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Reimagining Landscapes of the Mind: Trespassing Borders and Relational Futures in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*

Abstract I: Questo contributo analizza *The Nature of Blood* (1997) di Caryl Phillips come esplorazione del superamento e della ridefinizione dei confini attraverso appartenenza, memoria e amore. Muovendo dai *global trespassers* di John McLeod, dalla critica decoloniale della *modernity/coloniality matrix of power* e dalla distinzione di Riane Eisler tra sistemi di dominio e di *partnership*, mostra come Phillips decostruisca concezioni essenzialiste di razza, nazione, identità e storia. Attraverso Stephan ed Eva Stern, gli ebrei di Portobuffolè e un Otello riscritto, il romanzo recupera storie dimenticate e immagina forme di convivenza fondate su relazione, reciprocità e cura, invitando a reimmaginare futuri più inclusivi e orientati alla *partnership*.

Abstract II: This article examines Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997) as an exploration of trespassing and reimagining borders through belonging, memory, and love. Drawing on John McLeod's "global trespassers", decolonial critiques of the "modernity/coloniality matrix of power" and Riane Eisler's distinction between "dominator" and "partnership" systems, it argues that Phillips dismantles essentialist notions of race, nation, identity, and history. Through the stories of Stephan and Eva Stern, the Jews of Portobuffolè, and a rewritten Othello, the novel recovers forgotten histories and imagines coexistence grounded in encounter, reciprocity, and care, inviting readers to reimagine more inclusive and partnership-oriented futures.

Keywords: Trespassing borders, partnership, relationality, decoloniality, Caryl Phillips.

1. Introduction

"Landscapes of the mind" are not geographical locations but imaginative spaces through which literature enables us to rethink the worlds we inhabit. They emerge whenever inherited narratives are rewritten, forgotten histories are recovered, or established certainties are questioned. In many respects, they also extend one of the foundational insights of postcolonial studies. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin famously argued:

> A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the

> concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place (2002: 8).

Rather than reproducing the world as it is, literature possesses the capacity to imagine alternative forms of belonging, revealing that identities, communities, and histories are never fixed entities but dynamic and complex processes of encounter and transformation.

Few contemporary writers explore this imaginative potential more powerfully than Caryl Phillips. Throughout his literary career, Phillips has persistently challenged the narratives through which Europe has represented itself[1], exposing the silences that underpin its ideals of civilisation, democracy, and cultural unity[2]. His fiction returns repeatedly to those histories and subjects that have been marginalised, displaced or erased, exposing the structures of representation through which, in Gayatri C. Spivak's formulation, "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988: 308). In doing so, Phillips demonstrates that exclusion is never an isolated historical phenomenon but a recurring structure embedded within Western modernity itself.

Published in 1997, *The Nature of Blood* arguably represents the culmination of this project. Rather than recounting a single historical experience, the novel interweaves Jewish, African, and European histories across five centuries, juxtaposing apparently unrelated narratives into a fragmented yet profoundly interconnected whole. Through this polyphonic structure, Phillips dismantles myths of racial purity, stable identity, and linear history, revealing instead how mechanisms of exclusion continuously resurface across different temporal and geographical contexts. The novel therefore questions not only the violence of racism and antisemitism but, more fundamentally, the epistemological assumptions that sustain every attempt to classify human beings into fixed categories.

Yet *The Nature of Blood* does considerably more than expose exclusion. Alongside its critique of domination and violence, the novel repeatedly imagines alternative forms of relation grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, and ethical encounter. Refugees, migrants, survivors, racialised subjects and exiles are not represented merely as victims of history but as figures through whom new possibilities of belonging become imaginable. Literature consequently emerges as a space where suppressed memories are recovered, canonical narratives are rewritten, and more inclusive visions of communal life may begin to take shape.

This article argues that Phillips constructs what may be described as "landscapes of the mind": imaginative and relational spaces in which identities are continuously rewritten through encounter rather than essentialist notions of race, nation, religion or origin. These landscapes challenge linear Western historiography and invite readers to reconsider the very categories through which history has traditionally been narrated.

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[1] As Bénédicte Ledent observes, any attempt to define Phillips through a single geographical or cultural category, "Caribbean, Black British, European, or even postcolonial – is bound to be unsatisfactory in the long term" (2017: 3), precisely because his writing constantly exceeds such classificatory frameworks.

