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forum for inter-american research  
the journal of the international association of inter-american studies (ias)

## fiar

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fiar is the official journal of the International Association of Inter-American Studies (IAS).

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Vol. 8 No. 3 (Dec. 2015):

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## Caribbean Entanglements. Culture(s) and Nature Revisited

**Keywords:** Entanglements, Area Studies, Caribbean, Nature, Culture

### Introduction

Set off by the *spatial turn*, there is an ongoing struggle in the social sciences and in the humanities to grasp and conceptualize fluid, contingent, and relational understandings of flows, mobilities, and multiplicities. In the Caribbean, “archipelagization provides one entry point [...]” to grasp these understandings (Boyce-Davies 3). Starting from that entry point, numerous ideas have evolved. For instance, Benítez-Rojo’s notion of the *repeating-island* (1992) to more recent ideas such as *island movements* (Pugh), and approaches like *Transatlantic Caribbean* (Kummels et al.). The debates are far from being complete and the present special issue on Caribbean entanglements represents a critical intervention on these understandings.

Over two years ago, as editors of the present *fiar* edition, we started a dialogue in order to reflect on these debates, fathoming out perspectives from human geography and literature with a common regional focus and a common interest in postcolonial studies as starting point. As Jennifer Robinson suggests: “[...] postcolonial critique could encourage us to reconsider concepts [...], including theorisations of society, space and nature” (275). This led to the Call for Papers for this special issue, an invitation to scholars from across the world and from all academic disciplines to expand the debate and to bring together multiple perspectives. Some of those who answered our call are brought together in this special issue.

A look at this issue’s contributions sheds light on different dimensions of Caribbean archipelagic entanglements. There is an underlying *leitmotif* of the sea (Kowalik; Nicolas-Bragance & Saffache), rivers (Beushausen), and canals (Baquero Melo) as spaces of relations and (dis-)connections: in other words, as spaces of *entanglements*.

By interpreting the eco-epic textures of Romare Bearden’s *The Sea Nymph* and Derek Walcott’s *The Schooner Flight*, Ania Kowalik brings out “[...] the entanglement of the poetic and the material that generates cultural and historical meanings of the archipelago” (3). Fabiola Nicolas-Bragance & Pascal Saffache show how the transient area between the land and the sea undergoes not just geophysical changes by way of tides or surging storms, but also changes in societal use and meaning; in the presented case of the *tours des yoles rondes* from a danger zone to a party zone. In Wiebke Beushausen’s analysis of *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*, it becomes obvious that, in the Guianas, rivers serve as borders as well as center-hinterland connections. In Jairo Baquero Melo’s analysis of canal projects in Colombia, Panama, and Nicaragua, the author shows how transnational and (g)local entanglements are at work to “[...] facilitate territorial transformations [...]” which are accompanied by the colonization of nature and the reproduction of inequalities (2).

What these contributions have in common is that they place their analysis at the blurry transient area (*ecotone*) between the land and the sea, where the dichotomy of nature and culture offers a target to be challenged. The contributions show that there is potential for analysis beyond fixed entities and established categories. Entanglements as spatial metaphor *and* multiscalar analysis, reflect the deep spatiality of social, historical, material, and discursive processes. This is the key point which will be elaborated in this editorial.

What is proposed here as *entanglements* does not exclusively and predominantly emerge from within, and about, what is called *the Caribbean*. However, it is remarkable that many phenomena and studies here mentioned can be principally seen as *Caribbean entanglements* because of their vision to focus on relations and their dynamics. Therefore, the authors want to argue for and with Caribbean entanglements, since the image and practice of entangling as envisioned here focuses on a better understanding of dynamics, instead of reproducing hierarchies.

With this special issue, we pursue three goals. First, we want to foster a transdisciplinary dialogue on the (disciplinary) key concepts nature and culture(s). [1] In this way, we want to outline how far nature and culture are at work as concepts that are inherently entangled. Second, we want to take up and develop further ongoing debates in Inter-American Studies and in Area Studies, and third, we want to critically reflect the scope of the concept of entanglements.

Hence, in the following three sections, we shall offer an overview of recent trends and discourses in Area Studies and Inter-American Studies, a short synopsis of the evolution, debates, and challenges of nature and culture in geography and literature. Furthermore, we open and discuss perspectives on Caribbean entanglements in dialogue with the contributions to this issue. [2]

### **The Caribbean as Space of Entanglements**

The dichotomy of nature and culture corresponds to a binary framework one will not just find in the Caribbean and its diasporas, but also in broader global analytical and critical approaches when engaging with postcolonial spaces. It is also the analytical binary of the colonizer and the colonized that continues to shape dichotomies such as nature and culture as fixed entities.

Following fruitful perspectives coming from postcolonial studies and global history studies, taken up by literary studies, the focus shifts on to an

[...] intertwined, entangled history of Europe and the Global South, of colonizers and colonized, thus addressing not a history of isolated entities but rather a history that takes several sides as one complex unit [...]. Postcolonial history should no longer be seen as a history of European influence on the rest of the world or as a history of a serious deficit - of a catching up with European modernization. (Epple & Lindner 9)

Conrad & Randeria (2002) frame this idea of entanglements for a better understanding of the shared and divided history that mark experiences and constructions of modernity. That means that colonizing and colonized nations are bound together and shaped by the interplay of historical processes and dynamics.

We do locate our understanding of *the Caribbean as space of entanglements* within larger debates of and on postcolonial theory. Postcolonial authors have a particular liking for the use of spatial metaphors (like *entanglements*), to challenge the process of thinking in fixed identities. The logic behind this is to conceptualize difference in regard to spatial metaphors in a way that is non-dualistic (Lossau). Yet, they entail a broad range of methodological and conceptual tools across the disciplines. Edward Said's contrapuntal reading might be seen as an early attempt to think critically about interactions or *entanglements* despite its lack of focus on the dynamics of those interactions understood in the current discussions of the term and its possible uses as a method

(Kaltmeier; Müller; Raussert). [3] Furthermore, Fernando Coronil's approach entitled "Occidental Representational Modalities" (57-73), namely a "Dissolution of the Other by the Self", "Destabilization of Self by Other", and "Incorporation of the Other into the Self" can be regarded as an attempt to explain the conflicting constructions and stabilization/destabilization of identities in Western academic discourses as entanglements of knowledge production and ideas about identity in the Americas from an anthropological and Latin American perspective. [4] And it is here that two prominent studies from and about Caribbean cases are mentioned and resumed as one of the modalities: Fernando Ortiz's study on tobacco and sugar (1946) and Sidney Mintz's history of sugar's contribution to the formation of modernity (1985). According to Coronil's critique of the two studies, they both hint already at entanglements between and within different national areas and transnational spaces in methodological terms, yet they place the Caribbean or Cuba with Eurocentric essentialisms as a fixed entity. In this regard they indicate the dynamics and multi-relational connectedness of Caribbean entanglements, and more decisive in the context of the present collection of essays, they destabilize and deconstruct the dichotomy of nature and culture by taking (natural) goods as processors of social and cultural imaginaries and institutions.

