

Of Invisible Men and Native Sons: Male Characters in Caryl Phillips' Fiction

Bénédicte Ledent

Abstract

This essay focuses on the work of Caryl Phillips, a British author of Caribbean origin. It examines how his character-driven fiction has addressed masculinities over the years. The first part starts from the observation of a relative deficit in masculine visibility in Phillips' fiction from *The Final Passage* (1985) to *A Distant Shore* (2003) and takes a closer look at these "invisible men", analyzing what features they share and also examining the reasons, narrative and otherwise, behind their relative inconspicuousness. The second part of the essay concentrates on Phillips' latest novel, *In the Falling Snow* (2009), which is concerned with a "native son" of a kind and his relationships with his own father. The prominent male presence in this book not only begs for a re-examination of the male figures in Phillips' earlier fiction, it also calls into question the dichotomies that often permeate conventional approaches to gender.

As readers of this volume may already know, Caryl Phillips can safely be described as one of the most talented and prolific British writers of his generation. With nine novels to his name, he has garnered several prestigious literary prizes -- such as the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1994 or the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2004, to mention but a few. In almost thirty years, his fictional work has attracted sustained attention, not only from the international press but also from literary scholars all over the world. This wide-ranging critical success is confirmed by an even cursory glance at the many articles, theses and reviews that have been written on the work of this artist of Caribbean descent. However diverse the approaches adopted by the commentators, most seem to concur on one thing: that Phillips' main preoccupation is the exploration of complex identities, particularly those which are shaped by exile or displacement, whether actual or metaphorical. No wonder, therefore, if notions such as home, belonging, diaspora, and history, but also race, often inform the

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thematic lenses through which Phillips' body of work has been scrutinized so far. Rightly so. Nevertheless, an overview of Phillipsian scholarship reveals other interesting critical trends. One of them is that gender -- like race, one of the major components of identity -- has generated comparatively less attention among the critics. It would be quite difficult to provide a definite explanation for this, although one could venture that in the context of what Paul Gilroy has called the Black Atlantic, gender has often been regarded as subordinate to race, even if, as we will see later, the two are in many cases inextricably bound.

Nevertheless, it is a surprising fact that Phillips' essentially character-driven fiction has rarely been examined from a gender perspective, let alone in the context of masculinity, especially when one considers that it has, at the same time, often been praised, albeit mostly in passing, for its sensitive and sympathetic depiction of female protagonists. In the introduction to a 2009 collection of interviews with Caryl Phillips, for example, Renée Schatteman points out that "Various interviewers have commented on Phillips' ability to successfully capture female voices".¹ And indeed any reader familiar with his work cannot but remember the strong feminine presence in his novels, be it Leila, the Caribbean immigrant to England, in *The Final Passage* (1985); Emily, the nineteenth-century English woman voyaging to the Caribbean, in *Cambridge* (1991); Joyce, the vivacious English woman whose fate crosses that of the African diaspora, in *Crossing the River* (1993); Eva, the Holocaust survivor, in *The Nature of Blood* (1997); or Dorothy, the English pensioner, in *A Distant Shore* (2003). My first impression, however, is that Phillips' male protagonists in the same books have -- for all their idiosyncrasies -- been less memorable, almost as if the female characters in those novels had eventually stolen the show from their male counterparts.

Starting from this possibly subjective observation of a slight deficit in masculine visibility in Phillips' fiction, at least until *Dancing in the Dark*, published in 2005, in the first part of this essay I would like to take a closer look at his apparently "invisible men", to try and see what features they share, and to examine the reasons, narrative and otherwise, behind their relative inconspicuousness. This investigation into Phillips' male characterization will, I hope, yield some insights into the author's complex literary universe -- not only its take on gender, but its general philosophy as well. This attempt to retrieve the male voices from the formidable choruses that can be heard throughout the author's novels is to some extent a

¹ Renée T. Schatteman, Introduction, in *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, ed. Renée T. Schatteman, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009, xi.

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response to the shift visible in his most recent fiction, and non-fiction too, which has in the last few years been more clearly male-centered, as I will show in the second part of my essay. The focus there will be on *In the Falling Snow*, Phillips' latest novel, published in 2009, which addresses the inter-generational tensions between three men of Caribbean descent living in contemporary England, and focuses on Keith Gordon, a black Englishman born in England, a "native son" of sorts.

