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Narrative Restraint: Reproducing the Colonial Archive in *Crossing the River* and *Cambridge*

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Abstract

The colonial archive supplies Caryl Phillips with two documents of observation: the journal of an eighteenth-century slaving captain and the planter's ethnography of obeah. Criticism has read both as pastiche, or as evidence that the novelist reduces the complexity of his sources. The novels seem to withhold the ideological confidence sustaining each source document instead of the narrative resolution. Hamilton's ship log copies the arithmetic calculations of John Newton's journal. Unlike Newton, however, Hamilton receives no religious repentance to ease his conscience. Emily Cartwright's diary mimics and reproduces the typical structure and vocabulary of planter ethnographies such as the works of Mrs Carmichael and Frances Lanaghan. The framework upon which these works' authority is grounded never arrives as a reader might expect. Critics of Phillips's works have largely missed what one might call a "textual loan". Specifically, Lanaghan's note about a harmful charm buried outside a doorway clarifies an unexplained incident in Emily's text. Whether a postcolonial novelist should mend the archive or decode it is a pressing question that has preoccupied recent scholarship in this context. In Phillips's fiction, the colonial document is replicated and allowed to break down from within, demonstrating what Saidiya Hartman calls narrative restraint.

Introduction

Two accounts of colonial observation form the focus of this analysis. Both come from people who governed or watched the colonised, and the novels reproduce both texts with their authority untouched. Instead of altering the endings, Phillips, in borrowing from the slaving captain's log and the planter's account of obeah, removes the self-assurance that held each document together. He denies the slave trader's journal the repentance that made it readable. The planter's ethnography, on the other hand, is denied the explanation that supported its view of obeah.

Criticism of the two novels has established the borrowing and disagreed about its value. Evelyn O'Callaghan reads *Cambridge* as a work that "attempts historical reconstruction in order to interrogate and, possibly, rewrite the European record of the West Indies" (O'Callaghan, 1993, p. 34). On the third section of *Crossing the River*, Vanessa Guignery reports that "critics disagree about the proportion of appropriation and creation in this third section; some highlight the novelist's creative transformation and transposition of the historical documents while others insist that Phillips relies excessively on the original text while simultaneously reducing its complexities" (Guignery, 2018, p. 119). Both positions measure the novel against the document it borrows. Neither asks what the borrowing removes.

Postcolonial novelists' treatment of colonial archives is a matter of debate in recent postcolonial scholarship. For Helena Woodard, the historical slavery novel exists to make good the archive's deficiencies: the slave subject, "simultaneously denied voice and unable to speak in her own voice", "has to be both re-created and re-presented; hence reconstituted", and fiction that does so "serves a liberatory function in healing slavery's gaping wounds" (Woodard, 2005). Her instances are Morrison, who read of Margaret Garner's infanticide and then "refused to find out anything else about" her because she "wanted to invent her life", and D'Aguiar, who invents Mintah out of the anonymous hundred and thirty-second victim of the *Zong* (Woodard, 2005). Simon Gikandi proposes the opposite discipline, reading "the lives of the slaves in the archive of the masters, not to recover the authentic voices of the enslaved, but to witness new voices and selves emerging in what appears to be the site of discursive interdiction" (Gikandi, 2015, p. 92), on the principle that such control "still leaves in its wake important signs of that which it tries to control or erase" (Gikandi, 2015, p. 93). The truth of such a document, on his account, "is to be found not in what is described but in what it cannot, or is unable, to say" (Gikandi, 2015, p. 97).

Phillips takes neither course. In these two documents he invents no interiority that the archive did not contain, and he performs no decipherment on the reader's behalf. He reproduces the document and leaves the deciphering to be done or not done, according to whether a source survives to be consulted. It is the practice Saidiya Hartman calls narrative restraint. Each document is read here alongside the source it absorbs. The second of the two collations appears not to have been made before, and it discloses a borrowing that criticism has left unexplained.

