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Soundscapes

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Silences that Ride the Air: Soundscaping Slavery in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*

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ABSTRACT – Is anyone listening out there? The artists who write and produce radio dramas believe that a limitless imaginative world is possible. Radio drama is the most flexible of forms, allowing a freedom to experiment usually inhibited by considerations of space, time, and money in live theatre. It is no coincidence that the experimental nature of Caryl Phillips's radio plays fits perfectly into Brater's idea of "performative voice" (Brater 1994). Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1985), in particular, illustrates the necessity of filling silence with something, anything at all, by telling the Africans' trade story and trauma created by way of soundscaping sounds, pauses and silences.

KEYWORDS – Radio drama; Caryl Phillips; Trauma Studies; Slavery.

1. CARYL PHILLIPS AND RADIO DRAMA AS POETRY

Caryl Phillips's works are a perpetual source of inspiration to all those scholars who are interested in the variety and profundity of human existence. Phillips has written eleven novels and nine radio plays so far, not including a number of screenplays and television documentaries which he wrote early in his career. He has also edited seven non-fiction books and several essays and reviews in periodicals. His productions have been studied by scholars from every part of the world, and his novels have been translated into more than ten languages. His official website mentions St. Kitts, Leeds, and New York as the geographical coordinates of his life because he was born in St. Kitts and grew up in England. He lives in permanent migration, however, and currently teaches Contemporary English Literature and Creative Writing at Yale University (USA). From his earliest dramatic texts, moved by the mission of giving voice to one of the most justified truths in history between the black and white people – that is, the social discrimination of blacks – Phillips writes that "the location of the truth has always seemed to me to represent the true responsi-

bility of an artist” (Phillips 1984, 8). The truth Phillips talks about reaches our days and is linked to his obsession with the topic of slavery. Indeed, writing about slavery is an obsessive thought because the history of slavery is a vital part of British history for both blacks and whites. Coming to terms with its legacy provides a way forward: “you can’t expect something to characterise the relationship of Britain and the outside world for two-and-a-half centuries and for it not to have deep reverberations still today. If we don’t understand, and I don’t think we do, the multiple ironies [...] then we have no possibility of understanding where we are or where we might be going” (Jaggi 1994, 26).

These considerations, as well as the exploration of a black diasporic history through slavery, are the framework in which Phillips retells Britishness in his radio plays (Pirker 2011, 78). Artists like him, who write and produce also radio dramas, believe that a limitless imaginative world is possible. Sound can change a location, portray an internal or external world, and render random impressions or articulate logical arguments (Drakakis 1981). It is the most flexible of forms. It allows freedom to experiment, usually without constraints of space, time, and money in live theatre. It is no coincidence that the experimental nature of Caryl Phillips’s radio plays fits perfectly into Brater’s idea of “performative voice” (Brater 1994). Indeed, radio drama’s language is ‘performative’ in the sense that it seeks a voice to speak, and Phillips’s scripts demand to be read aloud and studied. Unlike his novels, Phillips’s radio plays are an underexplored body of texts worth studying alongside the rest of his work. So far, few scholars have carried out that research. The lack of interest in Phillips’s radio plays surprises a lot, especially because of the proliferation of the radio drama genre over the last fifteen years. Phillips’s nine radio plays¹, written between 1984 and 2016, have been unnoticed even by critics because in England the radio drama genre itself until the 1990s was subject to some form of cultural discrimination and prejudice determined by greed, snobbery, and intellectual arrogance. Indeed, radio drama has been one of the most unappreciated and understated literary forms of the twentieth century. The mistrust towards it was due to the impression that radio drama could offer no more than a sort of second-class drama (Lewis 1981). Moreover,

¹ *The Wasted Years*, in *Best Radio Plays of 1984* (1985); *Crossing the River* (BBC Radio 3, 1985); *The Prince of Africa* (BBC Radio 3, 1987); *Writing Fiction* (BBC Radio 4, 1991); *A Kind of Home: James Baldwin in Paris* (BBC Radio 4, 2004); *Hotel Cristobel* (BBC Radio 3, 2005); *A Long Way from Home* (BBC Radio 3, 2008); *Dinner in the Village* (BBC Radio 4, 4 Oct. 2011); and *Somewhere in England* (BBC Radio 4, 3 Dec. 2016).

a very limited number of radio dramas are published and access to those not published is difficult. Bibliographies are seldom found. Reruns are rare. There are very few recordings. Maintaining archives has not been a priority in the business of broadcasting. Equally relevant to the issue is the fact that the 1970s were difficult for BBC. Only when the Conservative Party won the general elections in 1979 did it commit to expanding commercial radio. Radio 2 then started twenty-four-hour broadcasting and in 1982 BBC Radio 1 and BBC Radio 2 separated in terms of content for the first time (Street 2006).

