Caribbean-born author Caryl Phillips has received numerous awards for his fictional and nonfictional works that engage the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. In *Crossing the River* (1993), Phillips goes beyond portraying the resulting dispersion and dislocation “to make a connection between the African world which was left behind and the diasporan world which people had entered once they crossed the water” (qtd. in Davison 93). He accomplishes this by reimagining the entrance into slavery, rendering it as a form of personal betrayal, specifically the abandonment of a child by its parent. Although Phillips has explored African complicity in the slave trade in other works, *Crossing the River* is unique in its portrayal of an abandoning parent seeking to explain his choice. The novel begins and ends with the voice of a mythic African father who, in the novel’s prologue, laments his “desperate foolishness” for selling his three children, Nash, Martha, and Travis, into slavery after his “crops failed” (1), and in the novel’s choral epilogue, returns 250 years later, listening for the voices of his children “on the far bank of the river” (235). In a series of narrative sections between prologue and epilogue, Phillips explores what might have happened to these children who were sent “beyond. . . . Broken-off, like limbs from a tree,” to find their way in the Western mercantile system (2). Their traumatic experiences demonstrate their disenfranchised status in Western society as well as the devastating consequences of severed kinship ties. Never addressing the issue of an African mother, the novel endows the African father with full responsibility for beginning his children’s passage into slavery and consigns him to unending guilt for that action. The African father’s presence, nevertheless, presents a side of the slave trade that few writers have represented and allows for a fuller account of the African diasporan experience.

In the novel’s prologue the African father calls to his dispersed children, and in the epilogue he reclaims and unifies them through song, celebrating their determined survival in spite of suffering and loss. Although he understands that for his children “there is no return,” the African father affirms that “they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved” (237). Metaphorically, his words are the overture that provides thematic unity to the otherwise disparate sections of this novel; however, his presence (and absence) literally haunt the text, entering the core narratives through the children’s recurring questions—“Why have you forsaken me?” (42) and “Father, why hast thou forsaken me?” (73; original emphasis). While the father’s words attempt to provide an explanation for his actions and give meaning to the suffering of his children, the reader is left with the realization that he speaks into the void, to children who cannot hear him. Knowing that his words do not reach their intended audience, the reader must wonder who really constitutes the intended audience for his discourse. In this article, I explore how Phillips positions the African father to speak to, and in fact, haunt his contemporary readers, who must then determine how to respond to this disembodied figure and his words.

The African father’s ghostly presence links *Crossing the River* to a growing body of contemporary literature featuring forms of haunting. Haunting serves primarily as a means of accessing lost or repressed knowledge, especially among subjugated peoples whose history and culture have been undervalued and underrecorded in
mainstream Western culture. In her sociological study of haunting, Avery Gordon argues that, "to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories" (17). The haunting aspect of these stories relates to their ability to alter "the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future," and to capture the multiplicity of connections that in this case connect an eighteenth-century African father to children of the African diaspora over the past three centuries (Gordon xvi). While the African father cannot make his intended audience hear his words, he draws in the contemporary reader to hear and acknowledge his expressions of love as well as the painful stories of his abandoned children. These narratives make us realize that "we are part of [the] story" told, that ghosts don't simply speak—they "speak to me" (Gordon 24; original emphasis). In Crossing, the African father requires the reader to respond to his ghostly presence and reckon how his words speak to us. It is significant that this figure is not contained within the core narratives. In this respect, he exists beyond the text, directly addressing and thereby haunting the contemporary reader. In her study of haunting in African American literature and culture, Marissa Parham characterizes reading as "a kind of memory-work," highlighting how "texts work on us, work us over, make us remainders of them" (5). In this conception, the text imprints the reader, imparting some of its ghostliness to us, in this case connecting us to the abandoned and still-suffering diasporan children (some of whom we recognize as ourselves), and the lost ancestors. Ultimately, the contemporary reader's responsibility to these characters and their ghostly remains is to receive them and carry them with us.

What the reader initially carries away from Crossing is the dissonance between the father's affirmation of love for his children and the dire consequences of his abandonment of them as well as the multiplicity of responses to their plight. Phillips carefully constructs the text to offset the optimism of the epilogue by using the trauma of the core narratives. Rather than rendering triumph where there is none, he intentionally leaves the African father's descendants (as well as the reader) in an unresolved middle space between the tragedy of their initial abandonment and the triumph of a hoped-for but unrealized reconciliation. Shelly Rambo's theory of remaining suggests the possibility of inhabiting this middle space as a place of survival and witness. She defines remaining as living on "as a form of witness to the persistence of death in life" (Rambo 937). Although the African children's narratives demonstrate their survival and efforts to build new lives and families, they also bear witness to the continued threat of danger in Western society, thereby signifying the middle space in which descendants of the African diaspora actually live. In the long middle of this novel, Phillips offers a fascinating mosaic of African diaspora experience by situating his characters in a variety of unusual historical contexts: Nash, an emancipated American sent to Liberia as a Baptist missionary in the 1830s; Martha, a formerly enslaved woman traveling to California in the postbellum United States; and Travis, an African American soldier stationed in a Yorkshire village in England during World War II. The broad historical scope of these narratives lends epic stature to African diasporan history, and, as Maroula Joannou notes, figures the African children as "subjects of history in a context that is both global and local, actively making history" (197; original emphasis).

