

# Celebrating Cultural Hybridity through Storytelling: Othello as a Borderlands Character in Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood*

Una celebración de la hibridación cultural por medio de  
la narración: Otelo como personaje fronterizo en *The  
Nature of Blood*, de Caryl Phillips

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a new approach to Othello's story in Caryl Phillips' polyphonic novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997). The fictional Othello finds himself at the crossroads between different cultures and is struggling to define his identity. Making use of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands theory as exposed in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), this study explores Phillips' Othello as a borderlands character. Accordingly, it is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that, as a borderlands character-narrator, Othello succeeds in bringing together the two hitherto conflicting cultures that he knows (Africa and Venice) through storytelling. Indeed, his narrative proves a transborder testimony that contributes to creating a debate forum where cultural hybridity is celebrated.

**Keywords:** Caryl Phillips; Gloria Anzaldúa; borderlands; cultural hybridity; storytelling.

**Summary:** Introduction. Redefining Identity as a Construct on the Move. The Struggle to Define a Complex Identity. The Evolution in the Writing Process of Othello as a Borderlands Character. The Power of Writing in the Celebration of Hybridity. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** El presente artículo ofrece un nuevo enfoque de la sección de Otelo en la novela polifónica *The Nature of Blood* (1997), de Caryl Phillips. El personaje de Otelo se encuentra a caballo entre distintas culturas y por ello le resulta complicado definir su identidad. Tomando como referencia la teoría expuesta por Gloria Anzaldúa en su obra *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), este trabajo estudia la figura del Otelo en la obra de Phillips como un personaje fronterizo. Finalmente, este estudio demuestra que, como tal, Otelo logra aunar las dos culturas que

conforman su identidad (África y Venecia) mediante la narración de su historia. En cierto modo, la narración de Otelo proporciona una síntesis de estas culturas, previamente en conflicto, y de esta manera se erige como un testimonio transfronterizo que permite la creación de un foro de debate que conmemora la hibridez cultural.

**Palabras clave:** Caryl Phillips; Gloria Anzaldúa; la frontera; hibridez cultural; el arte de la narración.

**Sumario:** Introducción. Redefiniendo la identidad como una construcción en continuo movimiento. La ardua tarea de definir una identidad compleja. La evolución en el proceso de creación de Otelo como personaje fronterizo. El poder de la palabra escrita en la conmemoración de la hibridez. Conclusión.

## INTRODUCTION

The encounter between different cultures has traditionally been shaped by hierarchical issues. In the expansion of Western civilisation in the New World, the contact between the colonisers and the natives was frequently violent and the process of conversion to new cultural and religious values unidirectional. In opposition to this one-way process, in 1940 the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transculturation.” According to Sebastian Jobs and Gesa Mackenthun, transculturation “emphasizes the multilaterality . . . of cultural interaction in colonial settings” (9). Therefore, when relationships emerge between different cultures, not only are the less powerful ones changed, but also the colonisers. In this context, transculturation becomes a two-way process whereby different cultures influence each other.

In the twenty-first century, transculturation has acquired a meaning that is not exclusively applied to colonial settings; rather, it makes reference to the relationships between different cultures in a society characterised by globalisation. Nowadays, globalisation has opened new possibilities for minority groups whose voices had been erased by hegemonic discourses to recall and narrate their experiences via their “counter-histories” (Radstone 10–11). However, in the context of globalisation these potentially subversive histories do not merely attempt to challenge dominant Eurocentric views. More interestingly, it is their main aim to create a dialogue forum between the hitherto conflicting categories of the Self and the Other without giving prominence to either of them. As the philosopher Rosa María Rodríguez-Magda argues, it is precisely this network-like model that present-day society demands: a “transborder” mode of thinking that dissolves the barriers between

supposedly different cultures and that allows for a dialogue between them (30).

