Nature-Function in Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge*

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At first sight, Caryl Phillips’s fiction may not be an obvious candidate for an ecocritical analysis. Indeed, unlike Caribbean writers like Wilson Harris or Derek Walcott who explicitly engage with the environment in their work, Phillips seems only peripherally interested in it or only insofar as it helps him provide context to his characters.[[1]](#endnote-1) At a recent colloquium in Belgium, he inquired about ecocritical studies in a way that revealed his lack of active engagement with the discipline.[[2]](#endnote-2) I argue that an ecocritical study of his work is nonetheless in order in the same way as feminists have shown the study of gender as “a social category of analysis” (in Joan Scott’s terms) to be relevant whether gender is addressed explicitly or not. After all, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), the classic book of feminist literary criticism, was exclusively focused on male writers who were not *a priori* writing about gender politics and Cixous identified her transgressive *écriture féminine* as embodied by the writings of male authors such as James Joyce and Jean Genet. Similarly, I argue that Caryl Phillips’s fiction lends itself to an ecocritical reading not because his texts showcase the environment as a motif but because of the author’s well-noted adeptness at exposing the construction of boundaries between self and other, male and female. Insofar as our understanding of the environment is predicated on a culture/nature, human/nonhuman binary and that binaries are precisely what Phillips deconstructs masterfully throughout his work, it is therefore not surprising that his fiction would provide an excellent fodder for an ecocritical analysis.

One of ecocriticism’s most significant impacts has been to show that humans are part and parcel of the very environment from which they had previously seen themselves as separate (Cronon) and that the so-called nonhuman “other” is always already part of the human body (Timothy Morton’s “strange strangers” and Donna Haraway’s “companion species”). For instance, William Cronon’s phenomenal anthology *The Trouble With Wilderness* (1995) was instrumental in raising consciousness about humanity’s imbrication with the natural world in a way that contested the elitist concept of “Nature-as-tableau-in-natural-parks-for-the-rich” that often defined the nineteenth-century’s environmentalist movement à la John Muir.[[3]](#endnote-3) Similarly, Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010) emphasize the interdependence of humanity and the environment in order to make people more accountable to an environment that is as much a part of them as they are of it. For Morton, thinking ecologically means acknowledging our “interconnectedness” and realizing that we live in a “mesh” where the human and inhuman are imbricated and inextricable rather than “putting something called Nature on a pedestal” (*Ecology Without Nature* 5). These scholars’ emphasis on interconnectedness and on humanity’s inseparability from the environment is motivated by the assumption that situating the human squarely within the natural rather than outside of it will lead to a more responsible relation to our surroundings, including to immediate urban environments. Indeed, the danger of seeing our cities and ourselves as separate from a supposedly pristine wilderness is that we would reserve our conservationist ethics for the categorically Other and ignore the destructive and polluting paths that define our cities. In dissolving the separation between urban and the environment, human and nonhuman, culture and nature, then, ecocritics broaden the scope of the environmentalist agendas of the past to, for instance, locations that had previously been ignored.

This is an important intervention that echoes and intersects postcolonial studies’ preoccupation with issues of racial otherness. Indeed, both ecocriticism and postcolonialism have had to contend with the construction of sites of difference, whether nonhuman or racial otherness, that have been consistently cast as categorically other by a dominant culture intent on keeping its exclusionary boundaries impervious. And both fields have responded to this hierarchical process of differentiation by revealing the imbrication and interdependence of self and other as well as the constructedness of categories of difference. Just as postcolonialism reveals the extent to which whiteness as norm depends on constructed notions of blackness as categorically other to produce its own taken-for-granted invisibility, ecocriticism has worked hard to expose the constructedness of representations of Nature as pristine and untouched.

