

Donne Decolonized: The Sinking of the Island of Conviviality into the Mare Tenebrosus

1 Islands and Humans between the I and the We

“No man is an island” says the famous phrase from “Meditation XVII” of the 1623 *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, and severall steps in my Sickness* by the metaphysical poet and Anglican dean of St. Paul’s, John Donne. It can be found on postcards, in collections of aphorisms, song texts, and many other forms of popular reutilization.¹ Apparently, Ernest Hemingway’s novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) is responsible for the meditation’s contemporary fame, which Gillian Beer calls “an extreme example of reading old texts into new history.” (Beer 1989: 6)² The idiosyncrasy of the meditation’s spatiality lies in the tension between the negation of an isolated island as self-sufficient solitude and the affirmation of a continuous identification with humanity as a continent.

Arguably, the meditation’s *imaginative geography* (cf. Said 2003: 49–73) has undergone a substantial change in order to address a variety of twenty-first century social and ecocritical challenges in contemporary Caribbean literatures. Some of the most interesting and decolonizing appropriations of Donne’s lines address disputed manners of conviviality between the I and the We, between self-relation and interdependence, between the private and the communal, between isolation and interconnection, between competition and coop-

1 “[A] text most of us know, at least in part, not so much from its source, [...] but probably from Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (the movie version of which stars Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman), or [...] from the countless novels, TV shows, greeting cards, and newspaper articles, in which the phrases ‘no man is an island’, and ‘for whom the bell tolls’ are regularly recycled with portentous urgency.” (Perloff 1994: 1)

2 As Hemingway’s novel is situated in the Spanish civil war, there is no explicit intertextual link to the form and imagery of the meditation. However, central to the novel are the actions and relations between individuals and parties within the developing trenches that divide the country and the planet between communist and fascist totalitarianisms.

eration; these appropriations hint towards the idea that the island and man(kind) have undergone a *translatio/n* (Italiano/Rössner 2012: 9–12)³ allowing for “a cliché” to retain “the capacity to reawaken as insight, perhaps as warning.” (Beer 1997: 47) This article follows contemporary Caribbean rewritings in their reconstitutions of the island(s) not as an allegory of an impossible isolation of the self but as a literary place that is home to a creolizing postcolonial society struggling to live together as one island nation or community within a globalizing world.

As the subtitle of my paper suggests, the *Mare Tenebrosum*, one of the obstacles that was speculated to impede the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean since the mythical drowning of Atlantis⁴, points towards a tradition of failing and thus (literally or literarily) drowning island communities. The question of the island status is thus closely related to questions about the establishment, preservation and dissemination of *conviviality*⁵. It does not regard peaceful conviviality between humans exclusively: Some of the texts facilitate an understanding of conviviality that goes beyond anthropocentric limitations. Therefore, this paper does not revolve around cultural identity construction via the island trope but focuses on the sinking or disappearing of islands which force their failing societies to leave. The texts in question produce several different forms of drowning, and the allegorical or metaphorical islands turn into fic-

3 “[T]he development of post-structuralist thinking and post-colonial theory have helped to recognize that translation is no substitution at all [...], but a process of negotiation and re-negotiation between two contexts which cannot remain without consequences for both contexts, too.” (Italiano/Rössner 2012: 10) “[C]ultural interaction and cultural practice of communication as the performative negotiation of differences between identity constructions [...] is what we call cultural translation or *translatio/n*.” (Italiano/Rössner 2012: 12)

4 O’Gorman refers to the Medieval belief that the earth-island had additional archipelagoes to the East, including Cipango, and to the West, including Atlantis (1993: 67–70). Apparently, the belief that the Atlantic was a dark sea and thus part of the uninhabitable and even inaccessible part of the planet was dominant until crossings became institutionalized (after Columbus’ first voyage). Cf. Alexander von Humboldt and Ernst Friedrich Apelt who both refer to Arabic geographers and the dictum “[...] *mare tenebrosum* [...] *ultra quod nemo scit quid contineatur* [...]” (Humboldt 2011: 227; Apelt 1845: 158). To be precise, the Arabic name for “The Sea of Darkness” is “*Bahr-al-Zulma*” or “*al-Zulamat*” (mer de l’obscurité) (Simar 1912: 77). Dust winds might be a possible explanation for the claimed obscurity and density of the sea: “Das Meer westlich von Marokko hieß im Altertum *Mare tenebrosum*. Zwischen 1551–1855 sind 127 Staubfalljahre festzustellen.” (Passarge 1929: 302)

5 Alexander Langer’s comes to the conclusion that the most peaceful form of conviviality is possible in mixed groups without ethnic markers (cf. Langer 1995). Paul Gilroy wants “to make it as easy for people to imagine a world without racial differences as it is for them currently to imagine the end of the world.” (Gilroy 2004: 167)

tional island spaces with very real geomorphological and biospheric problems of erosion and extinction. At the same time, the generic island will turn into decidedly specific islands.

