

ECOCRITICISM

The Politics of Place

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As a critical apparatus, ecocriticism has only recently been adopted to analyze Caribbean literary production. This belatedness does not reflect a lack of concern about the environment by Caribbean writers but rather a rise in ecological thinking as a methodology by literary critics in the 1990s (Heise 2006). Caribbean writers have long engaged the history of the environment and the complexity of its representation. Scholars have argued that the Caribbean is one of the most important areas for an ecocritical lens because the region's history does not allow for a facile division between humans and nature, an opposition that often determines the dominant ecocritical production of North America (DeLoughrey et al. 2005). In the Caribbean, an engagement with the environment means an entanglement with the history of empire and postcolonial nation-building. This history of empire, diaspora, and resettlement necessarily foregrounds the ways in which the violence of plantation societies ruptured continuous human relationships to place (Glissant 1989). Imagining a new relation to place beyond colonial violence has been vital to the growth of national literatures in the Caribbean and in other postcolonial regions.

In his introduction to *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell defines landscape, 'not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed' (1994: 1). In other words, landscape is not reducible to anthropocentric representation; the 'natural' environment is constituted and constitutive of human history. As a process rather than a passive template, it thus reflects a dialectic between the land and its residents. In the Caribbean, this dialectic is rooted in the region's violent history; an unprecedented upheaval and relocation of European, Asian, and African peoples and cultures, rapidly condensed, creolized, and reformulated within the borders and boundaries of ships, plantations, and (primarily) islands. Colonization of the Caribbean created a radical shift in European philosophies of human and nonhuman difference, raising profound questions about the relationship between nature and history, place and identity (Gerbi 1985). It also facilitated a new taxonomy that contributed to the erasure of indigenous knowledges while erecting a hierarchy of racial 'species', gendered difference, and a pathologization of the

hybridity of the tropics (Stepan 1982; Moore et al. 2003; Casid 2005). Due to this history, the Caribbean has been understood as an originary space of modernity (Mintz 1985; Glissant 1989: 146), one that has been facilitated by human and nonhuman transplantation and settlement.

Environmental historians Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove have shown that the relationship between colonization and ecology is rendered most visible in island spaces, particularly in the Caribbean. 'Portmanteau biota', the organisms that travelled with Europeans to the colonies, including animals, plants, and disease, radically altered island landscapes (Crosby 1986: 89) far more than in their continental counterparts. While the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean had over the centuries altered the ecology, the rapid shift from small-scale intercropping of food crops to plantation monoculture under capitalism, epitomized by introduced crops such as sugar cane, contributed to the decimation and even eradication of indigenous peoples, foodways, flora, and fauna (Watts 1987). Due to the colonial process of enclosure (Marzec 2007), larger continental-based nations such as Guyana and Belize did not escape this process of social and ecological upheaval. Foregrounding these histories of human and plant diaspora and resettlement calls attention to our very assumptions about what is a natural landscape. Although they are not 'natural' in the sense of being autochthonous, the dozens of varieties of sugarcane, breadfruit, coffee, nutmeg, ackee, mango, coconut and countless other staple crops transplanted to the region have become deeply naturalized. The complex diasporas of plants and peoples in the Caribbean problematize the notion of natural history and its segregation from human agency (DeLoughrey et al. 2005).

Caribbean literature is deeply engaged with the history of human and plant diasporas, rendering a complex cultural ecology and a dialogic imagination. As Guyanese author Sir Wilson Harris has written, Caribbean subjects 'entered into a dialogue with the landscape. Instead of seeing the landscape as a passive thing, to be manipulated, to have your formulae imposed upon it, we entered into a dialogue with it' (1992: 75). The history of colonization, which foregrounds the relationship between landscape and power, is thus vital to any discussion about literary inscriptions of Caribbean ecologies. This is 'a landscape saturated by traumas of conquest' (Harris 1962: 8). Like Buell, Harris warns, 'this matter of landscape is far more important than we realize. And it is essential to see how far-reaching this is, because unfortunately in the Humanities it is taken for granted that landscape is passive' (1992: 75). Harris's warning is all too prescient as the region faces a myriad of environmental threats, including earthquakes and hurricanes, as this active landscape responds to global climate change (Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre).