In this essay, I argue that in highlighting the construction of the concept of Nature, ecocriticism has sometimes failed to expose the constructedness of the category “human.” By contrast, my argument brings into relief the representational and ideological work that goes into producing the category of human itself in a way that reveals the imbrication of both racial and nonhuman forms of otherness in narrative. Specifically, I argue that an ecocritical reading of Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* (1991) reveals the extent to which nonhuman landscapes harbor a multiplicity of meanings that work in tandem with other sites of difference (most notably race and gender) to produce the category of “human” itself. This construction occurs in a way that has gone unaddressed in the current ecocritical consensus about the untenability of the human/nonhuman dyad, a consensus that typically singles out and examines the constructedness of nature independently of its dependence on other categories of difference such as race. Like whiteness and masculinity in studies that aim at exposing the constructedness of race or gender respectively, the human in the human/nonhuman binary is too often naturalized as a stable category of analysis by virtue of the near exclusive focus on the constructedness of the environment.[[4]](#endnote-4) What my ecocritical reading of the natural landscape in *Cambridge* exposes is the production of difference between the categories of human and nonhuman rather than a straightforward challenge to it. Indeed, the challenge to the binary typically focuses on dissecting the representation of the environment as a backdrop to human beings’ development, thereby not only leaving the concept of the human subject intact but also reinforcing it. In *Cambridge,* by contrast, this dynamic of production and reification is highlighted and exposed throughout the narrative: first, because the text is all about illustrating and exposing the characters’ assimilation and parroting of ideological assumptions about race, humanity, gender, and Christianity, as evidenced by the criticism highlighting Emily Cartright’s internalized gendered and racist beliefs about the black population she encounters; and secondly, because, in doing so, the novel sets into motion a process of reading that makes visible how it is the very concept of human itself--in all its naturalized and hence invisible gendered/racialized dimensions--that is created through a particular representation of the environment. I am not arguing here that Phillips’ depiction of the environment is aligned with an object-oriented ontology that would posit nonhuman objects as existing independently of human perception. Rather, I emphasize how, in *Cambridge*, the representation of the environment as separate from the subject is exposed as a construction on which the illusions of the autonomy, wholeness, and ultimately superiority of the subject rests.

In other words, instead of portraying the environment as a backdrop to human affairs that it may or may not be influencing, the environment in Caryl Phillips’s novel operates as a form of “nature-function” that echoes Foucault’s analysis of authorship.[[5]](#endnote-5) This “nature-function” challenges approaches that foreground the environment as a pre-existing space evolving outside of the subject and instead sees it as a function of discourse in its constitutive relation to humanity. The nature-function asks why landscapes are described the way they are, not in and of themselves but in and through narrative, and in relation to the protagonist’s constitution (via gendered and racialized narratives). It asks what “classificatory function” the environment and its representation play in the text. That the human and non-human worlds are connected is certainly true, but an analysis of what I call “the nature-function” in Caryl Phillips’s novel highlights how this interconnectedness leads not to a dissolution of boundaries between human and nature, black and white, femininity and masculinity but to their very constitution in narrative. It is ironically in performing over and over again the production and reification of sites of categorical difference (black/white, human/nonhuman, man/woman) that Phillips’ narrative exposes their construction and absurd arbitrariness.

The representation of Caribbean natural landscapes is a particularly useful test case to take stock of the repercussions of this representation on the relationship between humanity and the environment in fiction.[[6]](#endnote-6) That it fulfills a function and is itself a function of discourse becomes especially evident when we remember the contradiction at the heart of the representation of the environment in Caribbean fiction. On the one hand, the description of the landscape often evokes the most majestic, lush, verdant, uncultivated, tropical greenness of environments that we typically associate with the wilderness William Cronon has identified as “trouble,” i.e. with “an idealized natural landscape that is devoid of human history and labor” (DeLoughrey et al. 2).[[7]](#endnote-7) On the other hand, in stark opposition to this representation of unkempt and seemingly untouched nature, the Caribbean region’s physical environment is a reflection of its colonial history since, as DeLoughrey et al. argue, “there is no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation, and settlement than the Caribbean” (2). Colonialism, slavery, history and the sugarcane plantation system have irremediably transformed the Caribbean environment whether it is through human-caused intervention and extinctions or the introduction of new species to the island. Specifically, the arrival of Europeans led to “a period of mass extinctions after 1492” (Wilson 26). Yet, despite this profound overhaul of the natural landscape, novel after novel offers a description of the Caribbean landscape as rich, wild, and seemingly untouched. The illusion of a parallel universe, a place where the protagonist may escape from history and the vicissitudes of social oppression, is maintained and continues to echo the Romantic overtones that have defined representations of nature and the wilderness since the end of the eighteenth century.

