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Going Home? The Failed Myth of Return in Eddy L. Harris's *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* and Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9w32t11c>

**Journal**

Paroles gelées, 22(1)

**ISSN**

1094-7264

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

2006

**DOI**

10.5070/PG7221003161

Peer reviewed

**Going Home? The Foiled Myth of Return in Eddy L. Harris's *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* and Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound***

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Zara Bennett

Located a few kilometers off the coast of Dakar, Gorée Island served as a strategic location for bringing together slaves captured in the region that now makes up Senegal and Gambia and provided a harbor for slaving ships. Its role in the transatlantic slave trade has made Gorée an important site of memory for the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. As such, it receives thousands of international visitors each year who travel to this cultural heritage site to reconnect with slavery's memory. For Afro-Atlantic diasporic pilgrims, being well-received and accepted by Gorée is critical; this voyage represents a homecoming, a long-awaited return to the motherland's bosom. Through this act of reconnection, they seek to affirm the part of their cultural identity marked by slavery, as well as their membership in the Pan-African family. More often than not, this family reunion scenario fails to materialize, thus leaving the diasporic traveler feeling dejected.

This scene of misrecognition, where the diasporic traveler making a pilgrimage to Gorée does not get recognized as a prodigal son or daughter, raises the problem of reception, the way in which a text is read and interpreted—where text could signify any ensemble of signs or codes that could function as a signifying system. Cultural affiliation, signifying an individual's identification with or adhesion to a particular group, can therefore be read and interpreted as a text. The pilgrim's poor or tepid reception is dissatisfying because the signs of his or her membership in the Pan-African family have been misread. I am interested in the process of reading and interpretation that takes place when a black diasporic pilgrim, through travel, inserts himself or herself into the African context—a new signifying system.

I contend that this scene of reception, in which the pilgrim reads and is being read, is mediated by black diasporic discourse on Africa, particularly by its myth of the return. Through the study of two texts that narrate 'returning' to Africa, Eddy Harris's *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* and Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*, I want to consider how this discourse mediates the black diasporic traveler's experience in Africa by interposing itself between the traveler and his or her hosts. I argue that this screen through which the traveler sees and is seen diverts his or her attention away from the African context and focuses it instead on the traveler him or herself. By highlighting the theme of the mythical return, the scene of reception brings this problem of locating 'home' away from home to the fore.

This paper will examine the ways in which these scenes of reception play out in Eddy Harris's *Native Stranger* and Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*. Phillips, in his multi-layered narrative, juxtaposes his impressions of port cities made famous by their role in the transatlantic slave trade, against stories of historical figures whose lives were impacted by the trade and its protracted aftermath. Harris's account, however, relates a more personal journey across the African continent in the course of which he struggles to define what is African in his identity as a Black American. These self-conscious travel narratives problematize the phantasmagoric image of Africa that pervades the tradition of black diasporic writing about personal journeys to the African continent, including works by Maya Angelou, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes.

In this diasporic literary tradition, Africa is represented as a land of promise where the black diaspora can be regenerated, reborn as liberated men and women cleansed of the stigma of slavery's debasement. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy argues that this image of Africa as a site of origins to which the black diaspora wishes to return to at death "predates any formal organization around this goal" (208). Finding themselves in the Americas after having

been violently uprooted and expelled from Africa, slaves first articulated this need to return to the African continent. This concept of a spiritual, if not physical, return to the land of the ancestors was also incorporated into black political ideologies.

While Garveyism mandated a full-fledged return to Africa, Pan-Africanism conceived of Africa more as a spiritual home, the source of the cultural heritage shared by Africa and its Diaspora. This sense of black consciousness, which emerged from a concerted effort to end the slave trade, came to fruition at the Pan-African congresses. In addition to the need to combat the oppressive regimes and systems stifling Africans, as well as people of African descent worldwide, transnational solidarity among blacks grew out of the belief in a set of common cultural practices. Africa, as a site of origins for the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora, served as an important organizing principle for these political ideologies. Erna Broder, in *The Continent of Black Consciousness*, argues that, “by the early twentieth century, Africa became firmly established as a point in the continent of black sentiment and became bound in a new way to its diaspora. It had become an alternative home of choice” (93-94). This idea of an “alternative home” free from the scourge of New World racism captured the black imagination and, therefore, exercised a strong influence on this discursive tradition born of Pan-Africanism.

