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Nature-Function in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*

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Abstract: The consensus in ecocriticism today is that deconstructing the human/nonhuman binary is crucial if we want humanity to care for the environment. Indeed, viewing the environment as something to which we are connected is seen as more conducive to producing an environmentalist consciousness than seeing it as something categorically other. By contrast, my ecocritical reading of Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* (1991) reveals the extent to which nonhuman landscapes in Caribbean fiction are paradoxically represented as categorically other. In Phillips' novel, this reification of the binary works in tandem with other sites of difference such as race and gender to expose how the very category of "human" is constructed through this process of othering. Instead of discussing the environment as a backdrop to the human affairs and relations that it may or may not influence, in *Cambridge* the environment operates as a form of "nature-function" that echoes Michel Foucault's analysis of authorship. For Foucault, the author is not the originator of meaning but a function of discourse, of the set of assumptions that govern the production, circulation, classification, and consumption of texts. Similarly, the notion of "nature-function" challenges approaches that foreground the environment as a pre-existing space that evolves outside of the subject and instead sees it as function of discourse. In Phillips' text, this discursively produced environment then goes on to produce the human subject.

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At first sight, Caryl Phillips' fiction may not be an obvious candidate for an ecocritical analysis. Indeed, unlike Caribbean writers like Wilson Harris or Derek Walcott, whose work explicitly engages with the environment,[1] Phillips seems interested in it only peripherally or insofar as it helps him provide context for his characters. 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] 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" (Scott 1053) to be relevant in texts in which gender is not mentioned explicitly. After all, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), a classic work of feminist literary criticism, focuses exclusively on male writers who were not *a priori* writing about gender politics, and Hélène Cixous identifies her transgressive écriture féminine as embodied by the writings of male authors such as James Joyce and Jean Genet. Similarly, I argue that Phillips' fiction lends itself to an ecocritical reading not because his texts showcase the environment as a motif but because of his 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 Phillips masterfully deconstructs binaries throughout his work, it is therefore unsurprising that his fiction provides excellent fodder for an ecocritical analysis.

Two of ecocriticism's significant impacts have been to show that humans are part and parcel of the very environment from which they had previously seen themselves as separate[3] 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 example). For instance, William Cronon's 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.[4] Similarly, 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 inextricable rather than "putting something called Nature on a pedestal" (*Ecology* 5). These scholars stress interconnectedness and humanity's inseparability from the environment because they assume that situating the human squarely within the natural rather than outside of it will lead to a more responsible relationship with our surroundings, including our immediate urban environments. Indeed, the danger of seeing our cities and ourselves as separate from a supposedly pristine wilderness is that we may reserve our conservationist ethics for the protection of the wilderness and ignore the destructive and polluting elements that define our cities. Thus, in dissolving the separation between urban and non-urban environments, human and nonhuman, and culture and nature, ecocritics broaden the scope of the environmentalist agendas of the past to locations that were previously ignored.

This is an important intervention that echoes and intersects with 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 cast as categorically other by a dominant culture intent on maintaining exclusionary and impenetrable boundaries. Both fields have responded to this process of hierarchical differentiation by revealing the interdependence of self and other as well as the constructedness of categories of difference.

Yet in highlighting the constructedness of Nature as a backdrop to human affairs, ecocriticism has sometimes failed to expose the constructedness of "human" or of human characters themselves. By contrast, I want to throw into relief the representational and ideological work that goes into producing the category of "human" in fiction in a way that reveals the imbrication of racial with nonhuman forms of otherness. Specifically, I argue that an ecocritical reading of Phillips' *Cambridge* (1991) reveals how nonhuman landscapes harbor a multiplicity of meanings that work in tandem with other categories

of difference (most notably race and gender) to produce the category of "human." This construction occurs in a way that is unaddressed by the current ecocritical consensus on 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 to expose 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 a near-exclusive focus on the constructedness of the environment.[5]

My ecocritical reading of the natural landscape in *Cambridge* unmasks the production of difference between the categories of human and nonhuman rather than offering a straightforward challenge to that difference. Indeed, challenges to the binary typically focus on dissecting representations of the environment as a backdrop to human beings' development and thereby not only leave the concept of the human subject intact but also reinforce it. *Cambridge*, however, exposes the production and reification of the "human" in two ways: first, by laying bare the characters' parroting of ideological assumptions about race, humanity, gender, and Christianity, as revealed by criticism that emphasizes the protagonist's internalized gendered and racist beliefs about the black population she encounters; and second, by encouraging a reading process that makes visible how the very concept of the human—in all its naturalized and hence invisible gendered/racialized dimensions—is created through a particular representation of the environment. I am distinctly not arguing that Phillips' depiction of the environment is aligned with an object-oriented ontology that posits nonhuman objects as existing independently of human perception (Harman). Rather, I emphasize how *Cambridge*'s representation of the environment as separate from the subject is exposed as a construction on which illusions of the autonomy, complexity, wholeness, and superiority of the human subject rest.