Although the plantation complex greatly impacted the environmental history of the region, sites outside the Euclidean grids of the plantocracy provided vital alternative communities and continuities with African and indigenous traditions. Accordingly, these spaces have become integral to the Caribbean historical imagination in the wake of decolonization. A large body of Caribbean literature has sought to re-establish a sense of place outside of the plantocracy by recuperating African and indigenous

traditions maintained in creole (or 'folk') epistemologies, in rural or in maritime communities, in the spaces of maroonage, and in the places where slaves and their descendants maintained their provision grounds. Sylvia Wynter has characterized the region's history by the social and geographical split between the plantation and the provision grounds; she argues that this dichotomy remains 'the distinguishing characteristic' of Caribbean narrative (1971: 99). Mid-century West Indian novels often turned to rural communities to foreground their latent potential for providing social and ecological knowledge, such as Mittleholzer's *Shadows Move Among Them* (1951), Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1952), and Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* (1962). Like Michelle Cliff's later *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), and Erna Brodber's *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007), Wynter's novel focused on how women's knowledge, cultivated in the provision grounds, could provide an alternative to – or at least mediate – the masculine spaces of the plantation complex.

This turn to the rural, investing the folk as a vital source of ecological and social knowledge integral to the process of anti-colonial nationalism, has been a popular theme, particularly in the juxtaposition of rural space (or the Guyanese hinterland) to the social manners of the city, visible in novels penned by Jan Carew, John Hearne, George Lamming, Earl Lovelace, and more recently by Merle Hodge (1970) and Merle Collins (1995). In Kenneth Ramchand's words, this is 'imaginative fiction built around the lives of the folk' (1970: 15). 'Being identified with the land at the peasant level', Lamming has explained, provides 'an example of that instinct and root impulse which returns the better West Indian writers back to the soil' (1984: 46). Collapsing place, people, and representation, Lamming concludes that 'soil is a large part of what the West Indian novel has brought back to reading; lumps of earth: unrefined, perhaps, but good warm, fertile earth' (1984: 46). Although the process of twentieth-century urbanization has contributed to a romanticization of the folk, particularly by the region's intellectuals, there still remains a palpable sense that rural labour and village life continue to provide valuable lessons for an expanding urban middle class (Rohlehr 1992; Griffith 1996).

Other writers, like Harris, have turned to non-human nature as a source of both cultural and linguistic regeneration. In *The Radical Imagination* he explains:

when the human animal understands his genius, he roots it in the creature, in the forest, in the trees, in other words in the language which we *are* and which we acquired, not only from our mother's lips but also from the sound of the rain falling, from the sigh of the leaves, from the music of the earth as we pressed on it, what crackled under our feet. All those sounds are threaded into the language of the imagination that incarnates or realizes itself through diverse cradles into the birth and the mystery of creativity.

(1992: 78)

As such, Harris suggests the region's writing is not merely about accessing folk knowledge or the experience of agricultural labour because the Caribbean landscape

itself provides a source of language. This metaphysical relationship to soil, as Lamming describes, has also been extended to the sea. So while fishing communities have provided inspiration for writers like Derek Walcott and Anthony Winkler, the sea itself has also been sounded as a space for social and ontological origins. For instance, the poetry of both Eric Roach and Walcott inscribes maritime imaginary in which the emergence of the oceanic self is simultaneous with writing. As 'foetus of plankton', Caribbean poets have 'learnt their alphabet of alkali and aloe, on seeds of/islands dispersed by the winds' (Walcott 1986: 11, 15; DeLoughrey 2007: 22–30).

While the turn to the sea has provided fluid natural metaphors to imagine regional connection in the work of Édouard Glissant and others, he has also encouraged writers to develop a 'language of landscape' that he feels is vital for the decolonization process. He contends that the history of the plantation system, compounded by a neo-colonial market in which food is still heavily imported, has alienated Caribbean people from the land. Because the land has been associated with forced labour, 'people did not relate even a mythological chronology of this land to their knowledge of this country, and so nature and culture have not formed a dialectical whole that informs a people's consciousness' (1989: 63). Glissant argues that in the absence of local historiography, Caribbean 'landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history' (1989: 11). Consequently, he envisions Caribbean literature as fundamental to re-establish a dialectic between landscape and history and between culture and the natural world (DeLoughrey et al. 2005).

This call to reinhabit the Caribbean environment in meaningful literary and historical ways is not a new one. British colonials, like James Grainger, left a legacy of 'turgid mechanical meter' (Walcott 2000: 60) waxing in Georgic verse over the beauty of the sugar cane and the plantation system (DeLoughrey et al. 2005: 8–9). While Grainger's *The Sugar Cane* (1764) never considers the perspective of the transplanted African, Walcott makes an important observation about the function of landscape otherwise overlooked by Glissant's emphasis on plantation abjection. Walcott observes, 'No historical collection acknowledges the fact that the beauty of the Caribbean islands could have helped the slave survive' and derive 'some strength, because what is surely another beauty is the strength, the endurance of the survivor' (Walcott 2000: 61). He imagines that the slaves recognized 'that the nature which they occupied was not hostile to them for any reason', and that 'there was some separate benediction in the stupendous dawns and sunsets that had nothing to do with the boring evil of their servitude' (2000: 61).

