

VENETIAN MASKS: INTERCULTURAL ALLUSION,
TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY, AND TWO OTHELLOS

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This article explores the use of intercultural allusion in personal narratives of transcultural identity. Some theoretical considerations are brought to bear on Othello's interculturally allusive narrative of personal identity in Shakespeare's play, showing how that narrative serves pragmatically to broker Othello's acceptance by Venetian society. However, at the play's tragic finale Othello's mask slips, thus throwing into doubt the possibility of transcultural identity. The paper then considers how a contemporary transcultural writer, Caryl Phillips, alludes to the Shakespearean prototype of transcultural identity, and to what effect. While, as a figment of the European imagination which ennobles an ethnic quisling, it is a prototype that Phillips would wish to rewrite and/or deconstruct, he is in fact unable to do so for, *malgré lui*, his own allusive frame reveals him to be more European than he might care to think.

KEY WORDS: intercultural allusion, identity narrative, Shakespeare, Caryl Phillips, Othello.

Intercultural allusion and transcultural identity

This article is an attempt to sketch ways in which the intentional use of allusion assists in the construction of identity, particularly of culturally palatable identities for transcultural subjects.¹ As such it is a contribution to the growing literature which investigates the interfaces between intertextuality and postcolonial writing. However, that literature tends to focus on how intertextuality may be used by writers to subvert dominant discourses (Nielsen 1994; Kloos 1998) or to question the relevance of traditional genres to particular ethnic experiences (Döring 2002). My focus on the intentionally pragmatic use by individuals (writers or otherwise) of intercultural allusion for the construction of identity will, I hope, suggest new ways in which intertextuality impinges not only on postcolonial and multicultural literature, but on all sorts of identity narrative produced by all sorts of people, both fictional and real.

1. An earlier and shorter version of this article was read as a paper at the 4th International Conference of the Intercultural Association for Languages and Intercultural Communication, held at Lancaster University, 14–16 December 2003. The kind remarks of three delegates encouraged me to write up the paper for publication. Once written up, the acute comments of the article's three anonymous readers set me on the track of, variously, Erving Goffman, a parallel in Hamlet, and greater clarity of argument. I should also register my gratitude to Fernando Galván for showing me a copy of his forthcoming article on Caryl Phillips.

Intertextual theory offers some suggestive analogies between allusion and transcultural subjects. Firstly, as Heinrich F. Plett reports, allusion has been characterised as constituting an alien presence in a text, an alien presence which is removable from the text, not an organic part of it (1991b: 9). If we substitute “transcultural subject” for “allusion” and “host society” for “text,” one analogy becomes immediately apparent and more than slightly disconcerting, for the result of the substitution reads as follows: to many the transcultural subject is an alien presence in a given host society, an alien presence whose organic integration some might suspect and whose removal a few might desire. Intertextual theory even provides a terminology in which those few might seek respectability for their desire: allusion is “an *improprie*-segment replacing a hypothetical *proprie*-segment” (Plett 1991b: 9); it is improper in that it does not belong genetically to the text it has been grafted onto, but has been parented elsewhere—is of a different blood. That impropriety verges on the unethical in that allusion does the work that a putative genetically proper element could well have done—an argument more familiar from those who accuse immigrants of stealing the work of natives. Secondly, according to Michael Riffaterre (1980), allusion is inherently dual, its duality and therefore ambivalence stemming from its simultaneous sitedness in two different contexts, the quotation text (the text where the allusion is made) and the pre-text (the text to which the allusion is made); and this dual sitedness problematises interpretation, for allusion refuses to commit itself to any referential allegiance to one context or the other. Here the analogy would be with the ambivalent condition of the transcultural subject, who may unabashedly declare, for example, dual sitedness by holding two passports—as does Caryl Phillips (St. Kitts and United Kingdom) (Bell 1991: 593)—and whose allegiances may be questioned by the likes of Norman Tebbit when caught cheering on the wrong side at cricket. Thirdly, Linda Hutcheon (1991) has pointed out how, in political terms, allusion has been viewed as fundamentally subversive of representational canons and, more generally, of society at large. Similarly the transcultural subject causes us to rethink our own self-representations before either expansively modifying or defensively reasserting them, our modification or reassertion depending on whether we see transculturality as an opportunity or threat to ourselves and to society at large.

