The British Immigrant Experience in *A Distant Shore* and Other Works by Caryl Phillips

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## Table of Contents

1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 5

2 Biography .............................................................................................................. 8

3 Immigration issues in Britain .................................................................................. 10

4 *A Distant Shore* ..................................................................................................... 13
   4.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 13
   4.2 Solomon ............................................................................................................ 16
   4.3 Mahmood ......................................................................................................... 23
   4.4 Said .................................................................................................................. 24
   4.5 Dorothy ............................................................................................................ 26
   4.7 Solomon and Dorothy’s relationship ................................................................. 29
   4.8 Formal elements in *A Distant Shore* .............................................................. 31

5 *Higher Ground* ..................................................................................................... 33
   5.1 Plot .................................................................................................................. 33
   5.2 Dorothy and Irina ............................................................................................. 35
   5.3 Solomon and Irina ............................................................................................ 36
   5.4 Solomon and Louis .......................................................................................... 39
   5.5 Solomon and Dorothy, and Louis and Irina ..................................................... 40
   5.6 Empathic unsettlement in *Higher Ground* .................................................. 41

6 *Crossing the River* ............................................................................................... 45
   6.1 Plot .................................................................................................................. 45
   6.2 Solomon and Travis ....................................................................................... 49
   6.3 Dorothy, Irina and Joyce .................................................................................. 50
1 Introduction

Caryl Phillips is a much respected contemporary author of English fiction and non-fiction. Today, at the age of 50, he has already written four plays, one screenplay, nine novels, and several works of non-fiction, including the essay collections The European Tribe and The Atlantic Sound. His works almost always focus on the experience of slavery and its legacy: by describing the discrimination of people of colour in past and present times, he shows how today’s race relations have a long history. In this master dissertation, I will start by discussing how the theme of slavery and its legacy is developed in his novel A Distant Shore (2003). This will be followed by a comparison between A Distant Shore and four other novels by Phillips to demonstrate that all of his fictions have quite a few characteristics in common, both thematically and formally. These four novels are Higher Ground (1989), Crossing the River (1993), The Nature of Blood (1997) and Phillips’ most recent work: Foreigners: Three English Lives (2007). What these four books have in common is the fact that they are marked by cross-culturalism. However, I will not discuss these four works in full detail, instead I will mainly pay attention to how the British immigrant experience is depicted in them. As a result, I will only focus on the key characters who lead their lives in Britain during the twentieth century. Another aspect that will have my attention is how some of Phillips’ textual strategies return in all five novels, and how these formal elements in combination with some thematic qualities evoke “empathic unsettlement” in the reader.

The reason why I take A Distant Shore as my point of departure is that I want to fill a gap in the criticism of this work. This book slightly deviates from Phillips’ previous novels as it is set in present-day Britain, though it must be noted that his drama was always situated in today’s society (Ledent 13). As a consequence, Phillips now openly addresses the British nation whereas his previous fictions speak to British society in a much more indirect way. In A Distant Shore, he thus shows what is going wrong in Britain today. One critic has already
pointed this out by revealing how the village where the larger part of the story is set and the protagonist Dorothy can be seen as symbols for the gradual downfall of the British nation (Tournay-Theodotou n. pag.). Yet what the critics have not discussed so far is how the novel’s two protagonists can be viewed as persons who have to bear the consequences of Britain’s downfall, who have to deal with the legacy of slavery in present-day society. I will fill this gap by demonstrating how Dorothy experiences the pain of abandonment, and how Solomon, the other main character, faces the problems and discrimination that immigrants in Britain live through.

The fact that Phillips sets this novel in present-day Britain does not mean that every connection to his previous novels has disappeared. On the contrary, the same themes and style can be found throughout his entire work. Bénédicte Ledent and Helen Thomas, who are Phillips’ most prominent critics, have both written a book about some of Phillips’ works and they have already shown how many of Phillips’ novels have some features in common. However, their monographs do not include a discussion of A Distant Shore which means that the many links that can be drawn between this novel and Phillips’ other works have not been discussed profoundly by any critic yet. This is the main reason why I will draw some connections to the four other novels that I have already mentioned. These ties will demonstrate how all of Phillips’ characters have quite a few characteristics in common. I will also show how these novels share many textual strategies which leave a strong impression on the reader. I have chosen Higher Ground, Crossing the River, The Nature of Blood and Foreigners because they all contain different storylines that are either clearly separated or completely intertwined. In contrast, his other novels: The Final Passage, A State of Independence, Cambridge and Dancing in the Dark only focus on one plot. I find the presence of various storylines in one book interesting because it connects all the characters. I have thus chosen these four works because of the cross-culturalism that can be found in them. Each of
these five individual novels has already been discussed in the light of cross-culturalism; Ledent and Thomas, for example, have demonstrated how the different plotlines are connected by means of an overarching theme or motif. Nevertheless, these connections between the different protagonists have too often been discussed within the confines of one book. As a result, I will demonstrate how Phillips’ characters possess similar traits and even experience comparable traumatic events which connect them over time and space.

This does not mean, though, that I will discuss and compare each and every one of the protagonists present in these novels. As Ledent and Thomas’ monographs about Phillips’ work that have been published so far do not discuss A Distant Shore, and as the larger part of Phillips’ criticism tends to focus on the historical novels, I will pay attention to how the twentieth-century immigrant experience is depicted in these novels. Consequently, I will only focus on the key characters who lead their lives in Britain during the twentieth century. These characters include those who immigrated to Britain during or after the Second World War and who, as a result of their immigration, experience a strong sense of loneliness. They are in the best position to show what it means to be unaccepted in today’s Britain. The other protagonists will of course not be ignored completely; I will discuss them whenever this is relevant to our understanding of the characters with whom I am primarily concerned here.

Apart from my discussion of the twentieth-century protagonists, I will also focus on some textual strategies that Phillips frequently uses in these five novels. This will again demonstrate that many similarities can be found between his different fictions. What will become apparent is that by means of anti-linearity, fragmentation, indirection, and non-closure, Phillips tries to evoke in the reader what a character feels and experiences. On the other hand, though, we are prevented from fully identifying with a character as he or she always displays some negative characteristics which make us feel quite uncomfortable. This phenomenon is termed “empathic unsettlement”(LaCapra 135). The reason why I include this
in my dissertation is that the use of particular textual strategies in combination with the characters’ features has only been discussed with regard to some of Phillips’ books. Yet as this distinctive quality changes Phillips’ work into something that leaves a deep impression onto the reader, I will discuss this aspect in all five novels.

What I thus hope to reveal in this master dissertation is that many similarities can be found between Phillips’ different novels, or as Petra Tournay-Theodotou puts it: “he continues to write the same book” (n. pag.). This will become apparent in the depiction of the different characters who all have some or many features in common. This will also be demonstrated by the recurrence of the same themes and the same textual strategies in Phillips’ novels. The reason why Phillips keeps repeating the same problems with regard to the British immigrant experience will also be explained. A final facet that will have my attention is the evolution that Phillips has undergone as a novelist; he started to write about the past, then he turned to the present by writing *A Distant Shore* – though it must be mentioned that his early dramatic production and his scripts for radio and television have always directly addressed present-day issues –, and his latest novel, *Foreigners*, is even based on true events. Yet before I can reach these conclusions, I will discuss the five aforementioned novels, after having given a short biography of Caryl Phillips, and a theoretical reflection on the prevalence of racism in present-day Britain.

2 Biography

Caryl Phillips was born on 13 March 1958 on the Eastern Caribbean island of St.-Kitts. When he was 12 weeks old, his parents left the Caribbean and went to England, where they settled in Leeds in a white, working-class area (Ledent xi). Phillips’ parents chose “to downplay their origins so as not to hinder their children’s integration into the host society,” and as a consequence Phillips’ cultural heritage did not clash with the white, British education
that he received (Ledent 2). After having finished high-school in Birmingham, Phillips went
to Oxford, where he first wanted to study psychology and neurophysiology, which might
explain “his fascination for the fictional exploration of the human soul”, yet he graduated with
an Honours Degree in English Language and Literature (Ledent 2-3). During his studies at
Oxford, he undertook a first journey to the United States. It was there that he decided to
become a writer after having read Native Son by Richard Wright (Bell 583). When Phillips
left university, he received quite a few offers: he could have worked with the Royal
Shakespeare Company as an assistant director, he also had the chance to work with the BBC,
and be trained as a director or he could have stayed on Oxford University and do a doctorate
(Bell 583). However, none of these options could satisfy Phillips; he wanted to write. Nine
months later, this was in 1981, his career was launched when the Sheffield Crucible (a
regional theatre in England) produced Phillips’ play Strange Fruit (Bell 586). Shortly after
this Phillips journeyed back to St.-Kitts, this trip was “the first in a series of frequent visits to
his birthplace” (Ledent xi). In 1984 he toured Europe for over nine months and he published
his impressions in the non-fictional work The European Tribe. One year later, his first novel
The Final Passage, which won the Malcolm X Prize for Literature, was published. Over the
years, Phillips has received a number of prizes, including the Sunday Times Young Writer of
the Year Award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for fiction) and the Martin Luther
King Memorial Prize (Procter, “Biography”). Nowadays, Phillips is a Professor of English
and “Henry R. Luce Professor of Migration and Social Order at Barnard College, Columbia
University, New York” (Procter “Biography”). Due to the many travels that he undertakes it
is often difficult to pigeonhole him as “either Caribbean, Black British, or even, now that he
resides most of the year in New York, as African-American” (Ledent 5). This is also reflected
in the presence of diverse characters in Phillips’ novels; not only does one hear the voices of
black immigrants who came to Britain, but the voices of Holocaust-victims, slaves and other
repressed or abandoned persons are equally there. It appears that Phillips thus belongs to everywhere and nowhere, or, as he likes to put it: “I am of, and not of, this place” (Phillips, A New World Order 1).

3 Immigration issues in Britain

Before I start with the discussion of how Solomon and some other characters present in A Distant Shore suffer from racism, I will first look into the causes of British hostility towards immigrants.

According to Paul Gilroy in his work Postcolonial Melancholia, British society wants to put an end to multicultural society; it wants to abolish “any ambition toward plurality” and consolidate “the growing sense that it is now illegitimate to believe that multiculture can and should be orchestrated by government in the public interest” (Postcolonial Melancholia 2). As a consequence of this desire, “diversity becomes a dangerous feature of society. It brings only weakness, chaos, and confusion” (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 2). It is thus not surprising that immigrants are not welcome in Britain as they form a primary threat to the society’s homogeneity. One possible cause of this desire for homogeneity is the fact that after World Word II, Britain never took the chance to mourn the large changes that came with the end of the British empire and the “loss of imperial prestige” (Postcolonial Melancholia 90) that came with immigration. In There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack Gilroy relates the desire for homogeneity and the loss of imperial prestige to one another. Alien cultures are seen to form a threat to the British nation as their arrival supposedly means national decline, weakness and diversity (Gilroy, There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack 46). As a result, “The operation of banishing blacks, repatriating them to the places which are congruent with their ethnicity and culture, becomes doubly desirable. It assists in the process of making Britain great again and restores an ethnic symmetry to a world distorted by imperial adventure and
migration” (Gilroy, There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack 46). As is clear from this passage; some members of the British nation desire that immigrants leave the mother country and head back home, for then Britain would have the chance to become, once more, a great nation marked by homogeneity.

After having read this passage one would expect that the British look back at their imperial history with a strong sense of nostalgia, desiring that that time could come back. This is, however, not the case, as Britain’s colonial past contains a lot of atrocious aspects. These aspects are an equally important source for racism as the glorious facets. The history of the empire became “a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity” and as a consequence “its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside” (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 90). This means that the “unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten. The resulting silence feeds an additional catastrophe; the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects” (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 90). As Britain thus represses the atrocities of its colonial past, it equally represses and discriminates the most obvious results of its colonial past; those who lived in one of Britain’s colonies and who now want to find a better life in the mother country.

However, complete suppression of the memory of Britain’s colonial past is of course not possible, and the blame for this atrocious history is not put on the British empire; instead it is the immigrant that “comes to represent all the discomforting ambiguities of the empire’s painful and shameful . . . history. The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there . . . And yet its grudging recognition provides a stimulus for forms of hostility rooted in the associated realization that today’s unwanted settlers carry all the ambivalence of empire with them” (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia 100). The incomers are therefore unwelcome, “unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting bearers of the
imperial and colonial past” (Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* 101). Some members of British society thus do not want immigrants present in Britain because they remind them too much of their awful past; they do not want to feel guilty for the mistakes that their forefathers have made.

A further interesting explanation that Gilroy gives for racism in Britain is that “the Other” has become “partially familiar” (*Postcolonial Melancholia* 125). Some people are unable “to locate the Other’s difference in the commonsense lexicon of alterity” (Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* 125). Although people who are different are hated and sometimes even feared, persons who are at the same time familiar and “half-different” form an even greater menace as some members of the British nation are unable to label them in a clear way (Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* 125). Stuart Hall similarly claimed that “national cultures acquire their strong sense of identity by contrasting themselves with other cultures” (*The West and the Rest* 279), which means that people need the difference of other cultures so that they could define themselves better. This implies that some of the British do not want immigrants to blend in or try to integrate into society because then they would become difficult to pigeon-hole as either enemies or friends. What this thus comes down to is that large parts of British society cannot deal with the uncertainty of calling somebody a reliable or unreliable person. Therefore they make it easy for themselves and call white people good whereas people of colour are bad: “The black presence is thus constructed as a problem or a threat against which a homogeneous, white, national ‘we’ could be unified” (Gilroy, *There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack* 49). However, Caryl Phillips noted that today not all people of colour are necessarily bad; it appears that there are in fact two types of blacks; one that adjusts and one that does not. The good ones are of course those that look as if they belong: “no afros, no dashikis, no beads, no shoulder bags, only a suit, tie and briefcase” (Phillips, *A New World Order* 248). Clearly, immigration is a very complex notion; on the one hand
people do not want that the Others integrate as this would make them hybrid and thus difficult to classify, on the other hand people think it is necessary that immigrants adjust so that they can be classified as good blacks. This depiction strongly recalls what Homi K. Bhabha has termed “mimicry,” i.e., “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (85). Mimicry is the longing for a man of colour who is both recognisable and different at the same time (Bhabha 86). Mimicry is thus highly ambivalent; it desires that the Other is the same as the coloniser, yet there still has to be some form of distinction; the Other is “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 86). Once more, this shows that the position of the immigrant in Britain is very complex: on the one hand, the white man expects him or her to fit in completely, yet on the other hand, he or she may never assimilate completely; some form of division must remain.

