

## “Caryl Phillips's Drama: Liminal Fiction under Construction?”

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**Abstract:** Most of the existing criticism on Caryl Phillips deals with his novels or his essays. His plays, which were for the most part written in the 1980s, have received comparatively little attention. This article argues that Phillips's dramatic production should be examined closely because it contains in a nutshell some of the themes and characters that recur in his more mature work and therefore form the backbone of his world vision. Such a comparative approach helps to highlight Phillips's artistic consistency and his ability to give different forms to similar concerns. More specifically, its aim is to show to what extent Phillips's novel *In the Falling Snow* (2009) is a liminal text that is in fact built upon the preoccupations at the heart of his early plays, most notably *Strange Fruit* (1981), *Where There Is Darkness* (1982) and *The Shelter* (1983).

**Keywords:** Caryl Phillips; *In the Falling Snow*; drama; liminality

When Caryl Phillips's ninth novel, *In the Falling Snow*, came out in 2009, critics were divided. Some of them clearly enjoyed what a commentator called the "low-wattage realism" (Tayler 2009) of its narrative, and understood the relevance of this literary device to the general economy of the book. Others, conversely, were obviously irritated by Phillips's focus on the details of his protagonist's domestic life, responsible in their eyes for the slow pace of the first part of the novel. Another, more important, question on which there was no consensus was whether *In the Falling Snow* represented a departure in Phillips's oeuvre or rather provided evidence of artistic continuity. That *In the Falling Snow* should focus on Keith, a middle-aged man of Afro-Caribbean descent living in an England where emails, mobile phones, iPods and Starbucks have become household words was synonymous for some with a break from the rest of Phillips's fiction, which – with the exception of *A Distant Shore* (2003) – indeed takes place in a more or less remote past, exploring such historical events as the slave trade or the Holocaust. In this novel, at last, the proponents of the newness of the book seemed to suggest, Phillips "probes what it means to be black and British today" (Al-Shawaf 2009) and "attempts to tackle the present day and its many absurdities" (Devlin 2009). Arguing in the same vein, John McLeod (2010) used a quotation from *In the Falling Snow* to demonstrate that "contemporary black writing of Britain" (45) – including Phillips's novel – should rather be seen in terms of disconnection and difference with the previous generations of writers or with the issues traditionally viewed as exclusively Black British –

such as race or immigration – than in terms of continuity in relation to what came before. Proof of this, for McLeod, is the presence in Phillips's novel of a young mixed-race protagonist, Laurie, Keith's son, whose existential concerns have moved on from what preoccupied his grandfather and father's generations. Nevertheless, as noted above, not all the reviewers regarded *In the Falling Snow* as a departure from Phillips's earlier writing where he had already proved to be "an insightful and sympathetic chronicler of race, British identity, and the immigrant experience" (Zipp 2009). While Kasia Boddy (2009) described the novel as "[revisiting] many of his familiar themes", some critics even viewed it as so much in line with the writer's previous work that, in the words of Stephen Moss (2009), *In the Falling Snow* might raise "doubts about the way [Phillips's] novels till the same patch of soil – race, identity, the black person's struggle to live and make himself heard in white society".

