

**“Let me go, if you want me to let you in”:  
The Ghostly Circle in Caryl Phillips’s *The Lost Child***

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“I’m come home: I’d lost my way on the moor!”  
Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

**Abstract:** The present article argues that the examination of the significance of Gothic motifs in Caryl Phillips’s *The Lost Child* (2015) reveals the author’s approach to unresolved individual and collective traumas that haunt his protagonists, but also his texts. The intricate interaction between the circular structure of the novel and the theme of historical and generational cyclicality requires a special attention to the journey trope and its spatial markers. The title of this essay is borrowed from Chapter III of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *The Lost Child*’s canonical intertext, in which Catherine’s ghost appears at the window and begs Lockwood to let her in. Drawing on some concepts developed by Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (1993), the essay explores the meaning and function of spectrality and how it relates to circularity and to Phillips’s commitment to justice, which goes beyond remembering the “lost children” of the past, to actually *let* them *in* the present.

**Keywords:** Caryl Phillips, *The Lost Child*, circularity, spectrality, Gothic, *Wuthering Heights*

Displacement, fractured families, and the implications of failed literal or metaphorical adoptions, which are at the core of

Caryl Phillips's novel, *The Lost Child* (2015),<sup>1</sup> have previously been explored by the author in both his fictional and non-fictional works. However, it is the shadow of the transatlantic slave trade that returns over and over to his narrative in his quest for justice for all those voices of the past, invisible in stories reconstructed by historians. Past in Phillips's fiction persists through time, undoing the dominant idea of being distant, absent, and thus irreversible, in other words, that which rests in tombstones and memorials. The ambiguous presence of the past is reflected in the notion of circularity, which, interwoven with the notion of cyclicity, has remained central in all his fictional works at both thematic and structural level.

The main storyline of *The Lost Child* centers on Monica and her two sons, Ben and Tommy, trying to survive hardship and discrimination in England in the 1960s. Out of the ten parts into which the novel is divided, Parts I, IX, and X revolve around the story of Heathcliff as a young boy and part IV is devoted to the author of the intertext, Emily Brontë. By unveiling unresolved individual and collective traumas, the novel displays a sophisticated form of dialogue between stories of abandonment, loss, and vulnerability. Ghosts inhabiting the in-betweens of time and space haunt the text, de-historicizing the past and producing a space of anxiety fueled by unrepresentable secrets. Following Andrew Smith's understanding of the specter as "an absent presence, a liminal<sup>2</sup> being that inhabits and gives shape to many of

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<sup>1</sup> PHILLIPS, C. (2015b). *The Lost Child*. London: Oneworld. Further page references are in the main text

<sup>2</sup> The term was coined by Arnold Van Gennep to describe the three stages in the rites in magico-religious rites: separation, margin or limen, and reaggregation. See VAN GENNEP, A. (2004 [1909]): *The Rites of Passage*. London & New York: Routledge. In 1964 Victor Turner published his article "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites of Passage*",

the figurations of trauma” (2007: 147), we can say that in terms of spectrality, Gothic elements reveal *the presence of the absence*. The present essay explores the meaning and function of spectrality in *The Lost Child* and how it relates to circularity, one of the author’s recurring motifs and structural devices. To define the spectral, I draw on some concepts developed by Derrida in his highly influential work *Specters of Marx*. According to him, the specter is “neither substance nor essence” and what happens “between life and death can only *maintain itself* with some ghost” (2006: xviii, italics in original). Derrida argues that being with specters and living with them is to “live otherwise”, “more justly” and that “this being with specters will also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance and of generations” (2006: xviii, italics in original). It is my contention that spectrality in *The Lost Child* should be read as “a *politics* of memory, of inheritance and of generations”, as ethical responsibility for the “other” in history, which we should embrace if we want to live “more justly”, *more justly* implying that it is not enough to remember them through commemorative practices, but we should “live otherwise”, i.e. live *with* them.

Essential Gothic notions such as the “uncanny, the abject and haunting” (McEvoy & Spooner 2007: 127) are interrelated in *The Lost Child* in a way that seeks to disrupt the idea of spatially determined lines between inclusion and exclusion, real and hallucinatory worlds, past and present. In his discussion of Freud’s “uncanny”, David Punter defines it as “an event in the present [that] reminds us of something in the (psychological past),

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illustrating the concept of liminality with examples from the rites in different societies. See TURNER, V. (1964): “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” in L. Carus Mahdi, S. Foster & M. Little (Eds), (1994): *Betwixt & Between Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, pp. 3-22.

but something which cannot be fully remembered, a past event, or situation, or feeling, which should be locked away or buried but which has emerged to haunt the current scene” (2007: 130). He also coins the term “diasporic uncanny” – “a phenomenon which is marked by the appearance of ghosts in so many writers deemed to be ‘postcolonial’” (2007: 133). For Punter, it is “the literary reflection of what it might feel like to have no ‘place’ of one’s own, to be part of an ‘effect of history’” (2007: 133). The term, as defined by Punter, perfectly matches the prevailing logic of Phillips’s concern with belonging, or rather not belonging, to a particular territorial space, of being “both of and not of” (Phillips 2000: 133).

