

*Towards Afropean Perspectives:
Evolving and Conversing Af-
ro-European Narratives from
The European Tribe (1987)
to Afropean: Notes from
Black Europe (2019)*

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In 2014, Caryl Phillips, reflecting on the journey that had produced his travelogue *The European Tribe* (2017), contended that were he to set out again he would “aside from some factual details, ie the Berlin wall has come down, Yugoslavia has fractured along ethnic lines – essentially be making the same journey” and was “reasonably sure that [he] would simply end up reaching pretty much the same conclusions” (Phillips 2014, 4). Assessing a persistent European refusal to reflect the presence, importance and history of Black people in Europe, Phil-

lips' gaze is, as was the case in *The European Tribe*, turned towards 'White' Europe and the immutability of its exclusionary and 'tribal' practices. Johnny Pitts' 2019 travelogue *Afropean*, while explicitly drawing on *The European Tribe*, offers, as I will show, a different gaze. A comparative reading of the two texts informs our understanding of a thirty-year evolution (1987-2019) in the way two young Black British writers have constructed and narrated their position towards Europe – its 'Whiteness', its Black 'communities', its hybrid identities. The insularity of their Europeanness (perceived even more sharply in light of Britain's recent exit from the E.U.) positions them as liminal outsiders, or marginal insiders, both to an excluding White Europe and to a seemingly far-off continental Europe.

In reading both texts jointly, I am interested in understanding the nuances and evolutions of these expressions of position and belonging, and I attempt to locate the observed changes within the context of a wider evolution of Afro-European (and post-colonial) narratives. I examine the role of intergenerational mentoring and the importance of referencing and rewriting, or intertextual practices, to assess how they are geared towards the enacting and representing of *community conversations*¹.

1 I use the term 'community conversations' to denote conversations which make community by dynamically interrogating its nature and limits. They can be intra- or intertext, oral or written.

Originally tied to European expansionist and imperial projects, travel literature has been appropriated and mobilized by postcolonial authors to create what María López Roperó has termed the “postcolonial travelogue” as a critical space from which to decenter and unsettle the Eurocentric perspective of the genre’s origins (2003). A later travelogue of Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound*, constitutes the basis upon which Roperó develops this notion, highlighting the importance of Caryl Phillips in its emergence, and in its analytical articulation by scholars. Fittingly, scholars such as Hank Okazaki (1994) and Joan Miller Powell (2012) have read *The European Tribe* as a subversive text; a reading shared by Pitts, who describes the book as

quietly subversive, playing with the notion of an approach white people often assume when travelling in Africa: as an outsider observing a strange tribe practising odd rituals. He normalized the black gaze, becoming an invisible eye, and instead otherized Europeans as something strange and exotic with a nudge and a wink. (Pitts 2019, 116)

In both books, different elements pay tribute to the documentary nature of the travelogue, whether through photography and the actual “gaze” in *Afropean*, or stylistic peculiarities such as an uncommented, transcribed interview with the Archbishop Brosnahan in *The European Tribe*, introduced only by the phrase “Our conversation began:” and written in a journalistic style (initials, no

verbs, indications such as pause). Similarly, both books leave non-English words untranslated and provide other important elements of socio-political or linguistic and cultural context ².

Distancing themselves from academic, and in particular sociological, writing is important to both authors. Phillips presents *The European Tribe* as “based on personal experience. It is not academic, nor does it have any pretensions to being able to survive the rigours of the sociologist's laboratory” (Phillips 2000, ix). Pitts describes his book as a “black document” (Pitts 2019, 9), and writes “[...] it's true that I'm neither an anthropologist nor a historian; I'm a writer and photographer” (10). Neither book makes claims scientific truth, but both adopt a non-fictional, documentary dimension of portraying social realities. They allow for the strategic deployment of multiple “crossed gazes” (Shohat & Stam 2012) by laying out representations of each of the visited places, like mirrors held (also) towards their British and European contexts. The authors claim their affirmative subject-position and provide a personal and political commentary, and recognize this as part of the work's value. Subjectivity appears as a pathway into depicting a reality, in an autoethnographic manner. Beyond the strong authorial voice and the personal and subjec-

² In particular the recurring use of untranslated, context-specific words such as “Gastarbeiter” (Phillips 2000, 84), “Schwarzer” (83), “Polizei” (Pitts 2019, 172); or explaining the status of the French journal “Libération” (57).

tive emphases, travel writing as a genre offers collagist or kaleidoscopic practices, insertions from different genres and tableaux described as one would clip a picture to a notebook. In appropriating the travel narrative from its colonial association, and retaining the play between fact and fiction, personal and general, truthfulness and exaggeration, Phillips and Pitts construct books that function like scrapbooks and invite comparison, plurality, and webs rather than lines. The result is what Powell might call a “hybrid inventiveness”, one that stirs stylistic conventions and political identities or categories (2012, 88).

