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# **In Search of ‘Other Londons’: *A Bend in the River* by Caryl Phillips and Johny Pitts**

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## **1. Metropolitan London in Anglophone Fiction**

Metropolitan London has long had a strong hold over the British literary imagination – think only of such classics as Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860-61) or Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Equally frequent, London has figured in contemporary postcolonial and diasporic British fiction. With its landmarks and suburbs, the formerly colonial metropolitan centre features prominently in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* (2004), Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani* (2006) as well as in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012).<sup>1</sup> These and further novels demonstrate, as John McLeod claims in his 2004 monograph *Postcolonial London*, that African, Asian, Caribbean, and South Pacific Anglophone writers have significantly contributed to rewriting the imperial centre as postcolonial metropolis. Exploring contrasting attitudes towards London’s diasporic transformation, they have imaginatively transformed the city since the 1950s, foregrounding the diasporic hybridity of the United Kingdom’s capital. However, while literature during Thatcherism tended to present London “as a capital under strain”, urban fiction published in the late 1990s and early 2000s “proved remarkably optimistic”, as Nora Pleßke (20) and others have observed (cf. McLeod 162, 188).

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<sup>1</sup> See also the “London Fictions” website which lists more than 70 novels: [www.londonfictions.com](http://www.londonfictions.com).

Departing significantly from the celebration of the city's ethnic and cultural diversity in *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane*, more recent post-millennial London novels, in turn, have started to deconstruct the myth of multiculturalism purported in earlier works and have highlighted the continuity of racism and inequality instead. Notably, as Michael Perfect has shown in *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism*, this shift coincides with a rising number of white British authors who write about the experience of migrants in twenty-first-century London, demonstrating that the postcolonial London novel now includes a wide variety of voices. Moreover, as Pleßke's study of the 'new London' novel of the Blair era demonstrates, the city and its physical topography increasingly became more than a mere setting, making an impression upon the mind, affecting emotions and moulding characters and their destinies (21). As a result, according to Pleßke, a London-specific mental disposition or "urban mentality" has emerged in novels published in the late 1990s, i.e. at a time when multiculturalism and race relations became a central concern in New Labour's rebranding of Britain and London.

The following case study likewise focusses on "London fictions," but seeks to expand the exclusive concern with novels of these erstwhile studies by McLeod, Perfect and Pleßke, by analysing a more recent and distinctly intermedial work of art, namely *A Bend in the River* (2012) by Caryl Phillips and Johny Pitts. Their "geographical slideshow" ("Hearts of Darkness" n. pag.) combines black-and-white photographs, recorded sounds as well as readings with a stylised map and location tag.

## **2. 'A Room for London' by Artangel: An Interarts Project**

In April 2012, West Indies-born British writer Caryl Phillips was invited by the arts organisation Artangel to stay in 'A Room for London', a one-bedroom, boat-shaped installation on top of Queen Elizabeth Hall looking over the River Thames, built "as a peaceful space to think and reflect in" above the flow of traffic and bustle below ("A Room" n. pag.). The

installation's boat-shaped design was inspired by the *Roi des Belges*, the vessel with which Joseph Conrad sailed up the Congo River in the late nineteenth century; a journey that went on to provide the setting for his famous novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899). On the boat, there was a deck and a crow's nest. Inside, the boat featured a small octagonal library, containing a selection of books written about or inspired by London. There was also a desk installed inside the crow's nest, from where one could look out over the river to the historic buildings of Bankside, to Somerset House, Waterloo Bridge, the Savoy and other iconic landmarks. The view from the boat stretched from St Paul's Cathedral to the Palace of Westminster, the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben – sights that connect this view to major national institutions, i.e. the Anglican church, the Royal family and Britain's legislative power vested into the House of Commons and – as Phillips crucially highlights (2013, cf. 41) – the unelected House of Lords.



Figure 1: 'A Room for London' (rooftop installation built by Living Architecture and designed by David Kohn Architects in collaboration with the artist Fiona Banner, 2012; © Charles Hosea)

The project resulted in a collection of thirteen essays published by Granta Books in 2013, entitled *A London Address*. In addition, podcast recordings of the essays, read by their respective writer, were published and can be accessed online ([www.artangel.org.uk/a-room-for-london/a-london-address/](http://www.artangel.org.uk/a-room-for-london/a-london-address/)). Moreover, ‘Sounds from a Room’, the videos of a series of live-streamed concerts by invited musicians that took place in the main living area of the boat, are accessible on the arts organization’s website ([www.artangel.org.uk/a-room-for-london/sounds-from-a-room/](http://www.artangel.org.uk/a-room-for-london/sounds-from-a-room/)). Likewise, ‘Hearts of Darkness’, a series of works by artists working in other genres and with other media than text or music – many of them inspired by the space’s association with Conrad, can be shared via the digital space (“Hearts of Darkness” n. pag.).

