Ambiguity and Ambiguous Identities in Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*

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2016
Abstract

In the first chapter of *Crossing the River* (1993), Caryl Phillips depicts the dilemma of a fluid identity for the peoples of the African diaspora and their descendants by using ambiguity to simulate feelings of contradiction, liminality and a double consciousness. The first character, Nash Williams, struggles with his cultural identity as an emancipated, black slave and missionary who is repatriated in Africa to convert the pagans of Liberia. A postcolonial reading of Nash’s hybrid position illustrates his experiences of unhomeliness, of religious doubt and realisation in the shortcomings of mimicry. The second character, Amelia Williams is divided by her dual identity as the wife of a slave owning-slave liberator in antebellum America. Via a contrapuntal reading of Amelia as the antagonist of the tale, her hostile manner supports the suggestion that she sought to control the peculiar situation which was threatening her livelihood, depreciating her social status and debasing her imperialist values. Her proslavery standpoint could not, however, be established unequivocally. Nevertheless, both Amelia and Nash are unmistakably troubled by inner conflicts engendered through slavery and polarised ideologies.

**Keywords:** African diaspora, ambiguity, double consciousness, unhomeliness, mimicry, postcolonial, contrapuntal, imperialist, slavery, ideologies.
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1. Introduction

Caryl Phillips is considered by many to be a master-writer in the field of ambiguity. In one of the chapters of his novel *Crossing the River*, published in 1993 (shortened forthwith to ‘*Crossing*’ for referencing purposes), the identities of a repatriated slave, a slave owner and the slave owner’s deceased wife are purposefully left open to more than one interpretation. Set in the mid and post slavery years of the Anglo-African-American slave trade, the novel is comprised of four major narratives separated by time and place, although all the stories are strung together by the common denominator of slavery. Phillips’s employment of ambiguous characters, of a fragmented timeline in the novel and of settings derived from the infamous slave-triangle-route all serve to impress upon the reader a similar sense of disturbance and displacement which are commonly felt by the peoples of diaspora and their descendants. Diaspora signifies ‘the movement and relocation of groups of different kinds of peoples throughout the world’ (McLeod 236), and within this essay ‘diaspora’ represents the peoples of the African diaspora.

In the first chapter entitled ‘The Pagan Coast’, the plot is driven by the obsession of slave owner Edward Williams, a devout Christian, who is overly eager to be reunited with his former slave Nash Williams, a missionary who is missing in Liberia. This eagerness has been explored in other studies as being due to Edward’s homoerotic desires for ‘his’ young Nash, and that Nash might even be Edward’s biological son as opposed to being merely a spiritual one. Aside from these implications of an incestuous relationship between the two men, there is the more apparent explanation that the journey to Africa is aimed at preserving Edward’s ‘life’s work’ (*Crossing* 14), in other words, a mission to convert as many pagans as possible into Christians. Irrespective of the reasons behind why Edward embarks on his treacherous voyage, there is always an indefiniteness running throughout the chapter surrounding all of Edward’s relationships.
Although the issue of whether Nash is of mixed race remains a mystery, it is plain that a number of his American values undergo change the longer he resides in the newly established Liberia. From living in a monogamous society to living life as a polygamist, from being a missionary to one who decides upon a temporary suspension from his Christian faith, Nash’s doubled-migrant history creates a psychological liminal (in-between or limbo) space in which he has to redefine himself constantly as he struggles with expectations from his former life in America against commitments in his new homeland, the Republic of Liberia.

As mistress of the tobacco plantation, Amelia Williams’s existence is also governed by competing expectations, that of slaveholder versus that of slave liberator. One of the subplots in ‘The Pagan Coast’ involves her estranged relationship with her husband, Edward, and many readers complete the chapter largely overlooking Amelia by regarding her as an altogether insignificant character having committed suicide early in the story. However, her surreptitious confiscation of Nash and Edward’s letters is pivotal to the development of the story since she sets in motion a chain of events leading eventually to the men’s demise.