In order to show this change it is therefore necessary to take a short look at Donne's "Meditation XVII" and discuss its spatial conceptualization. Only then, sites of postcolonial intertextuality can be investigated in order to discuss the forms and consequences of this religious text's appropriation.

2 "No man is an Iland"

No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of thy *friends* or of *thine own* were; Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*. (Donne in Mueller 2015: 299)⁶

John Donne's "Meditation XVII" negates the idea of a completely detached singular identity conception with reference to every individual's partaking in the human ecumene⁷. The meditation uses the island as a negative contrast to the *continens*, a continuity called humanity in global interconnectedness, where the bell never tolls for an anonymous dead person but always for me and you as well. Identity in the sense of a "sameness of essential [...] character" (Merriam-Webster) between all human beings is thereby a quality of the continent, and life on earth is convivial, everyone partakes in it.

While Jonathan Scott argues – in opposition to Brendan Simms' geopolitical reading – that "Donne, while using geographic language, was not talking about geography," (Scott 2011: 11) the spatial constitution of this text that makes "use of Metaphysical mode and Senecan style" (Raspa 1987: xxii) can be read in line with ancient and medieval imaginations of an earth where the inhabitable part (*orbis terrarium*) is restricted by an uninhabitable *orbis alterius* (cf. O'Gorman 1993: 67–70). The breaking away from the continent and the

6 "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were, any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." (Donne 1839: 575)

7 Donne's meditation seems to take a strong stance for an inclusive ecumene that comprehends all human beings. Arguably, it is informed by the ancient Greek concept of *oikouménē*, the inhabitable part of the world, and by the cartographic vision of a *mappa mundi*, a medieval map of the world.

movement into the *orbis alterius* envisions an end of sameness, a fundamental change, a loss to be mourned. In other words, “Meditation XVII” conceptualizes the island as an impossible process of complete self-sufficient insulation, only reachable via death because no living man is as clearly delineated and distinct, both isolating and insulating as Donne imagines the lithoclastic detritus from the continent. His islands are thus *transareal* movements towards death by drowning.⁸

3 “Poetry is an Island”

One of the most visible adaptations of John Donne’s famous line from “Meditation XVII” can be found in Derek Walcott’s 1992 Nobel Prize lecture “Fragments of Epic Memory” where he asserts that “Poetry is an island that breaks away from the main.”⁹ When reading Walcott’s suggestion in context, one can assume an equation of the main with the institutions of language and knowledge handling – academia – he mentions right before¹⁰. On a topological level, the rupture and the distancing movement of the self-marginalizing subject in its diminishing relation to the center are important qualities. Here, the island as in-between, as watery land off the coast of the common has also a decisively engaged quality of resistance inscribed into its trajectory, into its breaking away. Furthermore and contrary to Donne’s topology, Walcott certainly does not allude to poetry as an impossible or dying form, nor, for that matter, to islands as lonely places of death.

Consequently, if poetry is an island, the qualities of this island are neither negative *insularity* nor what I like to call *Insularism*, a knowledge production that promotes a stereotypical and institutionally reinforced island-construction as prone alterity from an exoticist point of view.¹¹ On the contrary, Walcott’s

8 Ottmar Ette defines islands as crossroads of transareal movements that accumulate and register movements (cf. Ette 2005: 148), yet this case is more complex as the islands’ movement crosses areas, spheres, and realities.

9 “Poetry is an island that breaks away from the main. The dialects of my archipelago seem as fresh to me as those raindrops on the statue’s forehead, not the sweat made from the classic exertion of frowning marble, but the condensations of a refreshing element, rain and salt.” (Walcott 1993: 196)

10 “There is the buried language and there is the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one of excavation and of self-discovery. Tonally the individual voice is a dialect; it shapes its own accent, its own vocabulary and melody in defiance of an imperial concept of language, the language of Ozymandias, libraries and dictionaries, law courts and critics, and churches, universities, political dogma, the diction of institutions.” (Walcott 1993: 196)

writing of the island is a poetic endeavor *against Insularism*. In ‘Isla Incognita’ (written 1973 and published in 2005) Walcott circles cautiously around the question “Quales est natura insulae?” (Walcott 2005: 52) and proposes that the island has to be unburdened of stereotypical reduction “if it is to be rediscovered.” (Walcott 2005: 51) While an ironic apology to the colonially schooled gaze for the exuberance and overflow of tropical fauna sets the tone, his highly subversive renunciation of island exotism starts with a plea to erase the topos in order to rediscover the place: “Erase everything, even the name of this island, if it is to be rediscovered. It is the only way to begin.” (Walcott 2005: 51)