Phillips had been one of 38 international artists including British theatre director Tim Etchells, Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole, German composer Heiner Goebbels, American musician Laurie Anderson, and Belgian painter Luc Tuymans, who had been invited by Artangel to spend up to four nights in this room and create new work there. The Artangel website claims that Phillips, when he stayed in the boat-shaped installation, “wanted to challenge the iconic view that greeted him” and search for other visions of London (“Hearts of Darkness” n. pag.). In his essay “A Bend in the River” for *A London Address*, Phillips contemplates the symbolic significance and current relevance of this iconic London with regard to the culturally hybrid metropolis of 2012 (2013, cf. 42).

In the aftermath of his stay, Phillips invited Black British photographer Johnny Pitts to take up the essay’s search for “another vision of London” (Phillips 2013, 44). Their collaboration resulted in the geographical slideshow *A Bend in the River*, which contains excerpts from both Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Phillips’s essay as well as photographs by Pitts and field recordings by Peter Meanwell.<sup>2</sup> As will be shown in the following, both Phillips’s

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<sup>2</sup> Designed and built by Nat Buckley, this audio slideshow was originally commissioned and hosted by the digital arts agency The Space. It can currently be accessed via: <http://abendintheriver.artangel.org.uk>.

essay and the multimedia slideshow hybridize traditional notions of London purported in twentieth-century London fictions, which tend to concentrate on the city's iconic centre without mentioning its history of religious and (neo-)colonial exploitation. The essay and slideshow both question the desirability of this "familiar, hugely exportable, and in a sense, very comfortable, public face of Britain" (2013, 44), which Phillips identifies with the "idea of London and Britain" (ibid.), as it does not seem to "fit with the narrative of a twenty-first century, multicultural, multiracial, people" (2013, 41). They also challenge the canonical postcolonial London novel of the early 2000s, as epitomized by Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Even though the two novels each portray a radically different London, they both celebrate the ethnic and cultural diversity of the city and thus have contributed to the 'myth of multiculturalism' (Jacoby 1994). With their revisionist and almost ethnographic approach and their turn to – at least in the fictional realm – still largely undocumented parts of London, Phillips and Pitt's collaboration updates and corrects these earlier visions of London.

### **3. Caryl Phillips's London View: "A Bend in the River"**

Holding that the narrative of exclusion suggested by the iconic buildings in sight "no longer really squares with the Britain that we deal with on a daily basis" (2013, 43), Phillips's essay records his attempts to account for the paradoxes of post-Windrush London and discover 'other Londons' that better align with Britain's multicultural and multiracial society today. To this end, Phillips makes use of intertextual references. To begin with, the essay's title alludes to V.S. Naipaul's homonymous 1979 novel about an Indian man in a town located at the bend of (another) great river in an unnamed newly independent African nation, resembling the Congo, and thus implicitly points to European colonialism and to Britain's imperial history.

Moreover, intertextual references to T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* (1922) and Sam Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) conjure two opposing visions of London.

Phillips first evokes the “gloomy ambivalence” (2013, 40) with which Eliot pictures the “Unreal City” of London by referring to a crowd, flowing over London Bridge in the “brown fog of a winter dawn” and being “undone by death” (T.S. Eliot as qtd. in Phillips 2013, 38). Eliot’s vision of London as a ‘waste land’ tends to be read as a symbol of modern fragmentation and disillusionment and as a lament expressing the damage and displacement of national identity after World War I. Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, by contrast, details the life of West Indian immigrants newly arrived in post-World War II London and depicts their desire to participate in, and feel part of, the Britain of the period. At first, Phillips’s chosen quotations highlight how *The Lonely Londoners* shares with Eliot’s long poem the invocation of an ‘unreal London’. Already the first lines of novel explicitly refer to London’s ‘unrealness’ but also evoke feelings of alienation by comparing the latter to ‘some strange place on another planet’: “One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet [...]” (Selvon 1). Yet, the ‘unrealness’ of Selvon’s vision of London sharply contrasts with Eliot’s in the sense that the alienation depicted in Selvon’s novel is ascribable to Europe’s postcolonial condition rather than to the experience of modernity. This becomes particularly apparent when Selvon’s protagonist, Moses Aloetta, muses: “Oh [...] to have said: ‘I walked on Waterloo Bridge,’ ‘I rendezvoused at Charing Cross,’ ‘Piccadilly Circus is my playground,’ to say these things, to have lived these things, to have lived in the great city of London, centre of the world” (Selvon 133-134). As Phillips points out, Aloetta’s love for the colonial centre remains undiminished throughout the novel even though his desperate “clamour for ownership” (2013, 40) is continuously frustrated. Therefore, according to Phillips, compared to Eliot’s portrayal of England’s capital, Selvon’s literary representation of London rather illustrates that whilst “[l]andscapes are freighted with history and can suggest a national identity; they can also remain stubbornly standoffish and hold outsiders at bay” (ibid.).