4 A Distant Shore

4.1 Introduction

The text on which I will mainly focus in this dissertation, A Distant Shore, portrays the lives of Dorothy and Solomon. Dorothy has lived in England for her entire life and recently moved back to her town of birth, where she is a pensioned-off music teacher. From the beginning it is obvious that she leads a very lonely life and it soon becomes clear how this has come about. Not only has she been abandoned by her husband Brian, who left her for a much younger woman, and later by her married Indian lover Mahmood, but she was also forced to retire after having slept with one of her married colleagues, whom she could not leave alone after this one night. Not much later, her sister Sheila suddenly dies of cancer and her good friend Solomon is murdered by a young group of racists. Dorothy cannot take this anymore, and eventually she ends up in a mental hospital, leaving the reader with no hope for her.
Solomon’s life is equally depressing. He was born as Gabriel in an undefined African country that is torn apart by a civil war. As a young man he joins the rebel army, but when he loses control of his troops (who completely destroy an innocent village), he witnesses how his entire family is murdered by government soldiers. He has to flee from his country and undertakes a very dangerous trip to England. When he arrives there, he meets a young British girl, Denise, who later accuses him of having raped her. As a result, Gabriel is taken into custody and is (possibly falsely) charged with rape. Despite the fact that Gabriel believes that he did nothing wrong – as is apparent from the following excerpt: “no matter what anybody might say, Gabriel knew that he did not force himself upon the girl. He had done nothing wrong. He was guilty of nothing that would bring shame on his family name” (Phillips, A Distant Shore 167) – it is never entirely clear whether or not he forced this girl into having sex with him, or even whether he slept with her at all. The fact, though, that the girl never turns up at his trial leads the reader to think that Gabriel is innocent after all. While Gabriel is in prison he again experiences some awful things: the continuing insults of the guards and the death of his sick cell-mate whom no one wants to help. When he eventually gets out of jail, he is cheated by a fellow countryman. Obviously, Britain does not offer him a warm welcome. When he leaves for the north of England, Gabriel changes his name into Solomon so that no one would associate him with a possible rapist. Once there he can finally settle down when he finds a family, the Andersons, who give him all the help he needs. However, some time later Solomon loses his friend Mike and his ‘family’ moves to Scotland. Once more, Solomon is all alone, and to make matters worse, he becomes the victim of some disgusting racial insults. Fortunately he meets Dorothy, one of his neighbours, with whom he can establish a good yet shallow friendship. In the end, though, Solomon is never accepted into the community of Stoneleigh, and he is brutally murdered by some young skinheads who “just wanted to have some fun” (Phillips, A Distant Shore 47).
What immediately catches the eye when one compares *A Distant Shore* with previous novels by Phillips is that this book is set in today’s world, though of course one could say that his former fictions “allegorically address the present” (Ledent 13). Bénédicte Ledent notes that all of Phillips’ novels are set in the past whereas his plays and scripts for radio and television often focus directly “on what it means to be black in Britain today” (13). Ledent wrote this one year before the publication of *A Distant Shore*, so she did not know about this change in Phillips’ work yet. *A Distant Shore* thus contains a clear break with Phillips’ earlier novels as far as the temporal setting is concerned. However, certain topics keep recurring regardless of the setting: Petra Tournay-Theodotou states that “the themes addressed and the type of characters portrayed, have not actually deviated from his previous literary production” (n. pag.). It is true that Dorothy and Solomon share quite a few characteristics with many of Phillips’ previous protagonists, just as it is true that many themes such as displacement, alienation and discrimination are a constant throughout his work. The description of how Solomon crosses the channel by having to hold on to the side of a ship recalls how slaves had to cross the Atlantic. Tournay-Theodotou says that in general, the description of Gabriel’s flight is “strongly reminiscent of depictions of the Middle Passage . . . The intent of evoking a connection between the days of slavery and contemporary migration cannot be ignored. In other words, *A Distant Shore* is also a contemporary rewriting of the Middle Passage” (n. pag.). This is a theme that returns in many novels by Phillips, for example in *Higher Ground*, *Cambridge*, and *Crossing the River*. This demonstrates that despite the contemporary setting of *A Distant Shore*, this novel is concerned with the same themes that are present in Phillips’ previous novels. On the other hand, the fact remains that Phillips places this novel in present-day Britain, which means that he now, for the first time in his novels, directly addresses the British nation and the problems that it has with immigration. Phillips does this again in part
three of his most recent novel *Foreigners: Three English Lives* which shows that the contemporary setting in *A Distant Shore* was not a one-off.

After having given a rather general introduction to *A Distant Shore*, I will now discuss Solomon’s life and sentiments in detail. I will mainly focus on the problems that Solomon experiences as a black immigrant in Britain. This will be related to the issues that I have looked at in the previous section: “3 Immigration issues in Britain”. I will also pay attention to Mahmood and Said; two minor characters who are victims of racial prejudice as well. This will be followed by a discussion of the lonesomeness of the novel’s other protagonist, Dorothy. Another point which will have my attention with regard to the two protagonists of *A Distant Shore* is how Dorothy and Solomon are able to establish a good friendship despite the difficulties that they face. One reason for their amity is that they both like each other’s respectable and polite attitude. We will see however, that this is not the only feature that they have in common. Just like many of Phillips’ characters, they are both not entirely likeable, which makes it rather difficult to identify completely with them. I will conclude the discussion of *A Distant Shore* by briefly examining some formal elements present in this novel.

### 4.2 Solomon

When Solomon arrives in England, he is struck by the many differences between his and Britain’s culture. As he first meets Denise he is irritated, offended almost by the way she dresses and how she interrogates him as if she were his equal: “She is asking him questions that do not concern her, and it troubles him that she cannot see that he is a grown man and she is merely a child” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 165). This is one of the reasons why he likes Dorothy so much; she is one of the only persons in his direct environment who is “respectable” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 266). Another passage, though, shows that Solomon
is equally disturbed by the fact that British people seem determined to make no contact whatsoever with people that they do not know; they tend towards very antisocial behaviour:

    To Gabriel’s eyes, English people look unhappy, and he notices that they walk with their heads down as though determined to avoid one another. It is strange, but nobody is looking at anybody else, and it would appear that not only are these people all strangers to one another, but they seem determined to make sure that this situation will remain unchanged. (Phillips, A Distant Shore 144).

Solomon’s thoughts are thus quite contradictory; on the one hand, he does not like the forwardness of this young girl who clearly only wants to express her concern for him and be his friend. On the other hand, he is irritated by the fact that no one is willing to make contact with him. This shows that Solomon is not only isolated by society, he himself is to some extent responsible for his sense of lonesomeness, as he declines the first contact that he encounters in Britain. Maybe this is the reason why Denise presumably falsely accuses him of rape; perhaps she wants to take revenge for his disdainful attitude towards her? Nevertheless, the aforementioned passage demonstrates one of the main themes in this novel: the loneliness that is sensed by both protagonists. This feeling seems to be inherent to Britain’s culture. Nobody wants to know anyone new; everyone wants to be by him- or herself, and this completely isolates Dorothy and Solomon.

    Apart from suffering from extreme loneliness, Solomon is the victim of racism and racially inspired vandalism, which brings me to a second major theme in Phillips’ work. When he is locked up for the ‘abuse’ of Denise, he is either ignored or treated like an animal by the guards. His cell-mate, Said, is dying from a severe illness yet the warder refuses to take Solomon seriously when he begs for a doctor. Instead, the guard shouts that they should be silent while he is trying to watch television. Eventually, a doctor arrives but it is too late; Said has passed away and Solomon is left alone with the body in his cell. Together with this
shocking event, Solomon also suffers from the guards’ contempt in different ways. For example: when he finally receives his dinner, he is told that he has two visitors. Solomon wants to take his plate with him yet the warder tells him that this is not permitted and that his visitors are only allowed to stay for a short period. Consequently, Solomon has to choose between having his dinner and letting his guests wait, which will limit their time together even more, or leaving the food behind. Solomon chooses to eat his meal as quickly as possible and then goes to his visitors, whom as it turns out have already been waiting there for a considerably long time. The warder thus deliberately wanted to block Solomon’s consultation with his lawyers.

When Solomon lives in the north of England with his ‘family’, he again becomes the victim of racism when the house where he stays is decorated with racist slogans. As a result, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson are completely stressed out and Solomon once more feels that he is not welcome in Britain. What is very interesting in this passage is the explanation that Mike gives to Solomon to make clear why certain people react to him in this awful way:

‘I’m an old traditionalist, Solomon. I want fish and chips, not curry and chips. I’m not prejudiced, but we’ll soon be living in a foreign country unless somebody puts an end to all this immigration. These Indians, they still make their women trail after them, and they have their mosques and temples, and their butcher shops where they kill animals in the basement and do whatever they do with the blood. I mean, they’re peasants . . . It’s these kinds of people that cause others to have bad attitudes and to do things like they’ve done to Mum’s wall. I’m not saying they’re right, because they’re not. But I drive around a lot, and I see how people feel, more than the old folks do. It’s everywhere’ . . . ‘You see, you’re in a different situation, Solomon. You’re escaping oppression and that’s different . . . I mean, you’re working. You’re no
scrounger. But they don’t know that, and so that’s what happens.’ (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 258)

As is apparent from this excerpt, Mike is a racist himself, but instead of blaming black people for everything that goes wrong in Britain, he accuses the Indians of being the source of Britain’s misery as they are “peasants”. It now becomes clear to Solomon what is going wrong in this country: Britain needs scapegoats to put the blame on for everything that is unacceptable, and when one differs too much from the rest, it is easy to be pushed into that role. Mike’s speech reminds one of the infamous speeches that Enoch Powell gave in 1968. Caryl Phillips quoted the following sentence of Powell in his book *A New World Order*: “The West Indian or Asian does not by being born in England become an Englishman. In law he is a United Kingdom citizen, by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or Asian still” (274). Phillips further wrote that Powell wished to “stigmatise Caribbean migrants as ‘alien’, as impossible to assimilate, as genetically ‘foreign’ ” (*A New World Order* 274). Hence, we can see Mike – despite the fact that he is Irish, not English – as someone who believes in what Powell stated. Mike says that Solomon’s case is different from that of the West Indian or Asian because Solomon had to escape oppression, yet what Mike fails to understand is that in all probability the West Indian and Asian also wanted to escape a form of oppression, namely poverty.

When Solomon moves to Stoneleigh to become the “handyman-cum-night-watchman” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 13), he again becomes the victim of racism. This time he receives insulting letters of which some are filled with razor blades so that Solomon would have his fingers sliced off. What is particularly striking about these letters is that most of them are signed, as if the racial offenders want to make sure that Solomon knows who they are. These offences and the fact that he has had to say goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Anderson make Solomon more and more lonely, while the only thing he really desires is to become a little less so: “Become less lonely? That was all I hoped for” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 259). We thus see
that the theme of loneliness and the topic of racism are strongly intertwined in this novel, as
the discriminating attitude of some members of British society is one of the main causes for
Solomon’s isolation.

His lonesomeness is also strengthened by the fact that he cannot speak his own
language anymore: “My only real regret was the lack of anybody from my own country with
whom I might talk. My language was drying up in my mouth, and sometimes, when nobody
was around, I would place my language on my tongue and speak some words so that I could
be sure that I was still in possession of it” (Phillips, A Distant Shore 253). The point that he is
losing his language implies a loss of identity. England is clearly changing him into another
person, so if he were to return to his home country, he would never fit in there again. Yet on
the other hand, he will also never fit in completely into British society as “Britain has always
sought to define . . . the nation . . . by identifying those who don’t belong” (Phillips,
Extravagant Strangers xiii). Stuart Hall wrote about immigrants like Solomon that their
identity formation cuts across and intersects natural frontiers as they have left their homelands
and have no hope of ever returning there: “they are irrevocably the product of several
interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several ‘homes’ ”
(Hall, The Question of Cultural Identity 310). They thus belong to a culture of hybridity:
“they must learn to inhabit at last two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate
and negotiate between them” (Hall, The Question of Cultural Identity 310). As a result,
Solomon belongs to neither nation, and this again enforces his feeling of loneliness. This is
the main reason why he becomes a volunteer driver, yet the first person that he drives into the
city is clearly offended by the fact that the community services have sent him a black driver.
Yet Solomon does not give in, and he asks Dorothy whether she needs a lift into town. At this
point their friendship starts off, and they both find the company that they were looking for.
However, their friendship does not last long as Solomon is brutally murdered by a young group of skinheads who wanted to enjoy themselves by terrifying a black man.

According to Tournay-Theodotou the town of Stoneleigh is “a representation of the nation on a small scale” (n. pag.). As a consequence we can see Solomon as a symbol of the “wave” of immigration that “overwhelms” British society; he is perceived as a menace by the inhabitants of Stoneleigh. This is a clear illustration of one of Gilroy’s claims: Solomon exemplifies a threat to the homogeneity of Stoneleigh; he is an Other who must be excluded and repressed so that diversity cannot overcome homogeneity.

In this connection it is very interesting to discuss the passage in which Solomon meets Denise and is arrested for having had sex with her. Tournay-Thoedotou says that this episode must be read as an allegory:

   Keeping in mind the traditional identification of the land/ country/ nation with the female body, it is not only the innocence and virginity of a girl child that is at risk from the proximity of strangers but it is the moral purity of nation space itself that is under attack, that is violated by the uncontained sexual desires attributed to the black man. (n. pag.)

The supposed threat that Solomon forms for Denise thus stands for the supposed threat of the immigrant for the British nation. As I have written before, the reader is not entirely sure whether or not Solomon raped this girl, yet I believe that he did not force her into sleeping with him as she did not show up for his trial. Despite the fact that one cannot know the truth about this event, some characters in the novel, like the guards, tend to believe that Solomon is guilty. Solomon is thus declared to be a criminal by these people even though there is no proof for his offence. This is true for all immigrants who come to Britain: they are found to be the cause of everything that goes wrong, they are the scapegoats of the British nation and this will remain so until their innocence has been proven which, of course, is impossible.
Although Solomon is a victim of racial oppression, he has also committed some awful crimes, which make him not entirely likeable. This is a typical feature of Phillips’ characters, and this facet automatically makes them much more realistic. Eva, for example, one of the protagonists in The Nature of Blood, is a Holocaust-victim, and thus one would expect that she understands what racism can do to people, yet she expresses a striking racist thought: “I disliked the dirty, uncultivated people from the east” (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 169). The fact also that Eva forges a letter again leaves the reader with an uncomfortable feeling.

Clearly, Phillips refuses “to portray Eva as a saintly innocent” (Craps, “Linking Legacies” 15). Dorothy is not entirely likeable either; she did not like the fact that the school in which she worked had been turned from grammar into comprehensive and as a consequence she now had to teach “whoever came into the school” (Phillips, A Distant Shore 5). Apparently Dorothy preferred to teach only those who came from a rich background. The problem that she has with the homeless is another aspect that makes the reader feel uncomfortable:

These days whenever I go into town it’s the homeless people who annoy me the most, and the frightening thing is they seem to be everywhere . . . During the day they sit around the precincts playing the guitar like it’s some kind of summer camp that they’re attending. Why didn’t they pay attention at school? . . . It’s just a wilful waste, that’s all, and I believe most of them are doing it on purpose because they’re lazy and they want sympathy, but they never get it from me. (Phillips, A Distant Shore 11)

Some other characteristics are equally disturbing about Dorothy, but I will come back to this when I discuss her in more detail.

These two examples show how Phillips makes his protagonists not completely innocent. Solomon perfectly fits into this picture as he murders a friend of his. After the assassination of his family, Solomon has to flee his country to escape from the government
soldiers. However, the passage to England costs a lot of money and thus Solomon goes to Felix, his former employer, who kindly borrows him some money. Yet the sum that Felix gives him is not sufficient, and thus Solomon hits him on the head with a rusting metal clock and steals all his money, after which he leaves him to die. Although one can understand that it is absolutely necessary for Solomon to leave his country, it is beyond comprehension that Solomon betrays and kills his former friend. Bénédicte Ledent wrote the following about *Higher Ground*: “we are all colonised, seems to be one of Phillips’s messages, but all of us are would-be colonisers as well” (68). This quote can certainly be applied to Solomon; at one point he is a victim, but when his life is in danger, he does not hesitate to put other persons into that role.

Having discussed Solomon in full detail, I will now take a quick look at two other characters present in this novel: Mahmood and Said. Like Solomon, they are both immigrants who left their country and now suffer from severe racism. Their role in this novel is quite important as they enhance *A Distant Shore*’s indictment of discrimination.