(Literary) Genealogies: Referencing and Intertextuality

Around both *The European Tribe* and *Afropean* revolve journal articles, blog entries (afropean.com), video art and pre- and postfaces to new editions. In the accumulation and interplay of these materials, the authors display a striking willingness, if not necessity, to keep engaging with the text, to keep conversing with oneself, to reject monolithic identities and fixed stories of self. In her analysis of Phillips’ essays, Louise Yelin (2012) highlights what she identifies as “plural selves”: a “dispersion” (1) of the autobiographical narrating subject across a web of works which relate, correlate, and form the space of intertextuality within one author’s work. A comparative reading offers an insight into these “plural

selves” or layers of self as they are rendered in the multiplicity of texts produced by Phillips’ and Pitts around their respective journeys. In Pitts’ case, the digital enhancement of the relationship between articles predating the book’s publication and *Afropean* reinforces a conversational (and on the website and Twitter, collaborative) dynamic that shows Black European identities as constructs-in-progress.

These dynamics of exchange and reassessment tie in with an intergenerational transmission which is extensively thematized in both books. The authors choose and display their literary filiation (Powell speaks of a “politics of black literary filiation,” 2012, 103) through references and allusions, inscribing themselves into a tradition of anglophone Black writers who have written about Europe (Powell 2012, 93), such as James Baldwin, Claude McKay and Richard Wright. Pitts, as the youngest, most recent of them, draws explicitly on this tradition as he writes:

I was at the beginning of a five-month winter journey through the continent, hoping to write a book about “black Europe,” and sought out Caryl in the same way he once reached out to James Baldwin on a similar trip in the 1980s: as a young black writer trying to learn from a literary hero who had trail blazed various landscapes, both imagined and real, that I was now traversing. (2017, 38-39)

Fittingly, both narratives prominently feature a chapter in which this intergenerational dialogue is played out. Legacy is a central topic in *Afropean*; its literary dimension is best enacted as Pitts attends a conversation between Caryl Phillips and the Black British poet and musician Linton Kwesi Johnson. The authors discuss their relationship to Derek Walcott, of the generation of Caribbean writers before them, and quote Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe on intergenerational transmission (125). In *Tribe*, a younger Phillips' visiting James Baldwin in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, asks: "What was his legacy to be?" It remains unclear whether this question is raised by Baldwin himself, or projected by Phillips; but the importance of legacy in the making, and the semantics of the passage of time ("There was a tinge of nostalgia in his voice," "He was sixty and not getting any younger", 42, "[...] that his quiet conversation was so saturated with references to his past [...]", 43). When Phillips does not attend dinner with Baldwin and Miles Davis the second night, it is because he "realized that he [Baldwin] needed to be alone with someone who could relate fully to all the nuances of his predicament, past, present and future" (43). Throughout the chapter, the reader is made to feel the tensions between admiration and compassion, glory and loneliness; between the desire for approval and impulses to disrupt or innovate. Phillips uses James Baldwin's nickname to signal a familiarity that the chapter compensates with a form of respectful, though critical awe. Similarly, when Pitts sets out to discuss "issues of literary mentoring" (Pitts 2017, 37), he ends up proudly

calling Phillips “Caz” (Pitts 2019, 126). He states that *Tribe* “is one of the few direct precursors to this book. The difference is that Caryl wandered as a young black man in his twenties through white Europe, before the work of his generation had helped the continent even entertain the idea that there were black people taking an active part in its societies” (116). Some chapters later (“Germaica”), Pitts himself projects a new generation of Afropeans, personified in the figure of a little girl of Kenyan origin and adopted by a German Israeli couple (204).

Both authors thus engage heavily with genealogy, both in narration and around it, in their intertextual practice. I use the seminal concept of “intertextuality” as coined by Kristeva, to point to the importance of dialogism and of spaces between the texts that are a central element of the conversational practice I look at. The significance of this referencing—or auto-genealogy (Yelin 2008, 60)—is explicated by Pitts as part of his endeavor. Pitts suggests that unlike the African American civil-rights movement, “heroes” like Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall “aren’t overtly embedded in the narrative of European identity and history”. Consequently, they reach (Black) Europeans “too late or not at all, absent from our formative years and our deeply entrenched ideas about “authentic” national identity” (Pitts, 2019, 268). Narration and conversation appear, throughout *Afropean*, as ways to ensure intergenerational transmission of information and resources for Europeans of African descent.

