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‘Mapping the *Lived* through the *Imagined* Caribbean: Textual Geographies in the Work of Caribbean Women Writers from the Diaspora’

The paper I would like to present today is an overview of the research I carried out for my PhD thesis and its recent ‘routeing’ through the discipline of human geography during my work at Loughborough University.

My research examines the contribution- and its limit - that the contemporary literature of the Caribbean diaspora has to offer to both postcolonial studies and geography. My analysis revolves around how both language and the imaginaries of the texts I consider produce narratives of space and place that challenge the conventional categories that have defined the Caribbean as an object of ‘postcolonial’ studies.

I will provide a brief overview of the authors I have chosen, but first I would like to say that my argument stems from my belief in a ‘generative’ quality proper to the Caribbean space that is enhanced by its use in literature, especially the literature from its diaspora. The Caribbean is itself a space of contradictions: First of all, by virtue of its geography, it is a crucial bridge that both connects and separates the two Americas. Historically, quoting E. Glissant, the Caribbean ‘irrupted’ into so-called ‘modernity’ through colonialism, and has nowadays become a site of complex intersections of ‘postcolonial' and 'neo-colonial', ‘first’ and ‘third world’ practices and imaginaries.

Finally, today’s Caribbean is a place where visions of national unity clash with the material differences within nation-states (among which are racial taxonomies of colonial memory, ethnic conflicts and class divisions).

In light of this, I argue that specific places that are key to the Caribbean historical experience not only exemplify its conflictual and explosive nature, but also reflect what I call the Caribbean’s ‘ontological ambivalence’. This is exemplified in the capacity of the Caribbean to exceed any ‘borders’, whether in terms of cultural identity, geography or theoretical concept. Indeed, I would argue that the Caribbean is
unable to fit either the definition as the sole product of colonialism or the ‘success story’ of a ‘postcolonial’ hybridity.

Due to this ambivalence, the Caribbean also has the potential to challenge conventional forms of knowledge production; it is, therefore, a place epistemically transgressive and so is highly relevant to contemporary debates in postcolonial studies.

Specifically, I am interested in how the Caribbean triggers one question in particular: why certain places and peoples are deemed historically consequential and are recognised as having a geographical ‘presence’ while others, due to their own resistance and ‘opacity’, become ‘invisible’ or, with similar implications, ‘imagined’.

My research intends to test how and to what extent disciplines such as physical geography have, by circumscribing the definition of ‘materiality’, relegated places like the Caribbean to the plane of the ‘imagination’ (and therefore the ‘unreal’).[ link to magical realism].

In line with this introduction, I use some Caribbean places as transdisciplinary tools to challenge the colonial discourses that by representing the Caribbean as either an exotic landscape or a blank page to be ‘written over’ have denied its ontological ambivalence.

The experience of ‘dislocation’ lends itself to be the conceptual approach to unearth the potential of the Caribbean to transgress its material, conceptual and disciplinary borders. ‘Dislocation’ names the physical, cultural and affective displacements which are either undertaken voluntarily or imposed by external events, and are often the result of the lack or loss of a single, stable location. Dislocation, however, may also produce alternative paradigms of belonging that result from the constant tensions and frictions between people and places. People in fact constantly negotiate with space, and mould it even when they succumb to it, as in the case of immigrants vis à vis borders and checkpoints.

Given the Caribbean history of uprooting and diaspora, ‘dislocation’ is as much as an experiential common ground for its people as it is a valid conceptual gateway for any approach to the region as an object of study. Therefore my research tests ‘dislocation’ as both experience and as poetics and epistemology of the Caribbean, as it is proposed in the texts by five contemporary women writers of Caribbean descent – Jean Rhys, Guadeloupean Maryse Condé, Haitian Edwidge Danticat, Dominican-American Julia Alvarez and Cuban-American Achy Obejas. They value ‘dislocation’ as key to the project of a ‘Caribbean’ identity beyond nationalist paradigms. At the same time, however, they also
explore the various forms of spatial, cultural and even affective dislocation specific to their own native islands and infused with their personal experience of migration, uprooting and regrounding.

The texts by these Caribbean authors offer the readers an array of cross-cultural places highly significant for the reconceptualisation of the Caribbean in terms of ‘lived-imagined’ space; places that both ‘contain’ and expand difference, shifting it from inside out and outside in; places undergoing submerged changes, even when seemingly fixed. These are the Plantation (in Jean Rhys), the Creole ‘locale’ (in Maryse Condé), the ‘border’ separating two nations within the same island (in Danticat) and the US Latino *barrio* – neighbourhood – (Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas).

My intention is not to map these four places as fixed metaphors representative of either the Caribbean colonial or diasporic experience. Instead, they constitute the material and symbolical hinge around which revolves my analysis of the ambivalent ‘postcolonial’ terrain of the Caribbean.

Rhys and the plantation: Her place can be dislocated internally – the power structure of the plantation is only apparently ordered and unchangeable. Instead, it contains the seeds of its own vulnerability – as Rhys shows us in *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the transgressive figure of the white Creole woman who is the product of the plantation system – she literally comes out of it – but also reflects the vulnerability of the order on which that space is founded.

The Creole locale is another example of a place whose internal dislocation illuminates the ambivalence of the contemporary Caribbean. In the Caribbean, the term ‘Creole’ defined anything and anyone ‘belonging’ to the region, apparently making no distinctions between race and nationality. Yet Creole, as an identity category, has been appropriated by postcolonial discourses that have identified it with the dominant linguistic, cultural and ethnic identities that define the Caribbean nation.