### 4.3 Mahmood

Mahmood comes to Britain at the age of sixteen to escape the humiliations that he experienced in his country of birth, India. He joins his brother, who owns three restaurants in England, and dreams of making enough money so that he can go to college. However, this dream is quickly torn apart:

> The sight of fat-bellied Englishmen and their slatterns rolling into The Khyber Pass after the pubs had closed, calling him Ranjit or Baboo or Swamp Boy, and using poppadoms as Frisbees, and demanding lager, and vomiting in his sinks, and threatening him with his own knives and their beery breath, and bellowing
for mini-cabs and food that they were too drunk to see had already arrived on
the table in front of them, was causing Mahmood to turn prematurely grey.

(Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 179-80)

Mahmood quickly realises that he will never be accepted in this society. When he later
becomes a news agent, he still has to endure the constant insults, and this makes him almost
desperate: “this England is crazy. After all these years in this country they tell me, ‘Your
mother fucks dogs.’ Why does my mother fuck dogs? They do not know my mother”
(Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 228). Evidently, Mahmood is one of the scapegoats that Britain
craves for. He is also a typical example of an immigrant who has large hopes and dreams but
whose expectancies are quickly shattered; Britain can only become a disappointment to him.
This is something that Phillips and his parents also experienced when they came to Britain.

Phillips describes this in *A New World Order*:

The greatest blow to their [Phillips’ parents’] soul was the ‘news’ that
because of the colour of their skin, they would inevitably experience difficulty
being accepted as British . . .

The Britain that I recognised practised discrimination in education, in
housing, in employment, in all areas of social life . . .

They [Phillip’s parents] now conceded that the Britain that they had imagined
they were bringing me to back in the 1950s had, in all likelihood, never
existed.

(Phillips, *A New World Order* 241, 244-45)

4.4 Said

Said, Solomon’s cellmate, also experiences this depressing form of racism. Like
Mahmood, he too dreams of a better life in Britain:
I know that in England they will give me money and some kind of voucher and let me work. Everybody wants to keep out the Muslim, but in England freedom is everything. They can change the law, but you cannot change the culture of the people and so I am not afraid. British people are good.

(Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 69-70)

However, once he arrives in Britain, he is accused of having robbed a British couple, and as a result he is locked up in prison. Whether or not he has actually committed this crime is not clear to the reader, but when he explains himself to Solomon, it is obvious that the only thing he wants to do here is to work: “I have done nothing. I am not a criminal man. I have never been a criminal man. I have two hands, I can work” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 71), yet he does not get the chance. Gradually Said gets more and more confused; at one point he tells Solomon that he is married, at another time he says that he has never been married. Solomon informs the reader that Said is constantly telling different versions of his past, in which there is only one constant: in each account he has two children. This confusion suggests that Said has been traumatised by an event from his past. Cathy Caruth writes that trauma victims often do not remember whether the traumatic event truly occurred or whether it was only a hallucination; trauma victims experience “a deep uncertainty as to the very truth [of the event]” (6). However, the reader is left in the dark and can only guess at what happened to Said. In the end, Said dies in his cell despite Solomon’s efforts to get a doctor in there. Clearly, the guards did not care whether or not another immigrant would die. The paradise Said was hoping for turned out to be a living hell similar to the one he came from.

From my discussion of the difficulties that Solomon, Mahmood and Said experience upon coming to Britain, it is apparent that one of the aims of this novel is to strongly denounce the current situation of immigrants in Britain. However, not only the position of blacks is put into the spotlight; the extreme loneliness of Dorothy is also focussed upon. This
means that the problem of isolation is not something that can be dealt with by changing some immigration laws; it is an issue that goes to the very foundation of British culture. I will now discuss how this idea is elaborated throughout Dorothy in A Distant Shore.

4.5 Dorothy

Dorothy is a very lonely woman; she has lost all the people that were close to her: her husband Brian, her sister Sheila and her parents. When she is forced to retire, she moves to Stoneleigh, yet there her sense of loneliness is only strengthened. Her doctor advises her to start giving piano lessons, but after a few weeks her sole student quits and Dorothy is all by herself again. The only thing that she can hope for is that she might spot Solomon through the window:

In the morning I wake up in the same place with the pages of Sheila’s letter scattered about me like confetti. My neck aches from the awkward way in which I’ve been resting it on the edge of the chair, and I immediately recognise that I’m in some pain. But there is also another feeling, although I’ve no words to describe it. I glance out of the window, half-hoping to find Solomon washing his car, but there is nobody in sight. Then I understand the strange feeling that has come over me. Loneliness. Carla won’t be coming today. I stare at the piano and realise that music lessons won’t help me today.

(Phillips, A Distant Shore 33)

Another aspect present in this excerpt that illustrates Dorothy’s lonesomeness is Sheila’s letter. Although Dorothy says that this letter comes from her sister, it was in fact written by Dorothy herself. In it, she writes down everything that she had wanted to say to her sister yet no one may know about this, not even Solomon whom she tells that her sister is still alive.
Clearly Dorothy does not want anyone to know that she is all alone; she does not want any compassion.

However, it is not her new environment that makes her forlorn; before she moved to Stoneleigh she already suffered from a strong sense of abandonment. This is clearly illustrated at two different points in the novel; firstly when she starts an affair with Mahmood and secondly when she almost pounces upon the new teacher of geography.

Although Dorothy knows that Mahmood is a married man, she still asks him over for some coffee with the intention of sleeping with him. After this first encounter, Mahmood comes back regularly, yet he never spends the complete night. As is apparent from the following excerpt, this relationship does not completely satisfy Dorothy:

> These days their bodies separate with indifference and Mahmood is quick to give her his back. Sadly, her lover seems to have bolted down the short slope from attentive to perfunctory without any intervening stages of incremental boredom. One week he took the time to speak with her before, during and, most importantly, after their relations. The following week he was racing through the motions as though he was late for an appointment. (Phillips, A Distant Shore 176)

Yet despite Mahmood’s indifference she still keeps asking him over. This shows that Dorothy is in desperate need of some company. Their affair ends abruptly when Dorothy goes to Mahmood’s shop to give a doll to his child. There she is confronted with Mahmood’s wife, who apparently knew of the whole thing; Feroza does not say one word and spits Dorothy in the face.

Dorothy cannot stand the loneliness for long, and when the new teacher of geography arrives, again a married man, she asks him to go for a drink, which results in their spending the night together. Particularly interesting in this respect is the following passage, which
shows how Dorothy thinks about her life. Apparently she only asks Geoff Waverly out to break out of her routine, to put a stop to the predictability that characterises her daily life:

Why not? She thinks. It has been a fortnight now since Mahmood put the phone down on her. Apart from the twice-weekly games of tennis with the boring woman who is the head of English, her life has returned to a familiar routine of time spent at the keyboard, assiduous reading, undemanding television programmes and fitful bouts of sleeping. She misses the idea of Mahmood, almost as much as she misses the man himself. Even when he went at her without any intimacy, she felt connected to something that existed beyond the narrow scope of her own predictable world. (Phillips, A Distant Shore 192-93)

It is thus not only the lonesomeness that bothers her; the predictability of her life disturbs her as well. She needs someone who gives her the feeling that there is more to life than she is experiencing. However, Geoff Waverly regrets this night as he wants to save his marriage, and he asks Dorothy to understand this. Yet Dorothy calls his wife and expresses a deep concern about him. Consequently, Geoff is furious and accuses Dorothy of sexual harassment, which results in her retirement.

What is above all striking about these two affairs is the fact that Dorothy herself is largely responsible for their coming to an end. As I have said before, some features of Dorothy do not make her very likeable. The fact that she deliberately sleeps with two married men and then confronts their wives certainly adds to this sense of discomfort with Dorothy. It is as if she wants to show these women whom it is that their men prefer above them. For these women this is of course a huge humiliation. The fact that Dorothy fits into Gilroy’s description of someone who is irritated by the inability to classify people in clear ways also makes the reader feel ill at ease with her. In the opening pages of A Distant Shore, Dorothy is
very uncertain about the fact that she cannot pigeonhole each person: “England has changed. These days it’s difficult to tell who’s from around here and who’s not. Who belongs and who’s a stranger. It’s disturbing. It doesn’t feel right” (Phillip, A Distant Shore 3). This demonstrates that despite her friendship with Solomon, she too is disturbed by her inability to classify people in clear ways; it makes her very uneasy and consequently unsure about herself and everyone around her.

Yet despite her nasty characteristics it is impossible not to feel sorry for her. Especially the end leaves the reader with a very painful feeling; to read how Dorothy ends up in a mental hospital with no hope of recovery is quite stunning. It has been argued by Ledent that Dorothy can be read as an allegory of Britain, and Tournay-Theodotou agrees with this: “Dorothy’s disturbance with the changes and her general mental instability aptly reflect the current ‘disturbed’ state of the British nation” (n. pag.). If this reading is correct, then the novel gives the reader a very bleak and depressing picture of Britain in which there is no hope for the future.

4.7 Solomon and Dorothy’s relationship

As I have written above, Solomon and Dorothy begin their friendship when Solomon offers Dorothy a ride into town. However, it must be said that in contrast with Phillips’ previous novels, very little happens between these two protagonists. They greet each other and exchange some information about themselves, yet in the end they hardly know anything about each other. It has been noted by Rebecca Sodergren that whereas “most novels are built around relationships between characters’ A Distant Shore ‘is largely built around the lack of a relationship between the two main characters’” (Saéz 38).

The reason why they fit together has to do with their status in Stoneleigh. Both are talked about frequently by the community, as Dorothy observes when she wants to pose the
following question to Solomon: “Does he realise that he is also one of those people who Weston folk feel comfortable talking about? Does he care?” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 35, emphasis added). The word “also” points back to Dorothy; she knows that she is part of that particular group of outsiders. At other moments, though, Dorothy does not see herself in this way; for example when she desires to tell Solomon how he should blend in with the community: “I want to tell him that in England you have to become a part of the neighbourhood. Say hello to people. Go to church. Introduce your kids to their new school. You can’t just turn up and start washing your car. People will consider you to be ignorant and stand-offish” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 14-15). However, Dorothy does not do any of these things herself. Like Solomon, she stands alone in the village. As Tournay-Theodotou points out, their “common bond is chiefly based on the mutual recognition of their loneliness . . . What draws these two individuals together is thus their common experience of alienation and ‘strangerness’ which results in the creation of . . . a ‘community of strangers’” (n. pag.).

Apart from their exceptional position in society, they are also connected by “their shared inability to deal with painful memories” (Tournay-Theodotou n. pag.). Both have experienced some awful things, yet neither is willing to talk about them. Dorothy, for example, does not tell Solomon that her sister has recently passed away and that as a result she is now completely alone. Solomon does not share his atrocious past with Dorothy either; he does not tell her how he has lost everyone that was dear to him.

A final facet that Dorothy and Solomon have in common is their “obsession with decorum and manners” (Tournay-Theodotou n. pag.). Solomon strongly appreciates Dorothy’s respectable attitude; she always holds her head up high and seems to be confident at all times. Dorothy likes it very much how Solomon always kindly asks her about her health while never becoming too curious or involved; he keeps his distance in a polite way. Tournay-Theodotou has argued that this courteous and polite behaviour towards each other seems “to
compensate for their estrangement from their surroundings” and that it “provides them with a sense of dignity and self-esteem” (n. pag.). This is certainly the case, yet I would like to add that this behaviour hinders them in establishing a good friendship. Their companionship now remains very shallow because they do not dare to ask each other any personal questions; distance and reserve seem to be the words that characterize them.

Now that I have examined the characters of A Distant Shore, I would like to focus on some formal elements that are typical for this novel. After all, the combination of particular textual strategies with the protagonists’ positive and negative features, makes this book a fascinating literary text. The fact also that A Distant Shore’s style tries to reproduce the trauma that the protagonists have experienced for the reader, makes us realise a little more what it means to be unaccepted in today’s British society.

4.8 Formal elements in A Distant Shore

What immediately stands out when one takes a look at the structure of this novel is that it is marked by anti-linearity. It will become clear from the discussion of the four other novels that I have selected that this is rather typical for Phillips’ style. It is almost always the case that the reader only gradually learns about the past of the different characters, and that different pieces of the puzzle have to be put together for the reader to be able to create a whole that makes sense. In A Distant Shore, for example, it is only in the second half of the novel that we learn that Gabriel and Solomon are one and the same person. Solomon’s thoughts are also frequently confusing because at one point we read what he was thinking while fighting in his home country, and on the next line he is suddenly back in his British cell. According to Stef Craps, this deliberate confusion is an emblematic feature of literature that aims to “embody or reproduce the trauma for the reader” (“Introduction: Bearing Literary Witness...” 78). This novel thus wants the reader to experience what a certain character feels
and thinks during a traumatic event. However, this does not mean that the reader should appropriate the voice or the position of the victim; what this form of literature tries to evoke in the reader is what Dominick LaCapra terms; “empathic unsettlement.” This involves virtual not vicarious experience – that is to say, experience in which one puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of – or speaking for – the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice or suffering . . . [It involves] respect for the otherness of the other. (LaCapra 135-36)

On the one hand, the reader is thus expected to empathise with the novel’s characters, yet on the other hand, he or she is not allowed to completely identify with the protagonists. This aim has been successfully achieved in A Distant Shore. As I have written before, the reader feels sorry for what happens to Dorothy and Solomon, yet he or she is also made uncomfortable by the nasty features of the characters or by the crimes that one of them committed. This makes it impossible to fully immerse oneself in the protagonists of this novel. The narrative situation also enhances the distance that is created between the protagonists and the reader. The storylines of Solomon and Dorothy shift between a third-person and a first-person narrator. This means that we often do not have direct access to the protagonists’ minds because at many moments, the third-person narrator does not focalize through a character; instead he only gives us an objective point of view. This is often frustrating as it would be interesting to know exactly what a character thinks at a certain instant. One of those moments is when Solomon murders his old friend Felix. At that particular point, the narrator only offers us a cool depiction of what is happening; there is no psychological introspection: “Gabriel knows that he will have to act quickly, and so in one swift movement he picks up the rusting metal clock that hangs behind the door and he brings down its full weight onto the head of Felix” (Phillips, A Distant Shore 81). The narrator only shows the practical side of this murder,
namely that Solomon should act quickly. We do not see what this horrible crime does to the mind and soul of Solomon, and it is quite hard to believe that Solomon is just a cold murderer who does not feel extremely guilty for this terrible act. As one reads such a distant depiction, it is impossible to empathise with a character. In contrast, the parts that are told by a first-person narrator, by the characters themselves, are much more appealing to the reader. As a result, we are constantly drawn to these different characters when they narrate the story themselves, but as soon as the focus shifts to a third-person narrator, we are pushed away. This narrative situation enforces the effect of empathic unsettlement.

Having discussed Dorothy and Solomon, and some formal elements present in A Distant Shore, I will make the comparison between this novel and Higher Ground, Crossing the River, The Nature of Blood, and Foreigners. I will begin with the oldest of these four novels: Higher Ground.

5 Higher Ground

5.1 Plot

This novel has as its subtitle A Novel in Three Parts. It consists of accounts of three broken lives set in different times and places. The first part is entitled “Heartland” and describes the situation of a black man in a slave garrison in Africa. He collaborates with the white colonisers so as not to be sold to one of the slave merchants, but in doing so, he betrays his own people who will never accept him again, and he is constantly humiliated by the white men who treat him as a pet. When he falls in love with a native girl, he tries to escape from the fort, yet he is caught. This section ends when the unnamed black man stands on a slave market, ready to be sold. He realises that his life has come to an end; no hope is left for him.

