Travel Writing and Postcoloniality: Caryl Phillips’s The Atlantic Sound

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The postcolonial travelogue is one of travel writing’s most prolific and innovative offshoots in the late-twentieth century. This paper examines the way this subgenre encapsulates the new developments that distinguish contemporary travel accounts from their Enlightened and Victorian counterparts. The socio-political changes brought about by the new century have dramatically altered the motivation and subject matter of a genre that has traditionally been involved in European expansionism and the construction of Europe’s Other. Once vehicles for cultural prejudice serving official purposes, contemporary travel accounts have become powerful instruments of cultural critique, displaying a greater subject-orientation. My analysis will revolve around Caryl Phillips’s second and latest travelogue, The Atlantic Sound (2000), with references to The European Tribe (1987), his first venture into the genre, and to his fiction. This paper also aims at directing critical attention towards Caryl Phillips’s travel writing, which as yet has failed to generate as much scholarship as his fiction.

I

This paper approaches Caryl Phillips’s latest travel book, The Atlantic Sound (2000), as a postcolonial travelogue.1 My contention is that the postcolonial travelogue epitomizes the new developments that have taken place within travel writing from its eighteenth and nineteenth century representations until the late twentieth century. No longer an instrument of imperial expansion, travel writing has become a powerful vehicle of cultural critique, particularly in the hands of special-interest groups such as “postcolonial” authors. In addition, contemporary travel writers are more subject-oriented, their need to travel and record their experiences often stemming from a personal urge to solve some inner conflict.

In his new travelogue, this prolific novelist, essayist and playwright visits three cities involved in the ill-famed Atlantic slave trade. The venture depicted in The Atlantic Sound, however, is not only a revisionist excavation of Europe’s heavy entanglement in the trade; but, more importantly, an exploration of the elusive notions of home and cultural identity troubled by the complex background of its author as a Caribbean-born, English-raised individual currently based in the U. S. Section 2 of this article charts contemporary travel

1. The research behind this essay was conducted at the Centre for Caribbean Studies of the University of Warwick. Support from the University of Santiago de Compostela for this visit is gratefully acknowledged.
writing’s shift away from its Enlightened and Victorian manifestations. The genre’s adaptability to the changed socio-historical conditions of the late twentieth-century is the focus of Section 3, which elaborates on the notion of the postcolonial travelogue. Section 4 launches an analysis of The Atlantic Sound, bringing in the contributions of cultural critics to the ongoing debate over cultural identity.

II

Travel writing has traditionally been involved in socio-political discourses. Travel books feature prominently among the texts Said handles in Orientalism (1991 [1978]) as examples of the orientalist discourse, one seeking to naturalize the Orient into Western knowledge in order to facilitate and legitimize Western imperialism. Thus, he invites our attention to the role played by the work of a French traveler in Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. In Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie (1787), Comte Volney not only provided factual information about these territories, but also listed the encumbrances potential French conquerors might have to face, namely Islam and the English. Napoleon, Said remarks, put Volney’s expertise directly to “functional colonial use” (1991: 80). Said’s thesis reverberates throughout subsequent studies on travel writing. In his Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel (1983), Percy Adams claims that “as propaganda for international trade and for colonization, travel accounts had no equal” (1983: 77). Mary Louise Pratt’s much-quoted Imperial Eyes (2000 [1992]) remains the most comprehensive study of travel writing’s intimate connection with the ideological apparatuses of the European nation-state. Relying on the groundwork laid by Orientalism, Pratt dwells more extensively on the imperialist underpinnings of the travel account. Significantly, one of her case studies is Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa (1799), the most popular travel book of the nineteenth century, written by Mungo Park, a Scotsman working for the London-based Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa.

Pratt’s seminal work has influenced many scholars of travel literature. Ian Bell, for instance, underscores the role played by travel literature in the construction of national identities. Thus, Bell reads Daniel Defoe’s Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain (1724) as “consciously supportive” of the national coherence and fast economic growth of the newly formed nation (1995: 9). Grewal Inderpal’s Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel (1996) highlights the complicity of travel books written by educated Indians with English colonial education. In her outline of the history of travel writing, English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations (2000), Barbara Korte coins the term imperialist travelogue to refer to travel literature’s entanglement in imperialist discourse (2000: 92). Korte traces manifestations of the genre back to the Early Modern Period, which witnessed the publication of scores of travel writing compilations promoting overseas expansion and the colonization of America. Writing in the heyday of the British empire under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society, Victorian explorers and travel writers like David Livingstone or Richard Burton became national heroes bringing the blessings of British civilization to the “wilderness.”