These stories that speak into the "exclusions and invisibilities" of the historical record function as ghost stories, made more haunting by the spectral presence, and sometimes absence, of the African children. While many contemporary black writers would shape such narratives to explore the subjectivity of the black figure, Phillips offers the African children few opportunities for true interiority and consistently demonstrates the precariousness of their place in Western society. The children are unable to tell their stories unencumbered by the intrusions of others, and all die before their stories end. Nash and Martha, who have the strongest voices, share their narratives with a white person with whom they interact, while Travis has no voice at all.
Devoting more than half of the novel to the writings of white characters—Captain Hamilton, the slave trader to whom the children are sold, and Joyce, the British woman with whom Travis falls in love and marries—Phillips appears at least as concerned with how the African children are seen and represented by white characters as how they see or represent themselves. Phillips uses the African father's words and the white characters' responses to the abandoned children to model how those who initiated and benefited from the transatlantic slave trade can take responsibility for the children of the African diaspora, restore their humanity and finally earn the privilege of celebrating their survival, as seen in the epilogue. Entering the haunted middle spaces in which his characters live and die, Phillips offers his readers multiple representations of and responses to African diasporan experience that we may carry with us to broaden and inform our understanding of both this history and the development of contemporary race relations.8

This reading differs significantly from the majority of critical responses to Crossing, which either celebrate the expansiveness of its historical, geographical, and experiential scope, or criticize its giving equal representation to white characters in a work ostensibly about the experience of African diaspora. Those who applaud the novel emphasize its efforts to render the full history and consequence of the transatlantic slave trade in black and white, its crosscultural ethos, and the “celebratory tones of its choral conclusion” (Ledent 134), through which Phillips “offers a redemptive and affirmative history of survival” (Low 132).9 Critics from an African Americanist or diasporan orientation often question the predominance of white voices in the novel, particularly Joyce's, as well as the disparity between the victimization and voicelessness of the African children in their narratives and the celebratory tone of the epilogue.10 Among them, Yogita Goyal argues that Phillips's “deliberate evenhandedness” (17) in giving commensurate space to the perceptions of white characters in this novel “fractures the discourses of dominance and resistance equally, leaving us with a seemingly evenly matched playing field where the scars of history affect all participants equally” (24).11 In this process, Phillips's black characters are marginalized as “victims of history” (20) and displaced by white subjects who experience “moral growth” and “agency” that are denied the black characters (21). Goyal's criticism of Crossing reflects her discomfort with Phillips's unsettling decision to shift the emphasis of the novel away from black subjectivity and resistance toward the realm of responsibility. From this less-frequently visited and therefore more challenging space, Phillips seeks a reckoning from his white and complicit African characters, including the father who sells his own children into slavery. This study, which explores the issues of responsibility and representation in Crossing, ultimately negotiates a new space of discussion for this fascinating novel.

Recognizing the text's emphasis on responsibility, each section of Crossing can be read as an exploration of the theme. The novel's prologue presents the African father relinquishing responsibility for his children and "condemn[ing] them" to the custody of a slave trader, a substitute father (1). The African children experience a figurative death as they are torn from the fabric of their familial and kinship relations, which death is followed by a rebirth as chattel in an entirely new social system that negates their humanity and tasks no one with responsibility for their well-being.12 In the individual narratives, Phillips depicts the interactions of white characters with the African children to explore if and how they recognize the humanity of their black counterparts and their responsibility to them. He additionally analyzes how the African children are written into or represented in Western discourse, particularly in contrast to their representations of themselves. Upon entering Western society, the children are recorded as chattel in Captain Hamilton's log in “Crossing
the River," the third narrative of the novel, which highlights the middle passage as the space in which African subjects are transformed into New World objects. Jeanna Fuston White notes that "the only recollections of the sea voyage [in Crossing] come from white voices, magnifying the silence of the Africans in the cargo hold whose stories will be overwritten by the oppressor's voices" (95). The "present absence" of the African children haunts this narrative and, once objectified, they are systematically misread and misrepresented until nearly two centuries later, when Joyce, a twentieth-century British woman, recognizes her responsibility to restore Travis's humanity to the written record.

The only section of the novel that does not identify the African children by name, "Crossing the River" explores the mind of an agent of the system into which the children are placed. Presented in two forms—the captain's log and letters to his wife—this narrative sharply delineates the divisions in Hamilton's life and the psychic duality his participation in the slave trade requires of him. In his log, Hamilton chronicles his interactions with the captive Africans and crew "whose fortunes are entrusted to [his] care," representing them as little more than factors in the success or failure of his business enterprise (108). Hamilton describes the suppression of possible mutinies and punishment of disorderly crewmembers with the same detachment with which he records the details of his trade. Reducing human beings of African descent to numbers, Hamilton manages them to attain maximum profit by balancing the benefit of staying longer on the African coast to acquire more slaves against the danger of losing them to the sicknesses rapidly spreading in the ship's hold (115, 122). In this narrative, Nash, Martha, and Travis, the "2 strong man-boys" and "proud girl" that Hamilton purchases just before sailing to the New World, are recorded as Nos. 208, 209, and 210 on the ship's manifest (124). The humanity of the African captives, separated from their physical bodies, remains the haunting presence unrepresented in Hamilton's log. In contrast to the persona of a man who would keep such a log, Hamilton is somewhat humanized by his adoring letters to his wife and his attempts to separate his "dream of [their] future children, and . . . life together" (110) from the "petty concerns" of ship life (108). Through these letters, Phillips represents another side of a man that contemporary audiences might easily vilify, and explores the factors that blind him to the barbarity of his actions.

The dual focus of this section enables Phillips to explore the contradictions embodied by Hamilton's existence and permeating the social world surrounding the slave trade. Comforted that his "better, precious part is safely at home," Hamilton does not notice the irony that his trade provides the foundation for his own family through the destruction of other families and appears to believe he can separate the two aspects of his life—the domestic and the vocational—just as he keeps his letters distinct from his captain's log (109). Günter Lenz suggests that these contradictory social spheres actually support each other due to the nature of mercantile pursuits:

Phillips reveals the interrelatedness of two seemingly separate and oppositional discourses, exposing the eighteenth-century sentimentalism and celebration of the bonds of the middle-class family as the reverse side of the spirit of capitalism, of the economic rationalism of the time, and of colonial contempt for the black "primitive natives" in Africa, whom the white Christian slave-trader does not recognize as human beings. (247)

On the ship, Hamilton treats with contempt those who differ from him both in race (Africans) and class (crew), extending a disregard appropriate for those not valued in his social order. By contrast, the domestic sphere becomes the repository of virtue and the justification for his less-wholesome activities. Reminiscent of the purity of surrounding his intended in contrast to Kurtz's debasement in Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel Heart of Darkness, the necessity of maintaining the virtue of the domestic sphere requires and authorizes the degradation and exploitation of the "primitive" people and places of the imperialist conquest.
Nevertheless, the system that demands that the slave become alien to himself and his subjectivity finally requires the same of the slave trader. At this early point in his career, Hamilton does not understand his father’s warning that “the teachings of the Lord were incompatible with his chosen occupation” (119). In his log, he mentions praying at the factory chapel before making his final purchase of the three African children, manifesting his implicit belief that his work does not separate him from his heavenly Father (124). The slave trade does, however, separate Hamilton from his earthly father, also a slave captain, from whom he has always felt somewhat alienated. Hamilton rationalizes his father’s distance as what “often befits a great man” (120), but this strained relationship suggests how the slave trade causes “the disruption of family life” on both sides of the transaction (Ilona 7). Finally, the elder Hamilton’s mysterious death on the African coast suggests the impossibility of maintaining such a separation between private and public lives.