But there is more than a relationship of analogy between allusion and transcultural subjects, for allusion, more particularly intercultural allusion (that is to say, A’s allusion while addressing B to elements proper to the conceptual framework of B’s culture), may be used by such subjects to construct for themselves identity narratives which have the pragmatic goal, among others, of brokering their acceptance by the culture they happen to find themselves in at any given time. When I talk about identity, or personal identity, I am talking about the identity a person presents towards other people. This presented identity is a construction or personal narrative, or a “persona” in the original sense of a theatrical mask. Tellingly, Erving Goffman, the social psychologist of the 1960s and 1970s whose influence is still felt today, described his model of the presentation of identity as “dramaturgical” (1959: 240): the process of establishing identity in society is a “performance” or “dramatic realization”, conditioned by setting and audience, which an “actor” executes to achieve some particular goals at a given moment (1959: 17, 30); or, as Thomas Hobbes wrote as long ago as 1651, “a *person*, is the same that an *actor* is, both on stage and in common conversation” (1996: 106). It is important to realise that no performed or presented identity is coterminous with, or identical to, a person’s most

essential, irreducible, intimate and, so to speak, “real” identity, if such a thing exists at all (something which Goffman would have denied). As Jenny Diski puts it, “we are actors or con artists . . . who walk into discrete situational frames and become whatever will get us through” (2004: 10). Thus, we may deliberately present different identities at different times, in different contexts, and to different people by, for example, switching dialects, idiolects and allusive frames of reference, all of which are deictic of that sociocultural identity or persona we wish to display in the particular context. Acceptance is won by establishing social and/or cultural parity between ourselves and our current interlocutors, a parity which is grounded in our positing a cultural frame of reference which we assume our interlocutors share and to which our allusions, among other things, refer.² To achieve this relationship of parity, we play down some aspects of our identity and play up others, and it is this pragmatic gauging of the identity we present to the context we are in which allows us to conceive of identity as a narrative constructed for the pragmatic purposes of social and cultural interaction and acceptance. And, as Goffman argued in *Stigma*, the pressure, the need to perform palatably, to produce acceptable identity narratives, to pass oneself off as “normal” is greater among those who are in some way or another marginalized by noticeable disparity (1963: 42-44). This is why the identity narratives of outsiders of any ilk negotiating admission into a society or culture are of particular interest.

The point should also be made that since individuals tend to live in groups, individual identity narratives are conditioned by the set of identity traits which together compose the group’s collective identity or self-image. This self-image is usually predicated on differences in identity which the group perceives to exist between itself and other groups; as Samuel Huntington has put it pithily, “people define their identity by what they are not” (qtd. Pechter 1999: 69). Thus a mutually exclusive (if not mutually repellent) polarity, an insuperable frontier, is set up between the self-image and its counter-image—the image of the Other, or other-image.³ When a member of another, different group demonstrates possession of, or competence in, identity traits previously regarded as improper to his group and proper to our own, we may first feel threatened and then begin to wonder whether, in fact, our self-image, is accurate or adequate. For example, the “English” often take a pride in their language: the language of Shakespeare, decidedly not the language spoken in the U. S. A., and so on.⁴ The English language, proficiency in it, and veneration of Shakespeare as arch-exponent of it are parts of the “English” identity to which many English people would subscribe. And it is an identity under threat in a multicultural, polyglot society, as the recent plans to introduce a British Citizenship “test” and the controversy surrounding them demonstrate. Furthermore, far from being a neutral pragmatic counter, competence in English may serve to raise heckles rather than arouse empathy—if the competent person is not English. Indeed, the double-edged virtues of competence in English has become something of a topic in postcolonial and multicultural

2. This is a reprise of intertextuality’s concept of the *idéologème* which indicates a text’s and, by extension, any utterance’s cultural (including historical, social, ethnic, religious, etc) coordinates (Kristeva 1969: 114).

3. For a useful account of the imagologist scheme of self-image and other-image see Spiering (1992: 10-19).

4. Obviously, “English” is itself a slippery term around which to construct an identity: see Young (1995: 3-4).

writing in English where the transcultural subject is liable to be regarded as an ingratiating *arriviste*: Caryl Phillips's own anthology of "arrival narratives" contains several instances from, among others, C. L. R. James and Shiva Naipaul (1997: 62–70, 187–95),⁵ while his *Othello* mines the same topic of immigrant precocity when, proclaimed a "fine pupil" by his tutor ("a scholarly Venetian of advanced years"), he gives his ego some careful preening: "I believe he was correct for, after some few weeks, I came to the conclusion that there was little more this man could teach me" (1998: 116). And, of course, Shakespeare's *Othello* uses intercultural allusion so successfully to create for himself a palatable identity that for a time he is more Venetian than the Venetians (or more English than the English)—something that Brabantio and Iago find hard to assimilate.

