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**Conversing with Caribbean and Northern Scottish
Landscapes and Lifescapes**

by

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Conversing with Caribbean and Northern Scottish Landscapes and Lifescapes

The following conversation has emerged out of a range of reflections on the diverse ways in which we have become increasingly aware of connections between the Caribbean and Northern Scotland. This specific dialogue grows out of a joint presentation we undertook as part of the Landscapes and Lifescapes Symposium held in Inverness in June, 2015. The symposium offered a starting point for us to collaboratively explore transatlantic histories and geographies and to hopefully open up other interdisciplinary conversations addressing how we understand our relationships to identity, history and place.

To begin this conversation we have set out to address five key questions. These questions provide a broad scope for thinking about how the relationships between the Anglo-Caribbean and Northern Scotland have been depicted historically, and how the idea of landscapes and lifescapes may help us to diversify this dialogue further.

1. What can we learn from investigating the entangled histories and geographies of Scotland and the Anglophone Caribbean?

KS: When I first moved to Scotland, I was shocked by how many documents related to the Caribbean resided in my university's Special Collections. Some of these documents were reprints of famous speeches—such as ones given by Frederick Douglass in the nineteenth century—but others, many others, were related to

actual people, entities or groups whose interaction with the Caribbean was extensive. From doctors to workers to enslaved persons to artists and educators, Scotland and the Caribbean have a linked history that can be seen in the lifescapes of these and other persons. The land, too, carries these links. Plantation development in the Caribbean may have transformed formal gardens in Scotland. Agricultural practices may have also been applied in both locations. What I am intensely interested in following is political activism and critique. Rather than assume that the direction of these processes moved outward from Scotland to the Caribbean, it is worth considering how Caribbean peoples and their political movements (and dissent) may have shaped or influenced Scottish interactions with the wider British Empire. Or vice versa. There has been some interesting research into the lives of particular mixed race Scottish-Jamaican people, such as Robert Wedderburn,¹ but more work needs to be done to consider the Caribbean, as a whole. As of this writing, abundant evidence is emerging from a variety of disciplines, such as archaeology, geography and history that reveals the extensive and long-reaching links between the two regions

SM: As someone who grew up in Scotland, studied in the US, worked in Jamaica for nearly a decade, then returned to Scotland 5 years ago, I have been struck by missing and newly-present Caribbean-Scottish landscapes. As a school student I learned very little about

the Caribbean, I read lots of things about Vikings, and changing British monarchies, but little about the trans-Atlantic interconnections that took place with countries south of the US. While we had explored the inequalities, forced removal and linguistic struggles of my native land, a giant gap existed in the stories of where those displaced went (apart from rapidly growing industrial UK cities), and the role that many Scottish migrants placed in championing imperial geographies. And although the school curriculum has changed since then, these gaps—or perhaps knots—in these entangled stories, reveal the importance and implications of how we construct, negotiate, and challenge our understandings of social, environmental and spatial relations. While teaching human geography in Jamaica, Caribbean creative writing provided a very important entryway and critical engagement with exclusionary visions of what ‘Caribbeanness’ meant. On returning to Scotland—although as Stuart Hall notes, once you migrate you can never really return home—I became even more aware of the Caribbean in Scotland.² In particular, I had a more urgent need to explore and engage with Jamaican-Scottish connections, whether it be through education, film-making, creative writing or foreign policy developments. All of these contexts offer opportunities for having a more critical and nuanced understanding of history and place.

2. The lived experiences of the people in these histories are complemented by similar transformative experiences in the environment. How are these two places—and the islands that surround them—linked?