It would certainly be pointless to try and separate the two camps – that is, on the one hand, those who view *In the Falling Snow* as a significant turning point in Phillips's literary career, and on the other, those who regard this novel as a continuation of the author's favourite themes and topics. For there is undoubtedly some truth in each of the two positions, and their possible coexistence is apt for a novel that could be described as liminal, in the sense that, like much of Phillips's fiction, its ending does not provide any definite answer, but rather leaves the protagonist at a crossroads, with different possibilities in front of him. Although, at the close of the novel, the death of Keith's father means that "now there's nobody ahead of [Keith]" (Phillips 2009, 326), Phillips's emotionally and physically exhausted protagonist still remains in a zone of in-betweenness and ends up in the house of his ex-wife in a state of uncertainty. Will he leave her bedroom and go back to his own flat? Will he stay in her house and thereby accept her affectionate protection? Or will he stay while making it clear that he refuses to resume their former intimacy? Interestingly, the last lines of the novel oppose Keith's existential liminality, as a son of immigrants and a man who has just lost his father, to his white, middle-class ex-wife's apparent confidence and determination when she "turns off the lights and closes all the doors. Then he hears her footsteps as she begins to walk slowly up the stairs" (330). These two sentences also remind us, as Anita Sethi (2009) has suggested, that the novel is replete with liminal spaces – whether hallways, corridors, staircases, doorsteps or bridges – where some of the book's crucial scenes take place.<sup>1</sup> This is the case, for instance, when Keith attempts in vain to communicate with his teenage son, Laurie, on Westminster Bridge (Phillips 2009, 165-168), or when Keith's father escorts him as a 13-year-old boy back to the doorstep of his stepmother Brenda's house after an outing to the cinema and, in an unusual display of affection, "leaned over the threshold and hugged him" (321) –

the bridge and the doorstep symbolizing the imminent changes in the characters' lives, at once separating father and son and bringing them together.

However, it is another, perhaps less obvious, facet of the novel's interstitiality, more specifically its position between the old and the new, that I would like to examine in this article: its relationship to three early plays by Phillips – *Strange Fruit* (1981), *Where There Is Darkness* (1982) and *The Shelter* (1984) – which can be viewed as threshold texts on which – consciously or not on the part of the author – this particular fiction is built and from which it gains in complexity and maturity. This examination will in the first place allow me to participate in the debate around the novel's innovative nature that is mentioned above. It will also give me a chance to test the relevance of a critical practice that moves beyond the counter-discursive orientation typical of early postcolonialism – the writing-back paradigm – to encompass the less confrontational notion of writing back to oneself, which might be described as a form of auto-intertextuality. The possibility of such an approach signals a paradigm shift in a field whose meaning very much relied, in its early manifestations, on a confrontation with the western canon, but which can now also be construed as referring to itself, the sign of a stronger epistemological autonomy.

Following that line of thought, I would like to discuss to what extent Phillips's early drama conjures up some of the themes and characters of *In the Falling Snow*, and by the same token I wish to interrogate the articulation between the two genres within Phillips's oeuvre, without, however, questioning the ability of both his plays and novels to stand on their own. In almost 30 years, Caryl Phillips's work has given rise to a large body of criticism, testifying to a wide range of different angles. The vast majority of these commentaries deal with Phillips's essays and even more so with his novels, in particular those published after *Higher Ground* (1989). His plays and scripts, which were largely written in the 1980s, have so far received comparatively little attention.<sup>2</sup> This might be due to the limited availability of these early texts, only six of which have been published so far, among them the three theatrical pieces at the heart of this article. The rest of Phillips's dramatic output – comprising more than two dozen stage and radio plays – is in great part available at the Beinecke Library of Yale University, but is not accessible to a large readership. Another reason for the relative silence around Phillips's drama might be a mistrust of sorts for early writings, viewed as less mature and for this reason as not easily "canonized", combined with a form of indifference among critics towards the dramatic genre.

Phillips is surely not the only author whose criticism has suffered from this type of generic hierarchy, and many multitalented writers, postcolonial or otherwise, have had a part

