

*Jacqueline Bishop and Dolace McLean*

**(RE) ROOTED:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH CARYL PHILLIPS**



DOLACE MCLEAN: Caryl, why did you decide to give us this interview?

CARYL PHILLIPS: Well, because it had something to do with the Caribbean, in some way was connected to the Caribbean. And, you *were* persistent.

DOLACE: The first question for you Caryl, is what defines a Caribbean writer?

PHILLIPS: It depends on who is defining a Caribbean writer. If you ask an academic, they will give you one definition. If you ask a publisher they will give you another definition. From my point of view as a writer if you have any kind of association with the Caribbean by heritage, interest in the region, cultural politics in the region, [or connection]by birth, then you are a Caribbean writer. It just seems to me that by your heritage, by your interests and by your commitments. People discover the Caribbean and an affiliation for the Caribbean at different stages of their lives. Edwidge Danticat's relationship to the Caribbean is different from Derek Walcott's. But it certainly cannot be to do with your address. What I write about and what label people choose to apply to me, has absolutely nothing to do with me. I go into a bookstore, I don't know where I can look for my work in a bookstore. Whether to look under literature, Caribbean literature, black literature, if they have a section ... I don't know, I don't know where to look. Similarly with syllabuses, I get taught under post colonial, British, Caribbean, global, so I wouldn't define it. I have given up trying to define it.

DOLACE: So Caryl, what is your impetus behind what you do as a writer?

PHILLIPS: Well, you only write because you feel you have something to say. You don't have anything to say you shouldn't bother writing because its too difficult. So you write because ... the simplest definition of writing is that you have a story to tell and you hope to be able to tell that story using the best words but you must have something to say. I am not a writer because I feel that's my job. I am a writer because I have something to say.

DOLACE: So if you weren't writing what else would you do?

PHILLIPS: I would maybe teach. I would maybe play my golf. Any number of other things. There is nothing special about writing, it just happens to be my job, it happens to be what I want to do, and it happens to be because I have something to say. If I wake up one morning and I have no stories that are urgently pressing upon me, I hope I have the common sense not to write and leave the storytelling to other people.

DOLACE: So this is a question we ask of other contexts of other Caribbean writers: What if there were no commercial success? For example, what if someone were to say, Caryl you might think you have a story to tell, but oh, well, I am not going to publish you?

PHILLIPS: Every writer lives in fear of that happening. That one day they will feel they have something urgent to say and that since this is a business the publishers may decide, you may think this is urgent, and you may think its compelling but we don't think its particularly interesting or commercially viable. Who knows what you do at that point? I don't know what I would do. I don't know if you try X number of other publishers. If everybody said no, it would probably be a huge blow to the ego and to the spirit and I don't know whether one would continue in that situation. I do think though that this is what a lot of people live in fear of, particularly in this current climate where the literary fiction that one believes in is becoming increasingly backed into a corner with a type of popular fiction that is on the ascendancy.

JACQUELINE BISHOP: I have two questions related to that: The first one is, when did you realize you were a writer?

PHILLIPS: Well there are two things: One is realizing that you are a writer and then there is realizing that you *want* to be a writer. Realizing that I *want* to be a writer

happened to me when I was about 20. Quite young. Realizing that I was a writer is something that happened significantly after that. It took many years before I would write on the immigration form where it said occupation; it took many years before I wrote “writer.” It took a few books before I felt that that was a term that was applicable to me. I think the impulse to want to be a writer came first. Now, a lot of the time when I go through immigration, I just put teacher.

JACQUELINE: And the second question was about publishing: Was that a difficult road for you, trying to get published?

PHILLIPS: I was lucky in that I had written and had plays produced in London before I wrote the first novel. So when I sent the first novel in blind submission to a publisher at least there was a little tiny bit of name recognition because I had a couple of plays on, on kind of fringe theaters, not big major theatres, but small studio-type theaters, so I think the publishers were reluctant to throw it immediately on to the rubbish pile. But having said that and said, wonderful, they read it and said, well, we don’t think so but if you can look at it again and make some changes. And I did and then they said if you could look at it again. So it wasn’t any easy straightforward route. But I’m not kidding myself that I was helped by the fact that I had written plays.