Since the ambiguity of Edward’s tendencies has been scrutinised in other studies such as in “Parenthood in the African Diaspora: Caryl Phillips’ Crossing the River” by Maria Mårdberg and Helena Wahlström, 2008, which was later published as a part of an anthology of texts in Seeking the Self - Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation, 2008, this essay will largely confine itself to examining two of the other key identities from ‘The Pagan Coast’ chapter although this incorporates both characters’ interaction with Edward. The first section of this essay describes how the theoretical framework of Postcolonialism applies in general to the chapter before focusing on how Phillips uses ambivalence and ambiguity to reflect Nash’s dilemma of possessing a diasporic identity. The second section examines these
areas of ambivalence and ambiguity once again, although in terms of how Amelia may have been a passive onlooker in her husband’s actions, or contrastively, the antagonist of the tale. Consequently, it will necessitate taking on a contrapuntal reading for this second section by trying to flush out what is not made explicit in the narrative of the story, namely Amelia’s ideology as the wife of a Virginian slave owner in the Plantation Era, and the ideology that supported slavery on the plantation.

2. Postcolonial Theory and the Diasporic Nash

Some theorists argue that postcolonial theory is only applicable to literature concerning countries that either exerted or experienced colonial rule. Postcolonial critics dispute this restriction. John McLeod, for example, maintains in his book, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2010, that Postcolonialism should not be thought of ‘in terms of strict historical or empirical periodisation, but as referring to disparate forms of representations, reading practices, and values’ (6). It is therefore argued that Postcolonialism should not be conceived in terms of a temporal movement such as decolonization following independence from a colonial power. McLeod also emphasises that Postcolonialism ‘denotes something which one does’ (6), in other words, disparaging someone/peoples in order to dominate them. That action or ‘doing’ is commonly referred to as either marginalising or ‘othering’ as the agent of the action. As the recipient of that action, it is described as being marginalised or being ‘othered’.

One of the major aims of a postcolonial reading is to identify and question examples of othering by examining how the discourse in a text champions or challenges imperialist ideology which attempts to justify the necessity of colonial rule. A prime example of contrasting reader-interpretations is in Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899, which may be analysed as either praising colonialism with
its heroic tale of a European triumphing over the metaphorical African beast, or as Chinua Achebe took issue with in his 1977 essay, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness”, for strongly reinforcing racist views of Africans in which they are dehumanised.

Superficially then, ‘The Pagan Coast’ chapter lends itself easily to an interpretation of underpinning a colonial attitude of imperialism which views foreign natives as subordinates to be conquered and subsequently tamed. Phillips frames the alienation of Africa in Crossing the River through the recurring use of the words ‘darkness’, ‘dark’ and ‘dismal’ where the continent is depicted as the ‘land of darkness’ (25), ‘this dark world’ (26), the ‘dark land of our forefathers’ (41), ‘the inelegant shape of Africa, which stood like a dark immovable shadow’ (13), and the ‘dismal coast of Africa’ (14). Collectively then, Phillips’s repetition serves to convey a damaging image of Africa portrayed as a ‘devil’s environment’ (43) and also as a ‘savage environment’ (53). Referring back to Heart of Darkness, Achebe commented in an interview with Phillips that Conrad’s discourse painted Africa as Europe’s antithesis (Phillips, “Out of Africa”), and this contrasting seems to be mirrored in ‘The Pagan Coast’ chapter.

Furthermore, Phillips shows how the act of othering is reinforced when Africa is contrasted negatively with a light, bright and white America - light as in ‘as a beacon of civilization’ (40), bright as in ‘the Star Spangled Banner (41) and white as in ‘a land of milk and honey’ (25) where milk, of course, is comparatively whiter in colour. It might be argued that the discourse in ‘The Pagan Coast’ conceptualises two alternative worlds where one is held in higher esteem than the other, so that America is to be favoured over Liberia (where much of the story is set), whereas in Heart of Darkness, Britain takes prominence over the Belgian Congo.

The Conradian intertextual relationship within Phillips’s work is also evident in the striking plot similarity between Marlow’s mission to retrieve Kurtz who has
apparently ‘gone native’ in the depths of the Congo jungle with that of Edward’s equally perilous journey into the heart of the Liberian jungle to rescue Nash who has also reportedly ‘gone native’. Moreover, both Kurtz and Nash possess highbrow attitudes towards the Africans, and this air of Western primacy is demonstrated solidly in one of Nash’s letters, ‘one can daily observe the evidence of Christian work which marks out the superiority of the American life over the African’ (Crossing 27). McLeod points out that under colonialism, the colonised peoples’ cultural values were devalued or regarded as so uncivilised that it was imperative they be rescued (21). Such misguided widespread belief could only have been established with credible rhetoric and established authoritarians.