In my concern with the notion of circularity and how it relates to history, I have found very interesting analyses in Angeles De la Concha’s “The End of History? Or is it? Circularity versus Progress in Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood*” and Bénédicte Ledent’s “‘Look liberty in the face’: Determinism and Free Will in Caryl Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives*”. They provide an insight into the essence of Phillips’s understanding of the present-day Europe as haunted by the violent history of slavery and the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> Ledent argues that “Phillips’s fiction may be said to have been shaped from the very beginning by some sort of determinism” and points to circularity in his first novel *The Final Passage* as a means of conveying “an existential predictability” (2012: 75). She focuses on how

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<sup>3</sup> Phillips’s approach of juxtaposing stories of slavery and the Holocaust has drawn much critical attention, but it is Ronnie Scharfman in her article “Reciprocal Hauntings” who examines the topic in terms of spectrality. See SCHARFMAN, R. (2010): “Reciprocal Hauntings: Imagining Slavery and the Shoah in Caryl Phillips and André and Simone Schwarz-Bart”. *Yale French Studies*, 118-119, pp. 91-110.

individuals are caught in a cycle of spiraling and repetition determined by the past. De la Concha explores the formal aspect of Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*, and draws our attention to its circular structure which "spirals forward to the present, while incessantly gyrating towards and around events in the past" (2000: 5). She goes on to say that history blends in random stories "showing no development and no progress, only a sinister pattern of recurrence", "an indefinite replay of the past with slight variations" (2000: 13). In novels such as *Higher Ground*, *Cambridge*, *Crossing the River*, or *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips addresses the question of identity as "part of an effect of history", if I may use Punter's expression, through the juxtaposition of stories set in different historical contexts. In an interview with Bastian Becker, Phillips admits that the purpose of this narrative device is "to force people to see something new by seeing something familiar". However, to the question "Why does European history sometimes seem to be eerily circular?", Phillips answers that it is "tribal", suggesting that there is more to the constant return of the past than the cyclical reproduction of patterns of discrimination and oppression. He also recognizes the difficulty of dealing with the history of "solid countries" in Europe and asserts his intention to "work from inside", trying to be radical formally, structurally, and thematically (Becker & Phillips 2012).

In *The Lost Child* the narrative technique of juxtaposing overtly unrelated stories is elevated to a higher, more sophisticated level, rendering associations somewhat ambiguous. As a result, the circular structure, intrinsic to the idea of the past haunting the present, is reconfigured into a multilayered interwoven set of circles. Metaphorically, these circles seem to

have common origin in the slave trade,<sup>4</sup> which significantly is also the beginning of the narrative. The novel starts with the description of an anonymous woman wandering the streets of a port city. She is accompanied by a seven-year-old boy, who “hovers protectively over his afflicted mother, for she looks now as though she might, at any moment, abandon this discouraging world and attempt to gain access to the next” (4). Passers-by “unable to disguise their loathing for the skeletal woman . . . simply avert their gazes” and the child is the only one who accepts to “bear responsibility for her well-being” “on his young shoulders” (4). It soon becomes clear that she had been transported “chained and manacled” on a slave ship from Congo to the Indies, while brutally abused by the captain. The opening scene is invested with particular significance, for it represents in a nutshell England’s unwillingness to recognize the consequences of its colonial past and take full responsibility for its victims. The child figure, symbolizing both the descendents of enslaved Africans and future generations, but also innocence and incomplete identity, is charged with the unbearable burden of the unresolved trauma of the slave trade. Phillips inscribes the Gothic discourse into the description of the woman’s dying moments, bringing into view the social significance of the ghostly haunt:

The first time she saw the ghost quietly leaving her body, she shook with fear, but he quickly reentered her. The ghost appears and disappears stealthily, like a halo of breath on a looking glass. She knows that soon the ghost will leave her frail body, and this time she will utter a

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of Phillips’s approach to the question of slavery in his earlier works, see WARD, A. (2011): *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D’Aguir. Representations of Slavery* (Series Contemporary World Writers). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

series of long, shallow gasps and fall silent, and then follow him and begin her final voyage. (9)

The pain of the past remains undisclosed and the ghost of the unnamed woman becomes trapped in the liminal space/time, haunting the narrative as the ghosts of the dead ancestors haunt and stir the conscience of present generations. Long before passing away, the black woman's physical degradation and disintegration push her ghostly existence to the limit between life and death. She lingers between visibility and invisibility, until "vitality rushe[s] suddenly from her body and [leaves] behind an empty vessel" (249). Her sacrifice triggers an endless repetition of injustice and discontent ghosts, trapped in a circle of timeless past.

