

# Constructing the Literary Self



Constructing the Literary Self:  
Race and Gender in Twentieth-Century Literature

Edited by

Patsy J. Daniels

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

---

**P U B L I S H I N G**

Constructing the Literary Self:  
Race and Gender in Twentieth-Century Literature,  
Edited by Patsy J. Daniels

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2013 by Patsy J. Daniels and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4530-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4530-4

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ..... ix

Introduction ..... xi

## **Part I: Race, Gender, and the Self**

Chapter One ..... 3

Empathy and Metaphor: The Critique and Embrace of Essentialist  
Thought in Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge*  
Helen F. Maxson

Chapter Two ..... 23

Deconstructing Katherine Anne Porter: “Strange Fruit” in “The Fig Tree”  
Patsy J. Daniels

Chapter Three ..... 31

Shakespeare’s *Othello*: Postmodern Paradigm Shifts and the American  
“Other”  
Everett G. Neasman

Chapter Four ..... 49

The Walls Are Crumbling Down: Houses as Death Metaphors  
in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*  
Emily Clark

## **Part II: Assimilation and the Self**

Chapter Five ..... 65

Disidentification with the Homogenizing and Commodifying  
Narratives of Ethnicity in Han Ong’s *Fixer Chao*  
Youngsuk Chae

Chapter Six .....	87
Lawson Fusao Inada, West Coast Jazz, and the Politics of Identity Formation	
Shawn P. Holliday	

### **Part III: Black Males and the Self**

Chapter Seven.....	105
Appropriate Blackness: Oreo Dreams Deferred in Charles Fuller's <i>A Soldier's Play</i>	
Claude Wilkinson	

Chapter Eight.....	123
"A Friend of My Mind": Strategies of Black Male Subjectivity in <i>Beloved</i>	
Aaron N. Oforlea	

### **Part IV: Female Sexuality and the Self**

Chapter Nine .....	151
"The Best Stuff God Did": The Rhetoric of Same Sex Intimacy and Egalitarian Christianity in Alice Walker's <i>The Color Purple</i> and Ann Allen Shockley's <i>Say Jesus and Come to Me</i>	
Tara Tuttle	

Chapter Ten .....	167
E(race)ing Female Sexuality: The Discourse of Incest and Representations of Womanhood in Harper Lee's <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	
Cameron E. Williams	

### **Part V: The Family and the Self**

Chapter Eleven .....	189
Layers of Identity Formation in Ana Castillo's <i>Peel My Love Like an Onion</i>	
Lucinda Channon	

Chapter Twelve .....	199
Division of Maternal Effort in Anne Enright's <i>The Gathering</i>	
Candis P. Pizzetta	

Chapter Thirteen.....	213
When Ethnicity, History, and Parenting Collide: Mothering Understood in Amy Tan's <i>The Kitchen God's Wife</i> and Christina García's <i>Dreaming in Cuban</i> Preselfannie W. McDaniels	
Contributors.....	241
Index.....	245



## PREFACE

The impetus for this volume came from a discussion of race and gender in literature during a conference session at the 2012 conference of the South Central Modern Language Association, and I would like to thank the organizers of the conference for providing the kind of environment that stimulates ideas and that allows colleagues to collaborate.

Most of these essays have been presented at conferences, where the authors can receive constructive criticism from their colleagues that helps them transform their work into publishable essays. The willingness of these scholarly audiences to assist their colleagues in contributing to the body of knowledge is much appreciated.



## INTRODUCTION

This volume is about oppression and escaping from oppression as depicted in serious literature. Some oppression has been carried out in the name of Empire; some in the name of racial purity. Other oppression has occurred in the name of maintaining a norm, and still more for no reason except that the oppressor was stronger. The oppressor always gets to define what constitutes “Other,” or something less, as Edward Said explains so thoroughly in *Orientalism*. From the patriarchal viewpoint, anything not the One (subject) is the Other (object); any differences are conflated into Other.

Construction or definition of the self was once available only to the elite; in reference to the pre-twentieth century world, Daniel Walker Howe writes, “Classical political theory, though devoting much attention to the proper fulfillment of the self, had taken it for granted that some persons would be excluded from participation in this process and even sacrificed to the development of others” (4), and this seems to have been the practice throughout much of history. In the twentieth century, as previously excluded groups moved into a new state of recognition in society, group identity also changed and new definitions became necessary. Many individuals sought a new definition of themselves through their group affiliations; others sought their core identity in spite of these affiliations. As can be expected, an exploration of these changes, the quest for new definitions, and the search for individuality is depicted in much literature.

The twentieth century was the American century in many ways: the United States emerged as a world power to be reckoned with militarily; its economy endured both the Great Depression and periods of great affluence; its literature became a national literature which, although young, could finally stand proudly next to any other national literature; and its population changed several times over in terms of treating with the natives, immigration from many countries, laws against minority groups, the movement for civil rights, and the feminist movements for women’s suffrage and then for gender equity. Formerly excluded groups began to clamor to be heard, to be included. But the United States was not alone; much of the twentieth century American experience was also seen in other cultures, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the world.