Whereas discovery and expansion had fueled the writing of travel literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the changes brought about by the new century, more
specifically in the post-World War II period (Matos 1992), have inevitably altered the motivation and subject matter of the travel book. The lack of large masses of unknown territory to be explored has “robbed,” to borrow Colin Thubron’s words, the travel book of its “old empirical usefulness” (1984: 173). In addition, the advent of mass tourism and the widespread availability of travel have dimmed the sense of wonder and discovery prevailing the travel accounts written in the previous centuries. After two world wars and the collapse of European empires, the eurocentrism that characterized eighteenth and nineteenth century travel accounts has given way to a decentering of Western culture and a feeling of guilt over Europe’s colonial past.

Indeed, contemporary travel writing reflects the changes that have taken place in the social scene. As Colin Thubron rightly points out, one of the most striking characteristics of the contemporary travel writer is “an awakened social consciousness” (1984: 179). Thus, even when authors choose to draw on traditional patterns such as the exploration account, the tone and interest of the text bears no resemblance to that of its Victorian predecessors. Wilfred Thesiger’s wanderings in a dangerous and unknown part of the Arabian desert, for instance, stem from an urge to escape and criticize Western civilization rather than from the traveler’s desire to contribute to its expansion (Korte 2000: 137). Thus, in Arabian Sands (1959) Thesiger feels a deep bond with the Bedu tribe with whom he crosses the desert, regretting their gradual disappearance under the sprawl of European civilization. Thesiger’s travelogues, among others, illustrate a shift in the role of travel writing from vehicle of cultural prejudice to instrument of cultural critique.

At the same time, since they are not driven by official purposes or funded by social institutions, travel writers have become more subject-oriented. In fact, Korte has detected a gradual intensification of the subjective component in travel writing throughout the centuries. Critics generally agree that the writing of contemporary travel accounts—and the traveling itself springs from a subjective urge, the traveled world often being a mere “backdrop for the traveler’s very personal concern” (Korte 2000: 144). Thus, Korte perceives Bruce Chatwin’s travel writing—In Patagonia (1977), The Songlines (1987)—as an exploration of the author’s perennial obsession with the idea of human restlessness and uprootedness. Furthermore, as Holland and Huggan have remarked in Tourists with Typewriters (1988)—their study of contemporary travel writing—such personal drive is often a quest for self-understanding, revealing “a conflicted sense of belonging and allegiance” (1998: 14).

Subject-orientation and social awareness may well seem an improbable combination. However, this partnership becomes more cohesive if we bear in mind that the personal urge to travel may respond, as we will see, to an attempt to solve some inner conflict whose examination entails delving into broader socio-historical issues. The foregrounding of the traveler’s subjectivity, together with the awakening of social consciousness, are therefore the two most prominent features of contemporary travel writing.

III

The resilience of travel writing in the late twentieth century is partly due to its specialization in the hands of postcolonial, women and gay authors. Lured by the genre’s potential for cultural critique, these countertravelers have broken the stereotype of the
travel writer as white, male, middle class and heterosexual (Holland and Huggan 1998: 198). It may be argued that these specialized kinds of travelers have intensified the features that characterize contemporary manifestations of the genre. Far from wishing to delight the reader with the exotic or to boost national identity, countertravel writing aims at shaking the reader’s complacency through the “unmapping” of “mapped” world views, to borrow Richard Phillips’s words (1997: 143). In doing so, it dismantles the eurocentric views that gave rise to the genre.

Korte maintains that postcolonial authors have infused their travelogues with the preoccupation with identity and belonging that permeates postcolonial literature. Furthermore, she believes that this inner drive may well be the main reason for them to travel: “To many postcolonial travelers . . . the question of defining one’s home still seems to be more urgent than for other travelers, and the search for a home may even be their primary motive for travel” (2000: 170). With its twofold investment in the personal and the social, the postcolonial travelogue is arguably an epitome of the changes that have shaped contemporary travel writing. Although Korte surveys a number of authors from the postcolonial world in her study—Salman Rushdie, India; Margaret Lawrence, Canada; Laurens van der Post, South Africa, to cite a few—she highlights the prolific contribution to the postcolonial travelogue of writers of Caribbean descent such as V. S. Naipaul, Ferdinand Dennis or Caryl Phillips (2000: 155).

