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BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS IN CARYL PHILLIPS'S, ANDREA LEVY'S AND TEJU COLE'S LITERARY TEXTS

ABSTRACT: It is possible to argue that literature, *per se*, embodies various frameworks of information. Moreover, every time authors blend them together in the narration, they eventually provide a text whose words also function as a stimulus to readers' imagination. Images, whether in the form of the mental pictures produced in our minds during the act of reading or of photographs, work in tandem to convey meaning and make intersections between literature and photography achievable. In this paper I will provide some evidence of the intersections between Anglophone postcolonial literature and photography. The postcard pinned up on the wall above Caryl Phillips's desk is the source of his play *The Shelter* (1984) that involves the subjects of that picture: a white woman and a black man. In Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island* (2004) and in its adapted television drama (2009) photographs give a material form to the memory of individuals' existence. In Teju Cole's novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007) the unnamed narrator depicts his journey to Lagos—his place of birth—through the intermixing of words with black and white pictures.

KEYWORDS: "Writing with Light", Anglophone Postcolonial Literature, Photography, Caryl Phillips, Andrea Levy, Teju Cole.

Literary forms of narration may also function as sophisticated instruments for conveying and sharing knowledge. In addition, in these texts, the employed words may be a stimulus to readers' imagination. Images, whether in the form of the mental pictures produced in our minds during the act of reading or of photographs accompanying the text, work jointly with words to convey meaning and create fruitful intersections between literature and photography. Literature and photography exhibit some common key features: they fragment and freeze time; they portray and narrate reality; and, if we accept the description of photography as "writing with light", both are expressive and communicative textual forms. This peculiar written form—"writing with light"—may be employed discretely or in conjunction with words. In this paper I will provide some evidence of the intersection between Anglophone postcolonial literature and photography in the following literary texts: *The Shelter* a play by Caryl Phillips, *Small Island* a novel by Andrea Levy and *Every Day Is for the Thief* a novella by Teju Cole.

Postcolonial literature covers issues of displacement, identity, belonging, and otherness, and to postcolonial authors, literature becomes a tool for

understanding the world they live in. In accordance with their personal writing style, in the above-mentioned works Phillips, Levy and Cole employ words and photographs as a means to support their reflections on their status of human beings as descendant of diasporic ethnic groups. Each text contains a photograph that triggers the narration or merges into it. Despite their diverse purposes, those photographs emphasise the authors' attempt to come to terms with the past.

To begin with Phillips, in his play *The Shelter* the photograph reveals the author's point of origin, not to mention the reflections arisen from the looking at the image. As a second example, in Levy's novel *Small Island* (and its television adaptation) one of the photographs depicted in the narration becomes a token of rejected offspring on the basis of skin complexion; moreover, photographs visible in the movie, a family photo album, progress into tokens of collective memory. As a third instance, in Cole's novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* the reference to a moment that could not be preserved in print film becomes a 'missing' photograph as if to underscore the unresolved relationship with the past.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes states that photography faithfully preserves a moment eternally. Furthermore, photography "says: *that, there it is, lo!* but says nothing else; [...] the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look', 'See', 'Here it is'" (Barthes 1980, 4-5). In addition, to Barthes, a photograph "has something tautological [...] it is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself" (1980, 5). Likewise, a literary text remains unmodified over the years, and like a photograph, a literary text has "something tautological", too. Barthes is also interested in literature, which he analyses through the lens of semiotics and:

For Barthes [...] this formal language is powerfully underwritten by conventions, approved vocabularies, standards of 'taste', ranges of reference, and so forth, which shape its acceptable 'readability' in any period. Therefore, to be 'Literature' [...] writing needs to conform to prevailing standards of expression. [...] To thrive, authors need to advertise their literariness; their work must display the signs of 'Literature' which prevail in their period. (Rylance 1994, 9-10).

In spite of the formal rules which characterise literature, according to Barthes's theory of "The Death of the Author" it is up to the reader to provide different interpretations and meanings to the text. Nonetheless, in regard to conferring a meaning to a work of art, we can look to modern theories on interpretation to help guide our search for meaning. For instance, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Susan Sontag asserts that

Interpretation thus presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. [...] The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one. (Sontag 1982, 4).

