

**The Historical Background to and its Employment
in Caryl Phillips' "Crossing the River"**

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N'aie qu'un seul objectif: la Justice;

Qu'une seule haine : L'Esclavage ;

Qu'un seul amour : la Liberté.

(Vernes 1978 : 441)

1. Introduction

The word “diaspora” is composed by the Greek “dia”, meaning “through”, and “speirō”, meaning “to scatter” (Cashmore 1994: 83).

It can refer to any group of people forced into emmigration and forced into finding a new home for themselves – the Jewish diaspora is an example for that, the African diaspora is another one, one which also represents the central topic in Caryl Phillips’ fifth novel “Crossing the River” in which the author traces it back to the 1750s and moves on to the middle of the 20th century, so as to “make a connection between the African World which was left behind and the diasporan world which people had entered once they crossed the water “ (Davison 1994: 93).

Phillips opens his novel with a narrative frame, showing the reader a loving father forced to sell his own children – “My Nash. My Martha. My Travis” (Phillips 1993:1) - to a slave trader.

By doing so he first of all introduces the protagonists of his novel and shows at the same time that all of them are part of the diasporan background: Nash, who in return for excellent servitude is sent to Africa, Martha, who is heading for California in search of her daughter, Travis, a black G.I. stationed in Britain during WW II and, not least, Captain Hamilton, a slave trader in the 1750s.

All the characters receive, through also appearing in the narrative frame, a quality that one might certainly call an archetypal one – they are not single fictional individuals but representatives of a people forced into exile on the one side and, as far as Hamilton is concerned, representatives of those who were responsible for a part of the Africa diaspora. It is this archetypal quality of the protagonists that makes “Crossing the River” an interesting subject of a work on what role the historical background actually plays in it. In what way did Phillips use his archetypal characters, in what way did he overtake historical facts and in what way did he alter them and to what purpose?

These are the main questions of concern in my work, for which I have decided to keep the structure used in the novel itself, i.e. first of all the American Background will be dealt with, and later on the British one, with each of the four chapters analyzed separately.

The discussion of each chapter will begin with a short paragraph on the general setting, after which a paragraph on the historical background will be found, as far as it is relevant for the separate chapters.

Thus, a framework is created for the last part of the discussion of each chapter, the analysis of what influence the historical background actually has.

Of course, there are four separate backgrounds that need to be dealt with, but, however, it should not be forgotten that all of them work together to give a moving account of the African diaspora between the middle of the 18th and the middle of the 20th centuries.

2. The American Background

2.1 The Pagan Coast

2.1.1 The Setting

The focus in the first chapter of Phillips' work is mainly on two persons, namely on Edward Williams and Nash Williams, the former being a slave owner, the latter being one of his (former) slaves.

Both the development of these two protagonists and the development of their relationship can fully be understood only under consideration of the specific historical background, which is not so much the general situation of slavery in the U.S. in the 1830s and 1840s, but rather the role of the American Colonization Society (henceforth: ACS) and the movement of re-patriation of freed black slaves.

Therefore, in the following chapter a brief outline of the ACS' history and functions will be given before the role of the historical background for the chapter will be analyzed.

2.1.2 The Historical Background: The ACS and its Role in U.S. American Slavery

When late in the year 1816 the ACS was founded (Beyan 1991: 2 and Holsol 1988: 44), slavery had been a part of North America's economy for almost 200 years: as soon as 1619 blacks had been brought to the colonies (Wright 1990: 58), although their position in the social stratum had been that of life-time servants rather than that of slaves (cf. Olson 1983: 7), which was to change at the end of the 17th century. For the colonists searching for cheap labor force (Olson 1983: 2. See also Wright 1990: 46), Africans definitely represented the by far most appropriate group of people

for doing the work on the plantations, not least because, unlike the Native Americans, they were not familiar with the land they were brought to, and thus were less liable to escape (Olson 1983: 3ff.).