In other words, instead of portraying the environment as a backdrop to the human affairs that it may or may not influence, the environment in Phillips' novel operates as a form of what I call the "nature-function,"

which echoes Michel Foucault's analysis of authorship.[6] This "nature-function" challenges approaches that foreground the environment as a pre-existing space that evolves apart from the subject and instead sees it as a function of discourse; if we see it this way, we can see how it produces the category of the "human." The nature-function asks why landscapes are described the way they are—not mimetically but in and through their construction in narrative and in relation to the protagonist's identity (via gendered and racialized narratives). It asks what "classificatory function"[7] 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 the "nature-function" in *Cambridge* highlights how this interconnectedness leads not to a dissolution of boundaries between human and nature, black and white, and femininity and masculinity but to their very constitution in narrative. Ironically, in repeatedly performing the production and reification of sites of categorical difference (black/white, human/nonhuman, man/woman), Phillips' narrative exposes their construction and absurd arbitrariness.

The novel's representation of Caribbean natural landscapes is a particularly useful test case to take stock of the repercussions of this representation of the relationship between humanity and the environment in fiction.[8] That it fulfills a function and is itself a function of discourse becomes especially evident when we remember the contradiction at the heart of representations of the environment in Caribbean fiction. On one hand, descriptions of the landscape often evoke the majestic, lush, uncultivated, and tropical greenness of environments that we typically associate with "an idealized natural landscape that is devoid of human history and labor" (DeLoughrey et al 2).[9] 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 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley 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, and the sugarcane plantation system have irremediably transformed the Caribbean environment,

whether through human intervention, human-caused 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 descriptions 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 suggest the doctrine of the sublime, whose origins critics trace 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. Cronon notes that the sublime changed from evoking the sacred to a more sentimental reaction. One may wonder, then, what descriptions of natural landscape that seem closer to this legacy are doing in novels that are so intensely preoccupied with history, imperialism, and colonization? Why are there passages and settings that seem to represent a flight from history in novels whose authors are so intent on highlighting history's 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?

Why do so many Caribbean novels reinforce 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)? Isabel Hoving identifies a contradiction in Caribbean (women's) fiction, but only insofar as it represents the garden as 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 these novels' representation of Nature as Edenic and above the fray and the vulnerability of Caribbean ecosystems and history. I argue that because the representation of profoundly historicized social, racial, and gender oppressions occurs in the context of seemingly ahistorical Nature, such oppressions cannot be understood outside of the nature-function—that is, its foundational effect on the constitution of what is valued as "humanity." Whether or not the nature-culture opposition ultimately holds throughout the narrative, its deployment allows us to identify its 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.

This dynamic operates in Phillips' *Cambridge*, a novel set on 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, who narrates the bulk of the novel, introduces herself as a "proper" Victorian lady who has not only internalized the separate sphere ideology and its attendant gender conventions ("the preservation of my modesty" [Phillips 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), relations between black characters 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).[10] She also describes the African slaves as "tardy" and "careless" (32), as claiming to have "imaginary diseases" (34) and as plagued with a "self-evident inferiority" (35). 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, her black maid Stella, through racist stereotyping.

Critics note that, just as Cambridge's section of the novel draws on the tradition of slave narratives, Emily's narrative replicates the period genre of the travelogue.[11] This partly explains her reproduction of socially established precepts and formalities involving gender. As Mirja 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 is not a unidimensional character. Ironically, for many critics, the narrative even succeeds in creating "a connection between her and the contemporary reader" (Kuurola 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 racial oppressor, Emily is in a position of subordination because of her 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" (Phillips 4). Kuurola identifies Emily's critical distance toward gender norms 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 makes her character relatable, somewhat paradoxical, and gives her a depth she otherwise lacks.