of their literary production ignored or neglected for the same reasons. Derek Walcott, both poet and playwright, is a case in point. His plays have rarely been analysed by western scholars while his poetry has been the focus of most of their attention. However, as Edward Baugh points out, it is important to take "a comprehensive view at [Walcott's] achievement", and for Baugh a "primary challenge" facing any commentator of Walcott is "[bringing] his poetry and his plays into discursive relationship" (2006, 1). Similarly, I would like to insist that to fully appreciate the breadth of Phillips's artistic undertaking, it seems important to bring his novels and plays into dialogue with each other, for the latter at once complement the former and contain in a nutshell some of the themes and characters on which his more mature work is built and which can therefore be viewed as the backbone of his world vision. What I hope to be able to demonstrate in what follows is that such a comparative approach can help to highlight Phillips's creative consistency and his ability to give different forms to similar concerns. While his later fiction can be said to expand in some cases the portrayal of individuals who came across in his early drama as inhibited or unable to make themselves heard, his drama can also be said to contextualize the actions of some of his fictional characters. Reading Phillips's fiction in the light of his early plays, or reading Phillips backwards and forwards, in other words, is therefore likely to help the critic get the full measure of the writer's preoccupations while at the same time being a means of gauging the developments that have occurred over his career, for the reworking of similar themes always provides evidence of new thoughts and understanding. In this particular case, I would argue, *In the Falling Snow* testifies to a more complex vision, one which naturally encompasses the changes that have taken place in English society since the 1980s, but which also deconstructs racial, national and generational binaries more visibly than the plays did.

The links between Phillips's drama and his fiction can occasionally appear tenuous, at least on the surface. To take but one example, one sometimes finds strange similarities between the names of his protagonists in the plays and novels, patronymic echoes which would certainly be worth exploring further. For instance, one of the characters in *Strange Fruit* is called Alvin, which rings very much like Calvin in Phillips's first novel *The Final Passage* (1985), both being the sons of Caribbean women who have migrated to England where they have to raise their children on their own. The names Louis and Irene are used both in the second act of *The Shelter* and in the last section of *Higher Ground* (1989), to refer to a dysfunctional mixed-raced couple. Finally, it is interesting to note, as Craig Smith (2010) does, that the central character in *Where There Is Darkness*, a play published in 1982, is called Albert Williams, which is very close to Bert Williams, the name of the protagonist of

Phillips's novel *Dancing in the Dark* (2005). At first glance, these two men do not seem to have much in common, as they live at different times and in different places. Nevertheless, Albert, the social worker, and Bert, the vaudeville artiste, suffer from a similar lack of recognition as immigrants and encounter comparable problems of communication within the family, Albert with his son and Bert with his father. A parallel reading of the two texts (to which Craig Smith adds *A State of Independence* [1986]) therefore "provides insight into the complex concerns of migration, melancholia and Black Caribbean masculinity" (Smith 2010, n.p.), but also testifies to the fact that Phillips, like all great artists, returns again and again in his writing to the same predicaments and the same existential conundrums. As Phillips comments in an interview, for him, as indeed for many of his characters, life is "not necessarily a straight line but circular. Things that you thought you've left behind can come back and haunt you" (Sethi 2009).

In the rest of this article I aim to perform a type of textual archaeology on *In the Falling Snow* whereby I will attempt to unearth traces of Phillips's earlier plays in the later novel and see how these connections can be used to trigger reflections on the fictional text and its dramatic counterparts as well. For the sake of clarity, I will focus my attention on two major aspects of *In the Falling Snow* which find clear resonance in the plays (and could to some extent be regarded as iconic of Phillips's imaginary, by which I mean his way of seeing the world): first the relationship between black men and white women, and second the intergenerational conflicts, particularly in the context of the migrant family.

As Phillips reminds us in his introduction to his 1984 play *The Shelter*, "the story of the black man and the white woman in the Western world is bound together with the secure tape of a troubled history" (Phillips 1984, 10), and this evokes not only Othello and Desdemona's tragic fate but also the infamous practice in the American south of lynching black men suspected of intercourse with white women. In the same text, Phillips contends that such an interracial relationship, "the most explosive of all" (10), has not often been represented in literature because it inspires fear and shame. He therefore thinks that it is his duty as a writer to address this issue, which he does in *The Shelter* by depicting two mixed pairs, one in each act. The first one is "Him" and "Her", a free, educated black Englishman and an upper-class white woman, who are stranded on a desert island at the end of the 18th century. They prove unable to relate positively and to "begin anew" (28) because any interaction between them takes place in the shadow of slavery and the prejudices that it has given rise to. Whatever he does, Him is seen as someone who "was born near 200 years ago in a small village in [his] native Africa" (27). The other couple is made up of Louis, a depressed

