



# The Atlantic Sound

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## **The Atlantic Sound** Caryl Phillips

Liverpool, England; Accra, Ghana; Charleston, South Carolina. These were the points of the triangle forming the major route of the transatlantic slave trade. And these are the cities that acclaimed author Caryl Phillips explores--physically, historically, psychologically--in this wide-ranging meditation on the legacy of slavery and the impact of the African diaspora on the life of a place and its people.

In a brilliantly layered narrative, Phillips combines his own observations with the stories of figures from the past. The experiences of an African trader in nineteenth-century Liverpool are contrasted with Phillips's experience of the city, where, as a Caribbean black, he is scorned by the city's "native" blacks. His interactions with American Pan-Africanists coming "home" to Ghana (and with those Ghanaians for whom leaving seems the best hope) are paired with the account of a British-trained African minister in eighteenth-century Accra who turned a blind eye to the slave trade flourishing around him. The story of a white judge who disrupted "the natural order" in Charleston by integrating the Democratic primary in 1947 is set against Phillips's search for remnants of the "pest houses" where slaves were "seasoned" before being sold.

Phillips weaves these narrative threads together with acute insight and a novelist's grasp of time, place and character. The result is a provocative and unexpected book, at once historically illuminating and profoundly affecting.

## **The Atlantic Sound Details**

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Author : Caryl Phillips

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## From Reader Review The Atlantic Sound for online ebook

### Ryan Bissoon says

Brilliant beyond words. This is required reading for anyone with slightest interest in the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade. Phillips has Naipaul's keen eye, but without the emotional distance. This lends his writing an acuity and makes his observations free of bias. Rarely is travel writing this unputdownable.

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### Leslie Graff says

This book was accidentally put on a reading list on grad school by a prof who dismissed it as not falling correctly into the category we were studying – the contemporary novel. And so it sat unread on the shelf for many years.

I've used Phillips' essays from *A New World Order* many times in teaching but this book always seemed interesting in its conceit yet, as my prof noted, not easily fitting into any category. That observation in itself is probably fitting considering Phillips' point here and throughout his work about the multiplicities of identity of all diaspora writers, all diaspora people.

Here, he moves from Liverpool to Africa to the United States, with an unexpected journey to Israel thrown in to show just how complicated the international identity can be. He moves between a terse first-person recounting of his experiences in a voice that acknowledges he's trying to withhold judgement and a more rich, engaging voice of the historian, telling the stories of specific figures in the slave trade. Although as a reader, I wanted more of the history, I enjoyed the juxtaposition and rarely found it disconcerting as often happens when authors try to move between narrative styles.

The book doesn't give you a sense of completion or fullness as I was expecting. When I read a work of history, I want to have a sense of 'having the whole story' or at least feeling like I know for certain more than I did when I started reading. Here, the modern experience undercuts so much of the history sections that I didn't know how to feel about any of these observations. Obviously there's the horror of the slave trade but how do we respond to it today? Should we make historic pilgrimages? Should Africa become the home for monuments or museums, as one person calls it the "black person's Holocaust?" Just as we visit Dachau to remember and learn from our past, should we do the same with the African coast? And if so, who should make these spaces? What kind of tourism are you encouraging when you create such monuments?

Overall, there was a sense of disappointment, or that Phillips' experience is never quite what one thinks it should be as he visits these locations. Yet who is to judge what is "right" or "wrong" about how people experience and reflect upon history, especially those people who were wronged by the atrocities? Is Pan-Africanism a solution? Is Africa "home"? What about a celebration that you don't enjoy? Are you inherently critiquing the people if you're annoyed by events starting late?

While I wanted more of the history and that sense of getting the whole story, I quickly realized that wasn't the point of the book and in fact Phillips was criticizing that desire itself, or was he? There's no clear answer here, no declaration of the right way of being or the right way of experiencing this history. And for once, I enjoyed that type of book.

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### Andrew says

Well researched and interesting personal encounter with some historical aspects of the slave trade. The almost haphazard narrative can be irritating, and at the outset you mistake this lack of warp and weft for

laziness. Phillips also adopts a disinterested position towards his participants at the cost of our engagement, but the accumulation of accounts overcomes this and we end up as participants in his journey. As reportage it lacks bite, particularly in comparison to actual accounts of slavery (like, say, those in the Faber Book of Reportage). That said, I really enjoyed this book and must now visit Liverpool's International Slavery Museum to find out more ([www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/)).