This switch from an apparent male discretion in Phillips' earlier works to some measure of male assertiveness in his more recent writing is conveyed in my title through a reference to two classics of African American literature -- Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Significantly, these two books proved decisive catalysts for Phillips' literary vocation. As he writes in an early collection of essays entitled *The European Tribe* (1987), he bought these two volumes in a Californian bookshop in 1978, on his first visit to the USA and decided after reading Wright's novel that he wanted to become a writer. As Phillips puts it: "The emotional anguish of the hero, Bigger Thomas, the uncompromising prosodic muscle of Wright, his deeply felt sense of social indignation, provided not so much a model but a possibility of how I might be able to express the conundrum of my own existence."² There is something anecdotal in this, but the seminal role played by Wright in Phillips' career as a writer could also be viewed as a reminder of the predominantly masculine nature of his main frame of literary references. These, as his many essays and interviews also indicate, include such major figures as Richard Wright, naturally, but also James Baldwin, Sh saku End , Henrik Ibsen, and C.L.R. James, yet comparatively few female figures, with the possible exception of Angela Carter.

Do not mistake me: I am not arguing here that Phillips has a hidden, masculinist agenda, but I simply want to suggest that, in view of his literary genealogy and of the more perceptible male presence in his latest writing, closer attention should be paid to the male characters and to the expression of masculinities in his early work than has so far been the case. Such an approach would undoubtedly help to bring to the forefront Phillips' interest from the beginning of his career in the "social structures of domination"³ that have in the course of history contributed to the virtual erasure of black men but would also allow us to better appreciate how his most recent novel strives, through its main character Keith Gordon,

² Caryl Phillips, *The European Tribe*, London: Faber and Faber, 1987, 7-8.

³ Athena D. Mutua, "Introduction: Mapping the Contours of Progressive Masculinities", in *Progressive Black Masculinities*, ed. Athena D. Mutua, New York: Routledge, 2006, xi.

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towards an articulation of contemporary "progressive black masculinities", which Athena D. Mutua has described as "the unique and innovative performances of the masculine self that on the one hand personally eschew and ethically and actively stand against social structures of domination. On the other hand, they validate and empower black humanity, in all its variety, as part of the diverse and multicultural humanity of others."⁴

In what follows, I first propose to give a brief gendered reading of Phillips' early fiction by going in search of his "invisible men" and seeing what their common features are, in order to try and briefly delineate the Phillipsian version of male archetypes. Even a quick survey of the author's fiction until *Dancing in the Dark* -- which, as I have suggested, seems to mark a turning point in his fictional work in terms of gender characterization -- confirms that male characters are, in spite of their presence and their actual role in the narrative, rarely the main focalizers in narratological terms. There are a few exceptions to this, notably *A State of Independence* (1986), which centers on Bertram Francis, a Caribbean migrant to England who returns to his native island on the verge of independence, and *Higher Ground* (1989), a tripartite novel whose first two sections concentrate on male individuals. The narrator of the first section, "Heartland", is an unnamed African interpreter working for slave traders, and that of the second, "The Cargo Rap", is Rudi, an African American detained in a high-security prison. In spite of their narrative prominence, however, these three male focalizers -- Bertram, the interpreter, and Rudi -- do not come across as heroic, imposing or even likeable figures, although their stories still encourage the reader towards a sympathetic understanding of their predicament.

Lonely and isolated, these three characters can be read allegorically as men defeated by neo-colonialism, human greed or racism. As far as I know, among all the male personas created by Phillips only Bertram and the African interpreter have been submitted to a detailed reading focusing on gender. One of these studies is by Elena Machado Sáez, who views *A State of Independence* as "Phillips' closest engagement with the literary project of nation building",⁵ conventionally connoted as masculine, and reads migrating Bertram's relationship with Patsy, his girlfriend who stayed behind in the Caribbean, as "the site for grounding his migrant male subjectivity", but also "as the plane upon which the new world order is

⁴ Athena D. Mutua, "Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities", in *ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Elena Machado Sáez, "Postcoloniality, Atlantic Orders, and the Migrant Male in the Writings of Caryl Phillips", *Small Axe*, IX/1 (March 2005), 18.

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inscribed".⁶ The other examination of Phillips' early male protagonists is by Faizal Forrester, who construes the homo-erotic dreams of the African interpreter in *Higher Ground* as an expression of the commodification and "the process of radical 'othering' [suffered by] the black male body" in the context of the transatlantic slave trade.⁷ As these two analyses indicate, the masculinity of the migrant male and the slave is threatened by a larger order over which they do not exert any leverage, a clear sign of their tragic powerlessness.

One question to be asked at this stage is whether this acknowledgement of impotence could equally apply to Phillips' other male characters, whose masculinity has nevertheless not been systematically addressed by critics. What is certain is that, unlike Phillips' female protagonists, the great majority of the men in his fiction are black in an often white environment and have for this reason to bear the burden of a century-long history of segregation and discrimination, which often tragically curtails their ability to take control of their own lives and that of their families, a lack of power often regarded as incompatible with normative masculinity. Such is less often the case for Phillips' white male characters, like Captain Hamilton, the slave trader in *Crossing the River*, or Stephan Stern, one of the founders of the state of Israel in *The Nature of Blood*. Both Hamilton and Stern are leaders of men who wield power and have important responsibilities, without being in all respects exemplars of hegemonic masculinity either. This being said, it would be limiting to view Phillips' black male protagonists only in terms of social emasculation or infantilization, however relevant these notions might be to the description of their plights. What I would like to do instead is try to establish a broad-brush typology of black male characters in Phillips' early fiction, keeping in mind that such an exercise presents obvious dangers of simplification and therefore stereotyping, which I will do my best to avoid.

