

# ‘Broken-off Like Limbs from a Tree’: Fractured Identity in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* (1993)

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## Abstract

My major purpose in studying Caryl Phillips’s widely acclaimed novel *Crossing the River* is to examine, through a close textual analysis, the severe identity crisis inflicted upon slaves under the three-century long slavery institution. I explore how slaves’ tragic rift of separation from their African homelands led to a disastrous loss of identity. I particularly call attention to the ways slavery profoundly ‘shattered’ such identity-shaping factors as home, family, belonging, memory and roots. Quite curiously, this identity destruction was not only undergone by African slaves who experienced The Middle Passage firsthand, but has been ‘transmitted’ to their descendants in the contemporary realities of the black diaspora. I, therefore, look into the historical and psychic continuum that binds the slaves’ experience of home loss with their descendants’ exilic identity and space impermanence. Central to this paper is also the exploration of how the slaves’ identity fracture is reflected at the level of the language, narrative forms, genre mixing, and the temporal and spatial fragmentation Phillips freely experiments with in his narrative.

**Keywords:** *Crossing the River*, Caryl Phillips, slavery, identity, diaspora, narration

## 1. Slavery: Stubborn Memory

Phillips’s ongoing preoccupation with slavery and its lingering memory can be perceived in almost every single work of his entire oeuvre. Indeed, Phillips firmly ‘sticks’ to the theme of slavery which has occupied a center-stage position in his fictional and non-fictional worlds since his first writings. Phillips constantly revisits the history of slavery and “the long memory around which it is entangled” because “it is the duty of memory not to forget” (Oguibe, 2001, p. 95). Most, if not all, of Phillips’s writings undertake mapping out the historical, cultural and psychological elements that have shaped Caribbean identity and how the latter is in constant dialogue with the remote history of slavery. It is, therefore, no surprise that Phillips’s texts repeatedly revolve around the following subject matter: the Afro-Caribbean connections, the history of slavery, black-white encounters, the Middle Passage, the horrors of plantation life, the memory of slavery and colonialism, forced migration and the dispersal of the black diaspora and its lack of roots. These traumatic experiences, under the pain of which generations of blacks suffered, have shaped Caribbean identity structure and marked Caribbean people’s consciousness for entire centuries.

Phillips’s considerable concern with slavery has more to it than the mere personal identification with this history; Phillips being himself a descendant of slaves. Phillips’s devoting of the largest bulk of his oeuvre to the memory of slavery derives from the fact that this memory has been almost completely erased in Eurocentric history, literature, educational programs, mass media, television, etc. In *The European Tribe* (1987), Phillips addresses the huge marginalization of the history of slavery by comparing it with the experience of the Holocaust, at the mention of which Europe “still shudders with guilt” (p. 54). Phillips argues that the Holocaust has been immensely recognized through “hundred of books,” “films,” “television programmes,” and “thousands of articles” (p. 54). However, “the pillage and rape of modern Africa” and “the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas” have been condemned to deliberate oblivion and erasure in Eurocentric official texts (p. 54). Hence, Phillips believes in the black writer’s duty to retrieve his/her people’s lost memory and submerged history. Reflecting Postcolonial literature’s dialogue with the past, Phillips regards the unrecorded history of slavery as a “bank balance” that should be relied upon to dismantle the ‘prison house’ of Eurocentric historiography and react to its “undertow of historical ignorance” (Phillips, 1994c, p. 77).

It can be easily noticed that a wide range of Phillips’s texts, both fictional and non-fictional, openly challenge Western literary and historical narratives about slavery. Phillips engages into a radical revision of Eurocentric imperial narratives asserting the many biases and fallacies which mar European historiography about slavery. Phillips strongly voices his mistrust of Western “received history” and discourse through prioritizing fiction/literature as a more reliable means for re-inscribing the silenced past and re-writing the black people’s distorted/or submerged history (Phillips, 1995, pp. 157-158). Phillips’s distrust of Eurocentric historical narratives is eloquently expressed in this passage from his book *The European Tribe* (1987):