The Slaver's Log in *Crossing the River*

The artificiality of the narrative as a constructed pastiche is emphasised in *Crossing the River*. Birat holds that it is the ship's log imitated in *Crossing the River* that "encapsulates the role and place of writing in Phillips's novels", the voices of the slaves being perceptible "only as a form of silence, in the gap between the written document and the context in which it takes on its full meaning" (Birat, 2008, p. 298). The third part of *Crossing the River*, comprising the maritime log and correspondence of slaver captain James Hamilton, aligns with the hybrid generic classification that Peter Hulme identifies in Columbus's diary. That diary is by turns a log-book, recording the navigational details of the voyage, a personal memoir, "an ethnographic notebook, and a compendium of European fantasies about the Orient: a veritable palimpsest" (Hulme, 1995, p. 367). It is by re-contextualising such metanarratives that Phillips works upon these "master" historical accounts.

The log entries are literary echoes of the *Journal of a Slave Trader* kept by the eighteenth-century captain John Newton, to whom Phillips acknowledges an indebtedness for invaluable research material. Vanessa Guignery, who has collated the two documents in detail, distinguishes within Hamilton's journal between passages of free pastiche and passages barely amended from Newton (Guignery, 2018, p. 120). Marcus Wood, comparing the same two documents, reads the alterations in the opposite sense to Guignery, holding that they "reduce the complexities and complicities of the original" (Wood, 2002, p. 59). Wood is right that the borrowing reduces, and wrong about what has been taken.

His case is specific, and where it can be checked against the novel it holds. Newton's "I hope this has been the first affair of the kind on board" becomes Hamilton's "I suspect this has not been the first affair of the kind on board" (Phillips, 1993, p. 115); the boys Newton puts "slightly in the thumbscrews to urge them to a full confession" become slaves put "delicately in the thumbscrews to encourage them to a full confession" (Phillips, 1993, p. 114). The seaman who commits the rape is renamed, and the woman's number is changed with him (Wood, 2002, pp. 58, 60). What goes in each case is Newton's calculation, the pre-emptive defence to owners whose fertile property has been damaged; what arrives is a duller man.

The charge is pressed hardest upon a single entry, and there the collation goes wrong. Wood prints an entry burying "a fine woman slave, No. 11" as Phillips's and an entry burying "2 fine men slaves, Nos. 27 and 43" as Newton's, and asks what it means that Phillips "changes two men into one woman". Phillips's only change, he argues, "is to substitute a number that once did exist as a person into a number which now does not" (Wood, 2002, pp. 55–56). In fact, the attributions work the other way around. When Guignery collates the same documents, she attributes the woman's record to Newton under 9 January 1751 and locates the record of the two men in *Crossing the River* under 20 April 1753, exactly as it appears in the novel (Guignery, 2018, p. 131; Phillips, 1993, p. 116). Phillips did not compress two men into one woman; instead, he turned one woman into two men.

Since fabricated figures still displace numbers that once corresponded to actual human beings, the underlying argument endures in spite of such a factual slip. Guignery responds to this problem directly, pointing out that changing the numbers may keep real victims out of a fictional narrative (Guignery, 2018, p. 132). Her own conclusion is that Phillips's "faithfulness to the original enables him to preserve the memory of the slave trade in its sheer horror", while his "deviations from Newton's journal and letters point to the instability of any text, be it historical or fictional" (Guignery, 2018, p. 119). Still, neither interpretation seems to address the register in which these details appear. The changes affect only minor details: two hours of smoking turn into three, and an ailment from which enslaved people "seldom recover" becomes one from which they "generally recover", all occurring inside an unaltered bookkeeping form. Hamilton's entries and Newton's are kept in the same flat arithmetic. Hamilton records:

> *Thursday 4th February* This morning at daybreak I was saluted by the agreeable vision of my longboat, and soon after she came on board with crew well and a dozen slaves, viz., 4 men, 2 women, 1 man-boy, 1 boy (4 feet) and 4 girls (under-size).
>
> *Wednesday 17th February* . . . An unwholesome land wind. Have the Surgeon and 4 more people ill of a fever. Carpenter purposefully employed in building the bulkheads in the women's room, Gunner cleaning the arms . . . (Phillips, 1993, p. 111)