Studies departing from a Caribbean perspective have also taken up and further developed the specific ideas and methods of the entangled histories approach. With its strong focus on mobilities in historical perspectives it crisscrosses traditional assumptions of national and cultural spaces as given entities, not just spatially but also between material and immaterial objects and imaginaries. [5] While the idea of shared and divided history is based on fruitful postcolonial thought (notably Fanon; Hall; Mintz "Sweetness and Power") and useful for historical research on empire and (post-)colonial nation-states, the overemphasis of the transnational as the dominant scale of investigation limits the practicality of the approach. Focusing predominantly on the transnational scale allows us to grasp transnational processes, but makes it difficult for us to grasp processes on and between other scales. Hence, the focus of the present issue of *fiar* is set by an understanding of *the Caribbean as space of entanglements*, and thus as a space shaped by circulations and transfers of goods and ideas by multiple colonial and postcolonial policies, imaginaries, discourses of literatures as well as other cultural and social practices. Entanglements are not *a priori* the object of study, because natural and cultural dynamics are understood as inherently entangled. Consequentially, the concentration lies on asking *how* relations are entangled and *what* the results are.

Based on these reflections, one needs to be careful about the reiteration of dichotomies, as Sundberg & Dempsey (2009) highlight: "[...] to write about nature/culture constructions is to presume the existence of a divide and thus constitutes a Eurocentric and Euro-centered endeavor". Therefore, analyzing "how culturally specific formations of nature come into being and how they are put to work to achieve particular political ends" renders it possible to analyze the

construction of what is imagined as nature as the product of power-knowledge relations (458). While the dichotomy of nature and culture is a prevalent idea, this does not imply that this conception holds true in other cultures and contexts, like, for instance, for the cultures and people in the Caribbean, prior to colonialism (Fitzpatrick; Zierhofer).

*The Caribbean as space of entanglements* is a ludic example of how the essentialist character of the dichotomy of nature and culture was and is used as legitimation of colonial expansion, of the disparagement of human beings, and of commodification of nature, just to name a few practices. For instance, the term 'Caribbean' was originally used to demonize the inhabitants of the region who resisted against the invaders and who were discursively vilified as unchristian and immoral man-eaters (Girvan; Hulme; Sheller). From then on, "the term itself and its later application to a geographical zone were inventions of imperial powers" (Girvan 3). By distinguishing themselves as civilized and cultivated, European colonialists left the sphere of nature and in this way placed Indigenous people in nature, outside of civilization, and therefore subject to domination and exploitation. The contemporary, economically important industry of tourism is based entirely "on (the idea of) unspoiled natural landscapes and an image of the region as paradise" (Jaffe 317). The Caribbean landscape is seen as "so abundantly tropical it's virtually vandal-proof. [...] Nature here becomes a kind of self-generating power that can be endlessly consumed and can withstand all that human consumption can impose on it" (Sheller 69; see also Nicolas-Bragance & Saffache in this issue).

This quick survey of what we see as forerunners indicates our aim of understanding *Caribbean entanglements* as material, geo-aisthetical and historical constellations and shows the multiscalar perspective that is necessary for such an approach to be extensively applied. [6] Consequently, by using the term entanglements both as a method and a metaphor, we understand them as the wide range of historical and contemporary processes and dynamics of circulation and transfer of actors, goods, and ideas simultaneously with the multiple and multi-relational ways these connections as webs, networks and knots create symmetries and asymmetries of power. Set within a larger framework of these dynamics and the focus on how these dynamics emerge, we would like to continue the ongoing debate in Inter-American (Area) Studies and take up the appeal "[...] to converse, share, exchange, debate, but first and foremost work together" (Raussert 92).

In a previous issue of *fiar* (*fiar* 7.3 *Theorizing Inter-American Studies*), several authors reflected on the concept of 'Entangled Americas' as a rethinking of Inter-American (Area) Studies. While Julia Roth explores decolonial politics of *intersectional entanglements* (2014) and Olaf Kaltmeier identifies three primordial points of departure of how one might rethink Area Studies in the Americas: *flows, geopolitical imaginaries* and *environment* (2014), Wilfried Raussert stresses a processual approach to Area Studies and explored a critical lexicography addressing "the transversal, multidirectional, and interconnected nature of historical processes, political

developments, economic changes and cultural productions that one considers fundamental for a more comprehensive understanding of the Americas as entangled space(s)” (70-1).

The three texts share some commonalities which are worth exploring. First, they underline the importance of analyzing power relations. Second, they foster a focus on interconnections, flows and mobilities. Third, they support an understanding of the Americas as an area basically shaped by manifold north-south and transatlantic connections. While they put emphasis on the fact that the Americas as space of entanglements are not limited to north-south-relations, but instead built critically upon this divide.

In order to foster an understanding of *the Caribbean as space of entanglements* within and as an Inter-American perspective, we would like to draw attention to the discussions on Area Studies and the transdisciplinary frameworks which primarily address the issues of analyzing cultural, geographical and literary dynamics in historical perspectives, but also consider sociological and economical sides of these entanglements.

### **Entangling Area(s)**

Area Studies are “academic programmes that cut across disciplinary boundaries to develop a relatively comprehensive body of knowledge about given regions - or areas - of the world” (Glassman 34). Their roots lie in colonial projects and the linked demand to generate knowledge about the Other via techniques of mapping, counting and alike (Kaltmeier; Mielke & Hornidge; Said “Orientalism”). In the decades after the Second World War, notably European and US-American governments largely funded Area Studies programs in order to further pursue the creation of operational knowledge about regions of the world. This way of collecting encyclopedic-style knowledge about artificially fixed entities usable for the implementation of geopolitical aims has been widely criticized (for a detailed overview of the historical development and critique of Area Studies, see Sidaway). However, this kind of Area Studies is still dominant in European and US-American Area Studies programs. Nevertheless, there is potential in academic Area Studies to autonomously and critically reflect upon knowledge production and to propose dialogic ways of exchange (Kaltmeier). One may argue that Area Studies programs have helped lower traditional fixed disciplinary boundaries. Correspondingly, critical approaches which stand in opposition to traditional western agendas have emerged from Inter-American and Caribbean perspectives as sketched above. That’s why, among others, Robinson claims to reincorporate and strengthen Area Studies, and in this way to challenge what she calls “parochialism to geographical knowledge” (275). This transdisciplinary and critical character of Inter-American (Area) Studies paves the way which this introduction and this issue follow.