The enigmatic boy from the first part of the novel reappears on the pages of the two last parts and although he remains unnamed, it becomes clear that it is Heathcliff, the boy Mr Earnshaw picks up in the streets of Liverpool in the novel's canonical intertext *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. Although the publisher's blurb on the cover of Phillips's novel says that it is "written in the tradition of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*", the novel should not be read in terms of prequel or postcolonial rewriting of a canonical text. In fact, the author sees Emily Brontë rather as one "entryway" into his book (2015a).<sup>5</sup> In her review of *The Lost Child*, Patsy Stoneman argues that "only the slightest parallels appear between Heathcliff and the novel's other lost

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<sup>5</sup> The other "entryway" into *The Lost Child* is Keith Waterhouse's *City Lights* (1994), in which the Leeds-born author describes his working-class childhood and adolescence experiences, among them his journey to the Silverdale summer camp. See PHILLIPS, C. (2015a, May): "Finding the Lost Child." *FSG Work in Progress*. Retrieved from: <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2015/05/finding-the-lost-child/>

children” (2016: 275), which proves that the narrative strategy of juxtaposing stories set in different places and historical contexts has adopted a more complex form, one which calls for an interpretation not limited to parallelism. Stoneman also points to an interesting work Phillips was involved with, namely, the short documentary “A Regular Black: The Hidden History of *Wuthering Heights*” (2009), directed by Adam Low. In it, Phillips “riffs on the description of Heathcliff as ‘a regular black’,<sup>6</sup> brought from the slave port of Liverpool to the Yorkshire Moors” and suggests that “Africans kept on after the abolition of slavery as farm labourers in Dent, close to where the Brontë sisters went away to school, are seen as crucial to Emily’s fevered imagination” (Rice 2015). In *The Lost Child*, the boy Mr Earnshaw picks up in Liverpool and takes “home” is his son. In Phillips’s elliptical and allusive text, Heathcliff is transformed into an epitome of abandonment, loss, and alienation. Rosemary Jackson argues that the fantastic opens up to “that which is outside dominant value systems”, it “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (1981: 2)<sup>7</sup>. The most important point here is that Heathcliff in Phillips’s narrative functions as the double of all the “lost children” in the novel, and at the same time

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<sup>6</sup> The role of Heathcliff in the different adaptations of Emily Brontë’s novel has been performed by actors like Laurence Olivier, Timothy Dalton or Ralph Fiennes. However it is Andrea Arnold’s film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (2011) that was seen as controversial. The role of Heathcliff in it is played by black actors Solomon Glave from Sheffield as a boy and James Howson from Leeds as a grown man.

<sup>7</sup> The Gothic and the fantastic mode are not unanimously classified by critics, as some of their characteristics and dominant tropes overlap. I have adopted the term Gothic in the present essay, because Gothic elements prevail in both Phillips’s *The Lost Child* and its intertext, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*.



as the double of the silenced victims of the slave trade, in line with Andrew Webber's definition of the double as a "performer of identity . . . mediated by the other self" (2003: 3).

In his own words, Phillips had wanted to write about Emily Brontë for a long time. He grew up ten miles away from where she lived and for him, she is "not just *Wuthering Heights*, but Liverpool, Heathcliff, and the moors" (Becker & Phillips 2012). The fact is that in *The Atlantic Sound*, Phillips reflects on *Wuthering Heights* immediately after having seen the exhibition dedicated to the slave trade in the Maritime Museum in Liverpool. It seems ironic to the author that the boy, who is not "a regular black", but "dark alien", "should find himself adrift in the streets of Europe's major eighteenth-century slaving port" (2001: 92). Sitting on a bench overlooking the Albert Dock, Phillips is "suddenly convinced that it must have been down [there], by the docks, that Mr Earnshaw spotted the scrawny dark apparition named Heathcliff" (2001: 92). It is interesting to note that nearly thirty years before the publication of *The Lost Child*, Phillips uses the word *apparition* to refer to Heathcliff as a young boy, suggesting that Heathcliff is written into the plot of the novel by the phantom effect. The author's "vantage point" from where he visions the mirage of the black-haired child in *The Atlantic Sound* is also the starting point of his novel *The Lost Child* with Heathcliff's mother "sit[ting] down by the docks in a place where sunlight can discover her face" (3). In *Myths of Power*, Terry Eagleton seeks to identify "the inner ideological structure and to expose its relations both to what we call literary 'form' and to an actual history" of a number of works written by the Brontë sisters, among them *Wuthering Heights* (2005: 4). For him, the inner ideological structure rises from "the real history of the West Riding in the first half of the nineteenth century . . . imaginatively grasped and transposed in the production of the Brontë's fiction"

(2005: 4).<sup>8</sup> Eagleton's concept of "inner ideological structure" can also apply to Phillips's narrative, although in a slightly different way. The inner ideological structure of *The Lost Child* might be said to rise from the relation of its multilayered, circular form to the real history of Liverpool as a major slaving port in the eighteenth century, on the one hand, and Liverpool as "the heart of industrial Yorkshire" in the 1960s, on the other.

