

“FOR ME, FAMILIARITY AND STRANGENESS IS ABOUT RIGHT”

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKE PHILLIPS

EVA ULRIKE PIRKER

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Mike Phillips was born in Georgetown, Guyana, and grew up in London. He obtained degrees in English, Politics and Education and has been working as a journalist, commentator and broadcaster for many years. Since the 1990s, Phillips has become known as a prolific writer of crime fiction. His mystery and murder novels are also investigations into race relations in Britain. While *Blood Rights* (1989), *The Late Candidate* (1990), *Point of Darkness* (1994) and *An Image to Die For* (1995) are set in England, the latest thriller *A Shadow of Myself* (2000) moves beyond Britain. It centres around black British documentary filmmaker Joseph Coker and his brother George Coker who grew up in East Berlin. Unaware of his brother's existence, Joseph is sought out by George at a film festival in Prague and drawn into George's world that is determined by the struggle to survive in a jungle of corruption and mafia. A strong historical dimension is added with the enigmatic figure of Kofi Coker, Joseph's and George's Ghanaian father, who after the abrupt end of his career in Moscow lives a quiet life in London. *A Shadow of Myself* can thus be read as a historical crime novel that reimagines the human condition in the context of communist Eastern Europe, and the post-cold war period from a black perspective.

As a writer of non-fiction, Phillips has equally set examples. He is the co-author of *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (1998) that documents the experience of the first generation of post-war migrants from the Caribbean. He has also co-written and produced the television-documentary *Windrush* (1998). A personal account of black British history is his autobiographical essay-collection *London Crossings* (2001). Personal experience, critical research and expertise, and the ability to assume different perspectives, that of the novelist or the critic, the observer or the first-person narrator, the European or the Brit – these qualities make Mike Phillips's one of the most important voices in the current discourse around black British history. The following interview was held in August 2004 in London, during the Olympic Games in Athens and the 40th Notting Hill Carnival.

EUP: In *A Shadow of Myself*, a telephone conversation between [filmmaker] Joseph Coker and his father Kofi Coker on Joseph's documentary film contains the following exchange:

‘I would have done it differently if I could,’ he ended.

‘I know that,’ Kofi said. ‘we all knew that. The man who pays the piper gets to call the tune. That's what they say, and why would she [the producer, Hattie] want our version of a story she thinks she owns?’ Joseph heard him chuckling down the line. ‘None of us would have done any better. History is written by the winners. They will never allow you to say what they don't want to hear.’

Does this passage reflect an experience that you are familiar with from the production of the *Windrush*-series? Like Joseph's film, the series was aimed at a general audience, a fact which certainly required concessions on your side. How do you feel about it now?

MP: A lot of things happened during the production. If you read the book and look at the videos you will see a substantial difference in attitude and ideology, because we simply would not be allowed to put what was in the book on the screen. A lot of people do not realise

that because they look at the series and imagine that the book is exactly the same, but of course it's not. And in that sense, I was actually quite glad that the series wasn't widely disseminated. When I came to write *A Shadow of Myself*, I was quite angry about the series. In hindsight it stands up better than I thought it would. But I was angry nevertheless because there were a number of things that we would not have done, left to ourselves, and a lot of things left out that we would have put in. An example is the opening credits which has this kind of black success rhetoric about it which is really offensive given what the programme is all about. But what we were told by the executive producer (who is now the head of the BBC) when we objected, was that we've got to give the audience something that they expect. The BBC had never spent so much money on a black programme before. A four-part documentary about the history of black people in Britain? They could have a several-part series about American Civil Rights – no problem, that's America. But it was radical to have a history of black people in Britain. So they were very nervous about it. It was a much blander history that skipped over a lot of things, and it was too short, really, for what it was; we were covering fifty years more or less in three hours, and we had to say a lot of new things and correct a lot of stereotypes in a very short time. So I was disappointed, although in hindsight I should have been less disappointed than I was because the impact was so tremendous that it really surprised me.