The second part, “The Cargo Rap”, consists entirely of letters which are written by Rudi, an African-American youth in a US prison in the 1960s, to his parents, his sister, his
lawyer etc. From his cell, he tries to relate to the addressees what race and justice is and how he is the constant victim of racial injustice. However, his family does not respond to him in the way that he expects and he gradually loses his sanity. Once more, one of Phillips’ characters is left without hope.

For this dissertation I am mainly interested in part three, which is entitled “Higher Ground,” because this section shows a woman and a man who directly experience what it means to be an immigrant in Britain. In this part, we meet Irina/Irene, a Jewish woman who fled from her country of birth, Poland, to escape the Holocaust, which none of her family survived. When she arrived in Britain, she got a job in a factory, where she met Reg. She became pregnant but lost the baby, after which Reg left her. Not much later she tried to commit suicide and was locked up in a mental hospital for a considerable time. When she gets out she starts working in a library, yet her mental condition keeps getting worse and she will have to return to the hospital. Another important character in this section is Louis, a West-Indian man who came to Britain to improve his life standard. However, Britain is highly disappointing for him, and so he decides to go back to his country of birth. On his last day in Britain he meets Irene. Both immediately like each other and spend the night together, yet later that night Louis has to leave her so that he can return home. The novel ends with Irene who is waiting all alone for the morning to come to be brought back to the mental institution.

My discussion of Higher Ground will consist of a comparison between the individual characters of “Higher Ground” and A Distant Shore, and between Dorothy and Solomon’s friendship, and Irina and Louis’ relationship. After the analysis of the two protagonists in chapter three, I will focus on how empathic unsettlement is evoked in the reader by this novel.
5.2 Dorothy and Irina

As is already clear from the plot summary, there are lots of similarities between these two women. Both are marked by abandonment; Dorothy was left by her husband Brian and by her two lovers Mahmood and Geoff, whereas Irina was deserted by Reg, the father of her child, and by Louis. Both have also lost their entire family, they are completely alone, and they end up in a mental institution. Both novels thus do not have a happy end.

A striking similarity between these two women is the fact that they stay together with their men even though this does not make them happy. I have already described how Dorothy hangs on to Mahmood despite the fact that their relationship cannot satisfy Dorothy, and the same is true for her marriage with Brian: after their wedding they grow apart and they pass their thirties and forties “by staying quiet” (Phillips, A Distant Shore 174). When she discovers that he is having some affairs, she still does not leave him, instead she waits until he takes off with one of his younger women. It thus appears that despite her unhappiness she does not have the nerve to leave her husband; she is afraid of ending up all alone and tragically this is what happens at the end. The same goes for Irina; her relationship with Reg is a true nightmare, yet she does not have the heart to abandon him due to her pregnancy:

The war had ended and Reg had changed. He had a new job but he wasn’t ‘pulling his weight’; when he moved out of earshot they called the ex-conscientious objector a ‘coward’. He would soon be a father but Reg no longer felt like a man. He worked off his fantasies and frustrations by spitting words at Irene. He argued to kill. He often asked Irene to cry quietly then he would be apologetic and offer her money, then he would order her to cut off her hair. It was too late for Irene to consider the abortion that she had never seriously considered. (Phillips, Higher Ground 211)
When she loses the child, Irene realises that she will have to leave, yet she cannot face the world alone and goes to London, where she “tried to throw herself under the train (like Anna Karenina)” (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 211).

Both are thus terrified of being alone, yet the lonesomeness is inherent to their lives, and for Irina it is even a daily routine: “‘What you doing tonight then?’ asked Reg. Crying myself to sleep, thought Irene, a habit that has become as depressingly familiar as washing my face or taking off my shoes. She looked back at this young man; I am abandoned” (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 184). Another facet that enforces Irina’s loneliness is the language problem; even when she wants to talk to people in the pub, she cannot participate in a conversation with multiple speakers:

Irene . . . followed Reg over to the table where his friends were drinking heavily and already spoke with disorganized tongues. They greeted Irene politely, as though instructed to do so, but she knew she was little more than an exotic appendage to their provincial English talk. Irene listened but found great difficulty in reading their conversation. It was easier with just one person. With so many, and especially with people who kept bursting into unadvertised laughter, it was impossible. (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 186)

This passage brings me to the comparison between Solomon and Irene who both experience a loss of language and as a consequence, a loss of identity.

5.3 Solomon and Irina

I have described above how Solomon is suffering from the fact that he does not have the chance to speak his own language anymore; his language is “drying up” in his mouth (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 253). Irina has to deal with the same problem, but there is a large difference between the two of them when it comes to handling this situation. As I have
discussed before, Solomon is obsessed with “decorum and manners”; he strongly appreciates the polite behaviour of other people, and he will never be disrespectful to anyone (Tournay-Theodotou n. pag.). “This need for respectability goes together with an impeccable use of the English language” (Tournay-Theodotou n. pag.); Solomon thus makes a big effort to acquire flawless English, and he succeeds in doing so. Irina, on the other hand, refuses to practise and improve her English as she remains silent or nods whenever someone asks her a question.

According to Bénédicte Ledent, Phillips’ view of language is quite close to that of the Bakhtin School; according to them language can be “a tool of oppression and a potential factor of liberation” (70). Irina shows this dualism towards language; when she was young, she adored reading books yet as she grew older, she became increasingly frustrated and even scared of words: “for Irina, language . . . operates with destructive effects, through her relations to men, by whom, fathers and lovers alike, she is repeatedly abandoned” (Ledent 74). She, for example, says the following: “I suspect men can manipulate women with words, with hateful words alone” (Phillips, A Distant Shore 184), and also remember the aforementioned passage: “[Reg] worked off his fantasies and frustrations by spitting words at Irene. He argued to kill” (Phillips, Higher Ground 211). This clarifies why Irina is so reluctant to practise her English and why she only replies to questions by nodding and giving short answers; she refuses to enter the “master-discourse” (Ledent 75) of men who repress her. This suppression can also be found in the library where she works; Ledent remarks that this place is a symbol “of established order and of traditional, often men-dominated society” (75). There she has to work in the children’s section, which is “suggestive of the child-raising role to which women are often restricted” (Ledent 75). However, her act of emancipation by not entering the male dominated discourse does not help her to become less lonely, and as a tragic consequence she gradually loses her senses.
Another possible motive for Irina’s refusal to practise her English is the ‘laziness’ of the British people, who refuse to pronounce her name properly: “the Irene-Irina-Irene-Irina-Irene-Irina problem would now begin, for English people were too lazy to bend their mouths or twist their tongues into unfamiliar shapes” (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 181). Irina thus reasons that as the British do not make an effort to pronounce her name correctly, she will not tire herself by improving her English.

Besides the language problem, Solomon and Irina also share the fact that they have to deal with racism. Back in her home country she and her family lost everything due to the severe discrimination of Jewish people. Her sister Rachel even became the victim of a physical assault. As a result, Irene loses all faith in human kind: “We deserve to be eaten up, thought Irene. We have done nothing good, nothing worthy of him . . . This was Irene’s fantasy, that everyone was deluding themselves, that only the good and meek would survive, and she knew none who qualified” (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 176). All people are animals for her, unworthy to be labelled ‘human’. After her arrival in Britain, Irina still experiences some racism in the factory: “when Irene first worked in England there was a man at the munitions factory who used to stare at her with violence. Mrs McKenzie said that ‘up there’ there were not many of Irina’s ‘people’, and Irina tried to smile and forget at the same time” (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 182). Yet this form of racism is of course hardly as virulent as the one she witnessed in Poland. It is remarkable that Irina and Solomon are treated in a very different way; whereas Solomon is offended at all times, Irina is only rarely discriminated in Britain. It thus appears that skin colour does matter to people who have strong problems with immigrants. In this respect, it is Louis who shows a lot of affinities with Solomon.
5.4 Solomon and Louis

Louis comes to the United Kingdom to improve his living conditions yet his hopes and expectations turn out to be unfulfilled. Not only is he rejected at every job that he applies for, he is also shocked by “the lack of camaraderie among fellow immigrants” (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 191) and by the racism that he encounters. Therefore he decides to go back home “for he knew that it was better to return as the defeated traveller than be praised as the absent hero and live a life of spiritual poverty” (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 197). The unhelpfulness and even betrayal of fellow immigrants is something that Solomon also experiences. When he gets out of prison he meets a man, Emmanuel, on the street who speaks the same language as him and who is thrilled that he has finally found a fellow countryman. Emmanuel takes him to the local pub, but it turns out that he is broke, so Solomon has to pay for all the drinks even though he hardly possesses any money. When Solomon eventually becomes suspicious of this man, it is too late: he has disappeared through the open window of the toilet with Solomon’s money. Solomon has thus been betrayed by a man whom he thought he could trust. This is particularly striking because this man proclaimed the following: “You are in England now. If we do not trust each other, then how are we going to get along? The English think that they are superior so they do not care about us. We have only each other. Every day people come up to me and abuse me, but there is nothing that I can do, I have no choice but to be here” (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 155). Emmanuel depicts himself as a victim who can trust no one, yet it quickly becomes clear that he does not hesitate to victimize other people if he benefits from it. This is thus one of Phillips’ characters to whom the following can be once more applied: “We are all colonised . . . but all of us are would-be colonisers as well” (Ledent 68).

As Solomon and Louis both experience lack of support and even treachery, it is not surprising that they want to go home, yet here lies the largest difference between them: whereas Louis has the chance to go back whenever he wants to, Solomon is forced to remain
where he is; there is no turning back for him. As a result, of all the protagonists in Phillips’
works that I have discussed so far, Louis is the only one who has a chance for a bright future.
Even though he has only been in Britain for a few weeks, he sees how things are going to turn
out if he stays there: he will become “mentally damaged” by this environment, “feeling like
an exotic but unwanted appendage to the larger British culture” (Bell 603).

5.5 Solomon and Dorothy, and Louis and Irina

It has already become clear that there are a lot of similarities between Phillips’
individual characters, yet some affinities can also be found between Dorothy and Solomon’s
friendship, and Irina and Louis’ relationship. Irina and Louis first meet when Louis enters the
library where Irina works. Irina senses the hostility of her boss and of the library visitors
towards this man, and so she advises him to go to the pub across the street. During her break
she goes there to see him, yet she has no intention of becoming his friend, as she thinks that
“it would be unkind to capture him, or anybody else, as a friend” (Phillips, Higher Ground
198). Clearly, Irina does not like herself. As they sit there, they become a point of interest,
some sort of curiosity even for the pub’s customers: “Irene looked around and saw people
staring, people who would normally stand at the bar with their backs turned but who had now
their heads and bodies corkscrewed around so they could gape directly at them” (Phillips,
Higher Ground 199). Despite Irina’s intention of not making a new friend, she realises that
she really likes this man, and so they go for a walk. Once more, they are looked upon with
disdain: “Irene thought that only the strongest men could survive the glares of disapproval
that he pretended not to notice” (Phillips, Higher Ground 214). However, Irina does not care
about any of this because for the first time in a long while she “felt gloriously alive. Light
filled the darkness” (Phillips, Higher Ground 214). Louis thus gives her the company, the
friendship that she was craving for. It appears that Louis and Irina are attracted to each other
as a result of their position in society: both are outsiders, they are strangers to the rest of the community. This reminds one of A Distant Shore, in which Solomon and Dorothy also establish a good friendship as a result of their not fitting in. However, just like in A Distant Shore, their relationship does not last for very long; Irina’s happiness quickly disappears when Louis tells her the following:

‘Tomorrow I cross the water again. I should have told you this.’
Irene laughed on, but inside her chest she could feel her heart pumping noisily . . .
‘You’re leaving me!’ cried Irene. (Phillips, Higher Ground 214-15)

Irina is thus once more abandoned; she has lost everyone that was dear to her, and when she finally has some hope, it is quickly shattered.

5.6 Empathic unsettlement in Higher Ground

As was the case with A Distant Shore, Higher Ground often confuses the reader by using textual strategies such as in medias res openings, anti-linearity, and fragmentation. Particularly the second part, “The Cargo Rap,” is very confusing. In this part, which is set between January 1967 and August 1968, Rudy Williams sends letters to his loved ones and to his lawyers. At first, his correspondence makes sense, but as this chapter moves on, we see what solitary confinement does to his mind: he slowly loses his senses. At a certain point, he writes to his father that from now on, he “must learn . . . to read between the lines of my [Rudy’s] work, to re-interpret my phraseology and pauses for in everything there is meaning” (Phillips, Higher Ground 83), yet in the following letters, it is impossible to determine whether or not there might be a double meaning in everything that Rudy writes. The fact that he suddenly changes his name from Rudy to Rudi is not explained either. This is all highly disturbing for the reader, who can only guess at Rudy’s intentions. Yet this is probably the novel’s aim: to evoke in the reader the confusion that Rudy experiences in prison. Higher
Ground thus wants the reader to feel what Rudy goes through, but on the other hand, this novel prevents the reader from fully identifying with this character. To do so, this book uses the same strategy as *A Distant Shore*; it makes its characters not entirely likeable. When Rudy, for example, writes a letter to his lawyer, he starts by saying how beautiful she looked and how he could not keep his eyes off her. This must have made her feel quite uncomfortable, and as a result, she brings a male attorney with her to their next meeting. Rudy reacts to this in a furious way:

I do not see why you found it necessary to bring a man with you today. Was the purpose of your visit a deliberate attempt to humiliate me? . . . Was he your bodyguard? Did you fear for your personal safety if you were to visit with me alone? It is a sick and sad commentary on African womanhood that you are unable to sit casually across a small table and exchange ideas with a brother without harbouring thoughts of rape and potential molestation. (Phillips, *Higher Ground* 131)

This letter makes the reader feel very uncomfortable as it directly insults one of the few people who are willing to help Rudy. This sense of discomfort makes sure that the reader is unable to fully identify with the protagonist. Hence, empathic unsettlement is also present in this novel: the reader feels and experiences what the protagonist goes through but without appropriating his position.

The first part, “Heartland,” is far less confusing than “The Cargo Rap,” even though there are some disturbing elements present in it, like the fact that the black characters are nameless, which might reflect “the white man’s lack of interest in the African as a person,” or “the primacy of the group identity in African culture” (Ledent 57-58). As this section is also told chronologically and without fragmentation, the reader is not puzzled by vagueness. “Heartland” is thus related in a much more straightforward way than “The Cargo Rap”, even
though both parts are told by a first-person narrator. Due to this straightforwardness, one would expect that it is easy to identify with the nameless black man, but this is not the case because once again, this character’s acts are strongly questionable and leave the reader with a strong sense of unease. The collaboration with the white men is in itself a terrible crime with regard to his fellow people, but one can understand why he does this as he has very little choice: he must either work together with the colonisers, thus enjoying a little bit of freedom, or he will be shipped off to an unknown country where he must be a slave for the rest of his life. Hence, one can show some understanding for his cooperation with the enemy. Also the fact that he remains completely passive when a young black girl is raped and mutilated by his superior is very shocking, but we can understand this in terms of self-preservation. In the following excerpt we see that the nameless black man wants to help the girl, but he knows that if he stands up against his superior, he will be sold as a slave:

The rude shriek cuts through the night. Then silence. Then another scream.