Eddy Harris’s *Native Stranger: A Black American’s Journey into the Heart of Africa* and Caryl Phillips’s *The Atlantic Sound* are both shot through with black diasporic discourse and its myth of the return. “Native Stranger,” the paradoxical first part of Harris’s title, presents the enigma that he travels to Africa to resolve. He writes in the book’s opening pages:

In the mind and perhaps dreams of every person with black skin, the specter of Africa looms like the shadow of a genie, dormant but not altogether harmless, always there, heard about since childhood as some magnificent faraway world, a place of magic and wonder. Africa as

mother. Africa as a source of black pride, a place of black dignity. Africa as explanation for the ways of black men and women, their way of walking and their passion, their joys and their sorrows. Africa as some germ in the genes that determines more than skin and hair. Although I am not African, there is a line that connects that place with this one, the place we come from and the place we find ourselves, those lives and our lives. And I longed to follow that line. (14)

As a black American in Africa, Harris questions the ways in which his blackness or African heritage position him as an insider, despite his foreigner status. The book recounts his quest to determine exactly what constitutes blackness. Whether spiritual or physical, Harris wants to account for the perceived bond, what he calls a “line,” that joins him as a member of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora to Africa.

Harris recognizes that race is a cultural construction, stating that he is not African, but “the product of the culture that raised [him]” (13). However, he is still seduced by the Pan-African idea of a shared cultural heritage linking the members of the Pan-African family together. As the second half of his title announces, *A Black American’s Journey into the Heart of Africa*, he is traveling to Africa not simply as an American, but as a black American. Although he insists that his American nationality coincides with his cultural identity, by inscribing his project in the tradition of black diasporic writing on Africa, Harris entertains the possibility that this will be a narrative recounting the return of a native son. These inconsistencies in his discourse on blackness suggest that Harris is perhaps more invested in these myths than he is willing to admit.

Caryl Phillips’s novel, *The Atlantic Sound*, also engages with black diasporic discourse, but in a more circuitous fashion than Harris’s work does. Phillips’s title, *The Atlantic Sound*, does not explicitly state his project to travel to Africa and the outposts of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. Rather, it calls forth an atmosphere

or a scene, like the gray expanse of open water on the book's cover that evokes the mood of Phillips's enterprise. The open-endedness of the title invites the reader to sound the depths of the Atlantic's history and to listen for the resonance of the past in the present. The title's ambiguity also seeps into the chapter titles, making them unreliable points of reference for navigating the narrative's flow.

The chapter titles' proposed itinerary, "Atlantic Crossing," "Leaving Home," "Homeward Bound," "Home," and "Exodus," disorients rather than directs the reader. Home does not provide a fixed point of reference because there are several 'homes' being bandied about here. Phillips plays with the black diaspora's myth of return through these titles. His chapter, "Homeward bound," recounts his trip to Elmina, Ghana, re-enacting the quintessential black diasporic pilgrimage to Africa. However, the following chapter, "Home," set in Charleston, South Carolina, explores the history of this region of his adopted home, the U.S.

For Phillips, home is not a place of origins in the Pan-African sense, or even a fixed geographical location. Rather, it is a dynamic relationship with several places: St. Kitts, England and the U.S. An extension of his complicated relationship with the notion of home, Phillips's identity is a function of his movement through and residence in different cultures and nations. The complexity of this relationship to home reveals itself in the airplane scene he relates in the "Homeward Bound" chapter. Here, the narrator is forced to entertain his seat-mate's questions on the flight from London to Accra, Ghana. His neighbor, Ben, a Ghanaian businessman, asks him:

'Where are you from?'

The abruptness of his whisky-scorched question shakes me out of my reverie. The bullet-headed man appears now to be fully libated and eager for conversation. 'Yes please, my friend. Where are you from?'

*The question. The problem question for those of us who have grown up in societies which define themselves by*

excluding others. Usually us. A coded question. Are you one of us? Are you one of ours? Where are you from? Where are you *really* from? And now, here on a plane flying to Africa, the same clumsy question. Does he mean, who am I? Does he mean, do I belong? Why does this man not understand the complexity of the question? I make the familiar flustered attempt to answer *the* question. He listens, and then spoils it all. 'So, my friend, you are going home to Africa. To Ghana.' *I say nothing*. No, I am not going home (124-125).

