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Negotiating (with) the Other: Prostitution, Double

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"practising on the little girls."[3] It could be argued that Percy's matter-of-fact tone is more objectionable than Naipaul's portrayal of Willie's sex with child prostitutes if only because the young Jamaican girls in question have no say over what happens to them and do not even stand to profit from their involuntary role as "training ground" for adolescent boys. Some semblance of Western morality is restored when the reader finds out that Willie Chandran looks "shocked"[4] upon hearing Percy's off-hand comment. Rather than discussing all of Willie's sexual transactions with prostitutes in the novel, in this essay I consider only those encounters which take place outside England and involve members of different diasporic communities.

Chronicling this sexual dynamic is more of a departure for Caryl Phillips, whose works of fiction are often praised by critics for their sensitive depictions of what are usually considered to be "women's issues"—such as Martha's loss of a grown child in the "West" segment of *Crossing the River*, the stillbirth of Emily's baby in *Cambridge*, and the recovery from a forced abduction and rape in the "Heartland" section of *Higher Ground*. Although Phillips does portray an interracial encounter between an older European Jewish man and a Ethiopian immigrant-turned-prostitute in Israel in the novel *The Nature of Blood*, the episode follows the conventions of a fairytale romance instead of showing us the underbelly of the international trade in cash crops, such as bananas, as happens in *The Atlantic Sound*. Like the isolated Willie of Naipaul's *Half a Life*, Phillips strives for narrative objectivity in his travel account and therefore attempts to limit contact with his fellow passengers to a minimum. However, the prostitute incident in both texts marks a rare moment where each narrator experiences a deep level of intimacy with another male character by imagining how this acquaintance experiences sexual

arousal and seeks to satisfy his need for pleasure. As observers of this erotic negotiation and (potential) participants, Phillips-the-narrator and Willie Chandran address the social and ethnic hierarchies at play in the exchanges between diasporic peoples even as they also react to the trace of colonial morality left in these postcolonial spaces.

Appadurai calls these intrusions of international politics and commerce into the sexual arena, "tragedies of displacement,"[5] occasioned by the manipulation of desire brought about by mass media, especially the "communicative genres,"[6] among them television and cinema. In his reading of Mira Nair's film, *India Cabaret*, Appadurai contends that these outlets of mass media shape the imagery of attraction and seduction which then become globally marketable. Because of the gender inequality in the diasporic model of capitalist interaction, males have full access to mobility and travel whereas females are more stationary. To attract their menfolk, then, these same women resort to performing a simulacrum of exoticism, rendering themselves unfamiliar or uncanny to increase their mystery and appeal. Local prostitutes, in turn, adapt their behaviour and appearance to meet their prospective customers' expectations. Neither of the narrators, of *The Atlantic Sound* nor of *Half a Life*, ultimately provides enough description of the individual prostitutes for readers to objectify these women as attractive or sexy accos faust1(then)1.2, tu 5.8(ac,h Tw[or)4.2(c-0.001lvebaret)Tj/TTS2--0.001lv[de)Te1).6()nde to ol

Simply put, none of his fellow passengers knows quite to make of Phillips as a traveller. During the trip itself, Phillips maintains such a strict level of authorial distance and objectivity that he refuses to divulge any personal information to any of his interlocutors, apparently in an effort to limit the scope of the various racial and national stereotypes into which his audience of interpreters try to force him.

Phillips's travel narrative constitutes a virtuoso performance of "double consciousness," more directly influenced by Paul Gilroy's articulation of the dilemma of "striving to be both European and black" in *The Black Atlantic* than by the regionally-specific context of W. E. B. DuBois's theory about the internal/external hybridity experienced by African Americans in the United States.[7] Structurally, Phillips's chance encounter with a young prostitute in a seedy bar in Costa Rica takes place outside the Atlantic paradigm of the Middle Passage, although the chapter itself follows Gilroy in its

As Phillips tells it, the discontent among the Costa Rican Jamaicans is such that they are reconstructing their cultural heritage by learning English once more in the hope of one day returning to the "home" they left behind because of economic necessity. Institutionally marked as national Others even as their linguistic assimilation means that their first language is Spanish, these "Jamaicans" are barred from owning property or joining fully into the life and politics of Costa Rican society.

