Interview:

Migrant Journeys: A Conversation with Caryl Phillips¹

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Caryl Phillips and I met in New York City on August 25, 2008. We met in Central Park, a place that I realized during our conversation, means a lot to him and not just because his apartment happens to be located nearby. A pastoral landscape in the English romantic tradition, the park might provide Phillips with a sense of comfort, with some sort of familiarity in the anonymous atmosphere of New York. Interestingly enough, the park is also a place where Bert Williams, the protagonist of Dancing in the Dark happens to stroll at night as he reflects on the circumstances that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, made him the most famous black performer in America. Phillips writes: "He [Bert Williams] loves the way the city rises toward the sky, he loves the Brooklyn Bridge, the coal-powered elevated trains, the noise, the dirt, the rivers alive with their multitude of craft; this is his city, and these are his people, and as he walks he imagines that in its perversely detached way New York City understands him . . . " (Dancing 203).

I had many questions for Caryl Phillips, but as a migrant myself and a person who has been living in the United States on and off for about a decade now, I mostly wanted to discuss his views on America, the way the country has changed since he first moved here in 1990, and the way in which he sees himself as a Caribbean-born, British citizen currently living in New York City. Home and belonging are intricately complex questions in Caryl Phillips's writing. And those critics who insist on placing his work exclusively within a literary British tradition or a Caribbean literary tradition undermine the fact that as product of the African diaspora Phillips is quintessentially bound to the triangular cartography that links Africa, Europe, and the Americas in forcibly compelling ways. Most of Phillips's works reproduce such ternary topography in frequently

obsessive terms. At the end of A New World Order, Phillips relates how, over the years, he has come to know his other "home," a precious, imaginary space that has helped him come to terms with what he calls the "high anxiety of belonging." He writes: "I know my Atlantic 'home' to be triangular in shape with Britain at one apex, the west coast of Africa at another, and the new world of North America (including the Caribbean) forming the third point of the triangle" (305). In such a triangular map history played some of its most critical cards. Millions of people across the centuries would be forced to cross the Atlantic to start a new life elsewhere. These life journeys have all become part of Phillips's literary themes. Over the years, these journeys across the Atlantic have allowed Phillips to explore the importance of travel as a process of constantly reinventing oneself in a world in which identity is still far too often reduced to "unpalatable clichés of nationality or race" (A New World 6).

Europe, particularly London, the Caribbean, and Africa are the places to which Phillips continues to travel. Yet he spends most of his life in New York. In conversation with John McLeod in 2005, Phillips states: "New York is close to me because New York is my home. New York is a City where I've lived for many years, and one of the reasons that I have chosen to live there is because of an idea that is very central to American life, which is the act of reinvention. . . . So for somebody who is interested in identity, somebody who is interested in race, somebody who is interested in migration, it is an interesting place to be. It's not the only place to be, but it is a particularly interesting place to be, I think" (Familial 108-09). Even though the circumstances that brought Caryl Phillips to the U.S. are significantly different from the life experience of Bert Williams, and with all the artistic freedom that one has to allow to the art of writing fiction, I was intrigued by the way in which a real-life character such as Williams could take hold of the writer's imagination. A remarkable combination of circumstances—from the Caribbean place of birth to the many "physical reminders" of all the places Williams had walked in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century (Familial 111)—compelled Phillips to make the real-life man "visible" once again. Discussing the genesis of Dancing in the Dark, Phillips states:

Over the years I began to collect a file of information about him-odd articles, references from books, etc. Then, a few years ago, I realized that I would have to write about him, for he would not let go of me. This also coincided with a growing interest I had in how hip-hop performers in particular were presenting themselves (and being presented) to the wider American audience. There seemed to be an aspect of performative minstrelsy to some of their work. This all made me think increasingly about Bert Williams. ("Author Q&A")

Throughout our conversation, we discussed at length Phillips' latest published novel², but the reason I was particularly intrigued by Bert Williams's fictionalized story is because, as Phillips himself pointed out, the novel indirectly explores America's notion of re-inventing oneself, the quintessential motif of erasing one's past and start everything anew to become "the American" that J. Hector St. John de Crévecoeur, as early as 1782, described as "a new man," an Adamic figure "received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater" (Letters). In Dancing in the Dark it is Bert's father who acknowledges the transformation that America produces on his children:

A heart heavy like a stone, for he now understands that bringing his son to America was an act of foolishness that has allowed the powerful nation in the north to come between them. The country has made a nigger of the boy and there is nothing he can do to fight this United States of America, which he now understands habitually snatches children from the arms of those who gave them life and encourages them to become people who their parents no longer recognize, but people who their parents cannot stop loving even though they despise the transformation and resent the loss. (144)

"I wouldn't live anywhere else," Phillips said in response to my question on how he likes living in New York. The crux of cultural and linguistic diversity with an estimated 170 foreign languages spoken and with more than 36% of its population being foreign born, New York makes an ideal perfect home place for a writer such as Phillips who cultivates a plural personality and a fluid sense of identity. Here, in a city of more than eight million people, a city that in a previously

published article Phillips has defined as "recklessly hybrid" ("A Beacon in Dark Times"), Caryl Phillips seems to have found a sense of home with all the ambiguity that such a term obviously entails.