History is also the prison house from which Europeans often speak, and in which they would confine black people. It is a false history, an unquestioning and totally selfish one, in which whites civilize

and discover and the height of sophistication is to sit in a castle with a robe of velvet and a crown dispensing order and justice. (pp.121-122)

Spanning over two hundred and fifty years, Phillips's *Crossing the River*, reflects its writer's relentless concern with re-narrating the crime of slavery, with its untold horrors and traumatic legacy. *Crossing the River* depicts how the needs of this capitalist enterprise radically shaped the identity of slaves and still powerfully determines the lives and self-perceptions of their descendants now scattered across Europe and the Americas. More precisely, *Crossing the River* traces the "fractured" "lives" (p. 1) and identities of three African siblings (Nash, Travis and Martha), who, in the year 1752, were sold by their father to the "shameful intercourse" (p. 1); this "intercourse" is another name for the European trade in human flesh. The children's irrevocable loss and subsequent itinerant lives are openly confessed by the father in the novel's opening page: "My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. Their lives fractured" (p. 1).

The five chapters of *Crossing the River* record the destruction of the slaves' lives and identities from a variety of angles. In "The Prologue," a guilt-stricken father painfully reminisces how he willingly handed his children to the slave trade evoking the "chorus of common memory" (p. 1) that assails his consciousness for entire centuries. "The Pagan Coast" follows Nash's life in exile, his experience as a "bondsmen" and ultimate return to Africa's "Land of darkness" (p. 25) and "heathen shores" (p. 12). Nash's return to the fatherland is decided by The American Colonization Society whose major aim is the following: "Africa would be civilized by the return of her descendents, who were now blessed with rational Christian minds" (p. 9).

"West" narrates Martha's endless partings and brutal dislocations. Martha's plight stems from her tragic loss of her fatherland, father, brothers, little daughter and husband. Martha's multiple journeys across hostile worlds to meet her daughter in the flesh are ridiculed by her lonely death in Denver's "thick snow" (p. 94). "Crossing the River," the third chapter in the novel, occurs as a diary kept by John Hamilton, the British slave trader who bought the three children. In "Somewhere in England," the last section of the novel, Phillips surrealistically extends the life of Travis from 1752 to the middle of the twentieth century. The setting is Second World War Britain where Travis serves in an American army deeply divided by irreconcilable color bars. Thus, Travis moves from a life of bondage under slavery to a life of racism and exclusion after emancipation. This is the bitter truth Travis has to adjust himself to as a Black American soldier in Britain: "One Englishman is worth two Germans, four French, twenty Arabs, forty Italians, and any number of Indians (p. 164).

## 2. The Exilic Fate

As indicated by its title, dedication ("For those who crossed the river"), prologue and disorderly sections and narrative structure, *Crossing the River* foregrounds the intense border-crossing marking the lives of its protagonists. Nash's, Travis's and Martha's "shattered" lives are the result of centuries of enforced migrations and family severing. Phillips describes *Crossing the River* as an illustration of the "dislocation" and "historical homelessness" of both slaves and their descendants in today's black diaspora (2001a, p. 102). Arguing along similar lines, Ledent evokes the "spatial criss-crossing," "disjointedness" and "dispersal through continents and epochs" that have determined the lives of blacks from the time of slavery to the present (2002, p. 114).

The lives of the three slave siblings in *Crossing the River* are also "shattered" by the constant changing of hands the auction block dictates. Nash's, Travis's and Martha's constant transfers from one slave owner to another are in line with the "colored exodus" (p. 87) that prevents their belonging to a fixed place. This "exodus" refers to the intense wandering inflicted upon Phillips's protagonists by the harsh circumstances of slavery and its systematic space shifting. In order to further pursue the characters' permanent dispersal and border-crossing, one might re-visit the moment that started it all: the father's "desperate foolishness" (p.87) when he sells his children's "warm flesh" (p. 1) to white slave-dealers. The three siblings' initial uprooting is lucidly documented in "The Prologue":