In his own essay, Phillips seeks to modify the literary imaginings of London of both his precursors and begins to question the “grandeur, achievement, tradition” (2013, 41) and the “[e]xclusivity; privilege; power” (43) that the buildings across the river suggest as national symbols. According to Phillips, the buildings are evidence of a history “that for many is a narrative of rejection” (ibid.). Consequently, he notes a “disjuncture between the narrative on the streets and the narrative suggested by this particular view” (Phillips 2013, 41). The essay records how Phillips becomes increasingly irritated by “the suggestive rootedness, and unselfreflective confidence of th[e] buildings” he sees (2013, 44), and how he starts leaving his temporary home in search of “another vision of London” (ibid.). On the second day of his stay, he crosses the river and goes to the Embankment where he meets Yvonne, a homeless elderly Caribbean woman who has “established some sort of a home for herself on the banks of the Thames” (Phillips 2013, 42). On the third day, he leaves his lookout in order to explore the area downriver. He takes a Thames Clipper and finds the vision he is looking for in “those Londons to the east” (Phillips 2013, 45), including the “Isle of Dogs or the underdeveloped wastelands beyond Greenwich” (ibid.). These “other visions of London” (44) make Phillips feel “slightly more comfortable with [his] iconically powerful view” (45). Maintaining that they are no less representative than the iconic view he has from his rooftop boat, Phillips ends his essay as follows: “Can it really be true that not all views are equal? And if this is the case, is it possible, or even desirable, to make the narrative embedded in the view of London that is spread out before me available to everybody in Britain? Not for the first time I’m glad that Mr Conrad’s boat has come equipped with window blinds.” (ibid.) While not providing a direct answer to the questions he raises, the ending implies that Phillips indeed closes the window blinds of his residence in order to block out the iconic view.

This ending can be read in at least three different ways. Closing the blinds can, simply and first of all, be seen as a closing gesture that underlines the ending of the written piece (and



of Phillips's stay above the South Bank). It connects the ending to the beginning of the essay where Phillips reports how he opens the blinds, being rewarded with "a drama of light" (2013, 37) after his first night on the boat. Since, in Phillips's essay, writing is initiated by, and closely associated with viewing, opening and closing the blinds fulfils a dramaturgical function.

Secondly, closing the blinds can also be read as an act of refusal. Accordingly, it can mean that Phillips not only dismisses what the buildings symbolically stand for and the exclusionary narrative they suggest but also refuses the privilege of having access to the view provided by 'Mr Conrad's boat'.<sup>3</sup> It is as if, by blocking out the view, Phillips encourages his readers and listeners to imagine other, more accepting and inclusive (narratives of) London(s) by themselves, which chime better with the polycultural present of Europe's largest capital, in which hyphenated forms of identity (Black and/vs. British) and identity models predicated on fixed origins as well as a racial rather than cultural basis have been replaced by the hybrid identities of a British-born Black and mixed-race diaspora for whom Britain simply is home (cf. Dhouid 121-123). Phillips's essay, however, does not just criticize racial and ethnic discrimination but even rejects Britishness as a "quite well gated, and not particularly flexible" (2012, 43) identity that is out of tune with everyday Britain by pointing out how this identity excludes others also on the basis of nationality, gender, class and religion: "Britain is no longer exclusively Judaeo-Christian. English is not the only language we hear daily on the streets. The monarchy is not universally respected. And the upper house of our parliament could use some serious reform." (ibid.) Looked at this way, the closing gesture continues, and contributes to, the essay's overall critical agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> In how far closing the blinds could be aligned with a figurative act of voluntary self-blinding that implicitly refers to literary precursors of this motif such as Oedipus could provide an interesting avenue of exploration. As in the case of Oedipus, self-blinding here indicates a kind of self-knowledge – in Phillips's case the knowledge of the disjunction between dominant iconic and alternative visions of London. However, the facet of self-punishment present in Oedipus' act of literal self-blinding clearly does not apply to Phillips's figurative gesture.

Similarly and thirdly, closing the blinds could also indicate that Phillips quits trying to find and conjure other, alternative Londons in the view that greets him after he has found them further eastwards. This reading would take up the notion of ‘giving up’ introduced at the beginning of the last part of his essay that begins as follows: “Yesterday I finally gave up and jumped on a Thames Clipper and headed off downriver” (Phillips 2013, 44). Then, closing the blinds might implicitly point to the need for, as well as prepare for, a further continuation of the search for ‘other Londons’ beyond ‘his’ particular bend of the river. As the following section will demonstrate, it is exactly this search that is taken up by the multimedia slideshow.

#### **4. The Audiovisualization of Other Londons in *A Bend in the River***

Caryl Phillips and Johny Pitts’ geographical slideshow *A Bend in the River* lasts about 10 minutes. In many ways, it adopts the gesture of refusal with which Phillips’s essay ends, as the slideshow refrains from depicting the iconic view to which the essay responds. Moreover, since Phillips’s essay ends without further detailing the ‘other Londons’ down east the River Thames, Pitts’ photographs first and foremost seem to provide such alternative and in many respects more diverse ‘visions.’ Hence, the slideshow continues rather than illustrates the essay from which it has developed.