Following the demands for a transborder dialogue between cultural identities, this paper attempts to provide a new approach to Caryl Phillips' Othello, one of the central characters in his polyphonic novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997). In one of the five vignette-like (hi)stories composing this fragmented literary work, Shakespeare's Othello is reimagined and reinvented as a character-narrator that examines his identity construction as a newcomer in Europe and as a general who is supposed to lead the Venetian army. However, it is not the purpose of this article to explore Phillips' use of intertextuality as a strategy to subvert the canon (e.g., Galván 188; Sell 203). This paper's endeavour is to examine how Othello uses memory in order to explore the borders within his multifarious cultural identity, informed of both his African origin and his status as a Venetian citizen. Such memory retrieval on the part of Othello might appear to expose the problematics of his cultural multifariousness and the clash between apparently conflicting cultures. However, it is precisely Othello's identity borders that allow for the verbalisation of a fluid, culturally rich testimony that certainly meets the demands for a transcultural and transborder dialogue. In sum, Othello becomes master of his narrative in a setting where his power was remarkably limited, and he ultimately succeeds in destabilising the barriers imposed by colonialism and Eurocentrism through his testimony.

My main contention in this article is that Caryl Phillips' Othello can be read as a borderlands character. This deeply alienated and neglected character-narrator sets his heart on exploring the borders of his liminal identity and ultimately asserting his cultural complexity through storytelling. By making use of memory retrieval and telling his story, Othello succeeds in providing a powerful testimony that enables him to go beyond the border between the centre and the margins. Indeed, Othello struggles to and eventually succeeds in finding a narrative that exposes the intersection between his apparently disconnected identities, which are nevertheless revealed to be in constant dialogue. Therefore, Othello's narrative enables him to transcend identity borders, hence overcoming reductionist discourses on minority cultures and ultimately foregrounding the potential of the borderlands as the "privileged locus of hope for a better world" (Johnson and Michaelsen 3).

In accordance, this article provides a study of Othello as a borderlands character following Gloria Anzaldúa's theory as exposed in her seminal

work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). Though touching on postmodern and postcolonial identities, Anzaldúa's autobiographical text could be said to forward some of the central concerns in our twenty-first century global age, which scholars such as Irena Ateljevic and Rosa María Rodríguez Magda have located in a new paradigm provisionally termed "Transmodernity."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Anzaldúa's liminality makes room for a conversation between different places, sexualities, languages and even literary genres without establishing hierarchies. What this *mestiza* writer seeks is to examine the junction between apparently conflicting elements and eventually overcome the border between them. In terms of identity, this translates into a process whereby Anzaldúa, who finds herself at the crossroads between different cultures, struggles to define her identity and ultimately manages to assert a cultural hybridity that transcends hard-and-fast categorisations.

In each of the sections on the analysis of Othello (sections 2, 3 and 4), there will be a brief presentation of Anzaldúa's borderlands theory before it is applied to the study of Phillips' borderlands character-narrator. This theoretical introduction will pinpoint three aspects in Anzaldúa's theory that connect with Othello's narrative: Anzaldúa's work as a text that firstly exposes the problematics of cultural complexity (section 2 in this article); the gradual emergence of Anzaldúa's autobiography as a powerful testimony on how to integrate opposing realities (section 3); and the culmination of Anzaldúa's (hi)story as a transborder testimony that celebrates cultural hybridity (section 4).

As regards the article's structure, first I will present a revision of some important literature on the present-day demand for a redefinition of identity that allows for a relational dialogue between cultures and societies. As regards my analysis of Othello as a borderlands character, first I will provide an overview of Phillips' novel and briefly describe the state of Othello as a specific individual who finds himself at the crossroads between different cultures and that is struggling to define his identity. After that, I will explore the evolution in the writing process of this character-narrator, especially with regard to his role as creator of a counter-narrative. Finally, I will demonstrate how the act of writing enables him to overcome the differences between the cultures in which he partakes, ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> Ateljevic defines the transmodern paradigm as "a synchronised phenomenon of emerging higher collective consciousness" (200) and maintains that such synchronicity is proof of a general epistemological shift.

creating a (hi)story that both embraces and demands going beyond the acknowledgment of borders.

