Waging the War from the Outside: The Writers of the West Indian Diaspora and their Role in the Future of the Caribbean

Bénédicte Ledent

It has always been difficult – though not uninteresting – to try and gauge the role played by writers in the shaping of a society and in a community's ability to face the challenges of the future, especially in a postcolonial context. As early as 1965, the Nigerian Chinua Achebe already offered a reflection on this issue in his now classical text "The Novelist as Teacher," in which he reminded us that "what writers expect of society [...] is generally contained in their books, or should be." "What is not so well documented," he added, "is what society expects of its writers."¹ Further in this piece, and in another, even earlier text called "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Achebe viewed his task as helping his "society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement."² One way of restoring this lost dignity, for Achebe, was to look at his community's history, for, he wrote, echoing Aimé Césaire, "the short cut to the future is via the past."³

In the field of Caribbean letters, too, the nagging question surrounding the role of the writer has been widely debated, and has recently been given renewed prominence through the work of Patrick Chamoiseau, whose evocative image of the writer as "Warrior of the Imaginary" has been the main inspiration for this volume. The starting-point of Chamoiseau's reflection on the part played by the artist is to be found in his native Martinique and, more generally, in the French-speaking Antilles. Yet his vision of the Caribbean writer as a storyteller who uses diversity and creativity as paradoxically peaceful weapons against the destructiveness of globalization and standardization applies to the region as a whole, regardless of linguistic boundaries, and, as shown in some of the articles collected here, it finds clear echoes in the works of Dutch-speaking Albert Helman from Surinam as well as English-speaking Wilson Harris from Guyana. One could even add that Chamoiseau's urge to use poetics as a way to undermine oppressive forces – whether economic or cultural – and thereby find a new relational dynamic has indeed a universal appeal that goes beyond a strict

---

relevance to creolized societies like those found around the Caribbean basin.

Because of this potentially wide currency, however, Chamoiseau's original and cogent concept of the transformative powers of the Caribbean author may run the risk of falling victim to some form of academic commodification – ironically, the very scourge it is trying to withstand. There is also the danger of having its metaphoric and philosophical edge blunted if it is used in an exclusively decontextualized Utopian way, or, to use Chamoiseau's terms, if it gives rise to "a transparent universalism which is outside any place," by which he means: if it is not anchored spatially, either in an actual or an imaginary way. Consequently, in spite of Chamoiseau's wide-ranging call to literary arms, the specifics of the region should not be neglected, and it is therefore also necessary to consider the question of the location of the battlefield (although it is, rather, a question of dis-location for the writers of the diaspora). What I propose to do here is examine the terms in which the role of the writer has been debated in the anglophone Caribbean, concentrating particularly on the function that displaced artists can fulfil, as well as on how their expatriation affects their intervention in West Indian society. My argument is that exile does not diminish the combativeness of these diasporic writers, for, in spite of their spatial remoteness and apparent detachment, they are key recruits in the verbal war waged against what Chamoiseau views as the main curses of the present age – exclusionary impulses such as ethnocentrism and the fear of the Other. With their Caribbean-based imaginary, the writers of the West Indian diaspora can contribute to the effort made by their societies of origin to come to grips with an increasingly complex future.

♦

The debate around the relationship between writer and society in the anglophone Caribbean was particularly lively in the 1960s and 1970s, a critical moment that Alison Donnell extensively documents in *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, a book that provides a welcome "historiography of Caribbean literary history and criticism." The discussion, which culminated at the 1971 ACLALS conference in Mona (Jamaica), started around what Donnell describes as "the strain in relations that [...] existed between those who stayed and worked hard to continue West Indian-based writings and those who left and seemingly received all the

---

critical attention."⁶ One of the most prominent voices in this discussion was that of Kamau Brathwaite, who, in his essays "Sir Galahad and the Islands" and "Roots," for example, traced this tension between immigrant writers and those who stayed behind, then concluded that West Indian writers always worked "from an ex-centric position,"⁷ seeming thereby to suggest that their location did not matter as much as what he called their "conscience and [...] social consciousness";⁸ in other words, their attitude to the colonial system.

