TYE LANDELS

Liberal Multiculturalism and the Limits of Recognition in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*

Introduction

In recent years, critics of Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* seem to have developed a consensus that the novel presents a cosmopolitan view of diasporic identity. Paul Smethurst notes that, in the novel, "not only the lens of female experience, but also that of Jewish experience, are set beside that of black experience, giving three categories of difference: Jewish, black, and female, each superimposed upon each other" (9). More recently, Gils George suggests that "the characters jointly invoke polyphonic voices of their survival, even though they are separated by centuries" (578). Alan Liam McCluskey likewise argues that the novel is "suspicious of the received paradigms of seeing that are to be found in and define any given historical context, and seeks to look beyond fixed categories of identity and belonging" (215-216). While I agree with these critics, I believe that their claims fail to articulate why Phillips chooses to present a cosmopolitan view of diasporic identity. To this end, I shall argue that Phillips's cosmopolitanism emerges as a conscious response to the failure of multiculturalism to recognize what Robin Cohen calls "victim diasporas" in liberal states. Phillips suggests that for diasporic groups who have suffered a history of collective trauma, a cosmopolitan view of cultural identity - which draws upon histories of shared experiences and morality across cultures - is far more tenable than an essentialist view of cultural identity. In pursuing this thesis, I shall first articulate how traditional multicultural theory is incapable of recognizing minority groups for whom essentialist cultural identity is untenable.

Secondly, I shall demonstrate how Phillips portrays this incapability through his description of Eva Stern's tragic journey from encampment in Nazi Germany to a new life in liberal multicultural England. Finally, I will highlight how Phillips presents cosmopolitanism as a viable response to this incapability.

Recognition and Misrecognition

How minority groups realize equality and justice in liberal multicultural states has become an important topic of debate in political philosophy circles over the past half-century. Perhaps one of the most influential essays on this topic is Charles Taylor's "The Politics of Recognition" in which he argues for the cultural recognition of individuals belonging to minority groups as an important value in counteracting the hegemonic cultural bias of supposedly "impartial" liberal states. Taylor's article serves as a polemic critique of John Rawls's belief that a "veil of ignorance" by which citizens undertake political and moral actions without knowledge of their own or others' socio-cultural positions should serve as the foundation of liberal states. Building on arguments previously stated in *Sources of the Self* and *The Ethics of Authenticity* Taylor suggests that, seeing as one's claims to selfhood and individuality are always socially (and therefore culturally) derived and contextualized, the Rawlsian ideal of a "veil of ignorance" is unrealizable in practice. As he puts it, "'blind'" liberalisms are themselves the reflection of a particular culture" (Taylor 44) that, through misrecognition, ignore the worth of pupils outside of the dominant culture as liberal individuals who may access equality and justice. In response, Taylor proposes that majority cultures ought to engage in actions that affirm the cultural traditions of minority groups as a way of extending recognition to its members under the inherently liberal presumption that "all human cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time

have something important to say to all human beings" (66). He specifically targets educational institutions, in which the curriculum consists almost entirely of "dead white males," suggesting that "enlarging and changing the curriculum is [. . .] essential not so much in the name of a broader culture for everyone as in order to give due recognition to the hitherto excluded" (65-66). Taylor's project to articulate the value of recognition has influenced many contemporary philosophers of multiculturalism and, by extension, the multicultural policies of numerous liberal states.

The presumption that individuals belonging to cultural minorities desire recognition and are able to articulate the terms upon which they may be recognized is fundamental to any successful application of Taylor's framework of recognition. Indeed, as Taylor puts it, "the demand for recognition is now explicit. And it has been made explicit [. . .] by the spread of the idea that we are formed by recognition" (64). I find this requirement inherently problematic because it excludes the possibility of recognition and, consequently, access to equality and justice for individuals or groups who are unable to articulate a conception of their own culture or who do not have a stable conception of their culture. For example, Cohen describes "victim diasporas" which he associates with "a catastrophic event that precipitates the diaspora, forced movement, dispersion, exile, captivity, enslavement, collective trauma, oppression, persecution, displacement, homelessness, statelessness, powerlessness, alienation, isolation, insecurity, affliction, suffering, loss, incompleteness, loneliness, and sadness" (Little and Broom 223). Cohen's description suggests how victim diasporas may evade recognition in liberal multicultural states: in clinical terms, groups may be so psychologically traumatized by their victimization that they lack the agency or the desire to demand recognition; likewise, victimization may devastate and destabilize the cultural fabric of a minority group beyond recognition. In both instances, the circumstances of

victimization prevent cultural minorities from participating in Taylor's dialectic of cultural recognition. When a minority group is unable to dictate the terms of their own recognition, the majority culture must rely upon their own prejudices to recognize the minority culture. Inevitably, because the majority culture's horizon of interpretation is limited, the majority culture misrecognizes the minority culture.

