The Space of Crossing:

Caryl Phillips, Jenny Erpenbeck, and Parallel Genealogy

Stephen Clingman

There is a stranger outside your house.

– Emily Wilson, Translator's Note, *The Odyssey*

I am a one-year-old man who walks with heavy steps.

– Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore*

I don't know where I was at home.

– Jenny Erpenbeck, *The End of Days*

For writers such as Caryl Phillips and Jenny Erpenbeck, the standard logic of space and time does not always apply.[1] Phillips's work is noted for its dispersal across different locations and periods, and among different characters who may on the face of it have nothing to do with one another, all within the space of a single novel. In Erpenbeck's work, a single character can live alternate lives, and even her more "regular" novels involve spatial and temporal crossings of intriguing kinds. Taking my license from their writing, therefore, I propose a non-standard form of genealogy in this essay. Genealogy usually implies sequence, origin, derivation, but it would be false to suggest that either of these writers derives their inspiration from the other. Rather, the model I would like to suggest is one of *parallel genealogy*. Phillips and Erpenbeck are comparable not because of any debt from one to the other, but because both respond to complex

[1] This is a pre-print version of an essay published in In *Caryl Phillips's Genealogies* (essays in honor of Bénédicte Ledent), ed. Delphine Munos, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Mathilde Mergeai. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023, 21-41. I am grateful to Sohini Banerjee and Saumya Lal for research assistance.

histories that generate their comparable concerns. In many ways those histories are quite different. Phillips's starting point is the long history of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and their aftermaths, all of which are intrinsic elements of his own experience and identity. Yet it is notable how he explores other histories and situations as well, from domestic settings in England to the prehistory and aftereffects of the Holocaust. Erpenbeck is an East German (then German) writer, contemplating the atrocities and complicities of the European world of which she is a part, including the Holocaust. Yet she too explores other histories, among them the afterlife of Europe's imperial and colonial past. One is a black writer, male; the other white, and female. In some ways they (and their work) are reverse mirror images of one another. Yet in that very mirroring we see something similar in the depth and accounting of their fiction as they approach one another from opposite directions. There is something fitting in exploring their connection with one another across difference, therefore, because that is what they themselves do in their writing. Hence, this model: parallel genealogy.[2]

In what follows, I will be considering four novels: *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child* by Caryl Phillips; and *Go, Went, Gone* and *The End of Days* by Jenny Erpenbeck. But first, let us consider some matters of history and biography in order to see just how this genealogy develops, and why there are these connections.

The Space of Crossing

How is that two such different writers, who come out of two such different settings, can have overlaps and echoes in their work?

Caryl Phillips's story is well-known, and even in abbreviated version gives a sense of

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[2] This approach bears some relation to the model initiated by Michael Rothberg: see *Multi-Directional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

extraordinary personal and historical complexity. Born in 1958 in St Kitts, he was taken to Britain at the age of three months when his parents emigrated to England. Whereas most West Indian migrants of the period settled in London, Manchester, or Birmingham, Phillips was brought up in Leeds, and after his parents divorced, moved with his mother and brother to a predominantly white working-class area of the city. In Leeds he was in a small minority of a minority, subject to the threats of a persistently racist environment. He was ten years old when Enoch Powell made his "rivers of blood" speech; on the streets and at school he faced unrelenting questions as to where he was "from." As Phillips put it, "we grew up not quite knowing if this was home."[3] Even as he faced racial hostility and the meanness of reduced expectations at school, he did not – or could not – find any solace in the idea of resistance through black identity. Partly this was because for him race was complicated by class – "I was working class; I knew that"[4] – and partly it was because in his circumstances any uncomplicated affiliation with "blackness" was simply unavailable (and later undesirable). In a telling and characteristic move, early on that void was filled by a transverse form of linkage and self-recognition. Phillips has recounted many times how in the absence of any public narrative concerning his own situation, he found some mirroring – and a good deal of haunting – in the recent history of Jews in Europe. Watching the television series "The World at War," he drew his own conclusions: "If white people could do that to white people, then what the hell would they do to me?"[5] It was many years later that he discovered that he himself had a Jewish grandfather.[6]

Biography does not explain everything, but these beginnings, and the way Phillips's story

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[3] Rosalind C. Bell, "Worlds Within: An Interview with Caryl Phillips," *Callaloo* 14. 3 (Summer 1991): 599.

[4] Stephen Clingman, "Other Voices: An Interview with Caryl Phillips," *Salmagundi*, no. 143 (2004): 119–20.

[5] Caryl Phillips, *The European Tribe* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987): 66–67.

[6] Caryl Phillips, "On 'The Nature of Blood' and the Ghost of Anne Frank," *Common Quest* (Summer 1998): 4-7).

continued, do provide some logic for the patterns of his fiction: the way he explores not so much the core of identity but its outer edges and intersections; his interest in, and compassion for, marginalized figures of all descriptions; his invocation of differential yet connected histories across space and time. This last point has a bearing on a key feature of his fiction, its formal disaggregations and constellations, something Phillips himself sees as a feature of "outsider" writers who "experiment with discontinuities of time, and revel in the disruption of conventional narrative order."[7] One might say that parallel genealogy is built into his method and outlook as a writer – the sense that disparate phenomena and experiences bear consideration in combination and conjunction.

