

## “They Are Us”

Interview with Caryl Phillips

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ADRIAN GRIMA

**T**HE MIGRANTS’ “DEEP DESIRE” to get to Europe and to “participate,” says the acclaimed writer Caryl Phillips, “is about as fine a compliment as anybody could pay to the continent. Obviously, it breaks one’s heart to see – on arrival – so much disappointment, loss, and betrayal. Migrants are necessary to the moral, cultural, and social development of all nations. We should welcome them. After all, they are us.”

Caryl Phillips, winner, among others, of the 2004 Caribbean American Heritage Award for Outstanding Contribution to Literature, and the 2004 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book for *A Distant Shore*, was recently invited to Malta to deliver one of the keynote speeches at the triennial conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS). The conference, chaired by Dr Stella Borg Barthet of the University of Malta, dealt with the theme “Sharing Places: Searching for common ground in a world of continuing exclusion,” and issues related to migration featured in a good number of papers.

Caryl Phillips was born in St Kitts, West Indies, was brought up in England, and now divides his time between London, St Kitts, and New York. He is the editor of two anthologies, has written for television, radio, theatre and cinema, and is the author of three works of non-fiction and nine novels, including *Crossing the River* and *The Nature of Blood*. He has been a Fellow of the New York Public Library, and has won the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. After being named the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year in 1992, Caryl Phillips was on the 1993 Granta list of Best of Young British Writers. Currently Professor of English at Yale University in the USA, he has also taught at universities in India, Sweden, Ghana, and Barbados. He is a

Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. His eighth novel, *Dancing in the Dark*, appeared in the autumn of 2005, and his ninth, *In the Falling Snow*, in early 2009.

In an article entitled “Strangers in a Strange Land” (*The Guardian*, 17 November 2001), he reports from Sangatte in France where refugees risk their lives every day in the Channel tunnel trying to get to Britain: “Whether economic or political migrants, these people’s lives are broken and they are simply looking for a chance to begin anew. A chance to work, to contribute, to make something of themselves. To begin again at the bottom of the pile.”

In another article, “Necessary Journeys” (*The Guardian*, 11 December 2004), he reflects on the time when, twenty years before, as an aspiring writer fleeing Britain’s race and class stereotypes, he decided to travel all over Europe and beyond. His travels eventually led him to write *The European Tribe* (1987), a chronicle of a year’s wanderings, to which he added a new epilogue in 2000, which is also, however, a book of powerful essays about Europe and what he calls the “European tribe,” a global community of whites caught up in an unyielding, eurocentric history.

“The gift of travel,” he wrote in “Necessary Journeys,” “has been enabling for me in the same way that it has been enabling for those writers in the British tradition, those in the African diasporan tradition, and those in the Caribbean tradition, many of whom have found it necessary to move in order that they might reaffirm for themselves the fact that dual and multiple affiliations feed our constantly fluid sense of self.”

“Healthy societies,” writes Phillips, who is one of Britain’s key writers on the migrations and movements associated with the Atlantic slave trade, “are ones that allow such pluralities to exist and do not feel threatened by these hybrid conjoinings. [...] As a young writer, travel enabled me to understand the importance of constantly reinterpreting and, if necessary, reinventing oneself is an admirable legacy of living in our modern culturally and ethnically fluid world.”

Adrian Grima (AG) met Caryl Phillips (CP) in Malta during the EACLALS conference.

AG: *In The European Tribe (1987) you wrote about how your first encounter as a Black Briton with New York and the USA was stained with prejudice and verbal violence. Now you live in the USA. Have you changed, or is it the USA that has changed?*

CP: I don’t think that either of us have changed. I just think I’m now better equipped to understand what’s going on, and to write about it. Back then I was very much startled by the shock of the new.

*AG: In your talk at the EACLALS conference here in Malta you spoke about your renewed interest in writing for the theatre. What has prompted this return to your first love?*

CP: Of late I've written drama for the radio and for the screen, and I've begun to attend a lot more theatre. And I've also started to read the plays of the new generation of black British dramatists, work which seems both vibrant and I'm pleased to note is getting a lot of media recognition. All of these factors made me wonder about my own early years as a dramatist for the stage, and reflect upon why I no longer wrote stage plays.

*AG: What has caught your attention in the works of the new generation of British playwrights?*

CP: Well, I'm particularly struck by the intensity of the dialogue, which seems to be a great fusion of colloquial working-class English, and Caribbean creole. I am also somewhat taken with the raw depiction of violence, which today seems to play a much larger part in the lives of young British people than it did in my own time.

*AG: We often talk about the advantages of writing for the screen rather than for the stage. How can writing for the theatre be better or more effective than writing for the television screen or for cinema?*

CP: Well, an evening in the theatre, in the presence of good acting and good writing, can be simply electric in a very visceral way. It's not something I've ever experienced in the cinema or in front of a television screen. There's a 'danger' to the theatre when it's really working at its best.