That the influence of slavery on North American economy turned out to be a drastically increasing one is not of concern here. What is important is that the rise of freedom went hand in hand with the rise of slavery (Morgan 1999: 122) and only four years after the 1776 Declaration of Independence the import of slaves to North America had reached a climax of about 80,000 a year (Wright 1990: 18).

It was due to this paradoxon – slavery being an allpowerful economic factor in a land where, according to its constitution, all men were created equal – that ideas formed to found an organization to repatriate (freed) blacks to what was regarded as their native soil.

As soon as 1780 Thomas Jefferson had stated that “if a slave can have a country in the world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another” (Jefferson 1984: 288).

Anyway, Jefferson was not the only one to be afraid of former slaves who had gained their freedom, rather the remaining of these people was generally perceived to be a threat to the system of slavery: Blacks could hardly be securely kept in a state of enslavement when fellow blacks dwelled in relative freedom by their side (cf. Beyan 1991: 3).

Thus, the year 1816 saw the birth of the ACS.

Those engaged in the organization tried to attach a religious and benevolent background to it and declared the emancipated blacks sent to Africa religious messengers, fit to act as representatives of christian values (cf. Beyan 1991: 4).

Thus, high moral values could easily be combined with the more practical purpose of getting rid of those who might endanger the established system of slavery, which was, despite the foundation of the ACS, meant to be perpetuated, not ceased (Holsoe 1988: 45).

And so the first permanent settlement of former slaves, later receiving the name “Liberia”, was established in 1822 at the West coast of the African continent. (Holsoe 1988: 45. See also Beyan 1991: 67).

The former slaves brought there might nominally be free, but especially during the first decades they were extremely dependent on the help of the ACS, in particular for such goods as rice, flour and guns (Beyan 1991: 113f.).

The more surprising it is that only a quarter of a century after the erection of the first permanent settlement, on July 26 1847, the colony of Liberia declared its independence (Holsoe 1988: 45) – being definitely the most important day in the history of the young country.

2.1.3 The Employment of the Historical Background in “The Pagan Coast”

It is but a truism to state that both protagonists of the first chapter of the novel correlate with historical circumstances.

Thus, with Edward Williams, Phillips created a protagonist representing the typical member of the ACS as could be found in the first half of the 19th century.

He is described as a wealthy planter, owning about 300 slaves (Phillips 1993: 12f.). Being a typical slave owner so far, he yet is plagued by his “social conscience”, i.e. his “aversion to the system” (Phillips 1993: 13) of slavery, which makes him cheerfully welcome the ACS and its apparently benevolent motives (Phillips 1993: 13f.).

Nash, in comparison, is no less typical than his former master. The reader gets to know him as a highly gifted and profoundly pious man (Phillips 1993: 7) who well deserves the reward of being sent to Liberia and there to dwell in “freedom” (Phillips 1993: 9).

Moreover, their relationship is a typical one. It has its psychological background in what is called “paternalism” (Beyan 1991: 7f. See also van den Berghe 1994: 236f.): Slaves, who in the eyes of their masters behaved well, i.e. who showed entire submission and obedience, were in return rewarded, for example with being sent to the overseas colony of Liberia.

The relationship between a slave owner and his subjects might sometimes even be very close to that of a father and his son (cf. Wyatt-Brown 1992: 132), which also seems to be the case in the first chapter, the stress being on “seems”.

Thus, Nash states that he was brought up “in your (Edward’s) own dwelling as something more akin to son than servant” (Phillips 1993: 21).

However, to Edward Nash is less a son but rather the “chief player in his game, the most successful of his Christian blacks” (Phillips 1993: 14), a living proof for Edwards benevolence, or what he thinks to be benevolence.

The protagonists so far certainly can be said to be of an historically archetypal quality, with Nash being a grateful slave and Edward a typical slave owner finding no

contradiction in further being one despite his engagement in the ACS (cf. chapter 2 above).

Phillips' use of historical circumstances, then, gets a more interesting one, when Nash finally dwells in Africa, where the bonds with his master are almost immediately dissolved, due to the intervention of Edward's wife, Amelia.

