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“I am of, and not of, this place”: Caribbean Dis/locations in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid and Caryl Phillips

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Abstract

Despite the transnational/diasporic dimension permeating the lives and works of Caryl Phillips and Jamaica Kincaid, they keep turning and re-turning to the Caribbean as a nurturing and creative space for their literary investigation. As subjects ambivalently dis/located in the Caribbean, Phillips and Kincaid reflect the cartography envisioned by Antonio Benítez-Rojo in *The Repeating Island*, inhabiting a “meta-archipelago” with neither a boundary nor a center but whose fluidity conveys a sense of belonging that significantly re-maps Western notions of territory and identity. In this paper, I discuss the trope of the islands—more specifically, the writers’ native islands—as it is reclaimed and re-imagined in Kincaid’s *My Brother* and Phillips’s *A Final Passage* and demonstrate that, in their quintessential dis-locations, both writers ultimately and paradoxically “belong.”

Commenting on the indignant assault that Jamaica Kincaid launched against the parochialism of her native island in *A Small Place*, Caryl Phillips writes: “Kincaid may reside in the United States but only somebody with her heart in Antigua could have

written with such ferocity of purpose and self-revelatory-hurt. Quite simply, she has a right to criticize because, irrespective of residence or nationality, she belongs” (*A New World Order* 146).

Home and belonging are indeed highly contested terrain for Caribbean-born subjects forced for one reason or another to migrate. In her autobiographical narratives, Kincaid has been telling us how, at the age of 17, she left Antigua to go to the United States, a move that would later initiate her into the New York publishing milieu and into her writing career. By contrast, Phillips left his native island of St. Kitts as a four-month old infant when his parents, following the path of many post-WWII West Indian subjects leaving the Caribbean in search for a better life in the “mother country,” crossed the Atlantic to take up residency in England. While in the United States, Kincaid would sever all the ties with her family in Antigua, as reflected in her change of name, and would return to the island only in 1986, after twenty years since her early departure. Similarly it would take twenty years, since his first arrival in England, for Phillips to return to St. Kitts. For both writers, such spatio-temporal dislocation from their native islands is powerfully encapsulated in that feeling of ambiguous belonging, of being “of, and not of this place,” as the repetitive pattern framing the introduction to Phillips’s *A New World Order* obsessively suggests.

This paper will discuss how, despite the physical and psychological displacement characterizing the life and work of Phillips and Kincaid, they both keep turning and returning to the Caribbean as a nurturing and creative space for their literary investigations. Both in their fiction and non-fiction the endlessly dis-membered body of the Caribbean is powerfully re-membered and reassembled in new geographical

configurations, in localities that become at once exterior but intricately, and always, intimately interior landscapes.

In a 1996 interview, Kincaid said that when she is in Vermont, home is Antigua; and that when she is in Antigua, home is Vermont (Paravisini-Gerbert 13). And yet, I would argue that home for her is very much Antigua even when she is in Vermont. As a site of memory, Antigua becomes a locality that she constantly and endlessly tries to bring back--whether it's in her writing or in the garden she makes in her Vermont backyard, a further exercise in memory that results in her garden powerfully resembling "a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it" (*My Garden (book)*: xiv).¹ For the purpose of this analysis, I will focus on *My Brother* (1997) as the work that better describes this double-spatial configuration (Vermont and Antigua, the United States and the Caribbean), these two apparently incompatible selves traveling back and forth between time and space in the attempt to heal the physical and psychological wounds that have scarred Kincaid deeply since she first left Antigua.

For Phillips, the notion of "home" becomes even more complex and compellingly so as the author re-maps the triangular routes of the transatlantic slave trade: England, Africa, and North America (including the Caribbean). In his attempt to cultivate a plural notion of home, Phillips has found in the Atlantic a "watery crossroads" able to give him a sense of belonging while powerfully undermining Western notions of nationality and identity strictly linked to territorial borders. Phillips's Atlantic home reterritorializes Western conceptualizations of place and habitation and re-maps a transnational *sea-scape*² that, for all its aquatic rhizomes, does not ultimately erase the presence of the West Indian landscape. Within this context, I will look at Phillips's first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), a novel that, in my view, contains already the

transnational cartography he will elaborate later on in more sophisticated ways.

Phillips's representation of the landscape in this novel gives us already the idea that a powerful dialectic between land and sea operates in the Caribbean, *rooting* and *routing* this meta-archipelago in Africa, Europe, and North America, in other words in a transnational, diasporic space that becomes a highly symbolic site of our twenty-first century world order.