Representations of the natural world in Caribbean fiction thus strongly evoke a “[w]ilderness [that] hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural” (Cronon 69). They often evoke the doctrine of the sublime whose origins critics have traced back to Romantic as well as biblical influences. As Cronon notes, the sublime is instantly recognizable through the awe and emotions it has historically evoked in the human psyche. It is a doctrine whose genesis can be traced back to the eighteenth century and whose more tamed permutations have continued to affect human beings’ relationship to nature in subsequent centuries. Cronon notes, for instance, that the sublime went from evoking the sacred to a more sentimental demeanor. One may wonder, then, what descriptions of natural landscape that seem closer to this legacy have to do in novels that are so intensely preoccupied with history, imperialism, and colonization? Why passages and settings that seem to represent a flight from history in novels whose authors are so intent on highlighting history’s colonialist and racist legacies? What are we to make of what appears to be a contradiction between the biotic and historical investments of these narratives? What function does this contradiction play? Can we identify a nature-function at work, and if so, which one?

An examination of the description of the natural landscape in *Cambridge* helps provide an answer to this conundrum. Closer attention helps illuminate this dynamic pattern and explains its inherently paradoxical nature since it denotes a seeming complicity with a Romantic ideology of pure, exalted nature in a literary tradition that otherwise seeks to expose Romanticism’s flight from history. Why are so many Caribbean novels reinforcing the representation of nature as outside of human influence, as unbeatable Mother Nature in light of the “vulnerable island ecosystems, in which many of the endemic species have been destroyed” (Hoving 155)? Hoving identifies a contradiction in Caribbean (women’s) fiction but only insofar as their representation of the garden is a site of both delight and decay, delicious and repulsive smells. Hoving explains this ambiguity as an attempt “to radically redefine nature and create a new understanding of the natural” (155). By contrast, I argue that this treatment of Mother Nature is not in itself contradictory insofar as it can be traced back to the genealogy of the doctrine of the sublime described by Cronon. The Garden of Eden to which representations of Nature in literature and culture owe so much has historically been a site of both terror and beauty, identification and misidentification, and the taming of the sublime through the pastoral is a phenomenon that may or may not be operative in fictional representations. The main tension in Caribbean novels is not one that exists *within* the representation of Nature but rather between their representation of Nature as Edenic and as above the fray on the one hand, and the vulnerability of Caribbean ecosystems and history on the other. I argue that the fact that the representation of profoundly historicized social, race, and gender oppressions occurs in the context of seemingly ahistorical Nature cannot be understood outside of the nature-function, i.e. its foundational effect on the constitution of what is valued as humanity itself. Whether the nature-culture opposition ultimately holds or not throughout the narrative, its very deployment is what is constitutive of our identification with characters as round and complex beings whose sensitivity to the *nonhuman* other marks them as profoundly human despite their lack of identification with forms of *human* otherness.

Specifically, this dynamic is operative in Phillips’s *Cambridge*, a novel set in an unidentified Caribbean island some time between the abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of the slaves. The book tells the story of two characters, Emily Cartwright, a young nineteenth-century Englishwoman sent by her father to his West Indian estate, and Cambridge, a plantation slave who was educated and converted to Christianity by his first master in England before being re-enslaved. Emily Cartwright, whose narrative voice mobilizes the bulk of the narrative, introduces herself as a “proper” Victorian lady who has not only seemingly internalized the separate sphere ideology with its attendant gendered conventions (“the preservation of my modesty” (16)), but also every shade of racist prejudice that defines British imperialism and the Caribbean plantation hierarchy. Upon arrival, she remarks that “what I had taken for monkeys were nothing other than negro children, naked as they were born, parading in a feral manner to which they were not only accustomed, but in which they felt comfortable. I expressed my general concern at the blackness of the native people” (24). Later, she adds that “the more white blood flowing in a person’s veins, the less barbarous will be his social tendencies” (25), thus echoing the pseudo-scientific racism of the nineteenth century and its investment in anchoring the myth of race in biology. In keeping with the stereotypical reduction of blackness to animality, she compares her black servant’s voice to the “mooing of a cow” (29), negro relations to “those practiced by animals of the field” (36), their love to “the brutish gratification of animal desire” (39), and their exclamations to “bird-like screeching” (44).[[8]](#endnote-8) She describes the African slaves as “tardy” and “careless” (32), as claiming to have “imaginary diseases” (34), as plagued with a “self-evident inferiority” (35), thus reproducing every imaginable stereotype that has ever been generated in relation to nonwhite otherness (“he steals, lies, is witless, incompetent, irresponsible, habitually lazy, and wantonly loose in his sexual behaviour” (52)). In keeping with white supremacist thinking about hybridity and degeneracy, she affirms that “constant association with an inferior race will weaken the moral fibre of a white man and debase the quality of his life” (52). Her colonialist and imperialist presumptions are relentless, so much so that even at the end of the narrative when she is at her most vulnerable, she cannot help but distance herself from her most faithful and only companion Stella through racist stereotyping.