By giving the story that particular turn Phillips somewhat anticipated, as far as Nash is concerned, the 1847 Declaration of Independence of Liberia: as all of his letters to Edward remain unanswered Nash is practically forced into independence, independence from more abstract values like the bond to his foster father, but as well from quite concrete help, such as "dry goods and provisions" (Phillips 1993: 22) and other such stuff which Nash in his letters begs for again and again and which settlers in the new colony always were in desperate need of (see chapter 2.1.2 above).

It is from this forced and involuntary independence that Phillips' criticism arises, or to be more precise, from the way in which Nash's life develops after being plunged into it.

Under the patronage of Edward Nash was equipped with a "Christian education" (Phillips 1993: 7) and left for Africa as a thoroughly pious man – anyway, after his bonds to North America are dissolved he begins falling off his faith and eventually, in his last letter to his former master, describes that he "cast off the garb of ignorance which has encompassed me all too securely the whole course of my life" (Phillips 1993: 61f.)

The "garb of ignorance" here certainly is meant to include all what his former master tried to teach him, moral as well as religious values, the abandonment of which gets clearest in the fact that Nash has, in the end, three wives (Phillips 1993: 60) and is no longer active as a missionary (Phillips 1993: 62).

Thus, by making an historically archetypal protagonist forsaken his faith, Phillips clearly shows how desperate, vain and ignorant the ACS' aim to spread the christian faith among the African population actually was: The god promoted by the ACS was an American, not an African one (cf. Phillips 1993: 62).

All in all, the ACS is clearly shown to have failed in creating a loyal African outpost of civilization: when Nash eventually states that "We, the colored man, have been oppressed long enough. We need to contend for our rights, stand our ground, and feel the love of liberty that can never be found in your America" (Phillips 1993: 61) he certainly doesn't do so as a single and fictional protagonist but rather as a literary

spokesman and representative of those people who in 1847 gained their country's independence from North America and its ideals at that time.

2.2 West

2.2.1 The Setting

In the second chapter of his novel Phillips deals with the fate of Martha.

The action is probably taking place in the 1850s or a little later and can be understood only under consideration of certain historical circumstances, mainly the westward movement of slavery and of free slaves as well.

Especial importance must, of course, be attached to the situation in the states to which Martha's journey is (not) taking her and these are Virginia, Kansas and California.

2.2.2 The Historical Background: The westward Movement of Slaves and former Slaves in mid 19th – Century North America

The traditional slave states had been those at the east coast of North America, namely those in the south, such as Carolina and Georgia and those in the Chesapeake region, mainly Virginia, where North American slavery had had its origins at the beginning of the 17th century (cf. Wright 1990: 58).

Then, from the end of the 18th century onwards a considerable westward movement of slavery occurred, which was due to several reasons.

One of these was an economic one: the production of cotton had moved towards the more western states, such as Texas and Alabama (Fogel 1992: 78).

Anyway, there were other states in the west of interest to slave owners.

One of these states certainly was Kansas, where slavery had been outlawed for quite a long time due to the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which forbade slavery north of latitude 36° 30' (Willingham 1988: 503f.).

This decision was rendered invalid only in 1854 and even after that, the new permission of slavery in this area doesn't seem to have had too grave consequences at all: in 1855 only about 400 black slaves were living in Kansas and their treatment seems to have been somewhat milder than was the case in the traditional slave states (Bringhurst 1988: 804).

The importance of slavery was about as low in California: under Mexican rule slavery had been banned there in 1821 and when in 1850 it was declared a free state (Bringhurst 1988: 800) for everyone, including whites and blacks, it somewhat gained

the status of a “promised land”, inducing many former slaves to move towards the West, which may somewhat remind the observer of the trek of landless people heading to California in the 1930s, a trek so impressively described in John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” in which California appears to be a promised land as well.

Indeed, it was not, neither in the 1850s nor in the 1930s.

California may have been a free state since 1850 – slavery was, however, common there even after that date due to its remaining economic profitability (Bringhurst 1988: 800)

2.2.3 The Employment of the Historical Background in “West”

The protagonist in the second chapter, Martha, certainly can be said to have had a restless life.