Two major male profiles, not always mutually exclusive, seem to emerge when one looks at Phillips' novels until 2005. The first one is that of the unreliable male or absent father who fails in his family duties, either willingly or not, or lacks accountability, very much like Michael in *The Final Passage* who leaves his wife Leila and his baby son Calvin very soon after their arrival in the "Mother Country". There is a similar irresponsibility on the part of Bertram in *A State of Independence*, who returns to his native island after a twenty-year stint in England and comes across a young man called Livingstone, presumably the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32, 26.

⁷ Faizal Forrester, "'Revolting Bodies': Homosexual Dream and Masculine Anxiety in Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office* and Caryl Phillips' *Higher Ground*", *Caribbean Studies*, XXVII/3-4 (July 1994), 321.

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unacknowledged son that he had by Patsy. In an interview conducted at the beginning of his career Phillips suggested that such behavior was "born of ... an aimlessness of the life which has been bestowed ... by colonialism",⁸ though this also characterizes men who were not properly speaking colonized, but were taken away from their family in various circumstances with political or economic overtones, such as segregation in the United States or labor migration. Take the case of Rudi Williams, the African American prisoner in *Higher Ground*, who writes uncompromisingly radical letters from his prison cell. Although Rudi refuses "to take a back seat in [his daughter's] life",⁹ he never gets a chance to meet her as she was born shortly before his long detention started. Yet another absent father is the Othello figure in *The Nature of Blood* whose resettlement in Italy as an army general and also a migrant worker of sorts leads to his separation from his African wife and son whom he has, according to a shockingly moralizing voice erupting into the narrative, conveniently forgotten and "thrust... to the back of [his] noble mind".¹⁰

The second type that seems to recur in Phillips' early fiction is that of the "Uncle Tom", a black individual who has been transformed, alienated even, by his meeting with the world of the white man to such an extent that he could in some way be regarded as a traitor to his own community, not to say his own race. The African interpreter in "Heartland", the first section of *Higher Ground*, the educated and Christianized slave Cambridge in the eponymous novel, Nash Williams, the manumitted African American slave who goes to Liberia on a civilizing mission in *Crossing the River*, the Othello figure in *The Nature of Blood*, and even Solomon, the African refugee in contemporary England in *A Distant Shore*, all could to some degree be described as having compromised with the West for different reasons, including the need for survival but also the desire to be loved and to give meaning to their own existence. Nevertheless, as John Ford reminds us, Phillips' subtle portrayal of these ambiguous figures steers clear of depicting them as mere collaborators: it rather presents them as embodying "the encounter between cultures, flawed, discomfiting but human".¹¹

⁸ Caryl Phillips, "Interview with Kay Saunders", *Kunapipi*, IX/1 (1987), 48.

⁹ Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground*, London: Penguin, 1989, 144.

¹⁰ Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, London: Faber and Faber, 1997, 181. See the essay by Estrin, where the author discusses "the lost child plot" in *The Nature of Blood* and sees this central motif as "a vehicle for the imposition of a male order that renders gender as well as race key players in the drive for mastery" (Barbara L. Estrin, "I had rather to adopt a child than get it': Mythical Lost Children in Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood*", *Ariel*, XXXIV/4 [October 2003], 23).

¹¹ John Ford, "Representations of Deference and Defiance in the Novels of Caryl Phillips", in *Beyond the Blood, the Beach and the Banana: New Perspectives in Caribbean Studies*, ed. Sandra Courtman, Kingston: Ian Randle, 2004, 384.

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Clearly, then, Phillips' fiction does not encourage the reader to pass judgment on these men, whether those who walk away from their families or those who negotiate with the colonizer or the powers that be. For, in spite of their sometimes questionable moral standards, they are shown to be afflicted individuals, trapped by a world order in which they more often play the role of victims than victimizers, even if the situations described by Phillips tend to reject any simple dichotomy between these two opposite statuses. Perhaps the ultimate illustration of the male predicament in Phillips' fiction is provided by the eighteenth-century African whose voice frames *Crossing the River*. In the prologue and epilogue to this book, the guilty father explains his "desperate foolishness"¹² which led him to sell his three children into slavery because his crops had failed. In one go forsaking his offspring and resorting to what he calls "a shameful intercourse"¹³ with the slave traders, this character seems to crystallize the ambiguous combination of the patriarchal domination over others (here children) with the hopelessness of the dispossessed that has blighted the lives of many men in the African diaspora.