4 The Island from a Nissological Perspective

This plea for erasure implies a deconstructionist and a *nissological* agenda (of studying “islands on their own terms”)¹² which in turn leads to a critique of both the visualization of a clearly delimited terrestrial entity – be it blank, desert, or crowded (with intertexts) – and the creative reinterpretation of the sound /ar/ as a first person pronoun: They both discard the island’s etymological “roots in ea, a proto-Indo-European word for river, thus representing water” (Royle 2007: 33) and its “particular and intense relationship of land and water.” (Beer 1990: 271)¹³ Such a foregrounding of a glocal *negotiation of difference* between *land and sea* and *roots and routes* exposes the one-sidedness of the land centered perspective.¹⁴ The clearly defined distinctiveness, discreteness, and alterity of a land isolated from all other lands by means of the sea turns out to

11 The term arises from combining Pedreira’s aforementioned pejorative *Insularismo* with Edward Said’s critique of *Orientalism*.

12 “Following Christian Depraetere [...], McCall called this bold, islands-driven focus *Nissology* (after νησί – [*nisi*] the Greek word for island). Its key mandate: sharing, advancing, and challenging existing theorization on islands and island studies; while avoiding, delimiting, or debunking false or partial interpretations of the island condition.” (Baldacchino 2007: 16)

13 Ea is to be found in “the Old Norse word for island [...] ey (modern Danish has ø).” (Royle 2007: 33) “The concept ‘island’ implies a particular and intense relationship of land and water. The [...] word itself includes the two elements: ‘island’ is a kind of pun. ‘Isle’ in its earliest forms derived from a word for water and meant, ‘watery’ or ‘watered’. In Old English ‘land’ was added to it to make a compound: ‘is-land’: water-surrounded land. The idea of water is thus intrinsic to the word, as essential as that of earth. The two elements, earth and water, are set in play. An intimate, tactile, and complete relationship is implied between them in this ordering of forces.” (Beer 1990: 271)

14 The term arises from combining Pedreira’s aforementioned pejorative *Insularismo* with Edward Said’s critique of *Orientalism*.

be imprecise and partial as there exists no clear delineation of the island because one of its constitutive elements – water – allows for no such limit but forces us to perceive the island as a negotiation between isolation *and* relation.

Nevertheless, erosion and drowning of land are actual problems for low-lying islands and coastlines. The struggle of small sea-shore and island communities to remain above the water line becomes patently visible in Lucian Segura’s film *1.5 Stay Alive* (2015). The documentary tries to raise awareness for the grave impact of climate change on the Caribbean (particularly due to ocean temperature and sea level rise) and stresses that remaining below a 1.5 °C global average temperature rise would give the Caribbean marine environment and coastal cultures a 50% chance to survive. A global average temperature of 1.5 °C above preindustrial levels lies, however, 0.5 °C below the 2 °C agreed upon by the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancun 2010 (cf. [United Nations 2011: 3](#)).

Arguably, the endangered literary islands discussed in the following build upon island(s) in the archipelago as used in Caribbean cultural theory and literatures, the ecological and political problems experienced on the shores of the Caribbean Sea, and the island as a recurrent *pars pro toto* of the endangered planet.¹⁵ Their drowning points towards the endangerment of our global habitat and towards the (current) incapability of the industrialized nations to change from an anthropocentric and hyper-capitalist culture of extraction to a peaceful practice of biocentric conviviality and renewal.¹⁶ Thus, the sinking of these islands concerns local and foreign readers alike.

¹⁵ Richard Grove underscores that “during the fifteenth century the task of locating Eden and re-evaluating nature had already begun to be served by the appropriation of the newly discovered and colonized tropical islands as paradises” and shows that the rapid destruction of these Caribbean islands due to sugar monocultures led to “local attempts [...] to try to prevent excessive soil erosion in the wake of clearance for plantations.” (Grove 1995: 5) Within this re-evaluation of paradise as paradise lost “[...] the island easily became, in practical environmental as well as mental terms, an easily conceived allegory of a whole world. Contemporary observations of the ecological demise of islands were easily converted into premonitions of environmental destruction on a more global scale.” (1995: 8–9)

¹⁶ Cf. Naomi Klein 2014: 64–95 for the question of “Capitalism vs the Climate” and for a way of changing the course from extraction towards renewal cf. Klein 2014: 419–466.