The only explanation Hamilton receives regarding his father’s death is that he “traded not wisely, and with too much vigour . . . [and] cultivated a passionate hatred, instead of a commercial detachment towards the poor creatures in his care” (118-19). The elder Hamilton’s inability to keep the sanctity of his soul separate from the corruption of his work foreshadows a similar fate for his son; however, by basing Hamilton on reformed slave trader, curate, and abolitionist John Newton, Phillips offers the possibility that the slave trader can take responsibility for and attempt to rectify the harm he causes.13 Through Hamilton, Phillips presents one white man’s response to the plight of enslaved African children and adumbrates, through his lack of care and responsibility, the dangers they face in Western society. Meanwhile, the near-erasure of the African children haunts Phillips’s contemporary readers, who are left to work out what their responsibility might be to these spectral beings “huddle[d] together,” singing “their melancholy lamentations” as the coast of Africa recedes from sight (124).

“T

he Pagan Coast,” the novel’s first narrative section, demonstrates that even with the best of intentions, the slave master’s absolute power corrupts his ability to recognize his true responsibility to the humans in his care. On one level, Nash’s former owner Edward Williams, can be called a benevolent and enlightened master, offering through the American Colonization Society (ACS) the opportunity for Nash and other bondsmen to be educated and “repatriated” to Liberia where they could live as true men. Founded and operating under the premise “that white prejudice against black people was so debasing and immutable that African Americans could never be accorded equality unless they were removed from white society” (Dorsey 79), the ACS argued that the “debased” black male “could be miraculously transformed into a man by migrating to and colonizing Africa” (85). The arguably benevolent mission of the ACS was soundly rejected by abolitionists of the time for its refusal even to consider the possibility of blacks and whites living as equals in the United States. Phillips articulates the inherently racist mission of the ACS in Edward’s summation of the benefits of colonization: “America would be removing a cause of increasing social stress [people of African descent] and Africa would be civilized by the return of her descendants, who were now blessed with rational Christian minds” (9).

Just as Phillips exposes the inherent racism underlying the ACS’s supposed benevolence, his revelation of Edward’s history of sexual abuse of Nash (and other slave boys) reveals some of the corruption underlying his professed magnanimity. Nash’s departure from Edward’s home may remove a “cause of increasing [domestic] stress,” while his ex-slave’s presence in Liberia offers the possibility of colonizing African minds with Edward’s Western, patriarchal world-view. In “The Pagan Coast,”
Phillips contrasts third-person narrative sections focused on Edward with Nash's letters to Edward, to examine Edward's exercise of patriarchal prerogative and Nash's efforts to establish his subjectivity and manhood in relation to his figurative father and benefactor. Ultimately, the biases of his intended audience undermine the effectiveness of Nash's letters; however, in the end Edward may begin to understand what it means to care for rather than abuse those under his authority. After his death, Nash's letters remain to haunt both Edward and the reader, who together bear responsibility for the rare textual remains of this diasporan figure.

Phillips's third-person narration of Edward's journey to Liberia to discover Nash's fate offers a view into the heart of a patriarch who assumes the right to use his possessions to satisfy his desires and who attempts to justify rather than take responsibility for his actions. Recalling his wife's despair at his serial relationships with young boys, Edward easily absolves himself: "He simply craved to be offered the unconditional love of a child, could she not understand this?" (55). Later when he kneels to pray for forgiveness "for his indifference toward Amelia," he quickly shifts from contrition to rationalization, rendering his sexual exploitation of young boys commensurate to his wife's efforts to interfere with those relationships: "Had he not found it in his heart to forgive her" for attempting "to sabotage [his] friendship with Nash by destroying the colored man's letters," and accusing him of "making a fool of himself by lavishing an excess of affection upon a new retainer" after Nash's departure? Rather than humbly seeking forgiveness for the hurt he has caused, Edward approaches God with the smug assurance that, as a fellow patriarch, "his dear father understood" (56). In exploring Edward's abuse of young boys, Phillips demonstrates how sexuality "intersects with power and race," calling this abuse just "one form of colonial exploitation" (qtd. in Jaggi 28). The multiple forms of abuse to which Edward subjects those around him demonstrate the inequities underlying the patriarchal system, while his interactions with Nash reveal that the nature of their relationship is not "miraculously transformed" by colonization or repatriation.

In spite of their history of inappropriate intimacy, Nash's letters to Edward reflect a son's desperate need for the financial and emotional support of his benefactor and surrogate father. He addresses all but the first and last of his letters to "My Dear Father" and closes nearly all of them with "Your affectionate son." Edward's reactions to Nash's letters, however, demonstrate his inability to see Nash's humanity and refusal to take responsibility for how his benevolence affects his recipients. Although Edward himself, through his participation in the ACS, is well aware of the hazards the African American settlers experience in Liberia, he reads Nash's requests for assistance through his own biases: "The few letters he [Nash] had sent back to his master, whilst full of the usual childish requests for tools, seeds, money and other necessities of life, positively bristled with the spirit of faith, courage and purpose" (8-9). Rather than acknowledge Nash's need for material assistance and take responsibility for sending him ill-equipped to survive in an undeveloped land, Edward trivializes Nash's requests as childish and reads the letters seeking words that affirm his benevolent mission and "confirm that his life's work . . . had been of some worth" (14). He also ignores Nash's requests for emotional support, writing only two impersonal letters during Nash's seven years in Liberia—one of which is intercepted by Edward's wife, and never reaches its destination. Edward's unwillingness to respond to or engage with Nash renders the latter a ghostlike figure, a supplicant "other" whose petitions the patriarchal "subject" can simply choose to ignore.