Sontag argues that "the modern style of interpretation" replaces the spiritual

importance of art with the emphasis on the intellect. She highlights that “interpretation” has become “the revenge of the intellect upon art” (Sontag 1982, 4). I am of the opinion that works of art have to be experienced on several levels even though they are a representation of reality, otherwise interpreting and enjoying a work of art as mere ‘imitation’ would turn the product of the fine arts into something that borders on mediocrity. The tautological feature assigned by Barthes can be applied to both literature and photography and the redundancy of the meaning may be easily avoided if we observe “the target”¹ of a photograph or read a literary text under a phenomenological perspective as suggested, for instance, by Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl in *Phänomenologie und Erkenntnistheorie*. Husserl proposes a method for understanding the lived world and for better understanding the individual's life. The individual has to investigate the experience lived through a reflexive approach (Husserl 2000, 161-167). Enzo Paci defines this method of personal reflexive self-examination process as self-education. In *Diario Fenomenologico*, he states that self-education becomes a means of understanding the real meaning of our existence and requires the intent and will to give up our judgement, our knowledge and what is already familiar in order to formulate a fresh judgment, to always see as if it were for the very first time (Paci 1961, 5).

Anglophone postcolonial writers rely on self-education and through the act of writing they aim to understand the world they live in. Caryl Phillips is one of those writers who better exemplifies this process of self-education. Phillips is a West-Indian-British prolific writer. His peculiar writing style is characterized by fragmentation. The technique of breaking his narrative into fragments can be associated with the photographer's art. As a matter of fact, a photographer breaks and interrupts the flow of time allocating that fragment of time to eternity. Similarly, Phillips breaks and interrupts the flow of narration providing to his readers fragmented stories. Although those fragments are scattered around the novel, as soon as readers are able to discover the common features that characterise each piece, in the end those fragments prove to be closely connected and provide a complex but distinctive written text.

The Shelter was published in 1984 and in the introduction Phillips informs readers about the struggle that preceded the writing of the play until the point he “tussled with the practical considerations of no longer being able to write” (Phillips 1984, 8). After weeks of striving for bringing forth his play:

Then one evening I looked again to the postcard pinned up on the wall above my desk. I had bought it (in fact in six copies) the previous year whilst recovering from England in France. [...] The postcard had immediately seized my eye, as would a garish street mural in Bath, for amongst the postcards of Van Gogh and Munch, Cézanne and Velázquez, the postcard was not simply exceptional in as much as it was a photograph, it also seemed to me to have its finger on the pulse of a difficult part of modern life, a part of life I wanted to know about.

¹ In this paper I rely on Barthes's definitions: “the *Operator* is the Photographer. The *Spectator* is ourselves, [...] And the person or the thing photographed is the target” (Barthes 1980, 9).

(Phillips 1984, 9).

Phillips recognises the same status of work of art to different visual representations, and the vision of that postcard equally affects him like the vision of a “garish street mural.” In addition, when he defines that image “exceptional”, he establishes a private hierarchy where the photograph is ranked above artistic creations that are generally perceived and accepted as fine arts. Furthermore, the “antiphon of ‘Look’, ‘See’, ‘Here it is’” functions as a magnet to Phillips’s sensitivity who is attentive to rapid changes that characterise modern life and makes him sensitive and inquisitive to their consequences. In that postcard the “target” is:

A white woman’s face, probably that of a woman of thirty or thirty-five, who had probably just cried, or who would cry; and curled around her forehead, with just enough pressure to cause a line of folds in the skin above her eyes, were two black hands; obviously power and strength slept somewhere within them but at this moment they were infinitely gentle, describing with eight fingers that moment when a grip of iron weakens to a caress of love.

It had taken me only a few Parisian seconds to decide that the next play I would write would be about this postcard and would involve just one black man and one white woman. (Phillips 1984, 9).

To Phillips, this photograph becomes a source of information that will be acquired and elaborated in an effort to self-education. Perhaps unintentional as there is no clear reference to phenomenology, the aim of self-education through photography emerges, for instance, in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*: “it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world” (Berger 1972, 7). Furthermore, “To look is an act of choice” (Berger 1972, 8) and Phillips singles out a detail—“two black hands”—and associates those “two black hands”, that enfolds the woman’s forehead, to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized during and after the British Empire. In this play Phillips focuses on:

the story of the black man and the white woman [that] in the Western world is bound together with the secure tape of a troubled history; and the relationship between the black man and the white woman has always provoked the greatest conflict, the most fear, the most loathing (Phillips 1984, 10).