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### **dead letter office says**

I used to see the author from afar and have always been curious about his writing. As usual, I never gathered the courage to talk to him, but I finally got around to reading something he wrote. This starts slow and gains strength as it goes. Parts of it are historical fiction, parts are autobiographical, and parts are history. It chronicles the author's travels (England, Ghana, the Caribbean, America, Israel), and bits and pieces of history (an African trader visits England in the 1800s, an African-American spiritual group founds a colony in Israel, a white judge and his wife light the fuse that eventually blows up the separate-but-equal doctrine and in the process burn all the social bridges in Charleston). *The Atlantic Sound* follows the echoes of the Atlantic slave trade for five hundred years, from 1500 to 2000. The unifying theme is the enduring, shifting, kaleidoscopic African diaspora.

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### **Portia Andrew says**

This book contains several travel narratives of Caryl Phillips all with an overarching theme of the African slave trade. "Where do you come from, where do you really come from?" is the question that has Phillips irritated throughout. I don't blame him. People from so many places made assumptions based on the colour of his skin.

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### **Christy Collins says**

This book seemed patchy and uneven to me. There were sections I very much enjoyed and found very illuminating on slavery, the slave trade and its effects on our world and societies today. Some of it was quite entertaining and the complexities he teases out are necessary, important observations that I am glad to have encountered. Overall I suspect I may enjoy Phillips' fiction more than this nonfiction/travel literature.

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### **Sarah KKKKKKKK irnon says**

a fellow West Indian who writes about the transatlantic slave trade, Mr Phillips lets his own feelings seep through, but he tames them and moves with the stories of people and places of past. The Guardian reviewed this book a few years ago, and referred to it as "historically illuminating" they weren't half wrong. This book is a permanent fixture on the table next to my sleeping vessel.

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## Rachel Svendsen says

This book is part travel book, part history book, and covers several trips the author made in order to study the African diaspora and look for global community among blacks.

Even if that topic is of no interest to you, the historical sections were fascinating. One of them went deep into the roots of Liverpool, England to discuss its key role in the slave trade, as well as more current issues of race within the community. The other was about Charleston, South Carolina and the life of District Judge J. Waties Waring. Both of these sections were completely new history to me, and Phillip's way of telling them was both refreshing and honest.

Another part of the narrative that I found refreshing and honest, was the immigration story of Phillips' guide in Ghana during Panafest. Phillips almost tells the story twice, and by this challenges the classic stereotypical narrative people often hear or imagine once you discover someone has been deported from a country or denied a visa.

I had to read this for University, and many of my classmates found Phillips' tone overly negative. What I saw in him was a skepticism of the idea that the entirety of who we are is to be found in our ancestral roots. But this doesn't mean he's completely anti the idea of seeking out your historical origins. He describes things very cynically at times, but he also places against that cynicism the actions of some of the members of the diaspora that he encounters. If you're paying attention you can see him tracing the community among them in a soft hopeful way. And even if you don't agree with his ultimate analysis of global community, his book is a fascinating study of the results of the transatlantic slave trade on the black diaspora.

Phillips' writing is lovely, but I wouldn't necessarily call this book an easy read. It was dense, though not heavy, and as much as I adored it, the reading itself was slow going. The most rewarding part was the last chapter and the epilogue. Something changed with his writing style and it became like poetry. It happened slowly and subtly. I looked back and couldn't tell where it even started. By the time I got to the very last paragraph of the book I just didn't want it to end, the writing was just so beautiful.

I will definitely be reading more of Phillips' work in the future. He appealed to me with the way his writing was both beautiful and intellectually stimulating.

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## Sophie says

"It's like sleeping on top of a washing machine that is stuck on the spin cycle."

"The sea is heavy, and I imagine under the circumstances I am not doing too badly."

"They clogged the river and occupied the endless rows of imposing docks, the masts of the sailing vessels standing tall like a forest of leafless trees."

"...he had no desire to put himself into a position where he had either to defend his people, or chastize his hosts for their uncivilized behavior."

"A wide, murky river, it appears -- at least to my eyes -- to be singularly uninspiring."