If Phillips was an immigrant in his early life in England – and if England in a sense continued to see him that way – then Jenny Erpenbeck's country migrated around her, even as she stayed in place. She was born in East Berlin in 1967, in some proximity to the Berlin Wall, the very definition of a border (as she recalls, the street she grew up in "came to an end at the Wall").[8] Her father was a scientist and author; her mother a translator from Arabic into German. Her paternal grandparents were both leading figures in East Germany's literary establishment and members of the Communist Party.[9] Where Phillips came into his world as the marginalized migrant, Erpenbeck had a secure sense of home, although as she has said, she grew up constantly being reminded that she lived on the poorer side of Germany.[10] What changed everything was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent reunification of Germany. Suddenly what had been the "poorer" country was now the wealthy one, though East Germans remained marked

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[7] Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001): 292.

[8] Erpenbeck, Homesick, 557

[9] Philip Oltermann, "Jenny Erpenbeck: 'People in the West Were Much More Easily Manipulated,'" *Guardian*, 6 June 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/06/jenny-erpenbeck-interview-time (accessed 4 June 2020).

[10] Oltermann, "Jenny Erpenbeck."

"forever as its second-class citizens."[11] What was a moment of epic celebration for the vast majority, for her had is cataclysmic aspects. Specifically, the wall as an external border in space reappeared instantly as an internal border in time:

> Ever since then, there has been a border between the two halves of my life: a border made of time, between the first half of my life, which was transformed into history by the fall of the wall and the collapse of the East German state, and the second half, which began at that same moment.[12]

As she put it, "The price of freedom was having what had just been the present a moment before suddenly relegated to the past."[13] This also meant that in the moment of reunification, identity had conversely been fractured.

The paradox that one can migrate simply by staying in place is a principle that Phillips seems to recognize as well. Dorothy in *A Distant Shore* exhibits a personal pathology directly related to the idea that "England has changed"; and of course she is challenged by the presence of a refugee on her doorstep, which prompts us to see her as something of an internal exile in her world. Notably, Erpenbeck has some of the same instincts as Phillips when it comes to the matter of what makes a life. "Every biography," she has said, "winds up broken."[14] This is no doubt a consequence of her own experience – an experience that has give her a distinct feel for the lostness of things, the reality of absence and the untold.[15] Of her existence in East Berlin she has

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[11] Jenny Erpenbeck, "Blind Spots: The 2018 Puterbaugh Keynote," tr. Kurt Beals, *World Literature Today* 92. 4 (2018): 60.

[12] Erpenbeck, "Blind Spots," 58.

[13] Jenny Erpenbeck, "Homesick for Sadness: A Childhood in Incompletion," tr. Susan Bernofsky, *The Hudson Review* 67. 4 (2015): 549.

[14] John Domini, "A Broken Story: Jenny Erpenbeck's Refugee Novel," *Bookforum*, 21 September 2017, https://www.bookforum.com/culture/a-broken-story-jenny-erpenbeck-s-refugee-novel-18600 (accessed 26 May 2020).

[15] Robert Lemon, "Vectors, Vanishing Points and Vicissitudes in the Work of Jenny Erpenbeck," *World Literature Today*, 92. 4 (2018): 55, points to the title and contents of Erpenbeck's 2009 book, *Dinge, die Verschwinden* (Things that Disappear). See also Necia Chronister, "The Enduring Impermanence of Jenny Erpenbeck," *World Literature Today* 92. 4 (2018): 48-51.

written, “We learned without learning…that the things you could grasp were not all there was,”[16] and that has made her attuned to stories out of reach in the public narratives around her. One key similarity for Erpenbeck and Phillips is that their experience of displacement is what moved them into writing in the first place, as possibly the only way of making sense of their world. For Phillips it was his disturbing experience of the United States and reading Richard Wright that provided the impetus.[17] For Erpenbeck it was a kind of jolt. Without the transition of 1989, she has said,

> I probably never would have started writing. That much is clear to me today. My writing began with reflections on borders, reflections on how we change over the course of our lives, voluntarily or involuntarily, reflections on what identity is, and how much we can lose without losing ourselves.[18]

The recourse to writing, the centrality of borders, the complications of identity within and across those borders: we can see the relevance of all of this for both writers.