We sat in the bar & grill of the Central Park Boathouse restaurant. I was hoping that an outside space would be a quieter and more congenial atmosphere for a digital voice recorder. It turned out that the patio section in the bar & grill was actually noisier than the inside restaurant, but in the end it did not matter. I nervously began asking my questions in the typical formal mood of most literary interviews. Soon, however, I was drawn to Caryl Phillips's answers and comments and the formal setting suddenly transformed into a casual, friendly conversation. With each question and answer the voice recorder became less and less important. A natural storyteller, Phillips provided generous answers to my often convoluted questions. At times, I simply wanted to sit back and listen to his words rather than advancing with the next question. Like with his own work, there was not necessarily a precise order behind the nature of the questions and/or his answers. And yet, his comments clarified so many issues I have been raising about his writing all these years and much more. His comments on questions such as diaspora, migration, race, and identity, the quintessential motifs in his oeuvre, allowed me to reflect on my own personal journey as an Italian migrant to the US. They helped me think about the natural connection that binds me to his writing as well as to the writing of other Caribbean-born writers whose work I have come to treasure deeply over the years. "In reading other people's books, I am trying to figure out my own book," Phillips said at one point in response to one of my questions. For those of us who inhabit some kind of ambivalent space, whether this is by migration, race, gender, ethnicity, etc., Phillips argues, it becomes natural to develop a connection with individuals who also live at the crossroads. For me, I guess, the natural connection began when, upon arriving in the U.S. as a Fulbright scholar, I concentrated my graduate research on Native North American literature. I still remember the quizzical look I would receive when asked what my major was. Why not study Henry James, Edith Wharton and/or all those folks who, at the turn of the nineteenth century, travelled to Italy and wrote about its artistic

splendours? Ten years ago, I didn't really know how to explain my decision, nor was I equipped to provide a more provocative answer. More important, I did not want to engage in lengthy explanations on the many different realities of my native Italy (surely a very different country from the times of James's travels) and on the stark contrast between the north and the south. The island of my birth, Sicily, an island plagued by a deep, complex history of colonialism, a place sadly notorious for the illegal activities of the mafia, remains even today quite mysterious to the eyes of many Americans (and Northern Italians as well). But as the years went by and as the plight of Native Americans led me to the writing of the African diaspora and the work of Caryl Phillips, I began to understand how all the pieces fit together. In reading about all these varied writers' journeys, I began to figure out my own. Caryl Phillips's journeys in particular give us reflections of who we are, with stories that teach us how to negotiate our fluid, hybrid identities in a world in which migration is increasingly redefining the physical and psychological borders of our experience. Here are the questions addressed during our conversation.

EP: I would like discuss the question of your return to the Caribbean as I was re-reading A State of Independence just a few weeks ago. Was the book written after you returned to St. Kitts for the first time, in the mid 1980s?

CP: No, I had been there, it wasn't the first time. I think I finished the novel in 1985 and I first went back to St. Kitts in 1980.

EP: In a recent interview published in The Journal of Afroeuropean Studies you said that you "find peace, you feel comfortable in St. Kitts." Could you elaborate on that statement? What does it mean for you to find peace or to feel comfortable in St. Kitts?

CP: Well, nobody telephones me or comes around. I don't think I meant it in a cultural way. I meant it's anonymous, it's like New York. I find peace in New York because it's anonymous, but the difference is where I live in New York is noisy and crazy. Where I live in St. Kitts there is nothing, there is just peace and beach. In St. Kitts I can get on with my work and the phone does not ring, and I don't feel obligated to answer e-mails, and there is no chance that anybody is going to call unexpectedly. When I am in St. Kitts nobody bothers me mainly because it's a small island and if they know me they know that I am writing.

EP: You arrived in the United States twenty years ago upholding the belief that this was the land of opportunity, the land that gave a chance to everybody if they were willing to work hard. When did you start realizing the shortcomings of this myth?

CP: Well, I think, it still is the land of opportunity for some people. If you watched the Olympics recently, you saw that the guy who was carrying the U.S. flag was one of the lost boys of Sudan. He was a guy who a few years ago was in Sudan and who never thought that his life could change materially and professionally and transform itself into the state it is now . . . so I think for many people it still is the land of opportunity. And for me, twenty years ago it definitely was a land of opportunity because it gave me a chance to grow intellectually and professionally in a way in which I don't think at that particular time in England I would have done. But, you know, if you stick around in any place for long enough you begin to see its limitations for you personally, you begin to see its limitations in how it operates for other people, and you develop a not quite so romantic view of the place. For me, things began to change soon after September 11. There were some issues before this, such as the Gulf war, and American foreign policy was not that clever under the first George Bush. But after September 11, I began to see certain things happening that made me realize that actually this was not quite the land of the free and the home of the brave that, in my more optimistic moments, I might have imagined it to be.

EP: Earlier on you said that this country has one last chance to change. So what if this chance doesn't come? What do you expect to happen in America after the elections?