Misrecognition in *The Nature of Blood*

As a survivor of the Holocaust, Eva Stern evidently belongs to a victim diaspora. Phillips takes pains to graphically portray her victimization under Nazi rule both in an unnamed ghetto and in two concentration camps. For instance, Eva describes her fellow prisoners at the second camp as "troops of cattle. To their side, sick animals lying in pools of their own filth. Glazed eyes. A crazy bowel, perpetually active, shouting its protest. Life leaving without a real struggle, collapsing and tumbling in upon itself. No killing. No last words. No cruelty. Just death" (186). In this passage, Phillips distinctively expresses the effect of the state of encampment on prisoners' sense of cultural identity and belonging. Simply put, all sense of cultural identity or belonging is lost. The individual becomes dissolved into a series of base metonymies (e.g., "eyes," "bowel," etc.), anonymous, and indistinguishable from animals. Even Eva's own sense of self dissolves in this passage; she expresses herself in truncated phrases that lack a grammatical subject and verbiage (e.g., she does not say "I *see* glazed eyes"). Insofar as Taylor claims that culture fosters individualism, the lack of autonomy in this passage is symptomatic of an ineffectual culture. In Eva's case, she cannot lay claim to a sense of self because she lacks the interpretive horizon that Jewish culture provided her, sustained by her now broken familial and communitarian relations.

Phillips makes the traumatic effects of Eva's victimization apparent to the reader. After being liberated

by British troops, Eva remains unable to claim a subject position for herself. She remains in the camp well after she is invited to leave, claiming that she "do[es] not want to be a part of their world" (34). Similarly, when asked by a refugee facilitator if she intends to go home, Eva thinks to herself "[h]ow can she use the word home? It is cruel to do so in such circumstances. I cannot call that place 'home.' 'Home' is a place where one feels a welcome" (37). These statements reveal Eva as an outsider to the communities that previously fostered her identity. She mourns the loss of a homeland and a culture that she can never return to because it has been irrevocably tarnished. When she finally decides to leave the camp she recognizes that "[a] suitcase suggests a life" and therefore "it seems appropriate that I should emerge into the world clutching a bundle" (411). As a member of a victim diaspora, Eva possesses no stable cultural identity, only traumatic and sporadic recognitions of a previous cultural identity that was dissolved by the Holocaust.

In light of Eva's victimization, it is understandable why she moves to England, accepting a marriage proposal from a British soldier named Gerry who had assisted in the liberation of the concentration camp where she was being held. As an act of supposed recognition, Gerry's proposal presents Eva with an opportunity to regain a cultural identity independent from the trauma of the Holocaust. She expresses her sober hope for regeneration in the following apostrophe: "Tomorrow they will release me into an empty world with only Gerry for company. Gerry has never seen my true face. Oh Gerry, my heart is broken. Perhaps you can mend it again, but it will never again be complete. Do you understand this?" (48). What Eva desires from Gerry, I believe, is loosely analogous to what victim diaspora members hope for from liberal states who promise multicultural recognition: Eva desires Gerry's recognition of a stable cultural identity within her, which

she may claim as her own, thus filling the void caused by her victimization. This, however, impossibly presumes that the majority group, in relation to the minority group, is capable of operating under a "veil of ignorance" regarding its own sociocultural position of privilege.

In light of Eva's inability to articulate the terms of her cultural identity, Gerry and his fellow Brits eventually misrecognize Eva according to the prejudices of their own culture. Initially, Gerry misrepresents her as "a bit crackers" (194) to excuse the fact that he had lied about his desire for marriage —a claim that his family and Eva's doctor accepts by dint of his cultural authority over her. The doctor's misrecognition of her as a scheming madwoman surfaces in the following passage: "Why did you write the letter Eva? Mr. Alston. I mean, Gerry. He has a wife and child. As you can imagine, this has caused him some difficulties [. . .] Did you write the letter so that you might prove something to somebody, is that it?" (196). The doctor here draws upon sexist and anti-Semitic tropes located within what Hans-Georg Gadamer would call his "historically effected consciousness" to understand Eva. The first such trope operates in the register of the irrational, hysterical woman. By including condescending phrases such as "[a]s you can imagine…" and "is that it?" the doctor suggests that Eva is fundamentally juvenile and lacking rationality. Similarly, by suggesting that Eva was attempting to "prove something to somebody", the doctor evokes the trope of the anti-Christian Jew, interpreting Eva as a saboteur on the basis of religious difference. The doctor's misrecognition of Eva, although prejudiced, has serious consequences. Indeed, as Taylor notes, "a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (25). Eva's voluntary silence and subsequent suicide may therefore be partially attributable to the doctor's misrecognition.