The authors interweave the narrator's internal monologue with direct and indirect speech and citations, accommodating a book-wide conversation between authors living and dead, met or read. For Pitts, they reach, from Baldwin to Talib Kweli (6), May Ayim (204), to Public Enemy (130), creating a web which in its hybridity in genres, time and space reflects the mutual influences of diverse Afrodiasporic groups. Referencing Mos Def, Pitts positions himself both as a (counter-)narrator and as part of an in-group: "Hip-hop artist Mos Def once wrote of the depiction of black culture in the media that 'we're either niggas or kings, we're either bitches or queens' [...]" (6). Remarkably, Pitts leaves an ambiguity regarding his inclusion to the 'we', certainly not rebuking it. Phillips also crosses genres and art forms by referencing another historically Black musical culture in form of West Indian Calypsonians, a citation from which is in exergue of his *European Tribe* (1). As we have seen with James Baldwin, he draws on a Black anglophone literary tradition, invoking also Richard Wright in two chapter titles ("A Pagan Spain" and "In a Falling Snow")³. Through citations of Black Panther Party member Bobby Seale and Négritude writer Louis-T. Achille, but also Anne Frank and IRA member Bobby Sands, Phillips seems to expand the web of identifications and solidarities beyond the strictly 'Afrodiasporic' or 'Black'. Pitts also refers

3 Richard Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 1957; and the Haiku "in the falling snow," whose title is revisited in Phillips 2009 novel *In the Falling Snow*. For an analysis of the role of generational component in that book, see Ledent, 2014 « Mind the Gaps: Caryl Phillips's *In the Falling Snow* (2009) and the Generational Approach to the Black Diaspora »

to the francophone Caribbean space, citing six verses of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, in original, then in translation, then going on to quote Frantz Fanon (7). Fanon is a common literary ancestor to both texts: in *Tribe*, Frantz Fanon is first cited as a reference on the matter of Shakespeare's *Othello* (Phillips 2000, 50). Drawing on the Martiniquais psychoanalyst, Phillips offers a contemporary reading of Shakespeare's Black character as an alien, likening him to "the black man in the middle-class suburb who is suddenly surprised to see racist graffiti daubed on the side of his house." (51) In a similar bend from non-fiction to fiction and back, Pitts draws on the imaginary of Claude McKay's *Banjo* – also cited in Phillips (83) – an Afrodiasporic classic in which (among others) Black men from the African continent, the West Indies and the United States, of different political beliefs and objectives, live and reflect upon life, migration, oppression and Blackness together in Marseille. In *Afropean*, the chapter "McKay's Marseille" prolongates the mythification of Marseille as the city of Afrodiasporic encounter. Pitts writes, on the same page (2019, 336), of "a physical embodiment of Afropea", "a place I could exist in Europe without any questions of belonging", and finally "an Afropean Mecca that I would one day return to and make my home, in a bid to end up like one of the characters in Claude McKay's *Banjo* [...]." Fanon also haunts at least one other scene, in which at Belfast airport a small child looks intensely and fearfully at Phillips, echoing the famous sentence spoken by a child in *Peau noire, masques blancs*: "Maman, regarde le nègre, j'ai peur!"

This last use of intertextuality, as a way of legitimizing a marginalized experience, is of particular interest in the context of this study because it allows to move from an understanding based on literary filiation to one in which transtemporal solidarities and identifications are possible *beyond* the intergenerational transmission framework. By opposition, James Baldwin, is clearly positioned in both genealogies within the generational prism, albeit under different modalities: to Phillips, he is cited as a literary reference (2000, 52), but is also, as mentioned above, a character of the story. For Pitts, Baldwin is a similarly cited literary ancestor already in the introduction (2019, 9), but also a canonical and dead author who he seeks out in the Saint-Paul-de-Vence chapter. The familiarity noted above, and furthered by Phillips' use, for instance, of a personal paraphrase for one of Baldwin's most famous quotes ("As James Baldwin once remarked, it makes you wonder if you really do want to be part of a burning house", 2000, 126), indeed connotes a form of belonging. In their different capacities, by bringing an imaginary, theoretical or literary legitimation and inspiration, lineage and alliances, the webs spun by these referencing practices offer a vision of conversations which establish pathways of belonging within the Afro-diasporic rhizome⁴.