EUP: According to BBC rhetoric the series is a “landmark production”.¹

MP: It was more successful than I ever dreamed it would be. We never thought that we would make *Windrush* into such an icon – if we had known we would be rich. When the BBC paid for the production they invested in it in the most restricted way that they could. So it's not a programme that you would find in the video shops, although lots of people wanted to buy it. Every day, practically, we get requests from foreign universities. But the way that they did the rights, the copyrights etc., means that it would be too expensive for them to produce it as a video, so you can only ever see it just once in a while. In the BBC and the community it struck everyone that it's a success. Unfortunately, the part that my brother and I played in it has been lost. Our names are on the series, but nobody ever says that there is a reason why this thing was so successful. The reason why it was so successful is because that's one of the things we are good at. It was not some kind of accident. When I was resident writer at the Royal Festival Hall in 1997, Arthur Torrington came to see me and said, “the *Windrush* Anniversary is next year and we really have to do something.”² I called my brother and the three of us met in the Royal Festival Hall and discussed it. And my brother said, “I'll go and talk to some people at the BBC.” My brother is a kind of genius in management and getting things done.³ I don't think that without him the series would have had a chance of being there. It really wasn't the BBC – it was him. He spent about six months on getting the commission, and in the first meeting, he had every expert on Caribbean history in Britain, people from universities and from the community – there were about a dozen of us. We hired a conference centre outside of London and we were in this place for two days discussing what the thing should be like. All that took place before anybody had heard of *Windrush*. In 1997 nobody had heard of *Windrush*. We had to go out and find the people who had been on it. And there are all sorts of things about *Windrush* that didn't come out in the series, because it was too short. One of the little-known facts, for instance, is that there were 60 Polish women on the

¹ According to BBC manager Sue Caro, *Windrush* was “a landmark series in television-talk terms”. In Eva Ulrike Pirker, “Not Just Looking at Everything through the Same Set of Filters: An Interview with Sue Caro,” *EESE* 2/2005, <http://webdoc.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese>.

² Arthur Torrington was the secretary of the Royal Air Force's Afro-Caribbean Servicemen Association.

³ Trevor Phillips has worked in television for many years and has been the head of the Commission for Racial Equality since 2003.

Windrush and we never worked out what happened to those sixty polish women. They landed, but nobody ever saw them, nobody ever heard what happened to them afterwards, it was really strange. 60 polish women – I mean, this is a black story after all (*laughs*). But the point is: Before we created it, nobody had a coherent story. I made the story up. History is about fact, but it is also about narration. I created a narrative that had coherence. I didn't do it completely on my own, but it was part of how we did it. We said: This is the story, and this is its shape – it could have gone twenty different ways. We interviewed over two hundred people.

EUP: An incredible amount of material!

MP: The transcripts went up to here (*points at the ceiling*). Some were short, they were about 50 pages, some were long, about 180 pages. I had to read them all. But even worse than that: I had to make them make sense. And I had to make them tell the story. I did a long interview, about 200 pages, and I cut it down and cut it down to maybe three pages or four pages. People repeat themselves, they say irrelevant things and so on. But when you cut like that, you have to reinvent their style of speech. Some of them talked in a way that would be incomprehensible when you put it on the page. So I had to sit there and think, “how do I make them sound like them while keeping the formal standard English that everybody could understand. It was a hell of an artistic writing job. If there is one thing that I feel at all sorry about with *Windrush*, the book, it is that nobody – and they're not supposed to! – notices the extent to which that whole narrative and the speech and the people are constructed. Even the people themselves. I know many of them, and they think that that's exactly what they said. And that's really funny. I sometimes feel like saying: Look, I was making it up!

EUP: In the introductory chapter of the book *Windrush* you speak of being torn between “nostalgia and estrangement” when addressing the past. In *London Crossings*, you start by saying that your experience of arriving in London was characterised by “a combination of familiarity and strangeness”. Would you say that mixed feelings are part of your creative source?

MP: I am a postmodern man. (*laughs*) Look at Foucault and at those ideas about the self and how the self is constructed. I am post-Freudian. I don't believe in a coherent, continuous historicity. My life is full of breaks, discontinuities, disjunctions, contradictions and incoherence. My identity is a process by which I hold all those things together. So for me it is natural to feel this contradictory sense of familiarity and strangeness. My son in the last four years has lived in Berlin and Prague. Today I got up and thought “The same sun that is shining on him is shining on me.” And it struck me that suddenly Prague didn't seem so far away. It is the same European continent. When I was young, Paris seemed a long way away. Prague was just out of the world. And Berlin was out of the world as well. And now it's closer than Birmingham (*laughs*), more familiar to me than Birmingham. As you grow you live through so many things and realise that things are changing all the time. It isn't like things were solid then and shifting now – they are shifting all the time, that's the natural condition of life. For me, familiarity and strangeness is about right.