West Indian immigrant in England, who regards himself as a "British subject" (43), and a vulnerable Englishwoman, Irene, convinced earlier on in their relationship that "[they] can make it work but [they] just have to try harder than the others" (46). In spite of Irene's pregnancy, however, the couple cannot stand the pressure of racism in the London of the 1950s and the look of English people who hope that they – "Nigger and nigger-lover" (52) – "won't do anything human like laugh, or cry, or kiss" (47). Through his involvement with the white woman, the black man becomes threatening in a different way from the more familiar violent stereotype in which he had been cast. As Louis says,

They don't really hate the coloured man with a brick in one hand and terror in his eyes for they're used to that from slavery days. What they are not used to is a coloured man with a white woman on one arm and a spring in his step. (52-53)

Although the two stories at the heart of this play are merely juxtaposed, the author invites us to see them as part of the "troubled history" that he mentions in his introduction, suggesting at the same time that in the two centuries that separate the two acts, nothing much has changed when it comes to mixed couples. *In the Falling Snow*, written some 25 years after *The Shelter*, revolves again around two estranged mixed couples: on the one hand Keith, the novel's black protagonist, an Englishman of Caribbean descent, and the white English woman Annabelle, who meet during their studies at the University of Bristol in the early 1980s, and on the other Keith's father, Earl, and his English stepmother Brenda, who meet in England in the 1960s some time after Earl's arrival from the Caribbean. The two pairs have to face hostility in societies where, in both the 1960s and the 1980s, the union between black and white is still viewed by some as a threat to the nation's purity. While this refusal on the part of some English people to accept a "country full of half-castes" (Phillips 2009, 301) is probably the reason why Ralph, Earl's best friend, is murdered by Teddy boys when he starts seeing an English girl, it might also explain why the registrar who marries Keith and Annabelle "would not look them in the face" (35) on the day of their wedding. The reader is not directly told whether the interracial nature of both marriages is to be blamed for the two couples' eventual separation, but one can guess that their different ethnic and cultural origins are a likely source of tension, to which one must add the differences of class in the case of Keith and Annabelle. As the narrative is restrained – even more so than is usually the case with Phillips's fiction – and the situations are mostly viewed from limited points of view, especially Keith's and then his father's, the reader is not given a clear idea of the motivations behind the characters'



decisions, such as Annabelle's disconcertingly calm choice to break up with Keith after he confesses to a one-night stand with one of his colleagues.

No wonder, therefore, if a reviewer finds that "how she worked up the passion to leave Keith remains obscure" (Hungerford 2011, 169), while another has complained that Annabelle's attitude to Keith is implausible and lacks consistency, because her motivation for asking him to leave the family house contrasts with her earlier behaviour, notably her courage in marrying him in the face of her parents' disapproval (Hopley 2009). One might argue, however, that Annabelle's "unforgiving response" (Phillips 2009, 49) makes more sense if viewed in the context of the painful history surrounding the union between the black man and the white woman, which is given an almost emblematic value in *The Shelter*. One can then imagine that Annabelle's marriage to Keith has meant so much sacrifice for her that she is "in no mood to compromise" (49) when she hears that he has betrayed her. Similarly, some kind of ambiguity remains about Brenda's decision to have Earl sectioned in the wake of a deep depression (89, 190), especially when one realizes that Earl had been released into her custody after a previous five-year confinement at the beginning of their relationship (221). Yet the possible racial connotations of these critical moments in the novel might be diminished because the contemporary England that Phillips depicts in the narrative present reflects a society where the notion of race is apparently less problematic than in the past, whether in the 18th century or in the 1950s, as in *The Shelter*. For example, skin colour does not seem to play any significant role in Keith's casual relationship with mixed-race Yvette nor in his temporary infatuation with Polish Danuta, who regards Keith first and foremost as an Englishman rather than as a black man. Significantly, too, one is not given any definite clue as to whether Chantelle, Laurie's pregnant girlfriend, is black or white, even though her parents' description as "Seventh Day Adventists" (329) might plead in favour of the former. Such racial indeterminacy might indeed mean that Keith's England has become a post-racial society, where skin colour has become increasingly irrelevant. However, those changes are in a sense just cosmetic, for, as Abigail Ward points out in an article which partly deals with interracial couples in *In the Falling Snow*, "in the latter half of the 20th century racism [in Britain] has [ ... ] mutated into new forms, not disappeared" (2011, 303). Vigilance therefore remains the order of the day. This, at least, is the message conveyed by Earl's deathbed confession which reminds Keith of the importance of taking the voices from the past into consideration. In this perspective, I would argue that *The Shelter* can be made to work at the metafictional level in the same way as Earl's narrative functions at the fictional level: that is, as a reminder of past suffering and as a signal that, however much social progress has