However, given Phillips’s background of having emigrated in infancy from St. Kitts in the Caribbean to grow up as the son of black immigrants in Thatcher’s northern England, it is illogical that he would want to perpetuate such a false picture of his African ancestral homeland. The more likely explanation is that the discourse is deliberate; that the same imperialist ideology found in Heart of Darkness has been planted deliberately in order to examine the oppressing forces, something which Achebe posits Conrad did to set ‘Africa up as "the other world" so that he might examine Europe’ (quoted in Phillips, “Out of Africa”).

However, where the ‘The Pagan Coast’ departs from Conrad’s short novel is in Nash’s predicament of double displacement and double consciousness, the intense feeling of belonging while not belonging. Lois Tyson writes that in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois referred to a ‘double consciousness or double vision, the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures; the African culture, which grew from African roots and was transformed by its own unique history on American soil, and the European culture imposed by white America’ (362). This double consciousness, or way of perceiving the world from both an imposing Euro-American viewpoint while simultaneously rejecting
it, is noticeable when Nash reports on his new landsmen as ‘very savage when they think they have the advantage’ (Crossing 32) only to become protective of Liberia were it to be referred to negatively, ‘If you hear any speaking disrespectful of it, I would be grateful if you would hush their mouths’ (Crossing 32). Clearly, the act of marginalising the native Liberians in conjunction with showing devotion to his current Liberian status is not simply the trait of a hypocritical character but a reflection of Nash’s ‘unhomeliness’, of belonging to both communities and yet neither entirely.

Another instance of this double vision is evident when Nash imitates his white oppressor’s language by describing how ‘the natives are a much-maligned people in this dark and benighted country’ (Crossing 31), yet a few sentences prior to this, he praises and suggests adopting the practises of a:

‘grand devil man of the village who will, in exchange for some small trifle, tell them who it was that bewitched the person that died. This person will then be fed some poison in order to dispatch him for his wrongful deed. This appears to me not an entirely unjust method of administering justice, and one from which we of the so-called civilized world might learn something valuable’ (Crossing 31).

Interestingly, Nash designates himself within the ‘we’ Euro-American community, yet devalues them and ironically himself by referring to the we-group as inappropriate, as unworthy to fully call themselves civilized, hence a ‘so-called civilized world’ (idem). It is confusing how his double consciousness manifests itself when he compliments the medicine man, then demonises him as a ‘devil man’. Either way, incongruities in several of Nash’s meanings display an increasing state of incertitude.
In Peter Barry’s book *Beginning Theory – An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 2009, he draws similarities between W. B. Yeats and Chinua Achebe’s double identities: Yeats, for belonging to the ruling Protestants in Ireland as coloniser and colonised; Achebe, a Nigerian whose novel *All Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958 about a pre-colonial Nigeria, was also criticized for his British style university education and for writing in English, the language brought to Africa by the colonisers (188). Nash, of course, also houses a double identity. Like Yeats, Nash belongs to a community of colonising whites but has also been oppressed. Like Achebe, Nash has African roots and possesses the education and language reflected in the values of the men from the American Colonisation Society (ACS), but decries that ‘[f]ar from corrupting my soul, this Commonwealth of Liberia has provided me with the opportunity to open my eyes and cast off the garb of ignorance which has encompassed me all too securely the whole course of my life’ (*Crossing* 61-62). Nash is visibly plagued with double consciousness.

When Nash writes, ‘We, the colored man, have been oppressed long enough. We need to contend for our rights, stand our ground, and feel the love of liberty that can never be found in your America’ (my italics, *Crossing* 51), he seems to have categorically distanced himself from his former homeland, no doubt because of his new responsibilities as a (biological) father and patriarch of his own family. Later, he diminishes this autonomy by requesting Edward to clarify why he (Nash) has been so utterly rejected, ‘Perhaps in this realm of the hereafter you might explain to me why you used me for your purposes and then expelled me to this Liberian paradise’ (*Crossing* 62). Notably, the reference is akin to that of a young boy who has been expelled from school by his schoolmaster. Nash fluctuates between and within both manhood and boyhood; from being in control of his life to having someone else decide the outcome.
for him. Nash’s dichotomy is his internal conflict of independency and dependency, a liminal space in the either or, neither nor state of mind.