Born in the home of U.S. American slavery, Virginia (Phillips 1993: 73), her family is torn apart there and in due course she is forced to move to Kansas, working as a domestic slave for the Hoffman family (Phillips 1993: 79).

This move towards the West gives clear evidence of what period Phillips has chosen for his second chapter, namely the time after 1854 (cf. Chapter 2.2.2 above).

Fleeing from once more being resold to Virginia, Martha escapes and dwells, henceforth, in Dodge City (Phillips 1993: 83f.).

What is remarkable about her life is not so much her above described part of it, being merely a typical slave career turned into literary form, but rather her relation to the “promised land” of California (see Chapter 2.2.2 above).

While for her fellows, such as her friend Lucy or the pioneers in the caravan which Martha joins (Phillips 1993: 87f.) California represents abstract values such as freedom and liberty, this is, at the first sight, not so with Martha.

Her motivation for her eventual pioneering towards the West is a more concrete one, namely, the urgent wish to once again see her daughter, with whom she had to part in Virginia: “I know I’m going to find my child in California” (Phillips 1993: 89. See also 93f.).

Anyway, this desire has a more profound background than one might suppose.

At the onset of her final departure for California she no longer is a slave, and yet is not fully free, because the split-up of her family in Virginia certainly has somewhat traumatized her and taken her the personal freedom of having a family.

Thus, by making his protagonist move to California in the attempt to find her lost daughter, Phillips does more than sending one single individual out to the promised land: Martha's search is not only for her daughter, but also for the identity she once may have had before forced to part with her family and, within that, for a secure life in freedom.

The fact that she fails – she dies outside of the town of Denver (Phillips 1993: 94) – shows once more Phillips' criticism and his demystifying of historical circumstances: Neither was the ACS inspired by real christian benevolency, nor was California a free land after 1850: on her way to it, Martha is befallen by death and thus stands as a representative of the blacks' inability of gaining a life in freedom and security in the middle of the 19th century.

3. The British Background

3.1 Crossing the River

3.1.1 The Setting

The third chapter of Phillips' work is set in the 1750s with the background of the Atlantic slave trade, with one Captain Hamilton being the focus of attention.

Of course, the topic is closely related to the phenomenon of North American slavery, which has been dealt with above – therefore the following chapter will concentrate mainly on the first part of the Atlantic journey, i.e. the voyage from Great Britain to Africa and the proceedings there.

3.1.2 The Historical Background: The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Role of the British

The Atlantic slave trade was not a new phenomenon by the middle of the 18th century. Rather it had been an institution since as early as the 1450s when for the first time African slaves had been imported to Europe (Wright 1990: 17) and it ceased existence only by the middle of the 19th century.

The business had been dominated by Dutch merchants for quite a long time and the British entered the market to a larger extent only in the middle of the 18th century (Wright 1990: 19), so that in the second half of that century about two thirds of the slaves imported to North America were brought there by British traders (Rawley

1988: 679), with most of the slaves coming directly from Africa (Wright 1990: 9. See also Rawley 1988: 677).

The British slave vessels journeying to Africa came mostly from one of the great harbors in their mothercountry, namely Liverpool, Bristol and London and the voyage was made with ships especially designed for the purpose of trading slaves (Anstey 1975: 9).

Once arrived on the coast of West Africa, contact was being made with certain intermediaries, either with Europeans settling in Africa and supplying the slave ships with their human cargo or with native Africans doing about the same (Anstey 1975: 17).

Indeed, the supply of slaves turned out to be an ever more urgent problem, so that from the 1740s onward more and more ships had to leave Africa with an incomplete cargo (Wright 1990: 36).

However, the process of being forced to go onboard a slave ship certainly must have traumatized anyone of the Africans sold to a slave trader, even before the horrors of the Middle Passage, i.e. the journey from Africa to North America, had begun, such as entirely overcrowded ships and extremely cruel treatment of slaves on behalf of the crew (cf. Wright 1990: 40ff.. See also Anstey 1975: 32 f. and Rawley 1988: 680).

