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‘This was a Conradian world that I was entering’

Colonial and Postcolonial River-Journeys Beyond the Black Atlantic in Caryl Phillips’s Work

Yvonne Reddick

The British-Kittitian novelist Caryl Phillips is well known for his writing about transatlantic journeys. As Yogita Goyal notes, his 1993 novel *Crossing the River* ‘has been received as a paradigmatic Black Atlantic text’ (‘Theorizing Africa’ 15). Whilst *Crossing the River* creates a moving reflection on the Middle Passage and black people’s subsequent migrations, some scholars argue that the novel stereotypes Africa. Goyal, for example, finds that it ‘consigns Africa to the realm of myth’ (‘Theorizing Africa’ 14). She states that Phillips, like Paul Gilroy, is guilty of excluding Africa from modernity and of focusing on slavery at the expense of the traumas of African colonisation. If crossing the Atlantic in the hold of a slave ship is a profound historical trauma for black people in North America and the Caribbean, then the voyage up a West African river is an archetypal journey of European exploration, which brought European ‘imperial diasporas’ (Cohen 68-80) and colonialism to Africa. Gilroy’s black Atlantic suggests maritime migration, racial hybridity and

transnationalism; yet this article demonstrates that the rivers of Africa's Atlantic coast could be seen as crucial conduits into questions of how diasporan writers such as Phillips grapple with colonialism and neo-colonialism, criticise pan-Africanism and the return 'home', and demonstrate the need for non-Africans to be sensitive to the linguistic, regional and national particularities of African countries. [This article argues](#) that *Crossing the River* and Phillips's subsequent non-fiction essays on Africa suggest ways in which Gilroy's important paradigm of the black Atlantic could be broadened to become more inclusive of writing about Africa, by both African authors and black diasporans such as Phillips. Phillips draws inspiration from writers such as V S Naipaul, Chinua Achebe and especially Joseph Conrad to update the literary journey upriver and make it relevant to contemporary West African issues. [A complex interplay of racial identities occurs when people from the African diaspora travel to Africa; this is a key preoccupation for Phillips when he rewrites Conrad.](#) During the course of his river-journeys, Phillips meditates upon the complexities of being a black Westerner in Africa, examines the memory of slavery, colonialism and postcolonial unrest, problematises diasporan attempts to 'return' to Africa, and [recognises the longstanding modernity of African countries.](#)

Many scholars have attempted to 'stretch and reshape the boundaries' (Goyal, 'Towards an African Atlantic' 244) of Paul Gilroy's model of the black Atlantic or to expand significantly the Atlantic focus of the 'black diaspora' to include 'intra-African, Indian Ocean [and] Mediterranean' diasporas (Zezeza 36). Phillips's focus is largely on the Atlantic, yet his non-fiction writing does not confine itself to a littoral bordered by North American and West African coastlines. His essays also describe journeys inland: voyages upriver to London, Liverpool, Charleston, Bunce Island and

Freetown. [These](#) journeys suggest significant ways that Gilroy's research on the black Atlantic could be expanded. In the first section of this article, I show how theorists expand Gilroy's view of the black Atlantic to create a more nuanced view of Africa and how Phillips's views relate to theirs. In the second section, I [demonstrate](#) how Phillips updates Conrad's iconic colonial African river-journey. I do this by examining the fictional journey upriver in 'The Pagan Coast', the first section of *Crossing the River* (1993), Phillips's 1999 introduction to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, his article 'Chinua Achebe: Out of Africa' (2003), his essay 'Sierra Leone: Bunce Island' (2007), his film collaboration with Johny Pitts, 'A Bend in the River' (2012) and a recent interview at the Institute for Black Atlantic Research.

I. Beyond Gilroy's Black Atlantic: Journeying Upriver

Paul Gilroy's 1993 monograph on the black Atlantic is deservedly influential. Lazarus esteems it as 'immensely ambitious' (323). Gikandi praises it for the 'excitement' that it generates by claiming that 'black experiences and subjectivities were indeed key categories in the construction of a modern identity' (1-2). Yet some scholars have criticised it for paying insufficient attention to Africa. Gilroy describes blacks as 'people in, but not necessarily of the modern, western world' (29). Goyal accuses him of 'limit[ing] modernity to the West', thus creating 'a discourse that cannot find room for Africa' ('Theorizing Africa' 7). Far from 'begin[ning] with slavery' (Toni Morrison, ctd in Gilroy 221), modernity developed in West Africa independently of, and then concomitantly with, Western colonial modernity. Shapiro writes that the slaving states of the Niger Delta developed a form of capitalist modernity in the eighteenth century (116), and that 'embryonic capitalist commerce' arrived in West Africa with Islamic traders in the eighth century (122). Goebel and Schabio find that