Through Nash's letters, Phillips also reveals the black man's struggle to establish subjectivity and manhood in his new social sphere. Thoroughly indoctrinated in Western philosophy and the Western social hierarchy, Nash first seeks to establish himself according to Western standards. Raised in Edward's home, Nash is a son formed in his father's image, expressing gratitude that his former master "took [him]
Nash clearly hopes to resemble and please his role model. In Liberia, the place where black men can be men, he "transposes[es] the American discourse of slavery and inequality" on the indigenous people and takes full advantage of the liberties offered him (Birat, "Re-Visionary" 24). Nash relates his being considered a "white man" in Liberia and addressed as "master" or "Mr. Williams" but never "Boy" (32-33; original emphasis). His assumption of patriarchal prerogative, however, exceeds that of his African American peers, who criticize his "dictatorial manner" toward the local people (33; original emphasis). In order to exercise his power without censure, Nash slowly moves his "Christian empire" farther and farther away from Monrovia (34). His empire manifests the American imperialist mission in Liberia and calls to mind Kurtz's progress deeper into the African interior. Eventually, like Edward, whose shame over his wife's suicide follows him even to Monrovia, Nash is shunned by the other colonists. Modeling his new Liberian subjectivity on Edward's example, Nash replicates the corrupting tenets of Western patriarchy on African soil and reaps its negative consequences.

Nash's later abandonment of Western ideology, however, nevertheless demonstrates his dependence on Edward and his inability to establish a self-sustaining hybrid subjectivity. When Nash reaches the limits of the Western Christian discourse he has been taught, and discovers his new home to be "beyond the grasp of the representations which literacy has put at his disposal" (Birat, "Re-Visionary" 23), he terminates his missionary activities, concluding that "this process of persuasion, is futile among these people . . . [and] our religion, in its purest and least diluted form, can never take root in this country." Deciding to "reap what grows naturally," he replaces Western patriarchy for an African corollary and soon reports having three native wives and six children (Crossing 62). Nash also renounces the doctrine Edward has taught him, writing that Liberia has enabled him to "cast off the garb of ignorance which has encompassed me all too securely the whole course of my life" (61-62). While this passage may seem to show Nash's developing an African-based subjectivity, everything about his conversion reflects a reactionary rebellion against Edward's neglect: "my faith in you is broken. . . . You, my father, did sow the seed, and it sprouted forth with vigor, but for many years now there has been nobody to tend to it, and being abandoned it has withered away and died" (63). Even as he claims to abandon Western culture and religion, Nash persists in referring to Christianity as "our religion" (62) and to Edward as his father; he also uses the discourse of Christianity to accuse the father: "Why have you forsaken me?" (42). This allusion positions Nash as a martyr, a sacrificial lamb on whom the sins of others, in this case his "father," are cast, and replicates the novel's original abandonment when the African children look to their father, "Wondering, why?" (1; original emphasis). In connecting these moments, Phillips demonstrates the multiple ways in which the diasporan children are betrayed and abandoned in Western culture. Nash's death in the African interior ends his quest for recognition from Edward. His unsuccessful "repatriation" manifests Phillips's conviction that there is "no return" for the children of the African diaspora. Nash's inability to establish a viable existence in Western or African society dooms him to inhabit the middle space between cultures and social ideologies.

In spite of his inability to make Edward hear or recognize his subjectivity during his life, Nash leaves behind haunting remains that attest to that life, his struggle, and survival. His letters to Edward, the only tangible evidence of Nash's existence, and the unseen children born to his Liberian wives remain after his death. The reader never learns what becomes of Nash's letters or his children; however, in many ways,
Phillips leaves them in Edward’s hands and suggests the possibility that after his experience in Liberia Edward might dispose of Nash’s remains more responsibly than he treats Nash during his life. In Liberia, Edward begins to recognize the underside of his supposed benevolence. He regrets having banished “Nash [and] . . . many of his other slaves, to this inhospitable and heathen corner of the world” and realizes that “this business of encouraging men to engage with a past and a history that are truly not their own is, after all, ill-judged” (52).

On his way to the site of Nash’s death, Edward expresses his “intention of taking the children of Nash Williams back to America and offering them the possibility of a proper Christian life amongst civilized people” (67-68). While this thought demonstrates Edward’s belief that his ownership of Nash continues into Liberia and extends to his progeny, it may also reflect a desire to take responsibility for the results of sending Nash into exile. Reaching Nash Williams’s compound, Edward recoils “in revulsion” at the sight “of this specter of peopled desolation” and finds himself utterly “alone . . . abandoned.” This sensation strikes him “with terrible force,” enabling him to feel the abandonment Nash may have felt and perhaps making it possible for Edward to look with fresh eyes at himself, his understanding of race, and his treatment of the black people placed in his care (69). Oddly, Edward’s inappropriate intimacy with Nash, which causes him to travel to Liberia, creates the opportunity for Edward to begin to see Nash’s humanity and foster more equitable crossracial interactions in the future. Edward’s epiphany, however, requires Nash’s death and a black character’s being, in Goyal’s words, “displaced from the narrative in favor of Edward’s moral and psychological quandaries” (19). Here, Phillips subordinates the development of black subjectivity to explore the implications of white responsibility. The fact that Nash is never a physical presence in the novel augments this level of responsibility, because Nash Williams truly exists only in Edward’s memories and the letters that remain after his death. Phillips leaves Nash’s spectral presence to haunt Edward, the reader, and African diasporan history. We cannot know what, if anything, Edward does with Nash’s letters or his children; however, Phillips’s contemporary reader can decide, at the author’s bidding, to take responsibility to carry Nash’s memory and words with us.