4 For analyses of intertextuality in the postcolonial context as a form of subversion and a claim to literary 'belonging', a strategy to inscribe subaltern subjectivities into the dominant discourse, to produce estrangement in the reader's experience, to show the inadaptability, for instance, of certain genres in speaking to and of the subaltern experience, see in particular Döring 2002; Kloos 1998; Sell 2008.

Un-hyphenating, Be-longing: From Outsiders to Insiders

While both authors share an attachment to the travel narrative as a strategically mobilizable genre, the goal towards which it is strategized differs. Both books relay experiments aimed at testing and proving different hypotheses: in Phillips, it is that European cultures are marked by tribal and exclusionary whiteness; by opposition, Pitts introduces his endeavor as “flipp[ing] the journey on its head [...] aimed more robustly towards being black in black Europe” (2019, 117). In other words: Pitts states the existence of “black Europe”, whereas Phillips treats encounters with Black people more like isolated incidents that serve to illustrate exclusion. As a result, he sees African students in the USSR patiently awaiting their return to their home country, Black American soldiers waiting to leave the Russian base, and perhaps most strikingly, an unexpected Trinidadian woman, described in rather unflattering terms, whose encounter prompts Phillips to write — in his only use of the word (Caribbean) diaspora in the book — “Like a potter’s wheel that has suddenly been jammed to a halt, West Indians have been flung out into history and tried to make good wherever they have landed. She was the saddest case I had come across” (2000, 103-104). Dislocation, displacement from a point of origin, and in it the loss of home, remain central to Phillips’ narrative. In *The European Tribe*, he envies those who, like the Ugandan and Nigerian students at Queen’s College, “had a home to which they could return” (4), and almost fifteen years

later, in *A New World Order*, he writes of the fundamental difference between his parents' generation and his: "Whereas they could sustain themselves with the dream of one day 'going home', we were already at home. We had nowhere else to go and we needed to tell British society this" (Phillips 2002, 242). Yet another generation further, Pitts' narrative appears less focused on the lack of a place to go or return to.

In light of the genealogical value of intertextuality in these texts, the "return" for Pitts is arguably more tied to the literary traces of Black presence in Europe, such as Phillips' book. The emphasis is thus rather on what Christopher Keirstead calls "foliated footsteps", or a category of travel writing in which authors' journeys appear to follow in the footsteps previous authors and their texts. "These journeys", Keirstead writes, "pay tribute to the already deeply intertextual nature of travel writing, following spaces previously mapped [...]" by other authors (2018, 140). The very existence of Phillips' previous mapping out seems to provide a structure of identification for Pitts who, while not following Phillips' journey step-by-step, inscribes his own exploration into the geography of his predecessor. The semantics of "strik[ing] back" (2000, 123), so central to Phillips' assessment of the political situation he witnesses and the one he wishes upon in the future, give way in Pitts to a narrative less overtly concerned with an urgency to change 'white European' perspectives. In fact, it is

not estrangement but precisely his belonging to (Black) Europe which induces a responsibility regarding “the disjuncture between feeling Afropean and then those who were more intelligibly *African in Europe*” (2019, 279, emphasis in original). Hishem, a Black man in the refugee camp of Calais, but also the students at Lumumba university, are examples of being “African in Europe,” and are an important part of the story: Pitts claims that his 2016 trip to Calais has made him change the project from a feel-good photo book to something else, showcasing “beauty in black banality” and stories that are “about as far away as you can get from that coffee-table sheen: those of addicts, homeless people, thieves, drug dealers and militants” (6).

The difference in perspective and endeavor is also reflected in Phillips’ address to “White Europe”. Towards the conclusion of the book, the author begins with a third person exhortation (“It is crucial for white Britons to understand...”, “Britons should also ask themselves”), then moves to an accusatory address (“you belong to a group which exports a culture to every corner of the world – you are part of the European tribe”) (2000, 127). The multiplication of the personal pronoun culminates into a short and generalizing sentence, made more powerful by personification:

You justify your Empire, your actions, your thought
with your 'civilization'[...]. As I write, your cousins

in South Africa, a distant European tribe, prepare to fight for their economic future by killing black women and children in cold blood. Your eyesight is defective. Europe is blinded by her past [...]. (128)

Then, on the very last page, Phillips turns his focus to Black Europeans, and seems to pave the itinerary for Pitts' 30-year-later endeavor: he realizes "that [...] we, black people, are an inextricable part of this small continent. And Europeans must learn to understand this for themselves, for there are among us few who are here as missionaries" (129).