Gilroy:

highlight[s] the African American experiences of dislocation while neglecting unique African experiences of emergency and of emergence, which have allowed and allow for a number of local articulations of modernization and modernity and for a more pronounced role of emerging nationalities. (4)

By criticising Africentricity's 'ornate conceptions of African antiquity' (189), Gilroy rightly complicates [outmoded](#) views of Africa as an antique land — yet he leaves the question of African modernity unanswered. Zeleza criticises Gilroy's 'Eurocentric excision and disdain for Africa', his ignoring of 'questions of imperialism and capitalism' and his privileging of African American thinkers, which suggests complicity with 'US imperialism' (37). Lazarus, too, argues that 'indenture, wage labor, forced migration' are 'constitutive of the modern world' and opines that 'the concept of the capitalist world system' might provide a more constructive model than Gilroy's (334).

Other critics find Gilroy's concept of transnationalism problematic in a postcolonial context. His project to transcend of 'the boundaries and integrity of modern nation states' ([Gilroy](#) 4) does apply to Atlantic diasporan culture and, as Evans notes, he does not subsume nation states or regions into his model ([Evans](#) 256). Gilroy astutely criticises pan-Africanists who attempt to treat Egyptians as black, rather than as 'one African people among many' ([Gilroy](#) 190). Yet his 'explicitly transnational' (15) paradigm [is](#) problematic if applied to Africa's fifty-four countries: those who 'treat Africa as if it were one country' are ridiculed by Binyavanga Wainaina (92). Moreover, as Parry puts it, a disavowal of nationalism during the decolonisation process overlooks the important 'task of reclaiming community from the definitions of that very power whose presence denied community' ([1997](#) 18). I do

not find Gilroy's paradigm of the black Atlantic to be as exclusive and inflexible as Gikandi, Goyal, Parry and Zeleza do. He describes it as 'volatile' and a 'changing same' (198), which paves the way for current and future work on Africa's role in exchanges within and beyond circumatlantic systems.

Phillips's engagements with African localities, migrations and intellectuals suggest just some of the ways in which critics can continue to build upon Gilroy's paradigm. Nevertheless, some accuse Phillips of repeating Gilroy's errors. Goyal finds that *Crossing the River* (1993) 'consigns Africa to the realm of myth' ('Theorizing Africa' 14) and denies it any 'contemporary existence' (18). Goyal wrote her article after Phillips had problematised black diasporans' attempts to 'return' to Africa in *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), but before he had written at greater length of his travels to Ghana and Sierra Leone in *Colour Me English* (2011). In a later article, Goyal makes an:

attempt to stretch and reshape the boundaries of an Atlantic paradigm that may more adequately account for the contributions and complications of Africa: its modernity, its tradition, its symbolic and literal presence in the diaspora, as well as its relations of gender and kinship. ('Towards an African Atlantic' 244)

African modernity, tradition, symbolism, gender relations and familial relationships have all been explored in Phillips's work to date.

A recent interview with Phillips demonstrated that, [contrary to Goyal's assertion, he does not replicate Gilroy's views](#). Here is what he said about European views of, and writing about, Africa:

Caryl Phillips It's an absurdity to think of Africa as underdeveloped, apart from obviously economically. Africa's a very complicated place [...] it varies from region to

region and country. I don't bother too much with lines, because they don't mean a terrific amount. They were imposed, and they don't make a lot of sense. [...] It's a very complicated society, it's a very complicated set of societies. We are encouraged, or we have been encouraged, to think about it, to write about it, to read about it, to view it through a very chequered prism, and it's hard to shake this off [...] unless you read, unless you visit, unless you talk about it. (Reddick and Rice np)

Phillips speaks of African societies as plural and diverse. He views borders as potentially arbitrary because they were frequently imposed by colonial powers, but not because he wishes to dismiss national identity. His remark that it is absurd to think of Africa as underdeveloped – except perhaps economically – accords it modernity and agency. His comment on the 'chequered' history of Western thought about Africa provides insight into how Westerners – regardless of their race – need to think beyond neocolonial assumptions.