As critics have noted, just as the slave Cambridge’s section draws on the tradition of slave narrative, Emily’s narrative replicates the period genre of the travelogue.[[9]](#endnote-9) This partly explains the character’s reproduction of socially established precepts and formalities. As Kuurola points out, “[i]n Emily’s narrative, Phillips borrows scenes and phrasing from the journals of Lady Nugent, Mrs. Carmichael, and ‘Monk’ Lewis, and from Janet Schaw’s travelogue in particular” (132). Yet, despite the relentlessly formulaic, generic, ventriloquistic, prejudiced, and stereotypical aspects of her narration, Emily does not come across as a unidimensional character. Ironically, for many critics, the narrative even succeeds in creating “a connection between her and the contemporary reader” (133), a relation that Kuurola ascribes to Emily’s “underlying desire for self-determination” (133) in the face of the narrow role assigned to her gender by Victorian norms.

Indeed, despite the steadfastness of her racism and her status as oppressor in relation to race, Emily is in a position of subordinate structural femininity in relation to gender. As both oppressor and oppressed, she becomes a more interesting character. She also records her dissatisfaction with gender norms in a way she never does in relation to race, by comparing, for instance, her father’s marriage arrangements for her with “the rude mechanics of horse-trading” (4). It is her critical distance toward gender norms that Kuurola identifies as the source of a connection between her and the reader that “would have been unlikely to arise if she had embraced her own time’s conventions more enthusiastically” (133). This added layer is what makes her character relatable, somewhat paradoxical, and gives her a depth she would otherwise have been lacking.

I argue that in addition to her fraught relation to gender conventions, the way the protagonist relates to the Caribbean natural environment is yet another layer through which what would have otherwise been a unidimensional character is provided depth in the narrative. It is because the heroine can identify the beauty in the otherness of a landscape that is represented as a more or less sublime, untouched, and self-renewing Nature that an even more complex stratification of the subject is generated. The representation of nature in *Cambridge* reveals that the subject in all her paradoxical complexity does not precede her representation of the natural world but rather is produced by it. It is the reader’s assumption that the character precedes her representation of the natural landscape that creates and perpetuates a separation between the human and the nonhuman worlds, whether that constructed nonhuman setting is identified as a construction or essentialized. Such assumption of a pre-existing subject is ironically aligned with Emily Cartwright’s own self-satisfied assertion, namely that “good manners [and one could add character and ultimately what makes us human] rise above clime and conditions” (32). Yet, the novel, I argue, shows us otherwise.

As Emily leaves her beloved England (which she refers to as “The truth”) and arrives at her destination in the Caribbean, she describes the landscape in ways that evoke Romantic ideas of wilderness and reveal her sensitivity to the majestic beauty she is witnessing:

A mountainous island heavily clothed in vegetation, wooded on the upper slopes, the highest peaks swaddled in clouds, an island held in the blue palm of the sea like a precious green gem. (16-17)

Emily’s representation of the foreign nature she is encountering for the first time is in keeping with the myth of exotic lands and nature that Romanticism developed and popularized in the aftermath of the industrial revolution. As large swaths of natural landscapes were getting destroyed in the West, the Romantics began turning to exotic landscapes elsewhere as more awe inspiring and sensual, more colorful and lush than natural sights at home (Mazierska and Rascaroli 82-3). Along with a more anesthetized vision (“precious gem”), the exotic landscape described by Emily also evokes impenetrability and mystery (“heavily clothes” and “swaddled in clouds”) as well as a pristine state that Emily further echoes in her descriptions of the foreign environment:

The view of the island that I now beheld was nothing less than magnificent. (19)