DOLACE: Your first two books were Caribbean based so to speak. Where did that world spring from? I know you left St. Kitts when you were four months old. So how did you become familiar with than world?

PHILLIPS: When I was 22 I went back to the Caribbean with my mother for the first time. When she left with me when as a baby in the late 50’s she’d never been back. We didn’t have any money growing up. We couldn’t afford to buy a plane ticket from England back with her. And of course it was a big psychological, emotional and cultural shock for me, having grown up in England. Having felt that I didn’t understand the flora and fauna of this world. I had no idea what the trees were called, I had no ideas what the flowers were called. I had never been in hot sunshine in December. Everything about the place was alien to me, apart from the fact that, of course, I was born there. So, out of an attempt to reconcile these huge ambiguities I realized that right in front of me was the subject matter because they were countless numbers of people like me in New York, in Toronto, in London, who also knew that they were Caribbean to some extent but actually

had no cultural point of reference with the place. That's why my first books were concerned with trying to write myself into the landscape. Passages of those books are very descriptive of just landscape because I was trying to understand how to describe the landscape. I could describe the English countryside quite well, because that's what I had seen all my life. But I needed to be able to describe this, because, this was a part of me. Even if I did not recognize it, people recognized me.

DOLACE: How so?

PHILLIPS: Because they are family. They knew. They remembered me. They remembered the photographs that had been sent back. They were in frames on the mantelpiece. I saw photographs of myself growing up in what seemed to me to be strangers' houses, because I did not know these aunts and these uncles, and then you realize that there is a whole narrative, a whole part of your life that was hidden. But that was you too, and so it was impossible for me to then turn and deny – not that I intended to or ever wished to – but it was absolutely impossible to deny that the Caribbean wasn't an essential component in who I was, because I saw the evidence on the mantelpieces. I saw the look in people's faces when they saw me. And I felt the emotional connection to certain people. My great grandmother ... I had never seen her before and immediately we just bonded. That gave me an emotional space, which the only way I could fill in that was to try and write about it.

DOLACE: Do you feel that St. Kitts is home?

PHILLIPS: Ah, home, is probably one of the more problematic words for Caribbean people. You know Caribbean people have always had a multiple sense of home. More so than any people in the world. I mean, here you are in a region of the world where Africa met Europe on somebody else's soil. To me for 400 years the notion of home has been a problem for Caribbean people, whether you are in the Caribbean or whether you are out of the Caribbean. I am no different. I feel we are in a city now, in New York, which of course is the great city of rootlessness. I feel equally at home here as I do when I was sitting in my house as I was a couple days ago in St. Kitts. The only difference is, in a way; St. Kitts has no choice but to take me in. I was born there. The poet Robert Frost says, home is the place where when you have to go there, they have no

choice but to take you in. America doesn't have to take me in. Britain doesn't have to take me in. But I feel that St. Kitts does.

JACQUELINE: When you were growing up in North England, wasn't St. Kitts brought into that landscape any at all?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

JACQUELINE: So why was the island so alien to you when you returned?

PHILLIPS: St. Kitts was brought in and discussed and obviously all the forms I had to fill in I had to write down St. Kitts. But most first-generation migrant parents, particularly to England at that period of time, were very careful because of the racism in Britain and because the predominant cultural political mantra from the white community was, "why don't you go back to where you come from?" So my parents in common with my cousins in England, their parents as well, and my friends who were West Indian or of West Indian background, the parents were very wary of filling your head with too much about home, because they really wanted you to feel that Britain was your home. They were working hard 9-5 everyday to make sure that you had a future in this country called Britain. To make sure that you had access to the education system. To make sure that you could advance yourself. They were putting up with being called "nigger" and all sorts of things on the factory floor for you, not for them! For you! To start waxing nostalgic, if you like, about the place that you had never seen, that was left behind, there was always a fear that it would confuse the kids. And that's why one was aware of where you came from and you saw the photographs, and of course my mother cooked the food and we had family get together and we listened to calypsos and we supported the West Indies cricket team like crazy, but it only went so far. Because they were also very keen to say: Remember, you are British too. And I have talked to a lot of people of my generation about this, and its shocking how everybody had the same experience.