Phillips elaborated on this 'chequered' way of thinking about Africa by saying that westerners of all ethnic backgrounds need to beware of neocolonial attitudes:

CP [Bunce Island was] a very early example of trying to construct your own so-called outpost of civilisation in the middle of so-called savage, wild, barbaric Africa, but of course, the very nature of what you were doing was savage, wild and barbaric, and it becomes like a bizarre pantomime, trying to establish these rules of civilisation, making the locals dress up and perform in certain ways. But you know, that's what I see when [...] you're invited to certain clubs in India or Sri Lanka or in various parts of East and West or South Africa. It's the same performance. Guys dressed up, serving European colonists. And just because the people they're serving today happen to have brown or black faces, doesn't matter. [...] It's still a system that's grown out of colonial exploitation. (Ibid)

Phillips's reactions to colonial and neocolonial attitudes towards Africa have led scholars to affiliate him with some of Africa's most significant anti-colonial writers.

[building on the tradition of Achebe's project to create a 'balance of stories'](#) (*The Bardian* 9). Phillips stressed that the common ground between black writers from Africa and the diaspora could be found in colonialism and its aftermath – [traumas as critical as slavery in creating modern black consciousness](#): 'The question, perhaps, will not be so much about finding a common black culture; it will be a question that brings us back to colonialism: the quest for power' (*The Bardian* 10).

II: Conradian Intertexts: Postcolonialism and the Journey Upriver

The journey upriver haunts colonial and postcolonial writing, [as](#) rivers were crucial landforms to imperial expansion and capitalist trade. [Expeditions from Pedro de Teixeira's 1637 voyage up the Amazon to Sven Hedin's 1905-8 journey to the sources of the Indus and Brahmaputra, testify to the importance of rivers in establishing western influence. In Africa, the Nile, the Zambezi, the River Niger and the River Congo are the subject of famous travelogues by the explorers Burton, Speke, Park and Livingstone – all mentioned by Conrad \(2010 12-13\).](#) The Congo and Niger rivers became so important to European colonial enterprises that the Berlin Act of 1885 opened them and their tributaries to free mercantile commerce. Joseph Conrad's iconic problematisation of late colonial practices has [most famously](#) helped to shape André Gide's colonial voyage through the Congo (1927), the postcolonial fictions of V S Naipaul (1979) and Barbara Kingsolver (1998), and Tim Butcher's memoir *Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart* (2008). [Achebe's denunciation of Conrad \(see below\) is one of the best-known African responses, but more recent examples include Nyaba L. Ouedraogo's exhibition and photo-essay *The Phantoms of Congo River* \(2015\), described as a 'ballad to, and deconstruction of', Conrad's novel \(Manchester Museum\).](#) This list is far from exhaustive, and could

[include many more canonical examples.](#) Phillips, too, enters into dialogue with Conrad. Gilroy's 'webbed network, between the local and the global' (29) must be extended inland and rivers are highly significant links in that network. Indeed, the very title of [Phillips's *Crossing the River*](#) evokes the idea that the Atlantic is a river: 'It was the people of the west coast of Africa who, looking out at the vastness of the ocean, first thought of it as a mighty river' (*Colour Me English* 165). This belief exists on the other side of the Atlantic: Rice describes 'the African-American folk belief that the ocean is only a river' (26). For Phillips, who evokes 'ribbons of water which ineluctably bind us together' (*Colour Me English* 166), rivers and oceans are prime localities for contact and migration. Gilroy posited the ship as a primary vehicle for transatlantic travel (16), [but Steinberg has criticised his evocation of the ocean across which ships travelled as too abstract, 'far removed from the liquid space across which Africans historically travelled \[...\]'](#) Venturing into Gilroy's Black Atlantic, one never gets wet' (158). [Phillips' engagement with maritime and riverine ships foregrounds the materiality of the journey over water.](#)

Heart of Darkness is a famous consideration of the dualities and problems of imperialist capitalism. Phillips's analysis finds that '[t]he fissures and fractures of "modernism" are laid bare' in the book ('Introduction' xvii) — yet the fractures of *modernity* are equally significant. Charlie Marlow's journey from the River Congo to the Thames highlights the uneasy link between a 'modern' London on the banks of the Thames and a supposedly primordial Congo River. Although London is one of the formerly colonised 'dark places of the earth' (Conrad 5), its wealth is augmented by brutal labour practices on the banks of the Congo, a watercourse trapped at 'the earliest beginnings of the world' (41).