At the structural level, the circle devoted to the Brontës is formed by Part I "Separation", Part IX "The Journey", and Part X "Going Home". Part IV "The Family", which is at the centre of this storyline, focuses not on *Wuthering Heights*, but on its author, Emily Brontë, thus, bringing another intertext into the novel. "The Family" describes Emily in her dying days in a dreamlike mode, blending biographical facts and fiction. Like the black woman in the first part, Emily floats on the threshold between life and death, aware of her ghostly appearance: "*Surely only the most desperate would interpret the spectre of my pale, thin figure as being suggestive of a return to natural exuberance*" (97, italics in original). Like Heathcliff's mother in the streets of Liverpool, lonely Emily reaches out for the others in an attempt to establish a connection, but they either do not seem to notice her presence or do not seem to understand her words. She would sometimes take a stroll in their garden, where Charlotte and her master, Monsieur Heger, would talk to each other "oblivious to her ghostly presence" (101). The ghost is therefore that part of our reality we

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<sup>8</sup> Eagleton argues that the stereotype of the Irishman as "violent, dissolute and subversive" is "not at all that remote from the character of Heathcliff" (2005: xv). His version of the boy's mysterious origin is that "a few months before Emily began the novel, her brother took a trip to Liverpool, where he could easily have observed some of the hundreds of semi-destitute Irish-speaking refugee children hanging around the docks" (2005: xv).

are unaware of or refuse to recognize and the obvious pattern is that both women's invisibility is the result of the unwillingness or inability of the living to listen to them.

While the black woman and Heathcliff perfectly fit into the main haunting trope in *The Lost Child*, which Bénédicte Ledent and Evelyn O'Callaghan define as "the narrative reclamation of absent stories, the unvoiced accounts of orphans and lost, stolen, or denied children of the Empire" (2017: 229), Emily Brontë's ghostly presence is more ambiguous. Ledent and O'Callaghan, who focus on *The Lost Child* "intertextual conversation" with *Wuthering Heights*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and some of Phillips's earlier works, in particular, *Cambridge*, show that Emily Brontë's novel "haunted Phillips' imagination for a long time" and point to the name of one of the two main characters in *Cambridge*, Emily, "unmarried young woman" "from northern England" and to the name of the "widower whom her father has arranged for her to marry", Thomas Lockwood, like Mr Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* (2017: 231-32). Like in *The Lost Child*, in *Cambridge*, Phillips produces an intertextual dialogue between his fictional text, on the one hand, and Emily Brontë and her work, on the other.

There is yet another novel, apart from Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that the publishers mention in the book cover blurb and it is J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*. This allusion to *Foe* might help to understand some aspects of Phillips's intertextual references to Emily Brontë. *Foe* has been widely read as explicitly dealing with the question of discourse, authorship, and authority. Jane Poyner argues that

Coetzee stages the paradox of postcolonial authorship: whilst striving symbolically to bring the stories of the marginal and the oppressed to light, stories that heretofore

have been suppressed or silenced by oppressive regimes, writers of conscience or conscience-stricken writers risk re-imposing the very authority they seek to challenge. (2009: 2)

Instead of trying to stick to the facts known about Emily Brontë, Phillips fictionalizes her into the narrative. In her dreams, Emily “sees herself bounding tirelessly across the dry blacken and wispy grass in search of . . . *the strange boy with blazing eyes who had lost his place in the world*” and who her father brought them as a “*gift*” from Liverpool (109-110, italics in original). Emily’s daydreaming resembles Phillips’s own search for the character, which he describes as “a kind of territorial fumbling” in the form of a trip across the Yorkshire Moors after some research on the topic (Clingman & Phillips 2017: 591). In light of Poyner’s argument, my point is that by placing the part about Emily Brontë in the centre of the circular structure, Phillips draws our attention to authorship, and by representing her as a fictional character, rather than limiting his reference to her biography, he avoids “imposing the authority he seeks to challenge” when he relates Heathcliff to the history of the slave trade. When he describes the process of creating his characters, the author admits that there were initially four Post-its on his desk: Yorkshire, Moor, Lost, and Child, but eventually another Post-it “fell gingerly into place with a fifth word upon it, Literature, a word which spoke to the presence of Emily Brontë” (2015a). Thus, Phillips aligns with Coetzee in revealing the role of discourse in shaping historical records, but also the potential of literature and the ethical responsibility of the writer to fill in the gaps with the missing voices.

Against representational thinking, the circular structure of the narrative overthrows hierarchies of suffering and exclusion.

None of the stories is more important than the others, for all the ghost stories in the novel become one, the story of the lost child who haunts Emily's dreams: "She closes her eyes and dreams of *the boy who came from the moors*, but she cannot see him. *The boy who went back to the moors*." (109-110, emphasis is mine). Several ghost stories, several circular journeys, one landscape – the moors, the space of the uncanny, of the horror of the "other" world. Gothic elements are compressed into a single motif – the journey of the boy *from* and *back* to the moors, a journey that echoes the journey into "the heart of darkness", except that in Phillips's narrative it is the "otherness" that comes from the darkness, lives on the threshold, and is expelled back into the darkness.

