IT'S IN THE BLOOD! OTHELLO AND HIS DESCENDANTS: READING THE SPATIALIZATION OF RACE IN CARYL PHILLIPS' THE NATURE OF BLOOD

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[W]e are hunted, we are pursued by repetitive catastrophes, repetitive Nemesis, and our insight into Beauty – which we may gain at the heart of terror deepens the trial of creation to bridge chasms in itself . . . or else we will continue to perpetuate hierarchies of brutality sponsored unwittingly perhaps by Privilege, hierarchies in which each theatre of inhumanity is placed on a scale to measure which is less horrendous or more hard-hearted than the last. (Wilson Harris, Jonestown)

"You can't change the story while you are in it, and therefore it follows certainly, without question or doubt, that you can't achieve anything by saying NO to what happens in it. The story exists because it has to, and it needs you to be these things so we can know who we are. So your huffing and puffing is nothing more than a temper tantrum, and your indignant fictions are only corrosive fantasies. We need you too much, and we need you as you are." (Abdulrazak Gurnah, Admiring Silence)

This paper examines the representation of race and race relations in a number of recent West Indian and 'Black' British fiction focusing primarily on literary 'blackness' in Caryl Phillips's construction of the 'dis-located' figure of Othello and the ways in which his 'story' prefigures subsequent migrations, displacements and struggle for placement by the strangers within the gate. I begin with a brief analysis of Wilson Harris's The Angel at the Gate (1982) to lead into a discussion of Phillips's representation of Othello in The Nature of Blood (1997), which I wish briefly to examine under the topic the spatialization of race. By the term, the 'spatialization of race,' I refer simply to the ways that non-Europeans, especially black people have been placed both within the physical and the imaginative architecture of Europe. I am looking specifically at the notion of spatialization set out in David Sibley's idea of social contagion in his text Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West (1995). Sibley states:

> There is a history of imaginary geographies which cast minorities, 'imperfect' people, and a list of others who are seen to pose a threat to the dominant group in society as polluting bodies or folk devils who are then located 'elsewhere.' This 'elsewhere' might be nowhere, as when genocide or the moral transformation of a minority like prostitutes are advocated, or it might be some spatial periphery, like the edge of the world or the edge of the city. . . . Portrayals of minorities as defiling and threatening have for long been used to order society internally and to demarcate the boundaries of society, beyond which lie those who do not belong. (49)

But first, to Harris: Harris's novel thematises the journey (indispensable to the migrant consciousness) as both metaphysical and metafictional. There are various references to oceans, seas, voyages, planets and the whole cosmos of traveling. Space in this novel both contracts and expands as Harris's narrator links arrival to departure, black to white, and the corporeal to the ephemeral. It is within this context that Harris's fictions are seen as 'difficult' and evasive, often eliding issues of race and racism both within and outside of his Caribbean settings. But I wish to suggest here that rather than read Harris's work as avoiding pertinent socio-political issues, we may see his novels as engaging in a serious 'dialogue' with these matters by refusing to engage in the cheap politics, or to use a term from the novel, the one-sidedness of race that has come to dominate much of the discourse of late twentieth century early twenty-first century discourse. For example, the search for an authentic Africa, or an authentic India or Europe for that matter has no place in Harris's fiction as he often creates shifting (shifty?) characters that contain hybrid and syncretic notions of race, nation and identities. In fact, there is the sense in which Harris sees these authenticities or authentic cities or states crystallizing or merging or oscillating within a space called the

Americas – that space that contains the confluence of tribes and races. In the novel The Angel at the Gate, Harris transports/transfers/transposes this "American" Amer - Indian vision to London in his construction of the city and its faces and spaces within his "misty conglomerate of space" (21).

While, on the one hand, we are in London of the early 1980s, 1981 to be exact, on the other hand, we are taking a historical journey from the eighteenth century perhaps – the year 1769 is mentioned in association with Joseph Marsden as a slave owner. For example, we have the Indian figure Khublall, "versed in Hindu lore", saying to the Jamaican Jackson, who "had studied literature and history at the University College of the West Indies in the late 1940s", in Shepherd's Bush: "Who doesn't know Marsden of Angel Inn? Your antecedents and my antecedents were taught by him in India, the West Indies, South America, USA, Africa, everywhere. And we still feel attached to him. Sometimes it's as if nothing's really changed …." (Angel 91). Marsden is both their predecessor and their contemporary, embodying both past and present, and in a sense, both literature and history. In The Angel at the Gate, we find the writer as shamanic medium, conveying both a conception of visionary transpersonal memory and the author or text remembering his/its own antecedent works (103). Marsden combines the figures of slave owner, plantation overseer, guide, director, priest, and psychiatrist - the role of shaman that is essential to Harris' notion of ars combinatiora (combinatory art) – that speaks to the whole notion of intertextuality. Harris' intertextuality is more than mere self indulgence however, it allows him to focus on aspects of history and literature by reordering perceptions of the past and creating new possibilities for understanding the complex interrelationships of innocence and guilt via the breakdown of tyrannical biases of stratified social attitudes and linear documentary history.