The European Tribe (1999 [1987]), an account of Caryl Phillips’s one-year trip across Europe, sprang from the author’s dilemma of “feeling both of and not of” Europe (1999: xv). Conceived as an instrument to increase the author’s self-awareness as a black European, The European Tribe turned out to be a scathing study of the widespread racism of an increasingly multicultural 1980s Europe. Similarly, in his next travelogue, The Atlantic Sound—which is outside the chronological scope of Korte’s study—Phillips’s revision of Europe’s historical involvement in the slave trade through his trips across the Atlantic provides him with an opportunity to take up his perennial preoccupation with notions of home, belonging and cultural identity. My analysis of The Atlantic Sound will revolve around this dual focus.

IV

In The Atlantic Sound, Phillips plunges into what Paul Gilroy has heuristically defined as the black Atlantic world, “one single, complex unit” drawing together the cultures of people of African descent (1999: 15). In his journeys across the Atlantic, Phillips revisits the cities historically engaged in the slave trade, an economy whereby English goods were exchanged on the African West coast for human captives, who were then sold into slavery for work on North American and Caribbean plantations in return for cash or exotic products that would be sold back in England. The body of this work consists of three chapters dealing with the three juncture points of the slave triangle—Liverpool, England; Elmina, Ghana; and Charleston, South Carolina—the Prologue and Epilogue depicting two side trips to the Caribbean and Israel respectively.2

2. The motif of traveling is not confined to the author’s travelogues, but vertebrates much of his
In terms of form, *The Atlantic Sound* partakes of the hybridity that characterizes the travel book as a genre, which has accordingly been described with labels such as “hydra” (Glaser 1991: 48), or “omnium gatherum” (Korte 2000: 5). Actually, some scholars attribute the critical neglect suffered by travel writing to its generic elusiveness (Kowalewski 1992: 8), which has caused *The Atlantic Sound* to be reviewed not only as a travelogue (Adebayo 2000; Neel 2000), but, less compromisingly, as a non-fiction book (Alibhai-Brown 2000; Childers 2000) or a book-length essay (Ledent 2000). In effect, the travel narrative occupies a space of “discursive conflict” (Holland and Huggan 1998: 10), borrowing freely from a wide array of disciplines such as history, social science, journalism, autobiography, or fiction. If, as I have argued elsewhere, Phillips’s fiction idiosyncratically straddles several genres (López 2002), in his new piece the author exploits the formal flexibility that is characteristic of the travelogue. Accordingly, Phillips unleashes the encyclopedic drive of the travel writer, unashamedly displaying his great erudition. As a result, *The Atlantic Sound* is a melange of intriguing historical passages, geographical descriptions, fictionalized narratives, interviews, newspaper articles, letters, poems, extracts from courtroom proceedings, speeches, an endless string of epigraphs, and so on. Besides, Phillips is able to adjust the Western molds of the genre to the contours of a different epistememe; thus, in one of the sections the narrative is interwoven with an anonymous African choral voice—“*The African dispatches the money to the white man* . . . *African voices begin to whisper*” (2000: 17, 30)—that gives the text an oral quality.

The fact that Phillips chooses to start his Atlantic tour with a trip from the Caribbean to England is symptomatic of the marked personal investment of his travel writing. In the Introduction to *The European Tribe* Phillips had explained that the identity “conundrum” (1999: 8) triggering his European tour was rooted in his growing up in culturally exclusive 1970s Britain. Significantly, the Prologue to his new travelogue strikes an equally personal note. It features Phillips’s trip on a banana boat from the Caribbean island of Guadalupe to the English city of Dover in the attempt to reopen “a chapter of [his] own personal narrative” (2000: 16). The author refers to the migration of his parents’ generation—the *Windward Generation*—to England in the 1950s, which he had fictionalized in his first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985). Though unconsciously, Phillips himself had crossed the Atlantic in his mother’s arms as a four-month-old baby.