### 1. REDEFINING IDENTITY AS A CONSTRUCT ON THE MOVE

The impact of globalisation poses a threat to reductionist views of culture as a monolithic construction. Accordingly, Daphne Grace marks the need to redefine the very notion of culture:

While culture has long been defined as the force that defines and delimits societies in terms of fixed spaces, the recent intensification of globalisation means that it is no longer possible to imagine the world as a collection of disparate, autonomous regions. (11)

In this context, by no means can identity be seen as something fixed. Rather, globalisation emerges as an arena for redefining identity as a construct on the move. This allows for the negotiation between the different cultures in which a given individual or community may partake. This dialogic and democratic view of culture and identity is embraced by the critical theorist Homi Bhabha in the formulation of his influential Third Space theory. According to Bhabha, individuals are characterised by their hybridity, that is, they partake in different cultures and identities (216). Accordingly, he elaborates on the complexity of identity by making prominent the concept of “third space”: this is a place in which ambiguities are exposed and negotiated, and that “enables other positions to emerge” (211). This poses a challenge to essentialist views of the Other such as the *either/or* dichotomy, since Bhabha brings to the fore the third space as a fascinating place where the clash of different cultures and identities gives rise to new “positions” (211) and possibilities.

The new reality emerging from the contact between cultures is closely related to the idea of cosmopolitanism, which is defined by Skrbiš and Woodward as openness to “being changed by encounters with difference” (10). According to Mousavi et al., cosmopolitanism ensures a dialogic engagement with the Other aimed at challenging simplistic views of culture (68). Along the same lines, Moraru identifies the need to overcome reductionist views of culture and identity and hence proposes relationality as a rationale for “a new togetherness, for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious and other boundaries” (5). The purpose of relationality is, in words of Moraru, “replacing postmodernism’s

conceptual unit, the nation-state, with an ever more worlded world” (312). Hence, the delimitation of societies in terms of fixed spaces is replaced by a conception of place as fluid, where different identities are continuously interacting with each other.

The interaction between diverse cultures paves the way for the verbalisation of stories that enable minority groups to assert their complex identities. In these circumstances, collective memory plays a fundamental role in the process of giving visibility to the hitherto silenced (hi)stories of minorities. Manier and Hirst provide a comprehensive definition of collective memories as “representations of the past in the minds of the members of a community that contribute to the community’s sense of identity” (253). The function of collective memory is thus to strengthen the identity of a given group, the differences between each individual notwithstanding.

Once the minority communities have managed to achieve this group identity, it would seem reasonable to assess how their (hi)stories interact with those of other cultures. Indeed, Mousavi et al. note that “individuals in the contemporary world rely on a globalized intersectional network of relations and resources to create a sense of personhood and identity” (69). Taking intersectionality and relationality as central concerns, Rothberg proposes the concept of multidirectional memory: “The model of multidirectional memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites” (11). This model allows for the negotiation between cultural differences with a view to transcending reductionist views of cultural identity. Hence, a network of horizontal relationships is displayed between the acts of remembrance of a wide variety of communities. This multidirectional model attempts to show that neither culture prevails over the other; rather, all of them engage in an ever-flowing dialogue that guarantees the achievement of a common ground where the previously distancing borders between cultures can be overcome.

## **2. THE STRUGGLE TO DEFINE A COMPLEX IDENTITY**

The novel analysed in this article gives prominence to the role of memory as a catalyst for reconciliation between heretofore conflicting cultures. Caryl Phillips thus lends the narration to people who perform the task of recalling a series of key moments in their lives. The memories selected by

the character-narrators in *The Nature of Blood* are revealing of their complexity in terms of identity, and they ultimately seek to break down the centre/margins dichotomy. First of all, it should be noted that Phillips' novel presents a complex structure that mirrors the multilateral relations between the cultures depicted in the novel. This polyphonic work puts the focus on the question of alienation and draws a parallel between the deep sense of displacement undergone by Jews and Africans. Accordingly, it juxtaposes the stories of a number of characters from different historical periods that might be said to undergo a trauma of deracination within their respective diasporas. These stories belong to such diverse characters as the following: Eva Stern, a German Jew who has been liberated from a Nazi camp; Eva's uncle Stephan, who migrated from Germany to Palestine in the 1930s; two Jewish moneylenders who are persecuted in fifteenth-century Italy; the African soldier Othello, who has been urged to help the Venetian army; and Malka, an Ethiopian Jew living in Israel.