JACQUELINE: I guess that's probably one of the differences with West Indians in America. I was reading Audre Lorde and she was saying that her parents were very keen for her to understand that America was *not* her home!

PHILLIPS: Precisely. But that's also part, as I am sure you know, of the often fractious relationship between African Americans and West Indians. Because, there was a distinction instilled into the souls of a lot of West Indians in America that you have a

home. You are not American and you are certainly not African American. Whereas in Britain because there wasn't a viable discernible non-white population, apart from the Pakistani and Indian population, you were it. So, you were always going to stand out. So it was a strange, a different type of upbringing and it wasn't always comfortable and I often tease my mother about it to this day: I say why didn't we know more? Why didn't you say more? And in her defense she always says, I didn't want to confuse you.

DOLACE: What was it like growing up in North England knowing that your roots were somewhere else?

PHILLIPS: You grew up with tremendous difficulty. I mean, it was not always comfortable. Because, like a lot of Caribbean people, you had access to two modes of communication. Two modes of living. You live one kind of discourse at school where you play football and listen to pop music as all the other kids, white kids, and then at home you had another way of behaving. I remember at school I was on the football team and we liked all the English soccer teams and then at home when my brother and me played tennis we used to fight to see who would be Arthur Ash! So you get used to basically living a home life where you turn on the TV and hoped to see a black face, and it was big news if you saw a black face on TV back in the 60's, 70's on TV. And at school: you *were* the black face.

DOLACE: I image that made for a very alienated existence.

PHILLIPS: My brothers and I always said, you learned two things really fast: you learn how to run and how to fight! And you had to know which one to employ. One of my brother's is a psychotherapist who specializes in dealing with mental problems in the black community in Britain, and some people did not learn to run and suffered problems of mental health. Problems of break downs of all sorts. So, if you lucky you survive with a bit of humor and seeing the nonsense of it; and if you weren't so lucky you got really angry and really pissed off.

JACQUELINE: Do you think things have changed any for blacks growing up in England today?

PHILLIPS: Yes, my niece is sixteen today and she lives in an entirely different world than I did. I spoke to her this morning and the way she carries herself, the way she goes about her business at school, it is a much more confident sense of her entitlement to

participate in British life than my generation. We were always: What did you say? Oh, yeah? She doesn't have that kind of nervous anxiety which I think that a lot of my generation felt. The way that people of my generation dealt with it was through books, some became activists. When I look at my niece she comes across as someone who has been called a nigger and will be called a nigger but has a more witty response to that than I would ever have.

DOLACE: So then, when you went back to St. Kitts at 22 how did it help to shape your identity?

PHILLIPS: Going back meant that I had to understand, not sweep under the carpet, but I had to understand who I was and that meant that I had to understand the Caribbean. All four of my grandparents were born on this small island which is 12 miles long by 6 miles wide. All four of them were born there and I was born there. All their anxieties, which they took on the ship with them to England, both of my parents, came from having grown up in this place. They first met and decided to get married there. They first thought of having a child, me, in St. Kitts. They had me in St. Kitts and then they decided to come to England. So this whole part of my history is there. So I could no longer think of myself, not that I ever had done, it would be a fantasy to think of myself as a British child. It made me much more interested in the Caribbean.

DOLACE: Did going back engender a more fractured kind of consciousness in relation to England?