[2] Phillips had already begun interrogating Europe and its exclusionary narratives in *The European Tribe* (1987), where he reverses the colonial gaze by turning it back upon Europe itself. See also: *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) and *Colour Me English* (2011), which further develop his reflections on migration, identity and belonging.

To examine this process, the article combines John McLeod's (2024) concept of "trespassing borders" with the decolonial critique of the "modernity/coloniality matrix of power" and Riane Eisler's (1987) distinction between "dominator and partnership systems". Read together, these perspectives illuminate Phillips's rewriting of canonical texts and forgotten histories not simply as acts of literary revision[3], but as imaginative practices capable of rethinking inherited forms of representation and envisioning more relational and partnership-oriented futures. Phillips himself has explicitly described this rewriting as an attempt to destabilise the authority of the English canon. As he observed in an interview with Maria Festa:

> It is probably an attempt to engage with, and somehow destabilize, the English canon. If you can engage with it, but also make people try and see it in a new way, thus destabilizing it, you are inevitably taking away some of its authority […] It's a way of making the reader see things afresh, which is after all what literature is, a way of making you see the world anew (2020: 166).

Building on this authorial emphasis on "destabilisation", the present article shifts attention from the crossing of borders itself to the forms of relationship that become imaginable once inherited boundaries have been unsettled. Rather than approaching displacement, hybridity, memory, and historical rewriting as its ultimate analytical categories, it examines how Phillips mobilises them to envision relational modes of belonging grounded in encounter, reciprocity and care.

2. Trespassing Borders: Towards Relational and Partnership Futures

John McLeod's notion of the global trespasser provides the starting point for the integrated relational framework developed in this study. In *Global Trespassers* (2024), McLeod argues that mobility is never entirely free but always "sanctioned", simultaneously authorised and restricted through cultural, political, racial, and epistemological boundaries. Consequently, trespassing extends beyond the crossing of geographical borders. It becomes an act of questioning the normative structures through which identities and relationships are organised. McLeod's formulation is particularly illuminating because it shifts attention from borders themselves to the relations they produce. As he argues, "to trespass is to threaten normative relations", opening "creative possibilities" for those who refuse to "stay put" within inherited identities (McLeod 2024: 13, 3). Trespassing therefore becomes both "a strategic challenge to authority" and "the negotiation of new ways of knowledge" (McLeod 2024: 14). Rather than understanding identity as fixed or culturally predetermined, McLeod proposes a notion of relating personhood, according to which subjects emerge through mutable, transgressive and continually evolving encounters with others.

This relational understanding closely resonates with the decolonial option. Long be-

[3] On the need to read Phillips beyond the conventional postcolonial paradigm of "writing back", see Ledent, who argues that his work should be approached "outside the usual 'writing back' paradigm" as it occupies a position that is simultaneously "outside and inside the Western canon" (2017: 6).

fore McLeod's study, decolonial thinkers such as Gloria Anzaldúa[4], Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo[5], Madina Tlostanova and Catherine Walsh had already demonstrated that colonialism survives beyond formal empire through what Quijano (2007) terms "the modernity/coloniality matrix of power": an enduring epistemic structure that regulates whose histories, knowledges, identities, and ways of inhabiting the world are recognised as legitimate. From this perspective, borders are never merely territorial; they are cognitive, cultural, and affective constructions that organise perception itself. As Mignolo and Walsh observe:

> Decoloniality […] does not […] imply the absence of coloniality but rather the ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living; that is, an otherwise in plural (2018: 81).

Decoloniality therefore represents neither a final destination nor the simple reversal of colonial power, but a continuous practice of opening alternative relational possibilities. In this sense, Tlostanova and Mignolo's invitation to "learn to unlearn" (2012: 1) becomes both an epistemological and an ethical gesture: it requires questioning inherited certainties in order to recover those memories, narratives and forms of knowledge that dominant histories have systematically silenced or marginalised. Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* performs precisely this decolonial gesture. By rewriting Shakespeare's *Othello*, revisiting the Holocaust through forgotten perspectives, recovering the history of the Jews of Portobuffolè, and bringing to light the experiences of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, Phillips demonstrates that literature may itself become an act of epistemic trespassing. Hidden stories do not simply supplement official history; they transform our understanding of history itself.