Through this Atlantic crossing as an adult, Phillips explores the extent to which he can relate to his parents’ generation, to soon find out that he is a very different kind of traveler. Unlike his parents, he is not a colonial going to the mother country with a sense of “hope and expectation,” but a well-to-do black British citizen of Caribbean descent traveling towards Britain “with a sense of knowledge and propriety” (2000: 16). Although his choice of a banana boat may stem from the need to invest his experience with a certain degree of authenticity, Phillips insistently complains about the inconveniences of the vessel. He is

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fiction. It is only in his first two novels, *The Final Passage* (1985) and *A State of Independence* (1986) that Phillips maintains a narrow spatial focus concentrating on England and the Caribbean. In keeping with his preoccupation with fragmentation and dispersion within the Black Diaspora, there is a tendency in Phillips’s fiction towards shuttling between continents and times. *Crossing the River* (1993), an emblematic example of this tendency, takes the reader on a journey from Liberia in the 1830s, to the American Wild West, ending up in a Yorkshire village during the Second World War.
glad that his cabin has two windows instead of a porthole, and describes sleeping in the boat as “being on top of a washing machine that is stuck on the spin cycle” (2000: 6). As a reviewer has put it: “You feel his [Phillips’s] depressions, the tedium, his forbearance as he lives through each day” (Alibhai-Brown 2000: 12). Moreover, soon before the boat’s departure, Phillips acknowledges that he is already longing to take the black taxi cab that will “whisk” (2000: 4) him to his West London home.

In fact, the traveling persona that Phillips projects in this section often seems aloof and elitist, slipping into gestures that we may associate with what David Spurr identifies as tropes of colonial discourse. At times, Phillips perceives the sight from the ship as what Spurr would call a “negative space” characterized “by emptiness and absence” (1993: 92–93). Thus, he describes the Atlantic very unromantically as a “vast unresponsive expanse of sea and sky” (2000: 11). His description of the Costa Rican town of Limon seems indebted to Froud: “After an hour wandering about the town center, I decide that Limon is little more than a dismal, down-at-heel Caribbean coastal port . . . The population is a mixture of black, Hispanic and Indian, most of whom seem to be idling the day away assiduously not looking for work . . . but despite its shabby exterior, Limon does, however, boast telephone booths” (2000: 6–7).

Yet the view of Phillips as a mere Victorian seeing-man—to borrow a term from Pratt (1992: 7)—trying to legitimize his civilizing mission fails to recognize his sensitivity to neocolonial tendencies in the “postcolonial” world. Rather, the occurrence of this discourse in postcolonial texts may reveal, as Jesús Varela has said speaking of Bertram Francis’ bleak perception of St. Kitts in A State of Independence (1986), “disappointment at seeing the chaos and underdevelopment of the Third World” (1999: 401). From the vantage point that his long stay in England as a student has granted him, Bertram fears the ineptitude of the native ruling class and the looming spectrum of American imperialism in the newly independent Caribbean nation. Similarly, in The Atlantic Sound, Phillips criticizes the exploitation of the Burmese crew of the boat by the Germans and openly condemns the treatment given by Britain to her helpless colonial offspring back in the 1950s. The following passage emphasizes the colonials’ subsequent shattering of expectations in the famed metropolis:

West Indian immigrants, such as my parents . . . traveled in the hope that the mother country would remain true to her promise, that she would protect the children of her empire. However, shortly after disembarkation the West Indian immigrants of the fifties and sixties discovered that the realities of this new world were likely to be more challenging than they had anticipated. In fact, much to their dismay, they discovered that the mother country had little, if any, desire to embrace her colonial offspring. (2000: 15)

More accurately, in his Atlantic crossing Phillips shuttles between the roles of insider and outsider, between the sensitized son of Caribbean immigrants and the educated British scholar.

Such role-shifting amounts to Phillips’s grappling with his inability to pin down his cultural allegiances. Though able to sympathize with the plight of his parents’ generation, Phillips is aware that he holds a very different subject position; in spite of his “being in” British society, the writer has repeatedly complained about not being perceived as “of” the society (Phillips 1997: 17). In fact, Phillips himself has shown uneasiness about the critics’
pensant for labeling him as a “British writer, a black writer, a black British writer, a West Indian writer, a Caribbean writer, a black Caribbean writer, an so on and so on” (1992: 25). Not surprisingly, the author has been regarded as a paradigmatic diasporic intellectual, “in a state of perpetual wandering” (Williams 1999: par. 1). In this light, neither his transatlantic crossing nor his arrival to England are emotionally-loaded experiences. This trend towards undercutting all notions of original identity pervades the whole travelogue.