Othello's is one among the five stories that are intermingled in the novel and that attempt to reconstruct the fragmented memories of displaced people "as a way to critique the totalising mode of conventional historical discourse" (Douglass and Vogler 6). Hence, Othello's recollection of his cultural awareness while in Venice enables him to destabilise the social and cultural hierarchy whereby his African heritage is disregarded. Accordingly, Cecile Sandten argues, Othello's narrative "extends, complements, and fills in the gaps of collective memory, . . . creating a post-empire imaginary that 'writes back' to, but also transcends, the former centres of colonial discourse" (345). Moreover, the dialogue between Othello's story and those of the other characters in the novel contributes to creating a network-like model that mirrors Othello's—and Phillips'—endeavour to transcend identity borders. Prior to examining the problematics of Othello's multifarious identity, there should be a brief introduction to Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), whose theory will be applied to the analysis of the African soldier living in Venice.

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) is a structurally complex work that intertwines sections written in prose with poems. It is an autobiographical text that deconstructs the motif of the borderlands and exposes how the previously irreconcilable divergences between the Mexican and US nation-states can eventually be overcome. While exposing how the tensions between Mexican and Anglo cultures affect Mexican immigrants, Anzaldúa reconstructs some relevant memories of her childhood along the Texas-Mexico border. Most importantly, she

recalls how she came to terms with both her lesbianism and with her *mestiza* consciousness, eventually embracing both and emerging as a powerful new *mestiza*. In words of Anzaldúa, the new *mestiza* “learns to juggle cultures. . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). In this context, the author’s retrieval of her process of identity construction sets an example for Chicanos—and more concretely *mestiza* women—to actively seek the complexity and richness of their identity, hence deconstructing any previous reductive views on their own cultures. As Ruiz-Aho marks, what Anzaldúa offers the *mestiza* is “a new vision for understanding her identity as plural and multiplicitous, while also postulating concrete strategies for building her own pathways for change” (357). Hence, this work foregrounds the plurality of relations between the different cultures comprising the *mestiza* consciousness while offering *mestizo* people a master plan to assert their multifariousness.

First of all, Anzaldúa argues that, as a Chicana, she belongs to a race that is neither Indian nor Spanish, but something that goes beyond: “*En 1521 nació una nueva raza, el mestizo, el mexicano* (people mixed of Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before” (27). As suggested by Anzaldúa, the newness of the Chicano race might contribute to making them a unique and fascinating society. However, Anzaldúa warns about the perils that she, as a representative of her people, has undergone so far. She feels herself “alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture” (42). On the one hand, she feels alienated from Mexican people and their Catholic background because she is a lesbian (41). On the other hand, she feels neglected in the United States due to the general attitude of Americans to the people crossing the frontier between Mexico and the States: she acknowledges that there is an overarching “racism in Chicano *barrios* in the Southwest and in big northern cities” (34). However, from the outset Anzaldúa shows a rebelliousness that proves crucial for her endeavour to assert her cultural hybridity: “There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. . . . It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imported” (38). That is, there is an inner element in the author that rejects the prejudices of both Mexican and American cultures. In this context, one of the possible ways to overcome such slanted views is by externalising this inner rebellion as “a form of reconciliation of the two bordering cultures” (Kynclová 44). With a view to externalising her inner rebellion, Anzaldúa tries to master



“the ability to respond” (42), and this will eventually allow her to make her stance visible and hence assert her identity as a new *mestiza*.

The case of Othello is somewhat different, since he does not share two different origins: he is an African warrior arriving in such a European city as Venice. However, as is the case with Anzaldúa, he also undergoes this sense of loneliness and alienation. He is an African warrior who has been called to lead the Venetian army in their mission to keep the Turks at bay, and exposes the tension between his African roots and his mission in Europe: “I, a man of royal blood, a mighty warrior, yet a man who, at one time, could view himself only as a poor slave, had been summoned to serve this state” (Phillips 107). Despite his lineage and his boldness, he is a former slave whose aim is to serve a European society that is likely to underline both his racial difference as a black person in a white society and the apparent inferiority of his traditions: “The Venetian aristocrat remained confident about the superiority of his traditions over those of any other” (119–20). Actually, until Venice’s welfare is threatened by its rivals, Venetians will take no notice of him and hence he will be “a man of leisure” (116). This invisibility is marked by Othello-as-storyteller: “I had made no friends among these people, and my standing in society rested solely upon my reputation in the field” (118). However, Othello also feels uneasy with his African origins, since he has left behind his wife and child and doubts whether they will remember him or not: “Perhaps I had no right to expect anything from them. Why should they trouble their minds with me?” (135). Therefore, Othello finds it difficult to assert his identity in such an in-between condition.