Thus, Olaudah Equiano reports in his autobiography:

“When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound, by some of the crew, and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me” (Equiano 1995: 55. Cf. also Newton 1962: 102).

Conditions of slaves before and during the Middle Passage were, through the brutality they had to face, beyond imagination, even under consideration of the fact that in the 18th century conditions on slave ships were almost as unbearable for white and free sailors, with physical violence regarded at as a mere necessity (Anstey 1975: 31).

As for the period of concern here, the 1750s, one can finally state that British slave trade had reached a full blossom while the first beginnings of the abolitionist movement still were some thirty years away (cf. Temperley 1972: 2ff.).

3.1.3 The Employment of the Historical Background in “Crossing the River”

It is evident that Phillips relies, as far as the third chapter of his novel is concerned, not on general historical facts on the Atlantic slave trade alone, as were described

above, but rather employs a source which he also alludes to in the preface of the book, namely John Newton's "The Journal of a Slave Trader", in which Newton recorded three voyages to Africa undertaken between 1750 and 1754.

There exist, first of all, some striking similarities between "Crossing the River" and Newton's journal.

Newton began his second voyage to Africa on 30th June 1752, while Phillips' Captain Hamilton starts for Africa on 24th August of the same year.

Phillips hints at the journal even more directly when he makes James Hamilton enter into his journal: "In the road, His Majesty's ship, the *African* [...]" (Phillips 1993: 101) – "African" was exactly the name of the ship John Newton had under his command when travelling to Africa a second time (Newton 1962: 65).

Moreover, both the real and the fictive captain exercised control over crews that can be stated to have had almost the same size: on the "African" 27 sailors were employed, including the captain himself, in comparison to 28 onboard the "Duke of York".

More examples like the ones mentioned could be enumerated, for example concerning the names of the crew members – but even from the few listed above it is clear that Phillips extensively referred to Newton's journal: not only did he chose the same outer form, that of a journal, but he even tried to attach his story with details as realistic and close to the historical facts as possible.

By doing so he once again creates an archetypal setting, as is the case in the two preceding chapters, which is rendered even more archetypal by the third chapter's protagonist, Captain James Hamilton.

It is not so much the fact that both Newton and Hamilton are strikingly similar to each other – both use excessive violence against their crew (Newton 1962: 75 and Phillips 1993: 102) as well as against their slave cargo (Newton 79f. and Phillips 1993: 116), not to forget their general proceedings as far as the trade itself is concerned (see chapter 3.1.2 above) – but rather the way in which Phillips presents his protagonist to the reader: this is done not only through the entries in the log, but as well through several letters written by Hamilton to his wife.

It is the contrast between the journal and the letters, which are one more reference to Newton who himself was often enough busy writing to his wife (Newton 1962: XVII), that contains Phillips strongest criticism of the slave trade: Men, behaving like mere monsters when busy in the business of trading slaves, turned out to be tenderly

loving men whenever they turned their back on it (See, inter alia, Hamilton's letter dating from 10th January, Phillips 1993: 108ff.), being but inhabitants of two worlds: one from which the topic of slavery was almost entirely excluded and one in which slaves were regarded as "outsiders" (Eltis 2000: 61. See also Anstey 1975: 5) who were denied even the status of human beings, so as to solve the moral dilemma slave traders possibly had to suffer from when treating their cargo as a mere trading good - a situation which may even remind the reader of the relationship between Nazis and their Jewish victims.

It is, as was stated before, mainly from this juxtaposition of the two worlds that Caryl Phillips' criticism arises most clearly and impressively, and unlike John Newton who later in the 18th century abandoned the business of slave trade and repented his former deeds (Newton 1962: 98), Phillips' protagonist Captain Hamilton is not given the chance to make an end to the dichotomy his life is.

Thus, the final sentence of his final entry into the log, reading "We have lost sight of Africa..." (Phillips 1993: 124), with Africa understood as the cradle of mankind, may quite easily be rendered to: "We [the slave traders] have lost sight of our humanity...".