5 Island(s) in the Archipelago

Furthermore, tropical islands – and especially the individual home-island in its connection to the archipelago and the earth – have repeatedly been used in Caribbean cultural theory to characterize philosophical, social, cultural, and political aspects of the relation between the local and the global (cf. [Graziadei 2011b: 274–281, 2016: 238–248](#)). The layered and paradox qualities of island spatialities and icons allow for widespread metaphorical and allegorical usages. While Antonio Salvador Pedreira’s negative assessment of Puerto Rico’s *Insularismo* (1934) perpetuates a denigrating racist, misogynist, and imperialist perspective on the Antilles that blames tropical island climes and creolization for weakening the population’s potential to become an aggressive and competitive nation,¹⁷ Lezama Lima’s delineation of a *teleología insular*¹⁸ – to be found in his 1937 Colloquium with Juan Ramón Jiménez – allows for positive island hopping and island hoping¹⁹. Especially affirmative decolonizing visions of islands in the archipelago can be found in Antonio Benítez Rojo’s theoretical work – which focuses on postmodern transcultural repetitions of the island(s) within the Caribbean *meta-archipelago*²⁰ – and in Édouard Glissant’s whole oeuvre, which opens from the Antillean condition to the *All-World (Tout-Monde)* in creolization and relation²¹. While these theories also include the second defining element of islands and archipelagoes, namely water, Kamau Brathwaite’s

17 For a positive evaluation and a resume of the different parts of *Insularismo* cf. López-Baralt 2011: 55–62. More critical positions on the determinism, racism, misogyny, as well as the bellicose, bourgeois and superficially hispanophile perspective inherent in Pedreira’s answer to the question “¿cómo somos? o [...] ¿qué somos? los puertorriqueños globalmente considerados.” (Pedreira 1979: 1–2) Cf. Flores 1979: 43–45 and San Miguel 1997: 42.

18 Here, the geographical island is put aside and the island as a problem of cultural history and sentimentalism comes to the fore. The theoretical and poetical advancement of this island teleology seems to be guided by a mythical, epic, transgressing, and communal pretension (cf. González Cruz 2004: LXVIII).

19 For island hopping and island hoping cf. Depraetere/Dahl 2007: 84–94.

20 “The Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity. It is, in the final analysis, a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feed-back machine with asymmetrical workings, like the sea, the wind, the clouds, the uncanny novel, the food chain, the music of Malaya, Gödel’s theorem and fractal mathematics. [...] Let’s say good-bye to Hellas, applauding the idea of a forgotten sage, Thales of Miletus: water is the beginning of all things.” (Benítez Rojo 1997: 11)

21 From his first important book on the Caribbean, *Le discours antillais* (from 1981 into the early 1990s), right through the rather globalized and expanding *Tout-Monde* phase

anti-dialectic marine *alter/native tidalectics* as delineated in “Caribbean Culture – Two Paradigms” and his *conVersations with Nathaniel Mackey*²² move further towards defining (Afro-)Caribbean culture as aquatic. Apart from Pedreira’s *Insularismo*, all the mentioned theories construct a strongly positive and emancipated view of the Caribbean, of archipelagoes, and islands in the sea. They are engaged in the project of writing a different earth, in constructing a decolonizing, anti-imperial geography where the geopoetical forces – earthquake, tsunami, volcano eruption, and hurricane – are destructive yet creative potencies (cf. Maximin 2006).²³ These critiques of a discourse centered on continents and large cold water islands with an imperial history propagate a *sea of islands* situated within an *oceanic world* (Epeli Ha’oufa)²⁴, a global community based on marine and geological continuity; they form the philosophical background of contemporary Caribbean literary island production.

6 The Total(itarian) Destruction of an Island(-society)

In his aforementioned Nobel Prize Lecture, Walcott compares the performance of the Hindu Epic *Ramayana* in the Trinidadian village Felicity to another Asia Minor Epic, “the *Odyssey* [...], presuming that the audience knew the trials of Odysseus, [...] while nobody in Trinidad knew any more than I did about Rama,

(around 1997) and the final *Philosophie de la relation* phase (around 2009), a constant negotiation between the local visibility of traces of global movements and relations are central to Glissant’s work, which includes philosophical treaties, novels, short stories, and poems.

²² Poet and scholar Kamau Brathwaite is responsible for both *alter/native* and *tidalectic*. Brathwaite constructs the first neologism via a dividing slash in order to highlight that the term for choice between different things or views encloses also native alterity. It points towards the existence of a local alternative that opposes the colonial or imperial dictate. Brathwaite’s second neologism replaces the prefix *dia-* with *tidal-* and thus completely shifts the focus from reasoning and coming to an understanding via dialogue towards a tidal and thus maritime communication. In “Caribbean Culture – Two Paradigms” he writes that “tidal dialectic(s) or tidalectics [are] our native version (less optimistic, perhaps) of Eurodialectics.” (Brathwaite 1983: 54) *Tidalectics* seems to share with Homi K. Bhabha’s *negotiation* the vision of “a temporality that makes it possible to conceive of the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements: a dialectic without the emergence of a teleological or transcendent History” in which “hybrid sites and objectives of struggle” are made accessible (Bhabha 2008: 37).