Arguably, no moral judgment is suggested in Phillips' fiction. One could nevertheless argue that the ethical ambiguity of many of his male characters might be one of the reasons why they seem to be less striking than their female, often white, counterparts, with whom they interact and who tend to display a greater sense of integrity or at least more ability to develop. Phillips' belief in women's moral superiority, which he has expressed in interviews,¹⁴ can probably explain the prominence of Leila in *The Final Passage* and of Emily in *Cambridge*, but this surely cannot be applied wholesale to all of Phillips' often polyphonic fictional production. What is certain, however, is that his novels often give narrative prominence to the female voice at the expense of the male one, both in terms of pages but also of audibility. *A Distant Shore*, for instance, is framed by the voice of Dorothy, a retired English teacher, who in her dealings with men is ironically "concerned to make sure that the dominant narrative is male".¹⁵ Still, she begins and ends the narrative, and therefore dominates the voice of Solomon, the African refugee whose childlike status in England seems to contrast with his career as a ruthless soldier when he was still in his native country. Phillips' narrative

¹² Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River*, London: Bloomsbury, 1993, 1, 237.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴ See, for example, the Lannan Literary Videos where he says in an interview with Pico Iyer (1995), "[women's voices in historical documents] always seem to be much more honest and direct in tone [They] seem to me to be clearer, more impassioned, more complex" (Caryl Phillips, "Caryl Phillips: Lannan Literary Videos", in *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, 43).

¹⁵ Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore*, London: Secker and Warburg, 2003, 203.

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architecture here might be read at once as subversive of the traditional gender relationships, whereby maleness overshadows femaleness, but also as mimetic of the conventional racial dynamics in the West, which gives precedence to white over black - a complex bringing together of patriarchy and racism which, as Lucie Gillet has shown, is also at the heart of *Cambridge*.¹⁶

However, it might be reductive, and in addition not always possible, to assign a clear meaning to the author's choices in terms of characterization, even if more research should be conducted in that area. *Crossing the River* offers a telling illustration of how difficult it may be to pin down Phillips' gender agenda, provided he has any at all. If one considers the last section of the novel, entitled "Somewhere in England", which is told from the point of view of an English woman called Joyce, it is intriguing to know that it was originally conceived as being narrated from the perspective of Travis, the son of the African father, who ends up as a GI in Yorkshire during the Second World War. As Caryl Phillips mentioned in an interview, and as can also be gathered from his archives, which are held in the Beinecke Library in Yale:

I tried to find a voice for Travis, I travelled down south during the research, drove round Georgia and Alabama for days in search of Travis. I couldn't find him anywhere, but I wasn't prepared to invent a voice. It wasn't working, and if it's not working, I don't care about balance for the sake of balance One thing I know is that Joyce was speaking to me forcefully, powerfully, in the dialect I grew up speaking, which is Yorkshire.¹⁷

That Phillips seems to have felt closer to Joyce than Travis may suggest that identity for him is first and foremost a question of social background rather than race and sex and that his work does not have an indiscriminate gender message to deliver, whether feminist or masculinist. The foregrounding of female voices in his fiction might not be as meaningful in terms of gender as might appear at first sight, as other factors also seem to determine his authorial choices.¹⁸ Nevertheless and to make matters even more complicated, Joyce's

¹⁶ See Lucie Gillet, "Omnipresent and Everlasting Imperialism: Race and Gender Oppression in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore*", in *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, eds Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012, 321-31.

¹⁷ Caryl Phillips, "Crossing the River: Caryl Phillips Talks to Maya Jaggi", *Wasafiri*, X/20 (Autumn 1994), 27.

¹⁸ Phillips expressed himself on this in a recently published interview: "I'm dealing with characters, I'm dealing with their frailties, I'm dealing with their vulnerabilities and part of that is obviously going to be conditioned by their gender. That's just part of what you are dealing with You don't sit down and try to write a character to point up an exploration of certain issues of masculinity or femininity. That's not how fiction operates" (Caryl Phillips, "'Who Are You Calling a Foreigner?': Caryl Phillips in Conversation with John McLeod", in *New Perspectives on the Black Atlantic: Definitions, Readings, Practices, Dialogues*, eds Bénédicte Ledent and Pilar

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narrative prominence does not prevent a reading of the novel as masculinist either. Indeed, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey has argued, although *Crossing the River* displays some awareness of the position of women in society, it features two female protagonists, Martha and Joyce, who can come across as inferior in the overall diasporic spirit of the text, because, unlike their male counterparts, neither crosses the Atlantic, "nor ... directly participate[s] in transnational migration". Moreover, *Crossing the River* nowhere refers to the mother of the sold children, which suggests, for DeLoughrey, "not only a transaction perpetuated through African and European men, but a *patriarchal genealogy* for the diasporic 'children' of the Americas".¹⁹ In this novel as in others, women's visibility cannot be automatically equated with power.