A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember. I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary paths until we reached the place where the mud flats are populated with craps and gulls. Returned across the bar with the yawl, and prayed a while in the factory chapel. I watched as they huddled together and stared up at the fort, above which flew a foreign flag. Stood beneath the white-washed walls of a factory, waiting for the yawl to return and carry me back over the bar. In the distance stood the ship into whose keep I would soon condemn them. The man and his company were waiting to once again cross the bar. [...] Approached by a quiet fellow. Three children only. I jettisoned them at this point, where the tributary stumbles and swims out in all directions to meet the sea. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl. I soiled my hands with cold goods in exchange for their warm flesh. A shameful intercourse. I could feel their eyes upon me. Wondering, why? I turned and journeyed back along the same weary paths. I believe my trade for this voyage has reached its conclusion. [...] My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. Their lives fractured. Sinking hopeful roots into difficult soil. [...] There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. [...] To a father consumed with guilt. You are beyond. Broken-off, like limbs from a tree. [...] Sinking hopeful roots into difficult soil. (pp. 1-2)

In line with the horror of the aggression ("I sold my children"), *Crossing the River* opens with a gruesome prologue the grimness of which reverberates throughout the story. "The Prologue" sets the bleak mood of the story where a guilt-consumed father remembers the "shameful intercourse." The words "condemn," "fractured," "broken off," "consumed,"

and “sinking” foreground the father’s horrible deed and the burning guilt he reaped from the transaction: “A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children.” The word “sinking” hints at the countless lives lost during the Middle Passage; the darkest episode of slavery that claimed the lives of millions of Africans who were cruelly severed from their families and thrown overboard with every next tide. The untold horrors of the Middle Passage have been widely addressed by Phillips in line with the retrieval of unrecorded history his work revolves around. In *The Atlantic Sound* (2001), Phillips talks about “those who perished at sea, either by their own hand, or through disease, or by being simply tossed alive in the depths” (p. 32) and in *A New World Order* (2002), he evokes the “horrors” of the “Atlantic crossing,” which “included malnourishment, beatings, exposure to contagious diseases, and many other deprivations of an unimaginable nature” (p. 83).

The father’s “jettison[ing]” of his children in exchange for “cold goods” uncovers an important truth about slavery; the complicity of some Africans in the slave trade. Captain Hamilton’s logbook contains the following revelation: “Bought a pair of man-boys from an African prince, as they are styled” (p. 110). In fact, it was not infrequent that many African traders and chieftains either enslaved their fellow tribesmen, or sold them to European slave-dealers. Slavery was not solely practiced by white traders, but was facilitated with the collaboration of some native Africans. In her novel *Abeng* (1984), Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff states that “there had been slaves in Africa where black people had put each other in chains” (p. 18).

The children’s exilic dislocation and irrevocable loss of home are expressed in “The Prologue” by such adjectives as “hopeful” and “difficult,” an insinuation that their lives are caught between a hope to belong and a frustrating inability to grow roots. The father’s farewell message to his children foretells their permanent dispersal: “You are beyond. Broken-off, like limbs from a tree.” This confession is indicative of the children’s irrevocable exile and the “fracture” of their roots. The children’s lives are “shattered” the way “limbs” are “broken off” “from a tree.” Nash’s, Martha’s and Travis’s loss of home and resulting un-belonging are alluded to by the numerous negations in the father’s monologue. The negative adverb “no,” for instance, is tellingly reiterated thrice. Thus, Nash’s, Martha’s, and Travis’s endless journeying obliterates their hope for reunion with family and/or homeland. For these “displaced victims,” the “middle passage is a one-way crossing. There is no returning because chains have taken root in this unwished-for elsewhere” (Julien, 1997, p. 98).