Within *The Atlantic Sound*, the Jamaicans of Limon exist only as anecdotes. Although he sees the evidence of their cultural contribution to the port city through an advertisement for an upcoming musical show, Phillips does not actually report encountering or interacting with anyone who might fit into this national/ethnic category.

The "rooted" or semi-permanent nature of the Jamaican community in Limon means that the music scene in that area has changed to reflect their tastes, rather than catering to outsiders or tourists who might be looking for a particular transnational musical "Caribbeanness." As agents of Jamaican "self-expression" within Costa Rican coastal society in Limon, then, Daddy Banton and company emerge as "positive" agents of culturalism within this paradigm. Yet, once more, since Phillips only reads about these musical groups' upcoming performance rather than actually hearing them play, his reading of their names as un-Costa Rican is more a projection of his own internalised assumptions of the Costa Rican national and cultural character than at all indicative of the separatist Jamaican transnational identity these groups may (or may not) ultimately claim. His encounter with the self-exoticized Other is yet again postponed and mediated through the familiar—in this case, mass media advertisements.

In this confused internal border zone between "banana republics," imbricated in commerce between first and third world countries, Phillips and his fellow British passenger, Kevin, have to negotiate their relation to one another and to the national/cultural Other in the bar when both men are propositioned by local prostitutes. Within this brief vignette, Phillips constructs a homosocial triangle of desire, to use Sedgwick's term, whereby he narrates his white male companion's attraction to and transaction with "a young prostitute who clearly has yet to pass through puberty."[12] Previously, Phillips has described Kevin, a fellow British passenger, as "a man in his late forties who is travelling alone"[13] who "is making this journey, without his wife, in order that he might relive his teenage years at sea and think about his future."[14] From the outset, then, Phillips codes Kevin's desire as illicit, improper, and adolescent because it

involves relations outside both marriage and the law, as well as framed within an earlier discourse of "teenage" erotic adventures reminiscent of Humbert Humbert's sexual perversion in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Following this particular dynamic, the only physical description Phillips provides of the prostitute herself is of her extreme youth; to him, her body attests to its unripeness for sexual intercourse since she is so obviously (to him, at least) prepubescent. Thus, in this formulation, Phillips emerges as the agent of a normative and compulsory heterosexuality that rejects the said prostitute as an object of desire because her physical characteristics, or lack thereof, do not inscribe this child sex worker within an economy of desire predicated upon sexual difference. Since she lacks the outwards manifestations of femininity—noticeable breasts and hips—this sex worker is not attractive to him. Presumably, then, his sexual desire is more mature than Kevin's arrested development.

The triangular tensions at work in this encounter, then, are not between Kevin, the prostitute and Caryl Phillips, as may first appear to be the case. In this triangle, Phillips functions as a mere observer since he is not interested in outbidding Kevin to secure the young girl's sexual favours. Rather, by addressing the reading audience directly in the present tense in this account, Phillips courts our favor instead of that of the prostitute. By criticizing Kevin's taste in women and clearly suggesting his paedophilia, Phillips the narrator echoes the conservative, Judaeo-Christian values which deem adult male sexual activity with children to be reprehensible. In an interesting twist to the British imperial assumptions about black male sexuality, Phillips here portrays the white, British tourist as the uncontrollable pervert, exploitative and predatory in his travels, all the while setting himself,

actions mark him as every bit the savage, while Phillips emerges as a culturally-sensitive, enlightened traveller whose actions do not incur his audience's disapproval.