While colonialism contributed to African modernity, Gikandi cautions against the view that ‘modernity and modernism were gifts of the West to the rest of the world’ (1996 3). Indeed, Goyal debunks the idea of the ‘providential advent of modernity’, highlighting it as ‘a catastrophic rupture of African history’ (‘Towards an African Atlantic’ 257). Moreover, Shapiro argues for the growth of multiple local modernities, not a monolithic Western ‘modernity’, showing how proto-capitalist ‘competitive and acquisitive’ practices developed in sub-Saharan Africa (Shapiro 123). The strategic location of eighteenth-century slave traders in the Niger Delta cities of Bonny and Old Calabar linked ‘riverine slave captures to offshore European slave ships’ since they had a ‘geographical advantage over the upland rivers, where the militarily weak, stateless villages stood as the main beds for slaving’ (127). Waterborne transport, and its role in slavery, is so important that headdresses resembling Western ships still feature in Kalabari masquerades (Rice 207). Rivers that flow to Africa’s coasts are primary locations of contact and tension between Africans and Westerners, global capitalism and traditional economies, Atlantic sea-routes and inland riverborne commerce.

Conrad is a seminal writer with whom African authors, including ‘Achebe, Ngugi, Salih, and Aidoo’ engage (Caminero-Santangelo 4). Moreover, Goebel and Schabio cite Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a highly significant book for subsequent writers who update the narrative of an outsider arriving at a colonised, or formerly colonised, country:

[S]tories of penetration by the imperial invader and his technologies have been the staple themes of the canonized classics of postcolonial literature, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. [...] [S]uch tales have themselves to be continually modernized and revised in order to come to terms

with complex processes of exchange between Self and Other, transitional modes of identity formation and advanced appropriations of technologies. (5)

One of the ways in which the narrative of the outsider's journey into a postcolonial country can be updated is to allow for the complex interplay of racial identities that happens when black Westerners arrive in Africa. Phillips is neither an African writer, nor an 'imperial invader', but a routed diasporan wishing to update canonical narratives about Africa. Caminero-Santangelo finds that postcolonial authors 'appropriate and transform Conradian intertexts and make them relevant to their socially and historically specific concerns' (5) — their writing need not be an antagonistic form of 'writing back'.

One of the best-known African writers to engage with Conrad is Chinua Achebe, whose reading of *Heart of Darkness* prompted his desire to become an author and 'write a different story' (Caminero-Santangelo 6). Phillips has analysed both Conrad's text and Achebe's response to it — he is described as 'an admirer of both writers' (Phillips, 'Out of Africa' np). [Achebe's famous riposte to Conrad, 'An Image of Africa' \(1977\), labelled Conrad as a 'bloody racist' \(xlix\) and accused him of using 'Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor' \(l\).](#) Phillips and Achebe agree that Conrad's book is 'an attempt to examine what happens when Europeans come into contact with this particular form of economic and social exploitation' ([Colour Me English](#) 200), although Phillips initially questions Achebe's judgement of Conrad as 'a thoroughgoing racist' (198). Phillips elaborates on Conrad's examination of the link between imperialism and capitalist modernity, and Conrad's continued relevance:

The end of European colonisation has not rendered *Heart of Darkness* any less relevant, for Conrad was interested in the making of a modern world in which colonisation was simply one facet. [...] Modern descriptions of 20th-century famines, war and genocide all seem to be eerily prefigured by Conrad. (*Colour Me English* 201-2)

After his conversation with Achebe, Phillips's position begins to shift. He reflects that 'I am not an African. [...] [T]o the African reader the price of Conrad's eloquent denunciation of colonisation is the recycling of racist notions of the "dark" continent' (206-07). Phillips's viewpoint is echoed by the Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou who, like Phillips, participated in the Artangel 'Hearts of Darkness' project. Mabanckou responds to Achebe by stating that 'we shouldn't blindly condemn' Conrad, and by praising Conrad's 'caustic view of the abuses of his own civilisation' (Mabanckou 79). It is telling that Phillips thinks of *Heart of Darkness* when interviewing trafficked Nigerian girls in Belgium (*Colour Me English* 317). Yet *Crossing the River*, 'Chinua Achebe: Out of Africa', 'Sierra Leone: Bunce Island' (both in *Colour Me English*) and *A Bend in the River* are Phillips's most notable engagements with Conrad.