The search for a benediction in the Caribbean landscape could be said to characterize a large body of the region's early poetry until the era of independence. Contrary to the assumption in some ecocritical circles that colonized spaces are too poor to be concerned with the environment, there is a treasury of Caribbean verse about nature, from early colonial writings about earthquakes, volcanoes and hurricanes (Burnett 1986: xlvi) to laments over the loss of indigenous peoples and the metonymic access they are thought to provide to a naturalized landscape (Burnett 1986: li). The majority of anglophone Caribbean poetry produced before the 1960s was influenced by the

British Romantic tradition of nature writing, to the dismay of some literary critics. In his *West Indian Poetry*, Lloyd Brown complained of the prevalence of the 'old-fashioned Caribbean pastoral' in the work of John Figueroa and others (1978: 65). Laurence A. Breiner has argued that up until the early twentieth century, the dominant themes in Caribbean poetry were religion, patriotism, and nature, and only nature enabled the poet to render 'a distinctly local experience' (1998: 110). In his review of the rapidly growing genre of West Indian literature anthologies in the early 1960s, R.J. Owens has observed that poets were turning to verse 'to declare their consciousness of a "spirit of place," and their community with it' (1961: 122). This was visible in poets such as Roach who explored the 'glorious landscapes of the soul' (1992: 71) and positioned rural plantation labour as a means to know 'the spirit of the place' (1992: 80). Like Roach and others of his generation, Frank Collymore turned to the landscape to inscribe:

This land of pastel tints and compromise,
 Of huddled tenantries and garden villages
 Of rumshops and churches, slums and postcard views
 This land where sugarcane impersonating wheat
 Deceives the traveller's eye

(‘This Land’, 1959, in Owens 1961: 122)

While Brown critiqued Collymore's nature poems, finding them to be a 'throwback to the neo-romantic imitativeness of the Caribbean pastoral' (1978: 89), this particular stanza highlights the contradictions of landscape representation. The tension between the picturesque pastel villages with 'postcard views' and the abjection of slums and deceptive sugarcane not only foregrounds colonial misrepresentations of the Caribbean landscape, but a traveller's gaze perhaps adopted by the poet that idealizes or pathologizes tropical poverty (see Thompson 2007).

The April 1958 special issue of *Caribbean Quarterly* on West Indian poetry epitomizes how this emergent generation of poets turned to local flora and fauna to find a new voice and proto-national imagination while creolizing traditional English literary forms. Significantly, the collection also included the work of writers living abroad, who turned to the British landscape known through the canonical literature of their colonial education to reimagine its seasonal and faunal difference. George Lamming contributed a poem about swans, and E.L. (Kamau) Brathwaite, who was later to write extensively about the landscape alienation created by colonial education, contributed a poem entitled 'The Day the First Snow Fell'.

These writers struggled with how to represent the post-plantation landscape of an incipient nation in the literary structures of inherited colonial genres. The pastoral, while initially popular as a genre, was rapidly outgrown by a new generation eager to experiment with more overtly creolized and political forms. In his 1979 essay, 'English in the Caribbean', Kamau Brathwaite called attention to the colonial education system that taught students to value and identify with British history and landscape over their

own. As such his work has sought to uncover Caribbean history through geography (Rohlehr 1981: 235). The problem posed by colonial education is not merely the content but the form – students became acclimated to verse that provided a model for the ‘falling of snow’ rather than ‘of the force of the hurricanes that take place every year’ (Brathwaite 1981: 19). But ‘the hurricane does not roar in pentameter’ (1981: 20). Developing the ‘syllabic intelligence’ to describe the hurricane is thus vital to the process of decolonization, and the school child who reports that ‘the snow was falling on the canefields’ provides an example of the creolization of form (1981: 19). In a quest to ‘get a rhythm that approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience’ (1981: 20), Brathwaite and others experimented with form and argued for a recuperation of African and folk traditions and rhythms to develop a ‘nation language’ that reflected what Glissant would term a ‘language of landscape’, one that reflects and informs the creolization of its complex human histories.