The libidinal economy of this episode in *The Atlantic Sound* becomes more complicated once Phillips himself becomes the focus of a different prostitute's attention. Age is no longer a factor in the transaction of pleasure, since Phillips does not report anything unusual about the prostitute's youth. The woman who approaches him does so as a member of the underclass, actively plying her trade. After describing the young woman who has captured Kevin's attention, Phillips narrates: "Her friend approaches me and whispers, 'Usually no coloured, but you I like.' As I try to uncouple insult from compliment, another girl approaches and whispers exactly the same words, in the same confidential manner."[15] Racism, vanity, double consciousness, class oppression and linguistic "passing" are all at work in this exchange. As mentioned before, Phillips does not give any specific physical descriptions of the prostitutes he discusses. As readers, then, our only racial context within which to imagine these young women is Phillips' earlier description of the population of Limon as being a mixture of "black, Hispanic and Indian," in which the "Indianness" in question refers to the native inhabitants of Central America rather than to those of the Indian subcontinent. This is an important distinction since European plantation owners imported Indian "coolie" labourers as a cheap replacement for newly emancipated slaves in the Caribbean islands, like Trinidad, birthplace of V. S. Naipaul. While the (likely) transaction between Kevin and the prepubescent prostitute has all the elements of an imperial re-enactment of the white man exerting his economic power over the oppressed, racial Other to fulfill his sexual longing, the (potential) encounter between Phillips as a black British man and the creole or

racially hybrid prostitute is coded as an interaction between members of two (presumably) similarly oppressed groups.

However, the prostitute changes this power dynamic between herself and Phillips by asserting her superiority to him on the basis of her racial status as someone who is demonstrably (at least in her own estimation) not "coloured." Although her words to Phillips convey her assessment of him as someone with surplus capital at his disposal, the prostitute apparently believes that the racial whiteness to which she lays claim gives her enough cultural capital when it comes to clients that she can exercise some degree of control over her own body by working according to a self-imposed general rule of "usually no coloured." Thus, by informing Phillips of her normal or normative code of behaviour even as she expresses a sexual interest in him, the prostitute tries to flatter him by the implied suggestion that he must indeed be an exceptional "coloured" man to inspire such a breach. Then again, as a businesswoman plying her trade, there is no reason to believe the prostitute's words are anything more than a slogan designed to attract more customers.

Phillips' status as a "coloured" man in this context is the result of two different semiotic texts working in tandem. The first, and most obvious, is the pigment of his skin. The first prostitute determines that Phillips is "coloured" because his outward appearance matches her preconceptions of who is "coloured." The second, more subtle, semiotic text at work in this determination re-inscribes the triangle of homosocial desire. To both the first and second prostitutes who approach him, Phillips is black or "coloured" in as much as he is not as white as Kevin. Thus, although these women communicate to Phillips their extra-ordinary sexual and monetary interest in his person, they also convey a sense that

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Willie's wife, Ana, and their circle of friends who also "have an African grandparent"[18] mixed in with their Portuguese heritage. Unlike almost everyone around him, Álvaro has "gone native" or creolised by marrying an African woman and having children. The ties of kinship he has developed in Africa unite him both to the land and to the people, but do not prevent Álvaro from exercising whatever degree of superiority his contested Portuguese "whiteness" affords him in this society.

In contrast, neither Caryl Phillips nor Willie Chandran have any children to tie them down to a particular location. Instead, they constantly portray themselves in the role of their parents' children: Phillips, by narrating how his mother spent her entire Atlantic Crossing memorising the easiest route from her cabin to the life boat so she could save her infant boy in the event of an emergency, while Willie Chandran measures his life against his father's achievements and his mother's silence. Their skin tones mark both Phillips and Chandran clearly as racial Others within the society in which they operate, but their parentage is not racially mixed. Caryl Phillips' parents are African-Caribbean people from St. Kitts while Willie Chandran's parents are both Indian. However, Naipaul's novel complicates the issue of race and class by making India's caste system a central concern of the novel's first section, which chronicles Willie's childhood. Willie's ethnic identity is fundamentally hybrid because he is the son of a high caste *Brahmin* and a woman of low caste. Thus, while the bar scene in *The Atlantic Sound* breaks down into two relatively pure extremes of Britain's imperial past, the white Englishman and the black Briton, facing an ethnically hybrid, under-age, gendered Other in a sexual arena, the same triangular dynamic in *Half a Life* plays out as an assortment of mixed-race

individuals facing one another in an open marketplace of desire for physical pleasure, social status and class advancement.

