

Mind the Gaps: Caryl Phillips's *In the Falling Snow* (2009) and the Generational Approach to the Black Diaspora

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As one of humanities's most successful fields of research in the last two decades, diaspora studies has generated an enormous amount of material. One of the first areas of activity that diaspora scholars gravitated towards was defining and redefining the terms and concepts central to their discipline, a theoretical reflection that is still ongoing, but which seems to have lately decreased in volume in favour of more practical forays into the diasporic domain. The aim of the present essay is to participate in this more recent, hands-on approach to diaspora studies through a case-study, an analysis of Caryl Phillips's latest novel, *In the Falling Snow* (2009), while trying not to lose sight of the speculative effort that has characterized the field since its inception. The underlying rationale of my chosen subject is that literary texts too have an inner, yet underexploited, ability to generate reflection about the diaspora and its various terminological ramifications. Or, in other words, that novels, plays, poems and short stories can be used as helpful springboards towards further conceptualization or re-conceptualization, instead of being read, as is still too often the case, as mere illustrations of existing theories.

It is hardly necessary to introduce Anglo-Caribbean author Caryl Phillips to scholars involved in diaspora studies. Most of his writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, indeed addresses to a greater or lesser degree migration, displacement, and unbelonging, all familiar elements of the diasporic galaxy. Phillips's consistent interest in the diaspora, taken here generically, both in its concrete and epistemological senses, has been criticized, not to say condemned, by a few scholars, such as Timothy Bewes, who views it as emblematic of a propensity for cliché, not only on Phillips's part but on that of some of his critics whose "Diasporan" readings of Phillips, Bewes argues, have focused on the historical setting and narrative content of the works . . . , and have neglected their significance as contemporary literary productions with their own historicity (49-72; 51). A similar denunciation of the type of diasporic preoccupations to be found in Phillips's fiction has been made by Jonathan P. A.

Sell, who links them with what he regards as an unsound predilection for the past, whose -iron holdø on Phillipsø characters is, for the critic, ultimately paralyzing (32). In most cases, however, Phillipsø nearly obsessive attention to the diasporaø which, it is worth noting, relates not only to the past, but also to the present and futureø has been greeted positively as a formative and essential part of his world view described by John McLeod, in overt opposition to Sellø disapproving conclusion, as an example of -progressive utopianismø one -that is mindful of the presence of the past while offering a tentative, hopeful and non-idealized illustration of diaspora ethics which are linked to... the practices of everyday lifeø (McLeod 2008: 3). McLeodø comment on Phillipsø diasporic vision relates more specifically to his 2003 novel *A Distant Shore*. However, one could apply this criticø perception of the highly pragmatic dimension of Phillipsø philosophy to the rest of the writerø work, in particular to his latest fiction, *In the Falling Snow*, a novel bringing together three generations of black men of Caribbean descent living in contemporary Britainø Earl, Keith and Laurieø whose identities, like that of many other Phillipsian protagonists, have been significantly shaped by some form of dispersal, whether lived through or vicarious.

The three men at the heart of *In the Falling Snow* could thus be described as having -diasporan soulsø (Phillips 1993: 236), very much like those making up the -many-tongued chorusø of the children of the African diaspora, which famously opens and closes Phillipsø 1993 novel, *Crossing the River*. To many, this formally fragmented book exploring the fate of African children sold into slavery still exemplifies the authorø particular take on the diasporic, and might be regarded, borrowing Yogita Goyalø words, as -emblematic of a diaspora aesthetics, both in form and contentø (207). In spite of common genealogical concerns, however, the two novelsø that is, *Crossing the River* on the one hand and *In the Falling Snow* on the otherø do not seem to address the concept of diaspora in the same way. Exploring a span of two hundred and fifty years of the history of the African diaspora, the earlier narrative adopts a sweeping, affiliative approach, whereby characters dispersed in time and space are only allegorically related to each other and to the father that sold them to a slave-trader. Therefore, in spite of its subtle and courageous tackling of the paradoxes and ironies of this particular history, the novel ends on a rather celebratory depiction of -those who crossed the riverø to whom the novel is dedicated.