EUP: Does it also account for the choice of different modes in which you are writing? The documentary mode on the one hand and the fictional mode on the other?

MP: Yes, absolutely. I suppose it is one of the interesting things in my writing career. When I started thinking about being a writer as a child, I had always wanted to be Graham Greene. And I still want to be Graham Greene (*laughs*), in terms of the breadth of interest, and, if you

look at his novels from *Brighton Rock*, *Stamboul Train*, to *The Power and the Glory* and so on – they're all over the world. To him, the world is a small place. I came to writing late, although I wrote as a journalist. I didn't have the confidence to sit down and say "I am going to write a novel and make my living out of it." I was writing in my spare time and it wasn't until I became a university lecturer that I had spare time. By the time I got to publishing my second book I was sort of becoming aware of the world. I was a terribly late developer. But I was a young migrant and what I learned was that I just had to hold on, survive, get a job and not get into trouble and then I would be okay. Keep my head down and be safe. But it wasn't until that time when I was over forty and I had published a couple of books that I realised that the world was so big! And not just that, in a way, I had the Caribbean and Africa and the United States: Because there were black people in those places, it was seen as natural that I should have contacts in those place. It's as if you look at the map and it is this very clearly marked-out thing: You're here in England, you're staying in London, and then there is a big avenue that leads to Africa, and there is a big avenue that leads to the Caribbean, and there is a big avenue that leads to the USA, and the rest of the world does not exist, you cannot see it. Today, I talk to black people about going to Transsylvania or the Czech Republic, and white people, too, and I am accustomed to them saying, "What do you want to go to those places for?" Well – why not? I have been to Kenia and I have been to Somalia, and those places have nothing to do with me any more than any other place, in fact. I find myself much more comfortable in, say, Berlin than I would in New York. One of the places I really liked being in was Berlin. I could live in Berlin. I could live in Kraków, I could even live in Bucharest. So I began to discover this big world and it was wonderful! In hindsight, one of the things that I really resent about the way that I grew up in London is not what was happening but what was *not* happening. When my son went to live in Brussels to do a stage at the European Parliament, he had all those friends from all over the world, he was going here and going there, he was hardly in this country. He is up in Prague, driving to Estonia, I cannot believe this man has this world that is so big. When I was his age, my world was two streets in North London. And this is one of the things that I regret about the way I was growing up, that my world was so narrow.

EUP: But it's always the big cities, the metropolises that seem to have an appeal.

MP: Yes. There is one thing that people forget about migration, because of the economic factor, and because the rhetoric of nationalist ideology has swamped all other expressions, all other ways of understanding human behaviour: Migrants migrate very often towards modernity. Migrants enter a time machine. And they come sometimes from the 19th century to the 21st century. I was in the tube recently, and there were two West-African women standing at the top of the escalator, and one of them was frightened to go on it, and her friend was encouraging her. Life was just like that for me and my family when we came. We, too, were frightened of everything. We hadn't seen it before, we didn't know how it worked, the public telephone and things like that. So we were moving from this rural life to modernity. And the kind of village life that we lived was nothing like the idea of the European middle or upper classes who enjoy rural life. When they go to a farm, they go to a nice place where they can sit and have a drink and enjoy the scenery. They don't live in that scenery. They don't live on the ground. They don't have to look after the pigs and the cows and chicken. And although that can be charming and nice, it is a desperate thing when that is your whole life and everything else is going on around you. You see it all over again, people who can live a reasonable life in some Romanian village will get on a train or lie underneath a train and risk their lives to get to the modernity, because that's what it's about. It's almost like a weird human instinct to enter that time machine and to progress. And the city is the highest expression of that. The city, for me particularly the European city, which is a mixture of new

and old, industry and heritage, it's got this vigour and the craziness of lots of people colliding and cultures meeting – I love that. So for me, urban life is the right way to live.