Then again silence. Then, at an irregular interval, yet another scream. It is the irregularity of the event that gives it such a haunting quality. One cannot prepare oneself for the irregular. I walk out into the night and wait. Again the scream. Will nobody come to her aid? I slump to the ground, my back propped up against the cold stone wall, and wait as though half-expecting my name to come singing out, a signal for me to charge into action. But I am not summoned. I am merely tormented by the endless cries of pain. The sun rises in the east. (Phillips, Higher Ground 32).

Although the nameless black man is tormented by the cries of the young girl, he does not help her in any way. Instead, he is waiting for a signal; to be called and be ordered to stop this horrible act. Yet this signal never comes and he remains inactive. I believe that the signal which he craves for, stands for his conscience. He is thus actually waiting and hoping for his
soul to revolt against the regime of the white man, but as he never stands up against the colonisers, I can only assume that his soul has become blunt by all the atrocities that he has witnessed already, and that his survival instinct prevails over his conscience.

It is thus possible to say that the nameless black man is an inhabitant of what Primo Levi has called the “gray zone” between victims and perpetrators (36). Levi indicates that people have a desire for simplification: “the need to divide the field into “we” and “they” is so strong that this pattern, this bipartition – friend/enemy – prevails over all others” (36).

However, the situation that he witnessed during his imprisonment in a concentration camp in the Second World War cannot be simplified: “the network of human relationships inside the Lagers . . . could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors” (Levi 37). The Lager is:

a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge . . . [The] components [of the gray zone] are bounded together by the wish to preserve and consolidate established privilege vis-à-vis those without privilege. (Levi 42-43)

Members of the gray zone mostly consisted of prisoners who received some privileges in return for their collaboration with the concentration camp guards. If the world could be divided into black and white, then these collaborators would have been put into the box of “the enemy”. However, the world cannot be simplified in such a naive way. As a result, it is impossible to judge these persons:

the greatest responsibility [for their collaboration] lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state; the concurrent guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators (never likable, never transparent!) is
always difficult to evaluate. It is a judgment that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances and had the opportunity to test for themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion. (Levi 44)

Despite the feeling of disbelief that this collaboration arouses in us, we can understand why they did this in terms of self-preservation: their chance of survival was increased by working together with the camp guards. The nameless black man in Higher Ground evokes in the reader the same attitude of unease; on the one hand we are horrified by his acts of collaboration, but on the other hand we can understand his behaviour because he would have been shipped off as a slave (which eventually happens when he does stand up against a white man) if he refused to cooperate with the colonisers.

It has become clear that the protagonists in Higher Ground all possess some negative characteristics: Irina despises mankind, Louis leaves Irina behind, Rudy does not appreciate the people who are trying to help him, and the nameless black man remains passive during a horrifying rape. This makes it difficult for the reader to identify with the protagonists even though many of their acts can be understood as an instinct survival. We thus see that empathic unsettlement is, like in A Distant Shore, present throughout the entire novel, as on the one hand we try to empathise with the different characters, yet on the other hand we cannot comprehend all their thoughts and actions.

6 Crossing the River

6.1 Plot

This novel consists of four parts which are preceded and followed by a prologue and an epilogue respectively in which the “father” of the protagonists explains why he sold his three children to a slave merchant, and how he has regretted this decision ever since. In
chapter one, “The Pagan Coast”, we read what happened to the oldest son, Nash Williams, who was freed by his master, Edward Williams, and sent to Liberia in the 1830s to work there as a missionary. It is immediately clear that Nash cannot be the same boy who was sold by the father, as Nash was born on Edward’s plantation. The father must thus be seen as a metaphorical figure (see below). However, Nash disappears into the jungle, and Edward goes looking for him. During his journey, we come to learn a lot more about Edward, who as it turns out, shows a lot more affection for Nash than is normal in a master-slave relationship. It is suggested that his wife, Amelia, even committed suicide as a result of his homosexuality. The storyline is frequently interrupted by letters that were written to Edward by Nash, but which apparently never reached him. In this correspondence, we read that Nash is not accepted in the “pagan” community. As Edward’s journey continues through the jungle, it becomes evident that Nash is dead. This chapter ends when Edward observes the horrible, disgusting situation in which Nash lived and died.

The second part, “West”, is much shorter than the first section. Martha, a former slave woman who tried to get to the Colorado frontier, sits down by the road, completely cold. She has been left behind by the group she was travelling with because the journey was too hard and exhausting for her. Fortunately, she is helped by a white woman who brings her to a small hut where she can rest. The passages that are set in the cabin alternate with flashbacks of Martha’s life. We learn that she is in fact a runaway slave who refused to be traded again, after she had already witnessed how her husband and her daughter were sold to another master. The loss of her daughter, Eliza Mae, has severely marked her, and she constantly hopes that one day her daughter might return to her, yet, sadly, this never happens. After her escape, Martha opens a small restaurant where her customers can also have their clothes washed. There she meets her second husband, but a few years later he is shot down. It is then that she decides to leave this place and go to California. However, as said before, the journey
is too difficult for her, and when the white woman leaves her alone in the cabin to sleep, Martha dies.

Chapter three, “Crossing the River”, is again much shorter than “The Pagan Coast”. It entirely consists of logbook entries and letters that are written by James Hamilton, a captain who is navigating in Africa with his crew to buy slaves. A striking element in this part is the personality of captain Hamilton: on the one hand he seems cold and indifferent, as he does not consider black men to be human, instead he only regards them as cargo. Yet on the other hand, he shows love and affection towards his wife in the letters that he writes to her. Captain Hamilton fits into this novel as he is the slave merchant to whom the African father sold his three children: “Approached by a quiet fellow. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl” (Phillips, Crossing the River 124).

The final chapter, “Somewhere in England”, is the section in which I am most interested as the relationship between the two protagonists shows many similarities with Dorothy and Solomon’s friendship, and Irina and Louis’ relationship. This chapter is divided into small sections which all have a short title, like June 42 or August 1939: it is possible that these segments are journal entries. The story is narrated by Joyce, a young British woman, but it is not told in a chronological way. The reader thus has to put the different pieces of the puzzle together and only gradually learns what exactly happened. For the sake of clarity, I will shortly sketch the story in the right order.

In 1936, when Joyce is eighteen years old, she goes to the theatre, where she meets the actor Herbert. She immediately falls in love, and he takes advantage of the situation by declaring his love to her, yet it turns out that he has a wife and two children. As a result, Joyce has to undergo an abortion. This is the first blow that she has to take. She later marries Len, but he does not make her happy. She doubts whether he ever truly loved her especially when she meets Sandra, a girl who used to work for Len in his shop: “I looked at her and wondered
if Len had only come after me because he needed somebody to replace her in the shop” (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 153). When Joyce’s mother dies, Len refuses to go to the funeral with her; he does not give her any support. At the moment when Joyce stands at her mother’s grave it is apparent how unhappy she really is: “Hello, Mother, how are you? Hope you’ve found Dad again. And if you’ve found him I hope you’re happy. Happier than I am, at any rate. I can’t rightly see how you couldn’t be. You’d have to be a miserable bugger to be unhappier than I am” (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 187). As the war breaks out, supplies are scarce and Len starts trading on the black market. However, he is caught and sent to prison. Joyce is thus left in charge of the shop, and she finally senses what it means to be free: “Something was lifted from the moment they took him away. My chest unknotted. I could breathe again” (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 199). Yet her feeling of liberation quickly disappears when Sandra, who has in the mean time become her best friend, is killed by her husband for bearing the child of another man. During the war, American soldiers arrive in Joyce’s town, including some black GI’s. Most of the villagers feel uncomfortable with this situation, but Joyce is unafraid, and she establishes a relationship with Travis, a black GI. She finally feels happy again. However, this situation does not last very long: when Joyce is pregnant, Travis has to leave for Italy, where he is killed in action. When she gives birth to Greer, she is practically forced to give up her child for adoption. Once more, she is left completely alone. Then the novel takes a big leap to 1963: Joyce is standing in the kitchen, and when she looks outside, she suddenly sees Greer, now a grown man, standing there. This part ends when she lets him in and asks him to sit down.

My discussion of *Crossing the River* will begin with a comparison between the protagonists of “Somewhere in England” and *A Distant Shore*. This will be followed by the discussion of some formal elements present in the entire novel, and by how empathic unsettlement is also evoked in this novel. Although this book shows a number of affinities
with *A Distant Shore* and *Higher Ground*, we will see that *Crossing the River* cannot be compared completely with these two works; some formal aspects are only characteristic for *Crossing the River*. Nevertheless, as was the case with the other two books, this novel also aims at reproducing the trauma which the protagonists experience, thus making the reader feel and experience the consequences of slavery and its legacy. To conclude, I will say something about *Crossing the River*’s positive ending, which makes this novel much more hopeful compared to the other two books that I have already focussed on, because this ending shows that it might be possible for the immigrant to be eventually accepted in Britain.

### 6.2 Solomon and Travis

Like Solomon, Travis and his black fellow soldiers are the victims of constant racial suppression; this is shown in violent and non-violent ways. The former can be found right after Travis and Joyce’s first date: when they go to visit the grave of Joyce’s mother, they accidentally miss their bus to go back, and Travis is severely punished for this. However, the reader realises that he is not being penalized as a consequence of his being late; he is beaten because he, as a black man, has a relationship with a white woman. Apart from this violent example of racial suppression, the black soldiers are also discriminated in less physical but equally painful ways. The clearest example of this can be found when the soldiers’ white superior comes to Joyce’s shop to warn her:

> I’ve come to talk to you a little about the service men we’ve got stationed in your village . . . A lot of these boys are not used to us treating them as equals, so don’t be alarmed by their response . . . They’re not very educated boys and they’ll need some time to adjust to your customs and your ways, so I’m just here to request your patience. (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 145)
In this depiction, the soldiers are obviously described in a very derogatory way; they are described as inferior creatures which one has to tolerate. Yet they were not only discriminated by their own superiors, the British leaders also looked down upon them: “Advice was given to British troops . . . to avoid making ‘intimate friend’ with black troops” (Fryer 361). The black soldiers are thus the victims of what Maria Root terms “insidious trauma,” meaning “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (Brown 107).

6.3 Dorothy, Irina and Joyce

Like Dorothy and Irina, Joyce is also marked by the pain of abandonment, and this is emphasised thoroughly in this novel, for example when Reg leaves her alone again to go drinking with his mates: “Not for the first time in my life I felt the humiliation of being abandoned” (Phillips, Crossing the River 155). She later concludes that she was in fact never married to this man: “I knew then that we’d never really been married. We didn’t know each other. We didn’t trust each other” (Phillips, Crossing the River 197). Her marriage is very lonely, especially when her mother dies and when her best friend is murdered. And to make matters worse, when she does not feel the pain of lonesomeness, she suffers from people who are shouting at her. Quite interesting in this respect is the comparison that one can make between Irina and Joyce. Whereas Irina refuses to enter the dominant male discourse of English, Joyce sees books as her sole refuge: “I’m just happier with books. They don’t shout at me, or accuse me of anything. They don’t even know that I’m not much to look at” (Phillips, Crossing the River 191). Hence, Joyce does not represent Phillips’ dualistic view on language; she can only see books as a form of liberation.
When she meets Travis, she will finally not be so lonely anymore. She first realises this when she catches his smell in her room: “The room smelt of him. A good smell. I could smell him on me. I wasn’t going to be alone again” (Phillips, Crossing the River 210). Yet, as mentioned before, her happiness does not last for very long as she loses Travis and is more or less forced to give up her child for adoption. The community does not accept a white woman having an affair with a black man and consequently every reminder of this has to be erased, including the child who is “like coffee” (Phillips, Crossing the River 228). Therefore, one could say that Travis and his fellow black soldiers are not the only ones who suffer from “insidious trauma”; Joyce is also a clear victim of suppression that does “violence to the soul and spirit” (Brown 107) as she loses the man she loves and is forced to give away her child. A large difference with Dorothy and Irina is the fact that Joyce is able to recover from the sadness that she experienced. When the novel jumps to 1963 the reader learns that she has remarried and is the mother of a couple of children (we do not know how many exactly). Also the fact that Greer comes to visit her is a very positive aspect as she now has the chance to come to terms with her past. The future thus looks hopeful for her. In general, Crossing the River has a much more optimistic ending than A Distant Shore and Higher Ground, but I will come back to this after I have discussed Joyce and Travis’ relationship.

6.4 Joyce and Travis

An interesting aspect about their relationship is the fact that Joyce does not seem to notice that Travis is a black man; she never describes him as a man of colour nor does she mention any clue to his blackness. It appears that Joyce is “colour-blind” (Wallace 101) or “prejudice-free” (Ledent 122). Consequently, the reader does not find out that Travis is a black GI until after a dance party, when she describes his hair as “thin black wool” (Phillips, Crossing the River 167). This also means that the passage in which the officer describes his
soldiers is not registered as a racist comment by Joyce: apparently she thinks that he is referring to national differences instead of racial ones (Wallace 101). Despite the fact that Joyce does not see Travis as someone who belongs to another race, their difference in colour still determines every aspect of their relationship. I have already described how Travis is severely beaten for this affair and how Joyce is practically forced to give up her child. When they walk together in the streets, they are also looked at with disdain: “I [Joyce] tried to avoid the way people were looking” (Phillips, Crossing the River 202). Yet what is striking about this passage is that Joyce does not register that they are being looked at because they are a mixed couple; she thinks that people are only staring with contempt because she does not wear a wedding ring: “I knew what they were thinking. That he was just using me for fun. There was no ring on my finger, but I didn’t think that they had the right to look at me in that way. Just who the hell did they think they were?” (Phillips, Crossing the River 202). Once more, Joyce seems to be colour-blind.

The passage in which Joyce and Travis are being stared at reminds one of the gaping that Louis and Irina had to endure when they were walking or sitting together. Apparently, not much has changed between the forties and fifties; a mixed couple is unacceptable in that society. And even in present-day England some members of the British nation find it deplorable that black people are helped by white ones; they see this as a form of betrayal. This is the reason why in A Distant Shore Mr. and Mrs. Anderson’s house is plastered with racist slogans: they are seen as traitors because they give shelter to a black man; the source of Britain’s downfall.

6.5 Formal elements in Crossing the River

This novel is marked by textual strategies such as; anti-linearity, fragmentation, and indirection. In the first chapter, “The Pagan Coast”, the story of Nash and his former master,
Edward Williams, is not narrated in a linear way, as it is only through the memories of Edward that one realises what is going on. The reader thus has to put together the different pieces of the puzzle before he or she can reach a conclusion, and even then it is still difficult to realise what has happened in the past, namely that Edward’s wife Amelia killed herself as a consequence of Edward’s homosexuality and his preference for young men. Consequently, the relation between Edward and his former slave becomes more and more difficult, and a lot is left open to speculation; it is thus impossible to reach a clear conclusion. This mystifies and disorientates the reader. The inclusion of the letters which Nash writes to Edward adds up to the indirection, as the story is constantly interrupted.

“West” is also characterised by anti-linearity, due to the many flashbacks, but this chapter is far less confusing and indirect in comparison with “The Pagan Coast”. One is able to make a clear distinction between the sections that take place in the past and the parts that are set in the cabin, because the former are told by Martha herself whereas the latter are described by a third-person narrator. In contrast with the third-person narrator that we have encountered in A Distant Shore, this narrator does not describe what is happening to Martha in a cold or distant way as he focalises through her eyes: “Martha leaned against the woman and peered into the small, dark room. Still cold. Through the half-light, she saw the single bed, the mattress rolled back and revealing an ugly grid of rusty wire. Then she felt the woman’s gentle touch guiding her across the room and into a hard-backed wooden chair. Like a child” (Phillips, Crossing the River 77-78). As a result, the reader is able to put him- or herself into Martha’s position. However, as we will see later, there is one particular aspect about Martha that makes it rather difficult for us to fully empathise with her.