Newton records:

> The boat returned, brought 6 casks of water and 6 slaves from Mr Tucker's, 2 men, 1 woman, 1 boy, 2 undersized girls. (Newton, 1962, p. 39, as cited in Ward, 2011, p. 213)

The enumeration is the same in both, down to the category of the under-sized girl, and it is not the habit of one entry but the form the log keeps for the length of the voyage. Three months on, the same reckoning returns unaltered:

> *Monday 3rd May* . . . Shortly after 9 a.m. the heavy canoes crossed the bar, and before noon all were aboard. 32 slaves, viz., 19 men, 3 man-boys, 4 women, and 6 girls, and none to be rejected. (Phillips, 1993, p. 122)

That register survives the transfer intact, and Newton himself describes the state of mind in which he kept it: "During the time I was engaged in the slave trade, I never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness" (Newton, 2010, p. 148). What disappears in the borrowing is the man Newton later became, a self he began shaping across those exact voyages. In the narrative he published in 1764, a slaving command, he writes, "affords greater advantages to an awakened mind, for promoting the life of God in the soul"; "I never knew sweeter or more frequent hours of divine communion than in my two last voyages to Guinea" (Newton, 2010, p. 138). The insurrections that the journal meets with thumbscrews and neck-yokes appear in the narrative as dangers from which he "was wonderfully preserved" (Newton, 2010, p. 139). Thirty-four years after his last voyage he published his recantation:

> I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders—that of the slave trade. (Newton, 2010, pp. 25–26)

Ward observes that the journal carries that afterlife with it, Newton having "evolved from being one of the more notorious slave captains to become a determined speaker against the slave trade" (Ward, 2011, p. 54). The journal is read through the recantation, and the document is bearable because its author came to shudder at it. Phillips reproduces the log and gives Hamilton no such afterlife. What Wood reads as a loss of complexity is the withdrawal of that consolation. Hamilton's register takes in what the voyage costs, and does not alter to do it. A man goes over the side, and the entry recording his death closes upon the account books:

> *Saturday 17th April* . . . When we were putting the slaves down this evening, one that was fevered jumped overboard (No. 97). Got him in again but he died immediately between his weakness and the salt water he had swallowed. To remain much longer on the coast may affect my interest and diminish my expected profits. (Phillips, 1993, p. 115)

For a death among the crew the log has a second vocabulary, and the two stand in a single entry:

> *Friday 23rd April* . . . At 7 p.m. departed this life Edward White, Carpenter's Mate, 7 days ill of a nervous fever. Buried him at once. Put overboard a boy, No. 29, being very bad with a violent body flux. (Phillips, 1993, p. 116)

The mate passes away and receives a burial. The boy is cast overboard. The logbook entry records both events without hesitation. Hamilton does not seem to draw the distinction between the two clauses. In fact, the moral complicity that Wood argues has been diminished does not vanish from the adopted form. Rather, it constitutes the form itself, maintained by an observer blind to its implications and left unmediated by the retrospective conscience that would later condemn it.

Obeah and the Planter's Ethnography

Not every appropriated archive takes a narrative form. *Cambridge* engages a second documentary mode. In this case as well, the borrowed idiom transfers intact, yielding no comprehension. That is, Emily replicates the planter's ethnographic discourse on obeah but leaves Christiania entirely unexplained.

Christiania is drawn with an eeriness about her that makes her appearances in Emily's journal disquieting, and her fellow slaves regard her with a mixture of dread and deference founded on a deep suspicion of what she is. To them she is an obeah or conjure woman; to Cambridge she is simply a madwoman he has taken as his "wife". The prominence the novel gives to such belief marks out the crevices of colonial society, where the conduct of daily life owes more to an amalgam of African practice than to the orthodoxy the plantation professes. As Ledent notes, the names Christiania and Cambridge "hint at Western religion and scholarship, two of the pillars of colonial oppression" (Ledent, 1992, p. 62), and between them the pair dismantle what Ledent calls Emily's "myth of the happy-go-lucky black" (Ledent, 1992, p. 55). For all her assumed superiority and her European Cartesianism, Emily cannot make sense of Christiania.