Nash’s insecurity over his identity is seen when he first delights at being addressed as *Mr. Williams* by the white citizens of Liberia and for being classed as a white man by the natives only to disparage himself for his darker complexion. Indeed, David Leverenz states that ‘[f]or centuries, black has been the negative defining white’ (21). Despite Nash’s obviously good command of the English language as penned in his letters to Edward, by referring to himself as a ‘colored gentleman’ (*Crossing* 61), Nash’s own choice of words exemplify his self-marginalisation. According to Tyson, this phenomenon is referred to as mimicry where ‘it reflects both the desire to be accepted by the colonizing culture and the shame experienced by colonized individuals concerning their own culture, which they were programmed to see as inferior’ (421). Nash has been Americanised, but is not entitled to call himself an American. He might be ‘like a white man’ to the African natives, but in America he is most certainly not a white man.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in 1952, Frantz Fanon, himself a psychiatrist and a descendent of slaves brought to the colonial French Caribbean island of Martinique, criticises that irrespective of how well-educated, how well-dressed and eloquently spoken a coloured man may be in a white man’s language, these western ‘attributes’ are all but mere adornments, like a white mask covering black skin. McLeod clarifies how ‘Fanon’s identity is defined in negative terms by those in a position of power’ (23). Clearly, Nash bears the signs of internalised racism which ‘results from the psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinates people of color to believe in white superiority /… /and often wish they were white or looked more white’ (Tyson 362). Even though Nash and Edward reside on separate continents, even though they are both free men and therefore equal, by comparing himself to the norms set by a
white imperial-colonial discourse, Nash continues to subject himself to the oppressive workings of white hegemony and exemplifies that ‘[t]he double or hybrid identity is precisely what the postcolonial situation brings into being’ (Barry 189).

Although it is discerning how Nash prejudices himself by continuing to ‘other’ himself, when Nash is not on American soil, he becomes increasingly disenchanted with his imposed ‘white’ American culture in the realisation that America has never been a ‘home’ to him to the extent that a white man is permitted to feel at home there. As Nash begins to perceive the white settlers and other black immigrants with their white values through a more objective lens, he learns that they are in fact without virtue and not the indigenous people he has so easily derided. This gradual dissociation from America accelerates when Nash writes about an American by the name of Mr. Charles who deceives a native man of his two sons under the pretence they would learn English, though the boys were sold to a slave factory (Crossing 31). In addition, Nash reports that there are ‘Americans, many of whom privately mock African civilisation’ (Crossing 41), and he details how ‘slave-dealers are establishing slave factories within the territory of Liberia, cunningly situating them further down the coast in the hope of avoiding prying eyes’ (Crossing 41).

That Nash becomes increasingly disillusioned with his imposed ‘white’ American culture might be because for Nash, ‘home’ and his identity are in continuous transformation, emphasised with his decision to ‘suspend his faith’ (Crossing 62). McLeod explains that ‘many diasporic writers have been keen to point out that home can no longer be relied upon as a stable and stabilising concept’ (244). Nash’s deliberation leads him to the conclusion that his white man’s faith, that which defined him as almost white by the whites, is merely a white mask, something to be put on and taken off at his will.
With Nash’s instilled image of Western idols now greatly disturbed by his reality in which whites are devoid of virtue, he finds himself forced to readdress his pride in having being classed as white by the Liberians. Thus, by inverting the focus from ‘blackness’ into drawing attention to the disparity among white values of ‘whiteness’, the tale ‘The Pagan Coast’ may be said to lean towards that of resisting colonial discourse.

3. Amelia Williams - Abolitionist or Anti-abolitionist?

Postcolonial criticism involves examining a text to determine whether the discourse strengthens or undermines colonialists’ imperialist ideology. This also incorporates investigating to what extent the actual text eclipses other essential parts of the story. Peter Barry explains that one of the most credited examples of re-centering a novel’s ‘background’ by bringing it to the ‘foreground’ (192) is exemplified in Edward Said’s study of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, published in 1814. According to Barry, ‘Said’s reading likewise locates the centre of the book in an absence, in things unsaid and unspecified’ (194). In other words, Said shows how Austen’s novel cannot be read without acknowledging that the country estate and the Bertram family’s wealth are contingent upon the sustained exploitation of slaves from their plantation in Antigua. In fact, Said himself asserts that ‘because Austen is so summary in one context, so provocatively rich in the other, precisely because of that imbalance we are able to move in on the novel, reveal and accentuate the interdependence scarcely mentioned on its brilliant pages’ (Culture and Imperialism116).