Coinciding chronologically with the American civil rights movement, whole cultures shook off their oppressors around the world in the 1960s

and beyond. But their literature exhibits traits of having been acculturated by a colonizer; this phenomenon has been recognized by scholars and critics, who have begun to study these literary works as postcolonial literature.\* The study of postcolonial literature bleeds over into culture studies, which has almost overcome any other way of analyzing literature, including as it does most poststructuralist theories: Deconstruction, Marxism, the New Historicism, Feminism, Gender Studies, and the Psychoanalytic and Reader-Response approaches. To paraphrase Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, even language which attempts to analyze or explain other language—that is, literary criticism—is “inextricably entangled with the forces and structures it seeks to analyze” (Harmon and Holman 432). Thus the analysis itself becomes part of culture studies.

The challenge of examining race and gender simultaneously requires shifting one’s focus from one to the other, as Lucinda Channon points out in her reading of Ellen Feder (189). Perhaps we could compare it to watching a tennis match: we watch one side to see its action and then turn to the other side to see its response. In this way, they help to shape each other, and it keeps us concentrating to attempt to follow their relationship, even as we are “inextricably entangled” ourselves.

Turning then to these analyses of literature—some of them analyses of twentieth century literature and some of them twenty-first century analyses of earlier literature, we find various depictions of struggles in negotiating with oppression in terms of race, gender, and other oppression. Authors of these analyzed works have made their characters hold a mirror up to the world so that we can see not only real injustices that have been carried out but also different ways of living with or escaping from cultural injustice. The literary critics who have interpreted the works scrutinize ways that the characters accommodate not only their own individual trials in constructing themselves, but also, at times, national struggles.

Here we see ideas ranging from the Victorian “angel” to the modernist idea of the “New Woman.” We see Jim Crow practices and multiculturalism; we see characters moving from “object” to “subject,” using the opposing forces to survive, to maintain or gain strength. Some of the works include the coping strategies of ethnic minorities, lesbians, and the physically disabled. Some of these works show the multiple consciousnesses that the characters live with and the multiple oppressions that they suffer, being members of a minority group, an oppressed gender, and carrying other characteristics that make them “Other.” Some stress the hyphenation that they live with, the hyphen serving as an attempt at bridging two cultures. The sections that these essays have been categorized in are, of course, artificial, but they are an attempt to show the reader some relationship

among the essays, all of which are similar in some way, but each of which is unique.

In the section on **Race, Gender and the Self**, Helen F. Maxson's essay is about a novel in which a couple from different races marries and is victimized by those in power; she writes that the novel, Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*, not only "participates in the oppressive thinking it depicts" (3), but also inspires "its readers to acknowledge labeling tendencies ourselves" (3). She continues that, in fiction about race and gender, there is sometimes an inconsistency between message and method as authors' rhetorical strategies engage readers in the very thought patterns, like essentialism, that are part of attitudes that marginalize, but that this inconsistency is not necessarily an artistic or a political liability. Even though she interprets the novel as "not optimistic about our moving as a species beyond the workings of prejudice" (3), she writes that its readers can work with the compassion in the novel to make an individual difference in the world.

My own essay analyzes the Jim Crow practices of the early twentieth century as they appear in a Katherine Anne Porter short story, "The Fig Tree," but indicates a move away from Jim Crow toward civil rights and the impulse toward the New Woman. As the protagonist, a young girl, grows into a greater awareness of the world around her, she recognizes both the cruelty of lynching and the injustice of limiting women to play a certain role. Porter leads the reader to believe that the girl, and perhaps the whole world, will have greater options in the future.

Shakespeare is certainly not a twentieth century author, but Othello's self-portrayal connotes a universal response to oppression. Everett G. Neasman traces the changing cultural practices around the character Othello; he analyzes the various ways that twentieth century audiences have accepted both the eponymous character and the play. Othello the character has become the "Other" in American society, and adaptations of *Othello* the play, he writes, "point to current identities of social oppression" (31), especially when the character Othello is presented as a lesbian.

Houses play a big role in the writing of Virginia Woolf, and Emily Clark points out that Woolf's houses in *Orlando* and *To The Lighthouse* can be seen as metaphors for transformation, as opportunity for females to change in constructing the self. She points out that "For women in these novels death offers them a vehicle for escape, rebellion, and, in many cases, serves as a precursor to renewal" (49) in the quest for a personal identity. *Orlando*, however, presents a man who becomes a woman in a ruthless society.