Nevertheless, even though famous intellectuals like W. H. Auden declared that radio drama was a “dying art” (Drakakis 1981, 167), both because of television was getting lots of attention in the press and because of the absence of specific materiality of performance in a world which set in motion the performance in the first place (Fischer-Lichte 2008), radio plays in the 1970s and 1980s thrived ². This “strange survival of radio drama” (Handy ND) was probably due to the fact that television was still too expensive. Also – as Tim Crook argues by quoting McWhinnie – the intensity of the radio performance had a strong appeal. The evocative power of radio performance could be compared to that of poetry: “It does not act as stimulus to direct scenic representation [...]. It makes possible a universe of shape, detail, emotion and idea, which is bound by no inhibiting limitations of space and capacity. In a way it is a bridge between poetry or music and reality” (Crook 1999, 66).

2. NARRATING TRAUMAS THROUGH THE SILENCED VOICES OF HISTORY

In characterizing Phillips’s sound poetics, Benedicte Ledent argues that it is important to study both Phillips’s radio plays and stage plays, because they contain in a nutshell some of the themes and characters that recur in his more

² Soon thereafter, independent production companies started drama productions. Today BBC Radio 4 remains the biggest commissioner of new drama in Britain, with a daily afternoon play Monday through Friday and at least one play in its schedule each day of the week. BBC Radio 3 broadcasts substantial dramas, including classics, cutting-edge new drama, and experimental work. Moreover, local radio stations in Liverpool, Manchester, and Newcastle constantly air plays. Radio suits multiple genres and styles, including book adaptations, situational comedy, detective stories, science fiction, classical works, mainstream British and European plays and modern writing, some of it commissioned. For further details, please see Crook 1999; Kerensky 2000.

mature work and therefore form the backbone of his world vision (Ledent 2015). Phillips's radio plays offer compelling examples of an emerging genre of world literature for which global comparison is a formal as well as a thematic preoccupation. In this essay, I examine how the juxtaposition of sounds and silences in Phillips's *Crossing the River* affects the characters' memory of their slavery experience.

Before focusing on the several features embedded in *Crossing the River* – such as voices, sounds, music, and silence, as well as the plots and messages themselves – we need to clarify that the following discussion is based only on Phillips's script of *Crossing the River* and therefore does not consider the role of actors nor the technical aspects of the plays' actual production. However, since its debut in the 1980s, Phillips's writing has dealt with the history of slavery, the ethics of representing the slave trade, and the difficulty of how to remember slavery. The actual victims of slavery are long dead, but their memory communicates the past of slavery which may be understood in relation to important writers such as Paul Gilroy, W. E. B. Dubois, and Jean-François Lyotard. Gilroy references African American writer W. E. B. Dubois as his intellectual forebear by grounding his theory of the black Atlantic in Dubois's theory of the double consciousness necessitated by the heritage of slavery. It is not easy for writers like Phillips³ to talk about violence and suffering in terms of race relations, especially because it is not something so far from us. Work in comparative literature and memory studies has contributed significantly to the study of slavery as a central topic within trauma theory (Rothberg 2009)

³ As regards radio drama there are some examples of radio plays that deal with the problems of narrating traumatic pasts through slavery. Some of them that deserve mention are Louis MacNiece's scripts, collected in the volume *Louis MacNiece: The Classical Radio Plays* (2013), that focus on slavery during the Roman Empire. Broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland on 15 September 1980, *Wedderburn Slave* (1980) by the Scottish poet Douglas Dunn explores the famous case of an escaped black slave, Joseph Knight, who was freed by The Court of Session of Edinburgh in 1777 (Crawford 2009). Based on her dramatised epic poem *The Lamplighter* (2007), the lyrical radio drama entitled *The Lamplighters* (2007) by Jackie Kay tells the multivocal story of slavery focusing on the lives of four women, Constance, Mary, Black Harriot, and The Lamplighter. It bears witness to the horrific pain and suffering felt by those people forced from their lands onto ships and taken to the Caribbean plantations or to Britain to build the industrial cities of Glasgow, Liverpool, and Bristol. Moreover, just like Phillips, even if Edson Burton's career in creative writing began with poetry as part of the Bristol Black Writers, he has written plays for the theatre and for Radio 4, including *De Wife of Bristol*, which was broadcast on 6 October 2014: its plot analyses the complicated politics surrounding the memorialisation of slavery in Bristol.