The extensive view from the piazza features an expanse of harvestable vegetation, but the higher slopes are rich with thick dark forest, parts of which I imagine could never have been trodden by the feet of man. The arrangement of the majestic trees, some solitary, others elegantly grouped, present a picturesque scene. These trees of noble growth cover all the banks and ridges, while the master-tree, the tall coconut, moves her fronds in stately regal fashion. These giant ostrich-feather branches hung almost motionless in what little breeze remained. Down towards the coast, which from the height of the Great House appears rough and barren, are clustered numerous fruit trees upon whom I am learning to bestow a name: the sea-side grape, sugar-apple, breadfruit, soursop, pawpaw, custard apple, mango, lime, acacia, orange, guava, etc. Examples of all these trees are to be found. (56-57)

That this bigoted young girl can find beauty in scenery that has nothing in common with “The truth” (4) that is England introduces a level of complexity in her character that makes her more interesting if not more sympathetic. Phillips is careful, however, not to simplify or idealize this essentializing view of nature since he shows Emily as unable to separate the alluring wilderness from the black natives she sees as inherently belonging to it, an association that further testifies to her saturating bigotism. In keeping with racist ideology, wilderness and uncontrolled Nature to her include “negro” life. Her representation of the environment paradoxically evokes both the earlier and the more domesticated elements of the Romantic tradition of the sublime (“fruit trees,” cottages, cultivated land) but does so precisely because she associates the blacks (and their labor) with nature. *Her* idea of a “tropical paradise” ironically includes both the untrodden “thick dark forest” and black settlements. Along with surveying the “trees, plants and shrubbery” she describes as magnificent, she claims that “I recognized the infamous sugarcanes, whose young shoots billowed in the cooling breeze like fields of green barley, and I noted the tall cabbage palms, whose nobility of appearance provided a formidable décor to the small settlement of Baytown which spread before us in ordered and recklessly formal beauty. Behind our capital town, slender lines of houses snaked up the hillsides and merged with the vegetation. Indeed I was beholding a tropical paradise” (18). Later she ignorantly and shockingly remarks, “If I were to be asked if I should enter life anew as an English labourer or a West Indian slave I should have no hesitation in opting for the latter. It seems to me manifestly worth abandoning the propriety and civility of English life for the pleasant clime of this island and the joyous spirit which abounds upon it... In this country there is scarce any twilight, and in a single moment, all nature seems to falter. All nature, that is, apart from the negroes…” (42-43).[[10]](#endnote-10) Negroes, in Emily’s eyes, are part of “all nature” so much so that their not following the same exact rhythms and schedule as nature is surprising and constitutes an exception to the rule to which they otherwise subscribe.

Whereas to the reader the description of a romanticized, uncontrolled nature emerges from a discursive history and Romantic ideology that is predicated on the exclusion of human presence and intervention, to Emily, the presence of black “natives” in the midst of a “tropical paradise” she has just described as wild is not in the least contradictory. She identifies “negroes” as part of the jungle, and consequently, scenes of sublime landscapes are juxtaposed with domestic scenes of black life without second thought. To Emily and many of her contemporaries, “it is because of its innate capacity to produce terror that blackness functioned as the source of the sublime” (Gikandi 43), so the juxtaposition of black domesticity and untouched wilderness was not contradictory. Black settlements are thus a natural extension, if not an instantiation, of the untouched wilderness rather than evidence of human subjectivity outside of nature.

This is why so many descriptions of nature that are so strongly evocative of a Romantic ideology are paradoxically juxtaposed with black domesticity in the novel. That Emily herself does not seem aware of the contradiction testifies to the depth of her racism, which casts slaves as “creatures of the jungle.” At the same time, her admiration for an “alien” landscape appears to belie the very sense of supremacy that has generated the juxtaposition between blacks and wilderness in the first place, thus granting her a level of complexity she would otherwise lack. This added complexity explains how the text succeeds in generating a level of readerly identification with a character whose consistently reprehensible ideological allegiances would otherwise have made unidimensional and dull.