Shakespeare's *Othello*

The question of *Othello*'s identity has become a major focus of critical industry, and while it is with certain misgivings that I embark upon yet another consideration of *Othello*'s identity, the identity narrative *Othello* constructs for himself around intercultural allusion so well illustrates the general theoretical point I wish to establish, is so accurate in its mimesis of real-life identity presentation, that it would have been self-defeating to ignore it. In the wake of G. K. Hunter's historically informed reconstruction of Elizabethan attitudes to race and his conclusion that Shakespeare was on *Othello*'s side (1978), critics have wrangled over Shakespeare's and the play's sympathies (not necessarily the same thing), while at the same time refining the base notion of race by unpicking related discourses of religion, miscegenation and the monstrous.⁶ Karen Newman concludes, for example, that "Shakespeare's play stands in a contestatory relation to the hegemonic ideologies of race and gender in early modern England" (1991: 93); but if that is indeed the case, it does not, according to Jyotsna Singh in her ground-breaking article on African responses to the play, exonerate him of participation in a Eurocentric discourse of the Other predicated on a "disidentification with the black man" (1994: 291). Such matters lie as far beyond the scope of this article as disquisitions on the colour of *Othello*'s skin. My concern is not with what is represented, but with how it is represented; besides, we should be guided by Dymrna Callaghan's salutary reminder that on the Elizabethan stage "[t]here

5. Another instance is Amit Chaudhuri's anecdote about the plump lady in the corridor of his uncle's Belsize Park bedsit who was unable to comprehend Chaudhuri's statement that he was studying English at Oxford—it clashed with her other-image of Indians and threatened her own self-image (1991: 153-56). This out-Englishing of the English is paralleled in the purportedly greater enthusiasm among Asians for certain traditional British values than among native British (Hand 1995) or the apparent "paradox" that "the seven most significant writers of twentieth-century English literature have been a Pole, three Americans, two Irishmen" and only one Englishman, the exceptional D. H. Lawrence (Eagleton 1967: 9). The best part of forty years later, we might quibble with the term "English literature" and Eagleton's choice of writers, but the point is still well taken. Meanwhile, A. Robert Lee (1995) has attested to the existence of a multicultural Englishness of which English Englishness is only a subset.

6. Apart from the articles cited elsewhere in the article, see also Orkin (1987), Bartels (1990) and Manzanos (1996).

are no authentic ‘others’ . . . of any kind, only their representations” because all parts are played by white males (1996: 193), a reminder that ties in neatly with my premise that there is no authentic identity, but an endless series of performed identities gauged to a particular situation. Deborah Cartmell (2001), concentrating on film versions of act 1, scene 3 of the play, has evaluated how the success of Othello’s attempts at cultural assimilation through such gauging of identity can vary in accordance with the skin-colour of the actor playing him. This section will examine how Shakespeare represents that gauging in the same scene through the use of intercultural allusion.

Othello’s famous narrative of identity is an allusive construction, a *summa* of literary commonplaces of the exotic with which Shakespeare’s audience would have been familiar. Despite its familiarity, the narrative still bears quoting:

Her [Desdemona’s] father loved me, oft invited me;
Still questioned me the story of my life
From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes,
That I have passed.
I ran it through, even from my boyish days
To th’very moment that he bade me tell it;
Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field;
Of hair-breadth scapes i’th’imminent deadly breach;
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence,
And portance in my travailous history;
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
It was my hint to speak—such was my process—
And of the cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders. (*Othello* 1.3.129–46)

These lines’ indebtedness to such works as Philemon Holland’s translation of Pliny’s *Historie of the World* (1601) and John Pory’s of John Leo’s *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600) has long been recognised (see Honigmann 4–5). Most of Shakespeare’s audience would not have read these works, but all the components of the exotic other-image regularly rehearsed by Othello for the benefit of Brabantio and Desdemona were much more widely available in popular potboilers by traveller-writers, some of whom seem to have been on the same trip as Othello.⁷ Interestingly, there is no such narrative in Cinthio’s *novella* which provided Shakespeare with his main source. Since Cinthio’s main concern is to moralise not problematise, we are simply told that Desdemona, “impelled not by female appetite but by the Moor’s good qualities, fell in love with him” (2002: 371). So why does Shakespeare interpolate this allusive narrative of identity?