There are other resonances too. Erpenbeck’s fiction may not be as overtly fragmented as Phillips’s, yet it has its own experimental qualities, and for comparable reasons. If the fall of Berlin Wall meant a break in time and space, if every biography winds up broken, Erpenbeck too is intent on disrupting time and sequence in her work. “I want to be able to think outside the currents of time,” she has observed, pointing out that in her fiction “I don’t just want things to move from the beginning to the end, but also from back to front, from left to right, from up to down.”[19] Even in what appears to be straightforward narrative, there is a fragmentary quality in

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16 Erpenbeck, “Homesick for Sadness,” 559.
17 Phillips, *The European Tribe*, Introduction.
18 Erpenbeck, “Blind Spots,” 58.
19 Oltermann, “Jenny Erpenbeck.”

her novels that makes readers work across gaps of time, space and inference. There is a further, key connection, a manifestation of that inverse mirroring I mentioned. Phillips, emerging from a postcolonial history, approaches the history of Jews in Europe as a form of oblique self-recognition. Erpenbeck, as a German writer, cannot but be aware of the implications of Jewish history in her country; and that is what sensitizes her to current postcolonial realities, specifically regarding refugees. On the Jewish past, Erpenbeck is clear. She has spoken of "[t]he guilt, the German guilt, of having killed so many people,"[20] and this becomes haunting territory in her work, a constant subtext. At the same time, because of her awareness of the horror and trauma of the German past, she is aware of its culpability in the present when it comes to refugees. "In the stories I grew up with, it was Jews trying to survive the Fascists," she remembers. "But now too, we are living with stories that will make history. These are in our own city, in a parallel world just under the surface, and again, people are simply trying to survive."[21]

The parallel world under the surface, or even in some alternate time and space: the concept is resonant for both Phillips and Erpenbeck not only as a topic but also as an organizing principle. It prompts what Bakhtin would have called the grounding chronotope of their work, invoking the kinds of stories they seek out and the ways they address them.[22] Emerging from broken worlds, the two writers, so different in many ways, insistently turn to broken stories – stories of what I have elsewhere referred to as the "broken road," the *via rupta*.[23] The border is of

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[20] Caroline Halter, "Author Jenny Erpenbeck Explores Europe's Migrant Crisis through Fiction," kgou.org 6 April 2018, https://www.kgou.org/post/author-jenny-erpenbeck-explores-europe-s-2015-migrant-crisis-through-fiction (accessed 26 May 2020).

[21] Domini, "A Broken Story."

[22] M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981): 84–258.

[23] Stephen Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2009): 25–6; Stephen Clingman, "Fugitive/Narrative: Some Starting Points," *Politics/Letters* 12 (2018): par. 9, http://quarterly.politicsslashletters.org/fugitivenarrative-starting-points/

course central to this for both writers. Erpenbeck mentions it insistently, and for her it appears there are borders in time and space which, once crossed, prohibit any return. And yet much does return in her fiction, just as it does in Phillips's. And in various ways, Erpenbeck, like Phillips, is concerned with the space *before* the border, or in the grip of its force-fields, or in transition because of it, or caught up in its aftereffects. For this reason I prefer the concept of the *boundary* to that of the border, because where the border invokes the wall or limit, the boundary is something we can conceive as a *space*, whether in location, existence, habitation, or time.[24] The boundary constitutes what I would call the space of crossing, and it is the territory par excellence of both Phillips and Erpenbeck, characteristic in their fiction as a matter of both topology and form.

The Refugee

In 2001, Caryl Phillips visited a refugee camp in Sangatte, outside Calais in France, and recorded his impressions there.[25] The scene reminded him of prisoner-of-war films. Most of the refugees were Afghans, Iraqis, or Iranians, but smuggling himself into the camp through the simple recourse of being black and looking as if he belonged, Phillips found two of the three African occupants (one of them a former lecturer in history), who told him of their desire to get to Britain. Calais itself was the nightly scene of refugees trying to board the Eurostar channel train. The town of Sangatte, and its local bar, gave ample evidence of the racism of its white inhabitants. At the time Phillips was contemplating, and conducting research for, the novel that became *A Distant Shore* (2003).

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24 Clingman, *Grammar of Identity*, Introduction, and Conclusion.

25 Caryl, Phillips, "Strangers in a Strange Land," *Guardian*, 17 November 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/nov/17/immigration.books (accessed 5 June 2020).

Bénédicte Ledent is quite correct in pointing out how the non-fiction account Phillips offered of Sangatte is textured and transformed in the novel.[26] There are two chief narratives in the book. One concerns Gabriel, later named Solomon, who has fled his native country in the circumstances of civil war, following his own seriously compromised behaviour in ensuring his survival. In this regard, while Phillips's work is evidently founded on compassion, it is never merely sentimental; he is as interested in complicity and complexity as he is in innocence or victimization. Gabriel makes the difficult crossing to France, where he arrives in a camp very much like Sangatte, and strikes up a relationship with a woman named Amma and her child. Eventually, he crosses to England clutching onto the thin ledge of a boat along with two companions, one of whom is evidently lost at sea in the journey. Landing in England, Gabriel finds himself on trumped-up charges of rape, and in prison sees his cellmate die of abuse and neglect. Released, he makes his way to the north of England, befriended by a truck driver named Mike, and becoming a form of adoptive son to Mike's landlord and landlady. Ultimately, Gabriel – having taken on the name Solomon – finds a job as caretaker in the new housing development of Stoneleigh (abutting a village called, with some significance, "Weston"), where he encounters the other main character of the novel, a white woman named Dorothy Jones. It is in Weston that Gabriel is brutally murdered by local white youths and his body thrown into the canal.