As the discussion so far has shown, it is difficult to precisely circumscribe the reasons why the male voices seem more in the background than at the forefront of Phillips' fiction until 2005, let alone conclusively demonstrate that this is actually the case. What is less likely to be questioned, however, is the fact that the two novels that Phillips has published since then -- *Dancing in the Dark* and *In the Falling Snow* -- clearly center on male protagonists whose female partners play a less prominent role. Not surprisingly, these two books directly tackle issues pertaining to masculinity, especially the father and son relationship, a topic which Phillips had so far only extensively addressed in *Crossing the River* - not only through the overarching absent presence of the African father but also through the ambiguous, incestuous filial bond between Edward Williams and his emancipated slave Nash in the section entitled "The Pagan Coast".²⁰ In this narrative, as Maria Mårdberg and Helena Wahlström have pointed out, "Father-son relations ... are complicated even further by the meshing of Christianity's myth of divine fatherhood with racist power hierarchies".²¹ The way that *Dancing in the Dark* and *In the Falling Snow* deal with the question of fatherhood is, by comparison, more central and straightforward, which confirms a possibly more direct, less diluted interest in matters relating to masculinity.

Concentrating on Bahamas-born Bert Williams and his artistic career as an entertainer

Cuder, Bern: Peter Lang, 2012, 293-94).

¹⁹ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Gendering the Oceanic Voyage: Trespassing the (Black) Atlantic and Caribbean", *Thamyris*, V/2 (Autumn 1998), 217-18.

²⁰ See Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, "Roots versus Routes in Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* and Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* in *Revisiting Slave Narratives/Les Avatars Contemporains des Récits d'Esclaves*, *Les Carnets du Cerpac* 2, ed. Judith Misrahi Barak, Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2005. Phillips also tackles father and son relationships in his 1982 play *Where There Is Darkness*.

²¹ Maria Mårdberg and Helena Wahlström, "Parenthood in the African Diaspora: Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River*", in *Seeking the Self - Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*, eds Tuomas Huttunen *et al.*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, 294.

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on turn-of-the-twentieth-century Broadway, *Dancing in the Dark* testifies to this new direction in Phillips' fiction, notably because it tackles the intricate link between black masculine identity and the entertainment business in the USA,²² a topic already explored by Phillips in an essay dealing with Marvin Gaye in *A New World Order*.²³ Given this clear focus, then, the novel begs to be read through a gendered lens. This has been done by Craig Smith, for example, who argues that *Dancing in the Dark* "bear[s] witness to a history of the silenced traumatic experiences of migrating Afro-Caribbean males",²⁴ reads it in terms of melancholia, and brings it together with Phillips' *A State of Independence*. Phillips' following book, not strictly speaking a novel but an original combination of fact and fiction entitled *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), confirms this increased male visibility in his work: it puts into the limelight three black men who lived much of their lives in England without being recognized as Englishmen, not only a challenge to their humanity but to their sense of masculinity as well. Yet, it is Phillips' latest novel, *In the Falling Snow*, which crystallizes the author's most exhaustive exploration of masculinity to date, bringing together as it does "invisible men" and "native sons".

In the Falling Snow has been described by a reviewer as "a sharply observed slice of modern British life, cutting across race, class and generational divides to reveal the complexities we're constantly negotiating".²⁵ As such, it offers a remarkable cast of male characters, whose frustrating intricacy makes it impossible to come up with any clear-cut interpretation of Phillips' approach to masculinity. This reminds us, as R.W. Connell points out, that "'Masculinity' is not a coherent object" about which one can easily generalize, which is perhaps truer than ever in a globalized world. The best one can do, rather, is distinguish "types of masculinity" and understand the accompanying "dynamics of change".²⁶ This is very much what the following analysis of *In the Falling Snow* attempts to achieve.²⁷

²² See Phillips, "'Who Are You Calling a Foreigner?'" 294.

²³ Caryl Phillips, "Marvin Gaye", in *A New World Order: Selected Essays*, London: Secker and Warburg, 2001, 35-59. For more on the gender implications of Williams' blackface performance, see Michelle Ann Stephens, "The Comic Side of Gender Trouble and Bert Williams' Signature Act", *Feminist Review*, XC/1 (October 2008), 128-46.

²⁴ Craig A. Smith, "Scenes of Trauma: Violent Rites, Migration, and the Performance of Afro-Caribbean Masculinities", Diss. University of Florida, 2010, not paginated.

²⁵ Siobhan Murphy, "Postcards from Society's Edge", *Metro*, 20 May 2009:

<http://metro.co.uk/2009/05/20/postcards-from-societys-edge-128937/>. This text was also used as a blurb for the paperback edition of the novel.

²⁶ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (1995), 2nd edn, Cambridge Polity Press, 2005, 67.