apparently been made, interracial relationships remain fraught with pain and tension.

Both *Strange Fruit* and *Where There Is Darkness* also address the doomed legacy of mixed couples, albeit in a less obvious manner than *The Shelter*, and in that sense they too shed light on the complexities around interracial love stories in mostly white societies like Britain. There is in Phillips's first play the pair consisting of Errol, a young Englishman of West Indian descent who has turned to a form of Pan-Africanism after a traumatizing attack by the police, and white working-class Shelley, who is pregnant by Errol and for this reason has to leave her family home, because her parents, in Errol's words, "can't handle the idea of their virginal lily-white maiden possibly falling prey to the lascivious clutches of an old black ram" (Phillips 1981, 34). Here Errol might be suggesting that the Shakespearean tragedy of interracial love is still relevant in the second half of the 20th century, and he somehow lives up to the part of the villain by abusing Shelley both physically and verbally, for he regards her as nothing more than a "historical phenomenon" (39), the logical inheritor of the history of oppression of blacks by whites. In *Where There Is Darkness*, Albert too vents his own frustrations on his white girlfriend Lynn, whom he abandons when she is pregnant by him, and on his white wife, Ruth, who is described by one of the characters in the play as a lonely figure, who doesn't "fit into the plan at all" (Phillips 1982, 49). Albert's violence, however, is not specifically aimed at his white partners for he is equally abusive towards his first wife, Muriel, the Caribbean mother of his son Remi. Yet there is the sense that the mixed couple is for Albert a measure, even if unconscious, of his own achievement as an immigrant in the mother country, in the same way as his house and his car are, and that it has for that reason an emblematic value – which might also be the case for Keith and Earl, who, incidentally, is as misogynous as Albert, with whom he shares a history of mental problems. Even if *In the Falling Snow* does not depict the same domestic violence as *Strange Fruit* and *Where There Is Darkness*, the tensions at the heart of its interracial couples can nevertheless be clarified, or at least problematized, when viewed in the perspective of the earlier texts.

My argument so far has been that Phillips's plays provide readers of *In the Falling Snow* with contextual padding for their reading of the novel's interracial relationships. Phillips's drama can also be made to play another role: to alert us to the growing complexity of his writing. Allegedly, this could be viewed as a reflection of an increasingly multicultural English society that has gone beyond the simple binary of black and white love encapsulated in the "Him" and "Her" couple of *The Shelter*, to incorporate characters such as the eastern European Danuta. Unlike Keith, she is a racial insider but a cultural outsider in England, which might explain why he is at first paternalistically protective of her and, why the power



dynamics at the heart of their relationship is different from that which binds Keith to his English ex-wife. The Polish girl's sudden disappearance from the narrative – she is "casually dispensed with" for one reviewer (Cross 2009) – could indicate that the novel should not be regarded as a mere bringing "up to date" of the Caribbean experience in Britain (Boddy 2009), but that it bespeaks a form of maturity whereby the strictly English-Caribbean divide of Phillips's plays is being questioned and yet remains central to his imagination. In that sense, *In the Falling Snow* could be read as a manifestation of what Edward Said has called "late art" – which is "what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favor of reality" (2006, 9). This means that even if *In the Falling Snow* seems to update some of Phillips's earlier themes, it also remains true to his original sources of inspiration.

