

THE ARCHIVAL SILENCE AND THE RECONSTRUCTED PAST: CULTURAL MEMORY IN CARYL PHILLIPS'S *FOREIGNERS*

J. SNEHA SABATINI, M.A.,

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

PG and Research Department of English,

Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Erode- 638012, India

ABSTRACT

The research paper examines the intersections of cultural memory, historiography, and transnational identity in Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners*. By reconstructing the marginalized lives of three historical Black men in Britain: Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin, and David Oluwale, Phillips intervenes in the hegemonic narrative of British national history. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks of collective memory established by Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, and Jan Assmann's cultural memory, the article states that Phillips's text functions as a compensatory site of memory.

Furthermore, through the lens of postmemory and the ethics of remembering, this analysis explores how *Foreigners* navigates the trauma of the diaspora, ultimately demanding a re-evaluation of how societies remember and forget their marginalized subjects. The paper examines that Phillips's literary intervention acts as an ethical imperative, transforming fragmented, forgotten histories into vital components of a newly globalized, transnational collective memory.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Memory, Transnationalism, *Lieux de Mémoire*, Diaspora, Postmemory, Historiography, Ethics of Memory

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and memory has long been a subject of intense academic inquiry, particularly as modern societies face with the complexities of identity, migration, and the legacies of colonialism. Memory, rather than being a passive repository of the past, is an active, dynamic process that both shapes and is shaped by the cultural present. Through the Black British experience, the archive of national history has frequently operated through mechanisms of exclusion, resulting in profound gaps wherein the lives of marginalized individuals are either distorted or erased entirely. Caryl Phillips's hybrid work of analysis, fiction, and historical fact, *Foreigners*, serves as a vital intervention into these archival silences.

The book excavates the stories of three Black men whose lives reflect the fraught position of the foreigner in English society. They are Francis Barber, the servant and companion to the eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson; Randolph Turpin, the first Black British world-champion boxer who ended his life in

despair in the 1960s; and David Oluwale, a Nigerian stowaway whose tragic death at the hands of Leeds police in 1969 forced a national reckoning.

Through these three disparate yet fundamentally linked narratives, Phillips addresses the mechanisms of cultural memory. Cultural memory is defined as a system of values, artifacts, and practices that retain the past for the present and the future, helping to cultivate identity and cohesion across generations. However, when a society's cultural memory is constructed upon a linear narrative of progress that supports a singular, authorized collective memory, it often fails to give voice to the marginalised and the silenced. This paper will explore how *Foreigners* challenges the selective, hegemonic memory of the British nation by transforming literary narrative into *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory). By navigating the theories of collective memory, the ethics of historical truth, and the phenomenon of transnational postmemory, this paper argues that Phillips reconstructs the identities of Barber, Turpin, and Oluwale, compelling the reader to recognize the traumatic voids in the official historical record and actively participate in the ongoing struggle of global justice.

COLLECTIVE FRAMEWORKS AND THE LITERARY *LIEU DE MÉMOIRE*

To understand the mechanics of memory in Phillips's *Foreigners*, one must first examine the foundational theories of how societies construct their pasts. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs pioneered the concept of “collective memory”, distinguishing it from individual memory by arguing that all remembering is embedded within and dependent upon social structures. According to Halbwachs, individual memory is shaped by the social environments or *milieux* and the specific groups to which an individual belongs.

A group is formed by the intersection of common representational content related to the past, and its collective memory is sustained by the continuous interaction of its members. Jan Assmann further developed this by separating “communicative memory” (informal, everyday recollections limited to a few generations) from “cultural memory” (institutionalized, mediated memory transmitted through texts, monuments, and rituals).

In the cases of Francis Barber and Randolph Turpin, their lives were heavily documented by the dominant white British groups of their respective eras, but they were documented merely as attachments to white history or as spectacles for white consumption. Barber is remembered almost exclusively through his proximity to Samuel Johnson, while Turpin's memory was commodified by the boxing public before he was discarded into financial ruin and obscurity. This is because these men lacked a supportive group equipped to institutionalize their specific experiences into strong remembrances which rely on the objectification of a given content into a physical medium like writing to ensure continuity beyond one generation. Their authentic, lived experiences were overshadowed by the authorized history of the elite.