Thinking about area in terms of, for instance, spatial entities, center-periphery models, or organic cultural traditions does indeed obscure underlying power-knowledge asymmetries and therefore obstructs emancipatory postcolonial thought (Mintz “The localization of anthropological practice”; van Schendel). There is a need to rethink conventional Area Studies in order to overcome the focus on fixed entities defined by political borders and assumed to have characteristic cultural elements. This leads to another concept of area itself. Area is not exclusively understood as a physical and/or symbolic space, but as a product of *geographical imagination* (Gregory “Imaginative Geographies”; see also Baquero Melo in this issue). Consequently, Area Studies represent a research paradigm relying on multiscale mobilities, networks, flows, and entanglements of people, ideas, and things. It is this potential that continues to make Area Studies a worthwhile endeavor.

Likewise, *the Caribbean as space of entanglements* cannot be examined as a bounded area. Urgent themes, for instance discussed in this special issue’s contributions, undeniably require the inclusion of connections with other areas and the multiplicity of relations between people, places, and spaces. Area Studies as a research paradigm “allows us to trace the global in the local, thus illustrating the benefits of local area analyses for understanding global dynamics” (Slocum & Thomas 553). Or, as Carole Boyce Davies puts it: “Because the Caribbean is clearly one of those geopolitical locations impacted by [...] larger historical developments, reading Caribbean space in this contemporary period means using different understandings of how this space is contoured beyond assumed fixed geographies” (6f.).

Here, the author reflects the interface of literary and geographical reading of the Caribbean space, which is at the core of our collaboration for a special issue on *Caribbean Entanglements*. In the following, we thus sketch some disciplinary and transdisciplinary key ideas of geographical and literary reading of space and the dichotomy of nature and culture. The discipline of geography played a major role in institutionalizing the dichotomy of nature and culture, and furthermore offered tools and practices to support, legitimate and advance colonial projects. It thus served as an instrument of empire and furthermore, helped establish dualistic ontologies like nature/culture, object/subject, woman/man, black/white, and other/self (Gregory, “(Post)Colonialism and the production of nature”). The discipline itself is held captive in the dualism of human geography and physical geography. At the same time, the discipline’s quite unique and distinguishing feature is its ability to reflect on this dualism and to use it productively in integrative and combined approaches. The broad debate on the dichotomy of nature and culture in the field of geography cannot be presented in this section. Rather, some main strands which are at the core of the debate are outlined here. Since its establishment as an academic discipline, geography has had the relationship between nature and society at its core. Changing understandings of the dichotomy of nature and culture range from 19<sup>th</sup> century environmental determinism and biogeographical

concepts à la Mackinder or Ratzel; to cultural ecology's attempt to relate nature and culture in the 1960s and 1970s; to Marxist approaches (e.g. Harvey); to late 1990s and early 2000s modern and post-dualist ontologies like Actor-Network-Theory (e.g. Latour), to name just a few (Braun; Gregory "(Post)Colonialism and the production of nature"). A central point of recent debates is the question of the meaning, the conditionality, and the causality of materiality in the social world (Schlottmann, Korf & Graefe).

The aforementioned critique of the established modern understanding of nature and culture is embedded in a broader appeal for integrative research, connecting perspectives from human geography and physical geography. The inherent danger of such appeals lies in its point of departure, reiterating the categories that are sought to be overcome. This highlights again the power of both nature and culture as essentialist constructions. However, a more integrative perspective is needed to better grasp the entanglements of nature and culture. Today's geography offers promising approaches to challenging the dichotomy as it sees the world not separated in ontological segments, but rather composed of a multiplicity and diversity of relational spaces, flows, patterns, and processes.

The basis for an explicitly geographical discussion of entanglements (Sharp, Routledge, Philo & Paddison) lies in Massey's (e.g. 2005) conceptualization of space and place. She conceives space as a side by side of different narratives—a social construction—and highlights that power relations are necessarily a part of space. Massey advocates dissolving the idea of place as a rather static site and emphasizes the processual and multiple character of place (Lossau). Developing this thought further with Jones' (2009) idea of thinking places as entanglements enables the investigation of cross- and multiscalar, temporal, corporeal, relational, material, natural, and cultural dimensions of a place. In this perspective, one can better grasp the "[...] rich entanglements of the social, the natural, the material, the imaginary, the past, and the present" (319), without falling into the infamous territorial trap (Agnew) of conceiving entanglements simply as intensive relations between places or areas.

Furthermore, theories that combine the critical potential of poststructuralist approaches and an engagement with realist understanding of materiality are emerging which might be a way to challenge the dichotomy of nature and culture without the inherent shortcomings of, for instance, Actor-Network-Theory. One could, for instance, think of entanglements in a similar way as of *assemblages* in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari. That means, entanglements are characterized by multiple flows, lines, imaginaries, and territories, always put together by relations and in relation, always challenged by processes of stabilization and destabilization. This understanding of space and time "[...] as a seamless web of reciprocal action, or as an integrated totality of functional interdependencies, or as a block of unlimited universal interconnections [...]" contests the thinking in linear causalities and dichotomies (DeLanda 19). Therefore, by shifting the focus from, for

instance, bounded territories to intertwined processes of (de-)territorialization, one must put an emphasis on the processes, mechanism, techniques, and effects. In other words, drawing on this *flat ontology* allows for overcoming the dichotomy of nature and culture, which is as any other technique of separation a powerful operation of ordering knowledge on the one hand (e.g. Foucault). And, on the other, to analyze discourses, practices, materialities, and effects in relation and in an integrative way.[7]

Taking up the above mentioned *leitmotif* of ecotone and water bodies in this issue, hurricanes represent an example for research drawing on the outlined approach by forms of thinking with entanglements at work at the nature-society interface; for example, an analysis of hurricanes and disaster risk management in the Caribbean focusing on Foucauldian apparatuses and Deleuzian assemblages. Hurricanes can be located at the interface of nature and society, as they are physical phenomena, which evoke diverse practices in different societies, influenced by human induced climate change. Hurricanes are neither all natural, nor all cultural. They shape social life and politics and, the other way round, social and political configurations are shaped by them. Furthermore, hurricanes and societies dealing with them develop a specific rhythm, a distinct interplay or entanglement of time and space (Schwartz).