“West,” the second narrative section in Crossing, represents Martha’s history in and after slavery and her determined efforts to direct the course of her life and establish her subjectivity, in spite of the social forces opposing her. As a woman, Martha suffers in both African and Western patriarchal societies; yet, relative to Nash and Travis, she exercises agency most effectively and has the strongest voice in her narrative. Like “The Pagan Coast” and “Crossing the River,” “West” is told in two narrative forms: contemporaneous third-person narration, focused on Martha during the time of the story, and first-person narration, spoken by Martha in the present tense, retelling her life history. Martha, however, resists this division by forcing her voice into the third-person sections, demonstrating her determination to exert authority over how her life is lived and recounted. Nevertheless, in death, Martha’s life story is overwritten by a white woman who does not know “who or what this woman [Martha] was,” yet is socially empowered to name her in order for Martha to “receive a Christian burial” (94). Unlike Nash, who leaves written narratives to attest to his life and subjectivity, Martha leaves only a voice spoken into the void, like the African father’s. In the end, Phillips places Martha’s remains in the hands of strangers—a woman in Denver and his contemporary readers—who will determine how she will be remembered.

Martha’s life is defined by a series of tragic losses that reflect her vulnerability in patriarchal society and her defeated efforts to establish a home and subjectivity.
through mothering. Most recently abandoned in Denver by a group of black pioneers headed to California (because she cannot keep pace with the group), Martha immediately connects this last abandonment to the many that have preceded it:

Through some atavistic mist, Martha peered back east, beyond Kansas, back beyond her motherhood, her teen years, her arrival in Virginia, to a smooth white beach where a trembling girl waited with two boys and a man. Standing off, a ship. Her journey had been a long one. But now the sun had set. Her course was run. *Father, why hast thou forsaken me?* (73)

The only one of the African children to recall her father, Martha loses her first home and family due to African patriarchal prerogative, and lives thereafter in the middle space between past and future trauma, in a perpetual "state of homelessness . . . her migratory subjectivity . . . marked by painful lack and displacement" (Mårdberg and Wahlström 303). Martha's thought, "*Father, why hast thou forsaken me?*" demonstrates the painful and long-lasting effect of her initial abandonment. Nevertheless, the intervention of her voice in the third-person narration asserts her subjectivity even in the remembrance of loss. Martha later becomes the victim of Western, slave-based patriarchy when her master dies, and she, her husband, and her daughter are sold at auction. Because kinship among slaves was neither recognized nor protected, Martha suffers the devastating loss of her family, and like the African Father is haunted by the voice of her daughter calling "Moma . . . over and over again" as they are separated (77).

The society in which she lives forces Martha to relinquish her maternal rights but not her maternal identity. At a time when slave-based Western society identified black women as breeders, not mothers, Martha's devotion to her daughter can be considered "an act of political resistance" (Mårdberg and Wahlström 301). Martha searches for her daughter and clings to her maternal identity as a means of defining herself against the prevailing discourse of her society. Her loss and longing for her daughter reflect the consequences of her African father's abandonment, which displaces his children from their roles as sons and daughters and places them in a society that will not recognize them in any kinship roles. Just as the African father experiences reunion with his lost children only in the fantastic space of the epilogue, Martha's "literal and emotional exile is overcome only in her imagination" (Mårdberg and Wahlström 303). Before her death, she dreams of her reunion with Eliza Mae, imagining her "westward soul" finding "its natural-born home in the bosom of her daughter" (94). Even in this context, Martha's maternal role is disrupted because "Eliza Mae now called herself Cleo" (94), the name of Martha's second owner. Once separated from her African home, Martha continually falls victim to larger social structures that circumvent her role both as daughter and as mother.

Martha nevertheless resists her disempowered position in Western society, exerting agency to gain freedom and build surrogate kinship relationships. Martha frees herself from slavery when her second owners, good Christian people, plan to sell her to finance their travel to California (80). As this history is recounted by the third-person narrator, Martha's voice interrupts with a repeated "No" as she resists the plans others make for her and determines "Never again" to "stand on an auction block" or "be renamed" (80). Martha escapes, heading west to Dodge City—where she makes a home with a black man named Chester who is later killed over a gambling dispute—then to Fort Leavenworth and finally to California. Thomas Bonnici notes that Martha's movement is ever westward, toward greater freedom (267).

While whites traveled west in search of gold, Martha seeks "a place where . . . your name wasn't 'boy' or 'aunty,' and where you could be a part of this country without feeling like you wasn't really a part" (73-74). Continuing her efforts to establish her subjectivity in community with others, Martha joins the black pioneers to "cook, wash clothes, and powerfully nurse . . . the sick and ailing," becoming a mother figure to the "seventy colored people walking" from Kansas to California (89, 90).
Ultimately, Martha’s efforts to develop surrogate kinship bonds with Chester and the black pioneers are no more successful than her efforts to recover her father or daughter. Nevertheless, Phillips allows the reader access to Martha’s remarkable story of resistance and agency in the face of great oppression.

With full knowledge of Martha’s story, the reader recognizes the tragedy of the defeat by death of her efforts to define and articulate her own story. While her “interior dialogization” enables her “to resist the objectifying discourse about herself,” the oral nature of her inner narrative finally works against her in literate Western society (Joannou 205). As Birat suggests, there is “no possibility of using orality as a way of linking [individual] lives to a present or past context” in Western culture; therefore, their lives become “accessible only as stories told in other people’s words. The meaning of their lives can be reconstructed, but their voices are inaudible” (Birat, “Neither ‘Written’” 294-95). Based on his research on black women in the American West, Phillips explains, “We don’t have their stories. You do have Martha’s story” (qtd. in Sharpe 160). In “West,” Phillips reconstructs Martha’s story and allows her voice to be heard. Her story then stands in for and is haunted by those of the multitudes of women that were lost or overwritten. In her death, Martha’s story will be overwritten by the white woman in Denver who offers her shelter but falls short of providing what she needs to survive a frigid night. In spite of her inability to care responsibly for Martha during her life, this woman is socially empowered to record Martha’s story in death. Although she too has limited power as a woman in patriarchal society, the woman in Denver stands in for the social forces Martha has resisted throughout her life, forces that empower someone else to arbitrarily “choose a name for her” and decide what becomes of her physical body (94). Phillips leaves the woman in Denver with the responsibility for Martha during her life, this woman is socially empowered to record Martha’s story in death. Although she too has limited power as a woman in patriarchal society, the woman in Denver stands in for the social forces Martha has resisted throughout her life, forces that empower someone else to arbitrarily “choose a name for her” and decide what becomes of her physical body (94). Phillips leaves the woman in Denver with the responsibility for Martha’s physical remains, but endows the reader with Martha’s personal narrative. Although intangible, her disembodied thoughts are the haunting remains that bear witness to her life and survival. Phillips entrusts his reader with these remains, bidding us to carry them forward, so that the true story of her life will not be lost.