*AG: At the EACLALS conference you also spoke about how important government subsidies are for new writing. But many people in government here in Malta and elsewhere conveniently argue that writers should be left to their own devices and that they should establish “strategic partnerships” with business. How would you react to such a position?*

CP: Writers, particularly those who work in the theatre, have always been subsidized. Shakespeare relied upon subsidy, as did the Jacobean, the Restoration dramatists, through to those of the late-twentieth century. This kind of 'Darwinian' thinking from governments is very convenient, but not very convincing. We have a right to expect decent roads, good schools and hospitals, and public safety in return for our taxes. I think we also should expect our taxes to subsidize art, and the most heavily cost-intensive artform is probably the theatre.

*AG: How can reliance on government subsidies limit or even stifle new writing?*

CP: Well, it depends what kind of government you're talking about. They're not all benevolent. However, I wonder what kind of 'interference' one might expect from business in the form of say, American Express or McDonalds. I hate to think!

*AG: A friend of mine who has a leading role in the cultural field here in Malta looks back in awe at the Thatcher years; he's convinced that Thatcher pulled Britain's socks up by controlling the unions. I suspect that you have a different take on this one, especially where the Thatcher governments' support of culture is concerned.*

CP: Yes, well let's just say that your friend and I would probably disagree about the price of 'pulling up one's socks'.

*AG: Have the "tentacles of media colonization" in a world increasingly affected by "corporate globalization" continued to grow in recent years? How do they affect artists like yourself?*

CP: It certainly affects me in terms of my publishers. I am published, both in the USA and in Britain, by a huge media conglomerate that is based in Germany. It's a different relationship to publishing, a less intimate and personal one, than when I first began over twenty years ago. As a result, I think that the choices that publishers make these days are much more informed by the market.

*AG: You have written about "the bubble of cheap tourism" in Spain. Have you seen the effects of such a bubble on Malta during your first visit here? What would you have written had one of your chapters been about Malta?*

CP: Well, I am not sure what I would have written about Malta as I didn't arrive looking at the island(s) through critical eyes. However, I certainly noticed some 'cheap tourism'. More than one Maltese person commented to me that the island was attracting the wrong type of tourist. This is also something I hear more and more of in the contemporary Caribbean. Those who arrive on package tours, or on cheap flights, tend not to put that much money back into the economy. I wouldn't dare to comment on Malta, having spent so little time there, but it's interesting how many of the comments I 'recognized' from my understanding of the Caribbean.

*AG: In The European Tribe you wrote about how "unemployment and the world economic crisis are nourishing" a "new European Fascism." Non-*

*Europeans, you wrote, “are not wanted.” In “West Germany it is a crime to scrawl ‘Judenraus,’ but not ‘Turkenraus.’ Europe is in danger of swaddling herself in a familiar hypocrisy.” Is Europe any better today, or have things actually taken a turn for the worse? Is racism among the European tribe still a “passion” rather than an “opinion”?*

CP: I don’t know if things are any worse, but I don’t think things are any better. There are still terrific problems all over Europe with regard to racism, immigration, and dealing with whomsoever is perceived to be the ‘outsider’. I hear the same arguments now that I heard back then. Sometimes the identity of the ‘outsider’ may have changed, but the social, religious, economic, and cultural *raison d’être* for exclusion is employed with the same degree of self-righteous vigour.

*AG: Later on this year, on 4 October 2005, you will be reading with Chinua Achebe at the Queen Elizabeth Hall of the South Bank Centre in London. “We conclude our season,” announce the promoters, “with a unique appearance on stage together by two literary giants.” How do you look at Africa and African literature today?*

CP: I am no expert on African literature, but I read many African writers and I travel quite extensively in sub-Saharan Africa. Because of the example, energy, and brilliance of Chinua Achebe, we have at least two generations of African writers who have found their voice, and a publisher. People need their writers to provide them with a moral compass. This being the case, the continent of Africa, despite the underdevelopment, the poverty, and the socio-economic problems, is in fine shape. The people have an alternative to the crassness of political ‘leadership.’

*AG: A Distant Shore (2003) is a powerful novel about an African immigrant fleeing his unnamed war-torn country. It is a novel that is more relevant than ever to an island like Malta that is having to come to terms with immigration and the conflicting emotions that it stirs in those who are more used to being emigrants themselves. What are your feelings about Solomon’s fate?*

CP: Well, sadly, Solomon’s fate is that of many migrants in Europe. The deep desire to get to Europe and participate is about as fine a compliment as anybody could pay to the continent. Obviously, it breaks one’s heart to see – on arrival – so much disappointment, loss, and betrayal. Migrants are necessary to the moral, cultural, and social development of all nations. We should welcome them. After all, they are us.

For more information about Caryl Phillips, including a list of articles and books about him and his works, interviews and links, and a list of selected articles, go to <http://www.carylphillips.com/>.

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