The title of Phillips's first play, *Strange Fruit*, encapsulates the two themes at the heart of this joint exploration of Phillips's drama and fiction. Taken from Billie Holiday's 1939 song and alluding to the "racially motivated violence in the American South" that often occurred in the wake of interracial relationships, the title, as Phillips tells us in a essay written in 2007 and republished in 2011, was nevertheless first meant "to be evocative of the puzzling situation that many parents unwittingly find themselves in with their children" – Alvin and Errol being in this case the strange fruit that Vivien has borne – thus of "the dilemma of intergenerational communication" (Phillips 2011, 99). And on this point too, Phillips's drama, particularly his first two plays, can enlighten our reading of *In the Falling Snow* while helping us to assess the extent and nature of its innovativeness.

*Strange Fruit* (1981) concentrates on a one-parent family of Caribbean descent living in England, including Vivien, the migrant mother, and her two sons, Alvin and Errol, whose identity construction as Black British youngsters is hampered by their mother's inability to communicate and her attempt to conceal the past from them. Things come to a head after Alvin visits the Caribbean to attend his grandfather's funeral and when, on his return, he blames his mother for not talking to him and his brother, for not "filling in the blanks". For at that stage Alvin realizes that "The most important part of knowing where you're going to is knowing where you've come from" (77), a backward perspective he has been denied because his mother keeps silent about her painful past, in the same way as Earl does in the novel. A similar intergenerational confrontation occurs in *Where There Is Darkness* (1982), whose West Indian protagonist, Albert Williams, is about to return home after 21 years in England and who finds it hard to communicate with his son Remi, for, he says, "I love that boy so bad I can't even talk to him" (Phillips 1982, 35). Significantly, several elements in Albert's life story find an echo in the characters of Phillips's latest novel, almost as if the protagonist of the

play was Earl and Keith rolled into one: like Earl, he has seen his dreams shattered in the "Mother Country" and like Keith, he has worked in England as a social worker, married a white woman and has a son whose girlfriend is pregnant.

Clearly, then, even if the novel focuses on three generations instead of two in the plays – which might be an index of its higher complexity – and although it depicts slightly different circumstances, the three texts cover similar emotional ground and can for this reason be made to dialogize with each other. Such a parallel reading would first enable us to highlight the modernity of Phillips's earlier texts, which, in the early 1980s, had already explored the contours of a new Britishness through the intergenerational strife between parents and children, in particular between father and son, a feature that Pilar Cuder-Domínguez (2011) has rightly isolated as one of the major characteristics of recent Black British fiction, including *In the Falling Snow* (see also Ledent 2014). But reading the plays and *In the Falling Snow* side by side might also be a way of compensating for some characters' inability to express their feelings openly, which is particularly the case in the fictional text where Keith, very much like his own father, is presented as "private to the point of being hermetically sealed" (Phillips 2009, 12). Once described as "cold fiction", not only in reference to the snow of the title but to its "absence of passion" and its "relentlessly even tone" (Hungerford 2011, 169, 170), *In the Falling Snow* indeed follows in a large part the meanderings of Keith's mind; in an effort to avoid any emotional involvement and until his father's confession at the end of the novel, he is more taken up by the trivia of everyday life – such as drink, food and the cleanliness of his own living space – than interested in facing the important issues in his life. The characters of *Strange Fruit* and *Where There Is Darkness*, on the contrary, seem to address these existential problems more directly, more vocally, and with more anger – so much so that they could be described, in the words of Alvin, as "tearing each other to pieces" (Phillips 1981, 99).