Arguably the most challenging section of Crossing for the African Americanist or diasporan scholar, “Somewhere in England” ostensibly tells Travis’s story but does so entirely from the perspective of Joyce, the British woman who becomes his wife and the mother of his son Greer. Moving from Nash to Martha to Travis, Phillips offers increasingly abstract representations of the African children’s lives. Travis imparts no written words or dialogue to the reader. He leaves only Greer and memories imprinted in Joyce’s mind and recorded in her journal. After Travis’s death, Joyce makes the “sensible” decision to put her biracial baby up for adoption so she can “return to racial normalcy and respectability” in her society (230; Julien 103). Two hundred years later, Joyce reaps the consequences of the pattern of race relations established on the African coast, as the same system that made it possible for a desperate father to sell his children makes it not only possible but socially acceptable for a desperate mother to relinquish responsibility for her child.17 This abandonment ruptures familial bonds, resulting in “generational discontinuity” (Mårberg and Wahlström 305). Separated from his mother, Greer has no ancestral history; however, unlike the separation between the African father and his children, this rupture need not be permanent. When Greer returns to her as a young adult, Joyce has the ability to deny or acknowledge her son and to destroy or preserve his father’s memory. While Goyal argues that “Joyce’s inclusion situates white characters at the heart of the African diaspora, as victims of history rather than its agents” (21), I would argue that Joyce has great agency in relation to Travis in spite of being victimized in other areas of her life. Because he has not given...
Travis the opportunity to speak for himself, Phillips places the full responsibility for remembering and representing Travis in Joyce’s hands. Again, he juxtaposes a white character with black (and biracial) characters to see how she will discharge her responsibility to these diasporan figures and allows these spectral figures to haunt her contemporary readers.

Phillips situates “Somewhere in England” in conversation with “Crossing the River” to enable Joyce to tell the story that Hamilton would not. While the novel’s first two narrative sections, “The Pagan Coast” and “West,” give us the African children trying to establish their subjectivity in relation first to a white man and then to a white woman, “Crossing the River” and “Somewhere in England” present a white man and woman representing their interactions with black characters. In both cases, the African children have no voices and their stories are told entirely through white characters’ written words. “Crossing the River” reveals Hamilton’s complete objectification of persons of African descent. “Somewhere in England,” however, examines the experiences that enable Joyce to represent Travis accurately in her journal. Although the main section of her narrative begins with the arrival of African American soldiers to her village in 1942 and closes with the end of the war in 1945, between those terminal points Joyce’s journal alternates among three narrative threads: one addressing her late teen years including her devastating relationship with an actor named Herbert and an eventual abortion; another recalling her courtship and marriage to her first husband Len, who is abusive and neglectful by turns until the time of his incarceration; and the last chronicling the events surrounding her relationship with Travis. Joyce’s journals reveal her marginalization within her community and open critique of her culture, as she deconstructs “political and masculinist discourses,” exposing “doubletalk” and British jingoism (Ledent 121). Ultimately, her existence on the margins of society and her “admirably non-racist view of the world” enable Joyce to establish a positive and affirming relationship with one of the African children (qtd. in Jaggi 27); but she nevertheless “falls victim to the weaknesses she denounces in others,” putting her son up for adoption to lead a more conventional life after Travis’s death (Ledent 121). While this relinquishment suggests a failure to acknowledge her responsibility to her child and her husband’s memory, the final section of the novel offers another possibility.

After Joyce records the celebrations at the end of World War II, there is an eighteen-year gap between the first section of “Somewhere in England” and the second. A careful examination of the two sections reveals that material inconspicuously missing in the first section unaccountably appears in the second. While it is immediately clear to the reader that Joyce’s journal entries regarding Greer’s visit in 1963 should be separated from her experiences eighteen years earlier, the reader should wonder why the second section, which begins and ends with Greer’s visit, also includes four entries from 1945, recording her marriage to Travis, Greer’s birth, Travis’s death, and her decision to put Greer up for adoption. Rather than representing another example of Joyce’s nonchronological recording, as some have suggested, Greer’s visit motivates Joyce to reconstruct entries she had removed from her journal. During their visit, she confesses that after meeting her current husband, she “destroyed everything” from her life with Travis. “Letters, pictures, everything” (224). Joyce thus alters the record of her past to support the requirements of her present and future. Greer’s unannounced visit in 1963 forces her to reengage with her past and create a more complete and truthful reckoning of her personal history. As the only person who can restore Greer to his history and Travis to living memory, Joyce accepts responsibility for acknowledging her child and recording her memories of his father. In so doing, she becomes the first white character in the novel to represent the African children truthfully and responsibly in written discourse.

In the second section of “Somewhere in England,” Phillips brings together the remains of Travis’s existence—Joyce’s journals bearing witness to his true history.
and Greer's physical presence representing the African children's survival to another
generation. Joyce's reconstructed journals render in fictional form Phillips's project
of creating a full history of the forces that engender contemporary society. Growing
up in Britain, Phillips recalls learning “a history that pretended that people who
looked like [him] didn't exist” (qtd. in Eckstein 40-41). Joyce provides a narrative that
affirms and explains Greer's existence as a biracial, American, and English man in
contemporary British society and recognizes the often repressed connections
between Britain and the far-reaching history and repercussions of the transatlantic
slave trade. Her acknowledgement of his son, however, cannot be considered an
embrace. “Somewhere in England” ends with Joyce reflecting on the moment when
she meets Greer: “I took a deep breath and turned to face him. I almost said make
yourself at home, but I didn't. At least I avoided that. Sit down. Please, sit down” (232).
This passage assures the reader that Greer's time with his mother will be at best
a moment of rest and recognition, not a restoration of the parent-child relationship
and certainly not a homecoming. Phillips does not offer his diasporan characters
such happy endings. Instead, he demonstrates the impossibility of simple resolutions
to the complex history of the African diaspora by leaving Greer in the middle space
between past trauma and an unknown future. Hybrid in race and nationality, Greer
becomes the embodiment of this history, his physical presence both demonstrating
the struggle and survival of the abandoned African children and demanding a reck­
oning from Western society that would otherwise deny or misrepresent his existence.
Although her journal is personal writing that Greer may never see, Joyce offers textual
reclamation of her abandoned diasporan child. As with Martha's personal narrative,
Phillips endows his reader with the responsibility to guard Travis and Greer's true
history as recorded in Joyce's journals. Greer remains, nevertheless, a figure of
dislocation and disconnection as well as one of survival and continuity. Phillips
positions him to haunt the contemporary reader and shape the uncertain history yet
to be written of the African diaspora.