Such interplays Schwartz is analyzing, we can observe as the object of literary and cultural studies. For instance, Lotman's concepts of the *semiosphere* (Lotman), combines structural spatial analysis of literary texts with models of cultural analysis. Recent approaches of (postcolonial) ecocriticism (see Beushausen's and Kowalik's articles in this issue, and Huggan & Tiffin in general) continue to critically re-write the latter holistic design of Lotman's approach.

Literary Studies and Comparative Literature take active part in defining recent approaches in Area Studies, such as *TransArea* (Ette), *Hemispheric American Studies* (Bauer) or *Inter-American Studies* (McClennen), in doing so, they also critically recognize and question the participation in the so called *project of modernity* that fundamentally set out to define what is natural and, idealistically, its cultural counterpart. We notice here similar discursive and practical mechanisms at work as they have been described above in the critical characterization of geography as a discipline. Literatures and also different and changing ideas of what literature *is* through ways of its institutionalization have helped to shape and transform the narrative of civilization and/vs. barbarism in the Americas not just geographically from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. But also thematically and spatially it is to be regarded as an entanglement of knowledge that combined, in its postcolonial trajectories, colonial discourses of landscapes as wilderness in terms and codes of morality from the Americas and beyond (see also Fitz 210-32).

In 'Caribbean literatures', it is slavery and the plantation trope that formed aesthetic discourses and literary practices since the colonial period. In recent years, these discourses and practices have been focused in their spatial formations. The idea of space in literary studies consequently works

as an entanglement of symbolic and material spaces. Evolving spaces of and in literature are therefore cultural practices as signifying practices. The study of topologies, topographies and mobilities of and within literatures continue to re-read the entanglements of nature(s) and culture(s) through the demonstration and critique of models and practices of imagination (see Russ; Isfahani-Hammond; and Kowalik in this issue).

At the same time *Caribbean entanglements* are explored thematically in literary and cultural studies approaches. Just to mention more historical and differentiating perspectives: Gudrun Rath offers new ways of looking at Zombies and *zombi narratives* and the critical approach to their global circulation as a worldly phenomenon (Rath; see also Anatol's video in the present issue). In a similar way, Leonie Meyer Krentler's work on human-animal relations and their representation in Caribbean literatures deals with the entanglements of nature(s) and culture(s) and serves up fruitful material for discussions in the future.

In this process of critical revision we are pointing at, the *Caribbean as space of entanglements*, has more recently been approached epistemologically as a space of transatlantic and inter-Caribbean knowledge production (Ette; Müller) and therefore not just reevaluated. [8] This idea of a producing space serves as multiple centers actively taking part in the process of exchange and not just passively receiving what is brought to it. Especially theories dealing with identity, from Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* to the discussion of *creolité* in Caribbean spaces and beyond have helped to reveal histories and History as entangled in the dynamics of creational processes.

### **Outlook: Caribbean Entanglements**

The very notion of *the Caribbean as space of entanglements* as it is proposed in the present issue of *fiar* already challenges ideas of spatial thinking practiced by traditional Area Studies. Thinking with the idea of entanglements is a way of description and reflection, not only prominent within fields such as Area Studies, but dominant and fruitful in more and more systematic approaches of cultural analysis departing from an understanding of space as a form of social, cultural, and aesthetic practice. The spatialized categories of postcolonial theory, for example *third space*, *in-betweenness* (Bhabha), have gained more importance in combination with cultural theories and models by Caribbean authors – e.g. *repeating islands* (Benítez-Rojo) or *poetics of relation* (Glissant). As a result, the notion of *the Caribbean as space of entanglements* is working with and within this combination of heterogeneous epistemologies, which itself is already formed by entanglements of knowledge-transfer.

The intertwined character of power-knowledge relations can be seen as a key topic in this issue's contributions and editorial. Reflecting this, for further research, one might investigate apparatuses

(Foucault) and assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari). This allows for an analysis of power-knowledge relations and their effects in neither causalistic, nor deterministic, nor dualistic ways. Furthermore, such a framework enables the dialogue between different areas, fields, and disciplines.

When looking at the contributions to this special issue, it is clear that a Caribbean perspective does include a wide range of areas and interconnections. A Caribbean perspective is transoceanic, multiscalar and connects places, ideas, and histories. Contributors to this special issue come from various disciplines such as Sociology (Jairo Baquero Melo), Geography (Fabiola Nicolas-Bragance & Pascal Saffache), and Literature (Giselle Anatol, Wiebke Beushausen, Ania Kowalik). The contributors are based on both sides of the Atlantic and on both sides of the Caribbean Sea, namely in Bogotá (Colombia), Fort-de-France (Martinique), Atlanta and Kansas (United States of America), and Göttingen (Germany). In their texts, they explore the entanglements of places, regions, nations, and continents. In this way they lay out interconnections and relations such as (among others) India-Canada-Guyana (Beushausen), Martinique-Europe (Nicolas-Bragance & Saffache), China-Nicaragua-USA-Panama-Colombia (Baquero Melo), St. Lucia-Trinidad and Tobago-Africa (Kowalik) and Africa-USA-Trinidad and Tobago (Anatol).

The location of the authors and their contributions highlight the scope of *transnational*, *translocational*, and *transatlantic* approaches. At the same time, the limits of these approaches become obvious and are discussed in the contributions. Studying interactions and the dynamics of construction of imagined and realized spaces in historical formations or/and in contemporary constellations is marked by an attempt to break free from national narratives. The fragmentary character of the juxtaposition of studies presented here and dedicated to histories, structures, actors, discourses and narratives of entanglements, reveal quite well the alertness to avoid overall celebratory images of circulation and transfer as entirely positive processes, because they would risk re-affirming stereotypes and the colonial categories they criticize.

Therefore, the concept of entanglements serves as a fruitful starting point for analysis, as it reflects the place and location, as well as the materiality and representation of social, historical, and spatial processes. Analyzing entanglements means thus to engage with a multiscalar analysis without excluding particular scales or using a framework with fixed and bound levels of analysis. All of these case studies start from a problem and analyze the entanglements of and on the relevant scales (spanning from the global to the body), and embed their analysis in the social, cultural, spatial, and historical context.

## Endnotes

[1] We do not want to restrict the use of nature and culture as key concepts of specific disciplines, like Geography or Literary Studies, however, consider the discussions of both terms as central to a wide range of a nowadays transdisciplinary exchange, ranging e.g. from Gender and Cultural Studies and Social Sciences to Biology and Natural Sciences.

[2] We thank the editors of Forum for Inter-American Research (*fiar*) to give us the opportunity to enter the debate with this special issue. Furthermore, we thank the contributors for their contributions, the reviewers, and those who provided inspiration and critique during the publication process.