While I would view the novelø redemptive dimension as central to Phillipsø revisionary, inclusive representation of the diaspora, as part of what McLeod has called

Phillipsø progressive utopianismø (as mentioned earlier), it has also been criticized, notably by Goyal for whom Phillipsø vision is ultimately not liberating because it goes hand in hand with a mythical representation of Africa and with what she regards as a reinstatement of white subjectsø (236). Such criticism can surely not be levelled at *In the Falling Snow* which, unlike *Crossing the River*, narrows down its imaginative survey to a mere fifty years, from the 1960s to the present, and focuses on the actual generational (as opposed to imagined) bonds between three protagonists, thus on the filiative rather than the affiliative. This understandably makes a metaphorical interpretation of the recent novel less obvious and entails a greater precision and realism as to the way the characters relate, or fail to relate, to each other but also to the society in which they live. To put the contrast between the two texts in yet different terms, one could say that both focus on the diasporic family but from different perspectives. The prologue and the epilogue of *Crossing the River* feature a father who, back in the eighteenth century, sold his children into slavery and thereby contributed to a worldwide population movement that was to change the world for ever. In spite of the centrality of this father figureø who for his metaphorical offspring does not belong to the realm of the realø most of the novelø characters are in effect presented as either parentless, or childless, or both, and for this reason always in search of surrogate family connections. In opposition, *In the Falling Snow* focuses on more tangible blood kinship and intergenerational relations, which, for Phillips, play an essential role in the identity construction of the individual with a complex background. This is also what he suggests in a recent non-fictional piece, entitled 'Rude am I in my speechø' where he discusses Othello, 'Shakespeareø pioneer migrantø' who, he writes, 'suddenly finds himself adrift with no son or daughter [nor parents, for that matter] to measure his situation againstø a predicament that is clearly at the heart of the Moorø tragedy (Phillips 2011: 137). This plight also threatens the protagonists of *In the Falling Snow*, especially at the beginning of the narrative when they are estranged from each other, even if they manage to restore some measure of intergenerational communication as the novel unfolds.

For all its realism and apparent literalness, however, *In the Falling Snow* has, like *Crossing the River*, an allegorical dimension that is worth unravelling and can help towards a better understanding of the diasporic. What I would like to show in what follows is that the intergenerational interactions between the three protagonists in Phillipsø latest narrative can provide us with a tool to think about the boundaries and the articulations between such notions as migration, diaspora and globalization, which, in spite of their recent critical

success, have sometimes proved difficult to distinguish from each other in practice. In their introduction to *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur remark, and rightly so, that '[the term "diaspora"] is often used as a catch-all phrase to speak of and for all movements, however privileged, and for all dislocations, even symbolic ones' (3). This lack of rigor implies, Braziel and Mannur add, that the term 'diaspora' has sometimes been used, in an 'indistinct and ahistorical' way, as belonging to the same 'semantic field . . . [as] exile, migrant, immigrant and globalization' (6). My argument in this essay is precisely that by examining the lives and the degrees of belonging of three individuals, grandfather, father and son whose respective conditions, I would label, for lack of better terms, migrant, diasporic and global Phillips' *In the Falling Snow* invites us to 'mind the gaps' between these different existential states, by which I mean that the novel encourages us not only to observe and assess the possible divergences between them but also warns us about the potential danger of regarding them as completely distinct from each other, and therefore as unbridgeable. In other words, reading this novel carefully might help us to have a more precise idea of terms which are often used interchangeably as well as have a better understanding of the tensions that exist between them.

In his *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod reminds us how important it is to pay attention to generational differences within diaspora communities, which, he insists, remain 'dynamic and shifting, open to repeated construction and reconstruction' (McLeod 2000: 207). Significantly, *In the Falling Snow* recurrently highlights its three protagonists' diverging experiences, how these have shaped their perception of who they are, but also how their lives reflect the societal changes that have affected the individuals of Afro-Caribbean descent in England over several decades. Earl, the grandfather, was born on a small unnamed Caribbean island and arrived in the so-called Mother Country in 1960, full of high expectations. His experience in England is characteristic of the post-Windrush West Indian migrants to Britain' marked by recurrent discrimination and the concomitant material and psychological hardships. Unlike his father, Keith, who was born in England and is middle-aged in the present of the narrative, has been able to fulfil his professional and personal ambitions with the confidence and the fighting spirit more typical of the following generation, who 'were born in Britain . . . who had no memory of any kind of tropical life before England [and] were clearly trying to make a space for themselves in a not always welcoming country' (41). Finally, Laurie, Keith's mixed-race son, embodies the brashness of the third generation who

no longer seem to be bothered by issues of cultural or national allegiance, and who, according to Keith, 'no longer respect any boundaries' (15). Seventeen-year-old Laurie and his peers have become citizens of a globalized world, where, to quote Phillips in *A New World Order*, 'the colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. . . . there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none' (5).