While “Somewhere in England” offers a textual reclamation of the children
of the African diaspora, the African father's choral epilogue represents a
spiritual reclamation that provides the embrace that is missing from Greer's meeting
with Joyce. Crossing opens with the African father calling to his children, who
respond with narratives revealing the traumatic results of his abandonment
of them. In the epilogue, the African father gathers “the haunting voices” of his
dispersed descendants (236). From somewhere in Africa, he listens for the “swell”
of “the many-tongued chorus of the common memory” through which he hears
his children in New York, São Paulo, Santo Domingo, Charleston, Haiti, Paris and
other distant locales (235). He reclaims and remembers his children in an imaginary
space of memory that Alessandra Di Maio suggests “holds all the voices together”
such that “their common wish to remember, reconstruct and share stories . . . renders
communication possible, makes truth accessible and assures survival” (370). While
their lives and histories are not valued or truthfully recorded in Western discourse,
the African father provides a space in which to celebrate the struggle and survival
of his diasporan children and fulfill their “longing for reunification with the father”
that has haunted the entire novel (Joannou 212). Finally taking responsibility for
dispersing his children into Western culture, the African father hears and remembers
their stories, thus reconnecting them to oral history. For her willingness to restore
Travis and Greer to textual history, Joyce earns the right to be included in the African
father's celebration and claimed as his own: “My daughter. Joyce.” In comparison
with the African father, Joyce becomes a sort of diasporan mother, marrying one dias­
poran child, giving birth to another, and struggling to claim the child she abandons.
Joyce’s inclusion reflects the breadth of the African father’s embrace, while his closing affirmation demonstrates the depth of his love: “they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved” (237).

Thus Phillips envisions love as an essential factor in the survival of Africans in the diaspora. Moving the text beyond the “analysis of fracture” seen in the core narratives, he designs the epilogue to manifest the “underlying passion which informs the ability to survive” and “love, an affirmative quality present everywhere . . . in those children of the African diaspora” (qtd. in Jaggi 28). Crossing thus ends on what Phillips concedes is an “unusually optimistic” note; however, the space of reclamation and love that opens in the epilogue ultimately remains an imaginary one (qtd. in Davison 95).

The novel ends with the African father resolutely in his place on the African coast and his diasporan children in their many locations, demonstrating that while a link to the African past can be imagined, it cannot be practically recovered. Stuart Hall advises that the past with which we interact “is . . . always-already ‘after the break.’ It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth” (qtd. in Halloran 3). Phillips confirms that “One can never go back. The old Garveyite dream of returning to Africa makes no sense” (qtd. in Sharpe 157). The African father remains a mythic figure permanently separated from his children, who are, therefore, unable to hear him; his recognition and desire to take responsibility for them thus cannot truly assuage their suffering—any more than Joyce’s reconstructed journals can save her son from being raised an orphan. The novel instead leaves its characters in the unresolved middle space between abandonment and reclamation, but gives its readers responsibility for bearing the haunting remains of the African children’s lives and the disembodied voice of the African father.

Phillips writes Crossing’s ghost stories, as defined by Avery Gordon, and positions his reader to be haunted by and take responsibility for them (17). Phillips explains that as a writer he has the power to “identify a history and perhaps do something about redressing the imbalance of some of the ills and falsehoods that have been perpetrated by others” about it (qtd. in Davison 96-97). He frequently speaks of his responsibility “to work against the undertow of historical ignorance” by reconstructing the lost stories of Africans in diaspora and their interactions with people of European descent (qtd. in Jaggi 29). In Crossing, Phillips offers the unusual perspective of an African father seeking to explain his decision to abandon his children to the larger structures of the transatlantic slave trade. At the novel’s end, the reader is left contemplating the father’s song, his haunting presence, and the remains of his children. Because his intended audience, his children, do not hear the words of his song, we the readers know that his words and presence remain to haunt us. He desires our recognition and realization of “something” we must do or understand (Gordon xvi). New World black readers receive, with the African father’s explanations and affirmation of love, answers to the deep-seated questions within our own cultural memory about who our ancestors were and who sold and abandoned us, and thus a portion of our cultural pain is healed. Meanwhile, Phillips’s careful portrayal of white characters interacting with the African children challenges all readers, because as Gordon suggests, “it is our responsibility to recognize just where we are in the story, even if we do not want to be there” (188). Thus we become Edward, recognizing the destructiveness of our actions too late, or Joyce, the abandoning mother, reckoning our responsibility to the child we created and set adrift. In many ways, we are all Greer, continuing the struggle to sink hopeful roots into difficult soil.

Ultimately, Phillips leaves Joyce, Greer, and his readers in a middle space of survival and witness, rather than in the space of resistance and triumph some scholars might prefer for this text on African diaspora history. I concur with Bénédicte Ledent’s suggestion that Phillips does not “directly exhort the reader to social or
political action,” but seeks to create “a patchwork understanding of the historical process behind oppression” (132). He creates this understanding by reimagining the lives of the children of the African diaspora, leaving their remains to haunt his readers, and inviting us to carry them forward. We similarly carry forward the voice of the African father, whose closing expression of love resonates with Shelly Rambo’s analysis of the end of John’s gospel: “What is handed over is the haunting figure of love, seeking readers . . . seeking forms of life that are not necessarily triumphant but nonetheless sustaining . . . Love remains. And we are her prophets” (940). What remains at the end of Crossing the River is love, beckoning us to hear, receive, and share the full history and significance of the African diaspora.