Nevertheless, along the same lines as Anzaldúa, he shows a degree of rebellion that eventually helps him solve his identity puzzle. Othello attempts to challenge the racism of Venetian society in two ways: first, he gradually adopts their language and dressing codes; second, he manages to marry Desdemona, who is the senator’s daughter. Eventually, Othello, as a married man, brings together the fragments of his story and composes what Maurizio Calbi calls “a responsible and just reading or rewriting of his story as well as of his self” (39). Indeed, Othello’s rewriting is meant to make his story visible for readers by means of a retrospective narrative that aims to enhance the complexity of his identity and, most importantly, that establishes itself as a transborder narrative.

### 3. THE EVOLUTION IN THE WRITING PROCESS OF OTHELLO AS A BORDERLANDS CHARACTER

As Anzaldúa summarises, she tried to conceal a secret: “[T]hat I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien, I knew I was alien” (64). It can be observed that, at this point in her life, Anzaldúa felt that she did not belong in her community because she deviated from what was considered normal. Unable to reveal her secret, she remained silent at first (65). Indeed, her inability to answer back contributed to her loneliness and paralysis. However, at a certain point she visited a museum in New York and saw the statue of the goddess *Coatlicue*, whose importance and power are underscored accordingly: “*Coatlicue* is one of the powerful images, or ‘archetypes’, that inhabits, or passes through, my psyche” (68). She argues that “*Coatlicue* depicts the contradictory. . . . Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites” (69). When beholding this statue, Anzaldúa realises that such contraries as beauty and horror are integrated in *Coatlicue*. This means that the abnormal aspects of oneself can be fused with the more widely accepted ones and give way to a different reality. This new reality is the new *mestiza*, which the scholar María Lugones describes as “an ambiguous being . . . , the borderdwelling self that emerges from the *Coatlicue* state” (34). The new *mestiza* is a new construct that presents the aforementioned fusion of contraries. Before this merging takes place, it is essential that both types of elements are consciously acknowledged and accepted; hence, “every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing” (Anzaldúa 70). Once Anzaldúa has become aware of the aspects which she has been concealing, she is ready to give them voice through language and to assert her identity as a new *mestiza*, thus crossing the border between Self and Other.

As regards Phillips’ Othello, this African man arrives in Venice with “a rudimentary grasp of the language” (107) and lack of fluency in “dealing with issues which related to common Venetian practices and manners of custom” (107–08). As a newly arrived soldier, Othello is supported by a retired merchant appointed by the doge. However, this employee is unable to give a satisfactory answer to Othello’s queries on Venetian society, to the point that he grows disheartened every time that Othello poses a question (108). The merchant’s unwillingness to fully solve the African general’s introductory questions poses a threat to Othello’s task of gaining proficiency in the target language. Such

linguistic-related hindrances are revealed in his recollection of an encounter with a female friend who usually visits him while staying at the merchant's house: "I listened, dumbfounded by the complex details that my woman friend seemed to be delighting in sharing with me" (113). This narratorial remark highlights both the act of listening and the complexity of the woman's detailed—and perhaps convoluted—language in an attempt to show that Othello is not confident enough to speak the language of Venice. Far from participating in a stimulating conversation, he only listens to the woman's ruminations. Furthermore, it could be said that the quotation suggests that Othello is paralysed: this passivity is entailed by the use of the adjective "perplexed." This means that Othello is somewhat puzzled by what his interlocutor is saying because of his gaps in the target language and, arguably, due to his inferiority in terms of race and social class. Reading this excerpt through the lens of Anzaldúa's theory, Othello may be aware of the hierarchical order governing Venetian society and therefore he may be opting for the concealment of his particular secret: he is paralysed to such a degree that he cannot speak up and share his stance.