Since then, there seems to have been less visible interest in discussing the function of the anglophone Caribbean writer in society, even though the question has remained as relevant as ever. This apparent lack of interest may be due to the fact that the field of West Indian letters has now become more established and is therefore less prone to the self-defining gestures which often accompany younger traditions. Another reason might be that the literary scene has changed and that it now appears much more difficult than in the 1960s and 1970s to determine exactly who can be regarded as a Caribbean writer, what his/her cultural commitments are, and for what audience he/she writes. This mostly happened in the wake of the success of Black Atlantic studies, whose emphasis on the diasporic component of Caribbean identities, Donnell claims, has since the 1990s diverted attention "away from the possibilities as well as the problems of Caribbean states and towards the migrant's condition"⁹ and has thus marginalized writers such as Erna Brodber or Earl Lovelace who are still living and working in the Caribbean. Their work, Donnell points out, has suffered from the preference for "metropolitan diasporic writings," which has transformed the Caribbean into "a theoretical Utopia" whose key words are "creolisation, hybridity, syncracnicity [sic] and deterritorialisation."¹⁰ While it is important, as Donnell does, to promote talented local writers and retrieve their disregarded texts as well as to alert publishing houses and academics to their responsibilities in resisting the neglect of important literary voices, one should be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. It might therefore be useful to look into the production of diaspora writers beyond the oceanic and diasporic paradigms, beyond the tug-of-war between the local and the global, and see in this context of reassessment what they have to say about the Caribbean and to Caribbean audiences, even though they do not always explicitly deal with contemporary West Indian life, and therefore, in the eyes of some people, may fail the test of 'authenticity.' Moreover, if the issue of the function of the West Indian

⁶ Donnell, Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature, 17.
⁹ Donnell, Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature, 79.
¹⁰ Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature, 127.
writer in society might still be formulated in dichotomic terms: i.e. in terms of writers based inside or outside the Caribbean area, the problem needs to be redefined, for the writers now living outside are no longer immigrant writers, as George Lamming or Derek Walcott were, for example, but diasporic writers who, even if born in the Caribbean or of Caribbean heritage, have settled and lived most of their lives elsewhere. And in spite of their frequently outspoken commitment to their ancestral Caribbean culture, these writers of the diaspora have allegiances to other cultures as well, which was not really the case with the exiled writers of the previous generation, with the possible exception of V.S. Naipaul.

In what follows I would like to argue that the writers of the anglophone Caribbean diaspora – regardless of their location and their chosen subject-matter – have a valuable message to deliver not only to the world at large, but also to the societies that have shaped their imagination and their intellect in often crucial ways. In other words, they too can be regarded as warriors of the imaginary, calling into question the colonial order as well as more general, if less obvious, systems of exclusion.

I will attempt to demonstrate this by referring to the writing of the St Kitts-born, England-raised, New York-based writer Caryl Phillips, also a contributor to this volume, not only because he is one of the most prolific and talented writers of his generation, but also because, since the beginning of his writing career, he has demonstrated an unflagging commitment to his native culture. However, the argument I am putting forward can be fine-tuned to apply to other diasporic Caribbean writers and, whenever possible, I will also mention their work in the following discussion.

Of course, the writings of diaspora writers could be seen as another product imposed on the Caribbean from the outside, as a proof of an imposed inability to construct their own reality. This is suggested by Earl Lovelace, who has been most active in trying to define what Caribbean societies should expect of their writers but also what they should do for them, as testified in his collection of essays Growing in the Dark. In a 1998 article from this collection entitled "A Caribbean Place for the Caribbean Artist," Lovelace writes:

---

11 At the end of Donnell's chapter entitled "Recrossing the Black Atlantic," in which she pleads for a re-centering on the dweller and the local, she adds: "It is certainly true that many of the ethical moves that I have identified in the work of these settled writers have also been played out in the works of migrant writers. Wilson Harris and Caryl Phillips come to mind in their stretching, both historically and geographically, of the boundaries of connected communities”; Donnell, Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature, 127. On Phillips's commitment to the Caribbean, see Bénédicte Ledent, "Caryl Phillips and the Caribbean as Multicultural Paradigm," Moving Worlds 7.1 (2007): 74-84.
In the past, many writers packed their bags and made for England: James, Selvon, Lamming, Harris, etc. And we felt we produced these writers from here. Now we have to note that the new West Indian writers are emerging all over in the metropolitan centres of the world. They are sending our writers back to us, they are determining who our writers are. [...] Because we cannot afford a place for our writers or to do these things ourselves.\textsuperscript{12}

And he continues by exhorting his Caribbean leaders "to give back ourselves to ourselves."\textsuperscript{13}

It seems to me that, far from being an agent of neo-colonization, a writer of the Caribbean diaspora like Caryl Phillips could help in this process of cultural re-appropriation advocated by Lovelace, and this for various reasons, which I will examine briefly in the rest of this essay. My point is that Phillips's writing, like that of many of his contemporaries, could help restore confidence in the Caribbean past, present, and future in three different ways. First of all, through its use of history; second, through its criticism of new forms of colonialism; and finally, through its non-utopian promotion of Caribbean value systems.