Like chapter two, “Crossing the River” is not really disorientating as everything is told chronologically, but of course, as a result of the logbook entries, one does not see the whole picture; one only gets bits and pieces of what is happening during Hamilton’s journey. The
tone in which Hamilton writes everything down in his logbook is rather striking; he always sounds cold and distant, treating everyone around him like objects. Consider, for example, what Hamilton writes down after the death of his Second Mate: “This afternoon departed this life my Second Mate, Francis Foster, after sustaining the most violent fever. I am afraid his death will retard our trade, for he is very diligent, and always gained a great influence upon the natives” (Phillips, Crossing the River 117). Obviously, he does not care about this man as a person, he only saw him as a member of his crew who did his work quite well. As a result, Hamilton is only worried about how this man’s death will affect his journey. Hamilton is even more cold and impersonal when he talks about the slaves that he captures. He constantly calls them “the cargo”, and when a pregnant black woman is raped by one of his crewmembers, he refers to her with a number: “George Robinson seduced a woman slave big with child, and lay with her in views of the quarter deck. I put him in irons. I suspect this has not been the first affair of the kind on board. Her number is 72” (Phillips, Crossing the River 115). In contrast, his cold, almost disdainful tone disappears completely in the love letters that he writes to his wife; he genuinely seems to love her, and cannot wait to be reunited with her again: “My dear, I long to dwell safely in your arms, and revel in the imagined joys that our projected children will bless us with” (Phillips, Crossing the River 120). The strong gap between his attitude towards his crew and the slaves on the one hand, and his love and affection for his wife on the other hand, confuses the reader enormously. We would like to despise him for his arrogant attitude yet we are prevented from doing so when we read his love letters, which make him very humane. As a result, this narrator is the most ambivalent of all the characters that I have discussed so far.

A final aspect that I would like to mention with regard to some formal aspects in Crossing the River is the way in which the prologue and the epilogue are written. These two sections make this novel completely different from the other two books that I have discussed
so far. In the prologue, the father describes how he had to sell his children after his crops had failed. This depiction alternates with an italic typeface in which we recognise the thoughts of a slave merchant who buys the father’s three children. The two opposite voices make it at first complicated to know what is going on exactly. This is also strengthened by the fact that the story starts in medias res. It is only at the end of chapter three, “Crossing the River”, that we recognise the second voice as belonging to captain Hamilton when he repeats exactly what he thought in the prologue. The repetition of identical sentences is exceptional in Phillips’ work, yet it is highly successful as this supports the reader’s understanding of what slavery and its legacy does to people. This reappearance wants to show how slavery and its consequences have a resonance throughout the entire novel, and thus throughout each and every person in the world.

As is the case with the prologue, the epilogue displays an alteration between two different typefaces. The first one again belongs to the father who connects different people who suffered. The second typeface represents diverse voices: we again read what captain Hamilton thinks, but we also hear the voices of William Nash, who thanks his former master Edward and God for his existence; of Martha, who is finally reunited with her daughter; and of Joyce, who happily sees Travis back. The combination of all these different thoughts gives Crossing the River a special quality that we have not encountered in the other two novels that I have already discussed; it shows how a positive ending is possible for all (see below).

In general, it is clear that this novel does not have the intention of being straightforward; the reader is challenged to create a unifying whole out of the different pieces that are offered to him or her. Yet as a lot is often left open to speculation, it is sometimes impossible to make complete sense of what is happening with the protagonists. This sort of narrative aims at disorientating the reader so that he or she can experience what these characters have been through. Another reason for this deliberate confusion is that this form of
literature criticises “naively redemptive accounts in which colonial trauma is easily and definitively overcome” (Craps, “Introduction: ...To Colonial Trauma” 60).

6.6 Empathic unsettlement in *Crossing the River*

It has become clear from the previous passage that *Crossing the River* aims at confusing the reader so that the trauma which the protagonists experienced can be reproduced for the reader. Yet, once again, this does not mean that the reader is able to fully identify or sympathise with the characters because each protagonist in this novel possesses some negative characteristics. Edward Williams’ lack of attention for his wife Amelia, for example, is probably the main cause for her suicide. He apparently did not take into consideration the humiliation that she must have felt by witnessing her husband preferring younger men over her. Nash Williams also displays some disturbing characteristics, as he forces his religion upon the native inhabitants of Liberia. For the larger part, Martha seems to be a character whom the reader can only feel sorry for. Yet, at one point she knows that three men are about to kill her second husband, and she does not undertake any action to warn him. It appears that she has already resigned herself to the thought that nothing can stop these men. Captain Hamilton also does not evoke sympathy as he treats the slaves that he buys as cargo.

This brings me to the characters that I have discussed in detail: Joyce and Travis. Joyce also displays some negative characteristics. Her naivety sometimes bothers the reader when she for example does not see that the people in the streets are looking at her with disdain because she is walking around with a man of colour. Even more disturbing is the fact that she gives in to social pressure when she gives her child up for adoption because it is not quite white. In contrast, Travis is the first character in the work of Phillips that I have discussed so far who does not make the reader feel uncomfortable; he is in fact entirely
likeable. Yet this may be the case because we do not get to know all that much about him. It is also possible to argue that he assumes an imperialist role as he is a soldier.

The presence of these negative features indicate that empathic unsettlement is also present in this novel because on the one hand, we are invited to feel for these characters by Phillips’ narrative style, but on the other hand, the protagonists’ conspicuous traits prevent us from fully identifying with them. However, it must be noted that all these negative characteristics in the protagonists of Crossing the River are a lot less noticeable in comparison with the two other novels that I have discussed so far. In A Distant Shore and Higher Ground, the characters’ negative features frequently attract attention or are emphasised. In contrast – if we disregard captain Hamilton – Crossing the River does not make these negative characteristics stand out. As a result, we often have to pay close attention to notice these conspicuous traits. This also means that we can sometimes easily identify with the protagonists. Especially Joyce and Martha arouse in the reader a strong sense of empathy as it is only rare that we question their actions. This again demonstrates that this novel cannot be fully compared with A Distant Shore and Higher Ground. A final aspect that makes Crossing the River quite exceptional is the positive ending, which makes this book a lot more optimistic than the other two works.

6.7 A positive ending

In contrast with A Distant Shore and Higher Ground, this novel ends in a very hopeful way. I have already described how Joyce is able to come to terms with her past when she meets her son Greer, and the epilogue of this novel is even more positive as it connects different people all over the world. The “father” who speaks in this epilogue draws links between four protagonists of this novel: Nash, Martha, Travis and Joyce but he also mentions other persons who suffer like the “helplessly addicted mother” and an eleven-year-old child
who is making herself ready for another night of premature prostitution (Phillips, Crossing the River 235-36). Due to this connection, it is possible to refer to Cathy Caruth who claims that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (11). Gail Low would certainly agree with this point of view as she writes that through the epilogue “what is offered finally is a choral invocation of all oppressed through the history of slavery. The utopic vision of the last pages of the novel is inclusive, for Joyce who is English and white is included as one of the many sons and daughters of the diasporan community” (139). However, Phillips himself says that he wanted to build a connection between all these characters based on “a kind of survival”, not on “exploitation or suffering or misery” (Ramraj 222). Hence, it is not only the trauma that they have seen that links all these different characters, it is the fact that they survived the trauma that connects all of them. According to Victor J. Ramraj, Phillips thus believes that this survival “binds the diasporic communities to each other and to Africa” (222). As a result African diasporic communities should not yearn “for a return to an ever-receding African homeland”( Ramraj 222) because they are already connected through their survival. Hence, they “should establish roots wherever they find themselves” (222), whether this is in England or somewhere else. In contrast with A Distant Shore and Higher Ground, there is thus hope for the British nation and for the world as the father’s children “arrived on the far bank of the river, loved” (Phillips, Crossing the River 237), which intimates that perhaps one day, racists will realise that immigrants are also only people who have suffered and are in search of love and acceptance.

7 The Nature of Blood

7.1 Plot

This novel is much less optimistic than Crossing the River and thus it is more like A Distant Shore and Higher Ground. It contains different storylines that are not separated clearly
from each other. One finds the story of the black Shakespearean character Othello, the narrative of three Jews who lived in Portobuffole in the fifteenth century and who were executed for having eaten a young Christian boy (which they did not do), the account of Stefan Stern; a doctor who gave up his practice and his family to go and fight for Israel, and some other storylines. All of these characters have in common that they are the victims of racism. I am interested in the story of Eva Stern, Stefan Stern’s niece, because she is the only character in this novel who experiences what it means to be an immigrant in Britain. She survived a concentration camp yet she cannot deal with this atrocious past and as a result, she commits suicide in a British mental hospital.

I will first focus on what Eva has in common with all the other characters that I have discussed so far: loneliness. This will be followed by what the notion of “home” means in this novel and how this can be related to Phillips’ personal experiences. Thirdly, I will pay some attention to the formal and thematic elements present in the entire novel, which deliberately disturb and confuse the reader. To conclude, I will focus on the cross-culturalism that is present in The Nature of Blood.

7.2 Eva and loneliness

Eva is strongly connected to all the other characters in Phillips’ work that I have already discussed as she too experiences what it means to be alone, to be abandoned. The first person that she loses is her sister Margot, who goes into hiding; she will never hear from her again. The second blow that she has to take is when Rosa, a woman who shares Eva and her parents’ apartment in the ghetto, commits suicide. The next person that she loses is her father, who is deported to another part of the concentration camp and whom she will also never see again. The last person that she loses is her mother, who dies next to her in the concentration camp: “My mama has left me alone . . . One morning, she did not wake up. She lay asleep and
I spoke to her all day long in the hope that she might answer back . . . I spoke to her all day long, but I never received a reply” (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 13). The fact that she is unable to make contact with other people in the concentration camp makes her even more lonesome: “Since mama left, I have grown accustomed to being solitary. But these days, even if I wished for company I would probably find myself alone” (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 29). And a little further in the novel she says the following: “There is no companionship in despair” (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 33). The atrocities that she has been through thus completely isolate her; they make her unable to communicate with the outside world or with the liberators. This persistent feeling of loneliness makes her mentally ill as she starts imagining that her mother has returned to her:

    Today, Mama arrived back in the camp. At first I was angry, for I thought the person lying in the cot next to me must have broken in during the night in order to steal something. And this being the case, why lie down next to me? Why not go to one of the other cots? Before I could say anything, the woman turned her face towards me and I saw it was Mama. I wasn’t frightened. I was expecting her to return, for I never truly believed that she had gone. And now she is back . . . Mama is back with me. I can now begin to plan a future for both of us.

    (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 35-36)

What is striking about the imagined return of Eva’s mother is the fact that it gives Eva strength again; it is only now that she wants to think about the future, it is only now that she is willing to leave the concentration camp to return to the outside world.

    Amongst the British liberators, Eva meets the young soldier Gerry. Gerry expresses his concern for her; he seems genuinely interested in her well-being. Ultimately, he proposes to her so that she can start over again, yet Eva refuses because she thinks that nobody can ever fully know her; no one will ever be able to realise what has changed her so much: “But he can
never understand somebody like me. None of them can” (Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* 43). This again demonstrates that Eva feels completely isolated. However, a little later Eva regrets this decision and she forges a letter that can give her access to England and to Gerry. When she arrives in London, she is a bit overwhelmed by the haste of all the people there: “I stand in the middle of a great rush of human activity. It is difficult to know which way to turn. All around me there is purposeful haste. Faces are set, minds focused” (Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* 188). This impression of London reminds one of how Solomon felt about England: he too was taken aback by the British society in which people are only interested in themselves, unwilling to meet or care about people whom they do not know. As Eva arrives at Gerry’s house, she again has to take a severe blow because it turns out that Gerry was already married when he proposed to Eva. Ashley Dawson calls “Gerry’s abandonment . . . the ultimate act in a long line of such betrayals” (91). The only thing that Eva desired was “to be the source of happiness for somebody. Is that too much to ask?” (Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* 190), yet now she gives up all hope: “Since Gerry’s sudden departure, I have stayed in bed. Propped up on my new pillow. I keep thinking that something is about to happen. But nothing has happened. Nothing is going to happen. And so life goes on. And so hope is finally extinguished” (Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* 187). Consequently, Eva becomes severely ill and is brought to a mental hospital. This strongly links her to Dorothy and Irina who also become sick due to the many times that they have been left alone. Eva’s doctor describes her illness as follows:

> Eventually, of course, we found a name for the collective suffering of those who survived. These unfortunate people have to endure a multitude of symptoms which include insomnia, shame, chronic anxiety, a tendency to suicide and an inability to communicate with others. They are often incapable of successful mourning, fearing that this act of self-expression involves a letting go, and
therefore of the dead, ultimately committing the deceased, often loved ones, to
oblivion. Their condition serves a commemorative function, suggesting a
loyalty to the dearly departed. Naturally, their suffering is deeply connected to
memory. To move on is to forget. To forget is a crime. How can they both
remember and move on? (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 156-57)

As one compares this passage to the description that Cathy Caruth gives of post-traumatic
stress disorder, it is clear that Eva suffers from this pathology: “there is a response, sometimes
delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive
hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing
that may have begun during or after the experience” (4). Eva is unable to overcome the
horrors that she has experienced, and she commits suicide. Not only the abandonments are too
much for her but also perhaps the fact that she survived everything. She must have been
convinced of the idea that she would never come out alive of the concentration camp.
Especially as she belonged to the group who had to burn those who had been murdered in the
gas chambers. This makes her, like the nameless black man in Higher Ground, an inhabitant
of Primo Levi’s “gray zone” because it is impossible for the reader to pass judgement on her:

Today, they continue to burn bodies. (I burn bodies.) Burning bodies. First, she
lights the fire. Pour gasoline, make a torch, and then ignite the pyre. Wait for
the explosion as the fire catches, and then wait for the smoke. Clothed bodies
burn slowly. Decayed bodies burn slowly. In her mind she cries, fresh and
naked, please. Women and children burn faster than men. Fresh naked children

After having read this horrible passage, it is not difficult to conclude that Eva is heavily
traumatised. As she witnessed how all those people died, she must have thought that one day
she would be next, yet as that day never came, survival is a problem for her. This is a typical
symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder: “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis (Caruth 9).

7.3 The notion of home

The notion of “home” plays a very important role in this novel. By losing everyone who was dear to her, Eva also lost what she used to call ‘home’: “‘Are you waiting for anybody from home?’ Stupid woman. Waiting where? Who knows where I am. I am not sure myself. I refuse to speak. ‘Do you intend to go home?’ How can she use the word ‘home’? It is cruel to do so in such circumstances. I cannot call that place ‘home’. ‘Home’ is a place where one feels welcome” (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 37). Homelessness is something that all of Phillips’ characters experience: Dorothy does not feel welcome in Stoneleigh as the older part of this town is against the new estate where Dorothy lives, Solomon certainly feels unwelcome in England as he is the constant victim of racism, Irina cannot call England her home as she is also the victim of racial comments, and Joyce feels uncomfortable in her town as everyone stares at her either because Reg is in prison or because she is seeing a black man. The only character that does have a home to return to is Louis; all the others feel the pain of not having a place where they can be themselves. According to Aleid Fokkema, one of the central themes in Phillips’ works is “the idea that identity is tied up with a negotiable sense of belonging” (284), as a consequence it is not surprising why so many of Phillips’ characters lose their senses: as they have lost their homes; their idea of who they are, their identity has also disappeared. Eva expected “to be welcome in the English ‘home’” but she soon discovered that “she is viewed as an interloper, a potential destroyer of Gerry’s family cell” (Ledent 152). The identity that she imagined having is thus demolished as the home that she desired to have does not exist. Another function of ‘home’ is that it “must be imagined as a
place in which both the past and the present are ‘welcomed’ in unison’ (Thomas 61), yet as Eva does not have such a place, she is unable to unite the past and the present, which gradually makes her insane.