As such, the imbalance within ‘The Pagan Coast’ chapter is observed in its rich attention to the developments in Africa, although the context in which Nash is emancipated in the first place, is unmistakably rooted in America’s growing concern
that slavery should not or would not continue. Nash’s pleas for economic assistance from the Williamses whose income, like the Bertrams’ income, is derived from slave labour, raise questions as to Nash’s double standards, and furthermore, since Edward is a declared abolitionist yet continues to profit from slavery, Amelia’s standpoint becomes a matter of similar interest. This section of the essay will therefore attempt to work through Phillips’s lines of skilful ambiguity to establish whether Amelia was really at odds with slavery as many readers believe, or if she might in fact be proslavery.

With no actual spoken dialogue from the character herself to interpret, Amelia’s thoughts and motives become a composite of commentary made by her husband, by Nash and by the omniscient narrator of the story. This poses immediate problems, not least because of speaker subjectivity, but also due to a sparsity of only twenty-eight sentences of commentary in which Amelia is mentioned, itself limiting the analysis. It is plain however, that her ongoing intervention in the postal letters indicates that something was clearly amiss on the Williams’ estate and that Amelia is not as innocent as might at first be believed.

Understandably, one way to perceive Amelia is that she ranks among the truly ‘virtuous’ stemming from Nash epitomising her as ‘the highest achievement in womankind’ (*Crossing* 29). McLeod quotes from Anthias and Yuval-Davis’s collection of essays *Woman-Nation-State* published in 1989, where they identify ‘five major (although not exclusive) ways in which women historically have been positioned within nationalist discourse’ (137-138) among which ‘biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities’ and ‘signifiers of ethnic/national differences’ (McLeod 138) are relevant in this analysis of Amelia.

Nash’s praise for Amelia registers as particularly odd for two reasons. Firstly, Nash’s references to women are generally accompanied with stories of children, but as Amelia is childless, possibly barren, that is to say not a biological reproducer of the
ruling white nation, his comment seems rather ill-suited. There is though the suggestion that Amelia might be a mother via an ambiguous meaning in which Edward tells Nash that ‘[o]nly yesterday the children gathered about Amelia and asked after your well-being, and then said prayers for you’ (Crossing 11). However, the children in question may be plantation children since it cannot be validated why Edward feels he is lacking the ‘unconditional love of a child, could she not understand this? (Crossing 55). Recalling Nash’s desperate requests for money, it thus begs the question: why is there a total absence of adulation for Edward’s heir(s) in any of Nash’s letters? Secondly, Nash is evidently contradictory. He extols Amelia as the ultimate female, yet lambastes those who are still involved in the oppressive workings of slavery. As the plantation’s matriarch, Amelia represents white slave oppressors and their values. She signifies these ethical/national differences (McLeod 138) to distinguish oppressors from the oppressed peoples. Nash’s words of flattery therefore suggest he does so because Amelia is perhaps not so unblemished after all.

Honouring her as Nash does may, of course, be symptomatic of nationalist discourse where ‘women are used as icons, such as mother figures of the nation’ (McLeod 138). Having grown up on the plantation, Nash has been indoctrinated with nineteenth century colonial discursive practices in which white Europeans and white European-descendants, such as Edward and Amelia, are customarily revered, all other races being regularly marginalised. In Crossing the River, for example, the indigenous Liberians are denigrated with expressions such as ‘their crude vulgarity sometimes taking the form of aggression’ (8), ‘the unlettered and heathen state of the masses’ (10) and ‘heathen shores at the edge of civilisation’ (12). As Tyson, an American herself, closely points out, while many of the founding members of America firmly rejected the political philosophies from former ruling nations, such as England, they had not however separated themselves from an inherited Anglo-European colonialist ideology
‘which permitted white Americans, in turn, to dominate the native American lands we now call the United States of America and to hold African captives as slaves’ (445).

Othering is therefore an ideological practise performed in order to feel superior by contrasting oneself against those one designates inferior, such as the civilised West (Occident) contra the uncivilised East (Orient). An extensive exposition of these binary oppositions is detailed in Said’s book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, where he explains that ‘the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience’ (*Orientalism* 1-2). These concepts of an Occidental West and Oriental East division whereby the Oriental East ‘is conceived as being everything that the west is not, its alter ego’ (McLeod 49) is even paralleled in the othering of liberated slaves within the chapter of ‘The Pagan Coast’ and is observed, for instance, in Edward’s bewilderment over Nash’s disappearance, ‘Had that dark face charged with belief and propriety, been somehow changed in the humid and barbarous climate?’ (*Crossing* 14). Here, Christian belief and American conduct are seen as admirable attributes compared to a pagan uncivilized existence.