Memory is an important motif/device in the novel and it functions as inner, spiritual process: the notes of a psychoanalyst and the automatic writing of a schizoid patient under hypnosis. Here we have the case of writer as medium witnessing to socio-historical events. The story in Angel is in fact drawn from the automatic writing of Mary Stella Holiday who undergoes hypnosis by Father Joseph Marsden. The narration is split between two characters, Mary and Stella. All of the characters in the novel moreover, flow within Harris's slipstream as one character slips into another from time to time, and from space to space. This works to facilitate Harris' notion of intertextuality and cross-culturality. As Ghose points out, Harris has said of cross-culturality that it

> differs radically from multiculturality. There is no creative and re-creative sharing of dimensions in multiculturality. The strongest culture in multiculturality holds an umbrella over the rest which have no alternative but to abide by the values that the strongest believe to be universal. Cross-culturality is an opening to a true and variant universality of a blend of parts we can never wholly encompass though when we become aware of them we may ceaselessly strive for an open unity that they offer. In this quantum way we may forestall the tyranny of one-sided being.

This leads me to a discussion of Caryl Phillips's work as an examination of cross-culturality in Britain within his intertextual narrative The Nature of Blood. I have used Harris's novel as a gateway into Phillips' work and I am examining the complex gateway in Phillips's writing in his interrogation of the place of the black man in European society and culture. Phillips's novels explore among other themes, the spatialization of race and

the effects of racism on black subjectivity and identity. The theme is poignantly and effectively represented in this experimental and difficult novel. In The Nature of Blood, Phillips plays with history and literature – with historiography and literary production, in his intertextuality with a number of historical events and texts. For example, his construction of Venice in the Othello narrative and that of Portobuffole are intertextual with Shakespeare's Othello and The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare's construction of both Othello and Shylock are done against a constitution of whiteness as dominant and naturalized and as an emergent ideology of white supremacy. In this regard, we may read whiteness as having been racialized in connection with ideologies of nationhood and nationalism. This provokes two questions. Firstly, are Othello and Shylock threats to whiteness? Secondly, how effectively does blackness perform against whiteness in these dramas? I am interpreting 'blackness' here as a property of those who are seen as enemies of England's/Europe's dominance and purity of blood – the Irish, Jews, Africans, and all non-British and non-Europeans. In fact, what marks the Jews and the Africans in Phillips's The Nature of Blood is a blackness that opposes the whiteness/superiority of the European. Both Othello and Shylock, in their blackness, connote all that is non-European, all those qualities that cannot be contained by certain cultural boundaries. It can be seen from these brief comments that earlier conceptions of blackness were not restricted merely to race or colour but to whatever was considered a threat to the dominance and purity of whiteness as a way of being and seeing. For example, as Kim F. Hall points out, Elizabeth's England regarded both the Spanish and the Irish in their opposition to its Englishness as black. So that Elizabeth's fairness or whiteness was compared to the 'blackness' of the King of Spain and his Spanish threat during the days of the Armada (69). Likewise Iago's language where he speaks of the black ram tupping the white ewe would seem to indicate that he saw Othello and his blackness as a threat to whiteness. However, discussions of blackness and whiteness in Shakespeare's plays are not unproblematic and without contestation, but as Ben Okri has observed, "even if Othello was originally not a play about race, its history has made it one" (qtd. in Loomba, 150). Similarly, the whole attitude towards Shylock is not only directed towards his occupation as a moneylender or at his wealth, but more specifically at his Jewishness (blackness). In other words, I do not attach to Othello or Shylock any unproblematic or uncontested 'blackness' (Africanness or Jewishness).

Thus, as Ania Loomba suggests, there is an "urgent" need to "move beyond European representations . . . when we study the Shakespearean encounters with non-English [non-European] players and intellectuals" (Loomba 151). Phillips's construction of the narratives of Othello and the Jews of Portobuffole can be read as a re-reading/re-visioning of Shakespeare's Venetian plays. In the case of Othello, Phillips pre-dates and provides his version of its history, pre/faces the characterization of Othello and provides a different perspective through which to read this play. In addition, Phillips's socio-cultural origins (black, male, West Indian) influences his 'reading' of Shakespeare's Othello and the literary history involved in criticisms of the play. As Louis Montrose has observed in his essay "Professing the Renaissance: the Poetics and Politics of Culture":

> Experiences of historical and cultural exclusion or otherness may, of course, provoke a compensatory embrace of the dominant culture, a desire for acceptance and assimilation; but they may also provoke ambivalent or even contestatory attitudes, and provide vantage points for the appropriation and critique not only of Renaissance texts but also of the interpretive norms of Renaissance studies. (25)

Phillips himself has pointed out in an interview with Frank Birbalsingh that he has read (and continues to read) Othello in a different light from readings which he had inherited:

> At Oxford University I read Shakespeare's Othello with a different feel than most of my contemporaries. I remember my tutor telling me that he didn't have anything to say about my essay on Othello because it was so personal. He hadn't thought about Othello as a man who was being used by society. My tutor approached the text through the easier prism of Desdemona or Iago; but I approached it through the magical window of a man who, whether he liked to or not, continually made references to his origins through the imagery in his speeches. (Birbalsingh 191)

Phillips's participation in European literary texts, history and literary history, is 'complicated' by his socio-cultural origins, by his experiences as a West Indian living and working in Britain. However, his writing in this novel is so self-consciously postcolonial that it demonstrates much of the nervous condition of the migrant writer, writing for a decidedly postcolonial 'exotic' market. There is the sense in which Phillips's Othello may stand for Phillips himself, the black British literary 'success' nervously writing from the heart of Europe's literary centre.

Phillips' earlier writing in The Final Passage (1985) also shows such spatialization of race in the restricting of black peoples – West Indians, Africans and Asians – to particular zones. Reference may also be made here to Samuel Selvon's The Lonely Londoners (1956) and Moses Ascending (1975) and their parodic rewrite in the Nigerian born writer, Biyi Bandele's The Street (1999) for further representation of this spatial ordering of blackness. In the latter novel, Bandele constructs the streets and avenues of Brixton as a "crazy parody of black urban ghetto space" where the various politico-religious voices are heard to speak their various versions of race/ethnic/religious philosophies:

> Brixton High Street was, as always, busy and frenetic, packed with the ever-present floating cast of the walking wounded and the clinically Undead; stricken men whose conscience hovered above them like flies over a banquet of dung; damaged souls haunted by memories of past transgressions and paralysed with guilt for sins not yet committed. (Bandele 11).

With its snappy dialogue and jazz-like breaks and crescendos, embracing a trance-like dream style, and a cut and paste narrative technique, the novel constructs Brixton and its environs as the places where the racial, ethnic, gender and religious discourses of 1990s London are performed within the polymorphic spaces and in the polyphonic voices of contemporary urban space. For example, just outside the tube station, we find the Heckler, one of the cast of characters, often locking horns with "the street clerisy" – the "gurus, roshis, lamas, shamans, revolutionaries, avatars, seers . . . and prophets" (Bandele 13) – in a jousting tragicomedy of street theatre (reminiscent of Ben Okri's short story "Stars of the New Curfew" [1988]), on the myriad topics concerning the lives and destinies of the 'migrants' of Brixton. Within the interstices of the many points in the journey, we encounter the many faces and spaces of contemporary Brixton – through mutation and transmutation. Alongside the often humourous street theatre, the novel treats the reader to insightful passages of social commentary on the history of the area:

> In the aftermath of several riots, an urban-regeneration scheme known as the Brixton Challenge . . . suddenly emerged from its lassitude. . . . Those who had lived through the nebulous years when Brixton was but

> a disease that officially did not exist and had given up trying to explain the place to visitors watched with interest. In the New Brixton, the old mean streets had become the playgrounds and night-haunts of Trustafarians and Afro-Saxon literary, media and artistic types. As house prices in trendier neighbourhoods up north traveled to the Himalayas, many first-time homebuyers exfiltrated across the Thames and headed South. (Bandele 17-18).

In addition, Bandele constructs a central character, Nehushta (the daughter of a Nigerian father, Ossie Jones and a British (white) mother Kate) who is among other things, an itinerant artist who paints "the faces of [the] band of nameless vagrants that drifted like flotsam on the sporadically turbulent streets of Brixton . . . the recurring faces on the streets around her" (183 & 184). One of these faces is that of Mr. Bill the word-seller, whom we later discover is the real narrator of the story. Another of the central characters, Dada, another Nigerian, is also an artist, a writer, who in the end wishes to write a book about Brixton: "about the weird and wonderful, sometimes saddening, constantly exhilarating characters that people the streets . . . and give it that strange, phantasmagoric quality which is called surreal. He would have at the book's heart several people reaching out to one another, searching for love. Sometimes being thwarted and sometimes not" (286).

We are reminded that multiculturalism does not mean the absence of race or racism, gender or sexism, religion or religious intolerance, but that these are brought into the new multicultural 'melting-pots' by the neo-tribes that inhabit these new urban spaces. But the question to be asked here is 'Do these neo-tribes enact a new racism or merely refresh old racisms?' London's 'new tribes' from Selvon's The Lonely Londoners to Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia (1991) to Bandele's The Street to Leila Aboulela's Minaret (2005) follow trajectories of urbanization employed by the migrant communities in marking out space for themselves amidst and against Britain's harsh geography of exclusion. These trajectories of urbanization are carried out against the backdrop of another earlier migrant to another earlier European metropolis, namely, Shakespeare's Othello in Venice. Othello prefigures the new migrants of London's post-colonial world – a world that in the language of Nehushta of Bandele's novel "gets meta and meta and where every post is postponed" (97). However, we have moved in the novels of the late 20th and early 21st century from the curiosity of race to the curiosity of religion and culture and all the baggage of individuation. We have also moved from the careful and deliberate placing of blackness and non-Britishness in the early migrant years to the angry, displaced and dislocated Londoners of the 1990s. It is on this point that Phillips' writing and that of the later generation of black British writers has focused thematically. However, though Phillips is wary of "the prolonged wandering of the displaced, who inevitably become the victims of handy theories, particularly if the host country is in trouble" (Tribe 126), I concur with Calbi that he is also "skeptical of any attempt on the part of the displaced to surrender to temporary triumphs" (Calbi 42).   Hence the narrator's caustic critique of Othello in the closing paragraphs of the 'Othello narrative' in The Nature of Blood.