EUP: You've once mentioned that artists play a public role and are rooted in a specific historical context out of which they speak and which they invent and reinvent.⁴ How does this actually go together? The public role seems to be the role of a representative while the role of the creator can be seen as more linked to the subjective moment.

MP: Yes and no – it depends. If you go back of the earliest examples of European poetry and drama: these have public functions. In a sense, it has always been that the artist speaks for the tribe. Not in terms of democratic representation but in terms of spiritual expression. And when I said that the artist has a public role, that was what I meant. I didn't mean that the artist expects anyone to vote for them. So that how good an artist you are almost inevitably depends on how well you are able to get in tune with the vibrations of society and the vibrations of the community around you.

EUP: This is also reflected in *London Crossings*, where the narrative voice constantly shifts between the use of "I" and "we". It does not seem to express a conflict, but a sort of complement, a necessity.

MP: Indeed. It also represents the shift of consciousness that you undertake when you become any kind of artist. It's a very odd thing. I think artists have to become vulnerable. This is why so many artists are mad or thin-skinned or crazy with one passion or the other. Because you have to break down those defenses inside yourself in order to feel the people, or else you don't have anything to write about. And so this sense in which "I" becomes "we" and "we" becomes "I", continually shifting, is very important.

EUP: But bearing that in mind, and what you just said about the metropolises, in *A Shadow of Myself* you take the liberty to talk about places that are not related to the context in which you grew up. Interestingly, and contrary to what you express in your documentary filming and writing, today's England in *A Shadow of Myself* seems to be this safe little place compared to the rest of Europe. Is europhobia secretly at work here?

MP: (*laughs*) That's a vicious comment. Maybe you're half right. Let me put it this way: From my point of view, Britain is domesticated. What I am has become part of what Britain is. I feel fairly comfortable with it, whatever struggles remain or difficulties – it's what I know. And I don't suggest – I hope – that in comparison with Europe Britain is better because it's safer. It's safer for me and people like me. It's not safer for everyone. But far from one place being safer or more comfortable than the other necessarily, I was suggesting that within this bigger European context the struggles of personality and culture could be encountered in a way that is more open and intense than in Britain. And I am not sure even that that's where it ends. I think I was trying to say something about the world as opposed to Europe.

EUP: It is not only you talking about Europe but also the other way around. European audiences seem to be very interested in what you have to say.

MP: Yes, I find this in Italy, for instance. People are really intensely anxious to know how you solve that issue of nationality and citizenship and how you come to terms with migration.

⁴ See Phillips in Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg, *Bidding for the Mainstream: Black and Asian Film Since the 1990s*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi 2004, 210.

It's very interesting: Twenty years ago there is no way I would have gone abroad and talked to a foreign audience as an English person.

EUP: In Britain, institutions and organisations have been undergoing a process of transformation in the past years. They are putting a lot of effort into the embrace and achievement of cultural diversity. What does this concept mean to you? Is it just a new slogan that has replaced older terms as “multiculturalism” or “antiracism”? Can it help?