Breiner observes that nature poetry radically diminished in the larger islands like Jamaica and Trinidad after independence (1998: 102), but I’d suggest here that the literary concern with nature has not so much diminished as changed forms to reflect more politicized and creolized landscapes. Addressing the creolization and hybridity of biotic transplants, and depicting a culturally complex island community, Jamaica Kincaid, Olive Senior, Lorna Goodison, Shani Mootoo, Merle Collins and others have turned to the trope of the island garden to depict creolization through a number of natural metaphors (Tiffin 1998; O’Brien 2002). Their work suggests that the natural world is not simply a backdrop for human subjectivity and history in the way that ‘environment’ functions as backdrop for anthropocentric events. Flora and fauna are inscribed as diasporic settlers, highlighting the ways in which the landscape itself mitigates the complex processes of human transplantation and sedimentation. ‘Gardening in the Tropics’, Senior tells us, ‘you’ll find things that don’t/belong together often intertwine/all mixed up in this amazing fecundity’ (1994: 86). Colonial fears of tropical fecundity, women’s sexuality, and racial degeneration were perhaps first fully represented by Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* and a new generation of authors such as Shani Mootoo have taken on this history by queering the garden landscape (Mootoo 1998; Casid 2005: xviii–xxi).

These works reinvigorate the etymological roots of the term ‘diaspora’, defined as the dispersal of (human) seeds. In a historical context in which peoples and plants were traded as commodities, Caribbean writers often foreground the simultaneous ‘uprooting’ of plants and peoples and their transplantation to colonial botanical gardens and sugar plantations across the Atlantic. For the Caribbean landscape into which plantation labourers were acculturated was as routed in trade networks as the human arrivants. This is a point made in Jamaica Kincaid’s essay collection, *My Garden (Book)*. She queries:

What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time [...] (Christopher Columbus) first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua now will not supply a clue. The bougainvillea [...] is native to tropical South America: the plumbago is

from southern Africa; the croton is from Malaysia; the hibiscus from Asia and East Africa; the allamanda is from Brazil; the poinsettia [...] is from Mexico; the bird of paradise is from southern Africa; the Bermuda lily is from Japan; the flamboyant tree is from Madagascar; the casuarina comes from Australia; the Norfolk pine comes from Norfolk Island; [...] the tamarind tree is from Africa and Asia. The mango is from Asia. The breadfruit is from [Tahiti].

(1999: 135)

The excavation of precolonial history, symbolized by the landscape, poses a particular problem for the Caribbean writer attuned to the temporal and spatial relations of power. Kincaid asks, before Columbus, 'What herb of any beauty grew in *this place*? What tree? And did the *people who lived there* grow them for their own sake? I do not know, I can find no record of it. I can only make a guess in this way: the frangipani, the mahogany tree, the cedar tree are all native to the West Indies, and Antigua is in the West Indies' (1999: 137, my emphasis). Here there is a slippage from what Kincaid initially calls 'this place' – the space of the contemporary Caribbean subject – to the objectified query about 'the people who lived there'. This suggests a profoundly discontinuous temporal landscape, which cannot be categorized in the same spatial terms due to the tremendous alteration and rupture of the island's flora, fauna, and human populations. In other words, the precolonial Caribbean and the contemporary island of Antigua are radically divided between 'here' and 'there'; Kincaid has semantically separated each space, refusing to establish a conceptually unified narrative of time. As such, Kincaid reiterates Glissant's contention that Caribbean history is characterized by 'ruptures' and 'brutal dislocation', where 'historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment' (1989: 61–2). The narrative result is not only a 'tormented chronology of time' and space, but suggests that the (subjugated) past, suppressed in dominant historiography, becomes 'obsessively present' (Glissant 1989: 63).

Kincaid explains 'the people on Antigua have a relationship to agriculture that cannot please them at all. Their very presence on this island hundreds of years ago has to do with this thing, agriculture'. Reiterating Glissant's theory that nature and culture have formed a dialectical split, she concludes, 'it seems so clear to me, then, that a group of people who have had such a horrible historical association with growing things would try to make any relationship to (agriculture) dignified and useful' (1999: 140). This is not simply a division between horticulture and agriculture, or aesthetics versus commodity capitalism. Like Brathwaite, Kincaid has written extensively about the ways in which even the flowers of empire, like the daffodils in William Wordsworth's poem, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', were utilized in the colonial education system in ways that alienated Caribbean students from their own tropical surroundings.