In his essay, "Negotiating the Ship on the Head", Kwame Dawes states that "colour played a significant part in the defining of race, nationalism and culture in the business of Britishness" (258). Thus race and racism have figured significantly in their textual work. For example, in her novel Minaret, Aboulela thematises the place of the Muslim

woman within the Western metropolis. Here, race merges with religion and the refugee status in the construction of female subjectivity and identity. When Najwa, the protagonist, remarks "but I had changed. My whole life had changed. There was just me now. No Mama, no Baba, no Omar, just me, fumbling about in London" (150), she echoes the sentiments of the refugee migrant consciousness (so often associated with the African presence in Britain as opposed to the West Indian or the Asian). The fact that Najwa sees herself as being lost in London speaks to the whole issue of the spatialization of race or the place of the other within the White City. Later in the narrative, Anwar, her boyfriend, says to her "Look here, no one knows our background, no one knows whose daughter you are, no one knows my politics. We are both niggers, equals" (157). Najwa's search for place emphasizes a need to belong, not necessarily to London or the White City, but to feel comfortable or at home in her skin. Later in the narrative she states her longing for "a country that was a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams. A country we could leave at any time, return to at any time and it would be there for us, solid, waiting. . . . Thank God my parents didn't divorce. At least I had a stable family – a fractured country but not a broken home" (165). Like Phillips therefore, Aboulela writes the psychological anguish of the migrant condition. Aboulela's narrative is not only concerned with race but with the politics and place of the Muslim woman in England – with issues of womanhood, religion and the whole matter of being Muslim in a hostile western city in the post 9/11 world.

Phillips' purpose in the Othello narrative appears to be an attempt to fill the aporias in Shakespeare's version – to explore and narrate the psychological anguish of a persona that he described in The European Tribe (1987) as a black European success. In this text, Phillips attempts to endorse a minority discourse that seeks "to wrestle Europe's face around so that she might at least be forced to stare in the mirror" to see her "rampant tribalism" (Tribe xiii), ethnic conflicts, racism and violence. Shakespeare's Othello had been overdetermined from very early in the narrative for a tragic end: there is a certain inevitability to this end from the very beginning of the story for before we meet him he has been labeled "a black ram" or, as Louis Althuser would put it, 'interpellated.' Othello is thus marked for 'death.' According to Maurizio Calbi, in The Nature of Blood, "Phillips' ironic stance toward Othello as a black European success turns into a more complex response which implicitly acknowledges that this Shakespearean other stands for multiple subject positions" (38). Phillips places the Othello story, which is central to The Nature of Blood, in such a way that it charts and influences the flow of the other narrative journeys of race, and racial difference from early modernity to our post-colonial age.

Othello's marginal position/placement within the Venetian ghetto allows him a different view or vision of this European metropolis. He looks askance from the margins. Again, we go to Harris and his notion of marginality not as a minority position but as another vantage point from which to view and comment on the world; indeed, from which to engage the world on one's own terms. Harris refuses to see marginality as a victimized position. Brought to Venice in the employ of the Venetian army, Othello is in fact a literary precursor to the many West Indians, Africans and Asians brought to London in the employ of London Transport and other agencies to work in this gateway city. In fact, many West Indians and Africans were recruited to fight in Britain's 'Great Cause' in World War 2. This is wonderfully narrated in Andrea Levy's recent novel Small Island

(2004), another black British novel that tells the story of West Indians and Blacks generally in Britain's cause.

Alinda Sumers (2004) has argued that blackness has come to be understood as responding to artistic intertextuality and as the expression of the cultural other among us (161). Speaking of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, she contends "they represent the postmodern version of the Black Man and the Dark Lady, elusive figures of the English imagination from the Renaissance to our own time" (161). Of course, one of the strongest representations of this melancholic format of the Romantic imagination is the figure of Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights (1847) (Sumers 163). Likewise, Sumers describes Shakespeare's construction of Othello's tragic flaw, the 'epileptic fit,' as a contemporary form of melancholy (162). The idea here is that of the black bile which is associated with the melancholic temperament – also with madness, frenzy, and the irrational, all qualities that are designated to blackness.