In a way, this ending is where Pitts picks up. In *Afropean*, while there may be a desire to showcase the existence and legitimacy of Black Europe to wider society, it is not this 'mission' which prevails. The passages that most resemble addresses are, from the introduction on, directed towards black Europeans, who "need to understand Europe and to demand participation in its societies" (2019, 8). In an article about his travels, "An Afropean Travel Narrative", Pitts concludes that he "had come to see Europe with new eyes—Africa [was] right here now, and I had the photographic evidence to prove it. I turned around and, heading back into a Europe that now more closely resembled the face I saw in the mirror each morning, went 'back to where I came from'" (51). Referring once again to documentary practice through the semantics of "evidence" and "proof," Pitts establishes his

belonging to a Europe that reflects him, a Black Europe, which exists, in his narrative, beyond doubt.

In a joint video titled (after V. S. Naipaul) “A Bend in the River” by Pitts and Phillips (2012), Phillips is heard reading out: “Britain, like most European nations, is not particularly open to hyphenation. [...] Being British remains a largely concrete identity, quite well-gated, and not particularly flexible.” Hyphenation returns as an entry point into Pitts’ *Afropean*, this time to point out the “unhyphenated” nature of the term and its potential for grasping complex Black European identities. In this sense, it can be considered that Pitts seeks to un-hyphenate the Afropean experience, in other words, to assert: “As a member of Europe’s black community, this Europe I speak of is all part of my inheritance, too, and it was time to wander and celebrate the continent like I owned it” (2019, 7). Perhaps these words can also be read as a testimony to the fact that the hopelessness and bitterness of Phillips’ words has healed, in Pitts generation into new narratives that allow for unhyphenated complexity, for a sense of *belonging* that doesn’t ask for permission. Narration is here understood as a political tool, revindicated by Pitts as “the right to document and disseminate our stories” (8).

Already in the first pages of the book, Pitts hints upon the role of story as a form of representation, illustrated by the necessity he felt to tell Hishem in the Calais

refugee camp that there is a history to his presence in Europe. This intertwining of narration (“story”), history and History is reminiscent of Phillips’ fiction. As Okazaki notes, “these works are also about imbrication of personal history with "History" writ large. Phillips brings to light the personal face of history [...]” (1994, 88, emphasis in original). This powerful role of narration places the storyteller at the center of the construction of new, collective belongings and of a sense of community: Pitts describes the “Afropean as a teller of transgressive stories, hybrid histories and complicated cultural allegiances” (2019, 268). Sensing, in Marseille, “the virtues of a translocal movement”, he continues:

The people in Le Panier likely had much to talk about with those in Rinkeby and Clichy-Sous-Bois, in Bed-Stuy and Peckham, in Dwarzak in Freetown and Rocinha in Rio. As I'd seen firsthand it would be easier said than done, but thinking of it this way seemed to justify my journey and the shaping of it into the form of a book connecting the disparate people and locales of black Europe in a single narrative, allowing each area and community to 'speak' to one another on digestible terms (332).

The storyteller is tasked with both encountering and articulating difference into a single narrative, whereby the telling of stories is recognized as a performative act bearing consequences. The role incumbent to the storyteller is akin to that of connecting, of translating not only lan-

guage and contexts, but to some extent, of translating Blackness⁵. The linguistic and symbolic dimension of this translation is found in an arguably cryptic, un-commented encounter narrated by Phillips in Paris, after a Black man in the subway station tells him he has been pick-pocketed by a white person: “‘I am a black man,’ he said. This was all the English he knew. ‘I am a black man.’ (2000, 63). Translations of Blackness are also mobilized strategically by Black people themselves: Pitts for instance notes how first-generation migrants, aiming at making their Blackness palatable to “the white gaze”, display the signifiers of the commodified and popularized black diaspora (“Bob Marley, 2Pac, Drake, and so on,” 2019, 57).

Importantly, both authors display an acute awareness of the wider political and social contexts in which they write or wrote. To Phillips, in the 1970s and 1980s, European tribalism, the necessity for a stronger sense of self, is precipitated, at the British level, by the loss of imperial ambition and self-perception; at the European level, by a decline that prompts “the somewhat unstable European Economic Community,” “a loose grouping of western European countries who are learning to cling to each other across old enmities” (Phillips 2000

5 I allude here to the term of translational Blackness, found in particular in the context of African and Afro-Arab diasporic cultures and solidarities. The term is encountered in the research of, among others, Sophia Azeb, Brent Hayes Edwards and Keith P. Feldman.