The **Assimilation and the Self** section includes an essay by Youngsuk Chae, who points out how assimilation and homogenization can lead to “commodifying ‘cultural otherness’ in the market multiculturalism” (65) in her reading of the turn-of-the-century novel by Han Ong, *Fixer Chao*. The novel, she writes, discloses “material differences and class stratification among Asian Americans and by disidentifying with Orientalist projections of Asian Americans,” the novel raises questions about the “heterogeneity of Asian American identity” and shows multiculturalism to be a “superficial understanding of ethnic minorities” (82). This novel, she writes, represents “politically critical Asian American literature” (82), but also provides for the possibility of coalitions among the disenfranchised.

Music, too, plays a part in forming an identity. As Shawn P. Holliday points out through the life story of a poet, even opposing forces can be transformed into a strength. He shows, through a discussion of West Coast Jazz, how Lawson Fusao Inada “privileges ethnic experience and pushes bourgeois white culture to the margin” in his poetry (94).

In **Black Males and the Self**, through Claude Wilkinson’s reading of Charles Fuller’s *A Soldier’s Play*, he points out that being “black enough,” a question about ethnic allegiance that “many voices, both white and black, have posed, and often attempted to control” (106), must be relegated to second place in favor of individual identity.

Aaron N. Oforlea explores Paul D, a character in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. He shows how Paul D represents not only the process by which black males resist racialized discourses but also the significance of black women to black male subjectivity construction. Oforlea argues that in order to move from being object, the acted upon, to being subject, the actor, Paul D draws on a legacy of African American resistance that includes both silence and creative expressions.

In the **Female Sexuality and the Self** section, Tara Tuttle explores Christianity and its relationship to homosexuality in her analysis of two novels: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Ann Allen Schockley’s *Say Jesus and Come to Me*. She writes that these authors “revise cultural understandings of both-sex and same-sex partnerships in a religious context that strives to prohibit, condemn, or exclude them” (152).

Even though Harper Lee’s only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, has been widely analyzed, Cameron E. Williams points out that most of these interpretations have missed some important points, including the conflation of female sexuality and blackness.

Lucinda Channon discusses, in the section on **The Family and the Self**, a physically disabled character in Ana Castillo’s *Peel My Love Like*

*an Onion* who refuses to conform to societal expectations despite her traditional family, and Channon explains how the character creates and maintains her own identity in the face of opposition.

Candis Pizzetta uses science and literature to show mothering as a strategy for survival of the species in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*. Her discussion centers on how mothers must make decisions about "how much nurturing to provide and to whom in their families they should provide it" (199). Enright's novel may demonstrate a situation in which the development of some siblings is sacrificed to the development of others, in similarity to the classical political theory explained by Daniel Walker Howe, above.

Preselfannie McDaniels points out the coping strategies found in the mother-daughter relationships of the two novels that she analyzes: Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. She looks at illness and death "as catalysts that lead to confrontations between mothers and daughters and later to some understanding of the mother's struggles in the process of rearing her children" (213). She includes in her interpretation the relevance of the fact that the mothers and the daughters not only represent different generations and historical times, but also are from different cultures.

Construction of the self implies a move toward equality, an ideal which American society has striven toward but never achieved. However, almost every one of these essays ends on a positive note. The authors show that the characters actually do find ways of accommodating or negotiating the hardships that they suffer, and these critics show that the characters find not only new ways of seeing themselves but also a new way of seeing others. The hyphen that ordinarily joins two binary opposites can be dropped, leaving a gap, a space within which each character can define himself or herself.

Literature is indeed the truth disguised as fiction. Whatever is considered important in society always appears in serious literature, and these thirteen interpretations of fictional literature point out several important truths about contemporary society.

Patsy J. Daniels  
Jackson, Mississippi  
January 2013

### Note

\* As I have pointed out elsewhere, much American literature also exhibits characteristics of postcolonial attitudes. See *Understanding American Fiction as Postcolonial Literature* (Lewiston, N. Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2011).

### Works Cited

- Harmon, William, and Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1978.

**PART I:**  
**RACE, GENDER, AND THE SELF**



## CHAPTER ONE

# EMPATHY AND METAPHOR: THE CRITIQUE AND EMBRACE OF ESSENTIALIST THOUGHT IN CARYL PHILLIPS'S *CAMBRIDGE*

HELEN F. MAXSON

Novelist Caryl Phillips explores in his stories the workings of prejudice as a response to any human characteristic that can be easily grasped and interpreted, whether it is race, gender, or the location of one's home. Phillips's novels trace the patterns of thought that inform prejudice and dramatize its egregious consequences in cases when it disempowers or, in some other way, diminishes another person. The novel *Cambridge* focuses on a black man and a white woman who are reduced in the eyes of the prejudiced to embodiments of labels that bear little or no relation to their real identities. In the process and in ways that are socially permitted by those labels, they are victimized by those who, in the social system, hold power of one sort or another. As one result, the power of the victimizers is increased. This paper will explore, in addition to this victimization itself, ways in which Phillips's narrative itself participates in the oppressive thinking it depicts and ways in which the humanitarian vision of the novel is, ironically, well-served by that apparent betrayal. The workings of language being what they are, verbal representations of oppression can partake of tendencies they condemn, and this is the case in Phillips's *Cambridge*. Nonetheless, the novel embraces this fluidity in its narrative and its rhetoric, inspiring its readers to acknowledge labeling tendencies in ourselves. *Cambridge* is not optimistic about our moving as a species beyond the workings of prejudice, but its powerful plot and characters put us in touch with compassion and ethical values that, if we will act on them as individuals, can ease human lives.