CP: I am trying to avoid those apocalyptic CNN programs about the state of America. They just drive me crazy. But one thing for sure is that if this country continues to spend ten billion dollars a month on a war in Iraq that is completely ridiculous, or continues to fight a war in Afghanistan, then the economy is not going to recover. People are losing their homes, they don't have jobs, they can't afford to travel abroad because the dollar is worth nothing, it will get worse. On a personal level, I don't know, I don't know. I mean, I sort of despair. . . . you know. I despair for the difference between the idea of this country and the reality. I think that if the wrong thing happens on November 4th, what is already a gap between the idea, which is fantastic—the idea is fantastic otherwise people wouldn't still try to get to this country—the gap between the idea of this country and the reality of this country, that gap will grow. I don't know what I would do if I were a recent immigrant. . . . I don't know. . . I have choices but other people don't have choices.

EP: I am fascinated by the way you blend history and fiction in your work. According to Édouard Glissant, the creative writer has as much to say as the historian in the archeological process of excavating the past, and your work seems to follow Glissant's views quite literally. Could you talk more about this double role of historian/creative writer in your writing and the kind of research that goes with it?

CP: Well, I mean, the historian is a storyteller. History is a story anyway so . . . I never saw them as . . .

EP ... separate ...

CP: When somebody starts to recount history . . . they are telling a story. History supposedly has an authenticity and feeds a national mythology. The history of this country, for instance, is that a bunch of decent right-minded wonderful white men--Jefferson, and Washington, and Alexander Hamilton, the founding fathers--basically stood up to the British and defeated them. Well? That's a story. If we examine the story a little closer we know that you could tell that story again from the point of view of one of the slaves that Jefferson owned, or we could tell the story again from the point of view of the Native Americans. It would be the same story, but essentially different in tone and purpose. History is just a subjective narrative, so what I am doing is not that much different except that I don't have the authenticity of a national mythology behind me. I often feel I have to counter the official history. Sometimes the official history is inscribed in all sorts of ways--faces on the coins, faces on the stamps, names to the monuments and statues--so sometimes if you are a writer, you find you are constructing narratives that are totally oppositional to orthodox history. For some writers this is dangerous. That's why they kill writers, that's why writers are jailed, because they are oppositional to state orthodox power, to state orthodox history.

EP: You are mostly interested in digging up the stories of characters who are often left out from the official pages of history. At the same time, critics have always praised you for your ability to create memorable female characters in your fiction, so I wonder whether you envision the possibility in one of your future novels to give voice to a female historical figure.

CP: Yes, maybe. . . [laughs] . . . I don't know.

EP: I know, it's hard. It's not happened yet, but I like to imagine that it might happen.

CP: It's not happened but on my part there hasn't been any conscious decision for it not to happen.

Recently I had somebody at the BBC asking me in an interview, why wasn't one of the people in

Foreigners female and I remember being slightly taken aback and thinking that this had never occurred to me. If there had been compelling women who had appealed to me at that time of writing, then I would have written about them.

EP: Yes, I can see why it has not happened yet. The reason I brought this up is because I was reading Dancing in the Dark at the same time as I was reading Michelle Cliff's Free Enterprise and I was trying to find a connection between the two books. I was also reading Cliff's comments about history and the importance of re-visioning conventional historiography, and I thought, "well, she is doing exactly what he is doing, but in a different way."

CP: If you live in a world in which you are perceived or viewed in some way as being an outsider, on the margins in some way, then of course you therefore become interested in people, male or female, black or white, who occupy a similar role of being an outsider, either by migration, or by their religion, or by their ethnicity, or their race, or their gender. . . you are interested in other people who share the same condition. Furthermore, if people look at you and think . . . oh, I was not expecting to find that person as my boss or I was not expecting to find that person as my professor. or that person as my colleague, then you become interested in who these other people are. In your own life you have had to, at various points, soak up the quizzical glance, the kind of second take that people have given to you, and this of course becomes part of your own theme, something you are interested in. I think that for some of my friends who write—English, male, Anglo-Saxon, protestant writers—they are like George Bush, they have never once woken up in the morning and questioned their identity. It doesn't make them bad people, but it just has never occurred to them to think about what their role in society is because they have always woken up assuming that their role in society is central and crucial. They have probably never walked into an office and had somebody look at them twice and think... "what are they doing here"? They have never walked on a plane and sat down and had somebody sit next to them and they know that this person is thinking, "well,

how am I going to have a conversation with him?" Now for those of us who by virtue of our gender, or our race, or our class, or by being migrants, have been forced to question our identity there is a natural connection to others in a similar condition whether it's, you know, Native Americans, Jewish people, men, women, blacks, Hispanics, there is a natural connection. There are a huge number of people in this world—look at John McCain—who have never, ever questioned themselves, ever . . . and those people to me are scary because while I believe they are a minority, they are a minority with an attitude.

EP: I am also interested in the lack of conversations or failed conversations between fathers and children in your work. Indeed we could perhaps talk about an "absent father" theme, which is a recurrent theme in African American literature. Interestingly enough, the absent father is also a distinctive feature of Native American literature. What role does colonialism play in creating such an absence/void?