Additionally, the image of Amelia as a demure wife is questionable when it is understood that after her suicide, Edward felt relief over no longer having ‘to endure neither harsh nor reproachful words from his lady wife, Amelia, who would no doubt be gravely suspicious of the motives which lay behind his projected expedition’ (*Crossing* 12). In an undelivered letter to Nash, Edward emphasises with clarity that ‘[o]ur whole experiment depends greatly upon your success’ (*Crossing* 11). If Amelia was entirely supportive of her husband’s project, then it would eliminate any need for mistrust or to reprimand him, unless that is, she was opposed to her husband’s ‘progressive’ notions to educate the slaves, to liberate them and to pay for their passage to Liberia.

If, however, Edward was secretly intent on reigniting the sexual desires he once held for Nash, it might explain her antagonism to some extent. McLeod writes that
Western travellers often viewed Eastern countries as places ‘where moral codes of behaviour did not function, and where they could actually indulge in forms of sexual excess’ (55). This fortifies the concocted image of an Oriental East, and for Amelia, being unable to scrutinize Edward’s every move means that if Edward had only previously fantasized homoerotically about young men, his unimpeded presence in Liberia, in her imagined ‘immoral East’, might lead to her husband engaging in homosexual liaisons. Amelia’s possible concern is that without Western socio-cultural constraints, without her reproachful words to moralise Edward, he might finally become the person that she has deprived him from being. As a nineteenth century female Westerner, perhaps in her mind, the ‘moral West’ functions as Edward’s saviour from her preconceived ‘immoral ‘Other’ (Barry 187).

Establishing whether or not Edward and his former bondsman were lovers is somewhat marred for the reader due to the niggling factor that for a former slave so precious to Edward, Nash’s welfare does not appear to be foremost in Edward’s mind even up to a year after Amelia’s death. If her strongly disapproving words were all that barred Edward from pursuing a romance with Nash, what persuasive words convinced her husband to refrain from visiting the man with whom many readers believe he was so enamoured? Moreover, what is peculiar about the men’s bond is not as much Edward’s unconcern with the lengthy absence of personal letters from Nash, for whom Edward had sponsored Nash with a college education, but that Amelia is riled with her husband for ‘making a fool of himself by lavishing an excess of affection upon a new retainer’ (Crossing 56). If Amelia was an abolitionist, there would be no reason to criticise Edward for preparing, as it were, a ‘new Nash’ since the new retainer would, in all likelihood, become a candidate for emancipation and relocation to Liberia. Irrespective of Edward’s clandestine intentions or the ambiguity of his male relationships, up until her death, Amelia’s tactics had proven successful.
Furthermore, apart from destroying Nash’s letters, additional acts of Amelia’s deception are unveiled when it is disclosed that Edward’s prescribed awareness of the trials and tribulations ahead of him as he set off for Africa was gained ‘through the evidence of those letters from his former slaves which Amelia had permitted him to peruse’ (Crossing 13). Apparently, not only was she intercepting her husband and Nash’s letters, she was also seizing an untold number of letters from other liberated slaves. Taking into consideration the large number of friends and relatives who eagerly awaited news from their liberated family members and brethren, plus the fact that Nash is a man known to many as one whose ‘missionary school was legendary’ (Crossing 7) and who ‘had been an inspiration to priests and educators alike’ (Crossing 7), yet is unable to have messages about his hardships relayed to his former master, suggests something larger than jealousy lay behind her need to restrict and manipulate information from abroad.

From the very outset of the chapter, it is made explicit that Amelia’s spouse is an abolitionist as seen in, ‘When, some years after his windfall of slaves, he became aware of the formation of the American Colonization Society, this seemed an ideal opportunity to divest himself of the burden or at least some of the burden, of being slave-owner, a title which ran contrary to his Christian beliefs’ (Crossing 13-14). This sentence is followed immediately with ‘his wife though initially not sharing in his unusually philanthropic fervour had slowly come to tolerate the strange behaviors and desires of her husband’ (Crossing 14). Phillips intentionally blurs Amelia’s position on slavery, and while it has been postulated by several writers that the reference to Edward’s ‘strange behaviors and desires’ are innuendos of his sexual eroticism, there is no reason for contrasting this against the subject of philanthropy within the sentence’s meaning. Arguably, what might be behind this awkward sentence in the story is that although Amelia secretly objects to Edward’s ideals, it is more logical to be perceived
complying with his benevolent manner of spending time and money on their captives as long as the planation still profits from free labour.