"Philip Quaake now took his place in the remarkable twilight world of inter-dependence and fusion which characterized the relationship between the native and the European in this period before the concrete

formality and racial separation of the colonial period."

"We smell of mists of powdered memories."

rearranged by grief

"Almost one third of all the Africans who entered the North American world in captivity passed through the gateway of Charleston, South Carolina."

"All in general came armed after their fashion, some with assegais and shields, others with bows and quivers of arrows, with many, in place of a helmet, wearing a monkey skin, the head of which was entirely studded with teeth of beasts--all these their devices to demonstrate their ferocity as warriors being so unseemly that they moved one to laughter rather than to fear. Those who among them were considered nobles had, as a token of their nobility, two pages following them, one of whom carried a round wooden seat to them to sit on when they cared to rest, and the other carried a battle shield. And these nobles wore a number of rings and jewels of gold in their hair and beard...The King, moving away, stood aside so that his men could approach Diego de Azambuja to do the same. But the way in which they snapped their fingers differed from that of the kin, for they touched him after wetting a finger in their mouth and cleaning it on their chest--a gesture a person of lower standing makes to one of higher--as a guarantee of safety made here to princes, since they say that poison can be carried in a finger unless it is cleaned away." --Rui de Pina and Joao de Barros Portuguese scribes.

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## Sam says

I don't know how interesting this text would be for anyone who doesn't care about formulations of diasporic identity and texts that challenge genre boundaries, but I personally enjoyed this book. Though it's not a book of theory, it almost reads like one because of the way it dramatizes theory (does that make sense?). I love Stuart Hall with every cell in my body, but I have to say that I enjoyed an approach to diasporic identity that didn't scream THEORY! That's not a critique of Hall, not at all, but as Phillips' use of multiple genres and voices elucidates, the black diaspora is an incredibly complex thing that cannot be reduced to a single genre, a single discipline, a single form. Hence, Phillips' deployment of memoir, fiction, history, journalism, amongst other things, seemed highly appropriate. I think it works to refuse that notion of authenticity that pervades identity politics (on Pan-Africanism, a narrator states, "Africa is not a cure. Africa is not a psychiatrist." Or something to that effect). That being said, it was difficult to tell when one genre began and another ended, and if Phillips was talking or if it was a narrator; in different circumstances, such ambiguities would have probably frustrated me, but I guess I was feeling like a generous reader this time around, and I just went with it. There are many beautiful passages in this book--one that comes to mind is in the middle of the book, one narrator's negotiation of the seemingly innocent question, "where are you from?" Anyway, certainly not everyone's cup of tea, but this book is an important and compelling mediation on identity and belonging.

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## Mike says

Travels of the middle passage: unexpected tone, aim and even subject matter. It's excellent

I picked this book up in the library probably because of its alluring cover image and title, I'll admit it. And I

was prepared to even enjoy what I thought was coming: an intellectual travel book of the Paul Theroux ilk, with perhaps the added sarcasm and chip on the shoulder due any returning British colonial.

It was, however, immediately more interesting and engrossing than any of those books Mr. Theroux has written, and it had even more honesty than Maya Angelou's book about coming to Africa, "All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes." For a long time I was not sure if it was meant to be novel or not. It was certainly a novel idea, to make such trips, one after the other, in the time that one would need to see the places one was visiting (although I get the feeling that he might have strayed further afield in Africa than he did. There is an element of depression at times that was perhaps strongest in Africa, that kept some of his questions from being asked, so that he decided to move on and end any meandering reflection.) He was always interested in talking to people of the places he visited, but not to justify or romanticize about some book-learned image of the place. He aims more to appreciate what the possibilities of the places he visits are now, and then more importantly, what people there feel their history to be.

It is almost as if he goes to visit a relative in each place, (although he never does this) and in the process was not recognized as a visitor or tourist (was not recognised as anything, perhaps, something that helped lend the novel air to the book, and an interesting element of his reflection. I guess it is based upon the narrator's (and author's, I suppose) African heritage, colonial experience, and English mother tongue, despite his never having lived in America, Britain, or Africa.)

I recommend this book as history and even as a novel. I guess it is a new sort of book for this age, frank and real and yet also curiously fictitious. It is hard to put down. I look forward to reading it again.