CP: Well, it does play a role . . . I mean, history plays a role. Certainly in an African American tradition, or an African diasporan tradition maybe more accurately, traditionally the father has little control over the family, and historically you have, as you were saying, in generation after generation after generation a lack of father figures. The responsibility, the home responsibility, becomes matriarchal, the person who binds the family together is the same person who rocks the cradle . . . it's the mother. That has to do with colonialism, that has to do with slavery, that has to do with history. This is not to excuse male irresponsibility, but conversations between fathers and children can, in these circumstances, become difficult.

EP: But that is how history often happens. If you think about it, Native women were consistently raped, men were forcefully disempowered in their traditional role, the structure of the family completely collapsed. When you move people away from their lands, from their traditional

lifestyles, when you relocate them to reservations, when you put the children in boarding schools, forcing them to assimilate to the white, Christian American ideology, forcing them to forget their languages, forget their culture, what do you expect the outcome to be? Men (and women, too) get lost to the world of urban America and the parental role is often taken up by strong, powerful women, in the extended family or in the community, who become responsible for passing down traditional knowledge and for keeping the cultures alive. So there are interesting patterns going on.

CP: Yes, I can see that. I don't think that this is surprising. I think it's a big theme in most

Caribbean literature and I think it's also a huge, huge factor in however you define the kind of new,

black British writing or filmmaking. It may be the same in France, it may be the same in the

Netherlands, I don't know but I suspect that the idea of the absent father is a big issue there, too.

EP: At the end of The European Tribe, you wrote: "Black people have always been present in a Europe that has chosen either not to see us, or to judge us as an insignificant minority, or as a temporary, but dismissible mistake" (128-9). Lots of things have happened in Europe since you wrote this book, including the reality called European Union. To what extent, you think, has Europe finally chosen to see black people as something other than "an insignificant minority"?

CP: I think it's changed only superficially. If you look at the Olympics, or if you look at the soccer teams, you see much more social visibility, but you don't see more visibility when it comes to power. You don't see more visibility in terms of members of parliament and bank managers, or lawyers, or doctors. You certainly see more visibility in terms of sports and the cultural arena. If you turn on the TV you will see a lot of black faces, but that doesn't mean anything, and again that's generally related to culture-- to music, sport, and entertainment. The one major shift is that in all of Europe, the battleground is being redrawn more along lines of faith, more specifically Islam. There is a move to say that the real problem, the real outsider, is the Muslim, the assumption being

that you can conflate Islam with race . . . after all, Muslims are supposed to be black or brown, but of course that is not the case. If you look at former Yugoslavia, huge numbers of Muslims are white. In Europe what constitutes the outsider is being complicated now, in the years since I wrote *The European Tribe*, by an attempt to make the other out of the Muslim, and that's something that twenty years ago I didn't really address. If I was writing that book now, travelling in France or Holland or Britain, I would have to address this issue.

EP: In an essay you wrote for the Oxford Amnesty Lectures, "Crossing Borders," you make a distinction between voluntary migration and displacement and involuntary migration such as slavery. The latter, you say, "has caused a psychic wound which, for countless millions of people of African origin, continues to fester" (220). And yet, when we look at a character such as Solomon, in A Distant Shore, when we look at the forced journeys made by refugees and asylum seekers to the West, I wonder if we can talk about a similar degree of psychic damage, the result of contemporary forced migrations. Aren't these forms of human trafficking new forms of slavery, the product of a contemporary global trade?

CP: Yes, I think that's true. The asylum seekers, in particular, have migration forced upon them. It doesn't involve chains, it doesn't involve manacles, it doesn't involve physically brutal labor, but the psychological trauma can fester for years. These are not economic migrants who have bought a ticket. Europe is full of people who are psychologically scarred, having cut the umbilical cord with their countries and their languages, as viciously and as traumatically as people did in the past with slavery. You see it most clearly, to my mind, in the Mediterranean. You see it in Italy, you see it in Spain, you see it in France. You see it in those guys selling stuff on the streets. . . . I remember I was very struck when I was in Sicily and saw the numbers of Nigerian prostitutes.

EP: I see that, too. The island of Lampedusa, in Sicily, is a telling example of that psychological trauma you've just mentioned. "Boat people" are the images we are constantly presented with by the media, images of people flooding the refugee center, images of despair often juxtaposed to images of wealthy Italian tourists vacationing on the same island. And yet, I often wonder why most people don't realize the degree to which Europe is implicated in the forced migration of these individuals toward our shores, these people whom we feel are "threatening" our borders and our ways of life.

CP: I believe that most people don't want to think about it. There has been a massive form of underdevelopment that has taken place in Africa----and it's going to start again. There will continue to be massive migration from Africa because the farmers, and other people, are tending crops that because of climate changes and drought are not going to grow. The situation with asylum seekers is not going to get any better and one of the chief destinations is going to be the Mediterranean.