This is a story that invokes key motifs of refugee flight, undocumented migrancy, hosting, and racial hostility. Solomon's murder echoes that of David Oluwale, killed by the police and dumped in the Aire-Calder canal in Leeds – the topic of Phillips's account in his essay "Northern Lights."[27] More distantly, Solomon's death by water (so to speak) evokes the slave trade, and the

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[26] For Ledent's commentary, see "'Of, and Not of, This Place': Attachment and Detachment in Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*," *Kunapipi* 26. 1 (2004): 156.

[27] Caryl Phillips, "Northern Lights," in *Foreigners* (New York: Knopf, 2007): 149–235.

abysmal history of African crossings before his. This is Gabriel/Solomon's story on the surface of the present insofar as it can be known – and even then it would be a story almost completely lost in any form of public narrative about his life. Buried even further, as if in an alternate universe, is the subjective content of that narrative: everything Gabriel/Solomon knows but no one else ever will. Phillips stages this quite deliberately: it is in space of crossing from France to England that, as Gabriel jumps from the boat into the sea, his leg snaps back with the impact and so too does his memory – to his African past and his very private story, which we now read. There are other formal complexities, almost to be expected in a novel by Phillips: a third-person account of Gabriel's past is told in the present tense, while his first-person narrative is told in past tense. Various temporalities slide across one another in the novel, and it is only after Solomon has died that he returns to give his first-person account. This is when he says, in his haunting words, "If I do not share my story, then I have only this one year to my life. I am a one-year-old man who walks with heavy steps."[28] For Gabriel/Solomon the space of crossing has been one of fracture and disappearance; the life of the refugee is such a life.[29] The refugee is a migrant in time as well as space, with multiple temporalities layered like an archaeology subject to cataclysmic upheavals and faultlines in its strata, and a certain irredeemable loss.

It matters very much in *A Distant Shore* that Gabriel/Solomon is not the only main character. In many ways his counterpart, Dorothy, could not be more ordinary as a middle-aged white woman, a retired school music teacher. Yet her life too is characterized by buried archaeologies, faultlines in her sense of continuity. Partly this is because she appears to be

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[28] Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore* (New York: Knopf, 2003): 266.

[29] Arijana Luburić-Cvijanovic comments that the novel's formal discontinuity "mirrors the discontinuities associated with refugee experience." "'As classless as the common cold': Migration and Humanitarian Failure in Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 29.2 (2018), DOI: 10.1080/10436928.2018.1463589: 126.

suffering from mental illness; at the same time, her mental illness seems to be defined by the fractures in her consciousness – the condition of her internal exile in the world. Her narrative is an expression of these faultlines rather than an account of them; she, like Solomon, is in some sense "out of time" – or in and out of the time of the world around her. The key thing, however, is that although Dorothy and Solomon have an instinctive understanding for one another, any full and reciprocal connection is beyond them. Neither gets to tell their story to the other; their life-histories remain mutually opaque. Given this thematic landscape, and the formal complexities of the novel, the narrative as a whole becomes a fugitive narrative: elusive in its folds and transitions, and completely hidden in the self-image of the nation state.[30] "England has changed" indeed (though there might be some question as to whether "England" has ever given a full accounting for itself). Solomon's and Dorothy's experiences are by no means equated, and that too is important. In their disjunctive universes, in the fractured encounter between refugee and ostensible host, we understand a generalized version of the fugitive condition that would be unavailable for inspection in almost any other form.[31] This is the extraordinary power of the novel, and this, it almost seems, is Phillips addressing England and saying, let me show you what is buried in the unconscious of your world, the world to which I came.

The Host

If the focus in *A Distant Shore* is on the African refugee and the internal exile, Jenny Erpenbeck's novel, *Go, Went, Gone* (2015/2017) concentrates primarily on the host, but only

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[30] For fugitive narrative, see Clingman, "Fugitive/Narrative"; for the hidden dimensions of the nation state in *A Distant Shore*, see Clingman, "'England Has Changed': Questions of National Form in *A Distant Shore*," *Moving Worlds* 7. 1 (2007): 57.