Such relational thinking also recalls Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), where identities emerge through unpredictable, rhizomatic encounters rather than singular origins. Phillips similarly constructs identities that remain fluid, interconnected and resistant to essentialist definitions. His protagonists never inhabit isolated narratives but continuously enter into dialogue across historical, geographical and cultural boundaries.

Yet relation alone is insufficient. As Riane Eisler (1987, 1995) reminds us, relationships may reproduce domination as easily as they may foster reciprocity and partnership. Her distinction between dominator and partnership systems therefore provides the ethical horizon of the present reading. While dominator systems are sustained through hierarchy, exclusion, violence, and fear, partnership systems privilege care, dialogue, mutual recognition, and cooperation. The crucial question raised by Phillips's novel is therefore not simply whether borders can be crossed, but what kinds of relationships become possible once they have been crossed.

As Eisler and Douglas P. Fry argue, human beings are not biologically destined for

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[4] Gloria Anzaldúa defines the *border* as "a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge", while the *borderland* is "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (1987: 3). Rather than conceiving borders as fixed geographical limits, Anzaldúa understands them as fluid spaces of negotiation, hybridity and transformation.

[5] Walter Mignolo's theorisation of coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience has been developed across several influential works. See Mignolo (2003, 2011a, 2011b, 2012).

violence or domination. Rather, evolutionary, neuroscientific, and anthropological evidence suggests that our species is predisposed towards empathy, care and cooperative relationships, receiving 'neurochemical rewards of pleasure' when giving or receiving empathic love (Eisler & Fry 2019). This position finds further support in Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöller's (2008) "biology of love", which understands love not merely as a private emotion but as a fundamental relational disposition through which the other is recognised as a legitimate other in coexistence. From this perspective, mutual recognition, care and cooperation are constitutive possibilities of human social existence rather than merely idealistic alternatives to domination. Partnership is therefore not a utopian aspiration but a biologically and culturally viable human possibility.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a relational framework for reading *The Nature of Blood*. McLeod explains how identities trespass inherited borders; decolonial thought reveals why those borders persist; Glissant illuminates the plurality of relational identities; and Eisler offers the ethical distinction through which those encounters may be understood as either reproducing domination or opening the possibility of partnership. The following analysis therefore examines Phillips's novel as an imaginative practice of rewriting: a literary act that questions inherited certainties in order to reimagine more communal, relational, and partnership-oriented futures.

3. *The Nature of Blood*

The fragmented architecture of *The Nature of Blood* invites readers to move across distant histories, cultures, and identities without allowing any of them to remain isolated. Rather than portraying persecution as the experience of a single people or historical moment, Phillips reveals its recurrence across different historical and geographical contexts, exposing the fragile foundations upon which notions of nation, race, and belonging have traditionally been constructed. The novel gradually dismantles every illusion of purity and stable identity, suggesting instead that belonging cannot be guaranteed by territory alone but must be continually negotiated through ethical relations with others. Stephan Stern's story introduces this central paradox and establishes the interpretative trajectory of the novel.

3.1. Reimagining Belonging: Stephan Stern, Malka and the Illusion of the Promised Land

The novel both opens and closes with Stephan Stern, whose trajectory frames Phillips's reflection on homeland, identity and the limits of national belonging. Having dedicated his life to the Zionist project, Stephan initially appears to embody the possibility of renewal after centuries of Jewish persecution. Israel represents not simply a geographical destination but the promise of security, historical justice, and communal restoration. Yet Phillips progressively dismantles this expectation, revealing that even projects founded upon liberation may reproduce the very mechanisms of exclusion they seek to overcome. The novel does not question the legitimacy of the desire for a homeland; rather, it questions the assumption that belonging can ever be secured by political borders alone.

Stephan's awakening arrives only in old age, when memory compels him to confront the personal cost of the choices that had shaped his life:

> He sat heavily and tried not to think of his wife and child. But it was useless. Every day, assaulted by loneliness. Every day, eaten up with guilt. His only companion was memory [...] He now understood that to remember too much is, indeed, a form of madness. And he understood that people are not made to live alone, neither when things are good, nor when they are bad (Phillips 1997: 211)[6].