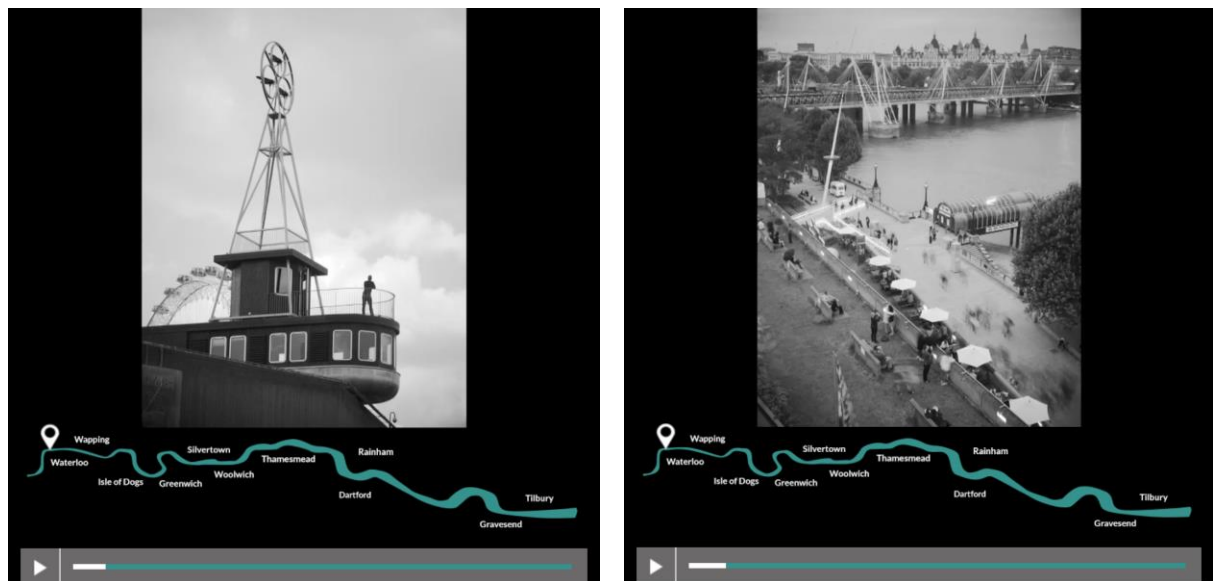


Figure 2 and 3: *A Bend in the River*, 2012 (screenshots of slides 1 and 2; © Johny Pitts)

The slideshow encompasses a total of 90 images. Most of them are snapshots of daily or leisurely activities of black or mixed-race individuals and groups. The photographs are generally taken in public spaces in the open air, in streets, playgrounds, parks, fields and on promenades next to the Thames. Only occasionally, the inside of a bus, market stalls or tunnels are pictured. We can see a joggers, adolescents playing football or basketball, a couple on a bench at the river, a girl waiting at a bus stop, a presumed father and his daughter crossing the road, people having a picnic in the park, a security man at the entrance of a Damian Hirst exhibition, a group of young black women dancing, mixed-race couples dancing, a black man sitting on a bus – in short, the pictures show black people inhabiting London's public spaces, going about their daily activities. In their totality, they evidence the contemporary multiracial, multicultural Londons to which the essay referred and, with their focus on the daily, they stake a strong claim as to the representative character of the depicted.

Only four of the 90 images of the slideshow refer to Phillips's stay in the rooftop boat above the South Bank. The first of these images shows the silhouette of a man (Phillips?) on

the deck of ‘Conrad’s boat’ (figure 2), while, in the background, London Eye evokes touristic London; the second presumably depicts the man’s view when looking down (figure 3). A detail of the first photograph is shown again at the end, providing the slideshow with a visual narrative frame (figure 5). Another photograph shows Phillips in front of a rain-stained window, marking the beginning of the second extract from his essay (figure 4). Together, these four images prompt viewers to identify Phillips as both author and speaker of the recorded text.