Notes
1. Crossing the River won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction, Britain’s oldest literary prize, as well as the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction, and was shortlisted for the 1993 Booker Prize. See the Caryl Phillips Official Website for a full listing of his awards and honors.
2. In Higher Ground (1989) and The Atlantic Sound (2000), Phillips represents African figures closely associated with the slave trade: in the former, an interpreter, residing at a slave fort on the African coast, translates between the captive Africans and the slave traders; in the latter, an African minister serves the spiritual needs of the white slave traders.
3. See Mardberg and Wahlstrom for an excellent study of the issues of parenting, masculinity, patriarchy, and intertextuality through which he signifies on historical fatherhood and motherhood, respectively. Halloran offers a broader exploration of representations of the African mother and father in Crossing the River and other neo-slave narratives.
4. For a comprehensive study of haunting in contemporary American literature, see Kathleen Brogan, Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1998).
5. The term “remaining” is derived from the Greek word menein meaning to live on (Rambo 937).
6. Rambo’s theory, based on her reading of the Gospel of John with its closing affirmations of love and remaining, seeks to address the following questions: what does it mean to survive (remain) after death (or trauma) and what does it mean for the gospel text to remain and be transmitted? Rambo’s paradigm seeks to revise the “triumphalism” characterizing a great portion of contemporary Christian thought to consider how “trauma . . . interrupts any theology that would leap right from the crucifixions of history to the hope of resurrection” (Keller ix). She then restores the middle space between tragedy and triumph as the space in which most of human life is experienced. This theological paradigm provides a useful space in which to consider the dissonance between tragic separation and triumphant reclamation represented in this novel, the precariousness of the characters’ lives, and Phillips’s frequent use of biblical allusions and representation of the abuses of Christian doctrine. See Eckstein for a discussion of Phillips’s use of Christianity in his writings.
7. See Joannou for a fuller discussion of Phillips’s intertextuality through which he signifies on historical and literary sources.
8. Phillips writes of the transatlantic slave trade as “unfinished business,” in Joannou’s words, based on his belief that the structures governing contemporary social interaction between “all those people, white and non-white, who live in Europe or the Americas” have their roots in “the forces that were engendered by the ‘peculiar institution’ ” (Joannou 195; qtd. in Jaggi 26).
9. This response best characterizes, but is not limited to, European critics, including Di Maio, Julien, Ledent, and Low. Ledent, however, in her extensive scholarship on Phillips, offers exceptionally nuanced readings of Crossing. In Caryl Phillips, she discusses the novel’s ambiguity, equivocality, and even carnivalesque performativity (107-34).
10. Certainly, there are notable exceptions to this generalization. European critics Mardberg and Wahlstrom also argue that the epilogue’s closing affirmation of love “ring[s] hollow” and that Phillips’s representations of lost kinship “articulates above all the diasporic wounds of disconnection” (306-07). In their emphasis on family structures in the novel, they, like this writer, are haunted by the recurring cries of children disconnected from their parents (307). In a very different reading, Caribbean scholar Antonio Benitez-Rojo argues that the epilogue’s rhythms and multiplicity of voices perform a particularly Caribbean sensibility, offering an example of creolization. See Benitez-Rojo, “Three Words toward Creolization,” James Maraniss, trans., in Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity, Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau, eds. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998), 56-58.
11. In her notes, Goyal concedes that “Phillips’s non-fiction often points in a different direction” (32n23). Citing 《The European Tribe》(1984), she recognizes Phillips’s attention to “power, neocolonial hierarchies, possibilities of resistance, and his own place as a black Western subject” (32n23). Considering Phillips’s clear grasp of the dynamics of power and hierarchy that informs prior writings, we must conclude that Phillips has not lost this sensitivity in Crossing, but has chosen to pursue a different type of project.

12. Spillers explores how the system of slavery obliterated traditional kinship structures, leaving the enslaved orphaned and unprotected. She notes that under the slave system, “the offspring of the female [slave] does not ‘belong’ to the Mother, [and] is [not] ‘related’ to the ‘owner’ ” (Spillers 395); thus, “the offspring of the enslaved, ‘being unrelated both to their begetters and to their owners . . . find themselves in the situation of being orphans’ ” (396).

13. See Joannou for a fuller discussion of Phillips’s use and revision of John Newton’s writings.


15. This philosophy is explored in some detail in The Atlantic Sound and is well documented in interviews, including Sharpe.

16. Although Martha’s “colored pioneers” do not travel west in search of conquest, their progress is not untainted by the United States’ larger project of empire-building. Their search for greater freedom requires their participation in American western expansion into Native territories both as soldiers in the Indian Wars and as homesteaders.

17. By dispersing persons of African descent into the Western world, the transatlantic slave trade changed the course of world history and created unimagined possibilities for crossracial encounters. Situating Travis’s story in twentieth-century Britain enables Phillips to reconnect contemporary England to its long history in the slave trade. He explores this history in greater detail in The Atlantic Sound.


19. Joyce is one of several white female protagonists represented in Phillips’s works. Others include Irene/Irina in Higher Ground (1989), Emily in Cambridge (1991), and Eva in The Nature of Blood (1997). For a thorough analysis of Irene/Irina and Eva, both Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust, see Stef Craps, “Linking Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural Empathy in Caryl Phillips’s Higher Ground and The Nature of Blood,” Studies in the Novel 40.1-2 (2008): 191-202; and for a discussion of Joyce in connection with these other female characters, see Collier. Noting certain Yiddishisms in Joyce’s speech, Collier suggests that she may be Jewish and that her “pronounced egalitarianism,” “hunger to read,” and rejection of “Christian rituals” may reflect her commitment to “the (Jewish) social practices and attitudes instilled in her as a young child” (194-95). If so, her mother’s embrace of Christianity after the general strike of 1926 may represent a turn toward the conventional similar to Joyce’s turn after Travis’s death.


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