In "Global/Postcolonial Horror", Ken Gelder claims that "the trope of horror – spectralisation, the return of the repressed, uncanny misrecognitions, . . . have often lent a certain structural logic to postcolonial studies" (2000: 35). He highlights the importance of horror for postcolonial studies and arguments that "horror became increasingly fascinated by *circulation*: one thing passing into another, mutating, even melting, identities along the way" (2000: 35, italics in original). If the story about Heathcliff's origin, which starts with his mother's death and ends with the boy's "return" to the moors, marks the outer circle in the structure of the novel, the story about Monica Johnson and her two sons, which includes the sections "First Love", "Going Out", "Brothers", "Childhood", "Family", and "Alone", constitutes the inner circle. The analysis of the symbolic significance of the titles of the sections that form the two circumscribed circles reveals the prevailing trope in Phillips's fiction, that of the *journey*. It wouldn't be wrong to say that in Phillips's novels space overtakes time in significance, hence the journey trope (literal and metaphorical), which converges with the structural circularity of

his narratives effectively illustrates the relationship between agency, identity, and intentionality.<sup>9</sup> The journey trope also enables us to discover some patterns in the completion of Joseph Campbell's three stages of the circular mythological journey – *separation/departure, initiation, and return*.

Phillips's male protagonists – Michael (*The Final Passage*), who immigrates to England in search for a better life, Solomon (*A Distant Shore*), who escapes from a civil war in his native country in Africa, or Othello (*The Nature of Blood*), who travels to Venice to take part in the war against the Turks – initiate their journey intentionally. Their journey might be incomplete, but their relation to place is active and dynamic. However, a close examination of the female characters' journey reveals that it is not initiated intentionally, but it is triggered by abandonment and betrayal and ends in abandonment. Unlike the male protagonists' journey, theirs is mostly interior and it is mostly an attempt to escape from a traumatic experience. Irina (*Higher Ground*), Emily (*Cambridge*), Eva and her sister (*The Nature of Blood*), and Monica (*The Lost Child*) become victims of multiple abandonments – by their father, by their partner or the man with whom they attempt to start a romantic relationship, and eventually by the community, while the mother figure in these families is portrayed as weak, submissive, and passive. By the time Monica is a teenager, she is sure what type of person her father is and “she certainly didn't want scrutiny from this warped

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of agency, widely related to intentionality, is extremely complex and interpretations vary within different fields of research. Given Phillips's concern with belonging and identity, it is important to note that Anscombe and Davidson see the latter as the close relation between intentionality and acting for a reason. See ANSCOMBE, E. (1957): *Intention*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, DAVIDSON, D. (1963): “Actions, Reasons, and Causes.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 60, no. 23, pp. 685-700.

man, who had already bullied his wife into near-mute submission” (16).

The journey in Phillips’s fiction is prominent in three different ways: as a plot structure, motif, and symbol. In *The Atlantic Sound*, the author himself becomes the protagonist of his own journey. He travels to the places that formed the major route of the triangular trade, drawing a circle by mapping memories of past oppression and anxieties about present identity conflicts. Although the author asserts that “[he]’d rather be on the path than at ‘home’ at the beginning or at the end of the journey” (Clingman & Phillips 2002: 98), in terms of Campbell’s model, his journey seems complete, as he returns “transfigured, and teach[es] the lesson he has learned of life renewed” in his narratives (Campbell 2004: 18). The titles of the parts that mark the circular journey of the protagonists in *The Lost Child* echo the titles of the three main parts of *The Atlantic Sound*: “Leaving Home”, “Homeward Bound”, and “Home”. Phillips’s choice of titles urges the reader to relate them to the Atlantic slave trade and the “middle passage”, a phrase that refers to “the bottom line of a trading triangle, between the ‘outward passage’ from Europe to Africa and the ‘homeward passage’ from the Americas back to Europe” (Rediker, Pybus & Christopher 2007: 1). According to Julian Wolfreys, textual haunting does not mean “that the text is haunted by its author, or simply by the historical moment of its production. Rather, it is the text itself which haunts and is haunted by the traces which come together in this structure we call textual” (2002: xiii). Following his argument, we may say that the textual structure of *The Lost Child* is haunted by the history of the slave trade, Phillips’s earlier fictional and non-fictional works, and by traces of the author’s personal journey.

In Phillips’s fiction, *home* often oscillates between a specter of the past charged with painful secrets and search for a

place where identity is restored or affirmed within harmonious family relationships. In an attempt to restore their disintegrated identity, Bertram (*A State of Independence*), Nash (*Crossing the River*), and Monica's husband Julius Wilson undertake a journey back home. The last stage of their journey cannot be completed, because the home they are heading for is a mirage, it exists only in their nostalgic memories. They return to a place that is the same, but not quite the same, i.e. their displacement results in dislocation of the place they consider "home". In *The Lost Child*, the motif of *homecoming without home* appears in three different versions in the final stage of Julius Wilson's, Monica's, and Heathcliff's journeys. Julius Wilson is an overseas student at Oxford, where he and Monica meet and get married. Monica's gradual decline starts with her dropping out of university after their marriage. Julius is described as a "tall, gangly man who had spent the greater part of his short adult life cultivating a patina of gravitas" (24), perfecting his "studious aspect", at accepting a junior lectureship, and his "self-regard", when he gets involved with the Anti-Colonial Club and later with his friend's newly-formed People's Action Party. Julius's mood shifts from self-pity to self-importance, which Phillips parodies to warn the reader against the preposterous discourse of some self-appointed "activists" who claim they struggle to "avoid [people] being beaten up by English teddy boys as part of an ongoing problem whose roots lay in colonial exploitation" (29), but who, like the newly-born politicians in *A State of Independence*, are mainly interested in profiting from anti-colonial discourse. Julius feels he does not belong in England and decides to return to his home country. However, he does not go through the last stage of the journey, rebirth, for he seems to learn little from the "trials" he has to undergo in exile. In the plot line of Phillips's narrative, his



act of abandoning Monica and their two sons, triggers Monica's journey into loneliness, vulnerability, and despair.