EP: And yet, in the midst of so much indifference to the stories of immigrant lives and to such massive circulation of labor in the Mediterranean, it is interesting to see a memorial dedicated to the people who have died at sea, recently erected in Lampedusa. Named "Porta di Lampedusa, porta d'Europa" ("door of Lampedusa, door of Europe), the memorial is said to be the first of its kind in Europe, a timely and overdue tribute to the hundreds of migrants who, in recent decades, have forced Europe and its inhabitants to question fundamental notions of identity and belonging. The memorial is also meant to represent the beginning of a conversation between Europe and its migrants. Have your heard about this memorial at all?

CP: No, I haven't.

EP: Let's go back to your work and let's specifically look at a novel that more than anything else, in my view, strikes a deep chord on the contemporary immigrant experience in Europe. Could you talk more about the genesis of A Distant Shore? Was the novel inspired by your trip to Sierra Leone, as one critic has suggested, or did other events influence you?

CP: I don't think it began there. I had been to Sierra Leone a couple of times, but I think the novel began with my going back to England . . . I had finally sold my place in London that I held on to for over ten years and . . . it occurred to me that I probably wasn't going to go back to live in England . . . You know, to sell a property in a capital city means that. . . you probably can't go back to live there because you can't afford it . . . so there is something quite final about it. I think the decisions I had to make about England, and what I really thought about England, and what was going on in England around 2001 and 2002 when I was selling the place made me really want to write a novel about contemporary England and that's why the novel begins with the sentence, "England has changed," because that's what I was thinking at the time. I was thinking, you know what? I have been living in America for eleven years now and for me personally England had changed. However, how would the country look to somebody who had not left in 1990 and who was still there? What might he or she be thinking about in terms of the type of restaurants, the type of neighbors, the type of smells that you smell when you walk down the streets and pass houses, or the type of people sitting on a bus next to you? That's where it really began. I was in America, thinking, ok, I sold my place, and I'm probably not going to go back. And then the other thought was what you were addressing earlier . . . I had been in Africa, in fact I have been lucky to be in Africa many times: East Africa, West Africa, South Africa, but on this occasion I went to help people in Sierra Leone. At the time Sierra Leone was, still is, the poorest country in the world, and I thought I had seen poverty. I had been in India, I had been in Nepal, I had seen real poverty, but what I saw, what I witnessed, in Sierra Leone was truly traumatic. I witnessed the psychological damage of warfare on people's faces, and saw individuals living in conditions that were basically, you know, medieval.

The life expectancy for a man in Sierra Leone was thirty-seven. I guess the combination of the two experiences—thinking hard about England and visiting Sierra Leone-- and somehow trying to put the two experiences together, led me to the novel.

EP: How about your Guardian reportage on Sangatte ("Strangers")? Did that experience give you any insight into Solomon's/Gabriel's story?

CP: Yes, I was already writing the novel when I went to Sangatte. I knew that if I could get inside one of those detention camps then it would help me to better understand the plight of asylum seekers, and Solomon/Gabriel in particular. So I just turned up and walked in and started to mingle with people and talk, and then the authorities discovered me and tossed me out. By then I'd pretty much seen what I needed to see.

EP: That's very interesting. When I first read "Stangers in a strange land," I was immediately captivated by the narrative voice(s) and the surreal quality of the whole incident. The parallels between these refugees risking their lives in the Channel and Solomon's/Gabriel's story were too obvious to be ignored, but it was difficult to tell to what extent reality shaped fiction or if fiction-the writing of the novel at this time--helped you better understand the reality of what you experienced in Sangatte.

CP: I think the reality helped the fiction but, as is often the case, having already begun to imagine the reality made the encounter with the place less disturbing than it might have been. This happened to me when I first visited the slave forts in Ghana after I'd written *Higher Ground*. Having imagined the reality meant that I responded with less emotion than I might otherwise have done. My host in Ghana, Professor Kofi Anyidoho, commented on this then, and continues to mention it to this day!

EP: Even though you have experimented with different genres, you seem to be more comfortable in writing fiction because, as you said in audio interview, in fiction one can hide (Gerzina, "Exploring"). What kind of person hides behind the characters created by Caryl Phillips, if I may

CP: A sensible one, I hope. Well, over the years I have got to know a lot of writers and they all have different personalities. They are as diverse as any group of people you might encounter. They are like your students when you meet them in class. You just have to figure them out. I am much more reserved than most of my colleagues in terms of being career-conscious. In the modern world, particularly in America, there is a tendency for people in some careers to seek to become what we might call celebrities or public figures. My personal inclination is to hide. I don't care much for the business. The only thing to me is the work. It's all about the work.

EP: You don't worry about what kind of person a reader might see behind the writing?

CP: No, I don't worry. It has never bothered me in the slightest.

EP: You don't think of an audience?

ask a more personal question?

CP: No, I am the only audience. There is only one audience, that's me, and if it makes sense to somebody else then that's great. You know, one of the lovely things about writing books. . . there are lots of frustrating things about writing books, but one of the lovely things about writing books is that if you are lucky they survive you. So I found myself thinking today, this morning, about Claude McKay who died in 1948. And to me he's as alive today as he was in 1948 because I am reading his work and I am thinking about the work. Or next month I have to give a talk about Richard Wright who died . . . forty eight years ago . . . to me he is most alive in his books so that's all that matters.