²⁷ I would like to thank the students who participated in the seminar on "Masculinities and the Literature of the African Diaspora" at the University of Liège in 2011 and whose discussion of *In the Falling Snow* contributed to my own reading of the novel.

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Keith Gordon, the protagonist of the novel, is in some important respects an unusual figure in Phillips' fiction, and is all the more interesting for this reason. With Rudi in *Higher Ground* and the African father in *Crossing the River*, he is indeed one of the very few "native sons" among Phillips' black male protagonists -- "native sons" being understood here in the literal sense, with none of the destructive anger of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas. Indeed, Keith is an Englishman who has not travelled across seas or oceans and has never left his place of birth, except for a brief tour of Europe with his then future wife Annabelle. This uncharacteristic sense of rootedness in England (even if Keith also feels drawn to a distant, ancestral Caribbean) is compounded by the fact that, unlike the majority of Phillips' black fictional characters, Keith is a socially successful man with a university degree and a safe job, which confers on him a certain amount of social authority. The contemporary setting of the novel goes some way towards explaining the atypical nature of Keith's profile, so entirely different from the historical, ill-fated male figures that people Phillips' earlier fiction, even if he shares with most of them a sense of extreme loneliness.

Through Keith, Phillips presents us with a model of new black masculinity, new in the context of his own fictional work but new also as a synonym for "modern", that is, which reflects twenty-first-century life in England while avoiding the stereotypes still often associated with contemporary urban black masculinities, such as gang life, crime, or sexual violence. If there is something of the everyman in Keith, he could nonetheless also be viewed as a representative of what Mutua has called "progressive black masculinities" in the sense that he has overcome systems of social and racial domination in his private life, and has in his professional life participated in "activities against racism, sexism ... and other systems of oppression that limit the human potential of the black masculine self and others".²⁸ Keith's marriage to Annabelle, for example, testifies to the fact that, as a black working-class individual, he has risen above the class and race prejudices of his white, upper middle-class in-laws. And through his job as a social worker, he also contributes to making society more egalitarian, not just for himself but for the other "minorities" as well. Keith is indeed in charge of the local Race Equality unit, which in the course of the novel surprisingly merges with Disability and Women's Affairs. This means for him "learning about the problem of wheelchair accessibility, understanding why rape crisis centres could not be funded if they excluded male rape, coming to terms with the irony of being an able-bodied black man speaking on behalf of disabled white people, and being the highly visible spokesperson for

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feminist groups, many of whom appeared to despise men".²⁹

As this quotation makes clear, Keith's professional duties are evidence of the increased black male visibility and participation in social work -- for a long time a white and female stronghold -- but they also convey the many ironies that this new state of affairs has engendered, hence the obstacles that might stand in the way of his professional fulfillment and which thus explain why he speaks in a rather cynical way of the "pantomime of his fancy job".³⁰ His occupation apart, the newness of Keith's situation also resides in the way he handles his responsibilities towards his teenage son Laurie, with whom he finds it difficult to communicate, especially after his separation from his wife Annabelle, who has their child's custody. Far from being an absent father, however, Keith is closely involved in the upbringing of his son -- often at his former wife's request, it must be added -- and takes his role as a father to heart. Nevertheless there is some form of awkwardness in the way he exerts his parental duties as shown by the few scenes where he tries "to bond with his son" who, as a teenager, is "Going through that 'I'm a man' stuff",³¹ which only widens the existing generation gap.

In contrast to his son Keith, Earl, who arrived in England from the Caribbean at the beginning of the 1960s, is not a "native son" but more of an "invisible man". Throughout his life his admittedly discrete presence is hardly acknowledged by anyone. This is already the case on his native island, where he is rejected by his father in favor of his elder brother Desmond who has migrated to the United States, and where, after his own father's death, he is manipulated by his sister Leona into leaving the Caribbean for England so that she can take possession of the family house. Things do not improve in England where Earl's lack of social recognition reaches a climax, as poignantly recalled through Keith's reminiscence of a scene that features his father, Earl, and evokes the title of the novel: "As he walked his father left behind a single step of footprints, and [Keith] remembered lingering by the doorstep and watching closely as the falling snow steadily erased all evidence of his father's presence."³² The falling snow, and by extension white English society, have metaphorically erased Earl's existence. He is therefore unable to leave a mark on the northern landscape as a human being even if his manpower (a strangely antithetical term here) as a migrant worker was welcome and necessary at some stage for the welfare of the host society.

²⁸ Mutua, "Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities", 7.

²⁹ Caryl Phillips, *In the Falling Snow*, London: Secker and Warburg, 2009, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 130-31.

³² *Ibid.*, 321.