It is a mistake to consider Othello’s narrative as underscoring his own exotic ethnicity through allusion to European commonplaces of the exotic; in fact, the narrative’s effect is

7. For similarities between the travails of Othello and one Elizabethan traveller-writer, Edward Webbe, see Sell (2002: 140–42).

just the reverse, for Othello's intention is to present to Brabantio and Desdemona an identity of sociocultural parity by locking into the topical coordinates of the European conceptual system's scheme of the exotic, or more precisely, of European encounters with the exotic. To put it another way, Othello's narrative shows how he has come into contact with the exotic and codified or conceptualised his experiences of it in a manner proper to and therefore admissible by the host culture, in so far as his allusions are proper to that culture's conceptual framework as, in this case, inscribed in its literary heterocosm. As a consequence, Othello's use of intercultural allusion allows him to cross the culture divide. He has effectively "defined himself as an Elizabethan traveller" (Hadfield 2003: 13) and thereby become transcultural, a point emphasized by Shakespeare's casting Othello as an African Aeneas telling his traveller's tales to a European Dido.⁸ Brabantio laps up Othello's tales greedily, despite being, along with Iago, the only character in the play who at times slips into racist discourse; as far as Desdemona is concerned, Othello achieves his amatory goal. Meanwhile the authoritative figure of the Duke believes the "tale would win [his] daughter too" (1.3.172), a testimony to the fact that Othello's pragmatic gambit, his bet on intercultural allusion to construct a palatable identity, was the right one: his competence in intercultural allusion, his adept management of Venetian topics of the Other, has temporarily rendered him one of the Venetians, so that at the end of the scene the Duke may remark to Brabantio that Othello "is far more fair than black" (291). So successful is Othello's identity narrative that people seem prepared to disregard his skin colour and seek the man elsewhere, which may be what Desdemona means when she tells the Duke, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (253), and which is certainly the state of affairs which Iago will spend most of the play attempting to reverse (Hunter 1978: 45–46).

All of this implies a measure of calculation on Othello's part, of cynicism even. He has gauged his persona with a weather eye and is fully conscious that this narrative is his own self in performance behind an allusive mask: as Stephen Greenblatt has suggested, in this speech "Othello comes dangerously close to recognizing his status as a text" (1984: 238). In an echo of Sidney, the identity he presents is not himself, but the tale of himself—a persona he fashions and presents with consummate skill. It is that tale or persona which woos Desdemona in particular and wows Venetians in general, not surprisingly perhaps, since its catalogue of "disastrous chances," "moving accidents" and "hairbreadth scapes" coincide uncannily with the sort of wonderful episodes which according to Aristotle (1972: 134) generate aesthetic pleasure. Shakespeare's dramatic technique at this point is of great significance: he does not directly dramatise Othello's tale-telling to Brabantio and Desdemona, the success of which would presumably hinge on an authenticity of performance; rather Shakespeare makes Othello deliver himself of, and comment upon, an action replay of his tale, thus emphasising its factitiousness and essential narrativity: removed from its original context of apparently *ex tempore* live dialogue, the narrative has become a recorded message and Othello himself draws attention to his ability to "run it through" (1.3.159), to rewind and fast-forward (and, possibly, play back in slow motion: "dilate" 154) his "story" (a word he repeats at 130, 159, and 165) according to the wishes of his hearers. And because Othello is not now running through his tale to win the acceptance

8. See Patricia Parker's interesting discussion of Shakespeare's echo of the parallel Virgilian episode (1994: 97–98).

of Brabantio and Desdemona, the actor playing him may ham up his delivery a little for the entertainment of the Duke, thereby emphasising for the audience the artificiality of this particular presented identity and ironising on the ontological deficits inherent to all discourse of identity. For despite being of heterocosmic origin and therefore not having any basis in fact, identity narratives constructed around intercultural allusion may yet be deployed for specific pragmatic purposes such as obtaining acceptance for the transcultural subject.