In the end the books will survive or they won't. I prefer to work on the basis that I am not going to be important in the long run but if I am lucky the books will be, so I may as well position myself behind them right now.

EP: You also said at one point that you write to make sense of the chaos or to create order out of the chaos. Do you see this chaos dissipating in your mind as you keep writing, if it makes sense?

CP: You know, to me, life is essentially mysterious. As you get closer to the middle you are not sure what it's all about. And then one day you realize that half the time has passed and it's the second half now, and you still don't know what it's about. I had a long conversation this morning with my brother in London talking about his children, about his two daughters. I put down the phone after about half an hour thinking, how come I don't have any children? Where are my daughters? Why am I talking to him about his kids at six o'clock in the morning? And if you ask yourself enough questions you begin to understand the personal decisions you made to navigate the chaos. You know, you will understand, the more you think about it, how come you made your journey from Italy to the United States, to Switzerland, and back to the US. At the time you are not thinking about it because you are just doing what the next thing is in front of you--navigating the chaos. But the longer you go on, the more you think about it, the more you will begin to see a pattern. It doesn't mean that you necessarily know what to do, it doesn't mean that you are necessarily smarter. You just think, ok, that's how I did it. I made this or that decision in order to navigate the chaos, in order to get through and there is something comforting about knowing this even if you have only a pattern and no real answers. I guess what I am really trying to say, in a very long-winded way, is life is always right. The life that you have is always the one you made for yourself even if you're not sure how it came about. The best one can hope for is to search for patterns, not answers.

EP: Thank you for helping me see some of my own chaos.

CP: No, chaos is fine. If there were no chaos, certainly in my case, then there would be no work. And, as a reader, if there were no chaos, I wouldn't be reading. I am reading other people's books because I am trying to figure out my own book. By looking at other people's lives, I am trying to figure out something about me. So if there was no chaos, I wouldn't be a writer, but then, I also wouldn't be a reader. And, you know, I read those authors you're studying and writing about, and teaching, because they help me figure out things about the world. You know, Edwidge's [Danticat] book about her uncle [Brother, I'm Dying], it's a good book; it's a terrific book because it helps me to understand what happens when somebody looks at you at the airport and they want to know if you are legitimate, because I have been there, we've all been there, and it's painful, but we are reading it because there is an element of chaos which is recognizable to most of us, which we come to better understand by being a reader. But it is also helped, in my case, by being a writer, so if the chaos goes then I think I will despair as a reader and as a writer.

EP: How about poetry? There are many examples in your writing in which the language verges into poetry (the last section of Foreigners, for instance). Native American poet Joy Harjo writes: "Poetry is song language. It can be captured by paper and ink, by imaging. When it is, it begs to be released" ("Poetry Manifesta"). I know that you don't write poetry and yet...

CP: No, but I read poetry and that maybe helps. I have a few friends who are poets and I always say to them, I don't know how you guys do it. . . . I would not know how to write a poem. I literally wouldn't know, but I do like what poets do. Poets have a tremendous respect for language and to me the main difference between literary fiction and a book by, for instance, John Grisham, or a book like *The Da Vinci Code* is a respect for language. I never look at those popular, plot-driven books and feel that the author has agonized over the right adjective or the right verb or that the

author has thought about the difference between "glaring," or "gazing" or "staring" or "looking" and what that really means to the character. After all, if a character "glares" that's different from "gazing," but "gazing" is different from "staring" because staring suggests that there is a lack of wonderment; the gaze has an air of wonderment about it which means that the one looking might be interested in the person, but if they "stare" they are not necessarily interested while if they "glare" it means that they are. Some of the more popular authors are not thinking about the minute details of language; they are thinking about plot and getting from here to here. But I'm very interested in language and so I spend a lot of time doing what I think poets do, which is trying to find the right word, not just the right image, but the right word which could make the phrase or sentence into an image, rather than using the words as just functional bridges to move the story forward. In that sense I think I maybe share something with poets, but that's all. Oh, maybe, one other thing.

Whenever I teach a writing class, I always tell my students that sentences have music and if you can't hear the music in a sentence, then there is a problem. That's the problem with translation, to be honest. If a book of mine is translated, I can't read that language so I don't know if the music has gone . . . but I assume it has because . . . [EP: Of course, it's never the same.] Yes. Language has music to it. A book written in French and translated into English has lost music. To me, there has to be music and a rhythm to the sentence and a lot of books --you know I say this respectfully--I find a lot of books that are popular have no music to the language. The language is flat, and there is no energy between one sentence and the next. I don't really get the sense that the author is hearing the music. That's something that poets do naturally, or at least they work hard to make it appear natural.

EP: Do you do a lot of editing?

CP: Yes. Most of it is editing. Maybe ten, twelve drafts. If necessary, I will read the whole book to change one word before I deliver. If I say, "somebody rummages in their pocket for loose change" and then a hundred pages later "somebody rummages in their pocket to find a cell phone," I want to

be aware of this and perhaps I will decide to think about another word. I might say "they fished in their pocket" but then I will have to think what kind of cell phone was it? Some cell phones, you don't fish for them . . . and then ok "they have to arch their back" to then fish for their cell phones, and then you think oh, "somebody arched their eyebrows" ten pages earlier, so you always have to be conscious about what's going on.