²³ For a discussion of various takes on geopoetics (of the island) cf. Graziadei 2011a.

²⁴ The planet earth, one could say while paraphrasing Hau’ofa, is mostly covered with water, and maritime thinking is of utmost importance to the biped whose body contains more than fifty percent water.

Kali, Shiva, Vishnu, apart from the Indians [...].” (Walcott 1993: 192) This highly polemical “apart from the Indians” highlights the failing of cross-ethnic conviviality and interchange. This segregation bears a risk that Trinidad-born and British-based writer Lakshmi Persaud illustrates with the sinking of an artificial (and fictitious) island.

Her novel *For the Love of My Name* (2000) is situated on a fictionalized version of Guyana under Forbes Burnam’s autocratic rule (from 1964 to 1985): an artificial island by the name of Maya²⁵. According to different voices in the novel Maya had been created via dam building during the era of Dutch colonization and had been sustained under British rule via the investment of a considerable part of the sugar income in dam maintenance. Central to the stability of its physical is its social geography: Only within a viable conviviality of the Forest, Country, and Urban Mayans (that is the Taino-, the Indo-, and the Afro-Caribbean part of this multi-ethnic post-colonial society), the soils and dams are tended and survive the onslaught of the sea. As the social balance between the various groups vanishes under racist and revengeful Afro-Caribbean post-colonial totalitarianism, the dams break. From the beginning of the novel, all we are left with are repeated descriptions of the drowning of the island:

There are religious, mystic, tectonic and economic explanations as to why the island of Maya sank. And though I was there and did feel a pending catastrophe, I offer a rational reason and leave viewers to make up their own minds: [...] There was no Noah’s ark. [...] The surrounding ocean opened its gigantic mouth and from reports given by passing aircraft, within six hours the island of Maya was swallowed. (Persaud 2000: 16)

Contrary to the certainty about the drowning of the island, textual uncertainty regarding the reasons for the sinking of the island is upheld throughout the novel. Cultural explanations are listed next to tectonic and ecological reasons; all are figured as processes with a potential impact on the physical world of the text, all are suspected to have the power to sink an island. The island of Maya exists only in embedded narratives, as narrative flashbacks in different media: in oral narratives, in a documentary film that is screened in a museum dedicated to the drowned island, and in the accompanying brochure (cited above). In fact, in the first chapter a first person narrator who is interested in the lost culture and the cult of Masks on the submerged island visits “The Library of Mys-

²⁵ One possible reference of this toponym is the concept of *MĀYĀ* which “is central to understanding Hindu mythology. The concept of *māyā* provides the supporting structure both for the magical effectiveness of the austerities and powers of Hindu mythology and for a fundamental rejection of any worldview that involved taking such illusions seriously.” (Williams 2008: 214)

teries” (Persaud 2000: 11), marvels at the masks, photographs, and dresses, reads two “Poems of Remembrance” (Persaud 2000: 13–14), and finally reaches a room where the screening of a scientific documentary about “The Purple Masked Mayans” takes place. The following forty-eight-and-a-half chapters supposedly consist of a transmedial narration of this documentary²⁶. The story of the sinking of the colonial island construction Maya due to the post-colonial racism and totalitarianism of a regime of masques allows the highlighting of the problematic suppression of ethnic, cultural, historical, and political differences during the process of decolonization that took place under the rule of Afro-Caribbean pan-Caribbeanism²⁷. While Maya survives either on the movie screen and in the artifacts of a museum (or in the words and on the pages of this novel), the insular society dies and only parts of it survive via relocation and as permanent *ex-isles* adapting to the “loss of the particular” (Bongie 1998: 18) in different migration hubs, potentially forming diaspora communities²⁸.

7 Drowning Island(er)s via Emigration

Emigration from a (sinking) island to anywhere else is equally important for the spatiality of Amir Valle’s *Santuario de Sombras* (2006). This detective novel focuses on the different possibilities, means, and hazards of illicit mobility and starts in a new kind of *mare tenebrosum*: “Mucha mierda. [/] Las aguas infestadas de una mierda que se le metía hasta en la sangre.” (Valle 2006: 11)²⁹ These

26 The documentary ends in a slow cross-fade into the lecture theater thus raising metafictional awareness: “As Marguerite walked homewards, the lights of the lecture theatre came on and I was left with the sea-wall crumbling before the waves.” (Persaud 2000: 338)

27 Both Walcott’s and Naipaul’s Nobel Price lectures highlight this problematic reduction of the ongoing processes of creolization. Naipaul stresses the dichotomy between the physical and epistemological absence of the Amerindians and the presence of indentured Indians. Columbus’ disorientation and misnaming allows for the same term (Indians) to be used for exterminated and forgotten first nations like the Chaguanes tribe, the “rather large aboriginal tribe” of the Warahoons, and the indentured laborers “[...] we Indians, immigrants from India.” (n.p.)