Benita Parry draws on Mahmood Mamdani's work to show how in sub-Saharan Africa, colonialists proceeded by 'boasting an instrumental purpose in developing the wasted and underused material resources of the pre-industrial world', while accelerating 'metropolitan modernization' ('*The presence of the past*' 13). These policies 'ensured the retardation of the non-capitalist zones' (14). Phillips's work updates Conradian narratives to take into account *the ways in which such problems have a continuing legacy; he explores* independence and decolonisation, the memory of slavery, neocolonial exploitation and the black diaspora. Commenting on his journeys to climb Kilimanjaro and to take his students to Africa, Phillips stated

that foreign tourists' encounters with Africa are still often tainted by neocolonial thinking: 'It's not that much different a model from the colonial encounter, it's not that much different a model from the precolonial encounter, which was to do with exploitation' (Reddick and Rice np). His river-journeys expose uneven development in formerly colonised countries and identify it as a significant after-effect of colonial practices. As Goebel and Schabio note:

modernization has always been a multiple and discontinuous process, producing distinctions in the West between technologically advanced metropolitan areas and 'retarded' rural areas – distinctions which in due course were exported to developing nations. (3)

Colonialism, slavery, racial tension and uneven development are primary preoccupations in the first section of *Crossing the River*, 'The Pagan Coast'. The journey upriver allows Phillips to explore the ambiguous project of 'creating' a new colonial nation and to respond to Conrad by replacing the earlier writer's white Europeans with Nash, a black colonist. Although Phillips describes Africa as having been 'trampled by the muddy boots of others' (*Crossing the River* 2) during colonial rule, Liberia initially has very positive associations. When Nash 'returns' to Africa, he styles himself as participating in a project to build this new nation: 'Liberia, the beautiful land of my forefathers, is a place where persons of color may enjoy their freedom'. His emphasis on 'industry and perseverance' that 'make a man happy and wealthy' (18) illustrates Western capitalist values – products of modernity – that he upholds while he is in Monrovia. The journey upriver is a journey away from Monrovia's nascent modernity and towards Nash's attempts to adopt an African identity. It is also a voyage into a fledgling nation, in which questions of power come to the fore. Nash is called a 'white man' (32) by local people, illustrating [their](#)

[perception of](#) his complicity in the British imperialist project; [other emigrants accuse him of having](#) a ‘dictatorial’ manner (33, original emphasis). Yet, once he has moved further upriver, he is criticised by Monrovia for [what they see as](#) his ‘native style of living’ (41, original emphasis). By the time of his last letter, Nash maintains that ‘Liberia is the finest country’, although it is ‘new’ and ‘everything has still to be created’ (61). He lives ‘the life of the African’ (62) and defends himself against the possible accusation that Liberia might be ‘corrupting [his] person’. He suffers from sores (61) and soon dies; Nash’s failed imperialist mission and his subsequent physical deterioration [are in](#) dialogue with Kurtz.

Nash’s former master, Edward Williams, journeys upriver to where Nash once lived and is also confronted with uneven development. The ‘unkempt and overgrown streets’ of Monrovia (48) house the ‘well-appointed’ premises of the white-dominated American Colonization Society (54). As he travels upriver, Williams seemingly journeys into a landscape that predates modernity:

The river wore a rutted frown where their slow progress had disturbed her sleep. To either side the sombre banks, cluttered with trees, shrubs and vines, were pressed by a thick, brooding undergrowth that was heavy with years. (65)

The voyage from river-mouth to upper course takes Edward away from nascent modernity and towards his own deterioration — he sets out ‘fevered with determination’ (65) and ends up attempting to sing a hymn to soothe his ‘beleaguered mind’ (69).

Riemenschneider sees Phillips’s narrative as a ‘response and postcolonial writing back’ to Conrad. The book ‘proceeds up a river [from](#) the West coast of the continent and ends with death’, yet Phillips ‘appropriates, subverts and reconstructs [...]

colonial writing' (273). However, Phillips's engagement with Conrad is not as antagonistic as Riemenschneider maintains. He [builds on Conrad's evocation of colonised people complicit in imperialism, such as Kurtz's mistress \(Conrad 76\), by showing](#) that imperialist practices were [sometimes](#) perpetuated by black former slaves. The voyage upriver illustrates the complex process of establishing a new nation, the difficulties that African Americans face if they try to 'return' to Africa, the physical and psychological changes that occur during the journey into the interior and the problems with a Western model of modernity that is sustained by slavery and colonialism.

Uneven development and the aftermath of slavery and colonialism are also significant preoccupations in Phillips's 2007 essay about his journey upriver to Bunce Island. The club where he stays would 'once have been as splendid place for expatriate diplomats', illustrating the inequality that colonial capitalism brought with it. Unrest in the wake of independence has led to a 'civil war' (*Colour Me English* 334) that leaves the country 'visibly scarred' (333). An earlier trauma in Sierra Leone's history was its slave industry — which is the reason for Phillips's journey upriver.