PHILLIPS: Hindsight is always 20/20. You look back and you see how you got over, but I wasn't thinking that strategically. I was thinking about making sure that every penny I earned, every chance I got, I got on a plane and I came back to St. Kitts. I was in St. Kitts in the early 80's I was there all the damn time. One of my brothers was working there. Was an engineer there. My girlfriend then, she was a lawyer in St. Kitts and so most of the 80's I was in St. Kitts. I bought land there as early as 1981 because I was determined to have some kind of St. Kitts identity. I certainly wasn't ever thinking of living in America. My notion of what I was doing was making sure that I nurtured and fed the Caribbean side of me. The British side of me was certainly taken care of, by nature of upbringing. So my main thought was to nurture the Caribbean side of me. Not in a selfless way, but because I knew it would help me as a writer as well.

JACQUELINE: So your first book that was published was *Final Passage* and what were you trying to do in that novel?

PHILLIPS: I was trying to give the story of a lot of people whose story hadn't been told by people of my generation. Lamming had told the story of the immigrants, Sam Selvon had told the story in *The Lonely Londoners*, so people of that generation had said what happened to them when they came over on the ship. But the kids, none of the kids had ever told the story of what happened to their parents? So I wanted to tell the story, if you like, from my generation's point of view. Try to recreate, reimagine that journey.

JACQUELINE: It's funny, because when I read *Final Passage*, I was reading *The Lonely Londoners* at the same time, and I could see the connections. The book also reminded me of Jean Rhys's work in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the absolute abandonment of that female character at the end and the wish to return to the Caribbean at all costs.

PHILLIPS: I think you were probably seeing correctly. I mean, Jean Rhys was somebody I was reading a lot in the early 80's and deliberately so. I went to and stayed at the hotels she stayed in deliberately in Paris ...the rootless, slightly dislocated person all throughout her life.

JACQUELINE: The thing about that female character, though, in *Final Passage*, she was so rootless in a certain kind of way. Probably it was wishful thinking, but she never seemed to realize herself in that relationship and she just never...

DOLACE: ... seem to come into her own as a Caribbean woman or as a woman...

PHILLIPS: Well, that's because it maybe a different story if she had stayed in England. What happened to a lot of Caribbean marriages is that you move from a largely matriarchal society, which is the Caribbean, to an extremely patriarchal society, which is Britain and something happens in that journey in terms of gender power shifting. So many marriages mashed-up in Britain because the role that the women were to play in Caribbean society she was not able to play that in British society because British society is patriarchal. So a lot of strong women or potentially strong women found themselves marooned in a society such as Britain.



JACQUELINE: The thing that really fascinated me in those two first books, *Final Passages* and *A State of Independence*, was in fact gender relations and gender politics and I wanted to talk a little bit about that. I hear everything you are saying about British society and how patriarchal it is, but that relationship in *Final Passage* was in serious trouble even before she made the crossing to London. I was just having a hard time trying to understand – I had seen it in real life – I was trying to understand how someone would become attached to someone as detached as that man was? That was the part where I was coming up highly frustrated.

DOLACE: Basically, you want to say Caryl why the woman didn't just get the hint and leave the man alone?

PHILLIPS: I have no answer to that. What do you want me to say? That's the book. That's what happened. That's the story. I am not writing gender politics here, this is fiction. This is not some kind of thesis to fit in with somebody's preconceived notion of what constitutes character. This is just real life. In this novel, the woman throws herself under a train in *Anna Karenina*. Presumably that's not how you think women should behave either.

JACQUELINE: Let's move on to a *State of Independence*, and I guess that falls under trying to write yourself into Caribbean literature again. I have to admit that was probably my favorite book of all the books, because, well, probably I could more closely identify with that character. But I wanted you to talk a little bit about what it was that that main character – I understand the title and the time that he came back – but what was the independence suppose to be one or to?

PHILLIPS: That book might be your favorite but I don't know if I can answer the question. The independence ... obviously it is political independence that we are talking about, also a notion of personal independence in terms of family. But to be honest, so much water has passed under the bridge since then that I am not entirely sure that I can give a properly cogent answer. But obviously there is some notion of independence, the larger notion of political independence working against the idea that no man is an island. You need your family; you need a certain rootedness.