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### **Valentina Salvatierra says**

A non-fiction book (something like a travelogue combined with historical chronicle) with the writing style of an impeccably refined novel, and that turns out to be more enjoyable and moving than several novels I've read lately. It follows the thoughtful travels of the author through key geographical locations associated to the transatlantic slave trade and its ongoing repercussions for both the African diaspora and the people of other races they interact with.

The book offers surprising insights into the realities and the continued importance of the slave trade, as a cleavage that cannot be put behind simply by changing the laws. From the black British inhabitants of Liverpool who are proud of their long (yet tragic) lineage despite their material deprivation in the present, to the Hebrew Israelites re-settled in what they believe to be their promised land, passing through African Americans anxious to recover their roots in efforts that the author ultimately implies are misguided: the heterogeneous nature of the African diaspora is highlighted throughout, and the book makes no attempts to simplify this complex reality. It intersperses poetry and historical documents along with the author's narrative and reconstruction of emblematic historical events; in this way the book's own polyphonic style underscores the complexities in what is depicted.

Phillips's writing does not offer a clear solution beyond, perhaps, the clear-sighted recognition and education about history. Although he tries not to be judgemental, in passages like this one about African American returnees it's easy to sense his opinion about **those who attempt to simplify, to latch onto pre-conceived notions of what Africa should mean for them:**

"People of the diaspora who expect the continent to solve whatever psychological problems they possess. People of the diaspora who dress the part, have their hair done, buy beads, and fill their spiritual 'fuel tank' in preparation for the return journey to 'Babylon'. They have deep

wounds that need to be healed, but if **'their' Africa** disappoints, then they will immediately accuse 'these Africans' of catering to the white man." (p. 172-173)

While sympathetic, Phillips is also skeptical of various attempts to return to a home that, he intuits, might ultimately be a mirage:

"They tell me they have come home. To a world that does not recognize them. To a land they cannot tame." (p.216)

So is Phillips then being pessimistic? It might seem so, from the way he implies the efforts of returnees to be somewhat futile - but in his beautiful writing one can also sense a deep hopefulness that in acknowledging the past one might build a better future, but that **this does not depend so much on geographical location as it does on state of mind**:

"Here, in this city [Charleston, South Carolina] which 'processed' nearly one-third of the African population who arrived in the United States, a population who were encouraged to forget Africa, to forget their languages, to forget their families, to forget their culture, to forget their dances, five young black women try to remember. Five young black women attempt to release their souls and their spirits." (p. 213)

The clear-sighted recognition of the past, it seems to me after finishing the book, is not just a task for people who come from the African continent, but for everyone who somehow benefits from a capitalist world system which in many ways has its foundations in the atrocities of slavery. Therefore, I'd say this is an appropriate and even necessary read for people beyond the 'African diaspora' as well as those who might be directly touched by it.

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### **Kerri says**

Reading this the second time and it's even better than before.

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### **Chad says**

An excellent, intriguing memoir of one man's expedition of self-discovery, overlying a historical narrative of another man's travel.

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### **DW says**

I guess I just didn't get this book. The historical part in Liverpool, where John Ocansey journeys from Africa to Liverpool to find out what happened to his father's money, was the most interesting part because John is a sympathetic character. Next most interesting were the author's experiences in Ghana, because I've never been there. Judge Waring is also mildly interesting - did he believe in civil rights, or was he really so desperate for friends (because he was ostracized because he divorced and remarried) that he was looking for the blacks to

be friends with? And why will Mansour stock shelves in a grocery store in London (where his visa does not allow him to work) but choose to remain unemployed in Ghana, where he considers such work beneath him?

Other than that, I had a hard time caring about most of the characters. I was particularly put off by the fact that the author keeps describing situations where somebody tries to engage him in conversation and he basically ignores them. I don't know if that's the British thing to do, but he seemed like a jerk to me. He also described a number of his interviews as if he walked in, the person started talking at him without any introductions or small talk, and then he was expected to leave after ten minutes. I'm guessing that he edited his experiences to fit his spacey writing style, but it seemed like he was deliberately characterizing other people as being as cold as he seemed to be. He also seemed to seek out the most unsavory, twisted people to talk to and write about. The experience of reading this book was like wandering around in a chilly fog and occasionally stumbling on arbitrary tableaux of people glaring.

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