[31] For an account of the ambiguities of hospitality in *A Distant Shore*, see Ching-Huan Lin, "Strangers on the Doorstep: Hostility and Hospitality in *a Distant Shore*," *American, British and Canadian Studies Journal* 27 (December 2016): 30–43, doi:10.1515/abcsj-2016-0017

through his interaction with African refugees. The novel opens as Richard, a professor of Classics, is retiring from his post as Director of an institute he runs. He is, for the most part, solitary. His wife has died, his former mistress has left him, he has much time on his hands. He is, like Erpenbeck herself, a former East German, living in the receding oscillations of that transition. One day, travelling into the centre of Berlin, he somehow misses a group of African refugees protesting on the Alexanderplatz. Their sign indicates their key concern: "*We become visible*."[32] Like Gabriel/Solomon in *A Distant Shore*, these refugees live on the threshold of visibility/ invisibility, and slowly Richard becomes involved with them, as they become visible in a different way to him. He visits them at the former school where they are now housed. At first for him they are a project: he wishes to interview them, find out about their lives, accumulate a kind of knowledge. In the process, he confronts his own limitations: steeped in the Classics, he knows so little about Africa, whether its geography, politics or history. He begins to identify the Africans by names from his familiar heritage: Apollo, Hermes, the Olympian or Thunderbolt-hurler (Zeus), Tristan. Yet even that heritage has its underside, its own suppressed implications. Richard's favourite part of the *Odyssey* is Book 11, the Book of the Dead, where Odysseus visits the underworld. Richard's student has written on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: the reference speaks for itself. He recites to himself from the opening of the *Divina Commedia* – and Richard himself is lost in the midst of his life in the dark wood of his unknowing. He begins to read Herodotus on the Garamantes, ancestors of the Tuareg. Naming becomes a buried element in the novel. Erpenbeck herself became involved with a group of African refugees, whom she credits in the acknowledgements of the novel, and changed the name of one of them (Richard's

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[32] Jenny Erpenbeck, *Go, Went, Gone*, tr. Susan Bernofsky (New York: New Directions, 2017): 14. Further page references are given in the main text.

Thunderbolt-hurler) from Bashir to Rashid.[33] In Arabic Rashid means, among other things, "following the right path."[34]

Even as the refugees are living in a kind of suspended animation, waiting for their asylum applications to be processed, so too Richard enters his own corresponding space. One of the refugees, Awad, talks to him of what it means to become foreign, and Richard contemplates: "Becoming foreign. To yourself and others. So that's what a transition looks like" (63). The fact is that Richard is already, in some sense, a foreigner in his own country as a former East German, and he is quite willing to enter into the ironies and paradoxes. East Germans who managed to cross the Wall were immediately given West German passports; these Africans who need asylum are refused. Richard finds himself unable to explain to Osarobo, from Niger, how in the vaunted Germany to which he wants access, Hitler systematically killed so many millions. Only if these refugees survived Germany now, Richard thinks to himself, "would Hitler truly have lost the war" (50). The refugees are learning German, and in one lesson which becomes the title of the novel they turn to the irregular verb "to go": "*Gehen, ging, gegangen*: go, went, gone" (50). The progression is not only a form of grammar, it is also a condensed narrative of the life of the refugee.[35] For Richard, the ghosts of the past return in such a grammar. He imagines all those murdered by the Third Reich "along with their unborn children and the children of their children…walking beside him on the street…. Go, went, gone" (222). For Erpenbeck herself, the connections are clear: "How long is the ramp from Auschwitz, anyway – " she has asked, "and is it made of time?"[36]

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33 For details on Bashir, whose story prefigures that of Rashid, see Halter, "Author Jenny Erpenbeck."

34 Its range of meanings also include the following: rational, reasonable, sensible, intelligent; wise, prudent, judicious; rightly guided, on the right way. My thanks to Mazen Naous.

35 Clingman, "Fugitive/Narrative": par. 32. Aspects of my account of the novel draw on this essay.

36 Erpenbeck, "Blind Spots": 62.

As is the case for Phillips in much of his writing – and quite likely not by accident here – water becomes the resonant element of the novel. All of these refugees have crossed by water, and for all it has marked a traumatic break with the past. Rashid – the Thunderbolt-hurler – stands as a prime example. In a devastating attack on his Nigerian town on the holiday of Eid Mubarak his father was burnt to death in his car, and Rashid fled via Niger to Tripoli. There, after the Europeans bombed Libya, the African refugees were forced onto a boat by the Gaddafi regime.[37] In the middle of the Mediterranean the imminent arrival of rescue caused commotion, and the boat capsized; approximately 550 of the 800 on board drowned, including Rashid's two children. His wife, who had been cut off from her family in the turmoil in Libya, returned to Nigeria and married again. As for the refugee group as a whole, Richard realizes that under the biopolitical regime of the German state, they are now "drowning in rivers and oceans of paper" (251). All of this has a tremendous effect on Richard. It is after hearing Rashid's story for the first time that he walks at night through his house in the dark "as if strolling through a museum, as if he himself no longer belonged to it" (91). He also has another drowning to contemplate, for the previous summer a man was drowned in the lake at the edge of his property. Like the unburied black body in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, the drowned man becomes a perpetual presence for Richard, a sign at once of his alienation, complicity, and mortality, a form of address he needs to make.[38] Step by step he does so. As the refugees are threatened with deportation, he brings them into his home, aided by his small group of friends. Two very different kinds of community find a different kind of community together. There is no easy promise in this resolution, but there is a form of turning and encounter, and it begins to redefine the nature of belonging and home.