This passage marks a decisive turning point in Stephan's journey. Throughout his life he had believed that belonging could be achieved through the construction of a national homeland; only at the end does he realise that the deepest form of exile originated not in geographical displacement but in the abandonment of those relationships that once constituted his true community. Memory therefore becomes more than recollection: it functions as an ethical space of self-recognition, exposing the inadequacy of every identity founded exclusively upon territory, ideology or historical destiny. The homeland imagined as the culmination of collective redemption ultimately reveals itself as another borderland, where inclusion continues to depend upon exclusion and where political liberation remains inseparable from personal loss.

Phillips thus shifts the meaning of home from a territorial reality to a relational condition. Stephan's tragedy lies not in the failure of Zionism as such, but in the recognition that no national project, however necessary or historically justified, can replace the human bonds sacrificed in its pursuit. Belonging emerges instead through reciprocity, care and shared humanity rather than through the possession of land or the affirmation of collective identity[7].

Stephan's encounter with Malka subsequently transforms this personal realisation into a broader historical and political reflection. If Stephan exposes the limits of national belonging, Malka reveals how communities founded upon histories of persecution may themselves reproduce new structures of domination. Through her testimony Phillips introduces one of the least discussed episodes in the history of modern Israel: the migration of Ethiopian Jews, welcomed as descendants of the House of Israel yet rapidly marginalised because of their ethnicity, cultural background, and social condition. Malka recalls the hope that accompanied the journey towards Zion:

> On the plane there were no seats. Just mattresses [...] We were frightened [...] My sister and I wondered, in this new land, would our babies be born white? We, the people of the House of Israel, we were going home. No more wandering. No longer landless [...] What is your name? Malka. Malka, do not be shy. You are going home. And when we arrived, and stepped down off the plane, we all kissed the ground. We thanked God for returning us to Zion (201).

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[6] All subsequent references to *The Nature of Blood* refer to this edition. Page numbers will hereafter be given parenthetically.

[7] Phillips's reflections on Israel in his interview with Maria Festa further illuminate his critique of identities constructed around a single organising principle: "I have been to Israel a couple of times and didn't feel comfortable and I left the country early. I simply didn't like the idea of a state where identity was principally built around just one thing. I saw young Israeli children carrying machine guns who were militarized and I thought, 'no, don't do that to the children, don't do that to them. This is not healthy'" (2020: 170).

The emotional force of this passage lies in the tension between expectation and reality. Zion is imagined as the end of exile, the place where displacement finally gives way to belonging. Yet Phillips deliberately juxtaposes this hope with the subsequent experience of discrimination, revealing that historical suffering does not automatically generate more inclusive communities. Victimhood, he suggests, offers no guarantee against the reproduction of hierarchy, prejudice or exclusion.

By recovering the largely forgotten history of Ethiopian Jews, Phillips also rewrites the history of Israel itself. Rather than celebrating the nation exclusively as a refuge after the Holocaust, he reveals the contradictions that accompanied its formation and questions every narrative founded upon ethnic or cultural homogeneity. Malka herself recognises that entry into the promised land was already conditioned by mechanisms of selection: "Not everybody was here. It was impossible to take everybody. Relatives were being abandoned. [...] I was lucky, for my parents, and my brother and sister, were relatively healthy" (199).

The language of rescue is therefore inseparable from the language of exclusion. Even within a community created in response to persecution, distinctions between those considered worthy of inclusion and those left behind continue to operate. Phillips thus demonstrates that the logic of domination is not confined to colonialism or fascism; it re-emerges whenever human value is determined through categories of purity, usefulness, race or difference. Malka's final reflections expose this contradiction with remarkable clarity:

> This Holy Land did not deceive us. The people did. The man at the hostel, he said to us, 'Welcome, my black brothers and sisters. You are helping us to understand what we are doing here'. Is this true? Are we helping you? I know now what a stamp is. I can use a telephone. I, too, can turn night into day by simply pressing a switch. I wear shoes. I have seen a highway. But please. My people never killed themselves (207-208).

The distinction between the Holy Land and "the people" is crucial. Phillips does not condemn the idea of home itself; he questions the human relationships through which that idea is enacted. The failure lies not in the aspiration to build a community, but in the persistence of hierarchical forms of thinking that transform difference into exclusion. Stephan's encounter with Malka therefore becomes the ethical centre of this section of the novel. Together their stories shift the meaning of belonging away from territory, blood, and national identity towards a relational understanding of community founded upon reciprocity, mutual recognition and shared responsibility. Phillips consequently begins to imagine an alternative to the exclusionary logic that has shaped so many historical projects of belonging: a community grounded not in purity but in relation.