JACQUELINE: But with his mother, in some ways I am waiting for that confrontation between him and his mother and she just disappears ... and he has just return. What is he going to do after returning to this island?

PHILLIPS: I don't know either. Presumably he thought he was going to fit in.

JACQUELINE: Do you think he is going to stay there ... do you think he is going to stay on St. Kitts ... stay on the island now?

PHILLIPS: Wherever "the island" might be! The thing I remember most about the end of that novel is the cable wires from America as a new form of colonialism begins to take over. Whether I am going to stay, I am not sure. I think the idea is that he wanted to stay, but whether he can stay, or whether he is basically now mortgaged with these years of silence in England, mortgaged his ability to effectively communicate and participate in his society, I think that is the suggestion.

JACQUELINE: I think with that what that novel did effectively was shift the locus of power: it is no longer England people want to get to anymore, but America. That's correct, right?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

JACQUELINE: When you are writing, do you start from a character or an idea?

PHILLIPS: Characters, always! No novel begins with an idea, it won't fly. It all comes from character. Everything comes from character.

JACQUELINE: What's that process like?

PHILLIPS: Painful.

DOLACE: How do you construct those characters?

PHILLIPS: If you knew how to do it, you would be writing many more books than I do write. The reason why people like Michael Crichton or John Grisham can write two or three books per year is because there are no characters. Its all plot based. Literary fiction takes time. The gestation period for literary fiction is connected to character. If any writer was able to tell you how to do that, they should put it in a bottle and sell it. They would make a lot of money. You just don't know. Characters appear to you, you think, think, think. Characters will drive the book. You need to know the characters. You need to understand them. It takes along time to understand them. I have no idea. Not a clue. You are thinking about a particular subject and then a voice appears. Toni

Morrison says, I don't know about my characters until I hear a voice. That's one way of getting a character. Other people say, I know my character when I know exactly what they would dress in ... how they would dress themselves in the morning. So, everybody have a different way of getting close to their characters ... voice ... appearance ... rhythm of speech, but nobody can tell you how to pluck them out of the air, because you just don't know.

JACQUELINE: Right, but what is *your* process like?

DOLACE: Yes, when do *you* know that this is a character for *you*?

PHILLIPS: It differs for me. Sometime it's a voice, sometimes it's their ability to speak. Sometimes you feel that they are starting to do things that come as a surprise to you. You want them to live in such and such a city, and suddenly they get on a damn bus, and you say, ok, there is something about this character now, which, it has its own volition. But they are all different.

JACQUELINE: But what I am trying to get from you is: When do you know that this is a character that is *insisting* a book upon you.

PHILLIPS: That is when I stop doing the other things that I am doing and buckle down and get on with it. Actually, that is a very good word too, *insist*. Because they start to make demands upon you. It's no longer that you are squeezing in your writing around something else. You know that there is a story now...

JACQUELINE: Because that is how it is for me.

PHILLIPS: And that is why I say *insist* is a good word and a good way of putting it. But what is it that gets you to the point where you feel that insistence because characters come by so many different routes.

JACQUELINE: No, I think you have answered the question, the characters begin to insist themselves upon you.

PHILLIPS: No, I think *you* answered it! Like I say that word of yours *insist* is a good word to use.

JACQUELINE: Because that is something we keep coming back to in *Calabash* interviews, is how do you know that this is the one that will sustain a whole novel.

PHILLIPS: Well, because, sometimes you know you get it wrong. Sometimes you begin thinking a particular novel is going to be about this person and as you are

writing it, another person begins speaking with a more declarative insistence. And that is part of the weird mystery of this process.

JACQUELINE: And so what are they like for you, these characters: Are they real people?

PHILLIPS: They are alive in my head. If they are not alive for me, then they are not alive for the reader. But they have to live first in my head. And that is what all fiction is, all writing is, it is all deeply imbued in one thing: hope. It's your own personal bag of fears transmuted into some form of literature for the reader. You hope that they are feeling fearful for this character, you hope that they hope that this character gets over, you hope that they are feeling equally frustrated that this character isn't doing this or isn't doing that's what storytelling should be, that magical moment where you think, for God's sake, do something about this situation! And conversely you are hoping that they are thinking, this is a terrible situation and why can't you see!