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[37] Most likely this would have been during the NATO intervention of 2011.

[38] For Gordimer's novel, see *The Conservationist* (1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

"The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows," wrote the French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida offers his own meditation: "The dwelling opens itself to itself…as a 'land of asylum or refuge.'"[39] Refuge for the refugee, home for the homeless, belonging for those who do not belong. There is a certain risk for the European writer in taking on a novel such as *Go, Went, Gone* – risks of appropriation, ventriloquism, claims to easy equation or representation. But this is the terrain Richard himself negotiates in the novel, and it is his recognition of precisely those stakes that informs the nature of his turning. In a distant echo of Dorothy in *A Distant Shore*, the arrival of the refugees have made him recognize his own internal exile, but it is in response to them that he finds a different form of relation. For Erpenbeck it is a resolution not so much achieved as committed to, a matter of obligation and rehumanization.[40] Sustaining the water imagery, Richard thinks at one point how Rashid occupies "life without a shoreline, as it were" (277), and the last words of the novel return to the idea. Richard remembers his fear when he knew his wife might die. That was when he realized, as he says, "that the things I can endure are only the surface of what I cannot endure." One of the refugees living in his his house, Khalil, asks him "Like the surface of the sea?", and Richard replies, "Actually yes, exactly like the surface of the sea" (283).

At one point the novel raises the idea of quantum superposition, which revises the stable identities of classical physics, so that objects can occupy different states at once (258). Displaced from his version of the classical universe, Richard has entered a condition of superposition.

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[39] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969): 173; Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999): 41–42.

[40] In this regard, see Corina Stan, "A Life without a Shoreline: Tropes of Refugee Literature in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54. 6 (2018): "Imagining a solution for the refugees in the novel is bound up with imaging a solution for…real-world refugees" (806).

Hosting the refugees, they too have hosted him – tangentially, asymmetrically – in the boundaries and crossings of their space.[41]

Lives Across Time

It is apparent in both *A Distant Shore* and *Go, Went, Gone* how in the refugee encounter space and time are inextricable. To face the other across horizontal space is also to encounter the vertical dimensions of their layered and often hidden temporalities (not to mention the vertical dimensions of unequal authority and power in the present). Still, if the two novels in some sense are prompted by the horizontal encounters of different characters, in Phillips's *The Lost Child* and Erpenbeck's *The End of Days*, it is the temporal aspect that is emphasized (though naturally with spatial implications). In the process the very meanings of biography and identity are reconstituted – another manifestation of the parallel genealogies of the two writers. It is worth saying that there is nothing automatic about this: it takes two very special writers to be able to fathom the implications of their genealogies in the first place and to encode that fictively for us to contemplate.

The Lost Child (2015), characteristically in Phillips's fiction, comprises multiple narratives. One is that of Monica Johnson, a white woman marginalized because of her marriage to a West Indian and her subsequent divorce. She is also the mother of Tommy, later murdered by a man Monica has taken up with, whom Tommy and his brother have known as "Uncle Derek."[42] In her spiral of despair, it is some time after Monica hears that her son's body has been found that she commits suicide by means of an overdose of pills. Monica's story is evocative of other women in Phillips's fiction – Eva, the Holocaust survivor in *The Nature of Blood*, and, as we have seen,

[41] From a different perspective, compare again Derrida: 'The *hôte* as host is a guest' (*Adieu* 41).
[42] Tommy's death alludes to the Moors murders in northwest England in the 1960s.

Dorothy in *A Distant Shore*. Her story also follows cognate patterns. She, like Eva or Dorothy, has a narrative told in various loops of time and, when it enters her first-person account, expressive of her mental condition rather than constituting an account of it. Like Gabriel/Solomon in *A Distant Shore*, she returns to the novel to give her first-person story some time after she is dead. Connected with Monica's story are those of her sons – Tommy's, told mostly through his absence, and Ben's, deeply affected by Tommy's loss. The most adventurous leap of the novel, however, is its entry into another work of fiction, that of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Here the twentieth-century of Monica's story (and Phillips writing in the twenty-first) communicates across time with the nineteenth; and it also enters into literary history – a crossing of time in yet a further modality. It does so primarily by reinscribing the story of Heathcliff in Brontë's novel as that of the son of an African woman, a former slave abandoned on the streets of Liverpool, with whom Mr Earnshaw has had a sexual relationship. Phillips has long been absorbed by the story of Heathcliff, described as "dusky" and as a "gypsy" in *Wuthering Heights*, not least because Liverpool was a major slaving port.[43] In this regard literary history enters into the potential version of an actual history – yet another kind of crossing.