The narrator is disgruntled because he is obliged to answer the vexed question of where his home lies. He knows from his experience as a Caribbean immigrant raised in England that a simple answer responding to the stated question will not suffice. More than a question, it demands its recipient to supply personal information to account for his or her presence in his or her country of adoption. It suggests that there is something about the stranger's appearance that signifies difference and, therefore, designates him or her as a potential outsider. This demanding question probes for the stranger's place of origin, not residence. While this conversation is difficult in England, having it with an African on a plane en route to Ghana further complicates matters because the notion of home becomes even more slippery.

The narrator and his seat-mate, Ben, clash on the subject of where to locate the narrator's home. After the narrator's lengthy response to what he calls "*the* question," he nonetheless remains at an impasse with his interlocutor. By insisting that the narrator is "going home to Africa," Ben dismisses his companion's carefully constructed explanation of his cosmopolitan identity. Ben responds to what he perceives as the narrator's lack of a fixed home by assigning him one: Africa. The narrator's unspoken response conveys his frustration with being denied the right to defend his uprootedness. He resents Ben's facile interpretation, particularly his use of diasporic discourse to lock

him into an identity and a home that do not correspond to his personal reality.

If physical travel to Africa raises the problem of how the traveler is received within the African context, it also begs the question of how he or she receives Africa. The traveler's expectations of what he or she will experience in Africa are also shaped by black diasporic discourse. This discourse imposes itself as a filter through which the black diasporic traveler sees and interprets Africa. It acts as an interpretive grid which organizes Eddy Harris's narrative of Gorée Island in *Native Stranger*.

Harris's description of Gorée Island creates a rupture in his narrative, a sudden move from a highly personal to an impersonal style of narration. His intensely subjective narration, cobbling together pieces of conversations he has with the people he meets as he wanders through Africa's capital cities and towns, comes to an abrupt halt when he reaches Gorée. The narrator's withdrawal from the narrative signals that he is grappling with how to receive Gorée Island. The opening description, rife with contradictions, demonstrates the narrator's ambivalence:

Out in the harbor Gorée Island sits like a scab on the smooth skin of the evening sea, raised like a welt, ugly and dark in the distance and misshapen. In the daylight and up close the island is as pretty and precious as a prize, its low buildings glimmering faintly pink in the newly risen sun (123).

This description suggests that the narrator is unsure how to read and respond to Gorée. Subsumed in the evening shadows, Gorée's appearance is ominous, an improperly healed wound, "a scab" erupting from the sea's "smooth skin." It marks the transatlantic slave trade's bleeding of Africa's life-force, its theft of millions of Africans sapped the continent's vitality. However, daylight transforms the site, amplifying its rich colors and drawing the eye to the island's striking beauty. The narrator



seems to resent its pleasing appearance because it distracts the eye and, potentially, the mind; therefore, threatening to jeopardize the transmission of the island's infamous history.

Overtaken by the island's symbolic import as a site of slavery's memory, the narrator loses sight of the physical reality of Gorée. He writes:

There is no fresh water on the island, nothing but a trickle from a spring and a few spent wells, but there is a river of blood. A river of tears. A river of history. Gorée Island was an important slave station (123).

This passage marks the narrator's turn away from Gorée's physical reality and move towards its intangible, historical imaginary. However, in many ways, his insistence here on the absence of potable water is ironic, given that this fact was used by historians to minimize the importance of Gorée's role in the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>1</sup> Above the narrator contrasts the lack of natural sources of drinking water on the island, the "trickle" of potable water, to the rush of history, which he calls a "river of blood" and a "river of tears." These invisible rivers swell with the flow of slavery's memory, as well as the emotional response that this still bleeding history elicits. The river image also characterizes the narrator's reaction to slavery's history: he appears to be overwhelmed by its powerful flow.

I contend that this sense of being swept away in history's turbulent waters points to the narrator's entanglement in the myth of return. In *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel*, Edward M. Bruner, describes the diasporic pilgrimage to Africa's monuments to the slave trade as, "a quest for their roots, to experience one of the very sites from which their ancestors may have begun the torturous journey to the New World" (103). Coming to this island steeped in history plunges the narrator into the depths of slavery's memory. His retelling of the transatlantic slave trade's history and Gorée's role within it can be interpreted as a strategic decision to distance himself from the island's

physical reality. He departs from his subjective, play-by-play style of narration as he confronts the physical place where his ancestors were severed from the continent. His reactions to this convergence of African history and African-American memory are perhaps too highly charged or too volatile to concretize in words.

In the closing passage, the narrator returns to the narrative space and raises the question of perspective: what one sees on Gorée.