The slaves’ interminable transits across disparate worlds can be best explored through the case of Martha whose exilic life is drawn in detail in “West.” This chapter documents Martha’s enforced passage from the blessings of home to the bondage of slavery. Indeed, Martha’s restless journeying across Africa, the Atlantic, Virginia, Colorado, the Rockies, the Missouri, and Kansas is dictated by her unpredictable life as an owned slave. Severed from her brothers, daughter, and husband (all sold to different slave-dealers), Martha leads a life of utter solitude (“Don’t know nobody” (p. 75)) where she “[b]arely recognize[s] herself” (p. 75); an indication of her identity effacement as a result of the enforced alteration of spaces dictated upon her by the requirements of slavery. The following passage provides a further portrayal of Martha’s extreme “loneliness” and “despair” after she lost her homeland and family:

In this Kansas, Martha sometimes heard voices. Perhaps there was a God. Perhaps not. She found herself assaulted by loneliness, and drifting into middle age without a family. Voices from the past. Some she recognized. Some she did not. But, nevertheless, she listened. Recognizing her despair. (p. 79)

Neither the alteration of place nor the drift of time has brought a cure to Martha’s “loneliness” and “despair.” Her “despair” results from her interminable wandering and tragic loss of “family.” The half-recognizable “voices from the past” tell about her burdened heart and failure to put the troubled past behind. Martha’s tragic life is also shaped by her multiple transfers between slave-owners, enforced journeys across “prairie and desert” (p. 73) and hope to become “a part of this country” “without feeling like you wasn’t really a part” (p. 74). Martha’s “countless years of journeying” (p. 75) can be further examined through the following passage:

So this was Colorado Territory, a place she had crossed prairie and desert to reach. Hoping to pass through it quickly, not believing that she would fall over foolish like a lame mule. Old woman. They had set her down and continued on to California. She hacked violently. Through some atavistic mist, Martha peered back east, beyond Kansas, back beyond her motherhood, her teen years, her arrival in Virginia, to a smooth white beach where a trembling girl waited with two boys and a man. Standing off a ship. Her journey had been a long one. But now the sun had set. Her course was run. Father, Why hast thou forsaken me? (p. 73)

The passage records Martha’s dis/location along a multitude of conflicting zones: “prairie” and “desert,” “east” and west, “back” and “beyond,” “arrival” and “pass[ing]” and “mist” and “sun.” The disparate places Martha involuntarily embarks on echo her possession of none and her loss amidst the unknown territories she is made to cross. Martha is depicted as an itinerant figure who is constantly on the move, hence her permanent un-belonging. Unable to comprehend why she has been driven through disparate worlds, Martha remembers the moment that started it all; her sale by her father and “arrival” on the “smooth white beach” of Virginia, where her Atlantic journey has eventually tossed her. Martha’s rejoinder “Father, Why hast thou forsaken me?” has more to it than the sheer blame to a culpable

father. Memories of the biological father are inseparable from those of the disowned fatherland, the loss of which causes permanent exile and uprooted-ness.

Martha's multiple border-crossings disrupt her right for a fixed home, an essential component for identity construction. Martha's intense journeying across disjointed spaces confirms her new exilic identity in the New World. Martha's 'spatial fluidity', so to speak, is in line with a central feature of the history of slaves in the New World. With its involuntary passages, slavery caused slaves a severe sense of loss, shattered their hope for belonging and led to their uprooted-ness in the New World. The original separation from the African homeland created a nation of uprooted blacks in exile. This enforced tearing of slaves away from their families and native lands resulted in a severe space impermanence for both slaves and their descendants. In view of the continuous changing of hands, belonging for slaves was only temporary and short-lived. Emphasizing the slave's loose connection with the space he/she inhabits, Ledent describes Phillips's characters as figures "torn by a double sense of belonging and un-belonging" and "unable to find a place they can definitely call 'home'" (2000, p. 198).

The slave's intense journeying and consequential temporization of space are also reflected by the way Phillips constructs the various settings of *Crossing the River*. These settings are characterized by intense disunity and fragmentation. The events of *Crossing the River* take place in such geographically disjointed locations as Africa, the Atlantic, Britain, the Caribbean, and a wide range of American settings. Commenting on the fluidity of spaces characteristic of *Crossing the River*, Ledent proposes that the novel "thrives in contexts of dislocation and dispossession, whether the colonization and evangelization of Africa, the Middle Passage and slavery in the New World, the decimation of Native Americans in the wild West or the Second World War in Europe" (1995, p. 59).