3.2 Somewhere in England

3.2.1 The Setting

The fourth and last chapter of Phillips' novel is entirely different from the preceding chapters – at least at the first sight.

The action is taking place not in the 18th or 19th centuries, but in the 1930s, 1940s and 1960s and the story is told from the viewpoint of Joyce, a white English woman falling in love with a black G.I. stationed in Britain during WW II.

While the other three chapters are dominated by the topic of slavery, this is not so in "Somewhere in England", at least not as far as slavery in its original form is concerned.

Anyway, Joyce's fate, as well as that of the other characters might be closer connected to that background as is at first apparent.

3.2.2 The Historical Background: Black Servicemen in Britain and their Treatment

The influx of blacks into Britain is, not surprisingly, closely related with the wars Britain was engaged in during the course of the 20th century, mainly WW I and WW

II. Thus, the beginning of WW I in 1914 went hand in hand with a greater number of black immigrants coming to Britain, the great majority of which were from the West Indies.

Their motivation to do so was sourced mainly in a firm loyalty to the “mother country”, whom they sought to help by joining the British Army (Scobie 1972: 153) : in 1915 the “British West Indies Regiment” was established, numbering about 15,000 black soldiers (Scobie 1972: 154).

While during the the course of the war these black soldiers might have represented a valuable help to Great Britain, their position and status in society steadily declined after the war had been ended, not least because they were envied by whites the relative prosperity they had achieved to acquire during doing military service.

As a consequence, race riots were, in the aftermath of WW I, a regular occurrence (cf. Scobie 1972: 156).

The situation of blacks in Britain received a turn for the better only at the dawn of WW II, 21 years after end of the last world war.

Once again the non-white members of the Commonwealth were granted the opportunity to bravely fight for the British cause.

However, discrimination against them was a common thing in the Army, which statement is valid not only for black soldiers fighting for Britain but as well for those doing service in the U.S. Army, many of whom were stationed in Great Britain.

Moreover, white members of the U.S. Army were often found not only to discriminate against their own black soldiers but as well against black British ones (Scobie 1972: 188).

Nonetheless, relationships between U.S. soldiers and white English women seem to have occurred not too seldom at all and English women appear to have been particularly fond of black U.S. servicemen (Scobie 1972: 189).

However, the status of blacks was not a generally high one at all, especially not after the restriction of immigration to Britain in 1962 (Hiro 1991: 203), which was also due to the great numbers of black workers coming to Britain after the war had been won and the country had been in an urgent need for labor force.

It was not before 1965 that first antidiscriminatory measures were considered, and even then the attempts were rather modest.

3.2.3 The Employment of the Historical Background in “Somewhere in England”

The by far profoundest historical influence on the last chapter in “Crossing the River” certainly can be stated to be WW II, although it should not be forgotten that part of the action is taking place well before 1939 and after 1945.

However, the period of main concern is that between the two mentioned dates and it is only an appropriate step to concentrate, first of all, on the first-person narrator, Joyce, and in what way the historical circumstances affect her life.

They do so in a certain way which one might call, concerning Joyce and her relationships, a systole-diastole-principle: in due course of the second world war her relationships are first erected, then destroyed.

The earliest proof of this is her marriage to Len, occurring in September 1939 (Phillips 1993: 139) and not so much because both love each other, but rather out of a necessity. Thus, Phillips makes his protagonist call herself “One of the war brides” (Phillips 1993: 139).

War is also what eventually makes them Joyce and her husband part: the longer the war lasts the more Joyce gets to hate Len, or what war made out of him (cf. Phillips 1993: 168f.) so that the relation concludes in a divorce (Phillips 1993: 217).

It is similar with Travis: being a U.S. soldier, war makes him come to Great Britain, where he gets to know and love Joyce (Phillips 1993: 149) and it is the same war that ends their love: Due to Mussolini’s fall in 1943 Travis is forced to move to Italy, where he eventually dies in battle in 1945 (Phillips 1993: 229).