EP: It reminds me of that wonderful scene in the film II postino (The Postman) . . . have you seen that film?

CP: Yes, I have.

EP: It reminds me of the moment in the film when Neruda asks Mario (il postino) to think of an adjective to describe the fishermen's nets, and Mario says "sad," "the fishermen's nets are sad" ("tristi" in Italian). It's a great example to describe the poet's meticulous search for words that you have just mentioned. Thank you.

CP: I remember the film well.

EP: On your website there is a Beverly Hills address for a film agent. Are any of your novels currently being considered for the screen? And which one would be?

CP: Just one, *Dancing in the Dark*. However, such options frequently happen, and then nothing comes of it. You know, it's a quite regular occurrence that people option books for a year, or for two years, and then nothing transpires. That one [*Dancing in the Dark*] is under option with a company in Hollywood who are trying to make it into a film. *A Distant Shore* was, and *Cambridge* was at some point. So it happens.

EP: I can see this one [Dancing in the Dark] happening, but A Distant Shore . . . that would be very hard, and I am not a filmmaker.

CP: Luckily, it's not my problem.

EP: You are right. Let's not worry about it right now.

EP: Discussing Dancing in the Dark, you said that your fascination with Bert Williams coincided with an interest you had in contemporary hip hop music and hip hop performers. I was wondering if you have written something else on this topic since the novel's publication.

CP: No, but in this country racial posturing--trying to negotiate race whether it's by plastic surgery à la Michael Jackson or whether it's what some Chinese women do in terms of adjusting their eyes to make them look more Western by surgery, whether it's skin lightening or skin darkening, or whether it's racial posturing in hip hop terms with guys holding their crotches and their baggy jeans--racial posturing tends to come with some kind of focus on sexuality particularly in the African American world. I wrote about it directly when I wrote about Marvin Gaye in *A New World Order*. I wrote a long essay about Marvin Gaye and what happens to a guy who wants to sing like Frank Sinatra in taxedo, but who in the 1960s is a good looking, tall, six foot one black man who isn't supposed to be singing in that way at all. I think *Dancing in the Dark* came out of my interest in Marvin Gaye and I think it also came out of my fascination with seeing the whole Michael Jackson thing. I saw Michael Jackson in the 1970s, when he was black, and then I saw him again in the 1980s when he was a solo performer and I walked out because I just thought this is absurd. The book also came out of my ambivalence about hip hop—I love a lot of hip hop—but the misogyny, and the fact that really intelligent. I mean seriously intelligent guys, a lot of them, feel obligated to

talk about bitches and whores and carry weapons and motherfucker this and hold their dicks, you just think, is this really who they are or do they feel they have to do this to get their message across? All of these things about America made me want to write this book and I mean it comes down to this one thing, which maybe again you, as an immigrant, can understand. One of the things that America has always allowed immigrants to do is to reinvent yourself but the reinvention comes with a price. What Italy, or Sweden or Ireland didn't allow me to be, or Cambodia, or China, I am going to be that here and that could mean changing my name, that could mean acquiring a different lifestyle, and that could mean coming out as gay, and that could mean all sorts of things, but you pay a price for the transformation because it means that you have split yourself in some way. It doesn't matter how smart you think you are being or how successful you are with this new incarnation of you, you have split yourself because you are forever navigating who you were with who you are and it might be liberating but it does create a problem for you. Sometimes it is easy to solve that problem; for instance, if you are a traveller going back, then somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic you put on your old language . . . you know, you re-adopt your old name, sometimes you get the money out from your bag, in your little plastic holder, you fold your dollars into that and you ...

EP: Take out the Euro . . .

CP: Yes, take out the Euro, another part of your identity . . . maybe it's easy for you, but for some people it's not so easy because the more famous they become in their new identity the harder it is for them to reconcile themselves to where they were. The problem is really exacerbated when they have people who knew them as they were and suddenly they are seeing them as they are now; for instance, those people could be their parents. They might well be looking at them and shaking their heads and saying, "are you out of your mind? Are you crazy? Because you are not that." But by agreeing to be "that" is actually how they are getting by in America. You see people becoming

"that," or versions of "that," all the time and sometimes people want to make you into their version of "that." I was giving a talk last year, in Scotland, and somebody stood up in the audience and said, "Well, it's nice to see you back here even though you have an American accent now." I wanted to take him out of his seat and smack him because actually I don't have an American accent, but that's somebody trying to tell who you are. There are a lot of treacherous people around who get a great thrill by trying to put you down in all sorts of ways, often because they find it difficult to deal with plurality. One of the ways they might try to put you down is by saying "well you have become one of them now." You should never be ashamed or upset or hide the fact that you have a plural identity. There is nothing wrong with a plural identity, there is nothing wrong with being more than one thing, but there are a lot of people who don't want you to be plural. There are people who want to tell you what your identity is.