Essentialism, the primary mode of thought which Phillips dramatizes in his portraits of prejudice, is indirectly defined by literary scholars who

study its opposite in the post-colonial era, the time period theorist Elleke Boehmer defines, using the hyphenated term, as beginning with the end of World War II. Boehmer gives her definition in the Introduction to her 2005 book *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, and explains that she will use the unhyphenated term “postcolonial” to describe literature “which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship . . . to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization—the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination” (3). In my essay on Caryl Phillips, I will adhere to Boehmer’s distinction. In her list of postcolonial themes, Boehmer names several aspects of imperialistic essentialism. She also defines that mindset by its opposite, referring in various ways to the heterogeneous nature of racial and national identity with which it has been replaced by “post-colonials.” Describing the tendency of characters in post-colonial literature to migrate from one country to another, Boehmer refers to “the regeneration of communities and selves out of heterogeneous experiences in the new country” (250). As Boehmer sees it, national loyalty in these works is no longer do or die. Similarly, racial identity is no longer homogenous. She refers to “the always qualified decision to belong to [one’s] adopted city or nation” and “the mixed race, multicultural British citizen” (256) that characterize the migrating characters in post-colonial literature. Referring to the dissatisfaction of postcolonial authors with monolithic bases for national definition, Boehmer describes their “creative project of decentring, possibly indeed revising and re-imagining, the centre” (256).

The concept of decentered, heterogeneous identities to which post-colonial peoples lay claim is commonly treated by the theorists who study them. Edward Said, in the 1994 Afterword to his 1978 book *Orientalism*, elucidated his original purpose in the book:

And this was one of the implied messages of *Orientalism*, that any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the “Orient” or the “West.” (347)

Both Boehmer and Said describe a movement against narrowly formulated identities on the part of post-colonial peoples. In Said’s use of it, the term “essences” evokes, on the contrary, a dangerous faith in inherent definitions, whether of peoples, words, or concepts, that provides an easily grasped handle with which one can manipulate others. The post-colonial aversion to being easily grasped characterizes much literature of

the time: it is precisely in being assigned an essential identity that a people is most easily misrepresented and oppressed. The existential thought of Camus and Sartre in the early twentieth century contributed to essentialism similar connotations of falsification which post-colonial thought may have absorbed. The concepts of transcendent or inherent meanings were seen by existentialists as fictions distorting that which exists most truly on its own terms, just as an imperial power misrepresents whatever people must exist on its terms. Linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure brought heterogeneity to a word's meaning, asserting that it depends not on any inherent definition, but on the shifting verbal contexts in which the word is used. The multiculturalism that has characterized post-colonial perspectives on global politics and literature has taken much from philosophical explorations of the twentieth century.

We might add here that the post-colonial principle of heterogeneity as a desirable cultural feature has a counterpart in the feminist notion of the plural subject, in terms of which feminist writers assume a plural voice and reject the essential identity implied by use of the first person singular. Plural subjectivity and the fallacious nature of the pronoun "I" are concepts that have informed literary feminism for decades. We think of Julia Kristeva's 1975 essay "Woman Can Never Be Defined," which points to the essentialism involved in defining gender. We think of Natalie Edwards's 2011 book *Shifting Subjects: Plural Subjectivity in Contemporary Francophone Women's Autobiography*, which according to Edwards's web page, "examines the ways in which four contemporary women writers . . . have written their autobiographical 'I' as a plural concept" ("Prof. Edwards"). We think of Eleanor Brown's 2012 book *The Weird Sisters*, in which, as interviewer Amy Sue Nathan puts it, "three sisters share the first person point of view simultaneously." The fiction of Caryl Phillips explores the marginalization of blacks, Jews, males, and females in a number of different countries, avoiding the "identity politics" that say one must be a member of a group in order to describe it (James Shapiro, qtd. in Craps). Phillips's work gives evidence that the impulse toward prejudice and oppression transcends narrow categories as an aspect of human nature.

Caribbean by birth, raised and educated in England, Phillips expressed in a 2006 interview the anti-essentialist theme that recurs in his work. He warned against anyone

who has the temerity, the sheer cheek, to be able to define you and to tell you who you should be . . . I consider that to be the most dangerous person of all. The person who tries to tell you that you should make your identity simple and able to be packaged and be put into a box is a dangerous person. And I don't care whether they're dressed like an Islamic imam or

whether they're dressed like the Chancellor of Germany or whether they're dressed like the Prime Minister of Britain. . . . they should never make people ashamed of the essential complexity of their identity. (qtd. in Stähler)

Locating complexity rather than purity at an “essential” (meaning “crucial”) point, Phillips’s statement reflects the quality of his fiction that resists the homogeneous as vulnerable and inaccurate.

