Bidirectional Revision
—— The Connection between Past and Present
in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*

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One of the central features of Caryl Phillips’s work is the clear connection the writer establishes between the history of the African diaspora – above all the founding experience of slavery – and contemporary phenomena within the diasporic community. While most of Phillips’s critics agree that the exploration of this transhistorical dimension is central to his narrative arrangements, there is much less consensus about the meaning that can be attributed to these fictional bridges between past and present. This is, I believe, mainly due to the fact that research on the political influence of literary discourses faces some serious structural problems. Apart from the fact that scholars in the field of literature usually lack the methodological apparatus to undertake empirical research, it seems very difficult to find convincing categories, especially for quantitative investigations into the socio-cultural impact of creative writing. Consequently, the exploration of counter-discursive agency, particularly in postcolonial studies, has to rely on traditional methods of interpretation. My analysis of the revisionary potential of fictional counter-history in Phillips’s novel *Crossing the River* can therefore only be described in tentative terms.

Phillips himself has always been firmly convinced of the emancipatory influence of the fictional rearticulation of underexplored aspects of the colonial past, as evidenced by the following statement, made early in his career but still programmatic for his subsequent writings:

I had learnt that in a situation in which history is distorted, the literature of a people often becomes its history, its writers the keepers of the past, present,
and future. In this situation a writer can infuse a people with a sense of their own unique identity and spiritually kindle the fire of resistance.¹

This early credo seems to be symptomatic of the political drive behind the author’s artistic ambition and resonates in the keynote address that he gave at the “Caryl Phillips: 25 Years of Writing” conference in Liège, Belgium, in December 2006. In almost three decades, Phillips has not lost any of his determination to use his art as a platform to provide identificatory impulses for people from the diaspora.

In this essay, I introduce the notion of bidirectional revision as a conceptual tool for the description of the complex interrelations between the negotiation of contemporary cultural identities and the literary representations of the past. Taking Crossing the River as an instance of Phillips’s techniques of artistic expression, I focus on the way in which the plight of the protagonists introduces a paradigmatic shared experience, despite the fact that these characters are separated by time and space. I argue that their trauma appears as a strong unifying transhistorical feature and transcends the individual psyche.

Bidirectional revision

The revisionary potential of Phillips’s literary work is twofold: it has a retroactive dimension, mainly aiming at a reinterpretation of the past through the introduction of fictional voices, and a proactive one, calling for a reinterpretation of the present through an increased awareness of the historical foundations of contemporary phenomena within the diaspora. Whereas the former dimension has been frequently analysed in postcolonial studies, the latter deserves to be investigated in more detail. In what follows, I shall first sketch how spatiality influences culture in diasporic communities, and then focus on the way in which the reinterpretation of the past has an impact on present processes of cultural positioning.

Arguably, the Middle Passage as an instance of traumatic deterritorialization constitutes the founding episode of the African presence in the New World. The cultural uprooting by violent force created a sense of community in an otherwise highly heterogeneous group of enslaved Africans. Several literary depictions of the Middle Passage suggest that a new sense of identity emerged already on board the slave ships, fed by an imaginary representation