Phillips demonstrates how Bunce Island is a crucial intersection between riverine slave captures and offshore trade:

Twenty miles up the Sierra Leone River, and located at the furthest navigable point that could be reached by the oceangoing ships of the eighteenth-century slave trade, sits Bunce Island. One-third of a mile long, and only 400 feet wide, during the eighteenth century this small island was at the centre of a complex slave-trading network that stretched throughout the region of West Africa known as the Grain Coast. (334)

The slaves ‘had been specifically targeted because of their rice-growing skills’ and were shipped to ‘Charleston, South Carolina or Savannah, Georgia’. It is because they lived near the estuary and knew how to cultivate rice on a river floodplain that they were taken downriver from Bunce Island and sold in riverine American towns: Charleston has ‘the Ashley River to the west and the Cooper River to the east’ (Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* 185).

When describing the river mouth, Phillips explicitly references and revises Conrad:

[T]he eerie stillness of the water made me feel as though I was travelling across a vast lake as opposed to up a river. Occasionally green mounds of vegetation appeared on the flat horizon and presented themselves as islands, and men and women stood perfectly still on these small protrusions of terra firma and watched as we passed by. I tried hard to push the word Conradian from my mind, for I understood it to be imbued with all kinds of ambiguous connotations, but truly this was a Conradian world that I was entering. We were moving purposefully towards the past and, despite the overwhelming beauty of the river, and the tranquility of this West African afternoon, I sensed a heavy, burdensome history beginning to thicken the air. (*Colour Me English* 335)

There is a particular passage in Conrad on which Phillips seems to draw, both here and in the section of *Crossing the River* that I cited earlier:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of the sunshine. [...] The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands [...] There were moments when one’s past came back to one. (Conrad 41)

Phillips is careful to highlight the ‘ambiguous connotations’ of his affiliation with Conrad — a white Westerner who criticised colonial practices, but whom Achebe accuses of racism. Yet he revises Conrad’s evocation of Marlow’s haunting past by replacing it with the ‘heavy, burdensome history’ of the slave trade. Personal memory is replaced by collective history, making Phillips’s journey a meditation on the aftermath of slavery and colonialism.

The island in the river-mouth remains a site for diasporans and Sierra Leoneans to meet: Phillips encounters ‘an American teacher from Ohio’ with an interest in African American history and a local ‘barefoot guide’. His status as a black Westerner gives him a valuable double perspective:

‘The trip had given me a flavour of the isolation and misery of Bunce Island, but it had also allowed me to understand about the loneliness of what it means to sail upriver in Africa. (*Colour Me English* 337)

Because Phillips’s ancestors were slaves, he understands the ‘isolation and misery’ of the place for modern-day Sierra Leoneans; yet having lived in the West, he also comprehends the loneliness of the outsider penetrating upriver. [This is a significant form of ‘double consciousness’ that differs from earlier models. For W. E. B Du Bois, African Americans had a ‘double-consciousness’: ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of \[white\] others’, of being both black and American and wishing to integrate those two identities \(8-9\). Gilroy takes this idea and complicates it with reference to Du Bois’s later work, which engages more thoroughly with hybridity and the anti-imperialist movements of several different races \(144\). Phillips goes beyond both paradigms: his consciousness here is both double and hybridised, informed by his St Kittitian birth, his British upbringing and his residence in the USA.](#)

Able to empathise with both European slavers and enslaved Africans, his perspective reflects the complexities of a black westerner's journey upriver.

For a moment, Phillips lapses into a dated, Conradian discourse of Africans' primordial nobility:

Silent and noble, these unhurried men seemed connected to an earlier epoch and I understood that this was the true gift of the day. The loitering at the Aqua Club, the desolation of Bunce Island, the thundering rain, all had been worth enduring in order to discover this serenely disturbing river where time seemed to stand still. And then I heard a phone ring, and I turned and watched as my pilot fished his mobile out of his trouser pocket. 'You will please call me later. Right now I am busy.' (*Colour Me English* 338)

The ringing of the boatman's mobile phone demonstrates that Sierra Leoneans have their own modernity. When asked about Bunce Island in an interview, Phillips commented:

