan of hers.

MV: What is the last book you have bought?

CP: Bought?

MV: Or read...

CP: I read the academic Arnold Rampersad's big biography of Ralph Ellison. That's the last one I have read.

MV: If you weren't a writer, what would you be?

CP: I don't know, I have a feeling I would have done something to do with the arts, maybe in television, or radio, or even the theatre. I wanted to be a theatre director. Maybe I'd have stuck with that, maybe I'd have ended up in TV or in journalism.

MV: What is your life philosophy?

CP: My life philosophy? I don't really have a life philosophy! Except I think it's important to try to find one image everyday that is beautiful. It might be a sunset or it might be a kid's face on the street, but you have to keep storing up the things that are positive because there's so many difficulties everyday, so many problems, so many terrible things that you hear on the news or read in the paper. I always look for one thing: it could be seeing somebody smile on a plane, or an old lady with a walking stick crossing the street. And once I've got that thing I say 'All right, the day can just go forward now':

MV: Of all the places where you live, maybe most of your time is spent in New York. What is your favourite corner?

CP: My favourite place in New York is Central Park. There's nothing better than being in Central Park early in the morning. The traffic is allowed into Central Park at 7, but because I live right on Central Park I'm often in the Park before 7 o'clock, when there are only pedestrians and horses. You can see beyond the trees, you can see the skyscrapers... that's my favourite place; being in that landscape, when it's quiet.

MV: Where do you find peace? Or where do you feel comfortable?

CP: In St. Kitts. I sit in my house, looking out at the golf course and the Ocean.

MV: Thank you very much.

CP: No problem. My pleasure.

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