[3] “As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said “Culture and Imperialism” 129).

[4] At the same time Edward Said is put prominently in the present discussions of postcolonial theories, we also share Fernando Coronil’s critique of post-colonial studies formed as set of dominant discourses since the 1980s: “It is remarkable but understandable that debates and texts on and from Latin America do not figure significantly in the field of post-colonial studies as it has been defined since the 1980s. [...] Said’s canonical *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) is emblematic of this tendency: it centers on British and French Imperialism from the late nineteenth century to the present” (Coronil 2004).

[5] Please see Bauck & Müller for a general critical introduction to *Entangled History* from an Inter-American perspective.

[6] As material conditions we subsume the constitution of territorial topographies and its respective geographical, climatological and geological coordinates; aesthetical resumes the interplay of sensitive, cognitive and affective conditions of perception and observation of surroundings.

[7] There are works preparing the ground for such an analysis. On a theoretical level inter alia Grove & Pugh or Legg; on an empirical level e.g. Matissek & Wiertz discussing an example from Thailand; first signs for the Caribbean: Grove “From emergency management to managing emergence” & Grove “Biopolitics and Adaptation”.

[8] It is relevant to notice that the above listed studies and authors are based in Western academia. But it is those studies and authors we are basing our reflections on, who foster critical approaches of transculturation, postcolonial theory, mobilities, imaginaries etc., rather than of fixed entities and identities. Overemphasizing the origin and institutionalization of an author follows the same binary logic like the dichotomy of nature and culture. Instead, we argue in favor of entanglements as an approach to put forward dialogue and transfer (e.g. Chakrabarty).

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### Suggested Citation

Bohle, Johannes, Marius Littschwager. "Introduction: Culture(s) and Nature Revisited." *forum for interamerican research* 8.3 (Dec 2015): 4-19. Available at: <[www.interamerica.de](http://www.interamerica.de)>

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**A Song from the Depths of the Sea:  
Eco-epic Textures in Romare Bearden and Derek Walcott**

**Abstract:**

An eco-critical analysis of Romare Bearden's *The Sea Nymph* (1977) and Derek Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" (1979) not only reveals new interpretive possibilities for Caribbean literature, but also demonstrates the centrality of nature in Afro-diasporic historical imaginary. This article argues that epic invocations of the Caribbean Sea in both works deconstruct the nature/culture binary by foregrounding a notion of diasporic environment as a text creatively rewriting Black Atlantic histories. To examine textual effects of the Caribbean Sea in Bearden and Walcott, I elaborate a notion of an "eco-epic texture," a mode of literary figuration that highlights entanglements of history, nature, and literature in processes of diasporic life-making. These textures, I argue, engender a cultural and political imaginary where affirmations of belonging give onto a critique of historical determinism and political ontology.

**Keywords:** Eco-epic, Derek Walcott, Romare Bearden, Diaspora, Sea

Art will go where the energy is.  
I expect a convincing outpouring of creative energy  
from lands touched by the Caribbean Sea.  
Romare Bearden "Clouds in the Living Room" (1985)

At last, islands not written about but writing themselves.  
Derek Walcott "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" (1992)

Derek Walcott's enthusiastic reception of Romare Bearden's *The Sea Nymph*—a collage from the 1977 Black Odysseus series and cover art of Walcott's *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979)—evokes the poet's own commitment to an epic articulation of Caribbean cultural identity. "[T]he grandeur of some of those 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' cutouts!" Walcott marvels,

Because the *brilliance* of making black silhouettes, right? which come out of Greek vase silhouettes, but are black ... and to make that silhouette alive in terms of the Caribbean. ... Because that Odysseus figure going down ... that's a *Caribbean* guy diving, you know? ... The breadth of it is staggering, because the color of that green is *exactly* what you get when you go down. I was there [diving in the sea] this morning. (qtd. in Price & Price 95; original ellipsis, emphasis, and commentary)

In his reading of the collage, Walcott not only points to the ways in which Bearden's work displaces Western literary imaginary from its origins in the Mediterranean and situates it within the context of the Caribbean archipelago and the Black Atlantic; he also foregrounds the interpenetration of Caribbean environment and art, a texture of the literal and the figurative. Diving *there* in the Caribbean Sea upsets the representational relationship this activity at first appears to establish between the blue sea in the painting and the blue sea in the world. In fact, for a moment it is unclear precisely where the poet found himself immersed that morning. And while the deictic *there* in Walcott's commentary is corralled by the interviewers' editorial intervention hooking the word to its material location, the ambiguity of the word persists, as the adverb cannot entirely disavow that moment of crossing between the green of Bearden's collage and the green of the Caribbean Sea, which equivocally entangles aesthetics and materiality.

Walcott's elated response to *The Sea Nymph* reflects the poet's own approach to the Caribbean environment in aesthetic terms. In fact, a poetic engagement with the natural world of the archipelago lies at the heart of Walcott's own philosophy of poetry. Critic John Thieme recalls that "[Walcott] and Dunstan St. Omer [St. Lucian painter and Walcott's friend] took a vow that they would not leave St. Lucia until they had 'put down' its neglected natural history 'in paint, in words' and, in a 1989 interview, Walcott spoke about his attempt to recapture the particular 'tactile' quality of specific St. Lucian trees and plants on the printed page" (8). This commitment to give the

natural world space in poetry and art illuminates why Walcott would take to Bearden's work with such exhilaration: for him, *The Sea Nymph* must have captured something of the Caribbean Sea's tactile quality, vividly evoking a simultaneously corporeal and aesthetic experience. But if the mimetic relationship traditionally organizing depictions of the natural environment in literature and art assumes the object and the act of representation to be separate, what are we to make of the impossibility of satisfactorily disentangling the material from the figural, as subtly suggested by the ambiguity of the adverb *there*?

This problem of exactly how to understand the relationship between the act of literary or visual representation and the represented object is further probed by Walcott in an interview recorded in 1979. Registering his impatience with the paltriness of what he calls "postcard poetry" of early St. Lucian writing, Walcott suggests that what he is after is a kind of writing that disturbs the traditional economy of representation:

There were so many *easy references* to bright blue seas, so many colorful depictions of peasant life. [...] West Indian verse seemed to have more of the flavor of a library than the most metropolitan verse not at all related to the Caribbean experience; and naturally I went in the direction in which the language was most vigorous and alive. I had to impose on myself the severe discipline of making sure that what I was doing was difficult; it was not willful obscurity. (283; added emphasis)

In contrast to "easy references" evoking simple realism that takes the environment as a knowable object, Walcott wants to mobilize poetic expression not merely to convey difficulty for difficulty's sake, but to grasp something of a difficulty inhering in the Caribbean experience itself. And what is crucial about Walcott's understanding of the relationship between poetic language and this experience (involving culture as much as the environment) is his intuition that it is the poetic language that can convey the Caribbean's difficulty, or perhaps that this difficult archipelago elicits a poetic, and not, for instance, ethnographic, articulation. For him, it is the entanglement of the poetic and the material that generates cultural and historical meanings of the archipelago.