Of course, what Amelia’s exact motives were cannot be proven beyond all doubt. However, some stock can be taken from one sentence in the text in particular. This is surmised in her xenophobia and racist attitude towards her slaves’ ancestry and is depicted in the following passage: ‘As Edward dressed, his mind turned back again upon Amelia. Clearly she would have hated this Africa that Edward now felt marooned in. It had struck him, while at the club, that the lack of civilised white women in these parts would only have served to drive home her suspicion of all things African’ (Crossing 56). Here, Amelia’s Euro-American prejudice towards those of a darker complexion is not as convoluted as in many previous sentences of the chapter. Clearly, she has a deep-seated aversion towards Africa, African peoples and their descendants, which by definition includes Nash, all other former bondsmen and all the remaining slaves on the plantation. How can Amelia therefore be interpreted as angelic, the embodiment of all that is upstanding as previously put forth by Nash? The conflicting narrative consistently manages to perplex the reader.

While Edward was familiar with Amelia’s animosity for Africa and ‘all things African’ (idem), it seems the three hundred (or less) slaves, which Edward inherited some thirty years earlier, may have been completely oblivious of her aversion. Her insincerity must surely dispute any opinion of her as an authentic ‘good lady wife’ (Crossing 28). Burin stresses that while ACS manumitters were intrigued by arguments from proslavery theorists and pro-liberators, ‘levelers they were not’ (37). In fact, Margaret Mercer, a slaveholder in 1820s Maryland is reported as commenting, ‘I would rather die with every member of my family than live in a community mixed up of black and white’ (Burin 34). The concept of civil equality does not appear to sit well with some. Perhaps this also rings true for Amelia. Leverenz’s simplification that, ‘[w]hat
class meant in England, race came to mean in the United States’ (27) sheds more light on anti-abolitionist conservatism. Indeed, Schreiber’s description that ‘[c]hanging Southern ideology would involve social displacement, with freedom for blacks threatening the economic as well as the psychological stability of the larger white culture’ (38) offers an alternative explanation as to why Amelia disposed of so many letters. Is there a possibility that she only wanted slaves to envision life in Liberia as a paradise and not feel troubled by reports of harder times in Africa than they might experience in America? Educated, emancipated slaves who refuse to leave American shores, termed as ‘ACS’s opponents’ (Burin 57), means that her hatred for ‘all things African’ (idem) becomes a hatred for all things African-American, a permanent discomfort closer than she might wish.

Following an example analysis of the novel *The Great Gatsby* which was published in 1925, from a postcolonial critical perspective, Tyson writes, ‘As our own national history reveals, then, colonialism doesn’t require a colonized population beyond a nation’s geographical borders. Colonized populations can exist within the geographical borders of the colonizing nation’ (434), and in this manner, Amelia may well have been othering the slaves within the ‘geographical borders’ of her plantation in Virginia.

Nonetheless, several questions remain unanswered in *Crossing the River*, such as when Edward names Nash as ‘the chief player in his game’ (14), was Amelia one of the other key players and was the game a battle of ideologies? How much internal conflict was she faced with in continuing to disguise how much she detested ‘all things African? What part did she play in extracting ‘obedience and labor from bondpersons without transcending southern gender norms, which declared white women to be naturally pious, humble and submissive beings’ (Burin 50)? Is Amelia’s ideology identifiable? If the suicide of Achebe’s protagonist, Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart* was
caused essentially by an uprooting of ‘values that defined his community, and his own sense of moral order, when the institutions he fought so hard to sustain collapse in the face of European colonialism’ (Gikandi. Foreward. Things Fall Apart), could Amelia’s opposition to Edward’s ‘life’s work’ (idem) conceivably explain his indifference towards his wife? Moreover, what is meant when Edward absolves himself of blame for her suicide by reasoning ‘[t]hat she had subsequently chosen to flee his home, then her mind, then this mortal world at the instigation of her own hand, was a tragedy the responsibility for which would not reside at Edward's doorstep’ (Crossing 56)? Does Amelia’s urge to ‘flee’ confirm that she somehow felt trapped? Since it cannot be taken to mean literally, could it be interpreted as Amelia, like Okonkwo, also sensed that her world was falling apart?