His apathy notwithstanding, Othello successfully overcomes the limitations mentioned above. As regards language, he grows to master it with the help of a tutor and eventually enjoys "the pleasures of the new world this language opened up for me" (114–15). In terms of Venetian customs, he sees the senator's invitation to dinner as an opportunity to assimilate the Venetian dressing code and to improve his manners. As Othello ponders, "I had often wondered if a marriage of the finest of my own customs with their Venetian refinement might not, in due course, produce a more sophisticated man" (120). Therefore, just as Anzaldúa intermeshes the Mexican and American features, Othello is going to combine the best of his African roots and the Venetian sophistication in order to gain social acceptance and, ultimately, transcend the differences between the two cultures. As Clingman asserts, Othello "is a 'mimic man' of a certain kind, struggling to balance his inward sense of authenticity with the kind of weightless non-recognition afforded him by Venice" (156). Therefore, by means of mimicking the language and customs of Venice, he is trying to reach a balance between his strengths and those features that are undermined by the Europeans: he does so with the aim of gaining visibility in Venetian society and eventually emerging as a powerful character and narrator.

This gradual entrance into the social sphere due to language and customs enables him to meet Desdemona, and it is through his relationship

with this woman—especially in their exchange of letters—that Othello eventually masters the language spoken in Venice. At a certain point in the narrative, he struggles with the decoding of Desdemona’s second letter: “I retired to bed in torment, thoroughly frustrated by my inability to interpret the lady’s script” (140–41). However, he finally resorts to a Jew who is able to decipher the message of love conveyed in the letter (141–42). This being the last obstacle that Othello finds in his learning process, he gains proficiency and, in the end, becomes the internal narrator of his story.

#### 4. THE POWER OF WRITING IN THE CELEBRATION OF HYBRIDITY

Anzaldúa brings to the fore the importance of Chicano Spanish as a means of overcoming the aforementioned tradition of silence and hence become visible. She argues that “Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally” (77). As suggested by the phrase “border tongue,” this language juxtaposes the Hispanic and Anglo components without giving prominence to either of them. Likewise, Anzaldúa engages in the creation of a rhizomatic network of relationships between cultures through the use of code-switching, that is, alternating between different languages in the same paragraph, and even in the same clause. The recurrent switching of codes suits Anzaldúa’s transborder project, as the borderlands is a place where both the Hispanic and the Anglo elements should be embraced as equally important for the construction of a unique consciousness: that of the new *mestiza*, which belongs not exclusively to Anzaldúa, but to the Chicanos as a group (89–90). Therefore, Anzaldúa shows a mastery of language and storytelling that is used not for the sake of the individual, but to enhance the complex identity that the Chicanos share as a community. Thus, Anzaldúa manages to use language as a means of “responding” (42). This ability to respond means that, once she has overcome the limitations of her paralysing silence, she will transcend the border between Mexican and Anglo cultures, thus giving shape and voice to an individual and collective identity that goes beyond categorisation.

In the case of Othello, his gradual mastery of language enables him to eventually control discourse in order to expose the bigotry of Venetian society and to transcend the border between his origins and his position in Europe. The initiation rite that Othello undergoes in order to gain acceptance is the senator’s invitation to dinner. As he observes, “[t]his second invitation . . . afforded me the opportunity to make a larger

statement about the manner in which I might henceforth conduct myself in this great republic” (120). During the dinner, the senator’s son wants to be the centre of attention and tells Othello that “Venetian households did, from time to time, use black slaves” (120). However, Othello, as a narrator, does not quote the son’s words in direct speech; rather, it is Othello that reports them in his retrospective narration. This can be seen as a strategy to not give Venetians prominence and to undermine the potential damage that such a mention of slavery could cause to the African warrior. Indeed, it is Othello that selects the information to be reported in his narrative. This shows that he is a powerful man in that he controls the information to be delivered. Later on, Othello narrates: “I watched this boy carefully and, deciding that the victory was already secured, I chose not to mention my royal blood, or the fact that many Romans and Greeks had also been held as slaves” (126). This demonstrates that Othello is a master of his discourse: what he does in order to ensure his victory is not to make reference to his past. Far from falling prey to lamentation, he has managed to use language as a means to overcome his flaws and worries, thus emerging as a powerful figure.