Towards the end of the play, just before stabbing himself, Othello's use of language becomes strongly interculturally allusive once more, but now the rhetoric is under pressure from Othello's resurgent otherness. He bids Lodovico, Gratiano and Cassio:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. (5.2.339–41)

These words imply Othello's awareness that identity is in essence narrative and, as such, susceptible to diverse narrations, for example, the extenuating or the malicious.⁹ He then dictates his own, climactic identity narrative for Lodovico to write down and send (or deliver in person) to Venice. The narrative starts with a brief psychological self-description ("not easily jealous" but easily misled when worked up), which is amplified through a pair of extended similes. His hearers are to speak

. . . of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. (344–49)

As before, Othello alludes here to European (Plinian) commonplaces of the exotic. But the effect is no longer to claim that he is one of the Venetians, but to indicate that he is both one of them and one of the exotic others. For in these lines his allusive competence in terms of the European heterocosm is undercut when he positions himself on the side of the first simile's exotic vehicle. Othello does not compare his irrational, murderous disposal of Desdemona with the Indian who fecklessly squandered a pearl, as if his disposal and the Indian's squandering were two discrete actions. Rather, he imagines that his own hand has actually carried out the action of the Indian: his own hand supplants the Indian as grammatical subject of "threw away a pearl," and the consequence is to assert a continuity of identity between the Indian and himself. As for the Arabian gum-tree simile, Othello keeps more of a distance from the vehicle: he drops tears whereas the trees drop gum, although a logical nexus is still forged between Othello and the exotic by the need to supply the verb "drop" in order to make good the ellipsis of the Arabian trees' predicate. Accordingly, Othello's rhetoric is at odds with itself: on the one hand the intercultural

9. They also parallel Hamlet's dying request to Horatio: "report me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied" (5.2.331–32). Hamlet was another outsider, trying in death to make himself acceptable.

allusions still attempt the presentation of a persona that is palatable to the Venetians; on the other, that persona is challenged by Othello's positioning of himself in the same exotic world as the vehicles of his figures. Released through gaps in the rhetoric, Othello's repressed identity begins to rip through his Venetian mask. Then comes what F.R. Leavis described as Othello's "superb *coup de théâtre*" (1962: 152):

. . . Set you down this,
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
 And smote him—thus! (5.2.349–53)

Here Othello's self-dramatisation through action unites his identity narrative and the real-time events of his life (or death) as his Venetian audience—and we, the audience—watch him smite himself with his dagger at the very moment he says the words "smote him—thus!" Narrative and (the theatrical illusion of) reality are for a split-second spliced together as what Venetians (on stage) and we (in the audience) see is what they and we alike get; and what this conjunction of the two disparate ontological categories of identity as narrative and identity in action persuades us that we are seeing and getting is the truth about Othello's identity. At first sight Othello's account of how he took the side of Venice against another type of the exotic other, and consequently against his own originally other self, might seem to be a definitive statement of how Othello genuinely believes himself now to be on the Venetian side, to be one of us. After all, on the point of killing himself he can no longer harbour any vested, pragmatic interest in espousing a Venetian identity when he is about to sever himself from Venetian—and all—society for good. In other words, the Aleppo anecdote may bespeak Othello's conviction of his total assimilation of Venetian culture and identity. Alternatively, the contiguity of the Aleppo anecdote and the preceding "base Indian" and Arabian gum-tree similes may constitute a statement of Othello's irremediable transculturality: neither fully Venetian nor any longer fully exotic, he is neither one of us nor one of them. This is, I think, the correct reading because the electric fusion of narrative and action at this point transforms Othello at one and the same time into the "turbanned Turk" and his Venetian executioner: Othello the Turk, the exotic other, dies at the hands of Othello the Venetian.¹⁰ Thus his final *coup de théâtre* enacts the irreconcilable tensions that undermine the attainment of true transcultural identity: the narrative matches the empirical events exactly, as Lodovico's inadvertently punning response to Othello's suicide confirms. For as Lodovico exclaims "O bloody period" (5.2.355), the journey of Othello's life reaches its conclusion and so does his last exercise in the discursive composition of an identity narrative. In short, the "strangely bifurcated discourse" (Boose 1994: 40) of Othello's final speech reveals him to be both Venetian and exotic other, both one of us and one of them. The tragedy is that the promising flicker of transculturality's potential to transcend culture divides is snuffed out by Othello himself, that it is Othello who shatters the dream he himself embodied, as if admitting that dream's impossibility.

10. Jyotsna Singh argues that in death Othello "implicitly identifies with the 'malignant and turbanned Turk'" (1994: 291), which is the third alternative.