[1987], 132). In “An Afropean Travel Narrative”, some thirty years later, Pitts argues that on the one hand, “with the birth of the single currency and the Eurozone in the late 1990s, continental black Europeans had very real, economic reasons for understanding themselves as [...] black Europeans or Afropeans, rather than simply black French, or Afro-German” (2014, 48). On the other, at the moment in which Pitts sets out on his journey,

Europe, in the grip of its worst recession since World War II, was in a mess when I travelled around its major cities and during the period in which I wrote up my notes. The single currency was trembling, there were major budget cuts, increased student fees and only two of the thirteen cities I visited didn't have some sort of major protest going on whilst I was there. (Pitts 2016, 5)

The author goes on to describe some European events illustrating the persistence of racist police brutality, white supremacist terrorism and the rise of far-right populism from Scandinavia to Eastern Europe. As noted previously, the fact-based approach, mixed with the bendable genre of travel writing, is presented by Pitts — following Phillips — as a more authentic, “from the street up,” (2019, 5) approach to Black Europe. But Pitts also concedes having read some of the scholarship on the topic (5), though he does not provide any specifics. Indeed, the (mutual) influence of narratives like his and of the expansion of Black European Studies, as well as some

of the post-colonial scholarship on Afropean literature⁶ can be considered a central feature of the evolution from the context of *Tribe*. Remarkably, the interplay between national and transnational categories is a central object of study in the realm of Black European studies. As Stephen Small, a prominent Black British scholar of Black European Studies, has written in the seminal book *Black Europe and the African diaspora*:

[...] I didn't know that I was a European until I stepped off a plane at San Francisco International Airport in 1984. People in Liverpool who looked like me grew up with various names, but "European" was not one of them. We called ourselves "West Indians" or "half-caste" or "Black British" or later, "Liverpool-born Blacks." We might have called ourselves British, but we were never English (that was too white) and, from our point of view, like most people in England at the time, Europe was always over there. (Small 2009, xxv)

This assessment resonates with the evolution felt in the comparative study of both travelogues: while Phillips ambiguously claims European heritage⁷, his British anchorage seems predominant, Pitts identifies as a Brit

6 Among them Hitchcott, Nicki, and Dominic Thomas, eds. 2014. *Francophone Afropean Literatures*.

7 For instance in the chapter "A black European success", Phillips, 2000, 45

“adrift from mainland Europe” expresses a sense of hope for “stamping out a unifying identity together on this old, stubborn continent” (2014, 48).

Going back to the 2014 quote by Caryl Phillips with which this article began, we begin to recognize that the evolutions between *The European Tribe* and *Afropean* were not only, as Phillips has provocatively stated, the redrawing of boundaries due to European tribalism, the digitalization of communication, not even the European Union and its Schengen zone and common currency which would no doubt have facilitated Phillips’ journey. The major change, although it has to do with the legacy of writers of Phillips’ generation (and those before them), transcends them and literature. In the time between 1987 and 2019, Western Europe and Europeans have largely — often painstakingly, reluctantly, worriedly — accepted their status of multicultural societies; in part due to the work of writers and scholars, workers, activists, collectives and individuals who were trying to be visible and to survive. From these efforts, Black Europe has emerged as an entity solid enough to assume its traceability in the world. The history of what happened between *The European Tribe* and *Afropean* is also revealing of the history of the construction of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983).

This structural shift is well illustrated in Phillips’ and Pitts’ chapters about Germany. In *The European Tribe*,

everything — except for a short catching of breath in Berlin “Kreuzburg” [sic] — points towards the desire to leave, from the chapter’s title (“A German interlude”) and the citation that opens it (from Claude McKay’s *Banjo*, “Yet I never liked Germany...”), to the semantic field of flight and escape. In Munich, “[t]he cold Germanic faces [...] gazed as though I had just committed an awful crime, or was about to cannibalize a small child”⁸ (Phillips 2000, 83). By contrast, at his arrival in Berlin, Pitts seems to stumble into an antifascist, antiracist demonstration, which he looks at skeptically, noting the disproportionate number of young white people for whom, he writes, “the mean-spirited carnival [...] looked to be less about fighting racism and more a chance to release some teen spirit without any repercussions [...]” (Pitts 2019, 173). He then relates long conversations with Black men at Nil, “a Sudanese oasis nestled in a land of endless currywurst cabins and doner-kebab takeaways” (181), the aftermath of which eventually leads him to “a grassroots non-profit organization” called YAAM for Young African Artist Market. There, he meets a multicultural crowd, among which many West Africans who, as part of their Rastafarian faith, had “assumed Jamaican accents and a reverence of East Africa.” Together, these encounters point to woven and complex afro-diasporic

