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Another “Our America”: Rooting a Caribbean Aesthetic in the Work of José Martí, Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant

Raphael Dalleo
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

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If one were to name some of the characteristics of Caribbean literary history in the 1990s, a primary one would surely be the development of a broadly conceived "global Caribbean" literature, incorporating multiple language groups and a diaspora stretching to a number of different metropolitan locations. More specifically, one might remark on the widespread popularity of novels beginning with a diagram of a family tree, a technique used by Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, Patricia Powell, Lawrence Scott, Robert Antoni, Julia Alvarez, Rosario Ferré, Cristina García, and Dionne Brand, among others.¹ It seems notable that of the writers who use this family tree motif, not only have all of them lived outside of the Caribbean for much of their lives, but most were either born abroad or moved to a metropolitan location at an early age. While it is a commonplace that West Indian literature has always been written by writers abroad as well as at home, most of these earlier generations (McKay, Césaire, Lamming, Brathwaite, Naipaul, Selvon) spent their early lives in the Caribbean, before going abroad during their young adulthood, often for University, but almost never at a younger age.² These family tree novels, as a result of a more foundational separation, aim to establish a rooted link to ancestors and ancestral space. Yet at the same time, most of these novels simultaneously complicate and question notions of rooted identity and inheritance through incest, illegitimacy, homosexuality, and diasporic movement.

It seems at once obvious and still controversial to say that these novels in some way respond to the swelling tide of what has come to be called postmodernity, postcoloniality, and globalization. In other places, I have explored the possibility of literary tradition amongst a group of writers of varied backgrounds and locations, in a region that defies simple definition, and in an era where anti-essentialism has become doctrine.³ This paper continues to pursue these ideas, but expands the scope slightly. Noting the family tree novels as one response to a world of flux and fragmentation, I would like to reflect on how Caribbean culture can be thought in light of the above factors.

To think through the interplay of movement and rootedness, and subsequently of exile and commitment, I am opposing two moments in Caribbean intellectual history which explore these entanglements in great depth: from the end of the nineteenth century, José Martí, and from the end of the twentieth, Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant.⁴ These generations of writers represent different poles in these discussions. The myth of Martí is that of the organic intellectual, committed Marxist, and national hero, who died fighting for the freedom of his island-nation. Brathwaite and Glissant, on the other hand, represent a later, post-national, almost post-ideological generation. Both Glissant and Brathwaite have been adopted, in various ways, as Caribbean apostles of the post-structural and the postmodern; their (somewhat different) concepts of "creolization" have become precursors to constructions of hybridity central to a variety of theorizations of the contemporary world.⁵ Although he maintains a commitment to the autonomy movement in Martinique, Glissant especially is associated with intellectual movements more likely to seek their revolutions in poetics than in politics; he readily acknowledges that he has been influenced deeply by French post-structuralism, from Derrida and

Foucault to Deleuze and Guattari. By considering these two historical moments alongside one another, by grounding Brathwaite and Glissant with Martí and delving below the surface of their complicated essays to get at what Brathwaite might call the “submerged” elements of their philosophies, by unearthing the metaphors that root each of their corpora, I suggest that both moments are integral parts of the Caribbean theoretical tradition, and each speaks meaningfully to the pivotal question: how do we construct a Caribbean discourse which does not lend itself to essentialism and totalitarianism, but still can be wielded as a weapon of cultural decolonization?

This paper began as a presentation at the 2001 (Re)Thinking Caribbean Culture conference in Barbados, as part of a panel entitled “The Legacy of José Martí.” The conference organizers worked admirably to make this conference international, multilingual, and to incorporate as many diverse aspects of Caribbean culture as three days could possibly hold. Yet this panel on Martí, one of only two or three which concentrated on the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, was attended by only four souls. As if this did not say enough about the general opinion of the relevance of Martí to the task of rethinking the contemporary Caribbean, during the question and answer session afterwards, one of the panelists asserted that Martí had nothing to say to the Caribbean as a whole, that his work pertained only to Cuba, or at most, to parts of Latin America. This paper, which looks at Martí from a Caribbeanist perspective, argues that Martí, as a forerunner of *modernismo*, asked many of the kinds of questions a century ago which Caribbeanists today consider most pressing. Looking back at the end of the nineteenth century through theoretical prisms created at the end of the twentieth by Édouard Glissant and Kamau Brathwaite, we can see Martí’s project as one way of navigating the webs of imperialism, capitalism, and modernization that are woven around the Caribbean word and world.