and the problem deals not only with the period of imperialistic slavery. Calls to remember transatlantic slavery as the African holocaust are, at one level, calls for its victims to be brought into the fold of the grievable (Gill and O'Connell Davidson 2016). The power encapsulated in the voice(s) and silence(s) of the slaves in *Crossing the River* shows how one should consider audio as a process that involves aural input which moves from aural source to the listener and then back to the aural source (Ferrington 1993, 61-62). Aural input includes silence, sound effects, voices, and music. These elements are Phillips's 'tools of the trade', and it seems that his sound architecture increased human experience through the brain's capacity to create visual representations based on a composite of images produced by an individual's senses.

Crossing the River is the story of three siblings, two brothers and a sister, and it is made up of many moments of silence and pauses. The twelve pages of the script tell how the history of slavery and the African diaspora created painful moments in the life of the three characters. An African father has sold his three children to colonizers and in the play one can hear their voices in indefinite times and different places. Sarah is still a slave on a Caribbean plantation. Ben is a black face artiste in New Orleans. Will, an angry young man, has problems with the police in twentieth-century England. Their voices reveal their identities, but not their physical appearance. Moreover, it is quite interesting to note the absence of dialogue among them. Indeed, those that look like dialogues are by no means individual voices that fail in communicating because of the dispersion linked to the African diaspora. Indeed, richer than dialogue in its potential to paint images in the listener's mind, the juxtaposition of pauses and silences is the real protagonist of Phillips's *Crossing the River*. According to Karpf, one should not forget that "radio plays are too often packed with words, as if the writer is desperate to fit in as much information as possible to compensate for not having pictures [...] But one of the sounds you need in radio drama is silence. Radio is very much like film in its perspective and depth of focus – you can zoom in to things and then leave it quiet" (Karpf 1994, 16). For example, a moment of silence precedes the dramatic scene in which the siblings are crossing from Africa to the Americas. They are terrified and shocked on the umpteenth ship that makes carrying their 'cargo' of slaves:

(SILENCE)

Ben: My sister?

Will: From the top of the boulder I could see for miles.

Sarah: The ship made a loving movement. Like a woman rocking a child. And the sea spoke to us. Telling us to have no fear.

Ben: Please. Some light. I cannot live in this darkness.

Will: From the boulder I saw them coming. They did not hurry.

Sarah: [...] (PAUSE) Father?

Ben: Father?

Will: Father. You let them take us. I can never forgive you. Never. (Phillips 1985, 2-3)

As in this extract, the silences in the entire play are used both for stressing moments of darkness, for spatio-temporal changes, and as a “rhetorical device(s), or to maintain the prosodic structure of an utterance” (MacGregor *et al.* 2010, 3982). Then, we can imagine the dark shades of the open ocean as the silences surrounding the moment of their “middle passage” across the Atlantic depict the agony of forced migration and enslavement – the classic image of the slave ship is often the most powerful one to come to mind (Finley 2011). In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy’s chronotope of the ship as an alternative to culture, conceived of as an organism, provides a way out the mire of separate homelands. The ship, used for its connections to the Middle Passage, enables an alternative vision of cross-cultural fertilizations, hybridities, and diasporas. Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* charts the migrations, displacements, borrowings, ‘affinities and affiliations’ which link black intellectuals to the project of the Enlightenment. It also offers their specific contributions towards a theory and praxis of freedom and citizenship. Moreover, water here is not simply one of the four natural elements, but is personified.

On the one hand, water speaks to the characters and looks like a rocking mother with the slave ship that becomes her cradle. In the play, then, the space of the slave ship (and its avatars) as “loathing dungeon” (Rediker 2007, 45) encounters the shattering of genealogical temporality. This chronotopic conjunction advances Orlando Patterson’s definition of the slave as a “genealogical isolate”, suffering “natal alienation” and inhabiting a state of “social death” (Patterson 1982, 5). The precise moment when the three children become prisoners is particularly important in soundscaping silence because then they are picked up by whites whose skin colour is compared to death:

(SILENCE)

Sarah: When the white men grouped before me I turned. I looked up at them.