In polarizing botany to agriculture, as Susie O'Brien points out, Kincaid denies the possibility of environmentalism as another possible engagement with the landscape (2002: n.p.). This brings us to the thorny question of the role of environmentalism and ecocriticism in the Caribbean. As O'Brien observes, 'the kinds of environmental

consciousness that have evolved out of ordinary (that is to say, poor) West Indians' experience with the land, which take shape in both spiritual movements like Rastafarianism and political struggles to reconcile problems of environment and social justice, remain unassimilable both to a colonialist understanding of nature and to the 'progressive' environmentalist politics of white, educated, upper middle-class America within and against which Kincaid writes' (2002: n.p.; Cilano and DeLoughrey 2007).

In recent years, scholars have sought to create a dialogue between ecocriticism and Caribbean Studies. Helen Tiffin and Susie O'Brien have published articles addressing the role of flora and the garden in Caribbean women writers and have offered pointed critiques of the North American bias of most ecocritical scholars, particularly as ecocriticism is thought to mimic imperialism in its globalizing moves (O'Brien 2001: 153–4). In their edited volume *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée Gosson and George Handley examined four thematic concerns: how Caribbean texts inscribe the environmental impact of colonial and plantation economies; the revision of colonial myths of Edenic and natural origins; connections between the process of biotic and cultural creolization; and how Caribbean aesthetics might usefully articulate a means to preserve sustainability in the wake of tourism and globalization (2005: 2). Anglophone contributions of the volume include interviews and essays on Walcott and the ecological impact of tourism in the region, plantation and hinterland narratives in Guyana, hybridity and creolization in works from Trinidad and Surinam, and literary histories of deforestation.

The year 2007 was a watershed moment in ecocritical publishing about the Caribbean and other postcolonial regions. Chris Campbell and Erin Somerville published their co-edited volume *What is the Earthly Paradise? Ecocritical Responses to the Caribbean* (2007), a collection of 2005 conference papers that examines environmentalism in Walcott's plays, the role of the pastoral in novels by Naipaul and Selvon, the challenges posed by urban ecological spaces, the intersection of ecofeminism and Indo-Caribbean women writers, and the influence of the sea. George Handley published *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda and Walcott*, an environmental critique of the imagination of nature in poetry of the Americas. DeLoughrey published *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, which drew from Brathwaite's theory of 'tidalectics' (Brathwaite 1983) to argue for the vitality of a dynamic land/sea relationship in Caribbean writing and examined this in works by John Hearne, Merle Collins, and Michelle Cliff. In the same year, Sarah Phillips Casteel's *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* turned to tropes of pastoralism and the new world garden in authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Walcott, Kincaid and others. While not of exclusively Caribbean focus, the special issues of journals such as *SPAN* (46, 1998), *Interventions* (9:1, 2007), *ISLE* (14.1, 2007) and *The Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* (13:2/14.1, 2007) all included essays that contribute to the emergent field of Caribbean ecocriticism. Graham Huggan and Tiffin have recently published their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010), which expands the critical terrain to consider the discourse of the environment, development, and 'zoocriticism'.

Although dominant environmental and ecocritical discourse has been associated with, as O'Brien rightly observes, a 'white, educated, upper middle-class America' that is inattentive to issues of colonialism and race, defining the field based on the limitations of a few voices can inadvertently minimize the long history of the environmental justice movement and the work of Caribbean writers, policy makers, and activists in thinking through the pressing questions of how to work towards a sustainable social ecology. As this chapter has shown there is a long and rich history of Caribbean literary production that has engaged the complexities of the natural and social environment even if it has not been recognized in the language of 'nature writing'. In fact given that Caribbean writers have always been attentive to the social makeup of local ecologies, they have been at the forefront in deconstructing the nature/culture divide. Moreover, the turn to cultivating a local sense of place, creating the island as a world, has been a prevalent theme in works by Selvon (1955), Collins (1995), and Lovelace (1996). As such, Caribbean writers have been at the forefront in thinking through some of the world's most pressing ecological issues.

Ecocriticism is concerned with far more than landscape and nature writing – its critical terrain ranges from the biotic history of colonialism to militarism to sovereignty over DNA. In the past decade, cultural critics and creative writers have been expanding the terrain of ecological concern, turning to issues such as tourism (Pattullo 1996; Kempadoo 1999; Sheller 2003; Carrigan 2007); cultural histories of food (Clarke 1999), obeah and herbal medicine (Douglas 1999; Paravisini-Gebert 2005), ecocatastrophe (Weekes 2006; Carrigan 2010) as well as the biopolitics of women's sexuality (Kempadoo 1998) and of organ theft (Hopkinson 1998).

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