Caribbean Studies continues to look to Martí as a forefather and an inspiration, although the Martí invoked is often projected into a distant past and greatly simplified. Michael Dash’s expansive literary history of the region cites Martí’s “audacious and pathbreaking notion of *Nuestra America*,” calling it a “crucial antecedent to the project of an *Other America*” (*The Other America* 10), the project which names the vision of the Caribbean that Dash adopts from Glissant. Yet reading only “*Nuestra América*” allows Caribbeanists to assign a certain role to Martí: this essay is one of Martí’s most strident and defiant major works, but also perhaps the hardest of Martí’s essays to reconcile with Glissant’s vision of rhizomatic identity. Focusing exclusively on “*Nuestra América*” allows Caribbeanists to produce a reading of Martí as anti-colonial oracle, the man who managed to unite writing and action; yet doing so ignores aspects of Martí’s thought that can perhaps prove more valuable to a postcolonial Caribbean Studies committed to re-affirming anti-colonialism’s utopian dream of creating truly free and democratic Caribbean societies, but going beyond the limitations of nationalist movements rooted in modernist master narratives and streamlined constructions of “the people” or “the folk” as a political subject.

It is in “*Nuestra América*” that Martí posits most clearly a vision of an Americas unified against U.S. manifest destiny; in order to demonstrate the strength of this unity, he looks

explicitly to the models of the family and the tree. “Nuestra América” is replete with the language of an organic wholeness tied to genealogy that can strike a contemporary reader as exclusionary. Martí begins by pleading for the sons of Our America to come to the aid of their sick mother. Elsewhere, in an oft-cited line, he writes “Let the world be grafted onto our republics; but the trunk must be our own” (114). He concludes that “we can no longer be people of leaves, living in the air; the trees must form ranks so the giant shall not pass” (112). This evocative language condemns the uncommitted wanderings of the intellectual, while extolling the organic naturalness of the family tree. But eventually, the logic of the family tree leads Martí to write that nations should live “always with one heart and one mind” (118), for his hope is to “make the natural blood of the nations course vigorously through the veins” (118) of all Americans. In moments like these, Martí appears dangerously close to asserting racial purity and advocating a national unity based on bloodlines.⁶

Glissant, in his collection of essays *Poétique de la relation*, focuses especially on the assumptions behind what he calls “root-based” identity, as opposed to a concept which he calls “errantry.” Glissant associates the tree-root with fixed identity and racial purity, tracing the origins of European nationhood and imperialism to this root:

The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, all require that the root take on the intolerant sense that Deleuze and Guattari no doubt meant to challenge. The reason for our return to this episode in Western history is that it spread throughout the world. The model came in handy. Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other. (*Poetics of Relation* 14)

Glissant’s critique of the tree-root offers insight into the language of “Nuestra América”: Martí’s metaphors suggest the complicity between this brand of anti-colonial nationalism with imperialism’s totalitarian logic of wholeness and exclusion. The rhizome, a root which spreads out in a tangled web, gives Glissant a way of imagining identity as both rooted and in process, a way of resisting nationalism’s tendencies to look to root itself in permanence and purity without surrendering a rooted grounding in one’s place.

Reading “Nuestra América” through a relational, Glissantian perspective uncovers Martí’s aspirations towards an organic familial oneness as inevitably part of the same discourse that makes him imagine the nation in terms of race and the exclusion of difference. Yet the context of these words cannot be forgotten: as Martí was writing these lines, the United States was turning its expansionist vision towards Latin America in general and Martí’s Cuba in particular. In one newspaper report on the Pan-American Congress held in Washington, D.C., in 1889, Martí urges his readers that “the time has come for Spanish America to declare its second independence” (“Washington” 340), and warns:

Only a virile and unanimous response [...] can free all the Spanish American nations at one time from the anxiety and agitation-fatal in a country's hour of development-in which the secular and admittedly predominant policy of a powerful and ambitious neighbor, with the possible connivance of the weak and venal republics, would forever hold them. (340)

This imminent threat explains why Martí deems manly action so necessary; writing is not enough, without a “virile” response, to ensure Latin American freedom from North American annexation. His return to Cuba to fight for his island's independence exemplifies this conception of the writer as a man of action that continues to be so seductive to intellectuals throughout the Caribbean.