The narrative ends with the description of Mr Earnshaw and the boy Heathcliff approaching 'home'. "We're going *home*," Mr Earnshaw tells the child, "And then the man repeats himself. The boy looks into the man's face, and again he asks him to please take him to his mother. *Home*" (259). Given the complexity of the narrative structure and the author's multilayered approach to the intertext, the end can be designated different meanings, which depend to a great extent on how we define whose double Heathcliff is in Phillips's text. Webber's premise that the double "returns compulsively both within its host texts and intertextually from one to the other. . . . therefore play[ing] a constitutive role in the structuring of its texts, by doubling them back upon themselves" (2003: 4) becomes relevant for the interpretation of the end of Phillips's narrative. The end of Heathcliff's journey perfectly illustrates the idea of *homecoming without home*. *The Lost Child* ends at the point where the ghostly circle in *Wuthering Heights* begins, i.e. with Heathcliff's arrival: "See here, wife! I was never so beaten with anything in my life: but you must e'en take it as a gift of God; though it's dark almost as if it came from the devil" (Brontë 2000: 15).

Monica's physical and psychological journey begins when she leaves her home in Northern England, "trying to look for herself" far from her dominant father (52). Her father abandons her when he learns about her getting involved with a man who, in his opinion, "originated in a part of the world where decent standards of behaviour and respect for people's families were obviously alien concepts" (22). After her husband decides to return to his homeland, Monica finds a job in Leeds and goes back, though not back *home*. The word *home* is repeated several times in the description of the moment when Monica and her two

sons meet her parents at the station, but in all of them it seems to be somehow associated to her father, whose first glimpse of them is “huddled together on the platform like evacuees, and all that was missing were their name tags” (54). The image of evacuees suggests that the place they have arrived at is some anonymous town of transit, as opposed to *home* as a place of belonging, memories, and dreams. Monica does not recognize the place as home, therefore her circular journey remains incomplete. She has nowhere to return to. If I may paraphrase Gaston Bachelard’s words that without home “man would be a dispersed being” (1994: 5), without home Phillips’s characters become liminal beings, inhabiting spaces of transit, like ghosts who want to return home to the same place they left, but it is no longer possible. The journey is haunted by the desired, but failed return.

The importance of the family in Gothic fiction, according to Fred Botting, “lies as much in a symbolic dimension as in actual existence. . . . Parentless children are left to roam the wild and gloomy landscapes without protection or property” (2006: 284). In *The Lost Child*, the author explicitly raises the question of the deeply negative impact of dysfunctional families on children. “Such family crisis”, as Ledent and O’Callaghan rightly point out, “are hardly alleviated by either fostering or sibling solidarity and tend to repeat themselves” (2017: 239). We should distinguish the family metaphor from the paternal metaphor, a distinction which is evident in Heathcliff’s plea to be taken *home* “to his mother”. A child depends on his family, and in particular on his mother, for affection and sustenance. Similarly, Monica, a single mother with two young children, depends on the local community for help. Thus, the lack of communal support shows Phillips’s concern with the community’s refusal to take care of its most vulnerable members. In the small lugubrious place with no hot water and food for the children, Monica despairs and “above everything

else” wishes “for somebody to help her out” (70), but like the passers-by who “avert their gazes” from the dying black woman, the council office and the “new community” abandon her. In *The Lost Child*, abandonment and subsequent confinement have an important institutional dimension that requires a special attention. “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constructed bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler 2004: 20), which explains Phillips’s female protagonists’ breakdown and disintegration in the process of, first, tolerating hardship and physical pain for prolonged periods, and then gradually letting go affectionate attachments and hope. The “fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space”, characteristic for the Gothic (Baldick 1992: xix), is reflected in the spatial symbolism of abandonment in Phillips’s text.