Othello’s definite triumph comes when he succeeds in mastering “the remote language of love” (Phillips 143). Through his marriage to Desdemona, he juxtaposes the African and European elements and is able to transcend any categorisation. As a borderlands character that has managed to reconcile the hitherto unbridgeable gap between different cultures and identities, he wonders: “Was I truly . . . the same man who had initially struggled with language, and who had, at times, wondered if he would ever settle among these strange and forbidding people?” (144). In his new state, Othello is no longer a man worried about issues such as the mastery of the Venetians’ language or the question of belonging; he is a man who, being an African married to a European woman, acknowledges that he will not be fully accepted by African people or by Venetians. Nevertheless, he contends: “Some of this I have already anticipated” (148). Hence, Othello is aware of the fact that he may be criticised as a man who has transcended any categorisation. However, he accepts such judgments as he has been able to accept the diverse elements comprising his complex identity. Indeed, he has embraced the elements of both Africa and Europe and has intertwined them in order to create a new consciousness: no longer is he either an African or a Venetian, but he is a borderlands character whose (hi)story is representative of cultural multifariousness.

Having accounted for Othello's status as a borderlands character, it could be asserted that the opening lines in his narration foreshadow Othello's—and Phillips'—endeavour to construct a transborder narrative that enhances cultural hybridity: "Out in the world, night has fallen and reduced the city to a succession of wintry reflections and whispered echoes" (106). Being a borderlands character, Othello somehow sees Venice as an outer reality that affects him neither positively nor negatively. He is a complex man that pays no attention to the whispers of the bigoted Venetians; he is a narrator that is going to share his story with the audience with the aim of creating a transborder debate forum, where the differences between previously conflicting cultures and societies are dissipated and where hybridity is celebrated.

## CONCLUSION

As I hope to have shown in my analysis, Caryl Phillips' Othello can be read as an example of a borderlands character. Far from falling prey to the rigid hierarchy of Venetian society, he gathers strength to overcome his linguistic and racial obstacles and ultimately celebrate his cultural hybridity. Following Anzaldúa's theory, this article has illustrated Othello's process of first exploring and second destabilising the borders that are present in his complex cultural identity. At first, both his coming to terms with Venetian society and his linguistic gaps prevent him from successfully giving voice to his cultural consciousness. Such obstacles provoke a sense of paralysis that thwarts any attempt on the part of Othello to destabilise the barriers between Africa and Europe and overcome any potential prejudices that he may encounter. However, this character-narrator gradually masters the language and overcomes his preoccupations, ultimately bringing together his African roots and his European dwelling via storytelling. Actually, his act of remembering and retelling enables him to establish a network of horizontal relationships between previously conflicting cultures that is representative of the more plurilithic view of culture and identity that globalisation prompts.

Othello's construction of a fluid, horizontal model of relationships mirrors the structure and purpose of the whole Phillips' novel. Not coincidentally, the debate forum created by the borderlands Othello may be said to be one of the central concerns in *The Nature of Blood*. With regard to this network-like model defining the novel's structure, Sandten asserts that Phillips has managed to dismantle the centre/margins binary

“by infusing Othello’s stories into other stories that are also central to European history—that of Christian anti-Judaism in the fifteenth century, Nazi persecution and the horror of concentration camps during World War Two” (335). All in all, the connection between Othello’s story and the different stories reconstructed in *The Nature of Blood* contributes to making visible people who had been previously silenced and whose (hi)story is essential for a successful deconstruction of the centre/margins dichotomy leading to the overcoming of borders. Therefore, Phillips’ novel—and, in some way, Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory—might be said to lay the groundwork for theoretical frames through which twenty-first century global narratives are analysed. Therefore, some future lines of research that could enrich the analysis proposed in this article might be addressing both this narrative, and Phillips’ novel as a whole, as early examples of transmodern texts. Similarly, Rothberg’s multidirectional memory could pave the way for new, interesting insights into memory and trauma in the work of Phillips, who similarly foregrounds the establishment of a mnemonic model that embraces an ever-flowing dialogue rather than a view of memory as a zero-sum competition.

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