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Moreover, in line with the male figures in Phillips' early novels, Earl is an occasionally absent father -- for various reasons, including his own failing mental health. First he is not given a chance to raise his son, then later, after the child's mother dies, he is all of a sudden "asked to play the role of the father",³³ which seems to be the cause of even more mental suffering. But Earl is also an Uncle Tom of sorts, who has had to give up on his scholarly ambitions and compromise with himself and the system -- which is shown to be at best paternalistic, at worst racist -- in order to get a job as a janitor and survive in England. Earl's failure both as a father and as a social individual does not inspire admiration in Keith, who views him as a "stubborn" and "unpredictable" man,³⁴ leading "a pitiful life".³⁵ But this changes after he hears his father's deathbed narrative, because it explains how Earl's humanity and his sense of masculinity were taken away from him. Moreover, it provides a moving corrective to his rather negative image as a man "either hospitalised or struggling in his mind"³⁶ that transpires through Keith's memories of him from the beginning of the novel. In a sense, Earl's confession of the various humiliations that he had to suffer during his lifetime puts a dramatic end to his invisibility (or inaudibility) and could vicariously constitute a vindication of the men in Phillips' previous fiction, such as Michael in *The Final Passage*, whose voices have not been properly heard. Therefore the extent of the humiliation of these characters is not fully understood.³⁷ If one takes Phillips' fiction as a whole, there is an almost performative quality to Earl's distressing tale as it somehow demands from the reader to operate a backward reading of Phillips' fictional production and pay closer attention to what his male characters have to say, thereby restoring some of their lost dignity.

As shown by this brief delineation of Keith's and Earl's personas, *In the Falling Snow* puts side by side two opposite black masculine figures, whose main differences lie in their experience of fatherhood and their degree of social recognition. The divergences in their trajectories could certainly be ascribed to their differences in personality. Keith is a born fighter and has a more driven nature than his father who is of a depressed and withdrawn disposition. But Keith's and Earl's diverging fates are also shaped by the different social contexts in which they evolve and which either favor or thwart their ambitions, and by the fact

³³ *Ibid.*, 317.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁷ See, for example, an essay discussing *The Final Passage* where the critic focuses on Leila and rightly points out that "Oddly enough, we are not given her husband's story of London" (Gail Low, "Separate Spheres? Representing London Through Women in Some Recent Black British Fiction", *Kunapipi*, XXI/2 [1999], 27).

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that they belong to different generations.³⁸ This indicates that space and time have a definite impact on the construction of masculinities -- as already suggested concerning Laurie -- but also that the condition of the black male in England might have improved with time, evolving from that of the silent immigrant to that of the socially active professional man. However, bringing together these two male portraits has other implications, which echo some of the key issues that have been at the heart of masculinity studies for a few decades, notably the notion of a masculine essence versus that of the constructed, and thus variable, character of gender identities.

As we have seen, the elements that separate the two men are most visibly context-bound, yet the reader is simultaneously made aware, especially after the eruption of Earl's story into his son's narrative, of several commonalities between the two which a superficial reading of the book might take as suggestive of an essentialist vision of masculinity, almost as if there were features that could define masculinities in a universal way, or at least point towards some permanent characteristics of the male condition. Earl's and Keith's common interest in pubs as places of refuge, which "[feel] like an extension of home",³⁹ might belong to this category. So could their propensity for taciturnity. Silence indeed pervades the two men's relationship with each other, which in most cases results in hardly anything better than an "awkward exchange",⁴⁰ and with their family, in particular their female partners, coming in the way of satisfying communication. Even Laurie, who is still a child in a sense, tends to "withdraw into a silence that is unmistakably sullen" which his mother describes as "his 'big man' behaviour".⁴¹

Nevertheless, for all the apparent male convergences between fathers and sons, what seems to bind them more than anything, and paradoxically so, is the variable nature of their masculine identity, the fact that they are not always as manly as they might appear at first sight or that their masculinity fluctuates according to circumstances. This, incidentally, also applies to Annabelle's father who first has all the features of the hegemonic male: he is "an ex-army officer who had resigned his commission because he was distressed at having to

³⁸ See Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, "Masculinities and Intergenerational Strife in Recent Black British Fiction", in *Migration, Narration, Communication: Cultural Exchanges in a Globalised World*, ed. Alicja Witalisz, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011, 23-29; Bénédicte Ledent, "'Mind the Gaps': Caryl Phillips' *In the Falling Snow* and the Generational Approach to the Black Diaspora", in *Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities, "Race ": 1. Diasporas and Cultures of Migrations*, eds Judith Misrahi-Barak and Claudine Raynaud, Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2014, 161-75.