“The relationship between the black man and the white woman” is a reference to what Frantz Fanon defines “this desire to be suddenly *white*” (author’s emphasis) (Fanon 1952, 45). Fanon explores the issue of “identity created for the colonial subject by colonial racism” (Appiah 2008, IX). This imposed mental construct based upon the superiority of the white colonizer and the inferiority of the black colonized leads the subjugated individual to the rejection of “the fact of [their] own blackness” (Appiah 2008, IX). However, the black man may overcome his sense of inferiority if he is loved by the white woman, because “by loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man” (Fanon 1952, 45).

In addition, that photograph affects Phillips so deeply that:

For over a year I had sat with my picture of the woman's face and the man's hands. I wanted them to stare at me, not me at them (for I knew I was not brave enough to endure such a prolonged two-way encounter). (Phillips 1984, 10).

Like a print film that is provided with transparent negatives with the light and dark areas inverted to their respective complementary colours, two inverted situations can be detected so far: (a) power and strength are perceived in the black hands that enfold a white woman's forehead; (b) the "target" has to stare at the "*Spectator*." Another reference to photography lies in the following statement:

I looked at the postcard but this time it was like looking in a mirror and suddenly realizing that you look like your father. A hand grabbed me and held me, and an unseen voice told me that I would never be able to run from it for the postcard was a part of me and if I did not acknowledge it I would be haunted, for the card had both fed and been feeding off my life. And true enough, like looking into my father's face, I clearly saw in it, perhaps for the first time, something that had made me what I was. (Phillips 1984, 10).

Despite of the above-mentioned reverse situations, the key "target" is the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized that proves to be an enduring, unsolved issue. The image, that evokes "power", "strength" and "the greatest conflict", gives rise to an intense bond between the "*Spectator*" and the "target" to the extent to combine and form a single entity. Nonetheless, the postcard conveys another sense of connection, that is to say a family tie. Phillips also perceives a resemblance with his father, and this sort of epiphany detected in the sentence "It was like looking in a mirror" echoes one of Barthes's reflections on photography:

But more insidious, more penetrating than likeness: the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor. [...] Lineage reveals an identity stronger, more interesting than legal status. (Barthes 1980, 103-105).

The issue of the relationship between a white woman and a black man is also covered by British descendant of the Windrush generation Andrea Levy. Her novel *Small Island*, published in 2004 and its 2009 BBC television adaptation describe the post Second World War multicultural British society where the feeling of belonging to the 'Mother Country' gradually evolves into the feeling of longing. In the novel, the two female characters, Hortense and Queenie Bligh, have a photograph of Michael Roberts a Jamaican Royal Air Force (RAF) soldier. Both photographs are a token of a wished partner. Unbeknown to him, he is the bond that fastens Hortense's and Queenie's lives. This bond can be detected on the cover of the dvd of *Small Island*. In that image, the two women are the figures in the foreground, their respective husbands stand at their back and beyond the couples Michael Roberts's face manifests itself. The five

characters are positioned to form a pyramid where Michael Roberts functions as its apex. Not to his knowledge, the Jamaican RAF soldier represents the point of origin of a babyboy. He is the result of the encounter between Queenie and Michael, or figuratively speaking, between the 'Mother Country' and its colonies.

Hortense is a Jamaican migrant and related to Michael. Queenie is a blond-haired British woman who supports herself during and after the war renting out rooms and Michael is one of her tenants. Queenie is charmed and aroused by the flirtatious Jamaican and spends a passionate night with him. The product of that encounter is a babyboy who is named after his biological father. The narration ends with Hortense and her husband leaving Queenie's house with the babyboy born out of wedlock and representing the product of miscegenation. This term, coined in the mid-19th century, conveys the notion of children being produced by parents who are of different races, especially when one partner is white.

In postcolonial studies the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity" play a core but questionable role. In his studies on postcolonialism, Robert Young states that the concept of "race" is intertwined with "sexuality and gender." Referring to Young's reflections, Shaul Bassi underscores the importance, for British colonizers, of maintaining diversities between "white" and "non-white" individuals (i.e. between the colonizer and the colonized). Moreover, sexual relationships between "white women and coloured man" were prohibited because of the woman's gift: her ability to give birth. In this sense "the woman is the guardian of purity"² and, a proper sexual behaviour becomes a means of preserving "purity." Likewise, Ania Loomba reminds us:

The fear of cultural and racial pollution prompts the most hysterical dogmas about racial difference and sexual behaviours because it suggests the instability of 'race' as a category. Sexuality is thus a means for the maintenance or erosion of racial difference. (Loomba 1988, 159).