Travis (his name suggests traversal) traverses not only unrelated historical periods (eighteenth-century slavery days versus the Second World War era), but also moves between disparate worlds such as Africa, the Atlantic, America, and Europe. Likewise, Nash's exile starts on the African coast. He, then, undergoes the Middle Passage, serves his slavery term in America, and is then sent back to the African fatherland. Nash's roaming through such spaces as "Liberia," "Monrovia" and "Sierra Leone" is dictated by his white owners who aimed at the following: spread the word of God to "the edge of civilization" (p. 12) and civilize the "uncivilized" "native population" (p. 19). Counter to the expectations of his surrogate father and the "Colonization Society" that dispatched him back to the fatherland, Nash "disappeared from the known world" (p. 7) and "was nowhere to be found" (p. 7). Nash's mysterious disappearance symbolizes the slave's impossible home return after the total "fracture" of roots. Nash's irrevocable loss is, in fact, professed by his father the very moment he sells his "warm flesh": "There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return" (p. 2).

One might argue that the ever-changing settings of *Crossing the River* are in line with its protagonists' continuous displacement and loss of home; essential features of the African diaspora's condition and identity. Foregrounding the complex fates of his protagonists, Phillips opts for a fragmented construction of place where disparate loci connect and disconnect in sudden and unpredictable ways. This link between the protagonists' dispersal and the dissociated spaces they inhabit hints at the estrangement and dislocation slaves underwent as part of their exilic lives and identities.

In line with slaves' exilic lives and identities, one notices the preponderance of water symbolism not only in *Crossing the River*, but throughout the entire oeuvre of Phillips. Quite clearly, water (as a setting, theme, title and symbol) is heavily omnipresent in most of Phillips's writings in response to the 'fluid' identities of his black diasporic characters. Even a quick look at Phillips's titles reveals that water, as literal presence and metaphorical trope, has a central significance. *Crossing the River*, *A Distant Shore*, *The Atlantic Sound*, *The Final Passage*, "The Passage," "The Pagan Coast," "Atlantic Crossing," and "Water," to mention a few of Phillips's works, show the crucial place water occupies in his oeuvre. Added to its literal denotation of the Middle Passage, water imagery in *Crossing the River* connotes the characters' unfixed homes and fluid identities due to centuries of enforced passages and transfers. Reflecting water's liquidity, Martha's, Travis's and Nash's identities are both ungraspable and ever-changing due to their restless lives and vain yearning for permanent places of dwelling.

### 3. *Crossing the River*: The Diasporic Emblems

The constant border-crossing, destruction of roots and scarcity of affiliations exposed in *Crossing the River* are not experienced by Nash, Martha and Travis alone. These ruptures were also undergone by millions of Africans who had experienced the Middle Passage, hence the significance of the novel's title and dedication: "For those who crossed the river." The initial separation from the African homeland and the resulting homelessness are also essential constituents of the identity of the descendants of slaves in the present times. The three siblings of *Crossing the River* can emblemize generations of slave descendants currently scattered across continents and commonly referred to as the 'black diaspora.' Due to the initial severance from Africa and the resulting history of journeying, slave descendants form nowadays a real diasporic community defined in terms of its exilic identity and space impermanence. Sharpe suggests that the slavery past is "intimately bound up with the present, as a point of departure for the African diaspora or a condition of existence for fractured identities" (2003, p. xxi).

In fact, many writers, critics, sociologists and historians have addressed the many ways slavery and its concomitant legacies still affect the identity and life conditions of blacks in Africa, the Caribbean and the wider black diaspora. As a matter of fact, the Eurocentric ideological and discursive formations that fuelled colonialism and imperialism are still at work in our contemporary world through new practices such as racism, globalization and ruthless capitalism. Achebe (1988) reasons that "it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe" (p. 29). Arguing along similar lines, Patterson proposes that the "end of slavery posed new

challenges for Afro-Americans” since the “Thirteenth Amendment abolished the individual ownership of one person by another,” but failed to “remove the culture and institutional system of slavery” (1998, p. 44).