This juxtaposition of Walcott's reading of *The Sea Nymph* with the poet's own reflections about the relationship between poetry and the natural environment sets the stage for the central question of this essay: What difference does a touch of the Caribbean Sea make for diasporic cultural representation, historical identity, and literary genealogy? Indeed, many scholars have extensively theorized the philosophical, political, and aesthetic repercussions of the Black Atlantic. For Paul Gilroy, the Black Atlantic deconstructs the inherited habits of dualistic thinking: it functions as a "non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, an asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding" (198). Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley retrieves from the Atlantic abyss a queer archive "where [...] currents of historical, conceptual, and embodied maritime experience come together to transform

racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized selves [...] reflect[ing] the materiality of black queer experience while refusing its transparency” (192-193). And Elizabeth DeLoughrey foregrounds traumatic burdens of the Middle Passage to reflect on “how Atlantic inscriptions rupture the naturalizing flow of history, foregrounding a now-time that registers violence against the wasted lives of modernity in the past and the present” (704). My essay likewise insists on the necessity of thinking through the opaque, unequivocal, and decentering currents of the Black Atlantic. But taking cue from the epigraphs anchoring this essay, I want to argue that the ecological materiality of the Caribbean Sea likewise transforms our understanding of aesthetic, cultural, and political representation. The grammatical shift in Walcott’s comment on the textual activity of the archipelago—*islands writing themselves*—seems slight, but its consequences are substantial. For if the natural environment of the Caribbean is envisioned as a text actively engaging in its own representation—*writing itself rather than being written about*—then what is at stake is nothing else than the relationship between nature and culture, and the whole problematic of knowledge, ontology, and historical change that follows from it.

In what follows, I examine how *The Sea Nymph* and Walcott’s “*The Schooner Flight*” rewrite the epic motif of home-leaving and home-coming to highlight the textual activity of the Caribbean Sea. Reflecting on the problem of Afro-diasporic collective identity in relation to the epic, these works, I propose, not only testify to diasporic resilience, dignity, and imagination, but also dramatize the creativity of the Caribbean Sea to offer an account of history and politics constitutively entangled with and transformed by nature. In the first part of the essay, I show how Bearden’s environmental vision of Afro-diasporic continuity and re-creation transforms notions of identity, cultural authenticity, and literary genealogy. In the second part, I focus on how “*The Schooner Flight*,” departing from the notion of nature as re-creative, engages the Caribbean Sea as riven with displacements, losses, and memories of dispossession. In demonstrating how for Walcott, diasporic turbulences disturb rather than consolidate political community in the post-independence Caribbean, I suggest that re-formulating Caribbean materiality in terms of scatter will allow us to honor diasporic affirmations of belonging while eschewing the idea of a fixed, timeless ontological ground of identity.

In my readings of *The Sea Nymph* and “*The Schooner Flight*,” I elaborate the notion of an “eco-epic texture,” which foregrounds those figurations where nature complicates historical imaginary. As an inextricable entanglement of the natural, the literary, and the historical, texture invokes Walcott’s interest in capturing the tactile quality of the environment of the page. But the word compels me for another reason as well. Texture conveys meanings of weaving, of making, of a temporal process by way of which it broaches the notion of firm ontological grounds taken to stabilize and render legible cultural and political identities. How then do diasporic lives materialize on such shaky foundations?

## 1. A Black Atlantic Odyssey

Walcott's appreciation for *The Sea Nymph* as a Caribbean collage reflects the significance of the Caribbean as a central inspiration animating Bearden's work in the 70s and 80s. Critics have pointed out that in the last two decades of his life, Bearden's work is marked by a shift in technique, subject, and color. Art critic and curator Lowery Sims observes that "Bearden's work began to take on a particularly lush quality. He used sumptuous shades of blue and green to present the dense vegetation of the Caribbean. Now Bearden's work was literally awash with the turquoise blues and lapis tones of the Caribbean" (qtd. in Price & Price 92). Other characteristics of Bearden's work in the 70s and 80s include his increased use of watercolor, and manifest interest in exploring the meaning of seascapes in Afro-diasporic cultural and historical imaginary. [1]

This artistic preoccupation with the Caribbean indicates that the archipelago's tropical settings become as crucial for an articulation of Black identity as the urban scenes of Bearden's Harlem collages or the southern rural spaces in the Mecklenburg series. Beyond this centrality of the Caribbean for Afro-diasporic artistic expression, however, *The Sea Nymph*—a Caribbean translation of the Greek epic—compels a radical rethinking of cultural foundations. In approaching the Atlantic abyss as a stage for a founding performance of historical memory, Bearden places the Caribbean at the center of a reflection about Afro-diasporic ontology; and his rewriting of a Western epic as a diasporic narrative unsettles a binary, oppositional alignment of cultural difference, drastically changing the ways in which diasporic and European identities have been conceptualized.

In the Black Odysseus series, Bearden claims the *Odyssey* as a universal narrative of human ingenuity, resilience, and survival to reflect on the continuities and discontinuities of Black Atlantic historical formations. One of the twenty collages comprising his visual revision of Homer, *The Sea Nymph* renders a scene in Book V where a drowning Odysseus is saved by goddess Ino, who pulls him out of the ocean depths with her veil of immortality. Situated in the Black Atlantic historical imaginary, this scene in particular engenders an Afro-diasporic collective memory of death and endurance, "a theft of the [black] body" (Spillers 67) and its startling "will to survive" (75). For a number of critics, then, Bearden's Black Odysseus is significant both in hemispheric American terms, as a narrative of life in the wake of colonial dispossession characterizing the "New World," and as a dramatization of Afro-American experience in the U.S.—an invocation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Great Migration out of the South, or a visual representation of jazz composition, a style characteristic of Bearden's collages in general. [2] The significance of Bearden's accomplishment in the Black Odysseus series was best captured by Ralph Ellison who argued that the triumph of Bearden's art in general lies in the artist's ability "to express the tragic predicament

of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world” (227).