MP: Multiculturalism was the son of antiracism, tolerance and hybridism. In the same way cultural diversity is the son of multiculturalism. It emerges from that background. Multiculturalism is an inadequate concept; cultural diversity serves the purposes of lots of people and institutions, particularly the politicians, better than any of the terms we have had before, largely because it sounds neutral. Who could object to “cultural diversity”? In practice, cultural diversity is not a useful way of thinking about what is happening, because it allows the same things as multiculturalism: it allows the central cultures, the dominant cultures, to occupy the ground and to place the minor cultures in the larger room, depending on how much room they've got. Cultural diversity does not impose anything on anyone, and in that sense, it's a continuation of what went on before. But it is a term which also allows you to challenge the attitude of the dominant cultures, because diversity implies equality. And if you can make that claim, as it were, of a level plain field, an equal stake for every culture, then you've got a political programme through which you can pursue the privileging of different cultures. The other problem about it is precisely that it allows people on all sides of the divide to do exactly what they were doing before. Once opportunities become categories, the people who benefit are the bureaucrats and the ruling establishment (who always want a cover for what they are doing) and the entrepreneurs within the minority communities. The bureaucrats put a number of boxes against a label that they can tick. There is a sense in which nothing changes. As an example of the way in which cultural diversity works, take Black History Month. When it really began forty-fifty years ago, the whole response to the idea of black history was the desire of migrants, in line of what was happening in the rest of the diaspora, in the United States. In particular, it was a response to the independence of the African nations; the whole nationalist drive was to discover a history that would point to the nations, and we all as African people saw that as a necessary and important thing. Black history was genuinely a voyage of discovery for a lot of us. I remember, back in the 1970s, I was going to meetings about black history, particularly in Birmingham. There was an organisation and we usually had meetings on Saturdays and Sundays. We would arrive on Saturday at lunchtime and have meetings until Sunday afternoon and then we would all go home to where we came from. I remember arriving at a place in Handsworth: As you went in the door, sitting opposite on the other side of the room there'd be a police van and a police car and they'd be taking your names and taking your photographs – that was black history in those days, and it was something that we pursued withing the community for twenty years. The point at which it became part of the official rhetoric was to do with the GLC when Ken Livingstone began creating initiatives which he hoped would buy him the black vote (which to some extent it did). And of course, backing black history was part of this. Well, he had to find it first (*laughs*). But they didn't pursue the black history of *this* country even then: It was all about the Civil Rights Movement. I was going up to the Guardian on a Sunday, and they sent a car for me; it was driven by a young black man and he looked at me and asked me what I was doing and where I was going, so I told him that I was going to write the obituary for Lord Pitt⁵ – there was a moments' silence and he said, “Who?” He didn't know who Lord Pitt was although Lord Pitt was a central figure in our community. But he knew who Nelson

⁵ Lord David Pitt (*1913 in Grenada, †1994 in London) was the longest serving black Parliamentarian in Britain.

Mandela was and Martin Luther King because he had been taught about those at school. And that was in a way the official position. Until *Windrush* that whole history was still sort of underground. Nobody paid any attention to it or took it seriously. *Windrush* changed everything. And for the GLA⁶, it became something that they could back. So they started supporting Black History Month. But they did it in exactly the same stupid way as they had always done. The first time they sort of featured Black History Month in the new City Hall, they had this “great week” which opened with a bang. They invited the children and grandchildren of Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Now what the fuck did those people have to do with us? Was my question. Nothing! They didn’t know anything about Britain, they didn’t know anything about us, and they didn’t care. Why should they?

EUP: But they came for the party anyway.

MP: Of course. They got a big freeby. First-class plain travel and five-star hotels. In the meantime, a lot of black authors were walking around dying for a little sum. Now, since then, they’ve got a bit more sensitive, but not a lot. They interpret history in a peculiar way. I was hired to evaluate the black history projects in Kensington and Chelsea last year. There were about twelve projects. One was about belly-dancing, one was about African drumming, etc. If you look at a list of Black History Month projects, you will find that two thirds or more are like that. One of the major projects being pursued by the borough of Lewisham is the Caribbean cake project. (*laughs*) There is this whole project on that, a chef is cooking it and so on, and they have pictures of it and classes of children learning to cook it and have posters in the tube and all that. One of the important projects at Chelsea this year is about Sudanese weddings, which is fine if you happen to be Sudanese and interested, but it’s not black British history! The other side of it is that many of these things that are registered under Black History Month are actually being run by the major museums – at the Victoria and Albert, we actually have an exhibition of African cloth or West Indian hairdressing – so that the bulk of money that is being spent by the Arts Council or the Heritage Lottery Fund or the local council on the black community and black history is actually being paid to the major institutions anyway. Very little of it comes into the community. And that is largely black history.

EUP: What about black British history on school curricula?

MP: There is nothing about the history of black people in this country. If anything, it’s Martin Luther King and the American Civil Rights. It is almost as if we didn’t exist as people with a history. We are aliens.

EUP: So the black community is still largely misrepresented in the public sphere?

MP: My biggest quarrel with the way in which the media have constructed images of the black British community is their refusal to admit the specificity of people, their habit of reading people by their car rather than by their individuality or their membership of an actual culture, so that when they discover for instance, that Africans are different from West Indians, they’re constructed as a problem. “Why are they different? They’re all black, aren’t they?” Every once in a while there is a shock horror report which says that there is hostility between Africans and West Indians or between Asians and blacks. Somehow, because they are not

⁶ The Greater London Authority (GLA) is the city-wide government for London, consisting of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly.

white, they all ought to be the same and all ought to be in solidarity with each other. And that's a product of this insistence on relating to us by our colour rather than any other quality.