Sumers argues however that "Othello's illness, like Hamlet's madness, is a symptom not of a flaw, but of the melancholia that afflicts an othered personality" (note 6, 168). It is this otherness that Phillips rewrites in his narrative, first by giving narrative power to Othello to tell his/story, and secondly, to comment on the Venetian society from his peculiar subject position. Othello's narrative rewrites and re-verses the European journey into the heart of darkness by itself following a labyrinthine trajectory into the very heart of whiteness:

> I had moved from the edge of the world to the centre. From the dark margins to a place where even the weakest rays of the evening sun were caught and thrown back in a blaze of glory. I, a man born of royal blood, a mighty warrior, yet a man who, at one time, could view himself only as a poor slave, had been summoned to serve this state; to lead the Venetian army; to stand at the very centre of the empire. (Phillips, Blood 107).

In short, Phillips gives to Othello the subjectivity that had been denied him in Shakespeare's play. The Nature of Blood is concerned with the retrieval of a lost his/story or a lost representation, the rewriting of recorded story, fable, myth and the bestowing of agency on the under-represented individual. The ways in which Othello through his many journeys within Venice's underbelly interprets the city from the perspective of his own experience foreshadows that of the West Indian and African migrant within 20th century Britain. The black general of Phillips's retelling subterraneously links with other figures of dis-location in the representations of the non-European in Europe's centres (Calbi 38). What The Nature of Blood demonstrates in relation to earlier narratives of migration is that whereas before black writing was seen as the sole and unique possession of a specific community it is now seen as a more diversified version/vision as part of a larger, global, but still complex culture.

To return to Harris briefly, there is a metaphor/myth of rebirth or regeneration in his writing that is more than just a flippant call for starting over or to bury the past, for the past cannot simply be buried. Such cheap politics has no place in the serious work of building effective race relations. Much of the work of our later Caribbean writers nudges us in the direction of racism as a repeated enactment. Perhaps the greatest and most effective point to be taken from The Nature of Blood is that while race may be seen as an essence of identity, racism is constituted because groups and individuals repeatedly

enact it.. Phillips' Othello story therefore looks behind the rationality that we assume daily, to explore the unconscious desires, the historical and social forces and the insidious influential ideologies and discourses which sway us from the otherwise rational persons that we would love to believe that we are. In The Angel at the Gate, Harris explores just this kind of irrationality within rationality in his construction of the automatic writing of Mary Stella Holiday alongside the session notes of her psychiatrist, Joseph Marsden. Kevin Baldeosingh employs a similar thematic device in his novel The Ten Incarnations of Adam Avatar (2005) where Adam, the protagonist, relates his ten incarnations as ten separate yet interconnected narratives to his psychiatrist in a crazy and parodic retelling of Caribbean history and myth. In his many incarnations or re-births, Adam is Amerindian, Conquistador, Slave, Slave Owner, Slaver, Pirate, and embodies both male and female within different incarnations. As a moving or moveable icon, Adam reveals not only the many sources or origins of the Caribbean text but also its several rhythms (Indo-American, African, Asian, European) and its cumulative historical relations namely conquests, settlement, colonial organisation and independence, all of which are under-girded by a particular kind of violence. But the moments of annihilative violence in each story is always postponed by another actor/author/reader, the Shadowman who lurks at the subtextual level as the enigmatic figure of rebirth or to use a Harrisian term 'life in death and death in life.' The Shadowman then functions as a witness to the many historical events, histories, fables and myths of Caribbean textuality – a figure of rehearsal and intertextuality, that in a sense, writes on the palimpsest of an 'original' text. The novel thus reveals the fissures and gaps, the utterances and the silences – the paradoxes and the tensions within the Caribbean novel. Baldeosingh's novel further explores and examines the syncretic realities of Caribbean histories and cultures where each incarnation flows into the other like the sea around the Caribbean chain. Hence the movement of the text is not linear as maybe suggested by its historical structure but rather one of ebb and flow ending in the final flow outward awaiting a later ebb, perhaps. Instead of an old world/new world dichotomy held in oppositional relations there is rather a confluence of worlds. In the end, all the stories, all the lives of Adam the avatar of beings relate to a Caribbean discourse that, in the words of Benitez-Rojo (1992), "carries a myth or desire for social, cultural and psychic integration to compensate for the fragmentation and provisionality of the collective being" (189)

This palimpsestual phenomenon has a strong resonance in Phillips's novel, in his interface with European myth/history. Phillips, to cite Harris in The Carnival Trilogy (1993), "addresses a European myth [history] from a multi-faceted and partly non-European standpoint" (171). In his re/configuration of the Othello story, Phillips writes his version on an old European manu/script, possibly Giraldi Cinthio's Hecatommithi, from which Shakespeare took his version (Blood 166). Phillips, in turn, unfixes Othello's Shakespearean moorings, opening him up to other perspectives and interpretations. In addition, the author in his narrative of Eva Stern, her sister Margot, their parents and uncle Stephan, seems to be superimposing this story on that of Anne Frank and her family, providing a different vision through which Anne's story is viewed. (Note that Phillips even names Eva's sister Margot, the name of Anne's sister.) Up against Eva's narrative, are those of Servadio and the Portobuffole incident, Othello's and Malka's. Through this structuring of the novel, Phillips, like Harris, emphasizes the interconnectedness of histories and stories, showing the complexities and ambiguities contained within the events of histories and legends (Booker 137). Phillips thus creates