History, collective and individual, is one of the pillars of Phillips's artistic undertaking. In his interviews he has repeatedly expressed the importance of revisiting the past, not in a nostalgic move, but as a means of preparing the future, very much in the way suggested by Achebe as quoted above. Let us take as an example Phillips's fourth novel, \textit{Cambridge},\textsuperscript{14} which is mostly set on a nineteenth-century Caribbean plantation. It can be argued that its multifaceted exploration of slavery definitely contributes to a better understanding of the social and racial mechanisms that are still in force in the New World today. Far from freezing the Caribbean in an unpalatable past and being therefore an obstacle to a sense of regional belonging, as argued by some critics in relation to exiled Caribbean writers of the first generation,\textsuperscript{15} Phillips's exploration of slavery, like Fred D'Aguiar's \textit{The Longest Memory},\textsuperscript{16} is one that can promote collective self-knowledge and hence a sharper awareness of the challenges of the future.

But Phillips's examination of the past is not limited to the re-creation of transatlantic slavery itself, it also touches on the frequently overlooked Caribbean presence in the history

\textsuperscript{13} Lovelace, "A Caribbean Place for the Caribbean Artist," 161.
\textsuperscript{15} Donnell, \textit{Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature}, 17.
\textsuperscript{16} Fred D’Aguiar, \textit{The Longest Memory} (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994).
of the West, which often goes together with situations of subjugation akin to slavery. His novel *Dancing in the Dark*, based on the life of Bert Williams, the famous Broadway entertainer, and mostly set in New York at the turn of the twentieth century, insists on Williams's Bahamian origins. Arguably, very little of the narrative is actually set in the Caribbean, and the Caribbean of Williams's early childhood is only evoked in his thoughts with a touch of nostalgia, as "hot sun, tall trees, and the sound of the sea." Still, his story can be read as an attempt to draw attention to the unacknowledged yet crucial role that West Indians have been playing in the construction of today's America, while also pointing to the "performative bondage" experienced by black artists in the USA. Similarly, in his latest book, *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, Phillips combines historical facts with fiction to portray the lives of three famous Black Britons, two of whom, Francis Barber and Randolph Turpin, had roots in the West Indies (Jamaica and Guyana respectively). In spite of their active participation in public life in England, Barber as a secretary to the famous Dr Johnson and Turpin as a world champion boxer, the two men did not get the recognition they deserved. Both had tragic ends: Barber died poor and lonely, while Turpin, significantly described as a "proud warrior," ended up defeated by life's pressure but also by his own inability to manage his temporary success. A similar project of recognition of Caribbean people's contribution to world history as well as of their experience of exclusion can be found in Dionne Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. One of its sections focuses on Samuel Gordon Sones, a fictional Trinidadian soldier who, during World War I, went all the way to the Middle East with the Second West India Regiment in order to "serve the mother country, Great Britain." Sones spends the rest of his life mentally destroyed, trying to come to terms with this traumatic yet unremembered military mission during which black soldiers "were not allowed to do combat against European soldiers because of their colour." By re-inscribing the Caribbean in the world's social and historical landscape, writers like Phillips, D'Aguiar, and Brand, to name just a few, help to save the Caribbean from the temptation of cultural

---

22 Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, 87. Interestingly, the image of the soldier from the West Indies fighting for the mother country is also present in Phillips's *Foreigners*. Turpin's father, born in then British Guiana, is said "to have been sent out with the British Expeditionary Forces to the Western Front where he fought numerous campaigns, including the legendary Battle of the Somme" (89). In the third section of the book, devoted to the Nigeria-born David Oluwale, Phillips repeatedly evokes the history of Leeds, and mentions that "Despite the fact that over 2,000 Jews volunteered for service during the First World War, Jews continued to be regarded as 'foreigners'" (213).
isolationism and fulfill the role that Earl Lovelace assigns to artists: i.e. as "catalysts and agents in regional integration, [who] must help to make us see the region not only as a place but also as people who share the same history of resistance in slavery," whatever form this slavery may have taken.