Once a personal note has been struck, Phillips undertakes the account of his Atlantic journeys. His visit to Liverpool reopens a world the reader may have perceived as closed, for it unearthed the city’s heavy entanglement in the slave trade. Touring Liverpool’s most remarkable buildings—the Town Hall, St George’s Hall, Nelson’s Fountain,—trademarks of the city’s past imperial splendor, Phillips puzzles over the fact that “history is so physically present, yet so glaringly absent from people’s consciousness in the Northern city” (2000: 93). In highlighting Liverpool’s “historical amnesia” (2000: 79), Phillips is restating the claim he put forward in his first travelogue, that Europe “does not understand the high price of her churches, art galleries and architecture” (1999: 128). Another living proof of Liverpool’s history of racial abuse is the segregation of its black population, confined to the Toxteth area, which reminds Phillips of “scores of other British inner-city areas that have entered a stage of terminal decline” (2000: 88). Toxteth is not very different either from the segregated areas he had visited on his European tour, such as Kreutzburg, Berlin’s Turkish ghetto, or the Parisian black ghetto of Belleville; Phillips found that even a “sanctuary of liberalism” such as Scandinavia “crumpled to pieces at the first brushes with multi-cultural experience,” as Socorro Suárez has incisively remarked in her analysis of The European Tribe (1988: 160). Significantly, Phillips introduces us to the hidden history of Liverpool through the story of Ghanaian John Emmanuel Ocansey, the son of a wealthy palm oil merchant who had traveled to that same city in 1881 in order to sue the English dealer who had cheated his father. Ocansey’s trip happened at a time when the British slave trade had been outlawed, but West African-British commercial relations still followed an exploitative pattern.

In spite of this, Phillips’ indictment of European imperialism is less harsh in The Atlantic Sound than in his previous travelogue. Certainly, the tone of his protest is much less strident. Whereas in The European Tribe he exhorted Europe “to purge herself” and “perform a historical striptease” (1999: 127), now Phillips does not see any purpose in arousing a sense of guilt among Liverpudlians. In turn, he concedes, though tentatively, that a certain obliviousness about the past of the city is not unnatural: “Maybe this is the modern condition and Liverpool is merely acting out this reality with an honest vigour” (2000: 93). The same applies to Charleston, the next city in his itinerary. Its Sullivan Island, a bar where slaves were seasoned after their arrival in the American coast, has become a summer resort for the wealthy. Phillips rejoices in the undisturbed ease with which black and white Charlestonians enjoy the city’s Festival of African and Caribbean Art (2000: 211-13). As Ernest Renan argued, and Anderson (1991) and Bhabha (1995) after him, “Forgetting . . . is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (1995 [1882]: 11). Obliviousness concerning certain “deeds of violence”, such as the trade with human beings that concerns us here, is at the core of all nations as political formations (1995: 11).

Thus, Phillips casts a very skeptical look on the reproachfulness of his young guide to Liverpool, Stephen, whom he describes as a “tightly wound metal coil” (2000: 79). Unlike
Phillips, who understands that the city’s involvement in the slave trade should not necessarily have a bearing on the way modern Liverpudlians perceive themselves, Stephen is obsessed with their refusal to acknowledge the city’s African history. The point that Phillips is trying to make through his portrayal of Stephen is that in his outspoken anti-Semitism, pan-Africanism and in his striking disregard of foreign blacks, the guide reveals a highly arguable notion of cultural identity. Stuart Hall’s reflections on identity may be useful to understand Phillips’s stance: “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (1994: 394).

The guide’s militancy reflects a longing for the recovery of a lost past, impervious to transformation. Phillips’s fluid notion of identity is further illustrated by the change undergone by the female protagonist in his novel Cambridge (1993 [1991]). Emily Cartwright’s three-month sojourn in her father’s West Indian plantation has altered her perception of England as a “home.” Asked about a return she endlessly postpones, she answers: “England. Emily smiled to herself . . . as though this England was a dependable garment that one simply slipped into or out of according to one’s whim. Did he [the plantation’s doctor] not understand that people grow and change? Did he not understand that one day a discovery might be made that this country-garb is no longer of a correct measure?” (1993: 177). Emily’s detachment from her father and her unwanted English suitor has caused her to become aware of and to outgrow the constraints of Victorian cultural codes. She consequently does not feel a bonding with her former home anymore. Identity is not “dependable” but unstable, emerging out of the subject’s constant positioning in response to specific conditions.