a space for revisioning histories. In the acknowledgements page at the front of the novel, the author shows his reliance on and indebtedness to history when he mentions two of the texts on which parts of his narrative are based -- <u>Trent 1475</u> by R. Po-Chia Hsia and <u>Portobuffole</u> by Salomone G. Radzik (<u>Blood</u> xi). In a sense, in his Venetian narratives Phillips might well be writing over these two prior texts. In addition, in his definitions of the terms ghetto, Othello and suicide as part of the novel's narrative structure, Phillips like Harris, reveals some of the scaffolding behind his writing - the metafictional nature of his novel.

In <u>The Nature of Blood</u>, using the trope of memory, splintering and compositing history and story, Phillips investigates the use of terror in the process of modernization, from the brutality of late fifteenth-century Venice to Hitlerite Europe to modern Palestine. He traces "the brutal practice of modernization" (Gilroy 1993) from its 'budding' in the fifteenth century to the 'late' modernization of the twentieth century in the building of the 'modern' nation state and national identities. He also explores, through Othello's story, the ways in which non-Europeans were co-opted in the service of this project of 'progress' and 'development' within European cultures. Phillips writes the fascination of civilizations with continued bloodshed and terror throughout their histories – the "repetitive catastrophes" which are "rooted in an addiction to holocaustic sacrifices and rivalry that [runs] deep in antagonistic cultures around the globe" (<u>Jonestown</u> 50), or as Harris states in the introduction to <u>The Carnival Trilogy</u>, "rituals of sameness, of repetitive slaughter ingrained in violence within the symbols of world politics" (xviii). In <u>The Nature of Blood</u>, Phillips constructs a "vision of Western history as perverse rehearsal of atrocity" (DeCoste 770). History in Phillips's novel, then, is read as "a chronology of recurrence" (774) of the nightmare of the West's repetitive slaughter – where "the inevitable rehearsal of arguments and bloody conflicts" (772) over six centuries are written. But I must add, they are 'inevitable' not because they were predetermined by some ancient rivalry, but because of a repetition of choices in world politics, resulting in 'bloody conflicts.'

<u>The Nature of Blood</u> is also a narrative of the attempts by dominant groups to purify their space while viewing others as defiled and polluting. Such obsession with space was characteristic of colonialist and imperialist societies. Here I treat the Venetian society of Phillips's text as a colonial society caught up in the process of early modernity – this was a society at its zenith as a colonial power. Similarly, Hitler's Nazi society of the 1930s demonstrated many of the features of imperialist ambition in its tendency towards spatial control. According to Raymond Betts (1998), "imperialism . . . was a way of seeing things, of arranging space" (94) and this space was arranged racially. This arrangement of space functioned on the We/They principle: We – superior, They – inferior. This spatial architecture is also at work in Phillips's construction of the contemporary Jewish society in its relations with the Ethiopian Jews. These Jews are consigned to "ugly housing at the edges of the city" (<u>Blood</u> 207). In addition the construction of this spatial architecture reveals a deep fear of difference, a fear of the contamination of one's blood by strangers.

Within the socio-cultural architecture mentioned above, colonialist/imperialist societies put systems in place to ensure effective control of space, of individuals and groups within space. For example, the socio- spatial structure of the Venetian city in <u>The Nature of Blood</u> included the "[erection of] boundaries to protect civil society from the

defiled" (Sibley 52). Thus the Jews were placed "beyond the spatial limits of [Venetian] civilization" (Sibley 49). The rulers of the Venetian city-state understood "the role of space in social control" and thus established clearly marked-out social spaces since, as Sibley has stated, in authoritarian regimes there is "an intolerance of ambiguity" (Sibley xiii). These "spatial arrangements [were] the means by which the colonial authorities were able to maintain and indeed expand their authority" (Betts 94). Accordingly, "space was used to establish a hierarchy which distinguished the civilized European from uncivilized native peoples" (Sibley 52). But we are also looking here at geographies of the mind – the arrangement of imaginary space – geographies shaped by the (geo)politics of hegemonic discourses: anthropology, philosophy, and of course, history. These hegemonic discourses write interpellating narratives, which make common sense out of systems of domination and difference such as racism and sexism. The result of this process of interpellation can be such extremes as genocide or gendercide. What we have therefore is the creation of rational violence, sponsored in most instances by the power of the state, or to use a Harris-ian word from the epigraph, 'Privilege.'