The past is not the only front for the displaced Caribbean writer-cum-warrior. The present or near-present of his or her native society is also a significant fighting zone. Phillips, for one, has expressed, in his early fiction as well as in his essays, his misgivings about the way twentieth-century Caribbean societies function. Though not as cynical as V.S. Naipaul or Jamaica Kincaid in her book-length essay *A Small Place*, Phillips has nonetheless managed in his writings to convey the parochialism, philistinism, and neocolonialism that still threaten Caribbean societies today and may be the major obstacles to a successful future. He suggests as much in his own review of Kincaid's scathing assessment of her native Antigua:

Kincaid's pessimism reflects the changing Caribbean, a small but increasingly complex part of the world, burdened with cable television, Japanese cars, the evils of American materialistic splendour and [referring to what happened in Grenada] now veterans of an actual American invasion. This new Caribbean stands at a political and moral crossroads, and Kincaid is a witness to what is happening in our West Indian backyards. And I trust her.

This is not meant to suggest that such a critical stance cannot be achieved by artists still based in the Caribbean. Earl Lovelace himself provides an example to the contrary in a piece significantly entitled "At War with the System," where he encourages his "Brothers and Sisters" to take up arms against the exploitative economic system, inherited from the past, which still causes "corruption, [...] waste and inefficiency" in the present. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that the "stereoscopic vision" developed by the writers who live outside their native Caribbean, and who therefore at once belong and do not belong to the

---

26 Lovelace, "At War with the System," 126.
region,\textsuperscript{28} can be of much help in the process of self-questioning that is particularly required in times of crisis, as two concrete examples from Phillips's own critical 'campaign' will suffice to illustrate. The first one comes from an article published in 1989 where the author takes stock of his experience of writing in the Caribbean. Questioning the values of a society more interested in calypso and cricket than literature, he acknowledges the "often stifling socio-cultural climate of the modern-day Caribbean,"\textsuperscript{29} but sees some hope in the potentially invigorating role that could be played by Caribbean writers resident in Canada, Britain, or the USA. Another instance of the ability of diasporic writers to diagnose and analyse the ills that affect their region of origin is Phillips's second novel, \textit{A State of Independence}. Through the story of one returnee, Bertram Francis, it questions the very notion of independence for Caribbean states and, as Elena Machado Sáez points out, "privileges the Caribbean as a space wherein the effects of history and global commerce have most concretely formed a challenge to cultural production and identity,"\textsuperscript{30} by focusing notably on American imperialism. Machado Sáez's careful analysis of this novel centres on Phillips's use of heterosexual relationships as a metaphor that not only problematizes the notion of independence, but also, more importantly for our purpose here, "the relationship between the migrant community and the home-nation."\textsuperscript{31} Through his main character, Phillips indeed specifically raises the issue of who is entitled to speak on behalf of the Caribbean, and provides a "fierce critique of the elitism that can arise out of the valuation of migrancy, structuring a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges those who have had the means to travel over those who have not,"\textsuperscript{32} which might, rather ambiguously, be seen as an interrogation of the writer's own mobilization on behalf of the Caribbean.

Besides a retrieval of silenced history and a critical appraisal of contemporary Caribbean life, there is a third area in which Caribbean writers of the diaspora can prove useful to their native societies and act as "Warriors of the Imaginary": by acting as ambassadors of their unique culture and thereby restoring the self-esteem of a region that has all too often been stereotyped and is still in the grip of misrepresentation. In this case, however, the intervention of diasporic

\textsuperscript{28} This phrase echoes the formula Phillips uses several times in the introduction to \textit{A New World Order} – that he is "of, and not of, this place." Phillips, \textit{A New World Order}, 1-6.


writers is not a direct one, for their promotion of the Caribbean as a social laboratory avant la lettre is not directed at the local people, who, for obvious reasons, may not need to be told about their own value systems and their own daily experience of racial plurality. Their target audience in this field is, rather, international, mostly North American and European. What displaced Caribbean writers do get across to them is the world-vision of a place with an early experience of modern cross-cultural plurality which, in the words of the Jamaican Erna Brodber, has "something to teach the world."\(^{33}\)