When Emily goes on an excursion with the overseer Mr. Brown, a romantic description of nature as pure and awe-inspiring is immediately followed by a description of half-naked negro women washing clothes in the stream:

The morning sky was brushed with high thin clouds which promised a fine day… Our steep and rocky path, whose nature seemed to have grown more treacherous since my earlier ascent, cut a rough-hewn passage through trees whose overhanging boughs formed a most verdant and magnificent arch. This green architecture allowed entrance to a few cheerful patches of sunlight, and afforded myself and Mr. Brown the occasional delightful view of the sea through the dense thicket of trunks and foliage. Below us the waves of the ocean rolled in measured cadence onto the beach, and as we encroached closer the musical harmony of rushing water broke upon our ears with ever-swelling amplitude. On reaching the coastal *island road* the vast expanse of the watery world burst upon our sight and lay spread out before us. Mr. Brown kindly informed me that this main highway circumnavigated the whole of this small realm, delicately skirting the watery hem of the island... From ledges upon the face of the rocky precipice on whose summit we stood, sea-birds plumed their ragged feathers and watched alertly for their prey. That great king of birds, the pelican, was on the wing, plying the air, then swooping down to the surface to gather provisions into its ample bill… some negroes engaged in washing clothes… The appearance of the females was truly disgusting to me, for without a single exception … they were in a state of unashamed nakedness (100-101).

Racial otherness is the ground on which ecstatic images of nature as “treacherous” and “rough-hewn,” impenetrable (“dense thicket” and “watery world”) and dangerous (“rocky precipice”) get reconciled with domestic images of “washing clothes”. Indeed, in Emily’s mind, no matter how engaged in practices of cleanliness or pastoral homemaking blackness is, it can simply never trump the quality of wildness and savagery with which it is associated.

Similarly, the journey back with Mr. Brown, now called Arnold, unproblematically combines a scene of “unchallenged perfect wilderness” with the image of an abandoned cottage more reminiscent of the pastoral followed by the “all too familiar bray of negro voices” (110):

Arnold and I continued our skyward journey in silence, which gave me the opportunity to survey the beauty of the abundant flora all around. The hill was shaded with trees, the master of which was the carnation. On account of its not growing above ten feet high, this tree can be numbered among those aromatic *shrubs* which exhale the most agreeable fragrances. Its dark crimson flowers were observed to be often spotted with white, its leaves a cool and inviting dark green. Among the other species were the passion flowers, which grew in every hedge and twined around every tree. The passion fruit is a speciality of the tropical table, and everywhere I observed both fruit and flower jointly ornamenting the bush (109).

Arnold and I wandered some twenty yards to the west and discovered a picturesque, shaded, though now deserted cottage, which had the great advantage of a magnificent prospect over the ocean... In recent years, the cottage had lain abandoned in this perfect wilderness, allowing tall grasses and climbing weeds unchallenged domain. … the bat and the lizard, and other less pleasant creatures who have made it their own” … I lingered a while until we were disturbed by the all-too familiar bray of negro voices (110).

These are surprising linkages to say the least since they bring together “the picturesque” with the “cottage,” the tropical with the pastoral, the “magnificent” with the “all-too familiar” in a way that exposes the stereotypical views of race through which Emily reconciles the incompatible in the landscape. These contradictory representations partly make sense in light of the genealogy of the sublime outlined by William Cronon (from awe-inspiring, pristine wilderness to a more subdued, sentimental sublime influenced by the pastoral), but they also, and most importantly, reflect nineteenth-century British racist beliefs that located anything related to blackness squarely within the wilderness and Nature. Emily is thus paradoxically revealed as both sensitive to one form of categorical otherness (via her ability to appreciate the otherness of the landscape) while simultaneously, this sensitivity is exposed as conditioned by European colonialist discourse. As David Gunning points out, even in the epilogue which “shows Phillips attempting to find a way of writing that … resists the imposition of fixed social and political identities … what comes across most strongly is the fragility and transience of a voice that speaks outside of such supports” (Gunning 78). Events in the epilogue are presented out of order and sometimes more than once, thus pointing to the untenability of the ideological discourses that link blackness to nature and through which the protagonist has so far made sense of her world. Nevertheless, while suggesting that subjects are never as monolithic or unified as the ideological discourses through which they speak, what emerges most strongly in the third-person narration of the epilogue are “the limits of what could be said within the iniquitous racial logics of that time” (Gunning 78). Emily cannot think herself outside of the stereotypical frameworks that associate whiteness with civilization and blackness with the natural/primordial.