3.2. Reimagining Memory: Eva Stern and the Jews of Portobuffolè

If Stephan and Malka expose the fragility of belonging whenever it is grounded in territory or national identity, the story of Stephan's niece, Eva Stern, shifts Phillips's attention towards another form of trespassing: the recovery of memories that history has attempted to erase. By linking uncle and niece across generations, Phillips suggests that exile, trauma,

and unbelonging are not isolated experiences but inheritances that reverberate across family histories as well as across collective memory. Throughout *The Nature of Blood*, remembrance is never presented as a nostalgic return to the past. Rather, memory becomes an ethical act through which forgotten lives are restored to visibility and silenced histories are reinserted into the collective imagination. Phillips's fragmented narrative therefore performs what the theoretical framework has defined as a practice of "learning to unlearn" (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012: 1): readers are invited to abandon linear and selective understandings of European history in order to recognise the plurality of voices that have traditionally remained outside its official archive.

Eva's narrative embodies this process more painfully than any other character in the novel. Having survived Bergen-Belsen after witnessing the extermination of her entire family, she appears initially to represent the possibility of renewal. Her transfer to Cyprus and subsequent arrival in England seem to promise a new beginning after the catastrophe of the Holocaust. Yet Phillips deliberately frustrates this expectation. Gerry's betrayal is not presented as the simple failure of a romantic relationship but as the final denial of belonging. Having already lost her family, her homeland and her community, Eva also loses the possibility of imagining a future built upon reciprocity and love. Her tragedy therefore lies less in deception than in the impossibility of reconstructing a relational self after systematic dehumanisation. Her final words encapsulate this longing for a home that no longer exists:

> I know that somewhere, buried deep inside me, is a place where I will be able to lay down in peace [...] Mama. Papa. I do not know in what strange land you are buried. Or what stubbled growth or building defaces the earth above your precious bones. But I am tired. And I want to come home [...] Everything will be fine. Please. Don't worry (198).

Home, here, ceases to designate a geographical destination and becomes instead an impossible landscape of memory. Eva does not seek England, Palestine or any other national space; she longs for the relationships violently erased by genocide. Phillips thus demonstrates that the most devastating consequence of the Holocaust was not only physical extermination but the destruction of the human bonds through which identity and belonging become imaginable. The desire to "come home" ultimately expresses the longing to recover a community that history has rendered irretrievable.

Eva's testimony invites comparison with one of the foundational narratives of Holocaust memory, *Anne Frank's Diary*. Like Anne Frank, Eva is a young Jewish woman whose voice survives the destruction of her family; like Anne, she passes through Bergen-Belsen, where silence itself becomes a strategy of survival. The comparison, however, also illuminates the significant differences between the two narratives. Whereas Anne's diary has become one of the most powerful symbols of hope, Eva's story resists any consolatory interpretation. Liberation from the concentration camp does not coincide with liberation from trauma. Instead, Phillips exposes the enduring psychological violence that persists long after the physical end of persecution, reminding readers that survival alone cannot restore the relational world destroyed by genocide.

This commitment to recovering neglected memories reaches its fullest expression in the episode of the Jews of Portobuffolè. At first glance, the narrative appears disconnected from the rest of the novel; yet it performs one of Phillips's most radical acts of historical rewriting. By reconstructing the fifteenth-century persecution of a Jewish community in northern Italy, Phillips retrieves an almost forgotten episode of European history and places it alongside the Holocaust, colonialism, and contemporary racism. The effect is not to equate different historical events but to reveal the persistence of recurring mechanisms of exclusion across time.

As Phillips recalls, many of these Jewish families had migrated from Cologne seeking greater security within the Venetian Republic, believing that Venice offered protection from persecution. Yet, despite this promise, "they arrived as foreigners, and foreigners they remained" (50). Once again, migration fails to guarantee belonging. The community becomes the object of suspicion, religious prejudice, and economic resentment until three Jewish men are falsely accused of the ritual murder of a Christian child and condemned to death. Before their execution, one of them quietly rejects the fabricated accusation:

> We rise with the sun [...] My brothers, do not let them see you weeping like this. Today, we must leave this cell and begin our final journey, but let us do so with dignity [...] We are going home [...] (*I tell you, I have never heard of this boy, Sebastian New. I have never seen such a boy. I know not what you are talking about*) (181-182).