Emily's first encounter with Christiania, during the midday meal, possesses a distinctly unsettling quality. Not being habituated to dining alongside captive labourers, Emily arrives to find the haughty black wench seated opposite her and orders her to clear out at once. Instead of going away, Christiania gazes at her with an "intense passion that indeed appeared unhinged, her eyes blazing with a malice the source of which I imagined to reside deep in her bosom, springing from some other hurt than that which I had inflicted upon her" (Phillips, 1991/1992,

p. 73). When the butler is summoned to escort her from the room, Christiania screams in the most reckless and foul-spoken manner, spitting words of abuse. Even Emily's shouted commands fail to move her, and "she loosed her invective upon me, howling and hurling abuse like some sooty witch from *Macbeth*" (Phillips, 1991/1992, p. 74). It is only after Emily's withdrawal, in a state of consternation, into the privacy of her bed-chamber that her servant Stella supplies her with particulars regarding the eccentric figure and the perilous sorcery she allegedly enacts:

> According to Stella's testimony, the negro belief in obeah involves the possession of a variety of strange objects which are used for incantations: cats' ears, the feet of various animals, human hair, fish bones, etc., all of which make their vital contribution to the practice of the magical art. One skilled in the practice of obeah is able to both deliver persons to, and retrieve them from the clutches of, their enemies. Such practitioners hold great sway over their fellow blacks, and they sell medicines and charms in profusion, acquiring a status unsurpassed within the community. (Phillips, 1991/1992, p. 74)

By bringing the rational, white, European Emily and the irrational, black, non-European Christiania together under one roof, while keeping them confined within their narrow private selves, Phillips dramatises the Manichean nature of the opposition between coloniser and colonised. Birat locates the power of the narrative in Emily's struggle to bring her experience "within the confines of a framework which does not offer her a language or structure adapted to her situation" (Birat, 2008, p. 299). Her relentless interrogation of Stella exposes the depth of her inherent biases in her observations of the negroes, and her report on the practice of obeah, resting entirely on hearsay, smacks of unreliability and of an extreme condescension. The journal is, in Ledent's phrase, "a masterpiece of unreliability and ambiguity" (Ledent, 1992, p. 55). Emily's attempts to "investigate further" (Phillips, 1991/1992, p. 75) consist primarily of badgering Stella with complicated inquiries, and the enslaved woman endures as an unfathomable mystery to her.

Emily Cartwright's travel journal is an assemblage before it is a narrative. The point of departure was a journal Phillips chanced to see, the *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, authored by a Scottish woman named Janet Schaw, who journeyed from Edinburgh to the West Indies in the 1770s. Birat observes that Phillips's literary imagination "has been inspired particularly by the way in which written documents give us access to little-explored aspects of the historical past" (Birat, 2008, p. 295). Emily's journal pastiches the works of Monk Lewis, Lady Nugent, Mrs Carmichael, and several contemporaries. The correspondence with them is not confined to the conventional form and the nineteenth-century refined English, as specific events, expressions and entire sections are deliberately "lifted" from the source documents (O'Callaghan, 1993, p. 36). By comparing excerpts from *Cambridge* with extracts from its foundational texts (*Journal of a West India Proprietor*, *Lady Nugent's Journal* and Mrs Carmichael's *Domestic Manners*), Evelyn O'Callaghan establishes how copiously Phillips has drawn upon such "historical" documents. She reads the novel as self-conscious fiction that "to a great extent" is "a pastiche of other narratives" and "deliberately calls attention to its intertextuality" (O'Callaghan, 1993, p. 34). These documents "have long been considered the proper domain of West Indian historians and have been read as historical reconstructions" (O'Callaghan, 1993, p. 34).