EUP: As a black British citizen, how do you envision Britain's future, particularly in light of the recent rhetoric of Britishness?

MP: It's a debate. We've got a number of things going on. We've got a debate about what being British is. We've got a rhetoric which says, we know what Britishness is and we are proud of it. We've got a rhetoric which says, we aren't British any more; we don't know what we are and we don't like it. All of these, and a number of positions in between, are fighting it out to see which one is going to possess the cultural territory because they will have implications which are political and social. At the same time, there is actually a sense of Britishness underground which equates very well to the community that we have. You don't think about it half the time – but it hits you some times. Take, for instance, Amir Khan.⁷ The commentators kept calling him “our lad” and “our Amir”. He's from Bolton, he's a Lancashire lad, and that's very specific. The way he talks and the way he behaves is very regional. Only a boy from Bolton would talk like that and behave like that. He's not anything else. He's Bolton through and through. Bolton is very proud of him. Even the fascists are saying, he has put Bolton on the map. He's so British, and he's so good at what we British regard as typically British: he's working class; he comes from a hard-working family. The guys in the local gym obviously love him. Young teenagers think that he's the greatest. It was fascinating to me to see this because he comes from a part of England where the National Front, the BNP are very strong and where there has been the greatest hostility towards Asians. But it's not simply that Amir won this medal, it is that he is probably the most British of the British team. Nobody could dispute that. You cannot learn to speak how he speaks. A foreigner would never speak like that. My point is, a figure like that immediately affects what people understand by being British. What's happening underground, as in the recognition of people like Amir Khan and the delight with which people across the borders embrace him, is to do with a grass-roots recognition of what Britishness is coming to be in practice. Our institutions do not reflect it, our government does not reflect it, but people know it. And that's another factor that is not so talked about very much, because it is hard to measure. You have to see it when it happens and describe it. So you have got all these definitions of Britishness and all these arguments about Britishness. In a sense, this is very positive – it is better than people killing each other. That sounds like a silly thing to say, but that's how it is. In all the rest of the continent of Europe the chances of a peaceful resolution of ethnic conflict and division etc. are increased by what has happened in Britain. To a large extent we have avoided, or worked through, some of the difficulties that are still to come in different parts of Europe. For me, that's a great sign of hope in Britain. The statistics tell us the extent to which young black people and young Bangladeshis are still discriminated against in Britain. All sorts of indications tell us that there is still an ideology of racism, xenophobia, anti-foreigner feeling among a substantial proportion of the population. What has changed is that in the fifties and sixties, when I was a boy, people thought that they owned the country and that they had a right to define what being British was. Part of the result of all this debate is that nobody has that confidence any more. There is not one single white English person who can tell me what it means to be British. They don't have that authority any more. They used to, fifty years ago. They'd tell you how to behave. They can't do that now, not because anything is stopping them, but they don't have the confidence, they don't believe it any more. They certainly would not stand up any more. On the contrary – on one of the lectures I did in Germany, there was an Englishman there, who came up to me and said, “I'm English, and I lived in that street

⁷ 17-year-old boxer Amir Khan sensationally won Olympic silver in Athens (2004) as an amateur. He is continuing his career as professional boxer successfully.

you were talking about; I must be the only person in this room who knows exactly what you are talking about.” And I find that everywhere I go speaking as an English person, the English recognize immediately what I am talking about.

EUP: Do they come up to you saying that they perceived things differently from their perspective?

MP: No, I have not found that, funnily enough. I expected to find that but I don't.

EUP: There is one passage in *London Crossing* where you write about the incident of one man coming up to you after a lecture about the past – he used to be one of the teddy boys that used to give you a hard time in the past. One should think that there must be a difference in the perception here.

MP: The funny thing about that is that it's really not any different. He is making his recognition, although he was “the enemy” (*laughs*); what he perceives now is that we were in the same boat. If we were enemies, it was within the same landscape, and we were speaking the same language, as we speak the same language now. Because the language that we speak comes out of that conflict.

EUP: Thank you.