The dignity of this testimony contrasts sharply with the irrational violence surrounding it. Phillips is less interested in reconstructing the historical event than in exposing the mechanisms through which prejudice becomes accepted as historical truth. Rumour, fear and inherited stereotypes prove stronger than evidence, allowing fabricated narratives to justify exclusion and death. By restoring this forgotten episode to literary memory, Phillips challenges the selective nature of European historiography and reminds readers that persecution did not begin with the twentieth century but forms part of a much longer genealogy of intolerance. Rather than simply recovering a forgotten episode, Phillips imagines what Cecile Sandten defines as a "post-empire imaginary"[8], a narrative space where Europe's hidden histories are brought into dialogue rather than organised through exclusionary hierarchies.

Read together, Eva and the Jews of Portobuffolè illuminate the ethical function of Phillips's rewriting. Both narratives recover lives that dominant historical accounts have marginalised, refusing to allow them to disappear into silence. If Eva restores an individual voice to the history of the Holocaust, Portobuffolè restores an entire community to European cultural memory. In both cases, literature becomes an act of resistance against oblivion. Phillips does not simply remember forgotten histories; he reimagines them, inviting readers to question inherited narratives and to recognise memory itself as an ethical form of relational responsibility towards those whom history has attempted to erase.

[8] Sandten describes Phillips's project as one that "extends, complements, and fills in the gaps of collective memory, […] creating a post-empire imaginary that 'writes back' to, but also transcends, the former centres of colonial discourse" (2015: 345).

3.3. Reimagining Love: Rewriting Othello Beyond the Borders of Race

If Eva and the Jews of Portobuffolè recover forgotten memories from the margins of European history, Phillips's rewriting of Shakespeare's *Othello* represents the culmination of his ethical and imaginative project. Here, trespassing borders no longer concerns only geography or historical memory, but the literary *canon* itself. By rewriting one of the foundational texts of Western literature, Phillips demonstrates that canonical narratives are neither immutable nor complete: they too can be questioned, transformed and reimagined. As Maria Festa observes, although the protagonist is never explicitly named, his identity is ultimately confirmed by an editorial note referring to Shakespeare's tragedy (2020: 30). The omission is significant. Phillips is less interested in reproducing Shakespeare's Moor than in reconstructing the humanity that the tragic narrative ultimately destroys.

Like the other protagonists of *The Nature of Blood*, Othello initially experiences exclusion and unbelonging. Conscious of his African origins, he recognises that he remains an outsider within Venetian society: "I was clearly not one of their own" (129). At the same time, however, he proudly recalls his royal lineage, carrying his "blood" as a sign of identity and historical rootedness rather than racial superiority. Phillips immediately complicates this apparent certainty during a dinner at a Venetian senator's house, where one of the senator's sons provocatively reminds him of the presence of Black slaves in Venice. Othello responds:

> I countered with the information that I had once been held as a slave, yet, as unpleasant as this situation had been, I had survived to tell the tale. I watched this boy carefully and, deciding that the victory was already secured, I chose not to mention my royal blood, or the fact that many Romans and Greeks had also been held as slaves, and so the moment passed (126).

The exchange reveals that identity is never reducible to a single category. Royal blood, slavery, military prestige, and foreignness coexist within Othello's experience, resisting every essentialist definition. Phillips thus dismantles racial binaries while exposing the inadequacy of inherited notions of purity, origin and social hierarchy. As Alejandro Nadal-Ruiz observes, Phillips's Othello ultimately becomes "master of his narrative" (2021: 201), reclaiming the authority to narrate his own multifaceted identity and to challenge the cultural hierarchies that have traditionally defined him from the outside.

Yet Othello's greatest struggle is not his racial difference but his inability to understand the language of intimacy. Throughout this section, Phillips transforms Shakespeare's military hero into a man profoundly vulnerable before love. His deepest fear is not rejection because of the colour of his skin, but the possibility of failing to communicate with Desdemona and of misunderstanding the emotional language that binds two people together. Reflecting upon his own life, Othello confesses:

> After all, since the age of seven I had known only the power that comes through confident usage of the arm in the heat of battle. Despite my royal blood, the remote language of love had remained alien to me (142-143).