The language and structure of Emily's report closely follow the planter journals it borrows from and reproduces. The account of Mrs A. C. Carmichael, who had lived for five years in St Vincent and Trinidad, follows three steps. She begins with a simple definition of obeah as nothing more than a belief in witchcraft. She then reveals that every estate has its own obeah man or woman, known to the enslaved and hidden from the whites. Carmichael finally explains how it works. According to her, one slave pays to have another obeahed. Once told what has

been done, the victim dies of that knowledge. The three steps run without a break, and the third closes upon an explanation:

> The Obeah of the negro is nothing more or less than a belief in witchcraft; and this operates upon them to such a degree, as not unfrequently to produce death. There is not perhaps a single West Indian estate, upon which there is not one or more Obeah men or women; the negroes know who they are, but it is very difficult for white people to find them out. The way in which they proceed is this: suppose a negro takes a dislike to a negro or negroes, either upon the same estate with himself or upon another, he goes to the Obeah woman or man, and tells them that he will give money, or something else as payment, if they will Obeah such and such persons. The Obeah (woman) then goes to those people, and tells them that she has obeahed them: she of course tells them that this is an impulse over which she has no control: slow poison is at times secretly administered, but in by far the greater number of cases the mind only is affected; the imagination becomes more and more alarmed,—the spirits sink,—lassitude and loss of appetite ensue, and death ends the drama. (Carmichael, 1833, Vol. 1, pp. 253–254)

Lanaghan, long resident in Antigua, reports the practice in more detail. The enslaved, she writes, "firmly believe the Obeah people can insert different articles, such as pieces of glass bottles, old rags, nails, stones, &c., into the flesh of those they dislike, and that the afflicted are obliged to get one of the same craft to relieve them" (Lanaghan, 1844, Vol. 2, p. 53).

Emily reproduces both elements of Lanaghan's account. Like Lanaghan's practitioners, hers can afflict and relieve. She notes that individuals skilled in obeah can "both deliver persons to, and retrieve them from the clutches of, their enemies" (Phillips, 1991/1992, p. 74). Her strange objects, including cats' ears, the feet of animals, human hair and fish bones, constitute a list of the same kind, a set of small heterogeneous objects differing from Lanaghan's only in content.

Yet Emily cannot reproduce Carmichael's authority as a witness. Carmichael knows "an instance where fifteen people, in the course of a few months, died from no other cause" (Carmichael, 1833, Vol. 1, p. 254). She also knows that the practice "is death, by the laws of St. Vincent, but there is no possibility of conviction" (Carmichael, 1833, Vol. 1, p. 254). Emily knows the practice only through what Stella tells her.

What Emily reproduces is not a set of observations but a set of habits. This ethnographic genre establishes cultural equivalence before offering any explanation. Carmichael frames her account of obeah by remarking that she "never met with one whose superstition, although different, was at all more absurd than the superstition of many of the lower classes in Scotland" (Carmichael, 1833, Vol. 1, p. 253), while Lanaghan adopts the same rhetorical strategy, noting that "while the English have their ghosts, the Scotch their brownies, and the Irish their banshees, the negroes have their jumby" (Lanaghan, 1844, Vol. 2, p. 58). It glosses its own vocabulary for a metropolitan reader, as Emily does by explaining her creole terms in the text and as Lanaghan does in a footnote: "The term 'jumby' is applied to all supernatural beings" (Lanaghan, 1844, Vol. 2, p. 58n). And it assumes in advance that its informant lies: "to obtain the truth from them is difficult beyond measure", Carmichael writes, "since they, as well as negroes, will swear to anything: they will tell you a story wherein it often happens that every second sentence contradicts the preceding" (Carmichael, 1833, Vol. 1, p. 85). Emily's method follows from the third of these. Her interrogation of Stella is not only a personal failing but the procedure the genre prescribes, applied to the one person on the estate who knows the answer.