The influence of the historical background on Joyce’s life being clear so far, it should prove interesting to have a closer look at Joyce’s and Travis’ life in England.

In doing so one soon realizes that both are outsiders.

This is true, first of all, when considering both separate from each other: After her husband is sent to prison for “what hundreds of others, the length and breadth of this country, are still doing” (Phillips 1993: 198), i.e. dealing on the black market, people’s reactions towards Joyce become increasingly hostile (See, inter alia, Phillips 1993: 129, 136 and 148) and without her husband by her side she no longer is a fully accepted member of the society of the village she dwells in.

Travis’ status in the U.S. Army is similarly low: for his once coming to late he is most severely punished (Phillips 1993: 207) and he states that “the army only liked to use them [black servicemen] for cleaning and the like” (Phillips 1993: 208).

Moreover, Joyce's and Travis' partnership is clearly disapproved of by the local population (Phillips 1993: 207).

Thus, each of the two is an outsider by himself and both are even more so when they finally join and become a couple.

An overall view of the story, then, might conclude in realizing that the fourth chapter is, despite being set in the 20th century, not too different from the preceding chapters: not only are Joyce and Travis outsiders, as were Nash and Martha, but moreover both are subject to conditions which might fairly well remind the reader of slavery.

This is best represented by the extreme physical violence both have to suffer, exercised by Len on the one side (Phillips 1993: 159) and by the U.S. Army on the other (Phillips 1993: 207).

Phillips does, in "Somewhere in England", more than to criticize the situation of blacks in the army and in society in general.

Rather he expands his criticism and shows that not only blacks were stigmatized but also those that were in close contact with them, as is the case with Joyce.

When Len calls her, at his final departure, a "traitor to [her] own kind" (Phillips 1993: 217) he is more than just a husband having lost his wife and instead rather a representative of a society unable to tolerate whatsoever interracial relationships there might be.

It is not too much of a surprise that both protagonists fail in the end, in some way or other: Travis is falling in battle before having had the chance to see the baby his and Joyce's love procreated (Phillips 1993: 229) and Joyce is being taken away the child – "My son who hadn't asked me to turn him over to the lady with the blue coat and maroon scarf" (Phillips 1993: 228).

Whatever hope for a peaceful coexistence of blacks and whites there might have been in the 1940s - in the last chapter of Phillips' work it is clearly denied.

4. Conclusion

It might seem, at the first sight at least, to be contradictory or even wrong to call "Crossing the River" anything else but a pessimistic book.

Nearly all of the protagonists fail, in some way or other.

Nash forsakens his former beliefs that a white man in a white society instilled into him and chooses to live the life of an African instead of an American.

Martha fails in her search for her daughter and her freedom and dies alone and, eventually, Joyce and Travis both are slaves in an intolerant society in the middle of the 20th century.

The only protagonist not failing is Captain Hamilton, who is a more or less successful actor in the slave trade, and the fact that he, as the prime representative of oppression and violence, does not fail makes “Crossing the River” seem an even more pessimistic work.

In a certain way it actually is, but it is not an overall pessimistic work and Caryl Phillips indeed didn’t want his fifth novel to be one (cf. Davison 1994: 93).

This is rendered very clear by the back end of the above mentioned narrative frame, told once again from the perspective of the father forced to sell his children (see chapter 1), who, of course, represents the voice of the African people itself, the voice of a people forced into the diaspora, which Nash, Martha and Travis are only some examples of.

They might have failed, but they are “survivors” and “only if they panic will they break their wrists and ankles against Captain Hamilton’s instruments” (Phillips 1993: 235) – they are, and this becomes once more apparent in the back part of the narrative frame, not mere individuals but historical archetypes, typical representatives of those black people who have gone a long way of suffering and who will nevertheless survive and finally break free, which even antagonists such as Captain Hamilton or anyone else sharing in the oppression of blacks will not be able to hinder them from doing.

They, Nash, Martha, Travis and all the others forced into the diaspora, “arrived on the far bank of the river, loved” (Phillips 1993: 237).

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