In the African section of the travelogue, ironically titled “Homeward Bound,” Phillips elaborates further on his anti-essentialist views on cultural identity. At the same time, however, we get a glimpse of the author’s own yearning for a sense of wholeness. Asked about his nationality by a flight partner on his way to Ghana, Phillips complains about the complexity of “the question,” which he can only “attempt to answer” in the “familiar flustered” way (2000: 98). We in fact sense his hankering after the rootedness that this man can lay claim to as “an African. A Ghanaian. A whole man. A man of one place” (2000: 100). Yet, as the title of the section anticipates, irony will pervade Phillips’s pronouncements during his African sojourn.

Phillips visits Elmina, a city on the coast of Ghana famous for its magnificent slave fort, during the celebration of Panafest, which, he says mockingly, “according to the publicity material . . . is to be a time when the diasporan family returns to Mother Africa to celebrate the arts, creativity and intellectual achievements of the Pan African world” (2000: 133). Elmina is, in fact, one of the fortified sites of slave-trading activity that have recently become places of pilgrimage and cultural tourism for the most affluent members of the African diaspora. Phillips helplessly watches the “diasporan excesses” of the festival, such as the slaughter of a ram and the wreath-laying to commemorate the victims of the “African holocaust” (2000: 38); or the tee-shirts displaying a human cargo in a slave ship with the logo “Never forgive, never forget,” paradigmatic of the “continual rush to overstatement” (2000: 148) that characterizes the festival. The notion of cultural identity underlying festivals like Panafest is the target of Gilroy’s criticism in his recent study on race and black nationalism, for “[identity] ceases to be an ongoing process of self-making
and social interaction. It becomes instead a thing to be possessed and displayed” (2001: 103). Moreover, he daringly links such spectacular manifestations of identity to the encroachment of fascism into contemporary black nationalism (2001: 7).

Unlike most of the Panafest revelers, Phillips does not perceive Africa as his home, but rather feels that a contrived brotherhood based on the restrictive axis of phenotype is constantly being pressed upon him. Whereas the spirit of Panafest aims at a recovery of a lost past in an ancestral homeland, Phillips argues that “Africa cannot make anybody feel whole” (2000: 173), implying that identity is not about a return to roots, but rather about “coming to terms with our routes” (Hall 1992: 4). As he has acknowledged in The European Tribe, he cannot write in Yoruba or Kikuyu, “anymore than a black youth born in Peckham or Middlesbrough can hope to feel at home in Addis Ababa or Kingston, Jamaica” (1999: 126). Oscillating between different cultural affiliations throughout his Atlantic journeys, Phillips once more refuses to tilt the balance towards a specific set of identity claimants.

The skepticism pervading The Atlantic Sound regarding notions of home and identity reaches its climax in the Epilogue. In this brief section entitled “Exodus,” Phillips narrates his stay with a community of African-Americans exiled in a small town in the Negev desert of Israel. These exiles believe themselves to be descendants of the Hebrews dispersed throughout the world, and have thus undertaken an exodus to their “true homeland.” Again, the stance of this community is based on a territorialized and exclusive notion of identity, one that, to quote Gilroy, “closes down the possibility of communication across the gulf between one heavily defended island of particularity and its equally well fortified neighbours, between one national encampment and others” (2001: 103). Not surprisingly, cynicism pervades Phillips’s remarks on these black Zionists encamped in the Negev desert. Watching them move around their village performing their chores, Phillips perceives them as “circus clowns,” “groups of costumed African-Americans wandering the compound together” (2000: 215). His utter bewilderment at their self-inflicted isolation finds its reflection on the fractured syntax that the author deploys throughout: “African-American people. African-American children. In costumes. Who have come to the desert. The lost tribes of Israel. Found in Chicago, Washington, New York” (2000: 216). For these black Hebrews, their exclusive identity is a sanctuary against the evils—homosexuality, welfare, obscene music (2000: 169), to cite some—of the Western Babylons they have left behind.