Whereas Phillips finds fault with his companion's arrested sexual development because of what he considers Kevin's inappropriate interest in a pre-pubescent prostitute in Costa Rica, Willie Chandran tries to understand the appeal of the young African prostitute to his guide, Álvaro. Before they even arrive at the bar, Álvaro instructs Willie about how to re-focus his adult male gaze to properly interpret the body language of the African girls and women around them:

> Álvaro said, 'How old do you think that girl is?' I really hadn't thought; the girl was like so many others; I wouldn't have recognised her again. Álvaro said, 'I will tell you. That girl is about eleven. She's had her first period, and that means that she's ready for sex. The Africans are very sensible about these things. No foreign nonsense about under-age sex. That girl who looks like nothing to you is screwing every night with some man.'[19]

Álvaro considers the onset of menarche, not chronological age, to be the indicator of sexual maturity in young women. He therefore conveys a disgust for inappropriate sexual activity with prepubescent minors similar to that voiced by Phillips in his condescending description of Kevin's prurience in *The Atlantic Sound*

young prostitute. By consciously modelling his behavior, if not his desire, on the patterns taught to him by a cultural insider who is, nonetheless, not "African," Willie engages in the same colonial mimicry that he first developed upon arriving in England. By having sex with a child prostitute, Willie behaves *like* one of the "second rate Portuguese" even though he is Indian. Willie Chandran also exerts the relative power afforded to him as a colonial agent who is not-"coloured" or, more precisely, not at all African by trading on his own exoticness much like the discerning prostitute(s) who approach Phillips and single him out as an exceptional "coloured" man in a rhetorical ploy to win his favors.

In his description of the physical transaction with a prostitute, Willie clearly establishes both himself and the young sex work

stays true to his novelist's calling by dramatising a situation rather than preaching about social change even as he writes a non-fiction account of his travels.

The aesthetics of diaspora portrayed in the bar episodes of *The Atlantic Sound* and *Half a Life*, then, are predicated upon a notion of the abject as the common experience that binds a disparate people together. By simultaneously expressing a desire to return to the womb of the mother country as sexual conqueror rather than as a child, Phillips's travel account and Naipaul's novel re-enact the colonial violence perpetrated upon the originary homeland by the invading forces, but without any of the monetary gain. Both texts also privilege the mobility of travel, which allows for a certain degree of anonymity, at the expense of the rootedness of a creole identity because it entails a commitment to a given (and known) racial/national/gender and cultural identity. By presenting the sexually charged space of the bar as the semi-private arena that mediates and facilitates encounters between and among diasporic communities, *The Atlantic Sound* suggests that a dispersed people cannot become one again except temporarily, while *Half a Life* suggests that the intimacies shared between oppressor and oppressed may be enough to challenge the entrenched prejudices within each individual community.

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[1] Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (New York: Vintage International, 2001); V. S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).
[2] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
[3] Naipaul, 67.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Appadurai, 38.
[6] Ibid., 36.
[7] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
[8] Phillips, 10.
[9] Ibid., 11.
[10] Ibid., 10.
[11] Appadurai, 147.

[12] Phillips, 11.
[13] Ibid., 6.
[14] Ibid., 9.
[15] Ibid., 11.
[16] James Wood, "Saving Vidia," (*New Statesman* 130.4557, 2001), 79-80. Wood claims that the African country to which Willie Chandran refers as "Ana's country" is Mozambique.
[17] Naipaul, 166.
[18] Ibid., 136.
[19] Ibid., 169.
[20] Ibid., 174.
[21] Ibid., 175.
[22] Thenceforward, Willie frequents these bars alone, looking to satisfy his own desires.
[23] Naipaul, 174.