This confession fundamentally reorients Shakespeare's tragedy. Phillips suggests that violence is not Othello's natural condition; rather, it is the consequence of a world that has taught him the language of war but never that of love. The novel therefore shifts the centre of the narrative from military power to emotional vulnerability, presenting love not as weakness but as the most radical form of trespassing. To love another person is to cross the boundaries of race, language, culture, and identity without seeking to dominate or possess them.

Such a perspective resonates with Riane Eisler's distinction between dominator and partnership systems. Whereas domination is sustained through hierarchy, fear and control, partnership emerges through reciprocity, dialogue and mutual recognition. Phillips's rewriting repeatedly privileges this second possibility. Othello does not conquer Desdemona; he gradually learns to encounter her. Significantly, his desire to understand her letters leads him to the Venetian Jewish ghetto, where he seeks the help of a Jewish scholar. Once again, Phillips intertwines narratives that history and literature have traditionally kept apart. The Moor, the Jews, Venice, and Shakespeare cease to exist as separate stories and become part of a broader relational network founded upon dialogue and shared vulnerability. Unlike Shakespeare's tragedy, Phillips allows this encounter to culminate in hope rather than destruction:

> Then I fell to one knee and sealed our union with the tenderest of kisses. Was I truly the same man who had arrived lonely and unannounced? The same man who had sailed in a state of spellbound wonder right into the heart of this city-state? [...] The same man who had initially struggled with the language, and who had, at times, wondered if he would ever settle among these strange and forbidding people? (144).

This scene represents far more than a romantic conclusion. It symbolises the possibility of imagining relationships that are not determined by exclusion, suspicion or violence. Phillips rewrites Shakespeare's tragedy not to erase its ending but to demonstrate that every canonical narrative contains unrealised possibilities. A different future can be imagined because a different form of relation is possible.

Phillips nevertheless refuses a naïve optimism. The reader already knows that Othello's later desire for acceptance within Venetian society will once again expose him to the logic of possession, jealousy, and domination that ultimately shapes Shakespeare's tragedy. The possibility of partnership therefore remains fragile rather than guaranteed. Partnership is not presented as a stable condition that permanently supersedes domination, but as a contingent relational practice that remains vulnerable to the re-emergence of exclusion and violence. Yet this fragility is precisely the point. Throughout *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips repeatedly insists that belonging, memory and love are never fixed achievements but ethical practices that must be continually renewed. His rewriting of *Othello* ultimately becomes an invitation to imagine that even the most canonical stories, and the histories they continue to shape, may be rewritten through encounter, reciprocity and the courage to recognise the humanity of the Other.

In this sense, Othello's story mirrors what has been described as the novel's "flu-

id, horizontal model of relationships" (Nadal-Ruiz 2021: 212), a partnership architecture through which Phillips dismantles the traditional centre/margins opposition by weaving together previously disconnected histories.

4. Weaving Histories Beyond Linear Narratives

Phillips's project of trespassing representational borders extends beyond the novel's characters and historical episodes to shape the very form of *The Nature of Blood*. The fragmented structure of the novel refuses chronological progression, stable narrative perspectives and clearly separated historical narratives. Rather than organising events into self-contained chapters, Phillips constructs a continuous movement of memories, voices, and temporalities that interrupt, overlap and illuminate one another. Form itself thus becomes an ethical and political strategy: the novel dismantles the linear logic through which Western historiography has traditionally classified identities, histories and cultures into separate and self-sufficient categories. As Maria Festa observes, *The Nature of Blood* is Phillips's "most elaborate and challenging novel". The narration

> is not organized into chapters: it is an aggregate of historical occurrences and situations that occur over a large span of time between the fifteenth and the twentieth century [...] [Phillips's] reflections shift from Africa, which was at the centre of the European colonial expansion and the slave trade, to Europe, where the prejudice against Jews has its origin, persisted across the centuries and culminated in the murderous master race ideology of the German Nazis (Festa 2020: 28-29).

Phillips's narrative technique may therefore be understood as a weaving of relational histories rather than a succession of isolated events. Stories migrate across centuries just as his protagonists migrate across borders, generating unexpected encounters between Renaissance Venice, the Holocaust, colonialism, Zionism, and Shakespeare. Temporal distance is progressively dissolved, suggesting that prejudice, displacement, violence, and exclusion are not discrete historical episodes but recurring patterns that continually resurface under different political, cultural and ideological forms. The novel consequently invites readers to perceive history not as a linear sequence but as a network of echoes, interruptions and recurring human experiences.