My Brother

In 1996, Kincaid's youngest brother, Devon Drew, died of AIDS at the age of thirty-three. Upon hearing that Devon had contracted the disease, Kincaid returned to Antigua bringing the AZT medicine that would send the virus in remission for a while. Having left the island when Devon was only three years of age, Kincaid does not remember any particular feeling of affection toward her brother. And yet, as she remarks in *My Brother*, she "became obsessed" by both Devon's illness and the fear that he would die before she could see him again (20). Her brother's wasted life, a life shaped by Antigua's drug culture, Rastafarianism, and a promiscuous sexual lifestyle allows Kincaid to identify with him, to see in/through him the life that she had managed to escape by leaving for the United States. In this sense, critics have been correct in labeling the book as an autobiography, in which Kincaid's brother's life becomes very much her own. Writing an elegiac song, Kincaid, according to Sandra Pouchet Paquet, "internalize[s] the deceased other" (*Caribbean Autobiography* 9) and out of a painful personal loss re-examines the terms and conditions through which identity is articulated.

My Brother is divided in two parts: the first one was written while Kincaid's brother was still alive; the second approximately a year after he died. The first part opens and

closes with the image of Devon lying in a St. John hospital bed. In between Kincaid weaves a richly-layered narrative in which three main topics overlap in significant ways: Devon, her mother, Antigua, all of them ultimately subsumed within a speaking “I” deeply engaged in a therapeutic process of re-membering.

Echoing some of the powerful images we have already encountered in *A Small Place*, Kincaid projects an image of Antigua that, for all its natural beauty, stagnates in decay and death. The hospital in which Devon lies is dirty and is run in ways that an upper-class person used to the comfort and facilities of the US healthcare system would find hard to understand. At a major crossroads, the narrator notices a broken stoplight that can not be fixed because it is impossible to find its parts anywhere in the world, which brings her to think that “in Antigua itself nothing is made” (24). More significantly, the Antiguan landscape, is evoked, from the very beginning, through decaying garden imagery, as Kincaid’s scrutinizing eye catches “an old half-dead flamboyant tree” symbolically located near the hospital premises (11).

Kincaid’s interest in gardens and garden writing strongly appears in *My Brother*, for she often uses arboreal imagery to describe not only the landscape but also Devon’s disease. “Inside his body,” she writes, “a death lives, flowering upon flowering with a voraciousness that nothing seems to satisfy and stop” (20). But garden metaphors are also a further example through which Kincaid constructs a portrait of Devon as her parallel self. Early in the narrative, we learn about Devon’s passion for gardening and love of plants, of how he had created a small garden “in the back of his little house,” planting among the others “a banana plant, a lemon tree, various vegetables, various non-flowering shrubs” (11). As she meditates on the disease that is now growing inside

his body, Kincaid writes, “the plantsman in my brother will never be, and all the other things he might have been in his life have died” (19).

Both Kincaid and Devon seem to have inherited this love for gardening from their mother whose relationship to plants is, however, highly ambivalent. If, on the one hand, Kincaid fondly remembers her mother’s creative ways with plants, she also (and all the more painfully) remembers her mother’s destructive impulse toward nature. Kincaid’s first recognition of such a shocking truth occurs rather early in her anamnesiac journey, when, in the backyard of her mother’s house, she notices the absence of the lemon tree that Devon had planted and that her mother had subsequently cut it down to “make room for the addition” (13). Similarly, upon recalling how, in another occasion, her mother had set fire to a soursop tree which had been infested by a colony of parasitic insects, Kincaid bitterly comments that her mother’s desire to eradicate all the things that stand in her way is an impulse “not unheard-of” (126).

Various critics have interpreted Kincaid’s garden images as a powerful metaphor for further discussions of empire and colonialism (Paravisini-Gerbert 27). The garden as a metaphor for conquest (and control) and Kincaid’s relationship with a long-established tradition of (Western) garden writing poignantly suggest the author’s paradoxical entanglement with the culture of empire.³ Within this context, the mother figure, a force as destructive as the hurricanes that occasionally rage over the island, assumes a significant political connotation.

Upon a careful analysis of the representation of the landscape in *My Brother*, readers are reminded of those ambivalent feelings Kincaid already voiced in *A Small Place*, that mixture of love and anger, attraction and revulsion, which prompted Phillips, in a

chapter of a *A New World Order* devoted to Kincaid's narrative essay, to mount his passionate defense. The sun, the sea, the smells, the stunningly beautiful colors of Antigua are all meticulously evoked by the narrator of *My Brother* as a way to re-claim her native island, an island that the evils of colonialism and the contemporary ravages of neo-colonial touristic enterprises have turned into the monstrous, disfigured, and decaying body of her beloved brother.