An analysis of spaces inhabited by abandoned women in Phillips’s fiction shows that they are, in fact, places of confinement, such as a slave trading fort (the African girl in *Higher Ground*), a concentration camp (Eva Stern in *The Nature of Blood*), an urban ghetto (Leila in *The Final Passage*), and a mental hospital (Irina in *Higher Ground*), Dorothy in *A Distant Shore*). After the loss of her younger son, Tommy, grief-stricken Monica is confined to a mental hospital, where she eventually dies. Thus, the circular structure of the hero’s journey in search of identity completeness on the background of Campbell’s monomyth is mirrored by the circle as a symbolic expression of gendered spatial confinement, usually preceded by entrapment in a gloomy domestic space with melancholic prison-like atmosphere, suggesting hopelessness. It is possible to detect the ghostly circle of female confinement on the first page of *The Lost Child* in the description of the unnamed black woman, who

passers-by call “Crazy Woman” (3), a circle that closes when Monica is sent to a mental hospital. In the section called “Alone” narrated in the first person by Monica, there is a passage that reminds of the opening lines of the novel and the black woman wandering in the streets of Liverpool: “The first time I lived in London I frittered away most of my time watching the city like I was looking at a programme on the television set. I could see people, but they couldn’t see me, and I can’t say it was a happy time” (215). “Madness is thoroughly a Gothic concern”, Scott Brewster argues and adds that “Gothic does not merely transcribe disturbed, perverse or horrifying worlds: its narrative structures and voices are interwoven with and intensify the madness they represent” (2000: 281). In *The Lost Child*, Phillips interweaves madness, recurrence,<sup>10</sup> and gendered confinement through and within the ghostly circle. There is one certainty in his narrative – to redeem a society in which vulnerability is made invisible and excluded from the normative community, we should move beyond awareness about the problem, avoid the neutral gaze and take care of the “other”.

In urban Gothic, fears reside not only in the association of labyrinthine streets and dirty slums, with secret danger lurking in the dark, very close to the virtuous and civilized city-dwellers, but also from images of vice, violence, and crime. The description of the place in Leeds where Monica and her children are forced to live reminds of the poverty and decay in the streets of Victorian

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche developed the doctrine of the “eternal recurrence” in *The Gay Science (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, 1882)* and later in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None (Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen, 1883–1891)*. It addresses the idea of how people might react to the prospect of being reborn and the repetition of one’s life. The doctrine implies endless identical repetition, eternal return, which means that what will occur has already occurred.

Gothic. “Dismal-looking pubs and corner shops with paint peeling from their facades and windows that were scarcely grilled”, “a dual carriageway, which ran like a scar though this part of town”, and “a decrepit redbrick swimming baths building, which stood like a rotten tooth all by itself” (66-68) map the spirit of the place. Monica’s descent into the abyss of body and soul disintegration is marked by her ritual crossing the threshold into “otherness”. The gate into the underworld is a place called Mecca Ballroom, easily “mistaken for a cinema” (76) from outside, suggesting an unpredictable imaginary world of which Monica will be a mere spectator. And that is how she feels when she climbs “the *circular* staircase” to the balcony, which “*encircle[s]* three sides of the dance floor”, where she gets “*marooned* with the less glamorous set” and a group of drunken men (77, emphasis is mine). The ballroom is painted as a kind of masquerade, a Gothic universe where communal values are erased and grotesque scenes of depravity reveal poverty, corruption, and alienation. Among girls with “sturdy curves and improbable inclines” dancing “around their handbags” and “blokes dawdled against the wall, smoking” and waiting to “make an approach” (77), Monica, wearing the blue velvet dress “with a bow on the front by the bust” (75), a present from her mother before she went to university, looks innocent and lost. Phillips combines the grotesque with the uncanny to create a scenario, which makes possible the proximity of good and evil, and then stages their encounter. The evil appears as a “reasonably handsome, clean-shaven man”, with his collar and tie firmly tightened, not “the type to be out trying to pull birds on a Saturday night” (79). Derek Evans emerges disguised as Monica’s savior, only to betray her later and, by doing so, accelerate her death. Monica transgresses normative behavior twice. First, by getting involved with a colored man, she threatens the traditional order of the community with much-feared

hybridity, i.e. were her children to be admitted into the inner circle of their “new community”. Like “independent” and “disobedient” women in Gothic novels, she is symbolically punished by being expelled to the margins of the normative collective. Second, she crosses the gate into the domain of the phantasmic evil, gets seduced by Derek, and trapped in darkness. It seems she is “free” to choose, as long as she makes the right choice. By forcing her and her children into marginality and abandoning them to their fate, the community forces her to accept Derek’s “protection” and relays the burden of guilt for her son’s loss to her. A strong feeling of anxiety and disorientation overwhelms her in the ballroom, she “go[es] fuzzy”, feels “a headache setting in”, and “[can’t] remember what happen[s] next”, as if the uncanny invades and settles into her mind (82). After that, Monica, her friend Pamela, and the two men leave the ballroom in a car and stop on the bank of a river. The moment when Monica “look[s] up at the stars” and begins “to turn in a circle”, asking her friend again and again if she “[can] see the clouds moving” until she faints in Derek’s arms, reflects the correlation between the lack of spatial reference in the ghostly circle and her disturbed sense of reality. The immaterial terror of disorientation in the uncanny atmosphere causes her perception to move centripetally from the surrounding space to the self, and entraps the self in her mind.

“The human experience of reality is inextricably linked with how the body perceives space, and conversely of how it perceives itself in space” (García 2013: 19), which is why Phillips’s description of Tommy on the first day of school is relevant. “Seated quietly behind a desk and looking pathetically out of place” (113), Tommy wonders if the fact that nobody comes to sit beside him had something to do with the desk or with him.