Martí's goal of defending his nation from an encroaching North American threat, continues to be honored by a committed Caribbean Studies today. At the same time, Martí's work should not be reduced to the privileging of heroic action; if anything, Martí feared that a “virile response” might be impossible in these “infamous times” (“Poem of Niagara” 309). Indeed, placing another Martí essay alongside “Nuestra América,” gives a more nuanced appreciation of his thought, and demonstrates the relevance of Martí's thought to contemporary, postmodern Caribbean Studies. In his prologue to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde's *Poema del Niágara*, Martí describes the work of art in a world of flux, a world “of tumult and affliction” (310). Modernity threatens to undermine the possibility of virile heroism and manly greatness in literature unless the writer can find a new basis for his activity: “men would look like weak females [if] they devoted themselves to purifying the honeylike wine of ancient Rome that seasoned the banquets of Horace” (310). In these passages, Martí expresses his nostalgia for the past and disdain for a present characterized by the loss of epic wholeness, which means that there is now “no such thing as a permanent work” (311). Instead of epic poetry, modern writers must settle for an emasculated form of lyric poetry that confines itself to the private and the personal and pursues beauty at the expense of the “peaceful strength and laborious development” (312) needed to represent truth.

At the same time that this prologue shows nostalgia for the disappearance of the epic world; its extinction appears to be inevitable. In this context, the poet wonders about ideas that can take root without becoming the rigid and intractable edifices of exclusionary thought. In this new world, tree-root based identity becomes untenable as new technologies bring new realities: “railroads are knocking down the forests,” he writes, and “newspapers are knocking down the human forest” (313). Whereas, “formerly, ideas would silently stand erect in the mind like strong towers” (314), like Foucault's Enlightenment panopticon, master of all it surveys, “today ideas leave the lips in a shower, they burst, take root, evaporate, come to nothing and vanish in burning sparks, disintegrated” (314). Martí's language in this prologue emphasizes the energy of the ephemeral and the fluid, the flux of modernity sweeping away all certainties.⁷

The Martí of "Nuestra América" might lament this moment of chaos and uncertainty, preferring the towering oneness of tower or tree, reaching to the sky. In the prologue to *El Poema del Niágara*, though, Martí tentatively accepts this moment of "decentralization" (314) if it means that, "man is losing for the benefit of men" [314] (similar to what Glissant says about building the Tower of Babel horizontally, in every language). "Intelligence," which is to say access to resources and reality, "has come to be the beautiful domain of everyone" (314). In this transitional moment, at the onset of modernity in Cuba, Martí feels both "nausea from the dying day" and "delight from the dawn" (311). He mourns what is lost as modernity sweeps away the epic world of heroic action (and for Martí, heroic action is the only thing that can save Cuba from Spanish or U.S. rule); yet he realizes that the tides may also sweep away the injustices of nation, race, class, and gender upon which the old world was based, that "neither literary originality nor political freedom can exist as long as there is no assurance of spiritual freedom" (317).

For Martí to position spiritual freedom as an equal or even more pressing priority than political freedom seems surprising, if we think only of the idea of Martí the nationalist warrior. Yet as a poet, he realizes that physical force (which he obviously supports) against the imperial power must be coupled with a decolonizing of the mind as well.⁸ Even while it threatens the viability of his nationalist oppositionality, Martí welcomes the democratization of knowledge, a world of "a kind of decentralization of the intelligence" (314). As a man who spent much of his life in exile, moving between New York, Europe, and the Caribbean, he describes an almost post-national world when he writes: "men are beginning to walk the entire earth without stumbling; before they had scarcely started walking when they struck against the wall of a nobleman's mansion or the bastion of a monastery" (312). Martí looks about him and sees a world free from the constraints of feudalism; this world in flux can liberate men, even while it uproots them and sends them wandering from their homes. Like much of Martí's writing, this essay relies on recurring imagery of landscape, and of movement through that landscape. The poet is thus "walking through the still smoking ruins" (316) of our times; elsewhere "life gallops along the road like spirited chargers pursued by barking dogs" (315).

Movement, which keeps the subject-in-process from hardening into a fixed identity, has been a central concept in the recent theory of both Brathwaite and Glissant. One of the central concepts of *The Poetics of Relation*, according to his translator Betsy Wing, is errantry, a kind of sacred movement that is neither the aimed and conquering movement of arrow-like imperialism, nor the idle roaming of circular nomadism. Simply by keeping in motion, errantry resists the temptations of filiation, the European desire for legitimacy rooted in the soil and in heredity. Errantry insists on fragmentation rather than wholeness, relation rather than essence, as it brings people into contact with one another, or with an Other. In this context, identity can no longer be seen only as inheritance; it is something always becoming, created through contact with Others.