However, in concretizing diasporic human drama, *The Sea Nymph* likewise draws attention to the activity of underwater life. With the two black silhouettes aligned off-center, the right-hand side of the collage is occupied by the tumultuous waves of the sea, tangled sea plants, and high wave crests, whose supple shapes resonate with Ino’s veil. While in the Greek version, Ino’s life-sustaining veil acts against the raging sea, in Bearden’s retelling the waves beat against the vessel and abet the transmutation of death into life. In this way, both the veil and the sea plants enwrap Odysseus—in the collage he is holding onto seaweed as he is extending his other hand toward Ino who is holding the veil in her hand—forming around him umbilical lifelines and delivering him into the future. This scene, then, is much more than a story of surviving the storm, of living through the Middle Passage; rather it narrates a new kind of cultural beginning that disrupts received notions of cultural continuity. This is a distinctly Black Atlantic narrative structured according to an “American grammar”—writing that “begins at the ‘beginning’, which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation”—as Hortense Spillers described U.S. American writing in the wake of the Middle Passage (68), but which I would say characterizes Afro-diasporic literary and intellectual traditions more broadly.

Following Spillers’s suggestion that what we refer to as cultural continuity in the Black Atlantic must be submitted to radical questioning, I want to extend her notion of an “American grammar” to include as well the writing of the Black Atlantic continuity performed by the natural world. How should one conceive this peculiar kind of continuance that flows from Ino’s hand through her veil that wraps itself around Odysseus and moves through his hand onto the sea plant? Here, the environment is not merely a background, a frame, against which this continuance unfolds; it is, rather, an active, transformative element that shapes diasporic historical and cultural imaginary. In the words of Édouard Glissant, “To describe the [diasporic] environment is not enough. The individual, the community, and the environment are indissociable in the constitutive episode of their history. The environment is a character in this history. One must [*il faut*] understand it in all its complexity” (343; translation mine). In the ruptured beginning figured in *The Sea Nymph*, the constitutive indissociability of humans and the environment is vividly envisioned as a stitching—a texture—of the cultural (insofar as the veil through which Ino extends the future to Odysseus is an artifact) and the natural. Figured as a chain of human body, textile, and seaweed, diasporic continuance emerges here as a peculiar foundational fabric—dispersed and differentiated—but nevertheless unfolding a narrative of ingenuity and endurance. Highlighting a transformation of the negativity of the Middle Passage into fragile conditions of possibility for the emergence of new futures, this texture centers a process of underwater *poiēsis*. But whereas we might be

accustomed to the meaning of *poiēsis* as “the capacity of human beings to alter radically the forms and structures they inherit” (Gourgouris xvii), what is so crucial about the kind of *poiēsis* at work in *The Sea Nymph* is that the transformation of the annihilating inheritance of the Middle Passage into forms of life is a conjoined activity of a natural-cultural making. In this ecological American grammar inscribed from the abysses of the Black Atlantic, nature is threaded with culture as a process of re-creation, laboring against the dehumanizing effects of colonialism that stifle creativity.

Such an intervention into our thinking about foundations is significant both at the philosophical and political level. Bearden takes the chaos and disorder of Afro-diasporic historical experience as a deconstruction of the nature/culture binary that has structured much of Western philosophical tradition. Feminist critics Val Plumwood and Nancy Hartsock have argued that “[t]he structure of reason/nature dualism and its variants is the perspective of power [...] [structuring] ‘a way of looking at the world characteristic of the dominant, white, male Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities’” (Plumwood 44). In this context, then, the sea texture in *The Sea Nymph*, insofar as it de-structures this sovereign, exclusionary way of looking, enables a radically new alignment of difference. Envisioned as interdependence rather than opposition, the relationship between nature and culture (and its variants such as reason, history, mastery, etc.), opens up the possibility of a likewise interdependent relationship between “identity” and “difference,” where neither of these positions can be stabilized within an already familiar social, cultural, and historical landscape. The political stakes follow from the philosophical ones and involve a thorough revision of political myths based on traditional notions of filiation and legitimacy. The image of drowning Odysseus grabbing onto the veil and the seaweed as two available lifelines evinces a foundational texture—rather than a firm ontological ground—that upsets the presupposition of a timeless ontological essence. An eco-epic texture, thus, does not support an absolute political vision, nor does it inscribe in teleological terms the social formations it patterns. Instead, an ecological epic that comes out of Afro-diasporic textured beginnings is a social event that simultaneously—and this is the intellectual challenge *The Sea Nymph* confronts us with—affirms Afro-diasporic lives in their multiplicity and dispersal, and deconstructs those socio-political arrangements which perpetuate the dispossession of and deny livelihood to all humans negatively constructed as “Other.”

Such a double articulation emerges in Walcott’s ecological reading of *The Sea Nymph* where the Caribbean becomes key for the transmission of the epic:

Besides its veracity, there is the color [...] which is absolutely, perfectly the color of coral water, while the figure could simply be a coral diver or a shell diver going down

to pick up shells from the bottom of the sea. So this combination of images—the black diving figure and the green water—immediately strikes me not as Aegean but as completely Caribbean. And as it is for Romare, it is perfectly valid for me to think of an archipelago in which there are boats and pigs and men, [...] to think of the *Odyssey* in terms of the Caribbean. [...] I think you can't live in the archipelago—and Bearden *lived* in the Caribbean—without that great poem in the back of your head of the time. And it's not sort of *adapting* it to the Caribbean—it's direct. [...] If you're living in the archipelago, the light is there, the rituals—the primal Greek rituals, the pantheism of Greek culture, it's still there in the Caribbean. (qtd. in Price and Price 96, 94; original emphasis)

In this feat of cultural translation, Walcott discerns in the Caribbean landscape epic exuberance not derivative of the genre's Greek articulations, but embedded within the region itself, yielding a radically different engendering of cultural origins. The sense of the simultaneous immediacy and latency of the Greek within the Caribbean—that it is all *still there*—bespeaks the constitutive multiplicity of the archipelago that complicates the understanding of a culture—any culture—and its material environments as present, determinate, and synchronized. To follow the logic of Walcott's reading, the emergence of the *Odyssey* within the Caribbean, while inextricable from “the artist's head,” is not an effect of a singular artistic design to fit the Caribbean within the inherited form. And although the word *direct* is not an entirely fortuitous choice as it does not capture the entire complexity of the situation where the poem is both on the artist's mind and “still there” in the Caribbean, *directness* nevertheless foregrounds the materialization of the epic out of the lived world of the archipelago—materialization textured as an entanglement of nature, historical and cultural specificity, and artistic creativity. Such a *direct* emergence of the poem in the Caribbean simultaneously diffracts the epic's familiar proper place in the Mediterranean, and the peculiar naturalization of the *Odyssey* within the archipelago in fact denaturalizes the notion of a grounding location as such. To pull a canonical Western text through its other origins in the Caribbean means to challenge the mono-cultural trajectories of influence and filial transmission the epic is so often taken to inscribe. Thus, the significance of Walcott's ecological reading is that he discerns in Bearden's gesture not simply an application of an inherited universal narrative to Black experience (or a translation of the Black experience as fitting with the universal narrative), but rather a destabilization of the very structure that organizes the patterns of inheritance, the notion of cultural authenticity and derivation, and literary genealogy.