In *Small Island*, the infant Michael is the product of so-called 'inappropriate sexual behaviour', according to the colonial ideology of purity. Queenie wants to protect her child from prejudice. She is entirely guided by a selfless, protective maternal instinct and the proof lies in her asking Hortense and Gilbert—a Jamaican couple for her half-Jamaican son—to take care of her child:

'The tea—I must just help Bernard with the tea.' And I was gone. Although I didn't go into the kitchen. I went behind the door and watched her through the crack. She was doing all the right things with him. Swinging him gently in her arms on her lap, while Gilbert, looking down at him, carefully gave him his finger to chew. [...] They looked so right with him. (Levy 2009, 517-518).

² Bassi 2010, 111: "la donna è la guardiana della purezza" (translation mine). In this sentence, the noun "purity" is related to race and skin colour issues.

The episode quoted above testifies to Queenie's maternal instinct, furthermore a sort of relief can be inferred in the last sentence "they looked so right with him" which implies that to Queenie's eyes, her decision to give up her son is eventually right and appropriate. Queenie watches Hortense, the mother-to-be, the only suitable woman in that circumstance for the upbringing of Michael:

The baby was as good as Mrs Bligh promised he would be. [...] I found a bundle of money tied with soft pink wool and secured with a dainty bow. [...] But then at the bottom of this bundle was a photograph. It was of Mrs. Bligh taken, sure, in a happier time. Head and shoulders, her eyes angled to the viewer, gazing out with a gentle smile. I had never thought to enquire about the father of Mrs Bligh's child. Who was he? Some fool-fool Jamaican with an eye for the shapely leg on a pretty white woman. (Levy 2009, 529).

Sontag emphasises the importance of photographs in relation to family ties. Family photo albums become tokens of collective memory. They trace back to the individual's point of origin, they grant identity and proof of the individual's past, present and future (Sontag 1979, 5-9). The BBC television adaptation pursues Sontag's statement. In the last scene, the audience watches the babyboy as a mature man who informs his daughter that: "We've been doing our genealogy thing again." Michael and his grandchildren are looking at his photo album that contains black and white photographs. The grandchildren are interested in their grandfather's past, they look at the photographs carefully without remaining in silence:

The little girl: "is this the house they moved into?"

Michael: "Mm-hm and a few years later, they bought it. And this is your great-grandmother. Hortense. The woman who raised me."

The little boy: "Who's that?"

Michael: "She's my mother."

At this announcement the camera zooms in the snapshot while Michael gently caresses the image of his biological mother, his point of origin.

The quest for the individual's point of origin characterises Anglophone postcolonial authors, especially those individuals who are descendants of diasporic ethnic groups and live in a country that does not adhere to the culture of their ancestors'. However, since their birth they are confronted with more than one culture. If on the one hand this may enrich the individual's personal knowledge, on the other hand it raises a constant feeling of not quite belonging. Teju Cole is an African-American writer and prolific photographer. The hyphen placed between two nationalities is already an indication of his unresolved issue of identity. The reflexive self-examination process characterises also Cole's artistic production. His first literary work, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, was published in 2007. The novella is structured around twenty-seven chapters that may be equal to twenty-seven short stories. Due to the independent reading this storyline allows, the narrative can be then compared to a photographic film where in each negative is visible/readable a new anecdote. Moreover, Cole

interrupts this potential photographic film nineteen times with cut-ins, specifically, black and white photographs that offer a view of Lagos and Nigeria. Furthermore, the “target” of each inserted photograph is not strictly connected with thoughts and reflections that are exposed and discussed in stories before and after it. In truth, this unconventional, intertwined narration simultaneously provides to Cole's readers a simultaneously double reading/interpretation.

Every Day Is for the Thief is the recount of the unnamed narrator's act of travelling to Lagos, his birth place where he visits his parents and family, maybe as an attempt to connect with his point of origin. The protagonist lives currently in New York. During his absence, Lagos, the place he defines as home, has gone through some changes that eventually bewilder him upon his return. However, the novella can be also considered as a journal. The narrating voice depicts his stay in details along with expressing the consequent feelings arisen out of that encounter and, to some extent, the photographs resemble a holiday photo album. The unnamed narrator's double perspective (African and American) on the understanding the world he lives in is also emphasised by his family: “Ehn, that was a long time ago. You're not quite as hardened now. Yes, you are street-smart, no one doubts it. But like it or not, America has softened you” (Cole 2014, 33). However, this encounter with his birth place exposes cultural differences that are emphasised by the unnamed narrator who realises that

The Nigerian literacy rate is low [...] I meet only a small number of readers, and those few read tabloids, romance novels by Mills & Boon, or tracts that promise “victorious living” according to certain spiritual principles. It is a hostile environment for the life of the mind. (Cole 2014, 42).