28 The biblical dispersion of the Jewish people is used in extension to name the “scattering of a people from an established or ancestral homeland,” “people settled far from their ancestral homeland,” “the place where these people live” (Merriam Webster) as well as transnational cultural formations and solidarities that arise from this situation. In the case at hand there exists not one people to be scattered, but three ethnical groups. Furthermore, the homeland is irretrievably gone.

29 ‘A lot of shit. The waters infested by shit that meddles even in the blood.’ (Translation D.G.)

excrement infested waters are the very grim and disturbing outcome of glocal dynamics that arise from the tension between an insulating policy and a population with a great desire to leave. The number of people that are shown drowning and dying during their intents of clandestine emigration adds a level of literal corporeal drowning to the intellectual brain drain. The same tension and movement is later reshaped via the allegory of the drowning island in order to express the failure of a viable conviviality within an aging revolution. In a mediatized twist, the erosion of the sociogeographical structure of the island society turns numeric reality within the virtual country of official news and is interpreted as a drowning of the island. “[L]o que indicaba una sola cosa: la isla se hundía, y esas estadísticas [...] se hacían reales en ese país virtual que aparecía en los noticiarios de la tele.” (Velle 2006: 50)³⁰ But this island has an archipelagic structure that includes the whole marine region and especially small tropical islands on the fringes of the international sea that can be read as iconic and consumable in the terms of Mimi Sheller³¹, while at the same time being both physical places on the deadly smuggling routes and spiritualistic, existential, and traumatic formations within a third space of negotiation and pass-over. In the nightmare of a traumatized survivor of a fake smuggling trip in the third introductory part “Asco,” (Valle 2006: 14–15) the island turns into a negative *île déserte* that is drowning in vermicular life-forms which are the effect of an open mass grave.

[...] y ese sueño que le revuelve las entrañas con arqueadas de un asco feroz: caminaría por una isla sin cocoteros ni mangles, todo desierto; se hundiría hasta los tobillos en una masa apestosa de gusanillos blancos que contorsionaban y revientan bajo sus pies hasta formar una nata babosa, como esperma sucia, que se le pega a la piel mientras busca la ruta; caería de cabeza, [...] y su cuerpo se estrellaría contra la esponjosa viscosidad pestilente que yace al fondo de la fosa: torsos y manos y brazos y piernas y cabezas arrancadas y pies y muslos y tripa.. y rostros blancos, como de ángeles muertos, como de fantasmas dormidos. Y siempre los gusanillos blancos... los gusanillos blancos... los gusanillos blancos. (Valle 2006: 15)³²

30 ‘Which indicated only one thing: the island was drowning, and these statistics turned real in this virtual land that appeared in the TV news.’ (Translation D.G.)

31 “The familiar sun-sea-and-sand imagery used in Caribbean tourism promotion may seem like an endlessly repeated cliché that hardly requires any further analysis [...], a more generic, global, and empty signifier of ‘the tropical island’ could hardly be imagined.” (Sheller 2003: 36) According to Sheller, this icon is a central marker of the “consumption of the ecological environment of the Caribbean in the widest sense and its reinvention as a ‘nature’ and ‘landscape’ for Northern Atlantic inhabitants’ pleasure and use.” (Sheller 2003: 36)

The living mass of white worms unites – again – the corporeal with the metaphorical in the form of the anti-imperial rhetoric of the Cuban government.³³ The metaphorical and virtual drowning of Cuba due to massive emigration allows for the actual drowning of emigrants, killed by highly mobile and bipartisan smugglers on the fringes of international waters. Body fluids and bodies cloud the waters and submerge pristine islands under the buzzing life of decomposition. In the nightmare of the survivor, great care is taken to specify that there are neither iconic coconut palms nor the rich ecosphere of the less photogenic mangrove forests on this desert island covered by a mass of pestilent worms and body parts. There is a deserted beach, the most “stereotypical image in countless variations,” (Courtman 2004: xviii)³⁴ but in at least one highly traumatic real situation such a transient zone is also covered with dead human bodies, some landed, some floating.³⁵ As it is typical for the plots of detective novels, only belated elucidation is offered. But the intelligence shows nonetheless

32 ‘and that dream that revolts the guts with arches of fierce revulsion: he would be walking over an island without coconut palms nor mangroves, all desert; sinking ankle-deep into a reeking mass of little white worms that twitch and burst underneath his feet until forming a slimy cream, like dirty sperm, that sticks itself to the skin while searching the route: he would fall headlong, and his body would bang against the spongy and pestilent viscosity which lies at the bottom of the grave: torsos and hands and arms and legs and heads wrenched off and feet and thighs and guts... and white face, like those of dead angels, like those of sleeping ghosts. And always the little white worms... the little white worms... the little white worms...’ (Translation D.G.)