Not surprisingly, the three men have very different conceptions of where they belong, and more specifically different conceptions of the Caribbean. Earl declares to his son on his deathbed, 'I want to go home, Keith. I don't mean to some stupid English house. I mean home. Home, home! . . . You understanding what I mean? I'm not from here' (269). If the Caribbean obviously remains Earl's only true home, it is for British-born Keith a mythical place, an 'imaginary homeland' (219), which he has never actually visited but would like to see with his own son, in a kind of pilgrimage whose aim would be 'to know something about where you come from' (126). Nevertheless, this almost spiritual dimension eludes Laurie who seems to be as happy to go to Barcelona, the home of his favourite football team, as to travel to the land of his father's ancestors. Clearly, the three characters' different degrees of attachment or indifference to the ancestral land speak volumes about their social confidence in England and their sense of home, be it single for Earl, dual for Keith, or multiple for Laurie. These generational differences surface at various places in the narrative, and are more crucially conveyed in a few key scenes bringing fathers and sons face to face. Chronologically, the first of these episodes is set when Earl takes Keith to the movies for his thirteenth birthday, and the two are caught in the falling snow, a typically northern element whose symbolic value varies in line with their experiences of England. Whereas the snow, which covers everything up, plays a magically equalizing role for the son, representative of the educational and professional opportunities afforded to him by English society, it constitutes a threat to the father, erasing his footprints and therefore 'all evidence of [his] presence' (321), a clear allusion to his failure to make good in the former colonizing power. Another significant passage in terms of generational differences occurs when Keith and his son Laurie stand on Westminster Bridge and become fully aware of the gap that separates their respective perception of their position in society. Keith expresses a sense of ownership over the city, a feeling whose romanticism might be reminiscent of Wordsworth's famous poem, 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' But when he tells his son that the place can be

his as well, provided he works hard, Laurie deflates his fatherø sense of achievement by pointing out that things have changed and that -It isnø just about discrimination and stuffi .but itø also about other thingsø including respect, a notion that in Laurieø mouth seems to have lost any racial connotation (167).

There is, of course, nothing exceptional to such generational clashes within the diasporic family. They have been represented in other recent literary texts, for example in Kwame Kwei-Armahø famous play *Elminaø Kitchen* (2003) where Black British Deli is stuck between his migrant father Clifton and his son Ashley, who unproblematically regards Hackney as home. This tripartite classification to some extent echoes the broad-brush, generational distinctions that have been made in the literary field as well, where the writing of the first generation of Anglo-Caribbean writers, say that of Samuel Selvon and George Lamming, has been regarded as mostly marked by migration and remains bound to their authorø native societies.¹ The writing of the second generation, represented by Caryl Phillips himself but also by Fred DøAguiar or David Dabydeen, for example, can be said to have more explicitly attempted to build bridges between England and the Caribbean, towards which they still feel some sense of loyalty, notably by exploring the two placesø involvement in the African slave trade and slavery. Finally, the third generation, most remarkably represented by Zadie Smith, the author of *White Teeth*, has been described as paying more attention to the multicultural nature of England, mixing an attachment to the local with a concern for the Babel-like nature of English society. In this case too, one has three relatively distinct generations, three worldviews, which could be described as respectively migratory, diasporic and global. However, it seems to me that *In the Falling Snow*, mostly through its form, goes some way towards challenging, or at least complicating, such an apparently neat taxonomy, which nevertheless underlies the novelø characterization. This calling into question surfaces in two different, seemingly contradictory ways, which is unsurprising for such an elusive text. On the one hand it suggests that the migratory and the global might have been absorbed, or at least repressed, by the dominating discourse of diaspora, which is embodied here by Keith, the novelø main focalizer. And on the other that in spite of differences, the three men also

¹ It is worth adding, however, that in his *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004) Mark Stein has convincingly argued for the need to problematize the term -generationø when used in the field of literary history. More recently, John McLeod has started from a reading of *In the Falling Snow* and of its genealogical focus to suggest a new way of looking at what he calls -Contemporary Black Writing of Britainø (McLeod 2010). See also McLeodø essay -Fantasy Relationshipsø which tackles the -model of generational influenceø in the context of a transnational black British canon (McLeod 2006: 97).

present commonalities, as they all partake of a culture of displacement in which the notion of race still plays a major role and cannot for this reason be dispensed with.