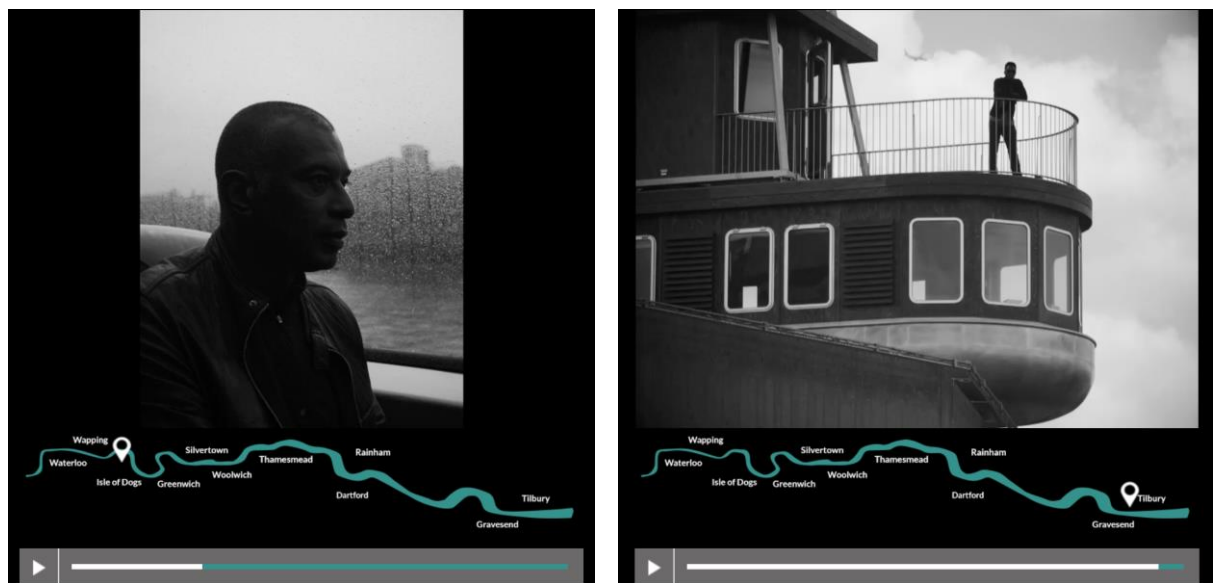


Figure 4 and 5: *A Bend in the River*, 2012 (screenshots of slides 22 and 90; © Johny Pitts)

The rest of the photographs included in the slideshow follows a spatial rather than temporal order – an observation that is underscored by the fact that evening or night shots alternate with photographs taken during the day, thus refuting chronology. As a result, the images do not add up to the visual narrative of an individual journey but hint at the slideshow’s documentary, ethnographic impetus. The spatial arrangement of the photographs traces an eastward journey – from Waterloo, passing Wapping, the Isle of Dogs, Greenwich, Silvertown, Woolwich, Thamesmead, Dartford and Gravesend, to finally arrive at Tilbury Docks, where modern multicultural Britain purportedly began when the first West Indian immigrants arrived on board

the Empire Windrush in 1948. The explorative character of this journey is reminiscent of Phillips's older essay *The European Tribe* (1987), the result of his year-long travel across Europe, which also inspired Pitts' own journey through Europe informing his "An Afropean Travel Narrative" (2014) as well as the ensuing photographic travelogue *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* (2019).<sup>4</sup>

As Yvonne Reddick argues (cf. 40), Phillips and Pitts' journey downriver into London's multicultural areas and out towards the sea-routes that connect the metropolis to its former colonies updates colonial expeditions of the past, directed upriver or inland. As an archetype of European exploration, these latter journeys haunt the colonial and postcolonial writing of writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe and Joseph Conrad. Drawing on these intertexts, the journey upriver is a recurrent motif in Phillips's oeuvre and can be found in the first section of his novel *Crossing the River* (1993) as well as in his essays on Chinua Achebe and Sierra Leone in *Colour Me English* (2011). While in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, according to Reddick, "Charlie Marlow's journey from the River Congo to the Thames highlights the uneasy link between a 'modern' London on the banks of the Thames and a supposedly primordial Congo River" (36), *A Bend in the River* maps this journey entirely onto the Thames and contrasts the metropolis' post-millennial centre with the racially mixed and less developed Londons downriver. Phillips and Pitts, however, do not just "revise Conrad's unsettling juxtaposition of Thames and Congo" (Reddick 40), but also underscore the "gross inequalities" (ibid.) that characterize the British capital "by showing monuments to capitalist domination alongside some scenes of profound inequality" (ibid.). Thus, the slideshow exposes what Phillips's essay merely implied, namely that both London's iconic buildings as well as its

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Pitts (2017) on Phillips's influence on his artistic work and career.

current inequalities, perpetuated by uneven capitalist development along racial divisions, “are legacies of Britain’s colonial past” (ibid.).

In the following, building on Reddick’s findings, this article will complement her exploration of postcolonial intertexts with an intermedial analysis of the slideshow’s aesthetics, which Reddick’s essay left largely unexplored. The slideshow uses several representational strategies in order to achieve a distinctly documentary quality and to convince viewers of the authenticity of both photographs and sounds, and – by implication – of the Black experience they record. While Pitts’ choice of black-and-white photography already contributes to this quality, the composition and especially his way of framing the photographs is equally significant. As shown in the examples below (cf. figures 9 to 12), groups and individuals often look into the camera, thereby acknowledging Pitts’ presence as a photographer. The photographs thus resemble self-presentations, which Pitts merely records. This authenticates the photographs as ‘documents’ and, at the same time, brings the agency of the depicted people to the fore, conferring an empowering quality to the photographs. As a result, Pitts’ photographs do not just continue to question the exclusionary narrative as Phillips’s essay did. Rather, they indicate the narrative’s lack of validity and representativeness by depicting Black Londoners in a way that indicates belonging. In other words, Pitts does not show “countless numbers of Moses Aleottas” (Phillips 2013, 42), but confident Afro-Britons at ease with and at home in their urban environment.



Figure 6 to 9: *A Bend in the River*, 2012 (screenshots of slides 15, 57, 60, 82; © Johny Pitts)

Other authenticating strategies pertain to the level of sound as well as to the overall layout of the slideshow. On the audio track, Meanwell's voice remains absent, creating the impression that his recordings for *A Bend in the River* are unmediated. The inclusion of a graphic representation of the meandering Thames at the bottom of the slideshow, which also features the names of the riverside areas, as well as the addition of a location tag which identifies where the photographs were taken, provide a geographical specificity that authenticates and strengthens the slideshow's overall documentary character. The latter forms a sharp contrast not only with the detached iconicity of the buildings and the exclusionary narrative they evoke, but also with the fictional intertexts by Conrad, Eliot and Selvon to which Phillips's essay

refers. By underlining the representativeness of the photographic visions of other Londons, the slideshow's documentary aesthetic is instrumental in corroborating Phillips's claim that the narrative suggested by the buildings is out of synch with everyday London.