33 The color white takes on rather complex and controversial qualities. On the one hand, white is the color of the faces of the dead which are compared to those of dead angels and sleeping ghosts. On the other hand, white is associated primarily and in traumatic repetition with the ‘little white worms’ that cover the island. Crushed under the feet of the dreamer their white changes to ‘dirty sperm.’ “[T]he image of Cuban exiles as *gusanos* (worms) [...] originally emerged among the ideological defenders of the Cuban Revolution [...]. [...] Fidel Castor’s government applied a cold war rhetoric to the Cuban exodus, branding the exiles as counterrevolutionary, unpatriotic, elitist, corrupt, selfish, and pro-American.” (Duany 1993: 168)

34 “The image of the beach, for example, is only one possibility amongst many of the stereotypes that are associated with the Caribbean. [...] In travel literature on the region, the archipelago of French, Dutch, Spanish and English speaking islands are reduced to a single exquisitely unproblematic cipher: the deserted palm-fringed beach. This image, emptied of all historical meaning, has endured for hundreds of years perhaps because it trades on deep longings for a fresh (pre-Columbian) beginning. It promises endless rediscoveries of a Caribbean that can still offer a solitude and innocence that the overcrowded and polluted beaches of other resorts can hardly embody.” (Courtman 2004: xiii)

35 “Desnudos, tiesos. [/] Los pedazos de esos cuerpos atontándose... y esa imagen de infierno terrenal. [/] El infierno a su lado. Cuerpos apestan. Nada idílico ese oleaje que los mece y los arrastra sobre la arena en la orilla. Quedarse abrazada sólo a la cabecita y

that all forms of corporeal mobility – be it outlawed migration or promoted tourism – are exploited and obstructed by criminal organizations and corrupt state officials in multiple entanglements. And while the island of Cuba is virtually and demographically sinking, the archipelago and the international community are deeply involved in this traumatizing event and ongoing situation.

8 Gone already? Gone.

The physical and figurative drowning of islands and their communities is, however, not always related to inner divisions, totalitarian systems plagued by harsh laws and economic decline. Olive Senior's "Rejected Text for a Tourist Brochure" (2005)³⁶ expands on a self-compromising poetic gesture of the lyrical I under hyper-capitalism. This highly ironic poetic mockery of tourist advertising challenges, subverts, and annihilates all imaginations and especially visualizations of the island paradise as an external and accessible place³⁷. One has to admit that there exists no overt indication of the land's island status, but the motto of the poem taken from Michael Smith's *Jamaica* localizes the poetic space on a specific island of the misnamed Greater Antilles³⁸.

"I saw my land in the morning
And O but she was fair"
– M.G. Smith, "Jamaica" (1938)
(Senior 2005: 53)

el pecho de tu propio hijo, sentir que te moja el líquido de sus vísceras podridas cuando esas otras manos te lo arrancan: 'Está muerto, señora, está muerto,' y no descubrir que ya se ha podrido, que sus ojos abiertos ya no te buscan, y solo Dios sabe a qué vacío miran." (Valle 2006: 13)

³⁶ First published 2005 in the monograph *Over the Roofs of the World* it is also the first poem featured in the anthology *Caribbean Dispatches. Beyond the Tourist Dream* (2006).

³⁷ For a change from the search for paradise all over the earth towards a search for paradise within oneself in 20th century French, Austrian, and Latin-American literatures, cf. Rössner 1988.

³⁸ "The term [Caribbean], of course, is a mistake, but one that Columbus covered sensibly by calling the region the 'West Indies.' [...] Then the Spaniards called these islands *Las Antillas* from the Portuguese *Antilhas*, similarly pronounced, referring to a legendary set of islands in the far west of the Atlantic. That, too, had no known historical validity, but the name was picked up by the French as *Les Antilles* and the English later identified the *Greater Antilles* and the *Lesser Antilles*, so completing the European authorization of the mistake." (Allsopp 2001: 33) Jamaican Poet and Anthropologist Michael Garfield Smith (1921–1993) joined "the protests against Crown Colony Government in Jamaica [...] striving towards self-awareness, self-respect, and self-government [...]" with this "song, which every schoolchild in Jamaica should know." (Hall 1997: 9)

Between the motto and the first line of the poem, a substantial *translatio/n* starts to unfold. The past tense and the classicist lyrical voice shift towards a more colloquial tone of the present that will later turn into a clear reference to Roots Reggae Music³⁹. Instead of the perception of an I/eye, the invitation to perceive visually now extends to a lyrical you: “Come see my land.” The reading ‘You’ is called upon to come and see for yourself/themselves and with your/their own eyes. What remains the same is the sell-out of a specific locale that is branded as the Other.