EP: I am going to quote a line from a young Italian writer whose book drew international attention at the Cannes film festival last year. He said, "The only weapon that until now hadn't been used against the camorra has worked . . . Literature" (Gomorrah, back cover). This is Roberto Saviano, the author of Gomorrah, a man condemned to death for simply having written a book, and yet a firm believer in the role of literature to disturb power. Would you elaborate more on Saviano's statement? Can literature really break the intricate network of power?

CP: Well, in some countries, it can. I am very pleased to think of an Italian writer or Western European writer who believes that. Many American or Western European writers are more interested in themselves as literary celebrities or, more to the point, they find themselves dealing with the problem of being promoted and marketed as literary celebrities and not as people speaking truth to power. If you go to Africa, or if you go to Asia, or if you go the Middle East or Latin and Central America, there are writers who are definitely speaking truth to power and who understand that part of the role of literature can be to take a hammer to the State . . . but in Western Europe and

in America a lot of people don't feel that way about literature, so I think it is great that this writer in Europe does.

EP: Well... Saviano is from Naples and operates from within a literary tradition that in the South of Italy has repeatedly spoken truth to the underworld of the Mafia power. Gomorrah is a mix of reportage and fiction that explores the global network behind Naples's system of organized crime (otherwise known as "camorra"). Since the publication of this book, and since the book became a bestseller due to the international attention it received at Cannes, the author has been forced to live under state protection, he had to go into hiding, his life has been completely disrupted.

CP: Sure, it has.

EP: I was having a conversation about Gomorrah with my friends in Italy this past summer. We sort of despair. Yes, Saviano did something very courageous and we do need writers like him today. But what has changed? As powerful and enlightening as his book is very little has changed in the way the camorra and Italy's other mafias control power. Saviano himself admitted that the camorra is more active than ever in Italy today. . . . I guess I despair between the idea of literature as a powerful instrument to expose power and organized crime and the fact that it is not the writer's job, ultimately, to defeat a phenomenon like the mafia, assuming that it can ever be defeated. . .

CP: Yes, But there are two kinds of writings here. I see an admittedly courageous kind of journalism or high literary journalism that he's writing, but the kind of writing that I think is equally important and more radical and more revolutionary is the writing that comes from the imagination. You know, the notion of being able to imagine another story--a parallel narrative that challenges state authority--is always going to be a problem for the state. If you are doing the job correctly, you are always going to be oppositional to orthodox power or received wisdom and . . . and I believe

that. It's really important that the imagination, the dream of poets, the alternative narrative should be dissenting in fiction or non fiction. The kind of work that comes with the imagination is critical because if we give that up, then you basically, as Chinua Achebe says, hand over authority to the emperor and you ignore the poet. The emperor is only scared of one person. He's scared of the poet. The poet looks like a small person but the poet is not a small person because the poet speaks truth and he has a completely different story. The reason people listen is because they want to know what happens next . . . and . . . as long as the poet is constructing a narrative that actually has the impulse to keep the audience wanting to know what happens next, then the poet has power. If the audience don't want to know what happens next, then it doesn't matter what kind of story you are telling them. You have to keep them wanting to know what happens next. I honestly cannot think of an American writer after the generation of Baldwin, Mailer, and Styron, back in the fifties and sixties, who is really important in terms of speaking truth to power. Morrison is important but she's important because what she's doing is excavating the past. I can't think of an American writer who is important because they have published something that you have to read because it might scare the hell out of the establishment.

EP: Well, back to Danticat's book [Brother, I'm Dying], look at what she has done with that powerful narrative. Whenever you want to teach something about current U.S. policies toward asylum seekers and refugees, ask students to read that book, a book that will teach them more than any kind of legal text possibly can.

CP: Of course.

EP: I teach Brother, I'm Dying in my Critical Race Theory course, a course that explores the relationship between race, power and the law in the United States. Students are both moved and enraged by Danticat's story... so there is hope.

CP: Yes, there is. Many American writers, including Danticat, speak the truth, but American power appears to be somewhat impervious to the "truth" coming from writers. Perhaps American power has changed and become more self-confident; perhaps American writers have changed. What is certainly true is that the role of literature in the west has changed and is changing. We have many different ways of being told stories, and people's attention spans seem to have shortened so much so that they find the act of reading literature less necessary. I regret this development, but I haven't given up my belief in the importance of literature.

EP: Neither have I. Thank you very much.

CP: You're welcome.

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Even though *Foreigners* has been called a novel and the publishers have marketed it as a novel, Phillips has stated that

the book is actually non-fiction or rather "a mixture of fiction, non-fiction, and a bit of travel" (Vinuesa, "Afroeuropa"). At the time of the interview, I was not aware that Phillips's new novel, *In the Falling Snow*, would have been released in 2009.

³ Italian journalist Giorgio Bocca captures some of this mystery in his non fiction work *Inferno: profondo sud, male oscuro (Inferno: Deep South, Obscure Evil)*, published by Mondadori in 1992. To my knowledge the book has not been translated into English.

⁴ I would like to thank George Cotkin, professor of history at Cal Poly, for reading an earlier draft of this interview and for his encouraging comments. My greatest note of thanks goes to Caryl Phillips for his willingness to have our conversation published.

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