³⁹ Phillips, *In the Falling Snow*, 177.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

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associate with fellow officers who he regarded as being a cut below by birth".⁴² Yet as the novel unfolds he appears as "weak, pathetic"⁴³ in his daughter's eyes and he is diminished by cancer so much so that even Keith "felt sorry for him".⁴⁴ Similarly, the way that Keith and Earl come across in the course of the narrative calls into question any normative representation of their masculinity, which is in any case already marginalized by virtue of their race. One might be struck, for example, by the ascendancy exerted by the women, black or white, in their lives. This is the case of Yvette, Keith's mixed-race girlfriend, who "was determining both the pace and the nature of their courtship"⁴⁵ and accuses Keith of sexual harassment when he decides to break up with her. Likewise, Brenda, Earl's white English wife, has a generous but dominating personality and she takes it upon herself to have Earl sectioned, thereby contributing to making him a typically weakened, incarcerated male.

Clearly, neither Keith nor Earl are epitomes of traditional patriarchy, yet this does not prevent the former from having predatory instincts towards Danuta, a young Polish girl living in London, nor the latter from expressing his contempt for all women who, he says, are "nothing but trouble".⁴⁶ In addition to this, the narrative contains more or less discrete clues that demonstrate how difficult, and eventually pointless, it is to ascribe rigid masculine characteristics to any man because there is always some form of what is generally viewed as feminine in them. So, in spite of his virile appearance, Keith is also presented as obsessed with domestic cleanliness and order, an attitude which tends to be regarded as feminine. Furthermore, his midlife crisis -- which he undergoes in the course of the novel and involves his resigning from his job following Yvette's accusations -- makes him vulnerable, depressive even, as he realizes that "there really is no cogent purpose to his day or his life".⁴⁷ The novel's open-ended, final scene shows Keith, now jobless and fatherless, being looked after, almost literally nurtured,⁴⁸ by his ex-wife Annabelle, who seems to want to take him under her wing. At this stage, Keith's masculinity is definitely less assertive than in the first scenes of the book. Earl's masculine identity, too, displays what might be called variable geometry even though he never possesses the same self-assurance as his son. Still, he first comes across as a cold, taciturn, possibly indifferent man, but his deathbed narrative makes the reader, and

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 138-39.

⁴⁸ This scene is an interesting replica of the episode where Keith also feeds some soup to Danuta to whom he has

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Keith, aware of all the suffering that he bottled up during his lifetime, and which institutions such as the Race and Equality Unit can never effectively redress. More importantly, Earl's life story demonstrates why he can indeed be described, in Brenda's words, as "sensitive like a petal",⁴⁹ a qualifier that is far from evoking normative masculine strength and crystallizes his life as a mentally fragile West Indian immigrant in England who "can't afford to be sensitive and decent in a country like this".⁵⁰

If Keith's and Earl's masculinities are shown to diverge from the norm as the narrative unfolds, it is rather the other way round for their son and grandson Laurie who is viewed through much of the story as a boy, with manly ambitions perhaps, but in any case as a child who has to be taken care of and protected. At the end of the novel, however, we learn that his girlfriend Chantelle is pregnant by him and that he decides to face this with a fully responsible attitude and "get it sorted",⁵¹ which doubly testifies to his being a "man", both as a genitor and as an accountable person. Laurie, as a mixed-race person but also one with a gender-neutral name, embodies in the novel the impossibility of a dichotomic approach to identity, whether one is talking of race or of gender. His personality therefore seems to exemplify a statement made by James Baldwin in one of his latest essays: "we are all androgynous ... because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other - male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white."⁵²

Much more could be said about the way masculinities are represented in *In the Falling Snow*, which is a far more complex and deeper novel than its recurrent attention to apparently trivial details of domestic life might suggest. If anything, this wealth of minutiae, which may be irritating to some readers, should convince us that the study of masculinities is more convincing if it can be grounded in the messiness of everyday life, as this allows the critic to "address the particularity, as opposed to the universality, of male experience" and as a consequence to research "its more intimate and specifically personal dimensions".⁵³ Moreover, as already suggested, the thorough exploration of the masculine condition at the heart of *In the Falling Snow* should also encourage the readers of Phillips' work to return to

lent his own bed (see *ibid.*, 144).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵² James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood", in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, New York: Library of America, 1998, 828.

⁵³ Stefan Horlacher, "Charting the Field of Masculinity Studies; or, Toward a Literary History of Masculinities", in *Constructions of Masculinity in British Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Stefan Horlacher, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 12.

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his earlier, perhaps less rounded male figures, for it clearly demonstrates through Earl's and Keith's fraught relationship that the narratives of the invisible ancestors are necessary for today's native sons to understand themselves, to know where they come from but also more crucially where they might be heading, which again highlights the essential role of literature as a medium for a better understanding of oneself and others. Phillips recently reaffirmed his belief in literature as a tool of human knowledge, for, he said, "it embraces and celebrates a place of no truths, it relishes ambiguity, and it deeply respects the place where everybody", including his invisible men and his native sons, "has the right to be understood".⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Caryl Phillips, "Colour Me English", in *Colour Me English: Selected Essays*, London: Harvill Secker, 2011, 16.