Interestingly, at the same time as the nature-function in *Cambridge* adds a layer of complexity to what would otherwise have been a wholly unidimensional character, the same dynamic can be seen at play in the representation of the black slave Cambridge whose wife Christiania, through her association with the “wild” and “natural,” plays the same role in relation to him as the exotic landscape plays in relation to Emily. He too would have been merely a reflection of British imposed and internalized Christian doctrine and Western assumptions had it not been for his association with his dirt-scratching, “savage” obeah wife whose unfathomable opaqueness evokes the categorical otherness of the wilderness. In other words, the black obeah woman’s identification with the wild provides a layer of depth and unexpected differentiation in her husband, Cambridge, who would potentially otherwise be perceived as a mere “mimic man.” Indeed, for all his internalized Christian beliefs, Cambridge shows a devotion to his obeah wife Christiania that can only surprise. Insofar as this unconditional commitment occurs in spite of her categorical otherness and opaqueness, it subverts rather than reproduces the imperializing norm with which Cambridge otherwise identifies. In this instance, the identification of black (female) otherness with nature fails to reproduce the very Western worldview from which this association emanates and which Cambridge has otherwise seemingly wholly internalized. Christiania remains, as it were, his saving grace. Indeed, as Bénédicte Ledent points out, both her “distrust of words” and her “refusal to produce children” who would merely function as fodder for the system of unpaid slave labor mark her, despite her narrative invisibility, as the kind of counterforce Cambridge cannot become (Ledent 99). She is a site of opacity through her metaphorical and literal association with nature’s unknowability and mystery, and he gains in complexity as a character through his somewhat inexplicable association with her.

Significantly, this dynamic of characterization through association with categorical forms of otherness appears over and over in novels from the region. Whether the characters’ added depth and complexity *by association* is one that saves them from characterological unidimensionality as with Emily in *Cambridge* and Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or from a mentally uniform state induced by trauma as with Mala in *Cereus Blooms at Night*,a close reading of the representation of the environment in relation to racial and gendered otherness in fiction reveals how meanings and hierarchies do not inhere in categories of difference but get accrued through their interactions. It is in their relation to one another that differences come to matter whether in progressive or negative ways.

I have argued that while insisting on the inseparability of the discursively polarized terms of the human/nonhuman, nature/culture, black/white, ecocritics cannot truly challenge the belief in some variation of the critical, distanced, reflexive, complex, analytical subject as what sets us apart from the nonhuman dimensions of our existence. The hierarchical nature of the relation between nature and humanity in ecocritical approaches is not ultimately threatened because what is revealed as a construction in these interventions remains predominantly nature, the environment, and what is classified as nonhuman. The human part of the equation may be subject to influence, but the supremacy of the human as the being that recognizes this state of affairs, enlightens and/or influences, and as such is entitled to direct the turn of events and the inscription of the natural is not questioned. No matter how much philosophers, cultural theorists, and political scientists strive to emphasize interconnectedness in the name of saving the environment, insofar as they highlight this “mesh” by relying on the consciousness of humanity’s imbrication with the environmental other, they cannot challenge what ultimately drives anthropocentrism, namely the certitude that our depth and self-reflexivity, ability to critique and debate is what places us above the “shallowness” of the surfaces we discuss as the environment, the other, the nonhuman. This is where literature can provide an avenue to reframing humanity’s thinking supremacy over nature. [[11]](#endnote-11)

What my ecocritical reading of *Cambridge* in particular reveals, then, is both the importance and limitations of ecocriticism’s seemingly corrective emphasis on the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman worlds. Through its deployment of what I call a “nature-function,” the novel highlights the imbrication of nature and culture in a way that does not subordinate nature to a mere discursive construction by humans but rather reveals how thoroughly dependent on the representation of a Romanticized nature the defining attributes of the white protagonist who parades as the norm actually are. Rather than merely emphasize the natural as a construction, this representation reveals the extent to which it is the white subject who gets narrativized, complicated, and ultimately produced in her rounded complexity through an appeal to the landscape as a lush, untouched, wild, and natural background that only a developed and round protagonist can genuinely appreciate and understand. It is, in other words, through the recognition of a relation with the opaque, categorically other environment that the humanity of the white protagonist in particular is established and produced. Similarly, it is through his association with Christiania’s “non-human” alterity, i.e. with the presence in the novel who represents the “ideological counterpart to [his] adoption of the colonizer’s religion and beliefs” (Eckstein 95) that Cambridge gains a depth in the narrative that his monolithic embrace of Christian doctrine would otherwise belie. This dynamic deconstructs the same/other, nature/culture, human/nonhuman oppositions that mobilize dominant discourses, not by revealing some inherent obscured similarity between the two terms but by bringing into relief the way in which one side of the opposition (human) is actually utterly dependent on its “othered other” to manufacture humanity’s own sense of autonomy, wholeness, and depth.