Historical narratives often create a false sense of closure by presenting the past as unified and coherent, effectively isolating the reader from the contemporary relevance of the past. This eradication of lived memory by official history is precisely the crisis that Pierre Nora identifies in his conceptualization of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). Nora speculates that modern societies have experienced an acceleration of history, wherein traditional environments of memory (*milieux de mémoire*) have collapsed, replaced by a fundamentally historical sensibility that obsessively archives the past while simultaneously alienating us from it. Because true, spontaneous memory has been lost, societies are forced to deliberately create archives, anniversaries, and monuments to anchor their identities. Nora articulates this divide profoundly:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically

revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. (8)

Phillips's *Foreigners* operates directly within this fundamental opposition. The official British historical record serves as the "representation of the past" that released the memories of Barber, Turpin, and Oluwale into the prosaic and secular realm of mere facts, effectively destroying the sacred and emotional truth of their existence. By resurrecting their stories through a hybrid of fact and fiction, Phillips creates new *lieu de mémoire*.

Literature itself, as Nora notes, has become a source for collective memory; history has become our replaceable imagination, and the historical novel or personalized document revives the exhausted capital of our collective memory. In *Foreigners*, Phillips refuses to let these men remain footnotes in a white-dominated archive. He gives them interiority, transforming the selective and discriminatory official memory into a multi-layered cultural memory that forces the reader to confront the psychological isolation of the Black Briton.

By engaging with the silences in the museum of British history, what goes unnoticed, unrecognized, and unacknowledged, Phillips acts as the cultural mediator. He takes what Halbwachs might call "weak remembrances" (Veridiana 4) –ephemeral, floating content dependent on individuals) and, through the act of writing, converts them into "strong remembrances," (Veridiana 4) objectifying them into a permanent text that transcends the immediate generation. The novel itself becomes the spatial and material embodiment of a marginalized group's memory, stabilizing the structural amnesia of the nation state.

TRAUMA, POSTMEMORY, AND THE ETHICS OF REMEMBERING

The recovery of marginalized memory in *Foreigners* is not merely a historical corrective; it is an inherently ethical and deeply traumatic project. Memory, particularly the memory of suffering and exclusion, is fraught with moral ambiguity. As Jasna Ćurković Nimac notes, memory is highly volatile and can easily be manipulated by political elites; a protective shield of memory can sometimes turn into a sword. Therefore, the normative weight of memory and how we ought to remember is a crucial ethical question.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes the ethical dimension of memory as operating on three levels: the pathologic-therapeutic (dealing with repressed memory), the practical (manipulated memory), and the ethico-political (controlled or forced memory). Ricoeur argues that there is an "injunction to remember", because the duty of memory is fundamentally tied to the project of justice. We are obligated to remember salient examples of radical evil and crimes against humanity, as public remembering is an act of acknowledging victims and restoring harm.

This ethical duty to remember is most urgent in the final section of *Foreigners*, which details the life and death of David Oluwale. A Nigerian immigrant who arrived in Leeds as a stowaway, Oluwale suffered years of institutionalized racism, psychiatric institutionalization, homelessness, and relentless police brutality before he was hounded to his death in a river in 1969. Oluwale's death is a manifestation of structural and situational violence. By dedicating a substantial portion of his text to Oluwale, Phillips engages in what Fuyuki Kurasawa terms the "work of global justice," wherein human rights are not just abstract attributes, but capacities activated through ethico-political labour such as bearing witness and unity.