In *Crossing the River*, the black diaspora’s lingering memory of slavery is underscored by the peculiar construction of the narrative’s temporal framework. Indeed, a close examination of the novel’s time structure of shows its constant back and forth movement, free vacillation between disparate periods and utter disregard for logical chronology. The father’s “foolish” ‘original sin’ breaks up the conventional linearity of time. Commenting on the disrupted chronology of *Crossing the River*, Julien reasons that the text “plays with time like a ship breaking erratic cross currents, tossing the reader here and there, lurching backward and forward” (1999, pp. 90-91).

The diasporic implications of *Crossing the River* are also made obvious through stretching the narrative from the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, hence the free interpenetration of events, flashbacks, dreams, memories, nightmares and even lives. Reflecting the equal fates shared by slaves and their descendants, Phillips surrealistically stretches the lives of slaves into the twentieth century. According to Phillips, Nash’s surrogate father (Edward) is not simply a historical figure from the distant days of slavery; Edward is also the embodiment of the white man’s racism in twentieth-century Britain: “I see him [Edward] everyday, man, I see him if I go in the Arts Council, if I was ever to go near parliament, in every university; the professional patron” (Phillips qtd. in Ledent, 2002, p. 132). Likewise, Travis reappears in the twentieth century, after he had been sold into slavery on African shores in 1752. Travis mysteriously outlives the temporal and spatial terms of his enslavement and resurfaces in Second World War Britain. The narrator juxtaposes Travis’s remote slavery days with the racism he faces in contemporary Britain after becoming a ‘free’ man. The diasporic implications of Travis’s story are confirmed by the inseparability of his past and present, both marked by continuous exile and inferior status.

The diasporic implications of *Crossing the River* can be also studied through the father’s case. The father’s experience proves that slavery by far outlives its actual history and impinges upon the diaspora’s present conditions and identity. The memory of slavery tenaciously lingers into the present and connects those who had ‘crossed the river’ of slavery with their descendants who share today a similar fate of exile and loss of home. This circularity of time and past-present overlap can be examined through the following passage from “The Prologue”:

And soon after, the chorus of a common memory began to haunt me. For two hundred and fifty years I have listened to the many-tongued chorus. And occasionally, among the sundry restless voices, I discovered those of my own children. My Nash. My Martha. My Travis. [...] For two hundred and fifty years I have longed to tell them: Children, I am your father. I love you. But understand. [...] And I, who spurned you, can only blame myself for my present misery. For two hundred and fifty years I have waited patiently for the wind to rise on the far bank of the river. For the drum to pound across the water. For the chorus to swell. Only then, if I listen closely, can I rediscover my lost children. A brief, painful communion. A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. (pp. 1-2)

The father’s dispensing of his children to the “weary paths” (p. 1) of slavery gives reign to unabated memories that assail his remorse-stricken soul for entire centuries. The father’s aggression outlives by far its time of occurrence, erases temporal distances and joins real facts with their belated hurtful memories. The father’s abundant memory is confirmed by the accumulation of a diction that is ‘soaked’ with wounding remembrance: “many-tongued chorus,” “I remember,” “common memory,” “I listen closely,” “I rediscover,” “a painful communion,” “haunt,” and “chorus,” a word heavily recurring in “The Prologue.” The father’s imprisonment within the dark memory of his aggression does not simply articulate the profundity of father-son bonds, but also testifies to his tardy recognition of the atrocious crime he blindly committed: “I, who spurned you, can only blame myself.”