In Brathwaite's poetry and essays of the 1990s, the concept of European culture as missile emerges as an analogy to what Glissant dubs arrow-like movement. Describing the

Middle Passage, for example, Brathwaite writes: “We came across the Atlantic in this space capsule within the missile of the Europeans” (“History” 33). Brathwaite opposes a number of images to the missile, especially the capsule, the womb, and the pebble, all of which share a concavity and circularity similar to Glissant’s circular nomadism. Whether movement is conceived as missile or arrow, it represents a progress-driven movement foreign to the Caribbean reality of what Brathwaite calls tidalectics⁹, and Glissant describes as the interplay of the beach and the ocean. The image of movement based on ebb and flow emphasizes the circular and repetitive, rather than the progressive and teleological. In Martí, then, the desire for a return to a lost time of rooted totality conflicts with his experience of exile as what we might think of as a tidalectic errantry.

The presence of these opposing demands produces Martí’s ambivalence towards uprooting. Brathwaite and Glissant see in postmodernity both the threat and liberatory potential which Martí, a century before, saw in modernity. Their ultimate concern is to map the postmodern moment, an epoch different from Martí’s but once again characterized by discontinuity, in which the agents of oppression are more difficult to identify than ever. As Glissant points out, postmodern mystification works to the advantage of the forces of imperialism:

In the shantytowns and ghettos of even the smallest cities the same gears engage: the violence of poverty and mud but also an unconscious and desperate rage at not ‘grasping’ [*com-prendre*] the chaos of the world. Those who dominate benefit from the chaos. Those who are oppressed are exasperated by it. (141)

For this reason, the chaos of postmodern global capitalism must be understood as a process of grasping which North American Marxist Fredric Jameson calls “cognitive mapping.” But how can we conceive of the totality, as we must, without totalizing? What makes this mapping difficult is the conscious recognition that it cannot reproduce the European cartography that accompanied territorial expansion. Because “generalization is totalitarian,” the errant traveler “strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows that he will never accomplish this” (20); s/he “conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or possess it” (21).

For Martí as much as Glissant or Brathwaite, the chaos brought on by economic and cultural exchange (what we might call globalization) simultaneously threatens Caribbean identity and cultural production, while highlighting its possibilities. As an example of this dialectic, in a chapter of *Poetics of Relation* called “Concerning the Poem’s Information” (presented as a lecture in 1984), Glissant discusses the role of the computer in freeing the word from its scribal prison. Like Martí, Glissant avers the importance of the poet in the (post) modern world, but admits that, “the advent of computers has, nonetheless, thrown poetics into reverse” (82). Speed and instantaneity, coupled with the hierarchical separation of poetic and scientific knowledge, have degraded writing poetry throughout the world. Glissant maintains faith that the computer

can eventually lead to a democratization in the creation of poetry: "Though it does not create poetry," he writes, "it can 'show the way' to a poetics" (84) informed by orality. This is because the computer has already begun to undermine the association of writing as putting words onto paper so important to elitist conceptions of literature meant to exclude orality. Technological changes mean that "poetic knowledge is no longer inseparable from writing" (84), an acknowledgement by Glissant of the growing importance of audio-based poetic forms such as dub poetry.¹⁰ The mediation of the screen, separating the poet even further from the written page, hints at a future in which texts will not be produced solely on paper, but by other multimedia means.

These comments made by Glissant in 1984 correspond uncannily to what Brathwaite would begin experimenting with in his own poetry a few years later. In an interview with Stewart Brown published in 1989, Brathwaite speculates that "the computer has moved us away from scripture into some other dimension which is 'writing in light' [...] the computer is getting as close as you can to the spoken word" ("Interview" 87).¹¹ The process of composing poetry on the computer, which Brathwaite calls "video style," involves the manipulating of fonts in order to evoke the oral; as Glissant suggests this is less an imitation of orality than a way of deforming the written word.¹² In Brathwaite's most recent work, the computer becomes an almost holy instrument of the process that he describes as Caliban's channeling of Sycorax, the otherwise inaccessible African womb from which he came.

Glissant's ideas about "the poem's information" and Brathwaite's video style are only two examples of how Caribbean discourse is being imagined within the New World Order. As attentive as Martí may have been to the impact of technologies on the writer's place in the public sphere, he could never have imagined the new directions which poetry would take in what Brathwaite playfully calls the "postmodern" era. Yet, Caribbean literature and theory today are still working through the issues of movement and rootedness that Martí raised over one hundred years ago. Spiraling back to the point where this paper began, Lawrence Scott's novel *Witchbroom* opens with an incomplete family tree, in which entire sections of the family records have been "lost in the diaspora." Similarly, in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*, the family-tree does not appear as a given at the beginning; on the novel's first page, the tree lists only the protagonist's immediate family, but after she travels back to Jamaica, the tree steadily grows in depth and complexity as she hears more and more stories about her extended family.¹³ These novels show how maintaining a sense of roots in the face of global movement, without allowing those roots to become exclusionary, remains a paramount concern for the people of the Caribbean. The ongoing work of Glissant and Brathwaite, along with the spreading proliferation of family tree obsessed novels, are evidence that thinking about Martí's insights into poetry, identity, and modernity remains integral to any present attempt to (re)think Caribbean culture.