Caryl Phillips's Othello in *The Nature of Blood*

Allusion to Shakespeare's Othello (prototype of the exotic other, icon of transcultural precariousness) is so common in the identity narratives of so many postcolonial and/or multicultural writers, among others, that it seemed appropriate to study one such real-life case of intercultural allusion as a counterpoint to Shakespeare's fictional case.¹¹ Caryl Phillips's recent novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997) suggested itself as a suitable object of study because of its particularly extended allusion to Othello and because its author—of African, European, Indian and Jewish ancestry (Ledent 2002: 7)—would presumably agree about the impossibility of achieving the transcultural dream. For Phillips in *The Nature of Blood*, transculturality seems to represent more of a threat than a promising opportunity. Far from being a means to transcend differences of identity by subsuming them within a new and hybrid identity which, if it does not completely reconcile all conflicts between the diverse identities simmering within it, is at least capacious and comprehensive enough to make room for such diversity, Phillips seems to believe that the bottom line of transculturation is the transcultural subject's abandonment of his or her culture of origin. Phillips makes his Othello bitterly self-recriminatory in this respect: "You are lost, a sad black man, first in a long line of so-called achievers who are too weak to yoke their past with their present; too naïve to insist on both; too foolish to realize that to supplant one with the other can only lead to catastrophe" (1998: 181–82). Phillips and his Othello are of a melancholy humour, obsessed with—or weighed down by—the guilt complexes associated with that abandonment neurosis syndrome suffered, according to Frantz Fanon's diagnosis, by all colonised subjects who achieve neither complete assimilation in the host culture nor complete eradication of their original cultural imprint.¹² Besieged by this neurosis, in Ania Loomba's words, "the colonised subject realises that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, or shed the blackness he has learnt to devalue" (1998: 176). This is similar to the predicament of Shakespeare's Othello, and to generations of subsequent transcultural subjects. So how does one such subject allude to Othello, and with what effect?

The figure of Othello was a constant, if ghostly, presence in much of Phillip's previous fiction (Galván 2004), lurking in the African collaborator with the English slavers in "Heartland" (*Higher Ground*, 1989), in Cambridge (*Cambridge*, 1991), and in Nash Williams in "The Pagan Coast" (*Crossing the River*, 1993). But the figure is fleshed out and made explicit for the first time in *The Nature of Blood*, where Phillips dispenses with the Shakespearean Othello's "emotional volatility," "sensuousness," exaggerated Christianity, and overdone rhetoric (the last two purportedly symptomatic of "cultural assimilation gone wrong"), which allegedly configure Othello as a prototype of ethnic and exotic otherness (all quotations from Honigsmann 2002: 20–28).¹³ Indeed, Phillips's sober, obsessively self-absorbed and self-analytical Othello (an Othello afflicted, say, with "the

11. Apart from Singh (1994), see the bibliographies by Smith (1988) and Mikesell and Vaughan (1990), and Vaughan's "contextual history" (1994).

12. On Othello and Fanon, see Phillips 1992: 50–54ff.

13. In fact, none of these characteristics taken in isolation is unique to Othello: within the play Emilia demonstrates a keen olfactory sensitivity to villainy (5.2.188), while Cassio has a good line in inflated rhetoric (e.g. 1.2.39–47); outside the play parallels are legion.

English malady”) bears a closer resemblance to Thomas Mann’s Gustave Aschenbach, one of the few conspicuous differences being that Aschenbach found his death in Venice, while Phillips’s reader knows (though Phillips never gets that far) that Othello will die on Cyprus. That Phillips gives up his version of the Othello story on the eve of Othello’s departure for Cyprus (whither he shall go unaccompanied by his new bride) is probably significant: what is certain is that Phillips’s Othello is neither heroic nor tragic. So what is Phillips’s point? Why allude to Othello at all?

Naturally enough, as a character in a novel, Phillips’s Othello is not formally dramatic. But more crucially, Phillips’s Othello is undramatic because he has been wilfully de-dramatised and condemned to exist in solipsistic quarantine from any social interaction. While this may be due to Phillips’s own belief that Othello’s tragedy was due to his lack of any supportive peer group which might have “reinforce[d] his own sense of identity” (1992: 50), one consequence is that we never see his Othello present a persona for the pragmatic purposes of socio-cultural insertion. In Phillips, the identity narrative constructed by Shakespeare’s Othello shrivels to a terse, dry *précis*: “the lady [unnamed throughout, as is Phillips’s Othello himself] declared that she wished to know principally of my adventures as a soldier and of the many dangers to which my life had been subjected. She listened intently, and I spun some truthful tales” (133–34). Here there is no exotic, no allusion, no performance, no feeling of any transcultural identity being presented or acceptance being negotiated.