CP It felt like a journey into an earlier epoch. [...] The isolation, the mystery and the sense of not quite knowing what was going to happen was in a sense in conversation, or in some kind of fractured conversation, with what Conrad had written a hundred years earlier. But it was a myth, because [...] the guy who looked like a Giacometti statue on the prow of the boat – just when I was sinking really deeply into the sense that this was an extraordinary journey through the slanting rain into another time – his cell phone went off [...]. And you just thought, hang on a minute. Of course Africa is connected to the rest of the world. Why shouldn't he have a cell phone like everybody else? So it's a kind of bursting of that myth rather than a reinforcing of it. In some ways, Conrad reinforces that myth, because there's a very distinct difference between Belgium, where the journey begins – [...] *Heart of Darkness* actually begins on a river in London, but the actual story within the story is Belgium to Africa and back to Belgium and it ends back in Belgium – so there's a very distinct difference between European civilisation and African pre-civilisation. I guess what I was not consciously doing in my own little

piece there was trying to say that there's a fusion. Civilisation is in Africa too, even if it's just a cell phone. There's not that distinct difference. (Reddick and Rice np)

Beyond the West African coast, Phillips also enters into dialogue with Conrad during a journey down the Thames. His contribution to Artangel's 'Hearts of Darkness' project¹ is an essay, 'A Bend in the River', which is read in combination with the sounds of London and passages from Conrad to create the soundtrack for a film [that](#) he made with photographer and television presenter Johny Pitts, also entitled *A Bend in the River*. The film [shares](#) its title [with](#) Naipaul's [post-Conradian novel about an East African trader of Indian Muslim heritage who sets up a business in a Central African country inspired by the Congo, enduring autocratic rule, insurrections, rebellions and a brief interlude in London. Phillips and Pitts map not only Conrad's Congo, but Naipaul's Congo, onto London; for Naipaul, the Congo is a place of 'half destroyed' settlements, Africans' 'low, box-like concrete houses' \(Naipaul 10\) and colonial monuments in 'ruins' \(33\). If Naipaul's characters experience the 'romance' of London's imperial architecture \(Naipaul 162\), and link the Rivers Thames and Congo \(153\), Phillips and Pitts show that urban decay and uneven development exist alongside London's imperial monuments. Perhaps most importantly, the film offers a riposte to Naipaul's narrator's disparaging views of Africans: one African is described as 'a child of the forest', sold willingly into slavery \(Naipaul 19\). Phillips and Pitts instead celebrate the cultural heritage of children of the African diaspora. However, it is Conrad's text that provides a partial narration for the film.](#)

Phillips and Pitts, both Black British men brought up in Yorkshire, undertake a river-journey through the heart of the metropole that pays attention to racial and regional mixing, intercontinental migration and the disturbing legacies of imperialism.

The film begins at Waterloo. Phillips and Pitts juxtapose images and sounds of a multiracial, technologically advanced London with Pitts's reading of Conrad's prose description of the Thames. The river bears colonisers 'into the mystery of an unknown earth', carrying with them 'the germs of empires' (Phillips and Pitts, *A Bend* np). Phillips's voice then takes up the narrative, reminding us of the character Moses Aloetta from Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, who reflects on his love of a city that has nevertheless rejected him because of his race (Phillips, 'A Bend in the River' 39). Images of skyscrapers and imperial-era stonework give way to shots of abandoned tricycles and portaloos. By Greenwich, the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf's financial district are framed by the rusting archways of a derelict building, highlighting the gross inequalities perpetuated by uneven capitalist 'development'. Phillips continues:

I have been witness to the silent muscular power of the river flowing beneath me, history emerging from its impenetrable depths. I have exchanged visions of Romans sailing up the Thames for Conradian visions of ships at anchor waiting for the fog to lift. I have contemplated contemporary images of immigrants sailing up the river and disembarking at Tilbury Docks. ('A Bend in the River' 40)

Here, there are also clear echoes of Phillips's earlier journey to Bunce Island, where a burdensome history hangs in the air.

A photograph of Billingsgate fish market shows a man whose stall is labelled 'Afikala Afrikana International Foods' and Pitts narrates Marlow's 'culminating point of my own experience' at 'the farthest point of navigation' (Phillips and Pitts, *A Bend* np). Phillips describes the years when Britain 'began to reconfigure her sense of herself', having lost an empire and begrudgingly begun to become 'both multiracial and European' (Phillips, 'A Bend in the River' 41). By Thamesmead, we see brutalist

architecture, graffiti, ladies in African head wraps and a pony grazing in front of concrete apartments. Pitts cites Conrad:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than us, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. (Phillips and Pitts, *A Bend* np)

Beyond Canary Wharf and Greenwich Palace, Phillips sees ‘less development, and a reminder of an earlier unregenerated Thames’ (Phillips, ‘A Bend in the River’ 44). At Gravesend, a window displays a toy golliwog (now seen as offensive to black people) alongside the cross of St George (often an emblem of the racist National Front).