Centuries after throwing his children to a life of endless water-crossing, the father still profusely remembers his lost children, now scattered across indefinable loci of dwelling. Even more, memory acquires fearsome, if not ghostly, proportions (suggested by the “many-tongued chorus” and “restless voices”) which parallel the horror of the crime itself. The speaker’s fathomless memory transcends time and place and exerts a severe psychic flagellation on a “father consumed with guilt” and desperate for excuses: “children, I am your father. I love you.” Nowhere in the novel do the father’s endeavors to forget materialize in view of the atrocity of the transgression. Indeed, the lingering “chorus” of traumatic memory that assails the father’s heart and mind is no surprise when compared to the horror of the deed: “Their lives fractured.” The scattered children’s undying memory and their incomprehension of the forces at play (“I could feel their eyes upon me. Wondering, *why?*” (p. 1)) are transgressions enough to make a witness, let alone a father, go insane.

Phillips’s juxtaposition of disparate historical epochs alludes to their interconnectedness and the way slavery has shaped the lives and identities of blacks over the centuries. Blacks “are always looking [...] to the past, always hyperaware” “of the fact that the present is conditioned by the past” (Phillips, 2001a, p. 102). The belonging of diasporic blacks to a fixed home is nowadays utterly contested and problematic since they lost ties with a seminal African past and failed to grow roots in hostile places of dwelling in the West. Phillips explains the root cause of the black diaspora’s permanent exile and un-belonging:

I think the people of the Caribbean, whether they live in the Caribbean or outside, are inevitably displaced because they’re all the product of the one initial great journey of displacement which was the middle passage, the journey from Africa to the West. So it seems to me to be part of the Diasporan heritage. As a black person in the West, displacement seems to be part of our heritage. (1994a, p. 52)

Phillips's definition of Caribbean identity is based on the notion of "displacement," significantly evoked thrice in the passage. Displacement is, in fact, central to understand the interrelated stories of *Crossing the River*. According to Phillips, the African's "one initial great journey" and the resulting geographical, cultural, and psychological "displacement" have shaped black identity over the last three centuries. Intense journeying ("great journey," "the middle passage" and "the journey from Africa to the West") and the subsequent alienation ("inevitably displaced") constitute, according to Phillips, the fate and identity of blacks from the time of slavery to the present.

Phillips's evocation of the notion of "heritage" suggests that if slavery is now over, its psychological legacy is still powerfully alive. Indeed, the legacy of slavery has a profound impact upon the descendants of slaves in Africa, the Caribbean and the many scattered spaces of the black diaspora. Phillips's oscillation between past and present tenses confirms their organic interconnectedness. Besides, Phillips's personal identification with the history of slavery (despite his removal from it by centuries) confirms its lingering effects. In other words, the "displacement" of slaves did not only mark the lives of those who underwent "the initial great journey" firsthand, but has been also transmitted to contemporary generations of blacks, mainly through memory and racial affiliations. "[H]istorical memory," Phillips asserts, "is deeper and a lot more powerful than some of us recognize" (1991, p. 602). The preponderance of the memory of slavery can be noticed not only in *Crossing the River*, but also in most of Phillips's writings where the black man's crucial remembrance and memory are tirelessly operating. Throughout his entire oeuvre, Phillips constantly revisits such remote experiences as the African's pre-enslavement past, his enforced departure from Africa, the submerged horrors of the Middle Passage, the inflictions of plantation life, etc.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I particularly emphasized the ways Phillips's novel *Crossing the River* maps out aspects of the slave's life and identity and how the latter are brutally disrupted by the destructive requirements of slave trade and slave-master encounters. I also showed how the stories of Phillips's characters in *Crossing the River* emblemize the exilic displacement, loss of home and family fragmentation inherent in the three-century-long slavery 'holocaust' at large. The slaves' exilic identities and loose notions of home have in many ways been inherited by their descendants in the modern times in what has been conventionally known as the black diaspora, a community of slave descendants now scattered along disjoined loci of un-belonging in Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas. Central to this paper was also an attempt to examine Phillip's subtle 'wedding' of fractured lives and identities, on the one hand, with fragmented form and unconventional narration, on the other. The formal fragmentation in *Crossing the River* is reflected by the following aspects: experimentation with form, genre mixing, blending first-person and third-person narration and unconventional temporal and spatial norms.

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