Critics have explored the anti-essentialist nature of Phillips’s work from several angles. Vivian Nun Halloran has said of Phillips’s *Cambridge* (and Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*) that “[b]oth novels suggest that social demarcations between English and Creole cultural identities are artificial because they ultimately depend on chance—on the geographical accident of a given person’s or character’s place of birth,” citing the “historical racial and social hierarchies enforced by English planters and civil servants in the West Indian colonies as rhetorical tools to carry out the work of empire building” (87-88). Halloran goes on to give us one form of Phillips’s distaste for hierarchies based on essentialist identities, pointing out the novels’ insistence on “the very impossibility of the individual’s existence as a unified subject” (88). Later in the essay, she explains that impossibility: “The postmodern approach to fractured subjectivity, evident in the intertextual, fragmentary, and polyphonic nature of his texts, attests to Phillips’s prismatic vision of any unified identity as a fragile and temporary construct” (97). Even the concept of selfhood, we are learning, can engage, and thus can be protected against, essentialist thought. We will see that the plot structure of *Cambridge* suggests that national, racial, and even personal identity are, indeed, vulnerabilities that lend themselves to victimization by someone else’s taste for power.

Critic Stef Craps underscores the notion that, in an imperialistic context, a fully-defined personal identity, one which theorists would call a well-defined “subject position,” can put one at risk. Craps extends Halloran’s claim that a unified subject is “impossible” in *Cambridge* to Phillips’s *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*, novels which explore the Holocaust. Craps finds in Phillips an awareness that even a solid personal identity created by an author for a character, along with the reader empathy it generates, can work as a risky essentialist construct. In reproducing a dynamic that Phillip’s stories indict, that empathy would put the novels’ techniques at philosophical cross purposes with their visions if Phillips had not, as Craps praises him for doing, deliberately limited the empathy his readers feel for his characters. Craps cites the importance placed by psychologists on limiting one’s empathy for victims of

persecution—feeling sympathy while remembering that the trauma is someone else’s, not one’s own—through “a critical and self-reflexive perspective [that is] conducive to the establishment of a truly inclusive post-traumatic community marked by openness to and respect for otherness.” The principle of heterogeneity is an aspect of this goal, but so is that of privacy. A reader’s empathy for a character in a novel, in light of this psychological principle, suggests in the character a unified personal identity, an essence that Craps sees as engaging the same quality in readers—invasiveness—that victims of persecution unwittingly engage in those who control them. From Craps’s perspective, an author who explores the trauma of persecution, as Phillips does, must not re-enact between reader and character the dynamics of persecution. This artistic (and one might say ethical) requirement demands a deliberate self-control on the part of the author.

Craps finds that self-control in Phillips’s approach to the Holocaust, saying that his novels “appear to invite the reader to recognize a common human essence that persists across space and time,” but that, nonetheless, “the inaccessibility of one’s innermost experience to outsiders is repeatedly remarked upon by the characters themselves. . . . Eva [in *The Nature of Blood*] reverts to silence in an effort to keep her inner reality inviolate from the world.” The notion of “a common human essence” generates an empathy on the part of readers for fictional characters that empowers the messages of the author. Still, Craps describes his sense in *Higher Ground* of “an implicit acknowledgment on the part of the writer of the limits that one’s subject position places on the imagination.” Craps finds in Phillips’s vision a balance between “a common human essence” that makes empathy possible and the respect for others that refrains from appropriating someone else’s experience as one’s own.

One effect of Craps’s analysis is to locate in Phillips’s work a consistency between the artistic and formal strategies behind it and the values it confirms. For Craps, the dynamic a novel creates with its reader is emblematic of some aspect of its plot; as such, it is a component of a novel’s artistry that, in a successful novel, is answerable to its vision. Thus, the management of reader empathy that Craps finds in Phillips signals the novelist’s skill. We will see in *Cambridge* different forms of that correlation, like that between plot structure and theme. However, there are points at which Phillips lets certain of his book’s rhetorical gestures go their own way so that they seem to disrupt the consistency between its form and its content. We will see, for example, that reader empathy and rhetorical figures like metaphor and stereotype trigger precisely the essentialist thinking to which the novel is philosophically opposed. We

will see, too, ways in which Phillips compensates for these divergences in *Cambridge*, managing reader empathy and his metaphors as if working to ensure the consistency between form and content that Craps foregrounds. However, we will also see ways in the novel *Cambridge* that the divergence ultimately becomes an eloquent and reinforcing part of the book's message. In a novel like *Cambridge*, whose story fails to dramatize answers to the problems it explores, we can turn instead to the values inherent in its construction as authorial responses to those problems. In *Cambridge*, more specifically, the inconsistencies between the ideas it espouses and the formal techniques it employs bring to mind the cultural heterogeneity esteemed by post-colonial peoples and authors. In light of that ideal, the inconsistencies are an ironic corroboration of the book's message that postcolonial heterogeneity can change notions of human identity that are based on ethnicity and gender. In light of that ideal, black people and female people are respected for whatever identities they naturally possess as individuals. Relocated people are able to claim national citizenship regardless of their race. The inconsistencies between the message and the rhetorical strategies of the novel *Cambridge* provide an ironic affirmation of the inclusive, tolerant, and—in ways—flexible ethics the book would instill in its readers.