Caryl Phillips himself experienced what it was to be uncertain about ‘home’; he wanted to belong to one place, yet it was very difficult for a black person to be accepted in the home that he knew:

> My feeling is that anybody who grew up with the sort of background in which I did, and that is not an insignificant percentage of the population of England, will question their identity. In other words, we grew up not quite knowing if this was home. Being told to go back to where we came from. The question of home is a very serious thing because you don’t feel at home in this place which is the only thing you know. (Bell 599)

He too thus must have questioned his own identity as he was frequently told that he should return to where he came from, even though Britain is the only home that he knew at that point. Also the fact that his parents chose to “downplay their origins” (Ledent 2) must have confused Phillips; the fact that he belonged to a minority group that was often not welcomed by some members of the British society was never discussed, and therefore “as a child, in what seemed to me a hostile country, the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them” (Phillips, The European Tribe 54). This explains why Phillips is not only interested in the history of black slavery or immigration, he wants to connect all those who have become the subjects of suppression.
7.4 Disturbing formal and thematic elements in *The Nature of Blood*

As was the case with *A Distant Shore*, *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River*, this novel is marked by anti-linearity. This book thus also challenges the reader to put different pieces of the puzzle together so that a coherent whole can be created, but this is often impossible as many of the storylines have a confusing or open ending. As a result, it is difficult to create a unified narrative that makes full sense. *The Nature of Blood* takes it one step further than *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River* as this time, the storylines are not clearly separated in different chapters. This novel constantly jumps from one character to the next, “The narrative strands . . . merge and mingle at an ever-accelerating pace” (Craps, “Linking Legacies” 4). As a result, the reader is frequently disorientated as he or she is unable to immediately realise in which storyline he or she is being dropped. These forms of fragmentation and anti-linearity are not the only formal elements that disorientate the reader. At one point, the third person narrator who relates the story of the Jews of Portobuffole comes across as highly subjective when he gives an account of the reasons why Germans sometimes murdered Jews (Craps, “Caryl Phillips” 46-48):

In Germany they frequently murdered the Jews, because the Christian people claimed (and provided good evidence) that the Jews spread the plague by poisoning the wells with whatever came to hand: spider’s webs, lizards, toads, and most commonly, the severed heads of Christians. Not only had the Jews killed Jesus Christ, but during the Holy Week it was common practice for them to re-enact this crime and kill a Christian child in order that they might draw out the fresh blood and knead some of it into the unleavened bread which they ate during their own Easter celebration, known as Passover . . . In addition to using the blood in the preparation of bread, it was widely known that the Jews used fresh Christian blood for anointing rabbis, for circumcision, in stopping
menstrual and other bleedings, in removing bodily odours, in making love potions and magical powder, and in painting the bodies of their dead. (Phillips, The Nature of Blood 51-52).

The narrator describes these practices as if they were actually carried out by Jews; he does not state that this was only common belief among some Germans. This makes this third person narrator extremely unreliable, which disturbs the reader enormously.

These disorientating formal elements are complemented by a few thematic disturbances, such as the deviation from Shakespeare’s original play Othello. The presence of a black character in Venice during the Renaissance clearly refers to this play, as the unnamed black general falls in love with Desdemona, whom he secretly marries. Yet after the marriage, the story just stops; The Nature of Blood does not portray Desdemona’s death and Othello’s downfall, thus giving the married couple a happy ending. However, as the reader knows how the Shakespearean Othello ends, he or she is disorientated by this sudden stop and naive, optimistic ending.

Eva’s storyline is also marked by intertextuality as many references to Anne Frank’s Diary of a Young Girl can be found in it. Eva’s sister, for example, like Anne’s, is also called Margot, but as one takes a closer look at the depiction of Margot in The Nature of Blood, one sees that she “resembles the Anne we know from the diary much more closely than Eva herself” (Craps, “Linking Legacies” 14). It is for example Margot, not Eva, who is in love with Peter, just as it is Margot who enjoys the movies, instead of Eva (Craps, “Caryl Phillips” 28). The story of Eva also strongly deviates from that of Anne Frank as Eva survives the concentration camp. However, this does not mean that Eva faces a happy ending as she later commits suicide. Another striking difference between Eva and Anne’s story is this novel’s reformulation of Anne Frank’s “much-abused most famous line: ‘I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart’” (Craps, “Linking Legacies” 14). This
sentence, full of hope and belief in mankind is transformed into “a message of utter despair which leaves no room for recuperation” (Craps, “Linking Legacies” 14): “You see, Eva, in spite of everything that we have lost, they still hate us, and they will always hate us” (Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* 87). These deviations from the original account deliberately confuse and disorientate the reader, thus reproducing the trauma for the reader, yet without allowing one to fully identify with a character as these “conspicuous departures . . . puncture the reader’s complacency and invite him or her to confront his or her own appropriative tendencies” (Craps, “Linking Legacies” 14).

In *The Nature of Blood*, the reader is also prevented from appropriating a character’s position as all the protagonists possess some features that make them not entirely likeable. This novel thus uses the same strategy as Phillips’ other works that I have discussed; it makes its characters not completely innocent. I have already described how Eva possesses some striking racial thoughts, forges a letter, and has to burn the bodies of those who were murdered in the gas chambers. These actions all contribute to the reader’s uneasiness when he or she tries to put him- or herself in her place. Her uncle, Stefan Stern, and Othello also make the reader feel uncomfortable as they both left their wife and child behind. The same goes for the subjective third-person narrator who gives an unreliable account of some Jewish actions throughout history. This shows that just like *A Distant Shore*, *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River*, this novel is marked by empathic unsettlement as on the one hand we try to identify with the protagonists but on the other hand, we are prevented from doing this by the characters’ negative features.

7.5 Cross-culturalism

A final aspect that I want to mention about *The Nature of Blood* is the cross-culturalism that can be found in it. Despite the fact that this novel is not very optimistic, it
strongly connects all its characters by making them victims of racism. Whether they are black (e.g. Othello) or white (e.g. Stefan Stern, Malka etc.) – though it must be noted that throughout history, Jews were not always regarded as being white – or whether they live in the twentieth century (e.g. Eva) or in the fifteenth century (e.g. the Jews of Portobuffole), they all have in common that they are suppressed and have suffered from a severe trauma. This connects them over time and space, and this bond can be a possible basis for the end of the loneliness of which they suffer: “over and against the tribalisms of racism, nationalism, and separatism, Phillips’s novels propose an ethics of cross-cultural engagement which works against and moves beyond the isolation imposed by trauma” (Craps, “Linking Legacies” 16). As was the case with Crossing the River, The Nature of Blood also demonstrates that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (Caruth 11).

8 Foreigners

8.1 Plot

The last novel that I want to discuss is Phillips’ most recent novel: Foreigners: Three English Lives. This work describes the lives of Francis Barber, who was the servant of Samuel Johnson; Randolph Turpin, who was Britain’s first black world champion boxer; and David Oluwale, a Nigerian who came to Leeds in 1949 to become an engineer, yet who was brutally murdered by two police officers. What makes this novel different from Phillips’ previous works is the fact that this book is based on historical facts. I will focus on the parts about Randolph Turpin and David Oluwale, as they both lived in England during the twentieth century and thus experienced what it means to be black in today’s Britain. This will be followed by a discussion of some formal elements present in the entire novel. And finally, I will conclude by demonstrating how empathic unsettlement is evoked in the reader by the characters.
8.2 Randolph Turpin

The chapter that discusses Randolph Turpin is entitled Made in Wales. It begins by telling how Turpin will fight Sugar Ray Robinson, the world champion boxer, a match that he wins and which makes him the first black British world champion boxer. As the narrator describes it, this match played a huge role in the mental recovery of the British nation:

Britain in the early fifties was a desolate place whose urban landscape remained largely pockmarked with bomb sites . . . the government lacked the resources to do anything about this bleak terrain . . . While allied money flowed into Germany to help rebuild the defeated nation, six years after the war Britain appeared to have stagnated economically, its confidence shot and its people suffering. Thousands of servicemen had returned after the war only to discover that there was no industrial machine for them to rejoin, and that jobs were scarce on the ground. The women who had manned the factories during the war found it difficult to readjust to their old roles as housewives and mothers . . . Britain was depressed and good times seemed a long way off . . . The opportunity of seeing boxers in action, particularly champion boxers like young Randolph Turpin, brightened up everybody’s lives. (Phillips, Foreigners 72-73)

On that one night, all of Britain’s hopes were pinned on this man of colour and by defeating Sugar Ray Robinson, he released an enormous amount of forces in the British soul (Phillips, Foreigners 78). However, not long before then black persons were not even allowed to fight for a title. The historical account that the narrator gives about this matter illustrates how hypocritical Britain really is:
In Britain things had been, until two years earlier, somewhat different. A clear colour bar had been in effect so that black boxers were prohibited from fighting for or holding the British title. They were allowed to fight for the British Empire title, but all weights black boxers, even if they were, like Randolph Turpin, born and bred in Britain, were treated as foreigners and excluded from fighting for their own national championship. (Phillips, Foreigners 78)

Turpin thus realises that two years before his victory over Sugar Ray Robinson he would not even have had the opportunity to fight because he is a black man. Although he is now a hero for the British nation, he probably feels uncomfortable by all the cheers of those who despised him only shortly before. Turpin’s mother makes a similar remark when she witnesses how her son is honoured by the masses; “The coloured baby that, much to some people’s disgusts, she had given birth to twenty-three years ago in this very town was, on this day, the most famous man in England” (Phillips, Foreigners 88). It must be noted that Turpin is a “mixed-race-man” (Phillips, Foreigners 63); his mother was a white British woman whereas his father was a black man from British Guiana who came to England and who fought for the British nation in the Great War. Despite the fact that this man risked his life and fought alongside white men, the relation between a black man and a white woman was something difficult to accept for the British nation. Just like Irina and Louis and certainly like Joyce and Travis, “they were regarded by some intolerant locals as a social problem which they were ill-equipped to deal with” (Phillips, Foreigners 96). Their marriage must have been very difficult as they had to deal with all kind of prejudices and financial problems as it was very hard for a black man to find a job between the First World War and the end of the Second World War:

The racism that poisoned the everyday lives of black people in Britain . . . did so in the form of what was called ‘colour bar’. In industry the colour bar was virtually total. Only in the early forties, when their labour was needed for the
war effort, could black workers get jobs in British factories; and even then there was often resistance from employers and white employees alike. (Fryer 356)

Despite the lift of the colour bar, their children faced the same racial problems; they were despised by many of their home-town, and it was only after Turpin’s victory that they were embraced by those who used to look down upon them. The reason for this contempt before Turpin’s triumph is very simple: prejudice:

More than two-thirds of Britain’s white population . . . held a low opinion of black people or disapproved of them. They saw them as heathens who practised head-hunting, cannibalism, infanticide, polygamy, and ‘black magic’. They saw them as uncivilized, backward people, inherently inferior to Europeans, living in primitive mud huts ‘in the bush’, wearing few clothes, eating strange foods, and suffering from unpleasant diseases. They saw them as ignorant and illiterate, speaking strange languages, and lacking proper education.

(Fryer 374)

This passage is reminiscent of the speech that Mike gave to Solomon in *A Distant Shore*, he too believed that Indians were inferior and filthy. However, the largest difference between this passage and Mike’s opinion is that Peter Fryer describes the people’s attitude towards black persons in the forties and fifties, whereas Mike says this in present-day England. It is thus easy to conclude that there has not been much change between the fifties and today.

The respect and admiration that Turpin receives does not last very long as he has to deal with some personal problems: he has a bad marriage – due to his violent behaviour and his constant infidelity – with Mary Stack, who eventually leaves him. He also cannot handle money and spends far too much on so-called ‘friends’ who are only there to profit from him.
This strongly affects his boxing results, and when he starts losing, he is no longer the hero who everyone admires; he is once again only a black man who disgraces the British nation. Not so much later, it turns out that his sight has been severely damaged by the fighting and that he will no longer be able to enter the boxing ring. With no money left, he is forced to take on a job far below the glamorous status that he was used to when he was a champion, and when the newspapers report on him in a story entitled “Turpin: A Story of Riches to Rags” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 144), he again feels the hypocrisy of the British society; the respect that everyone felt for him has been replaced by dismay; once more a black man has managed to lose everything that he possessed. In the end, Turpin cannot take this anymore and commits suicide. In 2001, fifty years after his victory over Sugar Ray Robinson, a statue of Turpin in boxing pose was unveiled in the centre of Warwick. “On the bronze plaque below his feet are inscribed the words: In Palace, Pub, And Parlour The Whole of Britain Held Its Breath” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 156). Although the state now recognises what a great man he was, the state did not offer him any help when he needed it the most; right before his death they even claimed that he should pay huge taxes on all the prize money that he had earned, money that he did not possess anymore. The fact that he was later declared to be bankrupt was certainly one of the causes for his desperate act.

One can wonder whether Turpin would have suffered that much if he had not been a black man. This question also occupies Phillips and Turpin’s daughters:

‘Do you think my dad would have got proper recognition if he wasn’t black?’ I have to think for a moment for this is a somewhat blunter version of a question that I was hoping to pose to the sisters. ‘Although,’ continues Annette, ‘somebody told me that there are only two statues to black men in England. One is just along the river here, the one for Nelson Mandela, and the other is of our dad. The one that’s in Warwick.’ For a moment it occurs to me that in a
sense she has answered her own question, but she continues. ‘But there should be more recognition for black people, shouldn’t there?’ (Phillips, Foreigners 159)

The answer to the first question is thus no: as a white man he would not have had to endure the dismay of the British. It is clear that during his life he was often despised, regarded as a man who for a short time could lift up the spirits of the British nation but who in the end still remained a black man.

8.3 David Oluwale

The chapter entitled “Northern Lights” which deals with the life of David Oluwale is rather remarkable because of its focalisation: we never see David’s point of view or thoughts, instead he is always described through other people’s eyes. This makes it often difficult to know who is speaking at a certain point, but on the other hand it is intriguing to find out what David was like by putting all these depictions together.