SM: Kamau Brathwaite's poetry maps out the ongoing links between landscapes: "sea/doan have no/BACKDOOR."³ I have drawn on this concept in my own work, exploring transnational and contested border landscapes. The impossibility of drawing borders around Caribbean—and Scottish—lands is highlighted through Brathwaite's determination to emphasize the constantly shifting dimensions and permeability of language, ideas and resistance. Physically, islands may appear to offer a temporary separation, but they are nonetheless interwoven with the practices, decisions and conflicts around such diverse interests as environmental management, migration policy, economic investment zones, tourism centres, agriculture and conservation. Global decision-making necessitates the involvement (whether that be collaborative and/or enforced) of many different, often far-flung states. People and resources move, approaches towards material landscapes may be duplicated, adapted, or refuted in multiple locations—and may have very different impacts in contrasting locations. These two places—and their islands that surround them—are, in fact, more than simply two places, they are the nodal points of many places and multi-scalar practices.

KS: As mentioned above, there are definitely ecological similarities and linkages between the regions. Both regions depend upon clean water ecosystems, tourism, development, resources (such as oil) and agriculture. Both have worked or are working through how to transition out of one industry (such as oil or sugar) to other more sustainable economies. If we think of oilscapes as part of a global plantation, then both have been transformed by plantation economies. These transformations have re-shaped the land and marine environments in both places.

3. A number of investigations into the role of Scotland in the Caribbean focuses on the history of enslavement and forced labour. As such, the conversation often involves Scottish landowners, slave owners or plantation management (including doctors). How do we shift this history to include Caribbean people, movements, systems and perspectives?

KS: As I noted above, there are a number of different life stories linking Scotland and the Caribbean. I typically tell two stories as examples: Mary Seacole and Frances Batty Shand. What is intriguing about both of these Caribbean-born women is that their lives highlight the possibilities and available movements for women of colour in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Mixed race and of Scottish ancestry, both of these women held property and travelled, extensively in Seacole's case, as well as left legacies of writing or charitable work. As two Anglophone Caribbean women, I find their

lifescapes critically important to our understanding of the past and current histories that join the Caribbean and Scotland. We must begin to tell their stories. We must work on producing biographies that place these women and others in a much more vital and active historical field.

SM: Building on the experience of the women mentioned above, the broader practice of migration (and tourism) is one that illustrates the necessity of engaging the varied and multi-faceted nature of movement. Within Caribbean, Reggae and Cultural Studies, there is a diversity of work examining the complexity of migrant journeys, landscapes, and stories. Engaging with Paul Gilroy's cultural 'artefacts'⁴—for example, music, built structures, poetry, bodies, laws—these interdisciplinary studies provide pointers to how Scottish-Anglo Caribbean connections (and beyond) can be understood in ways that embrace the “everyday” while recognizing the already engaging work emerging from Caribbean-based research.

4. Much has been made of the similar political positioning of the Caribbean and Scotland within the British Empire. In your perspective, what is helpful with this kind of analogy? What is lost in the forming of these sites as 'peripheral' British territories?

KS: I find that the peripheral conversation about these regions is limiting. What it does is trivialize the work, lived experiences and research activity within both areas. It also, unfortunately, pushes researchers invested in these regions to argue that the histories of these regions matter within what we could crudely describe as ‘the core’ of British history. I find these challenges troubling, as they demand that researchers fight to legitimize their research. This may be less of a concern for the field of Scottish history, but Caribbean history in the UK, especially as it relates to topics beyond slavery, struggles with these issues of legitimacy. Of course, many researchers push against this type of positioning. Their work and efforts have challenged presumptions about peripheral territories within the British Empire. Yet, we still have much work to do. I’m encouraged by the interest in Mary Seacole shown by curriculum developers—especially in the UK—but find it concerning that she is rarely discussed as a writer, traveller and a businesswoman. Instead, pupils often create poultices in an effort to replicate her purported traditional medical knowledge. That may be an interesting element of her life, but it ignores the fact that she had multiple businesses on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and produced one of the most important narratives written by a nineteenth-century mixed-race woman. Looking at her life, migration and cultural practice illuminates how central her experiences would be to empire, war, memory and national consciousness. I mean, she would be referred to as Mother Seacole

by *Punch* and adored by the military. Not too shabby for someone who supposedly should not even be a footnote in history. Her book, the *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* showcases a life that was anything but peripheral.⁵ Her confrontation of specific gender, social and racial conditions illuminate the entanglement of places and people far beyond their countries/regions of origin. We must continue to draw out the current and past links in our world that highlight the many ways that people (and things/lands) have co-existed.