The hospital staff employ the same sexist and anti-Semitic tropes to interpret Eva's suicide. An anonymous narrator describes Eva's suicide, stating that

> *at first I had no idea where she found the knife, but it seemed to me that it could not have been too difficult for her to obtain one. [. . .] There was no reason to think she would do something irrational. [. . .] But, sadly, we were wrong. There was a problem. There was also a lot of blood. She cut the right artery as though she knew what she was doing. A lot of blood* (186; author's emphasis).

Clearly, the statement that "there was no reason to think she would do something *irrational*" (emphasis mine) explicitly references the trope of the irrational hysteric woman. Likewise, the suggestion that she "cut the right artery *as though she knew what she was doing*" (emphasis mine) draws upon the trope of the anti-Christian Jew and associated blood libels. By portraying the prevalence of these Anglo-European tropes in the historically effected consciousness of the doctor and others, Phillips's novel confirms Taylor's belief in the importance that minority cultures articulate the terms of their own recognition; however, in cases such as Eva Stern's, in which articulation of a stable cultural identity is not possible, Taylor's model of multicultural recognition evidently fails in achieving the liberal ideals of equality and justice.

Conclusion

The tragedy of Eva Stern, as portrayed in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*, derives from the inability of the liberal multicultural state to achieve non-essentialist recognition of cultural minorities. In the novel, Eva emigrates from Germany to England after experiencing cultural victimization on the part of the Nazis; however, in England she encounters a nation whose liberal ideals are consistently undermined by the prejudices of its citizens.

Drawing from Charles Taylor's "Politics of Recognition," liberal states are always prejudiced against minority groups and multicultural recognition is therefore required in order to counteract these prejudices. That said, individuals such as Eva Stern fail to reap the benefits of multicultural recognition because they are unable to articulate the terms upon which they desire recognition, due to the traumatic effects of cultural victimization. How then can minority groups who lack a stable cultural identity become recognized in liberal states?

      Phillips proposes that cosmopolitanism, based on shared experience and common morality, may be uniquely capable of engaging minority groups who might otherwise evade recognition. As Smethurst (2002), George (2014), and McClusky (2014) have noted, the four narratives[1] in this novel support, inform, morph, and engage with one another across historical and cultural boundaries. In other words, a porous, narrative community emerges in this novel. Likewise, by allowing his/her individual experience to inform and be informed by these narratives, the reader becomes an integral part of this community and develops a cosmopolitan identity within it. I do not believe that this cosmopolitan/phenomenological process of identity formation is mutually exclusive from Taylor's liberal multicultural framework; rather, I think that it can support it. By developing a cosmopolitan identity, individuals or groups who might otherwise evade recognition in Taylor's liberal framework may develop the self-understanding required to articulate the terms of their own recognition. Phillips's model of cosmopolitan identity therefore finds

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1 Though they are not mentioned in this paper, The Nature of Blood portrays three other major narratives in addition to the Eva Stern narrative: 1. the Uncle Stephen narrative, in which Stephen abandons his family to establish the nation state of Israel; 2. the Jews of Portobufolle narrative, in which three Jewish men are indicted and executed for supposedly murdering a Christian beggar boy; 3. the Othello narrative, in which the Shakespearean protagonist retells his experience in Renaissance Venice.

traction in a variety of political contexts, most notably in his native Caribbean. Indeed, in a place as culturally diverse and tumultuous as the Caribbean, both majority and minority groups must necessarily view themselves in cosmopolitan terms in order to achieve mutual recognition in a liberal multicultural framework. Unsurprisingly, Phillips's model of cosmopolitan identity aligns itself closely with popular theories of Caribbean identity, such as Derek Walcott (1993)'s theory of fragmented memory, expressed through the metaphor of a broken vase, or Eduord Glissant (1997)'s theory of relation, expressed through the metaphor of the rhizome. Further research should be undertaken to highlight the commonalities and contrasts between Phillip's cosmopolitanism and these theories.

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