I argue that in addition to her fraught relation to gender conventions, Emily's relationship with the Caribbean natural environment also provides depth to an otherwise unidimensional character. Her ability to identify beauty in the otherness of a Nature that is represented as sublime, untouched, and self-renewing generates an even more complex stratification of the subject. 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 of 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's own self-satisfied assertion that "good manners [and, one could add, character and ultimately what makes us human] rise above clime and conditions" (Phillips 32). Yet, the novel, I argue, shows us otherwise.

As Emily leaves her beloved England (which she refers to as "[t]he truth" [4]) 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 land 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 destroyed in the West, the Romantics began turning to exotic landscapes elsewhere as more awe-inspiring, sensual, colorful, and lush than natural sights at home (Mazierska and Rascaroli 82–83). Along with a more anesthetized vision ("precious . . . gem"), the exotic landscape Emily describes also evokes impenetrability and mystery ("heavily clothed" and "swaddled in clouds") as well as a pristine state that she echoes in two of her descriptions of the foreign geography:

> The view of the island that I now beheld was nothing less than magnificent. (Phillips 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 "[t]he truth" that is England introduces another 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; Emily is unable to separate the alluring wilderness from the black natives she sees as inherently belonging to it, an association

that further testifies to her bigotry. In keeping with racist ideology, Emily believes that wilderness and uncontrolled Nature include "negro" life. Her representation of the environment paradoxically evokes both the earlier and more domesticated elements of the Romantic tradition of the sublime ("fruit trees," cottages, cultivated land) but does so precisely because she associates the black population (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 she

> recognized the infamous sugarcanes, whose young shoots billowed in the cooling breeze like fields of green barley, and [she] 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)

The tropical paradise includes houses that "snake up" and "merge with the vegetation," even though they spread in "ordered" fashion. The contradictions inherent in this description—ordered but reckless and merging with the tropical and disorderly nature—expose the constructedness of a discourse that seeks to contain both racial and nonhuman difference by imposing an arbitrary association between the two. Later Emily 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)[12]

"Negroes," in Emily's eyes, are so much a part of "all nature" that their not following the same exact rhythms and schedule as nature is surprising and constitutes an exception to the rule.

Whereas readers may understand the description of a romanticized, uncontrolled nature as emerging from a Romantic ideology predicated on the exclusion of human presence and intervention, to Emily, the presence of black "natives" in the midst of the "tropical paradise" she recounts as wild is not contradictory. She identifies "negroes" as part of the jungle and, consequently, scenes of sublime landscapes are connected to 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). Thus, for Emily, black settlements are 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 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 belies the very sense of supremacy that has generated the association 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 make her unidimensional.

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 black 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. (100–01; emphasis in original)

Racial otherness is the ground on which ecstatic images of nature as "treacherous" and "rough-hewn," impenetrable and dangerous are reconciled with domestic images of "washing clothes" and disgust. Indeed, in Emily's mind, no matter how engaged in practices of cleanliness or pastoral homemaking blackness is, it can never trump the quality of wildness and savagery with which it is associated. To evoke a common stereotype from nineteenth-century soap advertising, no matter how much washing is involved, blacks are perceived as dirty until an extraordinary soap can intervene to do its magic.[13]

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. . . . 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. . . . I lingered a while until we were disturbed by the all-too familiar bray of negro voices. (110; emphasis in original)

These are surprising linkages, to say the least, since they bring together "the picturesque" with the "cottage," the tropical with the pastoral, and 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 that Cronon outlines (from awe-inspiring, pristine wilderness to a more subdued, sentimental sublime influenced by the pastoral), but they also, and most importantly, reflect racist nineteenth-century British beliefs that located anything related to blackness squarely within the wilderness and Nature. Paradoxically, Emily is sensitive to a form of categorical otherness (via her ability to appreciate the otherness of the landscape) that is simultaneously exposed as conditioned by European colonialist discourse. As David Gunning observes, 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" (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 Emily 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, the epilogue, which is narrated in the third-person, exposes "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 an otherwise wholly unidimensional character, the same dynamic is at play in the novel's representation of 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 merely be a reflection of British-imposed and internalized Christian doctrine and Western assumptions were it not for his association with his dirt-scratching, "savage" obeah wife whose unfathomable opaqueness evokes the categorical otherness of the wilderness. The black obeah woman's identification with the wild provides a layer of depth and unexpected differentiation in her husband, who might otherwise be perceived as a "mimic man" (Bhabha 85). Indeed, for all his internalized Christian beliefs, Cambridge shows a devotion to his obeah wife that can only surprise in light of what we would expect him to think of as her unseemly comportment. 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 generally 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 apparently wholly internalized. Christiania remains, as it were, his saving grace. Indeed, as Bénédicte Ledent remarks, both her