Throughout the slideshow, images rarely illustrate Phillips's spoken text in a direct manner. A case in point is the passage when, on the audio track, Phillips contrasts the narrative suggested by the view from above the South Bank with that of the people on the streets (2013, cf. 41, and figure 2 above). Simultaneously, the photographs start focussing on individuals, who can be seen walking along or standing at the end of riverside promenades and who could be seen to represent the people on the streets referred to on the audio track, while in the background houses come into view (cf. figures 10 to 12).

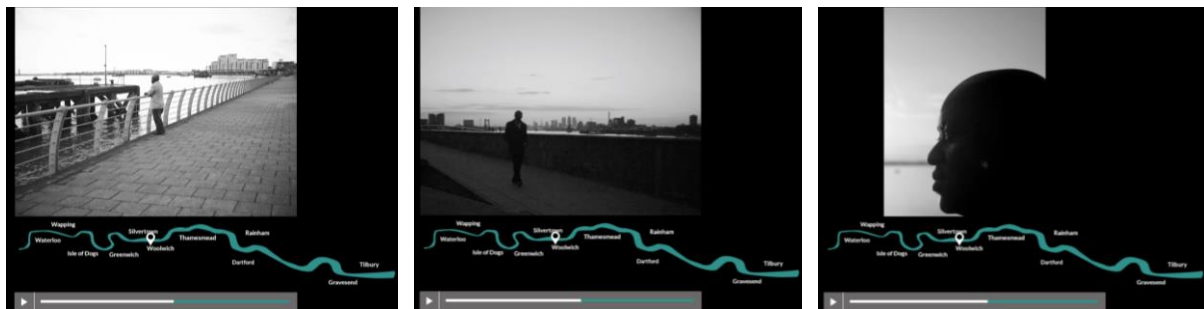


Figure 10 to 12: *A Bend in the River*, 2012 (screenshots of slides 43-45; © Johny Pitts)

Another such instance is the section accompanying slides 65 to 78. Here Phillips speaks of “the astonishing array of modern flats around the newly revamped Isle of Dogs”, the “Dubai-like spectacle of Canary Wharf” and “the glory of Greenwich Palace” (2013, 44), while the photographs show concrete council estates, unkempt pavements and a derelict footbridge in the area of Thamesmead, before giving way to a grazing white pony and a path leading through grassland on top of a dyke in Dartford. Yet, as in the previous example, where an earlier slide had already presented the view from above the boat, viewers here too may remember that earlier slides (notably 26, 28, 35 and 41) had already shown Canary Wharf. In short, one could say



that, even though the images do not simultaneously illustrate the spoken text in the narrower sense, they do provide manifold reverberations. As Reddick holds, “Phillips and Pitts map not only Conrad’s Congo, but Naipaul’s Congo, onto London” (39) by showing “that urban decay and uneven development” (ibid.) do not solely pertain to African locations but “exist alongside London’s imperial monuments” (ibid.). The images in particular concretize the more abstract revisionist stance of the essay by audiovisually displacing iconic London/Britain and its narrative of exclusion with alternative and, as the slideshow’s documentary aesthetic underlines, more accurate views of London which draw viewers’ attention to the variety of Black individuals and communities in the London areas east of the Southbank.

The field recordings gathered by Meanwell from the 30-mile stretch of the Thames between Waterloo and Tilbury, too, reverberate with the spoken texts without directly illustrating them. In addition, just like the regular change of photographs on the visual plane, the soundtrack structures the slideshow aurally. The repetition of a resonating gong-sound as well as recurring atmospheric background sounds (e.g. lapping waves, industrial noise, voices, and a ship horn) that are captured by the field recordings provide the slideshow with a rhythmic quality. The lapping of waves, with which the soundtrack begins, and the blowing of the ship horn are evocative of the conjunction of the sea or rivers and slavery in Phillips’s work, i.e. of what Wendy Knepper has aptly called his “seascapes of the imaginary” (213).

The soundtrack also records voices. They, however, are only audible once the journey has left the Bankside and coincide with the group of black men on slide 15 (see figure 6 above). This shows that the soundtrack, just like the images, participates in the search for alternative, multiracial and multicultural Londons. Yet, just as the images do not directly match the text, the sounds are not linked to particular images of people. Rather, the recorded voices – including the shorter and the few longer snippets we can hear distinctly, in which someone is giving instructions or maintaining that, ‘near the riverside, one is closer to God’ – in themselves

present additional *audio*-visions of ‘other Londons’. By forming only loose connections, text, image and sound retain their independence and, at the same time, relate to and complement one another in the way of three independent journeys in search of ‘other Londons’. These three journeys have in common that they address the “vexing issues of British identity and exclusion” (Phillips 2013, 44) by focussing on the ‘daily reality’ of post-Windrush generations in the greater London area. But how does their common contemporary focus relate to the excerpts from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, i.e. to a novella published in 1899 when criticism of imperialism was still scarce?