In this context, it is helpful to add that for Phillips, works of literature do not assume consistent philosophical positions. Thus, making room for inconsistencies in his novels does not, from his perspective, undermine their eloquence. In a 2006 interview with Alex Stähler, Phillips distanced himself from the idea of artistic consistency that might impugn his use of metaphors, stereotypes, and reader empathy in a book whose story challenges essentialist categories:

Literature has to be ambivalent because it can't, it doesn't make judgments. . . . [As a writer,] you explore and you usually end up in a position of some ambiguity. . . . Most writers . . . are not afraid of ambiguity. . . . Literature should not serve anyone's position.

Phillips's acceptance of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of literature allows him to experiment with the rhetoric of his fiction, using techniques that might seem, at first, to undermine the anti-essentialist implications of the story he tells and yet to empower its vision. More generally, Phillips teaches us to be tentative readers of fiction, interpreting plots and images rather than enumerating planks in a tightly made argument. It is true, on one hand, that he is a prolific essayist who argues emphatically and whose novels are often faithful to historical events and people. However, it is also true, on the other hand, that the rich and subtle

imagining in his novels refrains from asserting, in any final way, the arguable or ascertainable. That imagining asks Phillips's readers to participate in defining its impact and its implications, a sign in itself of his distaste for consistent, narrowly defined labels and of his willingness to expand concepts like heterogeneity and ethical artistry as they inform his work.

Nevertheless, the philosophical construct of essentialist thought holds a consistent definition in the plot of *Cambridge*. The Prologue is delivered by a third-person narrator recounting the departure from England of Emily Cartwright, a young woman who is on her way to visit, in a supervisory capacity, her father's sugar cane plantation in the British West Indies. We learn in those pages that when she returns, she is to be married to Thomas Lockwood, a fifty-year-old widow of her father's choosing whose ample financial resources will "insure [her father's] own future" (4) against his habit of gambling and losing (99). From the start of the book, then, Emily, by virtue of her gender, is the victim of an essentialist social tenet about the disposability of female offspring and their primary function as romantic or sexual objects.

In a novel that studies, as well, the workings of the slave trade and slavery itself, this emphasis on gender foregrounds and censures the essentialist thinking at play in victimization of any personal quality. One technique Phillips uses to belie the labels assigned by essentialist thought is to skew in his plot the defining categories on which they depend. The white, British, and socially prominent Emily holds a position of power over the slaves and other employees of her father's plantation. At the same time, however, she is imprisoned by the gender roles she must play. In the Caribbean, she will meet a slave named Cambridge who, thanks to a period of freedom as a young man in England, has been well educated; Cambridge's history skews the essentialist understanding of race that ultimately traps him. Reflecting the author's deploring attitude about those defeats though not avoiding them, these main characters, in their very natures, invalidate the essentialist categories that victimize them. They invalidate those categories, too, by holding, despite their roles as victims, the roles of power that victimize each other.

Thus, even though they are defeated by essentialist logic, these characters participate in various forms of it, an irony that admits to the book a cousin to the heterogeneous quality post-colonials look for in national identities. The longest section of the novel is narrated in Emily Cartwright's voice in the form of a journal she keeps as she sails toward and lives out her experiences in the Caribbean. To use Halloran's and Craps's concept, she assumes a "subject position" that draws our empathy.

We will see, too, that she brings her own essentialist notions of race from England and acquires others once she is in the islands.

Still, her defeat by the sexism of her father and her lover indirectly incriminate her own essentialism. Emily will be victimized in the book by a turn of events that might be seen as a metaphor of the heightened intimacy that a well developed subjectivity and empathy for it can bring. Even her own sensitive and generous thinking invalidate the essentialist thinking that Phillips portrays in the book. As an inconsistent character, Emily portrays her own evolving tendencies well, showing us human qualities as they really are behind the falsifying labels. Her inconsistency enables her to show us what it means to buy gradually into modes of essentialist thinking that surround one, in addition to how inaccurate they are, and what the consequences for doing so can be.