Even this, however, does not capture the full architecture of the novel, because there is a further dimension. The novel is called *The Lost Child*, and it contains a number of them: Monica, Tommy, Ben, Heathcliff among others. One is Emily Brontë herself, in a life partly drawn from fact, partly fictionalized. One of the most intricate aspects of the novel is to understand her creation of Heathcliff as a lost child of her own imagination, partly deriving from the circumstances of her own life. So here are further crossings – from fiction, into history, into a further fiction, into literary (re)reading as a form of (re)writing, into a form of biography. It is

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[43] Caryl Phillips, "Leaving Home," in *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000): 91–92.

worth focusing on that question of biography as one way of understanding the approach of the novel as a whole. Bénédicte Ledent has understood biography as an essential feature of Phillips's work in its address to generally unexamined and marginalized lives;[44] similarly, Louise Yelin has written of Phillips's "autobiography of the other" as central to his work.[45] Phillips himself has spoken of the orientation of his fiction towards recovering the lost and silenced stories that have never been "in the history books."[46] The key, however, is the *form* that biography takes in his fiction. We can see it here, as we can see it in the multiple narratives of *The Nature of Blood* or even *A Distant Shore*, as biography as both constellated and dispersed. Biography, in other words, is never singular in Phillips's work; even within the self it is articulated and tectonic, as we have seen. But most of all in his work biography is distributed across time and mode as a form of collective and asymmetrical relation. Whose biography, we might ask, is *The Lost Child*?[47] Is it Monica's, Tommy's, Heathcliff's, Brontë's? To ask the question is to answer it. Each life must be read against the others, emerging from the others by way of both linkage and difference, emerging from the *genealogy* that has produced this insight out of a complex historical legacy, the very form of this fiction in the first place.

We are products of composite and concealed histories; in relation to *The Lost Child*, Ledent and O'Callaghan speak of "all those children of empire…who are still wandering in search of a textual home."[48] If the "official" versions of biography are reductive and often complicit,

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44 Bénédicte Ledent, "Caryl Phillips: The Dignity of the Examined Life," in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael A. Bucknor & Alison Donnell (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2011): 72–77.

45 Louise Yelin, "Plural Selves: The Dispersion of the Autobiographical Subject in the Essays of Caryl Phillips," in *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. Bénédicte Ledent & Daria Tunca (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012): 69.

46 Tanya Agathocleous, "Yorkshire Calling: An Interview with Caryl Phillips," *Public Books*, http://www.publicbooks.org/yorkshire-calling-an-interviewwith-caryl-phillips/ (accessed 11 October 2018).

47 My discussion here draws on Stephen Clingman, "Writing the Biofictive: Caryl Phillips and *the Lost Child*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (2018), doi:10.1177/0021989418808010

48 Bénédicte Ledent & Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Caryl Phillips' *the Lost Child*: A Story of Loss and

silencing manifold "untold stories," this version of what I have called Phillips' biofictive method tells us there is something much more complex to navigate in approaching any given life.[49] The genealogy of the broken route has, in Phillips's hands, produced a challenging and deeply meaningful form.

Life in Times

Where *The Lost Child* examines multiple lives in relation to one another, Erpenbeck's *The End of Days* (2012/2014) heralds one life across a number of different spaces and times. Or, to be more accurate: it is not quite "one life" but the multiple lives of one person who is born and dies again into linked but disparate situations, as if inhabiting parallel (yet also sequential) universes. These are alternate lives she *might* have lived had circumstances unfolded differently – lives in the subjunctive, as it were. Akin to *The Lost Child*, though in its own form, this is a different way of considering the nature of self, and therefore biography. If "every biography winds up broken," this particular life is also a way of examining the broken times the character is part of. It may not be accidental that a female is at the heart of it, doubly subject to the force-fields of history.

The central character of the novel lives and dies five times across the span of the twentieth century; she is born for the first time in 1902 and dies for the last in 1992, growing older in each instance. She is not named until the week before her final death, and that is only as Frau Hoffman. The name itself is suggestive: in German "Hoffman" slides easily towards *Hoffnung* (hope), standing as counterpoint to the woman's experience, or as the eternally recycling hope that attends any life at its beginning. The character is initially born in a small village in Galicia to parents of mixed heritage – her mother Jewish, her father Christian. Part of the reason for this is

Connection," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 48. 3–4 (2017): 240.

[49] See Clingman, "Writing the Biofictive."

that her grandmother had married the mother to a Christian to keep her safe; the grandmother's own husband had been murdered by Christian men (some of whom he knew well) in a fit of antisemitic bludgeon. But the girl is not long for this world, dying of illness before she has left the crib, and the father leaves for America in a form of despair. Her second life takes place when she accompanies her mother and father (who in this story never abandoned the family, because the girl survived) to Vienna, where they live in semi-starvation in the aftermath of the First World War. There the girl dies following a suicide pact in an act of ultimate protest against the injustice of the world. Her third life continues in the USSR in the 1930s, where she has emigrated with her husband to help build the communist paradise. But her husband has been arrested and disappeared, and she herself is now trying to give a written account of her life in a desperate bid to stay alive. In a quite literal way this is an *apologia pro vita sua* – an account directly *for* her life. In the story, of course, it does not work, and she dies of starvation and cold in a remote Soviet labour camp. In her former life, she had been an aspirant writer, and so the fourth story finds her, having survived the Soviet Union, returned with her son to the German Democratic Republic, where she has become a celebrated cultural figure. There she dies by accident, in a fall down the stairs. We meet her finally the week before she is about to die for the last time in an old-aged home, already living a kind of afterlife in her mind.