4. Conclusion

In his depiction of both Nash Williams and Amelia Williams’s dilemmas, Caryl Phillips has written two enigmatic characters. Nash Williams is either: Edward Williams’s biological son, lover, both or none. Nash belittles his native countrymen as savages; meanwhile he proclaims he has chosen ‘freely’ to become an African though ‘bound’ to an African existence (62). Bound, too, by his duty as a missionary to convert African pagans, a prerequisite for which Nash was granted his freedom, he also suspends the main trait defining him. Via an epistolary literary form, readers are able to follow Nash closely through a first person perspective as he transitions from a Christian to a state of both Christian and yet not Christian. Phillips thus shows the religious dilemma of many hybrid individuals.

When Nash renounces America to Edward as ‘your country’ (Crossing 63), after indirectly expressing his unhomeliness in wanting to return urgently there, and having
been expelled to Liberia among, as he puts it, ‘the natives in whose land I reside’ (Crossing 62), it displays how complex the idea of ‘home’ is for migrants and people of diaspora by impacting their existence in central ways (McLeod 242). Despite having been relieved from the social constructions and constraints of America, Nash is unable to fully embrace his present physical existence because of the psychological impact from his former life. Perhaps, Phillips’s point is that hybridity includes the permanent liminality of psychological and conflicting social determinism.

Amelia is an equally complex character. Nash refers to her as an ideal woman, though her ideals tally neither with Nash’s nor Edward’s. She might share her husband’s Christian faith, but Edward’s liberal notions differ fundamentally from her own. The ACS project offers temporary alleviation for the widening social division among Southern Christian slaveholders, yet continued slave emancipation ebbs away at their wealth and for some, their social standing. Through a contrapuntal reading of Amelia’s role as the tale’s antagonist, she appears to be a far cry from the imagined national female icon of a loving Western civilised mother, and yet Phillips has still successfully managed to mask the character’s true convictions and her part in the oppression of the slaves on the Williams’ estate.

One area that in Amelia’s defence may disprove her as the antagonist of the story is in the form of Edward’s brother as a potential alternative authoritarian on the estate with Amelia having no participation whatsoever in the running of the plantation. If it was the case, that Edward’s brother was pro-slavery, Nash would not have written that he was saddened to learn that his former master’s brother had been ‘called to his long and happy home’ (Crossing 29). Neither would Edward’s brother have agreed to the financing of Nash’s college education nor any of the expenses incurred in repatriating former bondsmen. Consequently, in supposing that Amelia held a more
dominant presence on the plantation than her philanthropic, abolitionist spouse, this may be an area worth studying from a gender perspective in another essay.

This essay, however, has explored how by the same token that the business of empire in Europe could not have existed without the colonial discourse that encouraged imperialist othering, slavery in America could not have thrived and profited so successfully from its exploitation of African captives and their descendants without the application of the exact same practices. As McLeod and Tyson both argue, applying postcolonial theory and criticism should not be restricted solely to literature from colonizing nations or from subjugated writers from the former colonies. Through Nash’s predicaments, Phillips probes the controversial area of oppressive colonial discourse by entangling Conrad’s familiar tale of Europe’s business of empire with a variance of Phillips’s own diasporic situation, arguably for no other reason than that ‘works are made out of other works, which they take on, repeat, challenge, transform’ (Culler 34).

Carol Margaret Davison writes that Crossing the River ‘is a sophisticated, sometimes-sorrowful meditation upon the painful longings, and “weird” relationships borne of the aptly named “peculiar institution” of slavery’ (20), and within the chapter ‘The Pagan Coast’ alone, Davison manages to encapsulate three major aspects with which the main characters are struggling emotionally. Edward longs to find his lost ‘child’ in Liberia; Nash longs to feel unreservedly at home in Liberia and it is conceivable that Amelia longs for an existence without the dichotomy of being the wife of a slave owning abolitionist.

Finally, although as individuals both Amelia and Nash are physically free, both are mentally trapped inside the space of an incompatible identity, of ‘who they were, are and should be’. Control and loss of control are constant features of Carl Phillips’s postmodernist novel Crossing the River, yet it is ultimately about the ramifications of
displacement (Davison 19), and within ‘The Pagan Coast, it includes the effects of polarised ideologies engendered through slavery. It is hoped that this essay has been able to illustrate that the brilliance of Phillip’s writing ability is in the annoying discomfort of a multitude of ambiguities and to what has been referred to as ‘untidy categories’ which readers experience thus creating empathy for those ambiguous identities of the African diaspora.
5. Works cited