On the slideshow’s audio track, excerpts from Phillips’s recording of his essay alternate with quotations from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, read aloud by Pitts in a Northern accent. Usually, excerpts from the two texts are combined on the basis of a shared motif – be it the idea of a journey, past colonial exploitation or references to light and darkness. The quotations mostly follow the order of the original texts by Conrad and Phillips and strengthen the sense of a journey that the photographs and sound recordings convey. The intertextual dialogue between the two texts itself can be described as a literary journey into the fictional legacy of the river and its close connection to Britain’s colonial history.

The first excerpt on the audio track consists of a quotation from the frame narrative of Conrad’s novella and fades in on the sixth photograph. In this passage, the first-person narrator, a sailor on board the *Nellie* – a ship at anchor on the eastern Thames – contemplates on the ‘great history’ of sea-fared conquest undertaken from London as he and his fellow sailors are waiting for the fog to lift, which would enable them to continue their journey inland:

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires. (Conrad 5; as qtd. in *A Bend in the River*, read by Pitts)

The quoted passage introduces the River Thames as a location ('that stream') but also contemplates its multi-layered history. In his essay, Phillips assumes a position that resembles that of Conrad's frame narrator by casting himself as a witness to the "history emerging from [the river's] impenetrable depths" (Phillips 2013, 40). In the passage accompanying slides 29 to 32, Phillips connects the "visions of Romans sailing up the Thames" (ibid.), already invoked by the frame narrator of Conrad's novella (cf. Conrad 5-6), with the latter's late nineteenth-century setting as well as with "contemporary images of immigrants sailing up the river and disembarking at Tilbury Docks" (Phillips 2013, 40). Hence, in both *Heart of Darkness* and in *A Bend in the River*, the presence of the flowing river triggers memories of Britain's colonial history.

In *A Bend in the River*, the quotation from *Heart of Darkness* introduces the motif of the journey. At the same time, the passage also clearly invokes London as colonial centre. By celebrating the greatness of (colonial) conquests ('What greatness'), it voices the very historical narrative that Phillips's essay sets out to counterpoint as well as complement by showing its continued impact on the postcolonial Britain of today. Thus, the coupling and juxtaposition of texts in the slideshow serves to confront the historical narrative voiced by Conrad's frame narrator with its postcolonial counter-narrative, introduced and further fleshed out by Phillips in the course of his essay and equally present in the references to Selvon that follow the above-quoted Conradian passage. That the montage of texts highlights contrasts and continuities becomes apparent upon close inspection of the passage from Phillips's essay that succeeds Pitts' reading from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

And then I was rewarded with the drama of light crashing through the flimsy blinds and the dramatic announcement of a new day. I crawled out of bed and took in an extraordinary vista. A 180 degree view of London as she curves around the graceful bend in the river at the heart of the city. (Phillips 2013, 37)

In this passage, a contrast ensues from the fact that Conrad's boat grants a panoptical view to a postcolonial subject (Phillips) and thus reverses institutionalized structures of observing and being observed. Moreover, by referring to the 'drama of light' at the dawn of a new day, this passage also contrasts with the fog that envelops the *Nellie* in the previously quoted passage as well as with the motif of 'darkness' pervading the novella. At the same time, however, the passage underlines continuities between Phillips's essay and Conrad's novella, by referring not to a city 'centre' but to 'the *heart* of the city'.<sup>5</sup>

Later quotations from Conrad's novella, read out by Pitts, revisit the theme of the journey and strengthen the impression that Charlie Marlow's journey up the Congo River is paralleled with that of the photographer downriver along the Thames. This can be seen, for instance, in the second extract from the novella (accompanying slides 40 to 43), which is taken from the frame narrative but voiced by Marlow:

to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was somber enough, too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (Conrad 7; as qtd. in *A Bend in the River*, read by Johnny Pitts)

Here, enabled through the shared sense of a journey and the evocative first-person narrative, the intermedial layering of Pitts' reading of Conrad's novella connects parallel but ultimately discordant texts and images. This technique is instrumental in mapping the two spatially and

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<sup>5</sup> A similar tension between contrast and continuity, identification and disidentification in relation to the colonial master narrative of London that Conrad's frame narrator refers to characterises Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and comes to the fore in Phillips's paraphrase of the novel's ending which accompanies slides 22 to 26 of the slideshow: "Moses Aloett[a] finds himself, at the end of the novel, standing [...] gloriously still on the banks of the Thames knowing that he can't help but love this city that has effectively rejected him and his kind, and somewhat ironically he comforts himself by lovingly recollecting London's iconic images and locales" (Phillips 2013, 39).

temporally far-flung locations of the Congo River and the Thames onto one another (cf. Reddick 36).