It is important to underline the fact that *In the Falling Snow* is mainly seen through the eyes of Keith, the character whose world vision could most obviously be associated with the black diaspora, concerned as he is with the collective history and the achievements of people of African descent. The book that he is trying to write on the history of black music is telling in this respect: it is based on the thesis that the 'black cultural heritage is passed on from one generation to the next' (95) which 'means that he has to look across the Atlantic for his models' (95). It is also noteworthy that Keith wants at some stage to 'frame part of his book by looking at family history, particularly at singers who have children, or siblings, who are also singers' (142). As Abigail Ward has pointed out in a recent article on *In the Falling Snow*, Keith's 'transatlantic perspective' which combines the notion of a common black history with that of a sense of kinship 'might be regarded as a renewed exploration on Phillips's part of 'the complex relationship between black Britain and black America' (296), a conclusion notably confirmed by the fact that the title of the novel is borrowed from a haiku written by Richard Wright, the African American author who has had a decisive influence on Phillips's literary career.² But Keith's authorial choices in the conception of his book, and the rather romantic take on his identity that they suggest, also draw our attention to the possible dominating nature of diasporic discourse, which has already been highlighted at the general literary level by several scholars. For example, in his *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing*, James Procter 'works to raise questions over the deterritorialising tendencies of diaspora discourse and the ways in which it has tended to evoke a 'non-place based solidarity' that situates migrant subjectivities outside locality, region and nation' (14), while Alison Donnell deplores 'the strong purchase that a black diasporic critical framework has held within studies of Caribbean writings since the early 1990s' (77) and the concomitant neglect of the local, whether in the Caribbean or in England.

In the same way, at the level of *In the Falling Snow*, the diasporic outlook adopted by Keith as main focalizer is somehow shown to fail, perhaps because of its tendency to idealize or simplify the past and to cut him off from the reality around him, embodied here by his

² The haiku in question is n° 31 and reads as follows: 'In the falling snow/A laughing boy holds out his palms/Until they are white.' This poem can be found online at this address: http://allpoetry.com/poem/8584759-Haiku_21_22_24_30_31_-by-Richard_Wright accessed on 4 June 2012. Phillips has on numerous occasions evoked the role that Richard Wright's work has played in his own development as a writer. See, for

father Earl on the one hand and his son Laurie on the other. The fact that Keith eventually does not manage to write his book on music is symptomatic of this inherent flaw or at least of the limitations of the 'vantage pointø(37,66,155) that he insists on adopting. As someone who wants to be 'in controlø(37) and doesn't 'like messø(13), Keith is obsessed with order and cleanliness, and it is therefore not surprising that, in his escapist endeavour to construct a cultural history for himself, he fails to take into account, represses even, the voices, such as Earlø, but also Laurieø, which have an urgent but also messy story to tell, messy because it does not seem to fit with Keithø idealizing or simplifying view of the black world. Significantly, it is only in the last part of the novel that one gets to hear the voice of Keithø father, the migrant, as the latter is about to die. The harrowing story of his unhappy life in the Caribbean and of the discrimination that he has had to suffer since his arrival in England literally shatters the quiet surface of Keithø apparently smooth and well-organized existence and obliges him to leave his diasporic comfort zone to face the many humiliations that his father had to endure. Similarly, though less dramatically, the revelation of the pregnancy of Laurieø girlfriend brings home to Keith that in spite of his numerous attempts to talk with his son, he did not know much of the young manø emotional life. It is only at the end of the novel therefore that Laurieø injunction to his father to 'Get real, Dadø(128) takes its full meaning.