Let me take Phillips as an example once again. His promotion of the Caribbean as a place of great cultural complexity where, in his words, "there is more than beaches"\(^ {34}\) is mostly visible in the numerous essays he has written about his native society, even though it is also expressed in his editorial project in the late 1990s when he was in charge of the Faber Caribbean Series. The aim of this series was, in his words, to "change people's idea of the Caribbean and show them that there's more to its cultural life than calypso and limbo dancing."\(^ {35}\) Even if the series was stopped after the publication of a few titles, including translations into English of works initially written in Dutch, French, or Spanish, its spirit testifies to the role the writers of the diaspora can play in being spokespersons for their local counterparts whose voices are not heard often and loudly enough at present, mostly because of deficiencies in marketing and cultural policies. However, it is probably in his fiction that Phillips has best managed to pass on the unique philosophy that he inherited from his Caribbean background. For example, his sixth novel, *The Nature of Blood*, taking place in Europe and Israel and with no visible Caribbean connection, is based on a labyrinthine metaphor which, as I have argued elsewhere, could be seen as an echo of the Caribbean so-called racial impurity that steers clear of all idealization.\(^ {36}\)

Clearly, creative literature, with all its inbuilt nuances and ambivalences, is probably the best tool to promote Caribbeanness but also the best weapon to combat the current academic and intellectual appropriation and reification of creolization. Robert Antoni's novel *Carnival*, one extract of which is included in this collection, is a good example of this particular form of resistance. While the book evokes the extravagance and the tolerance attached to Carnival, it simultaneously deconstructs the Utopian exploitation and

---

orthodoxification of this essentially Trinidadian institution. Modelled on Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*, Antoni's narrative follows three Caribbean expatriates belonging to different racial groups who live nomadic, bohemian existences and decide to go back to their home island to attend Carnival. If Carnival indeed lives up to its reputation as an event which gathers people from different backgrounds and, in the words of the novel's idealistic narrator, "could save the world," it is also a celebration whose "mindless, blind energy" is potentially destructive. Far from being only a festival celebrating togetherness and belonging, then, Carnival is shown in Antoni's story as a site of conflict and betrayal where the human and the animal overlap, almost as on a battlefield. The author puts the imaginary promises of creolization, embodied in the street festival, side by side with a society which can also be homophobic and racist, as is made clear in the tragic events at the end of the novel when the three protagonists move to the apparently idyllic Madamas Beach. One is very far here from an idealization of the Caribbean as multicultural paradise. As Antoni himself explains in an interview with Lawrence Scott, "It's infinitely complex. To try and simplify that history, to attempt to make it in any way palatable, especially in the context of fiction, is in my opinion ludicrous and shameful. All we can do is try to be faithful to that complexity."

I have attempted here to answer the question whether the metaphorical war waged by diasporic writers of Caribbean heritage contributed in any way to helping their native societies to cope with the problems of a globalized age. Perhaps this question would best be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, as is done in several of the essays contained in the present book. Or, perhaps, the only thing that one could do in reply to such an interrogation would be to point to the irrelevance of existing "divisions between [...] home and foreign, inside and outside," a conclusion also suggested by Donnell in her examination of neglected Caribbean texts. If anything, one should hope that all writers, Caribbean-based or not, become, through their relentless struggle, models for the next generation of aspiring artists and, even more importantly, convince local authorities that Caribbean literature and its insurrectionary potential need to be taken seriously, or, in the words of Earl Lovelace, need to be able "to find

---

38 Antoni, *Carnival*, 159.
39 *Carnival*, 167.
40 This is reminiscent of Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979; London: Faber & Faber, 1998), where carnival is also described in terms of warriorhood.
a place."43 Then one battle at least will have been won.

WORKS CITED


———. "Roots" (1963), in Brathwaite, Roots, 28-54.

Brand, Dionne. At the Full and Change of the Moon (New York: Grove, 1999).


———. "At War with the System," in Lovelace, Growing in the Dark, 126-28.


43 Lovelace, "A Caribbean Place for the Caribbean Artist," 158.


Scott, Lawrence. "Robert Antoni" (interview), Bomb Magazine 91 (Spring 2005):

Valhodiiia, Jil. "La Guerre doit être menée sur le terrain de l'imaginaire" (interview with Patrick Chamoiseau), Les Périphériques vous parlent 10 (Spring 1998):