From the top of the only real hill on the island, Gorée is just another quiet place, a collection of tile roofs in various shades of orange and red and rust. The walls in the distance are sand colored. The dark green trees are bunched so close together they are like a forest. You cannot see the pink blossoms or the purple flowers. You cannot see the clinging vines or the low shrubs.

Amid all the color, the old slave cells are somber now, monuments to a history long forgotten in the never-ending on-slaught of life (125).

The narrator draws a parallel with the limited visibility of the island from its highest point and the way in which contemporary preoccupations obscure the presence of slavery's past on Gorée. This metaphor speaks to the difference between the way in which African Americans and continental Africans perceive Gorée.

The melancholic tone of this final passage suggests that the narrator is saddened by incommensurability of African and African American life experiences. Too much history separates them, making it difficult to create a sense of community based on shared memories of foundational events, like the slave trade. The "never-ending on-slaught of life" has monopolized African attention and, in the process, diminished the urgency of dealing with the history of slavery. In the African context, slavery has become one tragedy among many. Perhaps unwilling to deal

with the way in which this incommensurability of their divergent historical experience affects him personally, in the Gorée episode, the narrator chooses to see and to foreclose the possibility of being seen within the space of his narration.

*Native Stranger* and *The Atlantic Sound* engage with the implications of black diasporic discourse's need to posit Africa as a home away from home. Phillips and Harris, by expressing their conflicted relationship with black diasporic discourse on Africa and the return, are bringing attention to the problematic notion of home. Both works alternatively raise the question of what it means for Harris, an African American, to be at home in the U.S. and for Phillips, who is of Caribbean extraction, to be at home in England. They want to call attention to the precarious position of being a minority, or being considered to participate in a minority culture because of the color of their skin or their distant African origins.

In his monograph, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford writes that

Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both routes and roots to construct what Gilroy (1987) describes as alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference (251).

This raises the question of how one maneuvers so as to participate in the dominant culture, while at the same time occupying a position in an "alternative public sphere" from which one can preserve one's difference. Through their travels to Africa, the narrators question black diasporic discourse's capacity to carve out such a space. If its promise remains unfulfilled in continental Africa as Harris's text suggests, Phillips explores whether or not the idea of a black diasporic community holds currency in other Black Atlantic spaces. The awkwardness of their African homecoming accentuates the

ambiguous position of the black diasporic subject in search of an alternative space where he or she can enjoy recognition and solidarity. The texts suggest that the condition of exile can be remedied only by staking claim to a space, inhabiting it, and making it home.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The argument that Gorée lacked enough fresh water to function as an “entrepôt d'esclaves” or slave-trading center is acknowledged and refuted by Guy Thilmans in his article “Puits et captiveries à Gorée aux XVII et XVIII siècles” (107).

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**Exil: mode(s) d'emploi**  
**Experiencing Exile**  
**in Literature and the Arts**

*Paroles Gelées*  
UCLA French Studies

Volume 22  
Spring 2006

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Selected Proceedings from  
the Tenth Annual UCLA Department of  
French and Francophone Studies  
Graduate Student Conference

October 13 - 14, 2005



*Paroles Gelées*  
UCLA French Studies

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher  
et de rechercher si, par hasard,  
se trouvait ici l'endroit  
où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

*Rabelais, Le Quart Livre*

V o l u m e 2 2  
S p r i n g 2 0 0 6



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*Paroles Gelées* was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and is published annually under the auspices of the Department of French and Francophone Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

*Paroles Gelées*  
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## Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank all of our conference participants, contributors, and sponsors for their support and intellectual engagement. To all participants and our keynote speakers, we extend our thanks for contributing to the tenth annual conference. Thank you as well to all the graduate student volunteers from the department of French and Francophone Studies for their contributions at various stages of conference planning and journal publication. In particular, we would like to thank our vice-chairs, and co-assistant editors, Elizabeth Vitanza and Jennifer Westmoreland, who played crucial roles in organizing this year's conference and helping us publish these proceedings. The assistance from past department chair Françoise Lionnet and current chair, Dominic Thomas, along with the administrative expertise of Cyndia Soloway and Gina White has been invaluable. We would like to extend our appreciation to our generous sponsors, whose continuing support makes the annual conference possible. Finally, we thank the Graduate Students Association for funding the publication of this journal.

Amy Marczewski and Julie Nack Ngue,  
Conference Co-Chairs and Editors of *Paroles Gelées*

