Melanie A. Murray, *Island Paradise: The Myth* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 226 pp.

Reviewed by **Enrica Picarelli**

In Derek Walcott's poem "Names" (*Collected Poems*, 1986, 307) the narrator witnesses the genesis of the Caribbean archipelago as it is linguistically appropriated by European colonizers.

> Listen, my children say:
> *moubain:* the hogplum,
> *cerise:* the wild cherry,
> *baie-la:* the bay,
> with the fresh green voices
> they were once themselves
> in the way the wind bends
> our natural inflections.

Recalling how the history and culture of the Caribbean originated in the mutual relationship between sea and land established by willful seafarers, Walcott invites the reader to embark on a journey through an uncharted territory spreading over an elusive horizon. In this epiphanic moment, the deceptiveness of the geo-pelagic chronotope prevents the compass from drawing a map and naming the seascape, delivering in its place an experience of unmediated intimacy that the grammar of conquest reproduces but never fully masters. The constitutive untraceability of this floating origin informs Walcott's depiction of a race that "began as the sea began/with no nouns and no horizon ... with a different fix on the stars" (ibid., 305) while the articulation of naming, renaming and remembering voiced by the poem's characters exposes the discursive nature of colonialism. An element of amnesia and symbolic appropriation, as well as the hint of a different cartography governed by the unmeasurable absolutes of Ocean and Universe animates Walcott's picture of the Caribbean. It turns the archipelago into a metonym of the British empire, founded and managed through uprootedness, dispossession and creolization.

Although Walcott is only briefly mentioned in Melanie Murray's *Island Paradise: The Myth*, the idea of a mobile history where culture and identity are born at sea surfaces in the volume. The diasporic experiences of Jamaica Kincaid, Lawrence Scott, Romesh Gunesekera and Jane Arasanayagam inform her exploration of island representations of these four contemporary authors from the former British colonies of the Caribbean and Sri Lanka.

Murray's aim is to provide a "study of identity in island space" (192) through the motifs of the garden and the house as they become symbols of colonial power and "new metaphors for the imagination" (197). Research carried out by Diane Loxley, J. Michael Dash e Dorothy Lane provide the background for Murray's ecocritical reading of tropical nature as it affects and is affected by historical and social processes of appropriation. Instead, Avtar Brah's studies on diaspora and Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity introduce issues of migration and cross-cultural relation.

An introductory overview precedes three case studies distributed in four thematic and monographic chapters. These relate to the novels of Kincaid, born in Antigua and living in Vermont; Scott, a Trinidadian of European descent based in London; Gunesekera, who left Sri Lanka for England, and Arasanayagam, a Sri Lankan artist who chose to stay in her native land despite a civil war and her position as a Dutch Burger married to a Tamil. Intertwining analyses of the entrenched notion of islands as paradise with reflections on the personal experiences of migration of the authors, Murray examines the relationship between landscape and identity in terms of unsettlement and inauthenticity.

The book is a meditation on impermanence as it emerges in the writers' relations with a shape-shifting nature spanning the Sri Lankan jungle, the coastal and maritime environment of the Caribbean archipelago, the sheltered ecology of a greenhouse in Vermont and the alpine landscapes of China and Nepal. Murray focuses on the negotiation of a "multilocational" sense of self (95) in the face of colonial and Western concepts of tropical islands which privilege European authenticity and purity.

Among the defining features of insularity the author highlights the tension between confinement and limitlessness that colonial imagination has associated with island space and nature, a tension that hunts postcolonial subjects away from their native lands. Resisting the idea of islands as depopulated utopias emerging in the middle of nowhere, between past and future, primitivism and progress, Kincaid, Scott, Gunesekera and Arasanayagam unveil the fabricated nature of aestheticized notions of authenticity. They expose the authentic as a fictional construct resisted through literary attempts that acknowledge how "'paradise' pleasure and privilege depend on the labour ... of someone else" (90). For example, Kincaid's essay *A Small Place* (1988), analyzed in chapter two, dismantles the myth of the passive tropics to make room for a problematic reading of nature as a space where different material and 'psychic' dimensions come together. Kincaid refuses the assumptions of an edenic Antigua in favor of an approach to nature that "links colonialism, slavery, and contemporary multinational capital" (82). At the same time as she denounces the neocolonialism of international tourism, her writing returns to the place of her birth, presenting a double perspective that entangles the colonial

experience of her childhood and the present neocolonial situation of the island to negotiate "the straddling [of] two cultures" (81). According to Murray, Kincaid's gardening in Vermont reflects a diasporic experience that emerges through the creation of a different relationship between human culture and the material world of nature. In her North American garden Kincaid plants seeds collected all over the world as a strategy to assert a mobile identity and to reflect on the power relations that inform dominant fantasies of paradisal islands.

Informing the monographic chapters is Murray's overview of European representations of islands which shows how the colonial idea of 'Englishness' was established in relation to the exploitation of nature and culture in the Caribbean and Sri Lanka. The author argues that during the colonial period the landscapes and seascapes of the Caribbean and Sri Lanka were subject to the romanticized approaches that Western culture reserved to imaginary places. Like the fabled *Antillia* of Portuguese legend or the paradisal kingdom of Prester John mentioned by Sir John Mandeville and Marco Polo, the Caribbean and Sri Lanka appear in the colonial imagination as remote, virgin and ahistorical blank spaces open to exploitation. Such representations of islands as passive *terrae nullius* awaiting "discovery" still informs a Eurocentric view of the world, combining fact and fiction to offer an epistemological paradigm that justifies domination.