SM: Although initially using the idea of core and periphery may seem a helpful way of organizing vast and varied socio-spatial relations in relation to the legacies of empire building, such an approach can reinscribe a colonial gaze that generalizes rather than engages with diversity. For example, while the relative disadvantages faced by Scotland and Jamaica within imperial processes may suggest some commonalities—underrepresentation politically, regional stereotypes, economic exploitation—they are not equivalent or easily mapped onto one another. Using the idea of a ‘periphery’ is problematic in many ways: 1) it ‘fixes’ places and limits the possibilities of understanding the connections discussed in question 2 above; 2) it situates people, events and places as victim or oppressor, without a sense of mobility and resistance between these identities (as highlighted by Karen in relation to Mary

Seacole); and, 3) it fails to engage with a notion of ‘peripheral’ regions as self-determining, active and creative spaces.

5. Forces within Scotland and the Anglophone Caribbean are currently challenging the political contours of governance (the independence referendum in Scotland) or demanding reparations from former imperial powers for native genocide, the transatlantic slave trade and racialised forms of chattel slavery (see the CARICOM Reparations Commission)⁶. These challenges highlight the role of history in the current political landscape. Given these conversations (and others), what role can community-based collaborative research projects play in our societal understanding of the landscapes and lifescapes (in all forms) in both regions?

SM: To understand our landscapes and lifescapes it is important that we—whether we are academics, community activists, school children, policy makers, artists—invest time, passion and a desire to learn from each other, and from different places. Collaborative research projects are an important way of challenging our assumptions about what we need to know, record, and communicate and how we do that. Ideally, collaboration provides a practice that can be a bridge-building process: a step towards greater understanding, making connections between past, present and future activities, and working towards greater inclusion in the

stories of places that unfold. Ongoing collaborative research can provide new ways of working together that can be more attentive to issues previously ignored and, through a range of stakeholders, may encourage greater attention to geographies of social justice. This may not be an easy process, and there may be many obstacles that require negotiation during the journey, but these are tasks which can potentially make our social, academic and geographical relationships much richer.

KS: Community-based and focused collaborative research projects can reshape knowledge by enabling communities to actively participate in the creation and presentation of their histories. In co-producing and co-creating this information, researchers, activists, archivists, museums and other sectors re-draw our manufactured boundaries between research and 'the world' by re-linking research to social problems and conditions. The real situations mentioned here highlight the role and place of reparative justice, public responsibility and historical events in shaping our political systems. Regardless of your particular views on the rights and needs for any of these practices to be enacted, we owe it to those who have come before us and those not yet born to practice an engaged scholarship that neither censors difficult information from reaching the public, nor ignores the real and tangible realities of living with the aftereffects (or continuation) of inequalities. This is more than just a call for engaged scholarship

that is sensitive to the world; this is a reminder that our histories live on in the cracks of the now and we must remain ever-vigilant to their reverberations.

¹ For a recent example of the interdisciplinary research on Wedderburn, see Priyamvada Gopal, "Re-dressing Anti-imperial Amnesia," *Race & Class* 27.3 (2016): 18-30.

² Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in *Identity: The Real Me*, (London: ICA, 1988, Document 6.

³ Kauma Brathwaite. *Barabajan Poems 1492-1992* (Kingston and New York: Savacou North, 1994), 282.

⁴ See Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁵ See Mary Seacole. *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (London: James Blackwood Paternoster Row, 1857).

⁶ See "Caricom Reparations Commission Press Statement," *CARICOM* 10 Dec 2013

http://caricom.org/jsp/pressreleases/press_releases_2013/pres285_13.jsp.