Will: I felt no fear. I had seen them coming from the boulder.

Ben: But their skin is ... is dead, the colour of death.

(SILENCE)

Sarah: Then I saw father.

(SILENCE)

Though I felt no fear my legs were wet. The warm fluid burned. But I showed no pain.

Sarah: He ran blindly toward father.

Will: Father ... father ...

Sarah: He stopped and looked. (Phillips 1985, 7)

As one can notice, silence here is not, in fact, silent; recording it for radio or audiotape, therefore, presents special problems. On radio, “silence” must be sounded as it is in the extract above: the characters try to speak to one other, but the several silences stress the impossibility of communication.

On the other hand, one can observe that water’s negative symbolism recurs in the play when speech is paused because it means lack of rain. By escaping “unities of time and space, travelling effortlessly [...] between the time when the three children were captured in Africa and the present of their respective narratives in various venues in the western world” (Ledent 2018), the ear-splitting pause due to the absence of rain can be interpreted as if drought is deadly in more ways than one. First and foremost, through very short utterances, the characters affirm that drought is responsible for the poverty of Ben, Sarah, and Will’s family, who offer their prayers for rain but who were sold anyway:

Sarah: Two men in my life. Both then and now. I cannot include my father.

A daughter is nothing to a father. I just watched my father.

(PAUSE)

No rain.

(PAUSE)

I listened to my two men. Brothers.

Ben: Today father will make another sacrifice. A cock. To the God of all land.

And pray for rain. His crop is dry, burning.

(PAUSE)

He is a lonely man. A tall, distinguished lonely man. We are all he has. (Phillips 1985, 6)

In this case, “pauses” are not just “hesitation phenomena” (Cecot 2001, 65), or “silent pauses” (69), but they act as a kind of “silenced scream of pain”. As pragmatic markers, pauses have indications and functions. They guide the hearer or the reader to potentially interpret a conversation according to

the context (Fox Tree 2010). So, in this case, it is important to highlight the way in which pain diminishes the function of language as a means of personal expression and as a carrier of social narrative. The conclusions that all vocalizations are not an expression of pain, and that silence is not necessarily an expression of comfort, here convey a mood of subdued physical and emotional suffering (de Montalk 2019). There is, however, only one scene in which the three siblings try a conversation in the play, and it is not by chance without any silence or pauses, because Sarah exhorts Will and Ben not to cease from speaking to each other:

Will: Men never cry.

Sarah: Never?

Will: Never!

Ben: I have seen father cry.

Will: You lie.

Sarah: We must speak to each other. Always. Never argue. Why do you two always argue? Why do we never speak to each other?

Will: You are a girl.

Ben: I have seen father cry. Behind the village by the small lake. When his last wife died.

Will: He cried out of duty. (Phillips 1985, 6)

If at first sight one should notice the use of language not as a tool of logical communication, the lives of the siblings are kept together “then and now” (1) by the memorialization of slavery and become a strategic representation of their grief. In his *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988), Jean-François Lyotard identifies the need to voice traumatic experience; but he also cites the troubling realisation that words can be incommensurate with what has occurred. The apparent lack of communication could be interpreted as the chasm between what needs to be expressed and what can be accommodated within the existing frames of language. This abyssal chasm necessitates the development of new modes of expression (Lyotard 1988, 13). Phillips decides to give voice to their pauses and silences in order to reveal how black transatlantic trade victims are entangled by trauma; but he offers no resolution, however, and also no prospect that the other might return lost pieces of the self, and no confidence that narrating pain is a necessarily progressive act. Phillips’s characters are linked by their refusal to recognize the basis of their connection. In their silence they bear witness to a trauma for which recognition is not a cure, but a limit beyond which survival would be impossible.

3. “WE MUST SPEAK TO EACH OTHER”: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LISTENING TO HISTORICAL UNRESOLVED GRIEF

The traumatic consequences of the experience of Black Atlantic slavery, both as collective and individual memory, affect the three siblings, who are not able to speak to each other anymore. In order to emphasise their trans-temporal trauma, Phillips re-narrativises the consequential familiar rupture through voices, pauses and silences. By investigating trauma (Root, 1992) and the historical unresolved grief caused by the Black Atlantic slave trade (Owusu 2019), *Crossing the River* gives voice to the emotional anguish suffered by the three characters and also by many generations even after the end of slavery. An example of Phillips’s attempt at sounding a last cry of despair is presented by the final lines uttered by Sarah, which summarize their traumatic memories of childhood and the adult dispersion of their diasporic life:

Sarah: [...] (PAUSE) I listened to my two men. Brothers.
My breasts hurt. [...]
(PAUSE)
Father? Father? Today it will rain. Soon.
(PAUSE)
Nobody listens.
(PAUSE)
Then we all crossed the river. (Phillips 1985, 11-12)

The last image created by Sarah’s alternation of words and pauses symbolizes a sense of closure that does not erase nor deny the past ordeal, but affirms growth and health to emphasize that recovery, despite traumatic wounding, is possible, and that trauma, although it stands outside precise representation, can be integrated.