However, bearing witness to such cultural trauma across generations introduces the complex dynamic of postmemory. Postmemory refers to the traumatic transmissions articulated over time, where succeeding generations inherit the psychic strain of their predecessors' suffering. In discussing the transgenerational transmission of trauma, Stephanie Ceraso draws heavily on Marianne Hirsch's definition:

Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as narratives and images with which they grew up. In other words, the children of survivors incorporate into themselves a past that is not their own. They have been repetitively subjected to tales and images of events they never witnessed because their parents were unable to repress their own traumatic memories; showing and telling about their experiences with the Holocaust served as a release of psychic strain. Because of this repetitive exposure, the survivors’ indelible stories take on the weight of real, deeply traumatic memories in the minds of their children. (9)

Although Hirsch’s theory was originally formulated regarding the Holocaust, its mechanics are vividly applicable to the diasporic trauma represented in *Foreigners*. Phillips, as a Black British writer of the post-Windrush generation, inherits the “postmemory” of racial alienation, colonial displacement, and state-sanctioned violence that destroyed Oluwale, Turpin, and Barber. The trauma of the Black British experience is a transnational memory one that crosses the porous and flexible borders of globalization, linking the African continent, the Caribbean, and the British metropole.

By intertwining the historical past with narrative imagination, Phillips implicates the reader in this traumatic transmission. The reader is not allowed to passively consume the history of these “foreigners”. Instead, the text demands active participation, utilizing the silences and omissions in the official record to force the reader to bridge the gaps and make meaning of the trauma. The failure of the British state to protect its Black citizens is no longer a distant historical fact; it is a present reality that infects the reader’s consciousness. This cognitive colonization of the reader ensures that the memory of the offense is transmitted, confirming what humanity is capable of, but also demanding that the reader work toward a future that contains hope and justice. In extracting the exemplary value from these traumatic memories, Phillips fulfils the ethical demand of truthfulness. Even if memory is partial and reconstructive, the obligation to remember truthfully is rooted in the obligation to do justice.

Through *Foreigners*, the isolated suffering of David Oluwale transcends the local context of 1960s Leeds and enters the global arena of transnational memory. Just as human rights movements mobilize the visual legacies and memories of past atrocities to reframe contemporary injustices such as using the memories of the Argentine Dirty War to give meaning to the missing Ayotzinapa students in Mexico. Phillips mobilizes the literary form to connect the centuries-spanning isolation of Barber, Turpin, and Oluwale. Their stories become a predominant cultural memory of the Black diaspora, functioning as a critical language and terrain of human rights.

CONCLUSION

Caryl Phillips’s *Foreigners* is a profound meditation on the fragility of memory and the exclusionary violence of the national archive. Through the biographical excavations of Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin, and David Oluwale, Phillips demonstrates that when marginalized groups lack the structural power to objectify their experiences into institutionalized cultural memory, their lives are systematically erased or distorted by the dominant society. However, by deploying literature as *lieu de mémoire*, Phillips counteracts this historical amnesia. He bridges the vast gulf between the living, affective reality of memory and the cold, dull reconstruction of history.

Foreigners serves as an ethical imperative. It forces a reckoning with the cultural trauma of the Black British diaspora, utilizing the mechanisms of postmemory to transmit the psychic strain of historical racism to the contemporary reader. In doing so, Phillips fulfills the profound moral obligation to remember the victims of past injustices. His work transforms the silenced and the marginalised from fleeting historical footnotes

into enduring pillars of a transnational collective memory. *Foreigners* reminds us that the act of remembering is never neutral; it is a continuous struggle for global justice, a deliberate and ethical labour required to ensure that the voices of the past are granted the dignity of shaping our shared future.

WORKS CITED

Ceraso, Stephanie. "Survivors' Tales: Cultural Trauma, Postmemory, and the Role of the Reader in Art Spiegelman's Visual Narratives." *EnterText*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 204-228.

Cordeiro, Veridiana Domingos. "'Groups' as a product of individual and collective memory: the hardcore of Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory." *ProtoSociology – Essays on Sociology*, pp. 1-19.

"Cultural memory." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 21 May 2026.

Ćurković Nimac, Jasna. "Toward an ethics of memory. Is memory the root cause of violence or a path to violence avoidance?" *LiU Electronic Press*, Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Croatia.

Mandolessi, Silvana. "Transnational Memories and the Practices of Global Justice in the Ayotzinapa Case." *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*, edited by Jenny Wüstenberg and Aline Sierp, Berghahn Books, pp. 47-67.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, Spring 1989, pp. 7-24.

Phillips, Caryl. *Foreigners*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

"The concept of 'Cultural Memory' explained." *Diggit Magazine*, 2026.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.