In a passage evocative of Edward Said's critique of colonial representations, Murray notes that the myth of the island paradise is based on the consolidation of a system of power-knowledge that incorporates the motifs of the sea voyage, the shipwreck and the encounter with "savages" to motivate strategies of land management and social control. The treatment of Robinsonades (the literary genre inspired by Daniel DeFoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*) as "truth discourses" (xvii) in English school syllabi in the nineteenth century reveals how the ideological codes of "progress, economics and 'improvement'" (20) expressed by DeFoe framed imperial culture, imbuing the imagination of colonized subjects with notions of local inferiority and inadequateness. Such literary works normalized the discursive construction of far away lands as detached havens where the enterprising European male proved his worth by taming the (human and natural) wilderness. They also posed the islands in a dialectical relationship with Europe as they became "shadows" of England, subject to the superior maritime, military and agrarian technology of the colonizers. Although Murray does not refer to them, it could be added that the multiplication of cultural representations inspired by the mythology of fantasy islands in U.S. media, as exemplified by the TV series *Lost* (ABC 2004 – 2010), the reality show *Survivor* (CBS 2000 – present), and Robert Zemeckis' movie *Cast Away* (2000), testify to the entrenched nature of the

trope of the entrepreneurial Western self struggling to prevail over an anonymous yet threatening island wilderness.

The trope of appropriation and botanical management of unknown territories recurs in *Island Paradise: the Myth*, placing the lush vegetation of Sri Lanka and the Caribbean in opposition to the disciplined fields and gardens of the metropole and making it instrumental to discourses of colonial authority. The focus on control helps Murray to explore how the utopias associated with tropical islands relied on spatial coordinates based on the dichotomy between garden and jungle, especially evident in the British interventions on Sri Lankan landscape, that betrayed a panoptical and all-encompassing approach to unknown space. These oppositions resurface in Kincaid, Scott, Gunesekera and Arasanayagam's depictions of nature, communicating contrasting feelings of security and confinement. With reference to Scott and Arasanayagam's works, Murray writes that such binarisms return as a reflection on the centralizing and ideological bias of colonial geography where home and elsewhere become synonyms of presence and absence/lack.

This analysis suggests that such cognitive mapping informed a uniform reading of islands as ideological and social templates, a point made by all those postcolonial and eco- critics who have stressed the universality of colonial representations. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007, 9) has written, the "discourse of islands repeated itself rhizomatically, along a westward trajectory". Regarding islands as edenic realms, the hierarchical gaze places them outside time and space as anonymous backdrops that the West encounters *in medias res* on its march towards self-fulfillment. It is the universal "system of 'islandism'" (ibid., 10) created by the thrust of European expansion that allows Murray to bring together the Caribbean archipelago and the island of Sri Lanka under a coherent analytical framework, regardless of their differences.

Island Paradise: the Myth detects a continuity in the erratic trajectory of the contemporary writers' lives, linked to their shared need to engage with tropical nature and architecture to re-imagine their experience of displacement. Their writings bring together the northern and southern hemispheres, metropolitan and indigenous cultures in a movement that has no fixed trajectory, crossing borders between traditions and cultures to create what Murray defines a "syncretic whole" (185). Referring to Gunesekera's novel *Reef* (1994), Murray argues that the author's search for origins is frustrated by an experience of displacement that locates home in writing: the creative act foregrounds routes in place of roots. She writes: "Gunesekera claims that his work places emphasis on people and not on place; hence, 'home' is created in the language through imagination" (101). This author's migration, like that experienced by Kincaid, Scott and Arasanayagam, the latter forced to relocate in a refugee camp during the

anti-Tamil riots in 1983, follows a fractal pattern that de-centers the linear trajectories of Western cartography. Scott's novel *Witchbroom* (1992), for instance, that makes use of magical realism to review the European colonization of the Caribbean, incorporates childhood recollections, fantasies, nightmares and the imaginary tales of colonial education to map the unforeseeable pauses, jolts and interruptions of memory and time. In this novel the longitudinal and latitudinal rules of colonial maps are overturned by a re-visioning that speaks of an illusory sense of place. This argument returns in Arasanayagam's experience whose decision to reside in Sri Lanka does not prevent her from feeling alienated in her own motherland. The tension between homing and dispersal expressed in her novels and poetry inspires the "search for the 'innocent' garden of ... colonial childhood" (195) that she invokes as a sanctuary of peace in torn Sri Lanka. By acknowledging the fictional nature of this imaginary place, Arasanayagam voices a need to establish a sense of place where no stability is guaranteed. Her experience of marginalization and retreat into fantasy and hopes articulates the ambiguous nature of islands as both a troubled space and a safe haven, concurring to give birth to the imaginary homelands of diasporic subjects.

Focusing on the "double relation" that the writers entertain with the locations they have chosen as home, Murray thus establishes an implicit dialogue with Walcott's narrator in "Names" whose invocation of water and remote constellations symbolizes the impossible task of looking for the origins of peoples whose "history folds over a fishline". By focusing instead on the creative act of imagination and on the subversive power of representation, *Island Paradise: The Myth* traces a rhyzomatic cartography that sets the regenerative power of tidal movement against the centralizing and pre-determined paradigms that govern terrestrial geography. Its value lies in providing an interesting point of view to analyze how nature informs culture and to what extent they interact to give life to the diasporic experiences of contemporary authors from Sri Lanka and the Caribbean.