Clearly, then, through its characterization, *In the Falling Snow* implies a form of hierarchy between the generationsø tentatively described in this essay as migratory, diasporic and globalø and suggests multiple tensions between them, which, in John McLeodø words, 'challenges us to think of the genealogy of black Britain as one of partial discontinuity rather than neat evolutionø (McLeod 2010:45).³ At the same time, however, one cannot ignore that the novel also hints at a form of existential continuity between Earl, Keith and Laurie who, as Rini Vyncke has argued, share several striking personality traitsø such as a special type of stubbornness or a particular form of emotional insecurityø and are therefore 'contrary to their own belief... a lot more similar than meets the eyeø(63). The similitude between the three men therefore suggests a real sense of intergenerational concordance and, by extension, the need to examine the migratory, the diasporic and the global not in isolation, nor in any kind of

example, the introduction to Phillipsø early collection of essays, *The European Tribe* (1987).

³ It is worth adding that the tensions described within the diasporic family, and which are mainly due to a cruel absence of communication, also affect the white English family of Keithø former wife, Annabelle. This suggests that there is something universal about intergenerational conflicts even if these are often made worse by the specific predicaments of displaced families.

pecking order, but as ways of being in the world that are inextricably linked to each other and which can therefore only be understood in terms of relation.⁴ This is also clearly conveyed through another commonality between the three men: their complexion, a factor that, whether they like it or not, still affects their lives in Britain, as well as their outlook, and should prevent us from describing the nation at the heart of *In the Falling Snow* as a -post-racialø one, a label that, according to McLeod, could apply to recent texts from Britain, in particular those resorting to the trope of the mixed-race person (McLeod 2010: 51). Indeed the contemporary British society in which Earl, Keith and Laurie live is on the surface presented as an outwardly equal one where race seems to have become secondary, so much so that the racial equality unit that Keith is in charge of has been merged with -disability and womenø affairsø (33) and that the policeman who questions Laurie, in the context of youth stabbing, is black and therefore can hardly been accused of racism (227). However, behind the veneer of an apparently colour-blind society lurk various types of subtle discriminations, including racial ones, which, Phillips intimates, still have an effect on the way individuals relate to each other.⁵ As several minor incidents in the novel illustrate, the three protagonists of *In the Falling Snow* are still to some extent judged by the colour of their skin, more than by the content of their characters. This discrimination may no longer be life-threatening, as it was in the 1960s when Ralph, Earlø friend, was killed by Teddy Boys, but it is nonetheless real and should prevent any form of complacency as to the progress that has been made over three generationsø as exemplified by -The Nelson Mandela Community Centreø (186), the ghetto-like old peopleø home that houses Earlø Caribbean friends.

In the Falling Snow does not provide us with straightforward answers to the terminological confusion that was mentioned at the beginning of this essay. This is not astonishing as the role of fiction is not to point towards simple solutions to complex issues, but precisely to mess up with theorization, as it were, and thereby trigger off some kind of reassessment of established categories. What *In the Falling Snow* does through its focus on three generations is to allow us to take stock of the complex web of possible interactions between the migratory, the diasporic and the global, and of their unavoidable solidarity in spite of the divergences that they also display. One of the provisional conclusions that could be drawn from this is that we should -mind the gapsø between them, gauge these gaps, and

⁴ A term which interestingly also refers to kinship.

⁵ It is important to note that race is not the only divisive element in the novel, but that it often combines with class in the evocation of the difficulties met by the migrants, and their descendants, in English society.

possibly bridge them whenever possible. In this sense, *In the Falling Snow* could be said to view the black diaspora in terms of combined discontinuity and continuity, a double perspective that, according to Goyal, already characterizes Phillips's earlier novel, *Crossing the River*. In this book, Goyal writes, "Phillips's rendering of diaspora keeps in play two distinct and contradictory tendencies, one historicizing and the other transcendent" (207). The first of these tendencies, which involves realism, highlights "fragmentation and difference" while the second, which Goyal describes as romance, "present[s] notions of diaspora promoting continuity and seamlessness" (208). The major difference with *In the Falling Snow* is that the sense of continuity in the latter novel is not rooted in the mythical and the symbolic, as in the former one, but derives from an unromantic appraisal of today's Britain which, in spite of the progress made, is still divided along racial lines.

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