Come see my land
 Come see my land
 before the particles of busy fires ascend;
 before the rivers descend underground;
 before coffee plantations grind the mountains into dust; before
 the coral dies; before the beaches
 disappear
 Come see my land
 Come see my land
 And know
 That she was fair.
 (Senior 2005: 53)

Special insistency drives this call for personal contact: The anaphora *before* and the conclusion of the first stanza in the past mark this urgency on a structural and rhetorical level. On a semantic level, it is the ecological destruction exemplified by the topological antagonism of rising fires and subsiding rivers as well as by the devastating effect of coffee plantations on the mountain. This, I would like to argue, is a poem of the Anthropocene: the dying coral and the disappearing beaches can be read as symptoms of human induced climate change. Nevertheless, the lyrical I of the poem does not beg for the lyrical you to stay at home and emit as little greenhouse gases possible; on the contrary, the third stanza of the first part reiterates the first line’s invitation twice – “come see my land” – and finishes with a translation of the second verse of the motto: Instead of “and O but she was fair” it plays with homonyms telling the reader: “and know / that she was fair.” As we could argue with Richard Grove, it depends on the very concept of beauty in relation to non-human surrounding if the walled hotels of the 21st century, the sugar cane and banana fields of colonialism, the extensive agriculture of the precolonial era, or the untouched wilderness of the prehuman era would qualify as fair.

39 “Jamaican reggae music is a good example of a product born from local creativity and content that is now exported to all major international markets.” (Jessen/Vignoles 2005: 34)

In any case, the difference between the present tense of “Come see my land” and the past tense of “she was fair” plays on nostalgia. At the final turn, a deconstruction of the I-land as well as the tropical island trope via the total sell-out and poetic destruction of the semantic island space becomes visible.

Oh, them gone already? No Problem, Mon.
 Come. Look the film here.
 Reggae soundtrack and all. Come see
 My land. Come see my land and know, A-oh,
 that she was fair.
 (Senior 2005: 53)

With the sudden realization “Oh, them gone already?” and the reiteration of the cool, laid back way of reasoning that is heavily advertised as part of the tourist image of the island, the invitation is not canceled. Again, you are invited to come. Instead of seeing the last elements of the island’s biosphere that by now is completely destroyed, or consumed, you are invited to join a change of media and watch a documentary about the island’s beauty. Not any documentary, but one that sports the necessary signifiers to continue to propagate the imagery and soundscape that has been fostered throughout the poem: “Reggae Soundtrack and all.” This media change continues the exploitation, serving the sensationalist and escapist gaze virtually even after the destruction of the poetic island via transmedial translation into globally popular songs and videos, leaving no space for an unmediated, livable local place and a viable community outside the hyper-capitalist tourist complex.

9 Conclusion: No Man is an Island, but the Island is Drowning

From this brief look at three drowning islands from contemporary Caribbean literatures one can conclude that in the case of “no man is an island,” an old assertion is still being confronted with new perspectives and contexts, being transformed in the process, and yielding highly astonishing and productive results. Therefore, one has to ask: What are the consequences of this transformation of the European islands of impossible singularity to Caribbean islands of failing conviviality?

The Caribbean revisions of John Donne’s denigrating usage of the island as an allegory for the impossibility of a life in isolation from mankind perform various processes of *translatio/n*. All of these examples seem to build on the substantial deconstruction the island trope underwent in contemporary Caribbean cultural theories and produce decolonialized *imaginative geographies* that challenge *insularism*. On the one hand, Walcott’s Nobel Prize lecture

claims that “poetry is an island that breaks away from the main,” thus supplanting the subject and inverting the quality as well as the outcome of the movement while continuing to build on the allegorical spatiality of the source.⁴⁰ On the other hand, in the novels and the poem the erosions of the fictional islands (Maya, Cuba, Jamaica) transform the island of impossibility into densely populated islands with very contemporary sociopolitical and ecological urgencies.

In the fictional worlds of the two novels and the prose poem discussed, massive political, financial, and ecological exploitations threaten the biogeographical islands and unveil them as sites of endangered conviviality in the Anthropocene. Via the drowning of its islands, these texts continue to transmit the intertext’s *memento mori* and appeal for an all-encompassing, humble, and deeply compassionate humanity while being very clear and outspoken about the social and ecological erosions as well as the unjust and deadly repartition of mobilities that challenge the Caribbean and our planet today.

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⁴⁰ If one assumes that the *Devotions* might qualify as poetry (cf. Raspa 1987: xxi–xxii), they and their islands of impossibility necessarily form part of Walcott’s island of poetry breaking away from institutionalized knowledge production. The creative transformation of the aphorism thus not only offers continuation and variation but also a potential inclusion of the original sentence, meditation, part, and collection in the allegory.

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