How then can the difference of tone between the novel and the two plays be explained? One could relate it to what Phillips has called "the directness and immediacy of the form" (Phillips 2006, 45), to the specificities of the dramatic genre, which is in essence more economical than fiction, potentially less meditative, and relies more heavily on dramatic situations than on the protagonist's inner thoughts to get its messages across.<sup>3</sup> Still, regardless of generic questions, the more sedate atmosphere of the novel could be ascribed to a form of intergenerational appeasement, perhaps symptomatic of a more mature writer, whereby some measure of reconciliation is achieved between parents and children while the plays do not include any such pacification. As already suggested, a wall of silence prevents the characters

in all three texts from relating to each other, yet the novel offers a resolution of sorts through the deathbed confession that Earl delivers to Keith in long, often breathless, sentences, and in which he shares with his son the humiliations that have punctuated his years in England, thereby alleviating the "mystery" (Phillips 2009, 183) he had been in his son's eyes for all these years. Although Earl's story remains very much a monologue, in the sense that there is no real exchange between him and his son about what he says, it is a step forward in their relationship. One may imagine that it will result in Keith understanding his father and himself better in the future, but the novel stops short of such a glib conclusion. Quite significantly, when asked by Annabelle "Did the two of you have it out?" Keith carefully responds "Something like that" (328). The parents in the plays, by contrast, never manage to tell their children directly about their past and the racism they had to undergo: Vivien remembers her worst moments in a long tirade delivered only to her friend and neighbour Vernice (Phillips 1981, 49-52), while Albert's memories of his early years in England come back to his wandering mind in the form of several flashbacks. Both plays end on the realization of an unbridgeable gap between parents and children: *Strange Fruit* closes with Vivien's suicide and Alvin, unable to speak to her and thinking that she is asleep, kissing her goodbye (101);<sup>4</sup> *Where There Is Darkness* concludes with Albert's mad ranting and his son's almost desperate request to be talked to (Phillips 1982, 63).

That a bridge, however insubstantial and fragile, should have been thrown between Earl and Keith represents to me the essential specificity of *In the Falling Snow* and the real measure of its maturity, more so than the inclusion of a third generation. It is certain that the presence in the novel of Laurie makes the intergenerational problems more intricate, and constitutes in a sense a modernization of Phillips's traditional themes since it allows him to portray the more confident sense of belonging to England embodied by the young man. For all his symbolic meaning, however, Laurie too remains an elusive character in the book, more spoken about than speaking, and, as is the case with Danuta in the context of the relationships between the black man and the white woman, his presence in the novel does not fundamentally question the centrality of the painful knot that binds the first and second generations in Phillips's writing, and that is ever so slightly loosened in the novel.

It is quite appropriate that a parallel reading of Phillips's early plays with *In the Falling Snow* should remain inconclusive, as Phillips is a writer who in all his texts steers clear of a sense of closure. If any conclusion could be drawn, it is that instead of speaking of difference or similitude between Phillips's early and later texts, one should speak of increased complexity, a feature to be linked not simply to a changing context, but also to the writer's

artistic development towards even more ambiguity. Perhaps one could leave the last word to Laurie when he says "It's not always as simple as it looks" (Phillips 2009, 162). If, for John McLeod, the young man encapsulates the newness of *In the Falling Snow*, to me he rather undergirds its liminal nature, as a text whose many silences make it difficult to unravel.

## Notes

1. Anita Sethi (2009) writes: "If the novel thrives in those liminal places between here and there; between earth and sky; at train stations, the characters also find themselves at moral crossroads".

2. See, however, Ledent (2006), which contains some ideas developed in this article; Rahbek (2001); Scafe (2014); Schäffner (1999).

3. I would like to thank Suzanne Scafe for commenting on an earlier version of this article and for suggesting this idea of a difference of tone between Phillips's plays and *In the Falling Snow*.

4. It should be added, however, that Vivien makes a gesture towards the younger generation by giving Errol's girlfriend, Shelley, the key to her house. For Suzanne Scafe this "transforms the house of her disintegrating family into a home for future generations of her children's children who are both Black and British" (2014, 64).

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