David, eighteen years old, came to Britain in 1949 with the hopes and dreams of becoming an engineer, yet once he arrives there he experiences the painful aspects of racism. When he wants to go to a pub, for example, he is often confronted by a big sign in the window that says: “No Coloureds, No Dogs, No Gypsies” (Phillips, Foreigners 184), which is a result of the colour bar in Britain at that time. It is astounding that black people and gypsies are put on the same level as animals. These immigrants must have faced many contradictions: on the one hand they felt extremely unwelcome as a result of the colour bar, yet on the other hand they were extremely wanted by the British industry: “The British economy, short of labour, needed these willing hands. The door stood open . . . British industry gladly absorbed them. In some industries the demand for labour was so great that members of the reserve army of black workers were actively recruited in their home countries” (Fryer 372-73). As a result,
it was not very difficult to find a job, but the work that was presented to these immigrants was very dangerous, as they “were those the local white people did not want” (Fryer 374). David’s former personnel officer described his profession as follows:

We attracted immigrants because the pay was competitive, but the conditions were terrible and safety was non-existent . . . The day used to begin at 7:30 a.m. In fact, the hooter sounded three minutes before work was to start, and that’s when the men would assemble in the streets and begin to clock in. They had an hour for lunch and worked right through until 5:30 p.m., but it wasn’t easy. In fact, to many it was worse than being down the pit. Mr West liked his employees to wear ‘whites’, like he’d seen workers wear in India. Well, they might look nice, but they were useless as protective gear. And there were no safety shoes or anything. (Phillips, Foreigners 188-89)

In other words, the immigrants that worked there were strongly taken advantage from, and when someone dared to protest he was fired; these people had no rights whatsoever. This constant discrimination was difficult to accept for David: “he didn’t understand the colour-bar situation and he would get very wound up. ‘I’m from a British colony and I’m British,’ he would say. ‘So why do they call me “nigger”?’ This was the attitude David couldn’t deal with. He wasn’t able to think around a situation and do something else” (Phillips, Foreigners 191). Many immigrants thought in this way; they regarded Britain as the ‘mother country’:

“They ‘took their British citizenship seriously, and many regarded themselves not as strangers, but as kinds of Englishmen’” (Fryer 374). Consequently, they were shocked by what they experienced in Britain. Yet the fellow immigrant that described David in the previous passage did not share this disbelief; he sees David’s protest as some kind of flaw, and he thinks that David should just accept the situation, but how can one accept being looked down upon at all times? On the other hand, one can understand the attitude of this immigrant
as he witnessed how David became the police’s favourite target: it was better to keep yourself unnoticed and accept what happened than to be arrested or beaten. The fact that David did not want to hide from the police eventually meant his death:

David, if only you had turned and gone up The Headrow and away from the city centre they might not have discovered you. But you came to where you knew they would find you at the Bridal House, and you squatted on your little stone step on The Headrow. The most open place in town. Fully illuminated. Just a short way up The Headrow from Millgarth Police Station, and on every policeman’s route home from work. They pass by your bedroom without mirrors, and you’re not hiding. (Phillips, Foreigners 255)

As he did not hide himself, David was discovered by the two policemen who had already frequently beaten him without reason, and this time they were really merciless as they killed him. Tragically, something like this had to happen before Leeds realised that something had to be done; David’s death was the starting point for condemning racist policemen: “To me, David was a fighter for freedom. He was not another victim. You see, his life and death affected a whole generation. His life led to the full emergence of the Black Power movement in this city, and to black and white people finally saying ‘enough’” (Phillips, Foreigners 226). However, not all the voices present in this novel sound so optimistic. According to one other voice, David has died for nothing:

Today there is still a high percentage of black people in prisons and mental homes . . . sometimes when I drive down Chapeltown Road and see the lack of discipline, and children having children, and what we’ve allowed ourselves to become, then I feel bitter. Parents have lost control of their kids and England has taken them. David Oluwale paid a high price to get people’s attention, but for what? (Phillips, Foreigners 248-49).
This novel is thus, like *A Distant Shore*, *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*, not very optimistic. Although the situation of blacks has much improved during the twentieth century, a lot of work still has to be done.

Another problem that is addressed in this chapter is the mixing of black and white. One white woman testifies how she and the black men that she was trying to help were frequently at risk: “This was a difficult time for a white woman to be seen with a group of coloured men. I would be at risk, but the greater risk would be to them. People would often say things to me – nasty things – and naturally the men would want to defend me, although I’d try to encourage them to say nothing. But it wasn’t easy” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 187). Her work was especially difficult as she did not get the aid that she needed: “The Labour Party wouldn’t officially support us in our work with the coloured immigrants; some individuals within the Labour Party, yes, but not the Labour Party as a whole” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 187). This is of course not surprising as it was a Labour MP who in 1958 “raised the cry that no more black people should be allowed to enter the country and that new deportation laws should be passed” (Fryer 377). Fortunately, this outcry was met with a storm of protest.

8.4 *Formal elements in Foreigners*

As one takes a look at the three different chapters, one cannot fail to notice that none of the stories are told by the protagonists themselves. In part one, “Doctor Johnson’s Watch”, the life of Francis Barber is told by a former friend of Dr. Johnson’s who did not even know Francis very well. They only met three times during their entire life; firstly when the unnamed narrator paid a visit to Dr. Johnson, secondly at the funeral of Dr. Johnson, and finally on Francis’ deathbed. The story of Francis is thus told by a complete outsider, who only goes looking for this black man because he wants to write a small article about him for the *Gentlemen’s Magazine*. And this article will of course be incorporated into a larger piece of
writing about Dr. Johnson. Hence, the sole, opportunistic reason why the narrator is interested in Francis, is that he had the privileged position of witnessing “the birth of some of our [Britain’s] finest literature” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 73).

The life of Randolph Turpin is also told by an outsider. What is particularly striking about this narrator is that it seems to be Caryl Phillips himself who relates the whole story. For the larger part, he remains an objective third-person narrator, but at the end of this chapter, when he interviews two of Turpin’s daughters, it is possible to identify the “me” and the “I” with Phillips: “Annette is the older of the two Turpin girls sitting before me . . . I suggest to the sisters that a combination of race and class probably operated against their father being fully recognised, and I ask them what they think he would be doing now were he still alive” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 157-60). It is dangerous to see the author and the narrator as one and the same person, but in this case, I think this is the right thing to do as Phillips really interviewed these two women and he also thanks them in the “Acknowledgements” (Foreigners 261) of this novel. Yet of course, we can never be certain whether it is truly the voice of Phillips that we hear; it can also be the voice of a narrator who closely resembles the author but who cannot be the writer himself. This uncertainty leaves the reader with a strong sense of confusion.

The final part, “Northern Lights” has the most remarkable point of view as there is not one single narrator; instead we get a multitude of voices that are often unidentified, which makes it very difficult to know who he or she is, and how this person regards the murder on David Oluwale. As a consequence, this part is the most confusing of all three chapters because it jumps from one perspective to the next, without a clear break between two different angles. The inclusion of some fragments that come directly out of police and court reports also makes this chapter highly impersonal sometimes. Consider for example the following two excerpts:
The prosecution called Police Constable Cyril Batty who testified that in May 1968 he had witnessed Sergeant Ktiching urinating on David Oluwale in Lands Lane in the centre of Leeds. Former Inspector Ellerker was holding a torch, but at the time Police Constable Batty chose to say nothing in order that he might protect his career . . .

The prosecution asserted that on other occasions David Oluwale had been driven by the defendants to Middleton Woods in South Leeds and left there in the middle of the night. Police Constable Phillip Ratcliffe and former Police Constable Hazel Dalby both saw the defendants kick Oluwale so hard in the groin that he was lifted off the floor. They saw David Oluwale crying silent tears of pain and emitting no noise. (Phillip, Foreigners 236-38)

These two passages describe the malicious assaults on David without any feeling; they just dryly report what these constables stated in their testimony. This makes the reader very uncomfortable, yet at some points this dry objective account is countered by the words of the officers themselves, for example: “I have never seen a man crying so much and never utter a sound. PC Phillip Ratcliffe” (Phillips, Foreigners 238). Nevertheless, these personal, more humane declarations are rather scarce, which means that the impersonal, highly objective accounts prevail. This makes the reader experience a strong discrepancy between the horror of the events and the indifference of the reports.

Consequently, throughout the entire novel, the reader is confused by the disorientating narratives. Foreigners, like the other novels that I have discussed, thus succeeds in reproducing the trauma for the reader, but once more, he or she is also prevented from fully identifying with the characters.
8.5 Empathic unsettlement in Foreigners

The main reason why we are unable to empathize fully with these characters is that they all possess some negative characteristics. The unknown third-person narrator in chapter one for example, comes across as a highly opportunistic man who wants to put some emotional pressure on Francis Barber by presenting to him the watch that he had once received from his former master:

The tortoiseshell watch, which I had been led to understand the doctor had paid Mudge and Dutton the princely sum of seventeen guineas to purchase in 1768 had, on his death, been bequeathed by Johnson to his beloved negro. Apparently, as the result of a sale born of desperation, the watch had fallen into the hands of the Canon of Lichfield . . . Two owners later, the watch had come into my possession at a sale of Johnsonian relics at a London coffee house . . . I harboured some notion of presenting the watch to the negro in exchange for some testimony about the vicissitudes of his recent life. (Phillips, Foreigners 22)

Fortunately, when the narrator finds Francis on his deathbed, he abandons this idea. However, this does not make him more likeable because despite the shock that he receives by discovering the deplorable situation in which Francis’ family lives, he does nothing in particular to help them. He only eases his conscience by promising himself that he will give the watch to Francis’ wife so that she can sell it and have a few pounds extra to survive the following days.

Francis Barber is also not entirely likeable but this is of course rather difficult to judge as we only see his actions through the eyes of the unknown narrator. When he for example goes away from Johnson’s house to become a sailor, he leaves his former employer behind in great distress. This certainly worsened Johnson’s poor health. Also the fact that he abandons
his wife at a party when she receives too much male attention makes the reader uncomfortable. It would have made a lot more sense if he had defended her honour.

The protagonist of the second chapter, Randolph Turpin, is also not entirely likeable as he frequently abused and cheated his first wife. The only character that does not seem to possess any nasty characteristics is David Oluwale. The sole thing that he can be accused of is that he is, like Joyce in Crossing the River, too naive as he expected to be regarded as an Englishman instead of an immigrant. What also confuses the reader and adds to his or her disbelief is that David does not hide from the police. It is almost as if he deliberately wants to expose himself to them, to show these two men that he is unafraid of their assaults.

All these facets demonstrate that it is impossible to identify completely with these characters. As a result, I can conclude that empathic unsettlement is also present in this novel as the trauma is reproduced for the reader by the disorienting points of view, but on the other hand, it is impossible to fully empathise with the protagonists as they all possess some unlikeable features.

9 Conclusion

9.1 Similarities between Phillips’ characters

It has become clear that there are a lot of resemblances between Phillips’ novels and characters. In general, all the characters are marked by abandonment; they have all lost the people that they care about, with the exception of Louis, who is the only one who can go back home, to a world in which he feels good. What they also have in common is the fact that they have become the victim of suppression, and as a result they have suffered from “insidious trauma”; all of them have been hurt in violent and/or non-violent ways which harmed them physically and psychologically (Brown 107). A further remarkable resemblance is the fact that they are not entirely likeable; Solomon murdered a friend, Turpin cheated on his wife,
Eva and Irina both have racial prejudices, Dorothy has a problem with the homeless etc. Some of them, like the nameless black man and Eva, can even be called inhabitants of Primo Levi’s “gray zone”. The characters’ large and small flaws contribute to their credibility; they all come across as extremely realistic. Yet on the other hand, this feature makes it very hard for the reader to fully empathise with the protagonists: a distance is kept between us and the characters so that we cannot appropriate the protagonists’ voices or positions.

We can also find large similarities between the different storylines; the characters have all experienced similar events. Irina and Eva are both Jewish girls who came to Britain, though there is a crucial difference between them: Irina was able to escape the Holocaust whereas Eva witnessed it all. Nevertheless, both are severely traumatised and end up in a mental hospital. One sees a similar downfall into insanity with Dorothy; she too, despite the fact that she has not experienced something so atrocious as the holocaust, cannot stand the abandonment and feeling of lonesomeness anymore. The only female character of those that I have discussed that does not become mad is Joyce. Even though she loses everyone that was dear to her, she is able to rebuild a life, and at the end of this novel, she is reunited with her son. This shows that Crossing the River is much more optimistic than the other novels that I have discussed.

There are also a lot of parallels between the male characters: Solomon, Said, Louis, Travis, Randolph Turpin and David Oluwale are all black victims of racism who – but for Louis – die a tragic death. This could lead to an extraordinary yet interesting conclusion: can it be that these novels actually recommend the immigrants to return back home? In none of these five novels is there one immigrant character that has experienced good fortune; they all die or become increasingly unhappy, like Mahmood. It almost seems as if these works are saying that nothing good can come of immigrating to Britain. However, this conclusion is probably a little too far-fetched. It is much more likely that these books are denouncing the
racist attitude of a large part of British society; they want to improve the immigrant’s condition by fiercely criticising the current situation. This brings me to the reason why Phillips is constantly retelling the same story of loss and racism in slightly different forms. It is only through repetition that society will learn the sad situation of many of its members or will be reminded of them even when it does not want this. When people pass the place where David Oluwale died, for example, they hurry through that arch, as “he’s not here and we don’t want that type around here” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 252). If they do not want to remember his death, they will eventually forget about him. Therefore, repetition is significant for the remembrance of these victims and for preventing that the same errors will be made again.

9.2 *Formal elements*

From my comparison between these five novels it has become clear that each work displays some distinctive formal elements. Remember, for example, the frequent shifting between a subjective first-person narrator and a cold third-person narrator in *A Distant Shore*, the multitude of voices that we find in the prologue and epilogue of *Crossing the River*, the intertextuality in *The Nature of Blood*, the distant tone of the police reports in *Foreigners* etc. As a result, each of Phillips’ works is unique as Phillips always finds different ways of showing what slavery and its legacy do and have done. Nevertheless, a lot of similarities can be found between Phillips’ fictions. What immediately catches the eye is that almost none of the storylines are told in a chronological way. The only two parts that are not typified by flashbacks and anti-linearity are the letters written by Rudy Williams and the logbook entries of captain James Hamilton. Yet this does not make them less confusing in comparison with the other stories as these sections are strongly marked by fragmentation. As a result, in all the novels that I have discussed, the reader constantly has to put the different pieces of the puzzle together so that he or she can know what exactly occurred to a certain character. However, the
fact that many of the storylines do not have a clear, straightforward plot makes it often impossible to reach a unified narrative that makes sense. This is typical for literature that aims to “embody or reproduce the trauma for the reader by discomforting, disturbing, or disorienting him or her” (Craps, “Introduction” 78). Phillips’ novels thus not only show the reader what many people have been through, they also make the reader feel and experience the thoughts and sentiments of these victims. As a result, reading Phillips’ works can be a very unsettling experience, but it proves to be effective, as his novels “have a way of growing on you, staying with you long after you’ve closed the book” (Cooper 2). This does not mean, though, that the reader is encouraged to identify completely with the characters. As I have written before, a distance is kept between the reader and the protagonists by the fact that they are all not entirely likeable. We thus see that empathic unsettlement is present in all these books as on the one hand, we are encouraged to feel sorry for what happens with the characters, but on the other hand, we are prevented from appropriating the position or the voice of these characters as we are unable to fully identify with them.

9.3 From past and fiction to present and reality

Though Ledent argues that all of Phillips’ fictions “allegorically address the present” (13), reviewers have often criticised Phillips for never talking directly to the British nation. This changes with A Distant Shore and Foreigners. One can thus see an important evolution in Phillips’ fiction: he started writing about the past, and as a result he did not appeal to the British society directly. He then moved on to the present with A Distant Shore, hence pointing at what is going wrong in Britain today. And with Foreigners he even took it one step further by basing this book on historical events. He has thus now emphasised the painful mistakes that Britain has made and is still making today as far as the treatment of immigrants is concerned.
This evolution makes me very curious about Phillips’ next novels. Will he keep on writing about present-day Britain and use events that have really happened? Or will he turn back to the past, addressing the British nation in a much more indirect way? One thing seems certain; the themes of abandonment, suppression and immigration will keep coming up.
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