In the Venetian society of The Nature of Blood, the power of the state's interpellating narratives is used to *protect* the civil society from 'the defiled.' In the Portobuffole society the ghetto is set up as a functional space to contain the residual Jewish population. The ghetto (camp) runs throughout Europe's history in her relations with 'others'. Historically, the ghetto has functioned as a society of outcasts – usually as punishment for those seen as a threat to the homogeneousness and purity of the dominant group. The ghetto is therefore one of those 'residual spaces' strategically used in the purification of space and the treatment of difference in authoritarian societies (Sibley 50). We are speaking here of a space of cleansing – of ethnic cleansing in many instances – for example the Jewish ghettos in Warsaw during World War II. There were of course other acts of *ghettoization* employed against the others, Jews and Gypsies in particular, by the Nazi hegemonic power during the 1930s and 1940s. The most extreme and nightmarish extension of such *ghettoization* is the death camp.

It is believed that the Jewish ghetto of sixteenth-century Venice was the first of such 'established' ghettos in Europe. Phillips gives this definition of *ghetto*:

> GHETTO: It is generally thought that the word ghetto was first used to describe the section of Venice where, in the sixteenth century, Jews were ordered to live apart Christians in a 'marshy and unwholesome site' to the north of St. Mark's. The Italian word *ghetto* means 'iron foundry', the Venetian Jews being forced to live next to the site of a former foundry. Ghettos are generally subject to serious overpopulation, and they exercise a debilitating effect on the self-confidence of their inhabitants. (Blood 160).

This early ghetto pre-figures such horrifying extensions of the death camp as the holds of the slave-ships of the middle passage, the slave plantations, Hitler's concentration camps and recently, the townships of apartheid South Africa. These ghetto/camps maintained a capacity to criminalize and subhumanize their victims, displaying what Harris terms "a conquistadorial formula that kills alternatives" (Jonestown 9). This formula was adopted in the building of the 'modern' nation-state in Nazi Germany with horrifying results – Hitler's Third Reich literally slaughtered the 'alter/natives,' that is, those individuals and nationalities, Jews, gypsies, and all other 'natives' who were different from and deemed inferior to the German 'master' race.

In adopting this 'conquistadorial formula' in the Venetian society of <u>The Nature of Blood</u>, the 'dominant' group 'conquered' and co-opted foreigners through an inclusion/exclusion policy. Othello's narrative bears ample testimony to such a policy and, on the whole, reveals an insecure, neurotic society. Ironically, Othello, in his struggle for acceptance within this society, manifests its fears and insecurities:

> My standing in society rested solely upon my reputation in the field. My reputation. It was to be hoped that this one small word might lay to rest any hostility that my natural appearance might provoke. My reputation. (<u>Blood</u> 119)

Othello's insecurity is manifested in his language. Conscious of his origins, his race, and the attitude of Venetian society to 'foreigners'; he internalizes the neurosis of the society. Othello describes his move from his African society to Venice as one "from the edge of the world to the center. From the dark margins to a place where even the weakest ray of the evening sun were caught and thrown back in a haze of glory" (<u>Blood</u> 107). This is the power of interpellation . . . to call the object into being and have him accept his *name*. Throughout his narrative, Othello makes the comparison between Africa and Venice (Europe) as one between darkness and light in such terms as "my dark bosom" (<u>Blood</u> 109) and "fair Venice" (<u>Blood </u>107).

It must also be noted that Phillips, through the self-conscious and ambivalent narrative of Othello, opens up the 'closed' and bounded Venetian social order to a counter-discursive critique by showing an insecure and fractured society. Consider this observation by Othello:

> My own position in Venice could be explained by the fact that the republic preferred to employ the services of great foreign commanders in order that they might prevent the development of Venetian-born military dictatorships. In fact, it was common practice to humiliate and break outstanding Venetian soldiers so they did not rise above their station. (<u>Blood</u> 117)

Through readings like these, Othello undermines complacent readings of Venetian society as harmonious and peaceful by interrogating tropes of mastery within the Venetian national narrative. Othello's narrative, in the words of Montrose quoted above, "provide[s] vantage points for the appropriation and critique" of the Venetian national narrative. Using his marginal vision, Othello explores the Venetian society, showing the cracks within the sixteenth-century city-state. However tremulous his narrative, Othello, the subordinated other, inverts the European journey, explores and comments on, and provides means for revisioning the Venetian narrative.

Phillips, however, problematizes this revisionist reading by exposing his Othello to a further (re)reading; this time, a caustic twentieth-century commentary in the final vignette:

> And so you shadow her every move, attend to her every whim, like the black Uncle Tom that you are. Fighting the white man's war for him / Wide-receiver in the Venetian army / The republic's grinning Satchmo hoisting his sword like a trumpet / You tuck your black skin away beneath their epauletted uniform, appropriate their words, . . . their manners, worry your nappy woollen head with anxiety about learning their ways, yet you conveniently forget your own family, and thrust your wife and son

> to the back of your noble mind. . . . Brother, you are weak. A figment
> of a Venetian imagination. . . . Brother, jump from her bed and fly away
> home. (<u>Blood</u> 180 and 182)