These are the bare bones of the story, and as such they leave out the extraordinary depth and richness of the novel. One of the most powerful settings is that of Stalin's Soviet Union. Here, in circumstances where forced confession and self-criticism is part of the matrix of existence, the character's *apologia* is the very index of futility. What should she say? Should she acknowledge former comrades who have now been deemed enemies of the state? To ignore them might invoke suspicion; to mention them might do the same; to denounce them would be an act

of bad faith. The truth, as she intuits, is that it does not matter what she says: the mere reality that she has to account for her life is a function of abjection, and she will be guilty no matter what she says. In the world of what the Party understands as "objective truth," truth has on the contrary become inherently unstable, subject to the oscillating caprices of pure power. "Has Lenin been outlawed yet?" she wonders. "Could he have been a classic author when she set out to get her tea, but already a criminal by the time she returns with her cup?"[50] In moving from the aftermath of the First World War across Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union and then back to Germany on either side of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the novel is taking on major moments in twentieth century history. Yet all of it is enacted through the personal, whether this concerns a brutal murder at the hands of an antisemitic mob, the descent of the character's mother into prostitution, or complex relations between parents and children. The character's father will be obsessed with finding the answer to what he considers the deepest riddle in the record of mankind – how war, famine, or even his own incapacity to feed his family "can infiltrate a private face" (73). The historic and the intimate become aspects of one another's texture.

As might be expected, *The End of Days* is a novel occupied with borders, whether this involves marriage across religious lines, emigration to Vienna, the United States, the Soviet Union, or across the the edge of life itself. Yet, as the novel shows, even the end of life is not an absolute limit, because the character can live again in one or other of its alternate universes. Instead, the gestures of the novel are about repetition with difference, and transition across the faultlines of time. The novel the woman writes is titled *Sisyphus*, and her multiple lives are an instance of that idea, as she pushes the rock of her existence up the mountain again and again, only to fall. "I find myself in a transitional stage" (216), she remarks at one point; and that *is* the

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50 Jenny Erpenbeck, *The End of Days*, tr. Susan Bernofsky (New York: New Directions, 2014): 137. Further references are given in the main text.

point, that a transitional stage is always where one finds – and may be able to find in a deeper sense – oneself. As counterpoint to the successive "books" of the novel – its sequential stories leading to death – is a series of "intermezzi" between them, where the novel recites how things might have worked out differently by the small change of a detail or two; and hence, the character can live again. There are phrases and motifs that recur through her lives, and they serve as connecting and echoing threads. A saying in Yiddish – *Zay moykhl un fal mir mayne trep nit arunter* ("Do me a favor, don't go falling down the stairs"), voiced by someone as the character's infant body is being carried downstairs after her first death (7), is recited as a distanced inheritance by the character herself to her son, serving as tragicomic chorus to the manner of her death in the fourth story (180). In this way too the boundaries of death are not absolute, even if their continuities are obscure. Irony is the very substance of their pathos, and vice versa.

One of the most poignant aspects of the novel is that any future life is ignorant of much that went before it. So the character's son will visit Vienna after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and there see the grandfather clock and the collected volumes of Goethe that his grandmother, whom he never knew, once owned. But he does not take them back to his mother; he knows nothing of the history they contain, nor of his aunt's death – his mother's sister – at the hands of the Nazis, or indeed of his grandmother's deportation to a death camp in the East. In effect, the novel proposes history as a kind of dark matter – the suppressed and hidden background to everything we know. Just as in our own universe, it is much more massive and perhaps more significant than anything in the visible world. Life broken and dispersed; a different understanding of biography; recovering the lost and silenced voices of history, and letting them go again. Erpenbeck, like Phillips, draws out of the genealogy of her time a fictive form to match it.

Crossing the Water

As his mother's final death approaches in *The End of Days*, her son reflects on her unknowing: "His mother's not-knowing is as deep as a river on whose distant shore there must be a very different world than the one he lives in." What follows is a series of italicized voicings, one of which reads, "*I don't know where I was at home*" (235).

We are back to water and echoes of unbelonging. Caryl Phillips writes a novel called *Crossing the River*.[51] There is Solomon, like David Oluwale, cast into the canal. Phillips himself has written of his last wishes: "I wish my ashes to be scattered in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean at a point equidistant between Britain, Africa, and North America."[52] "I don't know where I was at home" could be a sentence from one of his novels.

Phillips and Erpenbeck come from very different worlds and from very different histories. But like a pattern from one of their texts, those histories touch one another, or communicate across distance. Both writers bring broken fragments of dark matter to light. *We become visible*. In the boundaries of history the space of crossing is the space and time of these novels.

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[51] Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993).
[52] Phillips, *A New World Order*: 304.

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