The ‘Creole’ locale examined by Maryse Condé in her novels set across the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe brings to the surface the limits of the Creole discourse and the ‘unsaid’ – beneath it. This is the ‘imagined’ aspect of the Creole, intrinsic in the root of the word ‘Criollo’ – both ‘to create’ and ‘to bring up’, suggesting cross-cultural possibilities that are also bodily and affectively transgressive (including that of the slave woman wet-nursing the white child). These images are often neglected, especially in narratives of Francophone Creoleness. Condé is interested in the aspect of unpredictability that comes from the trajectories out of which individuals and cultures become ‘Creolised’, which thus go not only beyond racial differences, but also beyond cultural ‘sameness’.
Achy Obejas’s space of the Cuban ‘barrio’ in Chicago is another example. The barrio both produces and is produced by the experience of the ‘diasporic’ Cubans that inhabit it. At the same time, it reshapes the identities of both the USA and Cuba. Indeed, the very idea of a homogenous Cuban identity that was promoted by Castro at several points during the Revolution needed its counterpart – the ‘Cubanness’ of the expatriates – to confirm and justify itself.

Another powerful spatial trope of the Caribbean ambivalence is in The Farming of Bones by Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. Danticat represents the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (the two countries that make up the island that was christened Hispaniola by Columbus) in terms of ‘vulnerability’ (one of the key moments in which we perceive Danticat’s symbolic significance of the border is when the protagonist Amabelle affirms: ‘A border is a veil not many people can wear.’ (p. 364).

Danticat creates an imaginary ‘vulnerable’ border that parallels the physical border between the two nations – a space of massacres, but also a very ‘modern’ space of interactions and passages. Expanding its relevance beyond its geographical location, the border in the novel encapsulates the Caribbean that is marked by both the modernity of its history – revolutions, independence – and the ‘vulnerability’ of its postcolonial present – characterised also by episodes of inter-island racism.

By using these ‘super-syncretic’ places, to quote Cuban-American critic Antonio Benitez-Rojo – in which ‘differences’ are locally condensed but also ‘intended toward the other’ to use G. Spivak expression– necessarily bring the Caribbean and its diaspora close to each other. These five authors bring to the surface the existing imaginaries that connect the Caribbean with its diaspora and that are best perceived through a language of space and place. Dislocation becomes to them a way both to reintegrate the diaspora within a vision of Caribbean ‘postcoloniality’ and to challenge the model of postcoloniality that identifies the Caribbean as a multicultural melting-pot.

The circulation of these novels support further their relevance to our mapping of a ‘lived–imagined’ Caribbean. By virtue of their popularity in the US and their transnational readership, these texts make ‘visible’ places that are often flattened out by one-dimensional perspectives; but they do this without compromising on the ‘imagined nature’ of their narratives – their use of romanced stories over historical accuracy. The perspective these authors use for the specifically Caribbean subject matter of their novels is also ‘dislocated’ in the sense that is neither documentative nor univocal, but traversed by personal memories (or those of their
families), and by their own affective, yet at times disavowed and frustrated, attachment to their islands.

These writers appeal to a wide, cross-cultural readership which often include less the local communities ‘back home’ (because of the language barrier), and more the authors’ imagined vision of these communities. Their agenda seems ultimately to be to negotiate between the marginality and privilege that define their own (dis) location. As their native islands, these writers cannot be identified simply with a ‘postcolonial’ rubric. They are in more than one way ‘cross-over’ writers, according to Chris Bongie’s definition. Perhaps with the exception of Jean Rhys (whose conscious migration to Europe did not lead to the literary recognition she deserved until late in life), these women have moved to the US – some of them ‘involuntarily’, the ‘one and half generation’ – and are now writers internationally acclaimed by both critics and the public. Using another coinage by Chris Bongie, these are ‘middlebrow’ authors: they write in English or, as in the case of Maryse Condé who writes in French, have become part of the Anglo-American literary market by virtue of being widely read in translation and by their academic status in US institutions. Their novels have in some cases become mainstream movies or are themselves rewriting of European literary classics – but they are also part of academic curricula in courses on postcolonial, diaspora or Latino literature.

By reclaiming such vulnerability and dislocation as new ways of looking at the Caribbean that invite readers to ‘cross the borders’ of what is believed to be already ‘known’ of its space and people, these authors eventually challenge any disciplinary approach to the region that prioritises chronological linearity (history) and/or conventional ‘scaling’ (as physical geography has done). Scaling is used not only to represent but also to ‘manage’ reality, making it more familiar, knowledgeable – from large to small). Scaling, like mapping, are conventional geographical processes that distort the world, as it seems to represent it neutrally.

It is precisely the inability of certain disciplines to address the internal vulnerability and resistance of places like the Caribbean that accounts for their representation as ‘imagined’ – in the sense of unacknowledged, historically unconsequential and exceeding any conventional mapping.

However, the literature I consider does not only expose the limits of both geography and postcolonial studies in their relation to the ambivalence of the Caribbean, but also suggest productive interactions between these disciplines starting from the literary and impacting on its ‘lived’ space.
In line with this, and by way of conclusion, this paper makes the case for a transdisciplinary and multidimensional approach to the Caribbean in the light of its particular nature as object of investigation. By being both ‘lived’ and ‘imagined’, and been represented as both historically contingent and ‘marginal’, the Caribbean space calls for a reconsideration of concepts of ‘reality’ and ‘imagination’.