JACQUELINE: Well then Caryl I got caught up in the hope of the situation in *Final Passage*. Its not a disengagement, its an engagement, where you get so caught up in the character's life that you just want to shake her and say, stop it!

PHILLIPS: But of course!

JACQUELINE: You can't help it, you end up shouting to her: Do something!

PHILLIPS: Well that is what life is! That is what fiction is! I spent my whole life reading. When you read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* that's what you think! You think, for God's sake, pull yourself together girl! When you read *Madam Bovary*, you thinking, lady what are you playing at?

JACQUELINE: So do you ever get frustrated with some of your characters?

PHILLIPS: Of course!

DOLACE: Which characters most frustrate you?

PHILLIPS: No one individual comes to mind more than anybody else. All I will say is that all of them to some extent, make you feel, that you wish they could look over their shoulder and see what was coming. Or you wish they would look up ahead and realize that the path that they was travelling on is going to get them in trouble. But that is a human condition. People who live perilous lives surround us. And we can't blame them for that. I don't judge my characters.

JACQUELINE: So I want to move on to talk a little bit about *Higher Ground* because the structure was so radically different in that novel and I wondered what accounted for that structure?

PHILLIPS: I think that in between the first two novels and *Higher Ground*, I traveled for *The European Tribe*, which effectively spun me out of just the Caribbean. I began to try to make connections between ... or I began to see connections between various thematic impulses – loneliness, alienation, etc—that I came across time and time again as I traveled across Europe. So when I sat down to write new fiction again after that, I didn't confidant enough to just set something completely in Britain or completely in the Caribbean. I basically wanted to do a bit of everything. And I also wanted to formally and thematically do something different from the naturalistic novel.

JACQUELINE: *Higher Ground* was a clear break. Some of your characters became larger than life. Rudy Williams, for example in the second section of *Higher Ground*, and the character Cambridge in the novel of the same name. These characters seem to almost be bursting at the seams for their own ...

DOLACE: Story; their own full text.

JACQUELINE: For me the first body of work is your first two novels, and the other works are variations on a theme, perhaps because of *The European Tribe*? The characters are so alienated. Do you see that?

PHILLIPS: No.

JACQUELINE: Do you see a break between the works before and After *The European Tribe*? A progression?

PHILLIPS: I see the next book. I think both *A Distant Shore* and *Dancing in the Dark* are both structurally and culturally rooted.

JACQUELINE: Well, I suppose there are three distinct progressions then.

PHILLIPS: You are saying that! I am not saying anything! People should be very wary about deconstructing their own work. That's your job and that's fine, and that's other people's job. I would just say that when you say you see the first two novels and then you see alienation well that is not structural alienation nor thematic alienation because *A Distant Shore* is a very rooted English book and *Dancing in the Dark* is really rooted in geography and time in the United States of America, so I don't really don't

consider them to be in the same either thematic or structural tradition of say, *The Nature of Blood*, which is all over the place.

DOLACE: I think what happens is the kinds of characters who seem to leap out of the different texts. That's what seems to connect the texts, even if structurally they are different or thematically, because I gather that there are the first two, and then the trilogy is deals more with the black Atlantic and the horrors of slavery. The characters themselves are speaking in all these various ways out of various places....

JACQUELINE: How to you feel personally about Cambridge and Rudy Williams? They are such forceful characters. Does he resonate with you still, Cambridge?

PHILLIPS: You have to remember that it's been eighteen years since I wrote those books. None of these characters resonate with me anymore.

DOLACE: So the characters insist themselves on you and then they are discharged into the text and then you can move on?

PHILLIPS: Yes, because I would be walking around with fifty people in my head. So between criticism and the books ... I don't read what critics say anyway. When I am a writer, I am a writer. When the book is published I am an author. The only relationship that I have with the characters is when I give readings.