"distrust of words" and her "refusal to produce children" who would function as fodder for the system of unpaid slave labor mark her, despite her narrative invisibility, as the kind of counterforce Cambridge cannot become (99). Her metaphorical and literal association with nature's unknowability and mystery make her a site of opacity, and he gains complexity 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 Caribbean. Whether the characters' added depth and complexity by association saves them from characterological unidimensionality as with Emily in *Cambridge* and Antoinette in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or from a mentally uniform state induced by trauma as with Mala in Shani Mootoo's *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 accrue 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 discursively polarized terms such as human/nonhuman, nature/culture, and black/white, ecocritics cannot truly challenge our belief in some variation of the critical, distanced, reflexive, complex, analytical subject as what sets us apart from the nonhuman dimensions of our existence. Ultimately, the hierarchical nature of the relationship between nature and humanity in ecocritical approaches is not threatened because it is nature and the non-human that is revealed as a construction. 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 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, self-reflexivity, and ability to critique and debate 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.[14] The knowledge that our representation of nature is instrumental in making the human subject multi-layered challenges not just our assumptions about nature as separate but also the idea that we stand above it.

My ecocritical reading of *Cambridge* thus reveals both the importance and limitations of ecocriticism's seemingly corrective emphasis on the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman worlds. Through its deployment of the 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 the white protagonist's dependence on the representation of a Romanticized nature and her presentation of its defining attributes as the norm. Rather than merely emphasize the natural as a construction, this analysis reveals that it is the white subject who is narrativized, complicated, and ultimately produced in her rounded complexity through an appeal to the landscape as a lush, untouched, wild, and natural background to which only a protagonist more complex than the sum of her unidimensional stereotypical assumptions can be attuned. The humanity of the white protagonist, in particular, is established and produced through her relationship with the opaque, categorically other environment. 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 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 an inherent and obscured similarity between the two terms but by bringing into relief the way in which one side of the opposition (human) is utterly dependent on its "othered other" to manufacture humanity's 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 the very concept of the self is constructed through its association with nature as other and racial alterity, we will not 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 we assume the subject's dominance over it, the hierarchy that underscores supremacist views of nonhuman and human alterity will remain intact.

Notes

1 See Harris' 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" ("202), or Walcott's Adamic man naming the New World landscape anew in *Another Life* (1973) and *Omeros* (1990).

2 The colloquium, *Altered States: Configuring Madness in Caribbean Literature Symposium*, took place on 23–24 April 2015 at the Université of Liège, Belgium and was organized by Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca. Phillips asked what ecocriticism was and did._

3 See Cronon's *Uncommon Ground* and *Changes in the Land*.

4 For a critique of environmentalism's elitism, see **Cronon's** *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature***.**

5 In other words, I aim to do for "nature" as referent what Dyer does 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.

6 In "What is an Author?" 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 did not 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 involves a plethora of endless meanings rather than a description of a self-determining and originating source. Therefore, Foucault argues, 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.

7 Foucault argued that the author has a "classificatory function," by which he means that the name of the author often works to evoke a set of beliefs and assumptions that will govern the circulation, distribution, and consumption of a text. For instance, the name J. K. Rowling now evokes a particular kind of writing à la *Harry Potter*.

8 The only other ecocritical reading of Phillips' work I could locate also focuses on the ideological and often racist construction of spaces of Otherness but in urban and suburban settings rather than the natural environments I have in mind. Specifically, Maufort highlights how these racially motivated spatial dynamics underscore the antipastoral nature of Phillips' work in *A Distant Shore* (2003) and *In the Falling Snow* (2009).

9 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. . . . [W]e need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about using nature as not using it" (85).

10 Ironically, Cambridge also reproduces these assumptions since he describes other slaves' spoken English as resembling "nothing more civilized than the manic chatter of baboons" (Phillips 135).

11 See Eckstein's "Dialogism in Caryl Phillip's' *Cambridge*, or the Democratisation of Cultural Memory" for a discussion of this intertextual dimension.

12 This passage is heavily based on Lewis' similar response in his *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834) and therefore constitutes another iterated performance of such responses.

13 Soap advertisements offered a racial ideology described as "commodity racism" by McClintock. See her chapter "Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising" in *Imperial Leather*.

14 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 the depth-surface model I have just outlined.

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