There is very little room for wonder in The Atlantic Sound. Not surprisingly, a critic has charged Phillips with being “always too controlled” (Alihah-Brown 2000: 12). One in fact senses that in Phillips’s travel writing the traveled world is secondary to the traveler’s preconceived notions of it. His sojourns in Liverpool, Ghana or the Negev desert hold very few surprises but rather seem to confirm the author’s views prior to the journey. This is even more conspicuous in The European Tribe, where setting is often a mere backcloth to Phillips’s musings on certain topics. His visit to Venice, for instance, furnishes the author with the opportunity to render his own reading of Othello and The Merchant of Venice, two plays featuring cultural Others—the black and the Jew respectively—stigmatized by sixteenth-century Italian society. Accordingly, all the black communities that Phillips encounters on his Atlantic journeys fail to challenge restricted views of cultural identity.
Phillips’s final words in his travelogue insist that “it is futile to walk into the face of history” (2000: 221), summarizing the message he has been trying to convey throughout his Atlantic sojourn. Identity is not in the past to be found but in the future to be made. Therefore, though roots are important insofar as they are part of our sense of identity, it is the routes that we take that should eventually determine the way we perceive ourselves. Ancestral homelands are places of no return; though liable to be placed under scrutiny, the evils of history cannot be redressed and should not be used to stir hatred, thus widening the gulf that already severs different racial encampments. In this realization lies Phillips’s detachment from the places and the black communities that he meets.

While The Atlantic Sound has been praised for its vivid portraiture and reportage in the manner of Jonathan Raban’s or V. S. Naipaul’s travelogues (Alibhai-Brown 2000; Childers 2000), it has also been criticized on the grounds of the author’s detachment, skepticism and excessive intellectual engagement. Diran Adébáyò therefore complains that Phillips does not “bare his soul”: “This book is billed as a ‘personal quest,’ but I wanted to know more about this Caribbean-born and England-bred author’s own deep feelings for ‘home’ and how they were affected, or not, by his journey” (2000: 26). More insightfully, Bénédicte Ledent has attributed Phillips’s unsentimental stance to the “mature, undogmatic and fluid vision” of identity he has achieved after repeatedly probing into these issues throughout his prolific writing career (2000: 199). Phillips’s detachment is an eloquent statement in itself. Though a good companion to The Atlantic Sound, The European Tribe develops a much harsher critique of European imperialism and conducts a more desperate search for answers to the author’s identity conundrum. The same tone pervades Phillips’s first novel, The Final Passage (1995a [1985]), where 1950s England is portrayed as a most unwelcoming mother country reminding her colonial offspring of their undesirability with graffiti like “If you want a nigger neighbour vote Labour” (1995a: 122). The thirteen-year gap spanning the publication of the two travelogues accounts for the more tempered tone pervading the latest one.

The shift away from the rhetoric of victimization found in earlier works such as The Final Passage and The European Tribe, through which Phillips’s writing has gained in complexity and appeal, began to manifest itself in the novels written after the publication of The European Tribe. In the “Heartland” section of Higher Ground (1995b [1989]), set in an African slave fort in the heyday of the trade, both enslavers and slaves are portrayed as victims of historical economic contingencies. The Governor of the fort meditates on this idea on his death bed: “I fear the wheel of history has spun us all into a difficult situation, and no amount of acclimatizing by you [a native interpreter] or by me is going to heal the wound that this economic necessity has inflicted upon our human souls” (1995b: 51, emphasis added). Avoiding demonizing whites, Phillips brings African complicity under scrutiny by choosing a black collaborationist as the narrator of the section and by enlisting the cooperation of African leaders, who allow their villages to be raided in exchange for profit. Similarly, the Prologue to Crossing the River (1993) features the remorseful voice of an African father who sold his three children to the captain of a slave ship after a bad crop. The whimsical spin of history blurs the distinction between torturers and victims.

British men and women have been writing about travel to colonies and other territories
for a much longer time than people from formerly colonized countries have been writing back in this genre. Therefore, there is not yet a large body of travel literature by, for example, Anglo-Caribbean authors such as Caryl Phillips. However, postcolonial authors, alongside with other countertravelers, are partly responsible for the steady growth of a traditionally Western genre in modern times. Travel writing's inherent concern with spatial displacement and its potential for cultural critique have proved a most adequate ground for authors to stage the issues central to the “postcolonial condition.” Phillips’s wanderings within and also beyond the spectral triangle drawn in The Atlantic Sound have allowed him to deal with a wide array of issues such as the complex cultural affiliations of people of African descent, their dispersal in the Atlantic world or their revision of Western history. Furthermore, the subjective drive underlying The Atlantic Sound, Phillips's grappling with his own identity conundrum as Black and British, is emblematic of the centrality of the personal in contemporary manifestations of the genre.

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