Modern East London is the site of racial mixing, yet inequality and tensions persist.

Phillips encounters ‘many Londons’ that make him feel ‘slightly more comfortable with my iconically powerful view’ (Phillips, ‘A Bend in the River’ 45) at Waterloo. A white man wears a Caribbean T-shirt; a woman with a West Indian accent tells us how ‘the river has no end’; a plaque at Tilbury shows where the Windrush arrived. The film ends with Phillips back near Waterloo as Pitts reads Conrad’s comment that the Thames seems ‘to lead into the heart of an immense darkness’ (Phillips and Pitts, *A Bend* np).

Phillips and Pitts revise Conrad’s unsettling juxtaposition of Thames and Congo by showing monuments to capitalist domination alongside some scenes of profound inequality. By applying Conrad’s colonial-era narrative to a modern, multiracial city in a postcolonial era, the film makes the troubling suggestion that both iconic London buildings and current discrimination are legacies of Britain’s colonial past. Updating Conrad’s narrative does not result in a parodic counter-narrative, but rather a nuanced meditation on race, neocolonial attitudes, national identity and inequality. There are

several [such](#) movements along the watercourse in Pitts and Phillips's film. If the journey up an African river shows an outsider penetrating into the heart of the country, migrants on the Windrush travel inland up the Thames. Pitts and Phillips journey downriver into multicultural areas and out towards the sea-routes that connect London to Africa, the Caribbean and North America. Throughout the film, we are confronted with the memory of colonialism and the effects of recent racism. Yet the most positive aspect of this Thames voyage is its vision of 'many Londons': [of](#) diverse communities where Black Britons [can be reassured](#) that their contribution to British society is recognised and celebrated.

Beyond the Black Atlantic: Conclusions and Future Directions

Phillips reworks the Conradian journey upriver to consider questions of slavery, colonial nation-building and postcolonial unrest in Africa, to show how Britain's imperial past has shaped a modern, multiracial London and to expose uneven capitalist development in both Africa and Britain. His 'fractured dialogue' with [Conrad's](#) iconic colonial [writing \(and with Naipaul's postcolonial fiction\)](#) allows him to expose colonialism's aftermath and neocolonial attitudes in Africa and Europe.

[Rivers-voyages are so important to Phillips's writing because they open this 'fractured dialogue' with Conrad, but they represent just one of the many ways in which](#) future [criticism could engage with](#) Phillips's other emblems of African 'routedness'. To name just a few, these could include: slave castles such as the castle at Elmina; trans-Saharan trade and slaving routes; voluntary migration by Africans, such as John Ocansey's nomadic Fulani origins and his journey to Liverpool (Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* 21); contemporary networks of digital and online communication, as suggested by the mobile phone on the Sierra Leone River; or the journeys of

refugees across the Mediterranean to Europe, as evoked by Phillips's novel *A Distant Shore*. While the black Atlantic is a primary site of diaspora, *The Nature of Blood* and the 'Exodus' section of *The Atlantic Sound* describe a black community in Israel, showing that black diasporas are not confined to the Atlantic. African diasporas are multiple; moreover, just as black people are not the only ones to suffer the traumas of indenture, slavery and forced migration, so journeys to and from Africa, whether voluntary or forced, have global ramifications. A recent edition of *Research in African Literatures* 'calls attention to new diasporic itineraries connecting Nigeria to the US and the UK, Egypt to Sudan, Goa to Angola, and Angola to Cuba and the Eastern Bloc' (Goyal, Introduction 29). Goyal and others have conducted important research on diaspora and travel in the work of African writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo (Goyal, 'Towards and African Atlantic') and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Goyal, 'Introduction'). Further narratives by African authors that reshape and expand the black Atlantic could include Togolese author Tété-Michel Kpomassie's *An African in Greenland* (1981) or Nigerian-British writer Noo Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2012). It is clear that black diasporas move in many different directions, and contemporary writing from and about Africa needs continually to be updated in relation to new movements, both physical and intellectual.

Notes

¹ 'Hearts of Darkness' by Artangel offered artists and writers a residency in a model boat above Waterloo named the *Roi des Belges* after Conrad's steamer.

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