Emily's journal records the process by which she learns first-hand about the workings of the sugar cane plantations and the racial assumptions they make, affording us a look at the psycho-social chemistry that generates and empowers victimizing stereotypes. To be sure, as we have said, she does bring her own categorical assumptions with her from England. When she first arrives on the island, she is met by a carriage from her father's estate. She remembers that "The carriage was light and airy and drawn by English horses. . . . I noted the difference between this carriage and those preferred by the negroes, whose carriages were large and heavy and drawn by mules" (21). The distinctions in value between what is English and what is negro are already in her mind. At another point, she mentions discomfort at the freed blacks she sees on the island: "A sight to which I found it difficult to reconcile myself was the number of apparently free blacks wandering the streets, shoes on their feet, their unstockinged legs shining like twin columns of jet" (104). With these and similar observations on her part as preliminaries, we are not surprised when, later in her visit, she observes that "[w]ithout rank and order any society, no matter how sophisticated, is doomed to admit the worst kind of anarchy. In this West Indian sphere there is amongst the white people too little attention paid to differences of class" (72). The class consciousness for which England is famous has arrived with her and gives her critical feelings about even the West Indian whites, who are lax in the class distinctions they draw. She goes on to observe that

The other men, perhaps because I am a woman, have shown little courtesy in affording the attentions proper to my rank. They converse with me as freely and as openly as they wish. This is barely tolerable amongst the whites, but when I find the blacks hereabouts behaving in the same manner

I cannot abide it, and see no reason why I should accommodate myself to the lack of decorum which characterizes this local practice. (72)

The ranks into which Emily sorts human beings involve gender as well as race, and we feel that she has not had to be shown around a Caribbean island in order to acquire that practice.

Yet, when she first arrives, the clear rankings and categorical ideas that she carries and encounters are softened by a kindness and fairness that are also native to her character. Because of her own situation, she is aware of the unfairnesses society deals to women. She never does return to England and the marriage her father has arranged for her. When she thinks of England, she thinks of “a life sacrificed to the prejudices which despise my sex” (113). She is clear from the start of her visit that she wants to write and lecture on what she learns in the Caribbean; her detailed and insightful account of what she sees as she gets to know the island reads like an anthropologist’s tract. She is well aware of the diminished respect accorded to women in England and the new world, and her awareness does, at least initially, soften the racial rankings into which she sorts life in both worlds.

At one point in her visit, she takes issue with the assessment usually made of Creole (or mixed race) plantation managers on the island. True, these are people of some white blood, but we are still inclined to appreciate this token of open-mindedness on her part:

I discovered much at this dinner that warmed my heart towards one class of these creole people. I had heard those engaged in West Indian cultivation spoken of as choleric and unstable, inclined to be imperious, but lacking in polish, who having raised themselves from mediocrity to some form of affluence, now reclined in tropical ease framing excessively elevated notions of their birth. However, these plantation managers are hard-working, up before sunrise, first into the field, and often the last to leave at night. . . . I have mixed in society where courtly manners prevail . . . but seldom have more sterling qualities of the mind and native good breeding been displayed than amongst these planters, whose propriety was such that not for one moment did I suspect any of aping their betters. (114-15).

Like this gracious assessment, Emily’s sensitivity to the injustice and pain attending Brown’s beating of Cambridge suggests in her an honesty and a generosity of spirit. She refers to the pangs of sympathy felt by nearby neighboring slaves during the beating, and then includes her own among them: “. . . if I am to be honest I would have to add that theirs were

not the only hearts whose sympathies leapt instinctively to this poor unfortunate” (41).

Still, part of the story of *Cambridge* is that of Emily’s assimilation by the racist thinking on the Caribbean island she is visiting. Much of the first part of her visit consists of a series of explanations designed to acquaint her with the practices and the nature of the peoples she will find there; we are able to see the network of local perspectives that will strengthen by the end of her visit the essentialist tendencies she has arrived with. After the hanging of Cambridge for the murder of Brown, a distraught Emily thinks of Isabella, her beloved white servant from England who has died on the way to the Caribbean:

O lucky Isabella that she never lived to witness the treachery of the negro that some would set free to wreak havoc upon our persons. Their lying subservience, their sly pilfering, their murderous violence, mark them out as very like the Irish, but of an even more childish character. (129)

Her reference to the Irish locates her essentialist thinking in her past, but her reference to the “treachery” of Cambridge makes clear the role of her experiences on the island in developing and finalizing her racist tendencies, despite the strands of her character which seem sometimes to soften them. Just as *The Nature of Blood* traces the development and self-fulfilling quality of fifteenth-century Venetian anti-semitism, *Cambridge* describes the same aspects of racism against blacks in the nineteenth-century Caribbean. We leave both novels convinced that it is an inevitable part of human nature to generate and act on stereotypes of racial identity that empower some and victimize others.

Emily’s gradual seduction by Arnold Brown can be seen as symbolizing the evolution of her racism. Emily’s confusion about Brown bespeaks not only the inconsistency we have seen between her categorizing attitudes and her innate kindness, but also a confusion in her sense of herself that allows her to be fully swept—in what amounts to a sexual surrender—into the essentialist perspective she holds at the end of the section she narrates. Emily’s connection with Brown, which prepares readers to find a more subtle sexuality in Eva’s reticence in the later *The Nature of Blood*, comments on the consequences of unwise intimacy and of essentialist thinking. Though the first is generated by in-depth knowledge about someone’s identity and the second distorts someone’s identity, the two dangers are alike in bestowing manipulative power on one individual (whether reader or lover) who seeks to know another (whether fictional character or lover). As a living text, Emily is at risk, both as an artistic construct and as an embodiment of human nature.