Phillips’s radio play is an example of many similar narratives that emphasize renewed life and growth after traumatization, opposed to trauma theory’s insistence on melancholy and weakness. It is quite evident that the intention of the writer – as Stefan Lampadius asserts – is also to provide “a counter-narrative to a self-confident white Europe, in which his hybrid identity as a *European insider* and *outsider* gave him a special position to criticize its history and culture” (Lampadius 2012, 188). Phillips’s primary interest, indeed, is to question the absence of black characters in British literature, and he wonders why so-called British society has been considered a multicultural society since the 1950s “with a couple of exceptions” (Phillips

2004). Blacks were part of the ‘exceptions’ British people made in order to maintain social differences in terms of class, gender, and race. In the same way, Pirker describes a “silence surrounding the history of black people in Britain” (Pirker 2011, 77), yet that history has been reimagined by Phillips in his *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007). This text disputes the ‘white-washing’ of British history and the resulting fallacy that before the period of emigration marked by the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948, there were no ‘black Britons’. Whilst Pirker holds up Phillips as devising fictional narrative which historicizes black Britain and facilitates “an exploration of a black diasporic history from a British perspective or context” (Pirker 2011, 78), she relies on the old trope of the post-war migrant and the black Atlantic as a framework for their retelling of Britishness.

Before being converted into a novel⁴, *Crossing the River* was the shortest of Phillips’s radio dramas, simple in its character development, but complex in its meaning. *Crossing the River* featured the disembodied voice which echoed the Phillipsian need to persist, the need to stand up after falling on your face. It also illustrated the necessity of filling silence with something, with anything at all. The story that *Crossing the River* recounted, the Africans’ trade story, is our story, the story of humankind, trapped by the desire for resolution, but unable to listen to the cry of despair uttered by whoever suffered from the experience of slavery, a despair even included in their silences. This is what Michael Rothberg calls ‘multidirectional memory’ by challenging the hierarchical and/or exclusivist approach to chronicling collective traumas – “either mine or yours” – and by pointing out how “[c]ollective memories of seemingly distinct histories – such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism – are not so easily separable” (Rothberg 2009, 524). In his book, *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg developed the concept at length: “Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory – as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources – I suggest that

⁴ As regards the transformation of the radio play *Crossing the River* (1985) into a novel of the same title (1993), Ledent states: “Phillips’s 1993 novel *Crossing the River* has been discussed in relation to his archives, which include three radio plays exploring, like the 1993 novel, transatlantic slavery and its aftermath” (Ledent 2018). Like Phillips’s stage drama, “his radio plays indeed cover similar ground to the rest of his non-dramatic works, addressing the connections and disconnections engendered by the Middle Passage, the historical and cultural currents that bind Europe, Africa and the Americas, and the often ambiguous exchanges that took place in the wake of colonial encounters and still reverberate in our present lives at both the private and the institutional levels” (Ledent 2018).

we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private. [...] This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, inter-cultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory” (3). The listeners – as well as the readers – of *Crossing the River* have a fundamental role, or more specifically, a set of roles to play. Indeed, their minds become mental stages, where they have to translate characters’ sounds and silences into visual and sensual worlds. Furthermore, while Phillips felt the responsibility to write about the trauma of slavery, we readers and listeners have the responsibility to communicate the oppression endured by enslaved Africans like Sarah, Ben and Will. Their words and silences, by resonating in our minds, help us reinterpret the past as a means toward reconciling present and future needs. It is no coincidence that the three characters crossing the river at the end can become a powerful image of loneliness and stasis in which “nobody listens” (Phillips 1985, 11). Just as there is a constant variation of sound and pause, however, those poignant moments are the materialization of disembodied voices coming out the dark by acquiring a fleeting presence, living, for a little while at least, in the minds of the listeners of *Crossing the River*.

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