Ecocriticism’s emphasis on interdependence and interconnectedness between humanity and the environment does not in and of itself undermine the categorical differences that are used to define each. Sometimes it just reinforces them. Unless we also account, as *Cambridge* does, for how it is the very concept of the self that is constructed through its association with nature as other and racial alterity, we will not actually undermine the binaries that the notion of interconnectedness is meant to deconstruct. Unless humanity’s ability to display a critical detachment toward our surroundings is exposed as part of the mechanism through which the subject establishes its superiority, the hierarchy that underscores supremacist views of nonhuman and human alterity will remain intact.

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1. Notes

   See Wilson Harris’s representation of a pre-Columbian dimension of space and landscape in the Caribbean context, one in which he identifies “a profound and unusual treaty of sensibility between human presence on this planet and the animal [vegetal and inanimate] kingdom” (“Profiles” 202), or Derek Walcott’s Adamic man naming the New World landscape anew in *Another Life* (1973) and *Omeros* (1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The colloquium “Altered States: Configuring Madness in Caribbean Literature Symposium” took place on April 23-24, 2015 at the Université of Liège, Belgium (organizers: Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca). Caryl Phillips asked what ecocriticism was and did. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a critique of environmentalism’s elitism, see **Cronon, William, ed.** Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature**. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995.** [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In other words, I aim to do for “nature” as referent what Richard Dyer did to “whiteness” in his excellent *White: Essays on Race and Culture* in which he challenges the apparent unremarkability of whiteness as a racial position by analyzing images of white people in culture. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault highlights what he calls the “moment of individualization” through which the idea of the author came into being in the history of literature, philosophy, and the sciences. Whereas most “commonsensical” understandings of the term today conceive of the author as pre-existing the text, Foucault reframes the author as an “author-function” that has historically been produced through its interaction with both the text and its audience. For instance, he points out that before the seventeenth or eighteenth century, works like tragedies or comedies were evaluated for their content and didn’t “need” an author as a guarantee of quality. By contrast, works of geography and science were only deemed accurate if attached to an author’s name. This relationship between subject and author has since been reversed with scientific discourses being accepted on their own merits, while literary creations are now dependent on the author function. “Author” in this reframed understanding therefore involves a plethora of endless meanings rather than a description of a self-determining and originating source. Therefore, as Foucault points out, the concept of “author” is an unnatural, historical phenomenon, a function of discourse, not because there is no actual, historical person behind the writing (there is), but because the meanings attached to the act of writing and its author are diverse and contextual. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The only other ecocritical reading of Phillips’s work I could locate also focuses on the ideological and often racist construction of spaces of Otherness but in (sub)urban settings rather than in the natural environments I have in mind. Specifically, Maufort highlights how these racially-motivated spatial dynamics underscore the antipastoral nature of Phillips’s work in *A Distant Shore* (2003) and *In the Falling Snow* (2009)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For Cronon, traditional notions of wilderness as pristine and remote reinforce the idea of humanity as separate from the environment. People who see themselves as outside of the natural world, he explains, are less likely to care and feel responsible for it: “Idealizing a distant wilderness often means not idealizing the environment in which we live […] we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about using nature as not using it” (85). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ironically, the slave Cambridge too reproduces these assumptions since he describes other slaves’ spoken English as resembling “nothing more civilized than the manic chatter of baboons” (135). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Lars Eckstein’s “Dialogism in Caryl Phillip’s’ *Cambridge*, or the Democratisation of Cultural Memory” for a discussion of this intertextual dimension. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This passage is heavily based on M.G. Lewis’s similar response in his *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834) and therefore constitutes another iterated performance of such responses. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The importance of the “watery world” and “the poetic of seascapes” (Knepper 218) in both Emily’s and Cambridge’s narratives may be seen as an extension of the same challenge to a depth-surface model I have just outlined. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)