JACQUELINE: Do you ever re-read any of your books?

PHILLIPS: No. I have never re-read a book.

DOLACE: But your characters, you have to fall in love with some of them?

PHILLIPS: In terms of what you said about falling in love with some of your characters, of course you do. But like falling in love in real life, sometimes you have to move on. But that's a good point, you *do* fall in love. Jane Austen is not an author I like very much, but my favorite novel of hers is *Mansfield Park* because in the penultimate chapter she slips up and addresses her character as "my Fanny". That is the only time the veneer ever was breached. Yet, I do know that she had to go on and write another novel. So you do find that you are filled with hope, you really hope, that whatever you went through as a writer in writing these characters that always the passion and the emotion end up on the page. You hope, yes, you hope, because as writers you do not know for sure.

DOLACE: The image I am getting of you as an author is that you are like a medium -- a medium communicating between two worlds.

PHILLIPS: I am not quite that spiritual enough to say that, but at the time when I am writing I do need to clear space, to use your image, your metaphor of a medium, to receive new people. To receive new stories. You have to clear space and move on to the next thing if there is a next thing and if there isn't a next thing that's fine. The only thing that I require from a reader is just someone who is respectful of my books.

JACQUELINE: What is the next thing for Caryl?

PHILLIPS: Another book.

JACQUELINE: *Foreigners*?

PHILLIPS: Yes, it will be out in September.

JACQUELINE: And, after *Foreigners*, are we engaged in a next thing right now?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I have a play opening in the fall in Britain. I wrote a play, which I haven't done for a long time. And beginning now because the book is about to be published, there is space to think about other things.

JACQUELINE: So there are characters already whispering?

PHILLIPS: Yes, there are. Maybe you felt this way when you finished your book. Sometimes I think I might take six months off ...

JACQUELINE: But they are insistent.

PHILLIPS: Yes.

JACQUELINE: What is the difference you think between playwriting and fiction writing? Is there a difference?

PHILLIPS: Playwriting I think is both more fun and more and more frustrating.

DOLACE: Are they characters the same way in your plays as they are in your fiction.

PHILLIPS: No. The final completion of the characters in the play depends upon the actor. Whereas I can do the whole caboodle if you like with the characters on the page, with drama you really need an actor. An actor can improve that character, can clarify that character, can make you think. That's why I say it's more fun, but can also be more frustrating because you find yourself having to scramble back at your desk because

until you see something in the rehearsal room it is not that clear to you. It is also not your art more, because others share in that responsibility of realizing a play. It is essentially the art form of the director. Theatre used to be the writers art form, people used to think that way about a theater. People no longer think that way about theater. They think that way about a book or a collection of poems.

JACQUELINE: Do you think play writing led you to fiction?

PHILLIPS: No. I always wanted to write fiction before I wrote plays.

DOLACE: What helped you to write fiction?

PHILLIPS: Reading. You read.

JACQUELINE: So Caryl, to wrap up: let's say that our Calabash readers know that we are going to be interviewing Caryl Phillips, so they say: Caryl tell us one book that we should just curl up and read; who is it going to be?

PHILLIPS: Well, since this a Caribbean audience and a Caribbean readership, they should read Derek Walcott's poem, "The Light of the World."

JACQUELINE: Great choice. With that we conclude and we thank you for the interview.

New York City  
25 August, 2007



# Calabash

A JOURNAL OF CARIBBEAN ARTS AND LETTERS

Volume 4, Number 2 / Spring-Summer 2007

## Information about this work:

---

*(RE) ROOTED: AN INTERVIEW WITH CARYL PHILLIPS:*

**By:** *Jacqueline Bishop and Dolace McLean*

**Start Page:** 139

**URL:** <http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/vol4no2/0402139.pdf>

---

*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

*Calabash* is published by New York University. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher information may be obtained at: [\*\*http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/about.html\*\*](http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/about.html)

*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*  
© 2007 New York University