Fear follows from incomprehension. Unable to rid herself of her mental constraints, Emily is seized periodically by a debilitating dread of the unknown, accentuated by the ominous presence of Christiania and her antique religious rites deep within the shadowy recesses of the plantation estate:

> And now this devilish fear has reasserted its power, but this time I find myself adrift, not on threatening waves, but upon an ocean of negroes who care little for my fears. Outside my window, I began to discern nocturnal scratching noises. At first I was too frightened to properly investigate, in fear that some strange beast might be waiting for an opportunity to assault and devour me body and soul. Eventually, on the third night, I pulled back a corner of the blind and peered into the darkness, whereupon I observed the re-entry into the drama of my life of the arrogant black wench, Christiania. Squatting down on her hams, she appeared to be scratching at the dirt, to what purpose I knew not. Furthermore, she was uttering sinister sounds which I did not wish to hear repeated throughout the night. (Phillips, 1991/1992, p. 89)

The planter's ethnography is a form based on the claim to explanation. Carmichael defines obeah, identifies its practitioners and accounts for how it kills, so her account closes on understanding. Phillips reproduces the form while withholding the understanding. Emily admits a lack of knowledge when she notes, "to what purpose I knew not" (Phillips, 1991/1992, p. 89). Lanaghan describes a second practice. In fact, it is this one that bears most upon the scene:

> Another practice of these Obeah people is to dig a hole before the door of a house where the resident is obnoxious to them, and in it place their favourite commodities—old rags and pieces of glass bottle. If the person for whose injury these articles are intended, unconsciously passes over, their health decays, or else they will never be better off in the world than they were at that day. (Lanaghan, 1844, Vol. 2, pp. 53–54)

Christiania squats below a window instead of at a doorway, and the narrative does not state what she is doing. The posture and the ground are the same, which places her scratching within the practice Lanaghan records. Even after copying an account of obeah into her journal, Emily cannot understand what is happening below her window. In this case, the withholding works on the narrator instead of the reader. Knowing that the claim to knowledge forms the basis of the text's ethnographic authority, Phillips repeats the claim intact and lets it fail in the hands of the woman making it. This provides a second instance of the same withholding.

Gikandi distinguishes, within the archive of enslavement, a "third text", written by observers "who were neither masters nor slaves, observers whose relationship to the institution of slavery was tenuous, and whose intentions were driven by goals that were sometimes at odds with the systematizing function of the archive" (Gikandi, 2015, p. 93). His instance is the missionary Oldendorp, whose history of the Danish West Indies rests on conversations with African informants and therefore admits voices the planter histories exclude. Emily Cartwright is built to occupy exactly that position. She is a visitor rather than a planter, her journal is not written to justify the system, and she does interrogate an informant. Where Oldendorp's third text opens a space in which the enslaved contest the master's account, hers closes: Stella answers, and Emily learns nothing she can use. Phillips constructs a position from which the colonial archive has been shown to be permeable, and demonstrates the archive sealed.

Conclusion

Why Phillips should refuse the repentance in one case and the explanation in the other is answered by the position from which he writes. These documents are, for the people who appear in them, the only surviving record. Record keeping, as Gikandi puts it, "was a form of violent control", and for the enslaved "the only existing records were those committed to their subjection" (Gikandi, 2015, pp. 92, 84). Woodard asks for a reconstitution that writes over this kind of record. This method uses invention to bring back the interiority the archive aimed to extinguish. Even so, such restitution comes at a price. Any inwardness given to Cambridge or

Christiania would come from a twentieth-century hand. As a result, what is offered as recovery is only another act of composition on people composed once already. Writing about a girl who appears in the archive only as a casualty, Saidiya Hartman wants to tell her story, as she puts it, "without committing further violence in my own act of narration" (Hartman, 2008, p. 2). She therefore settles on "narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure" (Hartman, 2008, p. 12). Phillips had been practising this restraint more than a decade before it was given that name, working upon documents rather than upon silences.

In the main, both documents appear to withhold the very assurance they were written to provide. Because its author later came to shudder at its content, Newton's journal remains readable. Hamilton, by contrast, shudders at nothing. Carmichael's ethnography, on the other hand, claims authority because it explains. Emily, however, accounts for nothing, least of all the woman scratching at the ground beneath her window. In this way, neither novel revises its source text or furnishes the absent comprehension. Neither work judges the colonial writer in a moral or ethical register foreign to the period. Phillips instead reproduces the archive intact and leaves it to fail on its own terms. Such restraint exacts a stricter discipline than repair and yields less consolation than decipherment.

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