In fact, Phillips’s Othello is more concerned to obtain information about Venetian customs from the lady than to capture her heart. This concern is consonant with what I take to be one of the motives underlying Phillips’s reworking of Shakespeare’s Othello. Phillips is interested in arrival narratives, as his collection of such narratives, published (in the same year as *The Nature of Blood*) under the title *Extravagant Strangers*, shows: his Othello’s thirst for information about Venice is understandable in a newcomer to the city-state. Taken for granted by Shakespeare, Phillips expends great energy on Othello’s arrival in Venice, and his account of Othello’s first impressions is at one point significantly allusive: “During my return journey [from the house of the lady’s father] it began to snow. Tiny white flakes spun down from the dark sky and lightly dusted the gondola with a thin salty layer” (128). As Fernando Galván (2004) indicates, the allusion in this passage seems to be to one of the works extracted in Phillips’s *Extravagant Strangers*, namely, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa the African, written by himself*, first published in 1789. Among other “English wonders” (11), Equiano recalls how “[o]ne morning when I got upon deck, I saw it covered all over with the snow that fell over-night: as I had never seen any thing of the kind before, I thought it was salt” (14). The striking resemblance between the two passages (especially the recurrence of “salt”) makes it tempting to deduce that Phillips wishes to rewire Othello’s allusive frame of reference so that the current of a more authentically alien identity might flow through it. However, there is a key difference between Equiano and Phillips’s Othello: Equiano feels a sense of innocent wonder at the snow, as a result of which he becomes the butt of good-natured practical joking, and then provides a list of further, increasingly amazing, English wonders; in contrast, wonder is totally absent from Phillips’s Othello. True enough, he repeatedly utters the vocabulary of wonder (he is monotonously “enchanted,” “overwhelmed,” “dumbfounded” by the “strange,” “wondrous,” “spellbinding” things of Venice) but he never seems to live it on his pulses and therefore fails to communicate it to the reader. In

significant contrast, most of the extravagant strangers gathered together by Phillips systematically register feelings of wonderment on arrival in Britain and manage to convey those feelings to the reader (e. g. Jean Rhys 58, and Shiva Naipaul 187). Not only that: most of them also chart a course from initial wonderment to the prompt disillusionment attendant upon that familiarity which, if not contempt, at best breeds only a grudging or stoical acceptance (e. g. Penelope Lively 167, and Shiva Naipaul 187). In contrast, Phillips's allusion to Equiano only throws into relief his Othello's difference from Equiano: Phillip's Othello, morose from the start, is inoculated against that wonder which usually accompanies encounters with new and strange worlds and people—that wonder which, triggered by literary commonplaces, guaranteed Shakespeare's Othello's successful wooing. Thus Phillips's Othello is temperamentally no extravagant stranger, a conclusion borne out by Phillips's neglect to give him reactions or language which might mark him off as different—in this novel at least, there is no evidence of Phillips's virtuosity in reproducing different Englishes, of his “accomplished ventriloquism” (Lezard 1993: 21).¹⁴

Phillips does, however, attempt to freight his Othello with a new identity narrative, the objective of which is to give expression to the feeling of guilt attached to the transcultural subject's abandonment neurosis syndrome. Central to that narrative is the existence of a wife and child, non-existent in Shakespeare's play, whom Othello has “left behind in [his] native country” (135). To assuage his guilt Othello seeks consolation in the fact that, as a warrior, the social mores of his country do not require of him any sort of formal marriage; but he never quite manages to convince himself. Furthermore, his spirits lower when he reflects that “this proposed marriage [to his Venetian lady] did indeed mark me off from my past, and Venice, the birthplace of my wife, was a city that I might now have to consider home. . .” (147). Ultimately, in his final appearance in the novel, Othello counsels himself to return home:

My friend, an African river bears no resemblance to a Venetian canal. Only the strongest spirit can hold both together. Only the most powerful heart can endure the pulse of two such disparate life-forces . . . Brother, you are weak. A figment of a Venetian imagination. While you still have time, jump from her bed and fly away home . . . No good can come from your foreign adventure. (183)

This is where Phillips abandons his Othello. So far as the reader knows, he may return to his African home (the likeliest assumption for a reader who knew nothing about Shakespeare's Othello), thereby avoiding his Shakespearean tragedy. If, as I have suggested, part of that tragedy was rooted in the impossibility of true and effective transculturation, Phillips's reworking of Shakespeare would be an attempt to ward off tragedy by admitting that you cannot be both one of them and one of us, but must yield to whichever culture exerts the stronger pull.¹⁵ For Phillips's Othello, it is obvious which culture is stronger and, were the pull of the Shakespearean pre-text not so great, the reader might easily imagine

14. It might also be noted how Phillips's Othello purveys what is often considered to be the typically western, white, male discourse of colonialism in so far as he views both Venice and his Venetian lady as beautiful, dormant women, vulnerable to his gaze and touch.