But every one of the thirty boys, who continue to stifle their laughter, feels sure that the queer apparition standing behind the desk has nothing whatsoever to do with their world, . . . and it's blatantly obvious to each of them that this Tommy Wilson is most definitely a stranger. (117)

Tommy is immediately excluded from the group, "nor does it look as if he'll be invited to join in" (119), laughed at and humiliated; even Ben, at first feels too embarrassed to admit he is his older brother. Describing the boy as a "queer apparition" on the first day of school reads as an omen of terror and death. From that very instance we feel we are witnessing, if I may borrow the title of Gabriel García Márquez's novel, the chronicle of Tommy's death foretold.

Throughout the novel, Phillips reminds us of the role of responsibility and how individual identity is shaped within a web of family and social relations marked by the dilemma of accepting or denying responsibility for the "other". The author shows a community which allocates responsibility for Tommy and Ben to their mother, Monica, herself in need of care. Despite the fact that all those who are in one way or another related to Tommy – teachers, social workers, adoptive parents, classmates – are aware of the child's extreme emotional and bodily vulnerability, they prefer to "avert their gaze" from the problem. In the scene of Monica and her two sons' first contact with the new community in Leeds, Phillips raises the question of responsibility, natural or conventional, and the burden of guilt as constitutive of the identity of subjects whose acts of solidarity and support fail to save those they care for. As Monica, Ben, and Tommy pass out of the park with "the foreign men and women, who sat on the grass in a circular group around a seemingly endless supply of food" (65), and after slapping ten-year-old Ben for "temporarily abandoning"

his younger brother in order to play for a while, Monica “silently reattache[s] Ben’s hand to that of his brother and look[s] at the older boy in a manner that let him know that he should not let go” (66).

Phillips explores the question of responsibility at three levels: individual, collective, and universal, through “literary forms that allow us to see a story *not* foretold in the existing human rights script” (Clingman 2015: 368, italics in original). Victim of bullying and abuse, Tommy chooses to say nothing to his brother about his pain and humiliation at Silverdale Holiday Camp and about his “so-called Uncle Derek”, Monica’s boyfriend (163). Considering the publishers’ reference to Coetzee’s *Foe* on the cover of Phillips’s novel, it is interesting to note that María López, who reads *Foe* as a ghost story, focuses on Friday’s muteness and Susan’s “impotence to make sense of her own story”, “inhabited by secrets she cannot explain and silences she cannot give voice to” (2010: 296). Although for a different reason, Tommy’s, but especially Monica’s silence make Ben “feel as though [he]’d done something wrong” (179), i.e. silences form gaps or in-betweens in his childhood story, gaps which are haunted by unspeakable secrets. Specters represent a psychological rather than physical form of agency, therefore Monica and Tommy speak through their silence, making us aware of the need to re-adjust our mode of reading to get access to the wisdom of our collective past.

The ghostly circle as an extension of Phillips’s approach to space as constitutive of inclusive dialogues with the past requires our understanding of the motif of the “double”, which together with the “factor of the repetition” in *The Lost Child* not only produces the “uncanny effect” (Freud 2003: 141-43), but also different interpretations of the last stage of the protagonists’ circular journey. Multiple doubles – Monica/ Heathcliff’s mother,



Monica/Emily Brontë,<sup>11</sup> Monica/Heathcliff, Ben/Heathcliff, Tommy/Heathcliff – reveal various coexisting circular movements. Whether the cyclical repetition of abandonment, loss, failed adoption, exclusion, confinement/death is eventually broken or not depends on our reading of the outcome of the journeys of the three boys: Heathcliff “returns” to the moors, Tommy dies on the moors, but Ben survives the traumatic events and is admitted to Oxford University.

I would like to go back here to Lockwood’s words: “Let *me* go, if you want me to let you in” (Brontë 2000: 17) when Catherine’s ghost appears at the window and begs him to let her in. It is not my intention to establish a parallel between Lockwood and Ben in their dialogue with the ghosts from the past, but symbolically these words seem to reflect Ben’s ambivalent approach to specters of his traumatic childhood. On the one hand, he intentionally destroys his mother’s letters, enacting his desire for closure. On the other, he realizes that breaking the “sinister pattern of recurrence” and “learning to live” amounts to learning “to live *with* ghosts” (Derrida 2006: xvii-xviii, italics in original). On his way to Oxford, Ben stops by the side of the road and ventures into the moors. He walks for miles, shouting his brother’s name until he “could feel the moors closing in on [him], and for the first time in ages [he] began to feel close to [his] brother” (189). In line with Derrida’s argument that no justice “seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” (2006: xviii), Phillips

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<sup>11</sup> In Phillips’s own words, Emily “is not too different” from Monica in that both Emily’s father and Ronald Johnson carry the burden of “not being able to communicate” who they really are (Clingman & Phillips 2017: 596).

articulates his commitment to justice, which goes beyond remembering the lost children of the past, to actually *let* them *in* and learn to live *with* them.

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