8 For a close analysis see Edwards Abdullah, 2013. Counter Strategies for Coping with Othering in Contact Zone Encounters: Caryl Phillips’s Travel Texts *The Atlantic Sound and the European Tribe*

imaginaries. Following Alex Lubin's conceptualization, I read these "imagined geographies" as "geographies of liberation" which, through communal and trans-communal identification and solidarities, can effectively defy the dominant map by creating alternative imaginings of the distances and connections (Lubin 2014).

Reframing the Black diaspora

Both writers' accounts reveal interrogations regarding the social constructs of race and Blackness. On the one hand, both of their approaches are based on a quest for Black people – whether it is their absence or their presence that is the object of the quest – and that in fact phenotypical markers are essential to their perception of diaspora: both long for the solidary nods of other Black people, and the lack thereof is often met with great disappointment and emotional response⁹. Yet at the same time, Phillips and Pitts, both placing themselves in Baldwin's lineage, insist that Blackness is a construct necessary to the White power structure. Pitts quotes James Baldwin on this matter: "I didn't invent him. White people invented him... [...] well, he's unnecessary to me, so he must be necessary to you" (Baldwin in Moore 1963, quoted in 2019, 119). Certainly, this ambivalence towards racial constructs is a recurring theme of the Black diasporic experience. In the words of Phillips, "[I

⁹ For example, in *The European Tribe's* East Berlin and Warsaw chapters, pages 88 and 93.

t is neither healthy, nor desirable to spend one's whole European life aware of 'colour,' and I have yet to meet a single black person who enjoys it, but the curiously warped logic of the European continually attempts this force upon us" (Phillips 2000, 125). Placed at the very end of *The European Tribe*, this statement appears almost as a justification for the mobilization of racial constructs in the book, to the purpose of showing what Phillips calls "racialism" (63).

Both texts nonetheless participate in a process of definition, and negotiation, of the meanings and implications of Blackness. Phillips' encounters with Blackness in Europe includes "the waiter in a cheap Pigalle Indian restaurant," who may or may not be of African descent, which does not seem to matter in the context of the interaction, as well as witnessing "the lifestyles of Dutch black people, West Indians from Aruba, Curaçao or Surinam, Asians from Indonesia" identified by him as "Black people" (68). A short stay in Belfast serves again, although less decidedly, as an occasion to build parallels: about the IRA's methods Phillips writes that "[i]t is a classic blueprint used by those who have already succeeded in decolonizing most of Africa and Asia" (74).

Phillips further intertwines references to independence movements of Algerians and "the Kanak people" (64); antisemitism when visiting the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and the concentration camp Auschwitz in

Poland, as well as reflecting on the Venetian ghetto; in turn put in resonance with “racist graffiti [which] continue to smear synagogues, but are now daubed on mosques. [...] In West Germany, it is a crime to scrawl ‘Judenraus’, but not ‘Turkenraus’” (70). Later, in conversation with Yuri, a writer attempting to leave the Soviet Union, Phillips records: “‘We are not cattle’, he [Yuri] said, ‘to be bought and bartered with. You, of all people, must know that’” (115). Both for Phillips and for his interlocutors, Blackness in more or less fluid interpretations and allusions serves to build solidarities.

At the same time, the Atlantic space, which has been a staple of Phillips’ fiction and non-fiction, remains his prevalent lens. Phillips writes in *The European Tribe*

But it seems to me that black people who are trapped in a hostile and racist Europe, exiled from a politically and economically unreliable Caribbean, are beginning to gather around themselves the values of survival and resistance that have sustained them on two journeys across the Atlantic, and are now fighting for the right to be a part of the future of this continent. (126)

By contrast, Pitts’ narrative includes many Black Europeans, Africans in Europe, and others, who are largely excluded from the Atlantic construct whose emergence is so tied to Britain¹⁰. Through the types of encounters he relates, as well as the content of conversations

10 See Paul Gilroy, 1993. *Black Atlantic*.

he relays, Pitts seems to embrace, as Jessica de Abreu from the Black Archives puts it in the chapter of the book devoted to Amsterdam, “resistance, especially to the notion that black people’s history is only defined by slavery” (2019, 136).