15. At the same time, Phillips's omission of Othello's suicide spares his characters what he has called a “European death” (1992: 51).

a happy African homecoming for his Othello. The fact that Phillips is unable to rewrite Othello so radically, to turn tragedy into, if not comedy, then at least a romance of Ulyssean nostalgia, suggests that for him, as for the reader, the pull of Shakespeare and of the British or European conceptual framework as reflected in its literary heterocosm is irresistible—even though he wished it were otherwise. He is able neither to “erase” nor to “dismantle” the European mythology of the exotic other as typified in the Othello icon (*pace* Ledent 2002: 140); rather that icon is simply abandoned, as if Phillips takes cognizance of its intractability—for him, at least.

The effect of Phillips’s allusive narrative of Othello and its major omission of any tragedy is to turn it into an identity narrative of the author himself: Phillips’s inability to completely controvert Shakespeare reveals him to have attained a greater degree of transculturation than either Shakespeare or Phillips’s own Othello would have dreamed possible. Phillips’s Othello realises that he is “a figment of the Venetian imagination”; the problem for Phillips is that his own imagination, in this novel at least, is predominantly Venetian. While Phillips’s heart, or ideological aspirations, might have wished it otherwise, *The Nature of Blood* is a novel which “foregrounds the writer’s European sensitivity” (Ledent 2002: 137). What is more, Phillips’s apparent attempt to establish a non-European/Western pedigree for his Othello—to restore him to his racial roots—by working into his identity narrative an allusion to a historical fellow-traveller in the form of Equiano was bound to fail. He would have done better to pick a fellow-traveller whose conceptual system harboured an alternative to the commonplace snow-salt comparison: all that comparison demonstrates is an experiential and conceptual parity between Equiano and his white English and American eighteenth-century readers, a parity which, thanks to Phillips’s allusion, is extended to Phillips’s Othello and his twenty-first century readers. If Othello is ever to be reclaimed for Africa, then he will need to be estranged from the West, a process that would require allusion to concepts that existed across a culture gap deep and broad enough to induce vertigo in the reader—a vertigo probably induced in Shakespeare’s audience by that big, blacked-up player waxing loftily eloquent and alluding to Pliny or the latest travel best-seller. But unlike Shakespeare’s Othello, Phillips’s Othello trades in intracultural allusions to wide-receivers and Satchmo (181), allusions which render him more familiar than strange. Consequently, the novel is a further instalment in the identity narrative of an author who, despite once having characterised himself a “a black man living in Europe” (1992: 54) is more essentially—and not just circumstantially—European than that description might suggest: unlike his Othello, he is no figment of the Venetian imagination but a Venetian imaginer himself.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown how transcultural subjects may use intercultural allusion in order to produce palatable identity narratives, and that these narratives are no more than performances or masks. Shakespeare’s Othello’s great “travailing history” is an accurate replica of both the allusive process and its essential theatricality and fictitiousness, a fictitiousness which is exposed by fissures in Othello’s rhetoric when his mask finally slips. Caryl Phillip’s allusive response to Shakespeare’s Othello shows the premium that attaches to using allusion as a common currency for dealings across cultures. However, Phillips’s

attempts through allusion to rewrite Shakespeare's Othello fail because they all take as their point of departure the same culturally-specific conceptual framework. Far from being intercultural, Phillip's allusions are intracultural and as such reveal him to be firmly esconced in the very culture from which he seeks to salvage Othello. Phillip's version of Othello therefore illustrates a real-life instance of the power of allusion to determine identity, in Phillip's case—and *malgré lui*—an identity which is more Venetian than he might wish. In the light of these findings, students of postcolonial and multicultural writing may like to consider the use of intercultural and intracultural allusion for the presentation of identity, and its possible implications. And politicians might like to include in citizenship tests a few questions testing allusive competence, although they'd better not examine the citizens they already have in case they end up with fewer citizens than they started with.

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