Notes

¹Although they do not explicitly use the family-tree diagram, Maryse Condé (*Tree of Life*), Fred D'Aguiar (*Bloodlines*), Pauline Melville (*The Ventriloquist's Tale*), Paule Marshall (*Daughters*), and Jamaica Kincaid (*Autobiography of My Mother*) are among this group of Caribbean writers who are producing novels equally obsessed with genealogy, movement and rootedness.

²Belinda Edmondson makes a similar point in distinguishing between the earlier generations (of mainly men) as exiles and the more recent generation (mainly women) as immigrants. See *Making Men*.

³See my essay "Tink is you dawson dis yana? Imitation and Creation in Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace*" for a more explicit discussion of literary tradition and the family tree.

⁴The similar trajectories of Brathwaite and Glissant's work are striking, and have only begun to be explored by Caribbean Studies; I can only point to some of the correspondences here.

⁵See chapter 6 of Mimi Sheller's *Consuming the Caribbean* and Part 1 of Shalini Puri's *The Caribbean Postcolonial* for explanations of how Brathwaite and Glissant have been incorporated into theories of postmodernism and globalization.

⁶For further discussion of the ambivalences of Martí's nationalist discourse, see the recently translated *Divergent Modernities* (originally titled *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina*) by Julio Ramos.

⁷It is difficult to ignore Martí's obviously gendered opposition between the "erect and strong" tower and the empty and fluid "lips". This opposition still has currency in Caribbean discourse: Brathwaite's phallic missile and womb-like capsule, for example, configure the Caribbean in similarly gender-coded terms. The introduction to Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* is perhaps the most extreme example of this way of conceiving the Caribbean: "The Atlantic is the Atlantic (with all its port cities) because it was once engendered by the copulation of Europe-that insatiable solar bull-with the Caribbean archipelago [...] because it was the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean, whose vagina was stretched between continental clamps" (5). Part of Martí's project is to recuperate poetry as a manly activity, a "battle with the lyre" ("Poem of Niagara" 308) just as important as any other battle.

⁸Indeed, history would prove that Martí's heroic action was not enough: he was killed in battle, and Cuba became a U.S. possession soon after.

⁹For more on movement as missile, see especially Brathwaite's "History, the Caribbean Writer, and X/Self" (33-34) and "Metaphors of Underdevelopment" (250-251), both of which discuss the poem "The Visibility Trigger." For his explanation of tidalectics, see *Barabajan Poems*.

¹⁰Glissant obviously is aware of dub poetry, since he dedicates *The Poetics of Relation* to Mikey Smith. In fact, one major subtext of Glissant’s work is the relation of the oral to changing technologies.

¹¹For Brathwaite’s own theorization of video style, see his interview with Stewart Brown. Brown’s subsequent essay “‘Writin in light’: Orality-thru-typography, Kamau Brathwaite’s Sycorax Video Style” provides an introduction to the concept. The style is first truly put into action in book-form in *Barabajan Poems*; but it is perhaps in “Namsetoura and the Companion Stranger,” published in *Anthurium* on the web, that he most fully brings to the reader his vision of poetry “written in light.”

¹²Rhonda Cobham explains: “Brathwaite also produces dramatic visual effects on the page by making use of the full range of typefaces to which his computers give him access. His video style layout, as he names it, calls to mind the way in which Reggae and Hip Hop musicians have foregrounded the technology of the studio in their music by exploiting the acoustic possibilities of dubbing, mixing and scratching, as well as the electronic distortion of sound itself. Like these musicians, Brathwaite is interested in breaking through the illusion of verisimilitude offered by more conventional forms of production” (*K/Ka/Ka/Kama/Kamau* 300).

¹³Elena Machado Sáez explores *Fruit of the Lemon* from a Glissantian perspective in her doctoral thesis, “Going Global in a Caribbean Locale: Returning Home in the Works of Paule Marshall, Cristina García, Andrea Levy and Caryl Phillips.”

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