It is evident from this passage that Othello's narrative is written over erased memory, an effaced history. There is no mention of an African wife and family in the earlier first person narrative. The third person voice writes the 'final' chapter in this story, filling in the past left out by Othello's amnesia and thus problematising the earlier narrative. The shift from Othello's first-person narrative to this third-person commentary underlines the importance of shifting perspectives on the construction of narratives. This sardonic, twentieth century voice 'reads' the previously 'performed' blackness within a post-modernist/post-structuralist, post-colonialism, that not only interrogates the subjectivity of the earlier Othello by reminding him of his 'black blood' and his wife and son, but also historicises Shakespeare's play by placing it within a chronology that stretches from fifteenth century Venice to a twentieth century post-colonial world. In fact, the twentieth century narrative, in the language of Loomba citing Dipesh Chakrabarty, attempts to 'provincialize' Shakespeare's Othello, not only by "shedding Eurocentric historical categories and methods" (Loomba 163), but by re-locating a displaced figure from European textuality, and from within "a Venetian imagination" (much like Shylock in <u>Merchant</u>), back to the source of his 'origins' however problematic they may be. However, by employing such terms as "black Uncle Tom," "Wide-receiver," and "grinning Satchmo," Phillips's narrator here places Othello within a much wider frame of blackness by identifying him with blackness on the other side of the Atlantic (North America), particularly in the United States of America. Othello might be the victim of Venetian prejudice and intolerance but he is not a character robbed of possibility. Phillips wishes to show that while he might be a man used by the Venetian society, Othello's position in this neurotic society was not overdetermined, but was rather one of choice.

The neurosis of sixteenth-century Venetian society can be read as a precursor to events in twentieth- century Europe. There are certain strands which link the events of the two periods within the novel. The ghetto in Venice has a historical and symbolic association with the camps of holocaust Europe. The burnings of Servadio and the other Jews anticipate the larger gassings and burnings of the death camps. The brutality inflicted on the Jews on trial in Portobuffole has a larger manifestation in that experienced by Eva and her family and others in Hitler's Europe. Phillips goes to great lengths in detailing these horrors in both narratives.

Through his narrative structuring, Phillips writes the 'repetitive Nemesis' that has pursued civilizations, as willing and unwilling prey, across the centuries. Each century has built on the brutality of the last, and producing, in Harris-ian terms, "hierarchies in which each theatre of inhumanity is placed on a scale, to measure which is less horrendous or more hard-hearted than the last" (<u>Jonestown</u> 21).

This of course, culminates at the end of the novel, in the building of another (potential) 'theatre of inhumanity' within post-war Palestine. The story of Malka and the Falashas is the final narrative linking the various themes in <u>The Nature of Blood</u>. Here Malka, the Ethiopian Jew, the symbolic descendent of Othello, meets Stephan, Eva's uncle and symbolic heir of Servadio, Moses and Giacobbe. They are both historical victims of racism and the geography of exclusion. But in the contemporary society in which they meet the Jews now have their own country and have themselves become the *scriptors*

of their own xenophobic and interpellating narrative. European Jewish hegemony in contemporary Palestine, in its need to construct a 'pure' Jewish space, repeats the neurosis adopted by societies embracing the tenets of dangerous nationalisms. I wish to make the point, however, that although this act of racism by the Jews, can be read as a reworking of an old racist script, it can also be viewed as the result of a vision of modernization built around narrow and unhealthy concepts of the nation, and national identity. This vision excludes the Falashas from modernity and the process of modernization. They are good for ethnic decoration, to sing and dance for the tourists coming to Israel, but never to be considered for serious citizenship. Malka and the other Falashas are not pure enough to be considered as *real* Jews; they are constituted as unsanctified – strangers in the 'Promised Land'. Within a culture dominated by what Sibley calls "place-related phobias" (59), where the pure are given the sanctified spaces, Malka and the Ethiopian Jews are consigned to a 'residual space' on the edge of the city: "she lived with her parents and younger sister at the edge of the city in one of the developments into which her people had been placed" (Blood 204). The use of the verb 'place' in this passage denotes a deliberate act of placing on the part of the dominant group in the use of a social cartography "defined by notions of purity and defilement" (Sibley 69). These 'developments' therefore constitute another ghetto – the Falashas are also a contami/nation, the unclean in the Holy Land.

It is ironic, but hardly surprising, that these European Jews, victims of the geography of exclusion, having established their geographical and national space, should now repeat this racism and culture rivalry. They have become the agents and the victims of the neurosis that drove the sixteenth century Venetian state and later, Hitler's Third Reich, as constructed in The Nature of Blood. In Phillips's multi-temporal and multi-layered novel, history has spiraled to a dangerous 'ending' – an ending which however is the beginning of another chapter in terror's manuscript.

Both Phillips and Harris eschew simple nationalist and regionalist stances in their writing. They use their fictions to attempt to "find a way to tap into and release the myriad traces of other humanities – across cultures and histories – which might make the world we inhabit a more truly humane place' (see De Caires Narain). The writing of Phillips and Harris in these novels demonstrate that unless and until societies revise some of the dangerous premises on which they were built, through what Harris calls in "On Marginality" "profound self- judgement" (61), we will continue to *write* one sided narratives of terror.

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