This relational structure also challenges conventional expectations of narrative coherence. Characters often appear before they are identified; voices emerge without immediate explanation[9]; stories begin only to be interrupted by different temporalities before returning many pages later. Significantly, Othello himself remains unnamed for much of the narrative, while dictionary entries such as "Venice" (160), "Ghetto" (160), "Othello" (166), or "Suicide" (185) abruptly interrupt the flow of the text. These formal dislocations compel readers to

[9] Phillips's reflections on his creative process confirm the centrality of voice to his characterisation. As he explained in an interview with Maria Festa: "I don't even know I have a character fully realized until I hear the character's voice. The key element is the voice. […] I need to *feel* the rhythm when they're speaking. I need to know if they have an accent. Once I can hear the voice then I know that I have a character", Festa (2020: 168).

question the stability of the categories through which both literature and history have traditionally been organised. Identity itself becomes a process of discovery rather than a fixed point of departure.

Phillips's fragmented narrative therefore performs formally what the novel repeatedly argues thematically. If the protagonists trespass geographical, cultural and emotional borders, the text itself trespasses the borders separating genres, historical periods, canonical and marginal narratives, fiction and history, memory and testimony. The form refuses closure because human experience itself cannot be reduced to neat chronological or ideological divisions. Instead, the novel constructs what may be described as a relational archive in which forgotten lives, suppressed histories and canonical narratives coexist in continuous dialogue.

Ultimately, *The Nature of Blood* demonstrates that form is never merely aesthetic. The novel's fragmented architecture embodies its ethical vision, inviting readers to move across identities, histories and cultures with the same openness that its protagonists continuously seek. Phillips does not simply represent relationality through his characters; he asks readers to experience it through the very act of reading. By weaving together stories that initially appear disconnected, he transforms narrative itself into an act of trespassing and reimagining, suggesting that alternative futures can only emerge once the artificial borders separating histories, communities and memories have been dismantled.

5. Concluding Remarks

Throughout *The Nature of Blood*, Caryl Phillips demonstrates that borders are never merely geographical. They are historical, cultural, emotional, and epistemological constructions that shape the ways in which individuals and communities imagine themselves while excluding others. By bringing together Jewish, African and European histories, Phillips refuses the compartmentalisation upon which dominant historical narratives have long relied. Instead, he constructs a relational landscape in which seemingly distant experiences of exile, racism, persecution, migration, memory, and love continually illuminate one another. Trespassing, in this sense, becomes far more than the crossing of physical frontiers: it is an ethical and imaginative practice of questioning inherited certainties and reimagining alternative forms of coexistence.

Read through McLeod's notion of *trespassing*, the decolonial critique of the *modernity/coloniality matrix of power*, and Eisler's distinction between dominator and *partnership* systems, *The Nature of Blood* ultimately emerges as an invitation to rethink not only history but also the future. As Johny Pitts has observed, Phillips "connects dots that challenge collective amnesia about Empire and writes and rewrites black people into their own history with depth and nuance" (2017: 46). Phillips does not simply recover forgotten stories or rewrite Shakespeare's *Othello*; he reimagines the very conditions through which communities are formed. Belonging is no longer grounded in blood, territory, race or nation, but in the continual ethical practice of encounter, reciprocity and shared humanity. Literature itself becomes a borderland: an imaginative space where fixed identities dissolve, forgotten memories return and new possibilities of relation begin to emerge.

Significantly, Phillips concludes the novel not with triumph or reconciliation, but with an image of openness: "alone on the bench, his arms outstretched, reaching across the years" (212). This final gesture encapsulates the ethical vision that permeates the novel. Those outstretched arms do not embrace one nation, one culture or one history alone; they reach across centuries, borders, memories, and identities, affirming the possibility of relation where violence has produced separation. Ultimately, *The Nature of Blood* reminds us that the most radical act of trespassing is neither political nor geographical, but profoundly human: the willingness to recognise ourselves in the lives and stories of others. In doing so, Phillips invites readers not only to remember differently but also to reimagine more just, caring and partnership-oriented landscapes of the mind.

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