Lack of space does not allow me to develop this subject any further, but I would like to point out some of the interesting revisions Kincaid makes in the representation of the Caribbean space in *My Brother*: on the one hand she inevitably subverts, through her use of botanical metaphors, the tradition of Western discourse that validates rootedness and ethnic nationalism to focus instead on what Elizabeth DeLoughrey has termed "a discourse of trans/Plantation," so common in the Caribbean literary tradition ("Tidialectics" 20); on the other hand, by inscribing the Antiguan landscape in the body of her brother, she problematizes and reverses the traditional (Western) gendering of the landscape as feminine voicing therefore a sense of displacement and cultural dislocation in rather complex and unprecedented ways.⁴

A Final Passage

Phillips's *A Final Passage* also participates, albeit in different ways, in a discourse of Trans/Plantation when it comes to representations of the island space. The novel moves back and forth between two locales: a nameless island, which vaguely resembles the author's native St. Kitts, and London, the city to which the young protagonist Leila, along with her young son Calvin and her restless husband Michael, moves following the migratory pattern of many Caribbean people in the 1950s and 1960s.

The first section of the novel, titled “The End,” presents Leila and her son at the harbour, waiting for Michael, ready to ship the *SS Winston Churchill* on its journey to England. Ambivalent images of the island immediately surface, as the narrator describes the bright colors, “sweet smells and juices” (9) along with the towering African breadfruit trees, crops originally brought to the Caribbean to feed the slaves (18). Images of paradisiac landscapes of the kind we have seen in Kincaid’s *A Small Place* are symbolically juxtaposed with the historical secrets that these same landscapes hold. The confined territory of the island, whose main road is bordered on the one side by sugar cane and on the other by the sea (a symbol of freedom but also a powerful historical monument, as Derek Walcott reminds us in “The Sea is History”), makes it a prison-like space that slowly and painfully encroaches upon “those satisfied enough to stay” (20).

By portraying Leila’s and Michael’s alienation from the island, Phillips obviously alludes to an entire tradition of colonialist discourse that has depicted the Caribbean culture and landscape as a “non-entity,” a sort of no man’s land outside history, a place where civilization and culture always happen elsewhere. The epigraph from T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding” illustrate the point rather effectively:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

To a certain extent, Leila and Michael embody the historical alienation that, according to Edouard Glissant, has prevented Caribbean subjects from establishing a healthy relationship with their island culture (*Caribbean Discourse* xxxvii).

And yet, as I have suggested earlier, the erasure of the West Indian landscape is not the final answer in Phillips's complex articulation of Caribbean dis/locations. If on the one hand, Leila and Michael seemed to be trapped by the island and look toward England as the New Eden, characters such as Millie (Leila's childhood friend) and Bradeth--her husband--offer a significant counterpoint to the former couple's feeling of unbelonging. Responding to Leila's questions about the possibility of ever wanting to migrate, Millie promptly states: "It's here I belong . . . I love this island with every bone in my body. It's small and poor . . . but for all of that I still love it. It's my home and home is where you feel a welcome" (115). More significantly, during one of the many flashbacks through which the novels' fragmented narrative attempts to piece together the characters' past, Michael's grandfather had tried to give his grandson a history lesson about the hate relationship binding colonizer and colonized in the West Indies. Mostly, he had tried to teach his grandson the importance of cultural memory: "West Indian man always have to leave his islands for there don't be nothing here for him, but when you leave, boy, don't be like we. Bring back a piece of the place with you. A big piece" (42). If to these images, we add those lyrical descriptions of the island through which we envision the promise of rebirth following days of "blinding rain" (67), then we realize Phillips's passionate intent to reclaim the West Indian landscape and rectify the view of the Caribbean as "a land of nothing."

The Final Passage ends with Leila in England contemplating the possibility of returning to her island of birth. Her dream/fantasy of "home" in the mother country having been inexorably shattered, she finds herself pregnant with a second child, husbandless (for Michael had preferred the company of other women) and utterly isolated in her cold, English existence. Despite the bleakness of the final passages, the novel, nevertheless, ends on a note of promise of rebirth--as signified by Leila's

pregnancy and by the Christmas season. Affirming a cyclical vision of history clearly announced from the very beginning, Phillips ends the narrative in a sort of in-between space, which is neither England nor the Caribbean, but rather the watery crossroads of the Atlantic within which the history of these two places is forcefully contained. As Leila daydreams about her children migrating to England once they would grow up, she pictures how, holding Millie's hand, "she would continue to wait for them," knowing that "they would come back to her with the next tide" (204). Repeating the movement of the sea, Leila's thoughts, in this final passage clearly allude to the waves of Caribbean migrations that according to Antonio Benítez-Rojo have always impelled Antilleans to roam "in search of their Caribbeaness" (4). Within this context, the vision of the Atlantic as home becomes a powerful trope to reconfigure Caribbean history and reterritorialize Western notions of habitation and belonging.