Some pages later in the novella/journal the unnamed narrator offers his perspective on “the Nigerian literacy rate” and to a certain degree he seems to justify the “hostile environment for the life of the mind”:

Writing is difficult, reading impossible. People are so exhausted after all the hassle of a normal Lagos day that, for the vast majority, mindless entertainment is preferable to any other kind. [...] By day's end, the mind is worn, the body ragged. The best I can manage is to take a few photographs. For the rest of the month, I neither read nor write. (Cole 2014, 68).

The unnamed narrator adapts himself to the local practices, but his camera seems to be like an extension of himself that temporarily helps him to negotiate between his double cultural approach to life. An example of blending words with images emerges in the last frame/chapter of the novella. The narrator is in New York, his “body is still responding to the difference in time zone” (Cole 2014, 158), but his mind returns back to Lagos where he “alone wander[s] with no particular aim” (Cole 2014, 159). The roaming leads him to a carpentry consortium where “as far as [he] can see, is coffins. [...] Only coffins” (Cole 2014, 160). The circumstance of the moment functions as a magnet for the narrator/photographer's eye:

I want to take the little camera out of my pocket and capture the scene. But I am afraid. Afraid that the carpenters, rapt in their meditative task, will look up at me; afraid that I will bind to film what is intended only for the memory, what is meant only for a sidelong glance followed by forgetting. (Cole 2014, 160-161).

On this occasion too, the camera is depicted as an extension of the narrator, the two forming a single entity. His instinct to register the moment is stronger than the negative feeling that those containers of corpses may convey. However, on second thoughts, his concern that the camera would intrude on the quiet concentration of the workers, and thus corrupt the moment he was hoping to capture, makes the narrator refrain from photographing. In spite of the fact that Cole is a compulsive photographer, in this case he provides a missing photo. The unnamed narrator's afterthought echoes Barthes's statement: "As if the (terrified) Photographer must exert himself to the utmost to keep the Photograph from becoming Death" (Barthes 1980, 14). To a descendant of the African diaspora, the negotiation with the past still is an unsettled issue. This is perceived in the unnamed narrator's employment of the word "coffin" that belongs to the semantic field of "death". As words and images may convey the same meaning, "coffin" can be visualised as a container that will be sealed and, to some extent, put aside; the frame that delimits the boundaries of an image can be also visualised as a container of the "target" whose existence terminates in the moment it is allocated to eternity. Nonetheless, the writer's refusal to let go of this fragment of time, to assign it to the category of lifeless artefact suggests an attempt to come to terms with the past.

For migrants and their offspring the encounter or collision between two ways of living and understanding the world is often fraught with confusion, disorientation and even conflict. They find themselves in what Homi K. Bhabha defines as the in-between space where the individual has to continuously negotiate to keep the balance between making up a new identity and the simultaneous sense of loss, between the feeling of not quite belonging to the new community, and at the same time the feeling of extraneousness and exclusion from the old one (Bhabha 2000, 138).

Piero Polidoro reminds us of one of Barthes' theories in regard to the possibility of inferring individual meanings from an image. Barthes's wide spectrum of interests embraces photography and literature and, as I have emphasised throughout this paper, both can be analysed on a visual level. Barthes identifies two different levels of inferring meanings. On the first level, the "*Spectator*", while watching/looking at an image, recognises the "target" as a familiar representation of 'objects of the world'. This identification is what Barthes calls "denotation." However, since this way of looking at an image, this identification of objects, is influenced by the "*Spectator's*" general cultural construct, there is another, second level of looking. On this second level, which Barthes describes as "connotation," the so-called 'objects of the world' may have a further meaning within a specific culture, a meaning that may be opaque to

others (Polidoro 2017, 30-31). The Anglophone postcolonial texts analysed in this paper corroborate Barthes's theory in relation to the level of "connotation." In Phillips's play, a postcard that portrays a white woman and a black man connotes the enduring, unsolved issue of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In Levy's novel and BBC television adaptation, a snapshot of a white woman introduced at the end of the narration hints at the possibility of discovering a mixed-race man's family roots. In Cole's novella/journal, the missing photograph—the photograph that was not taken—connotes the issue of double identity and the consequent difficult negotiation with the past.

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