Yet, while the slideshow, as has been demonstrated, largely refrains from using the photographs as a means to directly illustrate the recorded texts, its final section forms a striking exception to this rule. In the closing section, Pitts recites the novella's three final sentences where Conrad's frame narrator notices "a black bank of clouds" and an "overcast sky" into which the river seems to lead and which he compares to "the heart of an immense darkness" (Conrad 77). And, indeed, the slideshow's penultimate slide shows just that: a cloudy sky above a broadened Thames (at Tilbury). A sense of closure and resolution emerges from the exceptional coincidence of text and image. A significant contrast between text and image, however, still remains: While Marlow's musings summon a journey into an unknown darkness, the sky in Pitts' photograph is punctured by dramatic rays of light breaking through the clouds. The photograph visually renders the "drama of light" (Phillips 2013, 37) that Phillips evoked at the beginning of his essay, thus heightening the sense of closure pervading this passage. At the same time, the photograph's interplay between light and darkness differs distinctly from their binary opposition in Conrad's novel. Instead, it accords with the slideshow's critical agenda, i.e. to challenge the homogenized, nationalized, racialized idea of London through visions of multicultural and multiracial Londons. Having – now metaphorically speaking – shed light on how the imperial exploration of (African) darkness continues to affect present-day London, the slideshow returns to Conrad's boat and again shows the silhouette of a man (Phillips) standing on the deck (see figure 5 above). From this final visual cross reference a strong sense of closure emanates which clearly marks the slideshow's ending.

Given the limited number of short passages that Phillips and Pitts chose to recite from *Heart of Darkness*, one cannot help but notice how their selection – which includes Marlow's oft-quoted statement: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those

who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad 7) – accentuates the novella’s anti-colonial stance by concentrating on the frame narrative in which Marlow discloses to his fellow sailors the disturbing impact of his travels as a young man. This is particularly noteworthy if one thinks of Chinua Achebe’s well-known accusation that Conrad perpetuated racist attitudes by relegating African characters to the novella’s background (cf. Achebe). In an account of his conversation with Achebe in a 2003 essay published in *The Guardian*, Phillips had already disclosed his opposite take on the Conrad novella, i.e. his acceptance that – in line with the times in which the writer was living (2011, cf. 203) – “Conrad’s eloquent denunciation of colonisation” (206) comes at the price of ‘recycling’ the “racist notions of the ‘dark’ continent and her people” (207). Whereas Achebe is unwilling to pay this price and therefore finds fault with Conrad’s lack of artistic vision, the slideshow continues Phillips’s appreciation of Conrad’s novella, which – as Reddick shows in her exploration of Conradian intertexts in Phillips’s work – has greatly impacted and inspired Phillips’s writing, even though, after his conversation with Achebe, Phillips’s position also simultaneously shifted towards a greater understanding of the latter (cf. Reddick 2016, 37).

Summing up, the slideshow does not just confront iconic London, and the historical preconceptions it calls to mind, with ‘other’ Londons east of the centre. It also challenges and replaces the symbolic and imaginary spaces evoked in the slideshow’s literary intertexts by Conrad, Eliot and Selvon with the contemporary spaces that the slideshow documents through both image and sound. In contrast to Conrad, whose novella ultimately remains focussed on (a critique of) the colonial centre, Phillips, Pitts and their collaborators go beyond such a critique by making a showcase of, and celebrating, Britain’s contemporary multicultural society. By linking symbolic, imaginary and documentary dimensions of space, the slideshow represents more than a mere photographic extension of Phillips’s critical essay. Rather, the slideshow’s

use of different expressive media contributes to bringing the multi-layered experience of being Black in London to the fore, inviting its viewers to venture beyond the Southbank's particular bend in the river and to update their visions of London accordingly.

## **5. Conclusion: Displacing the Centre**

*A Bend in the River* thus does not only hybridize received notions of London as white colonial centre, as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and other postcolonial London novels already did, but it displaces the centre. In other words, rather than rehashing the ongoing privileging of the European colonial metropolitan centre as a node that continues to determine postcolonial relations of centre and periphery, the slideshow locates the 'real' Britain outside of London's historic, economic and touristic centre but refuses to conceptualize the location as 'peripheral'. Instead, as the intermedial focus of the analysis has revealed, the different audio and visual elements, both text- and non-text-based, play a central role in staking a claim as to the representative character of the 'other visions' of London that the slideshow depicts.

Moreover, according to Phillips, questioning the iconic view and the exclusionary narrative for which it stands and searching for 'other Londons' does not just reconfigure London and Britain in the twenty-first century; it also poses the question of whether (or not) participation and inclusion into the master narrative of this postcolonial nation, and of Europe at large, are even desirable goals (cf. Phillips 2013, 45). Hence, *A Bend in the River* and *The European Tribe* do not just share a revisionist stance and contribute to the process of "wrestl[ing] Europe's face around so that she might be forced to stare in the mirror" (Phillips 2014, 7), they also both express a sceptical attitude, namely the adamant reluctance to "engag[e] with the cultural bravado of a Eurocentric past", as Phillips writes in his 2014 essay revisiting *The European Tribe* (4-5). In this way, both works also contribute to provincializing Europe in the sense of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007). Therefore, and despite the increased visibility of non-

white people in London as well as in Europe, the question remains what will become of the revisionist project, and if/how it will possibly change, in a multipolar world in which London and Europe no longer are the centre but at best participate in a network of global connections.



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