Elizabeth Deloughrey has used the notion of "tidalectics" (aquatic metaphors) as conceptualized by Kamau Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant to articulate a form of diasporic reterritorialization that foregrounds the spatio-temporal complexity of the Caribbean history (18). Quoting Glissant's notion of tidalectics as elaborated in *Caribbean Discourse*, DeLoughrey reminds us that "the dialectic between the inside and the outside . . . is reflected in the relationship between land and sea" ("Tidalectics" 34). With the obvious word-play on the term "tide" and the prefix *-dia*, Brathwaite conceived of *tidalectics* as "the rejection of the notion of dialectic," with its ultimate resolution in a third element (Naylor 145).⁵ Crucial to the poet's notion of tidalectics is the idea of movement based on ebb and flow, a movement that points to the circular and repetitive rather than the linear and progressive. Similarly, Glissant describes the interplay between the beach and ocean as an endless, repetitive movement of ebb and flow.

I would argue that Phillips' s notion of the Atlantic home follows the circular, repetitive trajectory suggested by Brathwaite and Glissant. Undoubtedly a powerful trope to reconfigure geographical borders and Western notions of home and belonging, Phillips' s aquatic cartography does not ultimately suggest a flight from the landscape. Although it might be tempting to romanticize the Atlantic as a fluid, uncharted territory, an ideal space to cultivate the kind of "perpetual wandering" critics often emphasize when it comes to describe Phillips' s notion of home, the Atlantic for Phillips stretches out to the three symbolic locations that have shaped the history and predicament of his ancestors: Britain, the West coast of Africa, and the New World of North America (including the Caribbean). In *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), the book that, according to Bénédicte Ledent, seems to have played a major role in shaping Phillips' s notion of the Atlantic Home, this triangular, spatial configuration is fully explored, as the author re-visits the routes of the transatlantic slave trade in a journey that becomes at once, physical, historical, and psychological. And Phillips' s latest novels, with all their cosmopolitan ramifications in the African and Jewish diasporas, visibly affirm the importance of the Caribbean in the author' s personal history.

To conclude, I argue that, irrespective of residence and/or nationality, both Phillips and Kincaid keep returning to the Caribbean in an attempt to re-write a landscape that Western, imperialist ideology has forcefully attempted to erase from its cartographic vision. In journeys that are at once physical and psychological, both writers keep remembering the Caribbean, reversing and re-mapping the imperialist cartographic discourse that has historically inscribed the islands in sites of cultural stagnation. With all her rage and anger voiced toward the diseased body of Antigua, Kincaid' s passion and incantatory poetic toward her native island is a vivid testimony of the fact that

Antigua ultimately remains her home, no matter how far away from it she lives. On the other hand, by charting the “tidalectic” between land and sea, Phillips powerfully re-embodies the West Indian landscape in his notion of the Atlantic home. While expressively repeating how they are “both of, and not of” these places, carefully constructing “ambiguous visions of home” (Ledent), both writers ultimately and paradoxically suggest that “they belong.”

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¹ Kincaid's ambivalent relation with the notion of home assumes an interesting turn in *The New Yorker* garden articles, most of which were re-published in the collection *My Garden (book)*: (1999). Here Antigua always appears as "the place where I am from," in significant contrast to Vermont, "the place where I choose to live" (118; 105). Never does Kincaid describe herself as an Antiguan or an American. According to Helen Tiffin, such a "naturalized visitor" position allows her "to investigate the complexities of the concepts of 'exotic' and 'indigenous' in terms of both plants and people" ("Replanted" 162).

² In using the term "seascape," I elaborate on the terminology developed by Arjun Appadurai to describe those imaginary landscapes describing the global cultural flowing across cultural boundaries. See "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Modernity at Large*.

³ Susie O'Brien has pointed out Kincaid's ambivalent relation to the politics of environmentalism, "a relationship that is itself informed by the place(s) she comes from" ("The Garden" 173). Alienated from her West Indian culture, but not entirely part of the New England upper class she now inhabits, Kincaid's garden sensibility, O'Brien argues, cannot be easily and hastily inscribed within the liberal, environmental politics of ecocritical debates.

⁴ I am indebted to Sandra Pouchet Paquet for bringing to my attention Kincaid's "twists on the Caribbean space" with regard to gender reversal. See her *Caribbean Autobiography*, 230.

⁵ See also his *Barabajan Poems* (1994).

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