As raised previously, the predominance of African American culture has shaped Pitts up to a point, giving pointers of “Black” identity to him as he struggled to find them in his immediate surroundings. This translation of Blackness (also) as a cultural commodity participates in the expansiveness of the category and might be considered to renew Phillips’ understanding of Blackness as, largely, oppression. A striking example is the fact that, in Pitts’ Sheffield, it is his Yemeni neighbor Mohammed who introduces him to much of African American culture. Mohammed “culturally took part in that great ideological construct of 'blackness' that had been laid down in the 70s and 80s and bore fruit in the 90s through hip-hop culture” (14). Nonetheless, it seems that, met with the imperatives of community-building in the Black European construct, Blackness as a category is less expansive in *Afropean*. Instead, the focus appears to be on finding, showing and defining the Black diaspora in Europe, in all its complexities and dissonances. Remarkably, the reader enters *Afropean* (after the introduction) with a Parisian chapter that reflects, or announces, the complexities and dissonances of the Black diaspora, while at the same time perhaps reinforcing the idea of a Black Europe, specific and different

from African American narratives about the Black diaspora. Later, recounting his first encounter with Caryl Phillips' *Belgium*, Pitts presents Phillips' legacy in his own work, insisting on the dimension of growing up among the white working-class (an "atypical black British experience" 2017, 40). Pitts links himself to Phillips through this, i.e., a sense of navigating identities more complex and perhaps less essentialized than the narrative based on a single strand of identity, the ethnic or racial one. Pitts repeatedly posits both himself and Phillips in an outcast position not only to whiteness, but also to Blackness¹¹: in Berlin, upon hearing about a Rastafarian's faith of the return of all black men to Africa "to build a great nation," Pitts wonders "what the black king would do with those of us who are mixed race and/or feel mixed-cultured. Would we be selected for his African ark? And what if we did get a golden ticket? Would we choose to board?" (2019, 189). Here, the recurring afro-diasporic narratives of home and returns are interrogated by Pitts in a manner that recalls the textual conversations on home and generational gaps. In other words, the "teller of transgressive stories" lives in a space of tension between the narrative construction of a community and the awareness of the fluid and diverse identities the communal construct must reconcile.

Caryl Phillips' portrayal of tribalist, fragmented and conservative European societies arguably led the way to

11 "I began to feel culturally adrift from both black and white Britain." (Pitts, 2019, 146)

the transnational fragments of diaspora as a form of counterproposition for the gaze, a new direction to look to. Johny Pitts draws on *The European Tribe's* reassessment of European realities and the potentialities of a postcolonial Europe, and, by extension, presents *Afropean* also as a product of the literary and political context inherited from authors like Phillips. Pitts follows in a tradition of Black travel writing about Europe in a reversal of the colonial gaze. Yet the different objects of their enquiry hint upon a significant evolution of individual and perhaps even collective self-perceptions, from Black 'others' to unapologetic, and as Pitts writes, "unhyphenated" Afropeans (2019, 1). Nonetheless, the temptingly linear conception of placing both books within a historical progression must be nuanced by the personal and particular character of the two narratives, but also because, as John Nimis has noted, "while the term [Afropean] itself is relatively new, the broader experience it seeks to encompass has been a concern in literature for some time" (2014, 48). It seems that its articulation has opened doors for writers like Pitts, who describes the term's genealogy and appeal extensively. What appears most clearly through this comparative analysis is a shift not so much in historical context as in self-perception and affirmation; a shift sensed and predicted by Phillips from a diasporic sense of displacement and estrangement in Europe to a focus on belonging and representation, which can be deemed post-diasporic. The term post-diaspora, which I expand from Dunn and Scafe (2019, in the Afro-Caribbean context) and Lascelles

(US-American context, 2020), suggests a ‘new problem space in the diaspora’, in which ‘making community’ also requires negotiating complex and multilayered identities along lines of gender, class, power and agency. Following this conception, the ‘post-diasporic’ shift can be read not only in the chronological element induced by the prefix ‘post-’, but also signify changes in that which has been shaped by diasporic phenomena, processes that interrogate and complexify Afrodiasporic identities and offer to shape new terms and definitions. And so, Pitts’ intention of rendering Afropeans visible in their “equivocal and untidy lived experiences” (Pitts 2019, 5) may well be a manifestation of a post-diasporic moment in which Black Europeans claim not only visibility and belonging, but also the right to complex, nuanced identifications.

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