Emily's first contact with Brown takes place as she watches his brutal beating of Cambridge. The aversion to Brown that she feels then changes to a mistaken sense that he gentles in personality after she stands up to him about the presence at her dining table of a black woman named Christiania. As a result of her error, Emily gentles in her response to him. When he takes her on a tour of the island, she alternates when referring to him between Mr. Brown and Arnold in a manner that is confusing for the reader and bespeaks Emily's own confusion. She pities "Poor Arnold" when he must observe the sufferings of sick blacks (121), but expresses no sympathy for the sufferers themselves. She continues to sympathize with Brown even as he abandons her once she is pregnant (127-128). We learn from a character named Wilson, about whom Brown has lied to Emily, that Brown has offered Cambridge the authoritative position of Head Driver so that he (Brown) can manipulate other blacks on the island. There is no question in the reader's mind that he is an unsavory character. Still, Emily progresses in her attraction to the point of sexual union. That their child is stillborn, since her attachment to Brown symbolizes her developing racism, comments on the fatal workings of essentialist thought as eloquently as do the deaths of Cambridge and Brown. Metaphorically, we might say that Emily has been raped by the heightened racism she adopts on the island. The sexual undertones of her connections with the local clergyman and the local doctor underscore our sense that Emily's immersion in the environment of the island is dramatized as a sexual event. Gender and race overlap in Phillips's plot as victimizing (and therefore victimized) categories.

Not only do Emily's complexity and inconsistency as a character invalidate the essentialist thinking in the book's characters; they also require on the part of the reader an analytical reading that undercuts the empathy we feel for her. Her complexity and inconsistency forestall our impulse to find ourselves in her. Craps locates this authorial technique in *The Nature of Blood*, mentioning a self-reflexive quality in our response to Eva, "a kind of empathy that combines affect and critical awareness." For Craps, Eva's complex character—she is neither all innocent nor all guilty—demands that the reader read critically to understand Eva's place in the book's moral vision. It is not hard to see that that sort of reading is demanded by the complexity of the book as a whole, and I would argue that Emily Cartwright requires it as well. Cambridge's upbringing as a British gentleman and his position as a slave make demands on the reader in the same way. Furthermore, the narrative's source in several different voices, in a narrative strategy evocative of certain great modernist novels, undermines our faith in any one voice as an expression of what is true or

an example of what is essentially human. These demands on our thinking as we read limit the degree to which we can feel at the same time. In so doing, they underscore the book's indictment of essentialist, potentially appropriating perspectives.

Still, we have commented already on the inconsistent nature of the book. It delivers well-developed characters and the accompanying sense of a "common human essence" which transgresses the bounds of race, gender, and nationality. In so doing, it generates the very empathy it works against. Thus, in terms of the psychological constructs Craps cites, one might say that *Cambridge* encourages readers to appropriate aspects of its story as, in various ways, their own, tending toward the essentialist thought it locates in the practice of slavery.

In fact, several aspects of the book encourage us to think in both empathetic and essentialist terms, even as they undermine it by requiring our critical analysis. Thus we are reminded of Phillips's comment that literature is, by nature, ambiguous, and of the heterogeneity that postcolonials espouse. We learn that Cambridge has been given four different names in his life: Olumide, Thomas, David Henderson, and Cambridge. Only the first of these reflects a mother's love rather than definition by the slave culture of which he is a part. The fractured selfhood suggested by these changing and imposed names contributes to the reader's sympathy for the character who bears them and seems like one of the most hurtful consequences of slavery.

Encouraging our empathy for fully developed characters, the book questions the traditional use—as a measure of a novel's success—of consistency between its formal qualities and its vision, and, true to the ambiguous nature Phillips attributes to novels, *Cambridge* questions the importance of that consistency in other ways as well. For example, in the fictional rhetoric of *Cambridge*, metaphorical allusions shape our thinking as readers. As Craps and other critics of Phillips remind us, metaphor is often at play in an essentialist perspective, asserting an essential similarity or equivalency between two things whereby one suggests the other. Those who try to avoid essentialist thought prefer to think in terms of metonymy, which associates like or closely situated things without asserting a shared essence. In relying on metaphor, the novel's rhetoric engages thought patterns in its readers that its philosophy eschews. Still, these inconsistencies contribute to the novel's vision in ways that add to its power.

For one thing, as critical readers who are alert to our own thinking as we read, we might recognize in ourselves the workings of metaphorical thought. Such a self-consciousness would extend the novel's interrogation of essentialist thought into our own world. In recognizing our metaphorical