I emphasize this point because existing studies of Afro-diasporic revisions of the *Odyssey* often focus on the reappropriation of the hegemonic form initially deployed to oppress black and indigenous populations in the Americas (McConnell 2). In contrast to such interpretations, the point of my argument is that it is not enough to register the postcolonial appropriation of form, for such an account leaves intact the ideological presuppositions that ground the very form that is being

claimed. Rather, if Afro-diasporic interventions into the literary history of the epic are to reflect anti-colonial political commitments, then we must think about how these appropriations deconstruct colonial grounds and alter the ways in which societies are instituted, in the very gesture of claiming the epic for an articulation of diasporic lives.

My intention in unfolding this argument largely through a reading of a reading—through an analysis of Walcott’s appraisal of Bearden—is to offer a performative reflection on Glissant’s ethical injunction that rather than describe the environment, “one must [*il faut*] understand it in all its complexity.” What is so pertinent about Walcott’s engagement with Bearden’s work is precisely this appreciation for the complexity of the environment—not mere description, but a reading that dwells on the nuance of the natural. Such a reading is vital for affirmative articulations of Caribbean lives aiming to resituate the environment in positive terms, as a space of flourishing rather than a resource for appropriation, an attitude long characteristic of colonial and neocolonial approaches to the region. Historian Londa Schiebinger notes, for instance, that “[in the eighteenth century,] nature [...] was there for the taking. [...] [U]nspoken notions concerning a global commons applied only to nature and its resources outside Europe: European trading companies and states claimed exclusive rights to the natural resources of the territories they could hold militarily” (45). In contrast to the acquisitive approaches of colonial bioprospectors, the natural environment envisioned in Bearden’s collage—insofar as it eludes stable and stabilizing empirical description—allows differential inscriptions of historical continuity unhinged from the determinism of colonial deprivation. It is for this reason that Walcott’s charge of “an easy reference” is never directed at the magnetic blue of *The Sea Nymph*. In eliciting a *reading* of diaspora’s natural environment, Bearden’s collage never simply refers to—never just points to, or sends away to—the Caribbean Sea as if it stood outside the figural play of art. To the contrary, the Atlantic textile is inextricable from the process of cultural life-making in the Afro-diaspora—an intractable unit of American grammar—which invites an alternative understanding of socio-political reality and reframes nature as ethico-political category.

Ralph Ellison observed that Bearden’s art, in its modern engagement with the specificities of Black lives in the U.S., brings about such an alternative understanding of reality: it “brings a new visual order into the world, [...] [insisting] that we see and that we see in depth and by the fresh light of the creative vision” (229, 234; original emphasis). To engage with Bearden’s work, he writes, is to be offered a lesson in the appreciation of “the creative possibilities of cultural diversity” beyond “the distortions of newsprint and the false continuity imposed upon our conception of Negro life by television and much documentary photography” (228, 234). And in revealing this inherent creativity of Black lives, Bearden’s art reflects less the “prose” of Black life, and more its poetry—“poetry compounded of vitality and powerlessness, destructive impulse, and the all-pervading and enduring faith in [the Black] style of American humanity. [...] A harsh poetry this, but poetry

nevertheless” (237, 235). In other words, the poeticity of Bearden’s work lies in how it attests to the fact that race is not “an ontological given” (McDowell 234) and that Black bodies produce numerous “representational potentialities” (Spillers 80). Reading through the complexities of the Atlantic’s underwater life, my goal in this section was to demonstrate that Bearden’s vision responds also to the poeticity of Afro-diaspora’s natural environments. The complexity of the natural world that Bearden captures in relation to Black history suggests that this poetics of the natural is not a purely aesthetic commitment, but first and foremost a political one: in unhinging reductive representations of a culture’s materiality, Bearden’s Atlantic epic challenges how the diaspora’s socio-historical realities have been configured, and opens up new and unknown ways of inhabiting diasporic terrains.

## 2. A Song from the Depths of the Sea

Walcott’s choice of *The Sea Nymph* as cover art for his landmark collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* reveals the centrality of Bearden’s Black Atlantic vision of the *Odyssey* for the poet’s own reflection on Caribbean collective identity in the charged political context of West Indian independence movements in the 70s. [3] In this section, I focus on how “The Schooner *Flight*,” the inaugural poem of this collection, elaborates the Atlantic texture figured in *The Sea Nymph*, and inquire about the political positionalities and diasporic continuities the eco-epic texture underwrites.

In her account of the socio-political context of “The Schooner *Flight*,” literary critic Patricia Ismond puts her finger on the political interest of this poem:

“The Schooner *Flight*” deals with the case of Trinidad, whose materialistic spree threatens to destroy the very fabric of the society. [...] Walcott responds to [a representative case] of social and political collapse in the Caribbean of the late 70s, to extend against these, his definitions of a viable Caribbean selfhood and path towards self-development. (228-229)

What is crucial to note is that Walcott extends these definitions by way of a departure from the concrete location in which the socio-political crisis unfolds: the title of the first section of “The Schooner *Flight*” reads “Adios, Carenage.” [4] Further, this reflection is articulated by Shabine, Walcott’s captivating sailor-poet, whose frequently cited autobiographical confession—“I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I’m nobody or I’m a nation” (4)—has become a motto of postcolonial hybridity and statelessness. While the political community to which Shabine’s equivocal identity might belong is referred to as “a nation,” his claim to this political formation appears enigmatic because the kind of nation summoned here answers neither to the demand of common ethnic origins or cultural ties, nor to the demand for a shared historical memory.

Therefore, if this claim to a national political community is to mean that “this very condition of not belonging to any exclusivist, absolutist ideology may be the basis of a different, other identity with its own access of freedom and possibility” (Ismond 232), then we must necessarily reflect on what it means to make a claim for this kind of political community from the midst of the Caribbean Sea. What is crucial about Shabine’s claim is that this declaration of political belonging (or perhaps non-belonging) is made on the brink of leaving the island as a geo-political unity where such a community might begin to cohere. Departing from Ismond’s reading of this fragment, then, what I am suggesting here is that we must not only ponder the possibilities of “a different, other *identity*,” but also, and perhaps more importantly, envision a different, other *basis* of political identities. Given his composite pedigree, Shabine is an especially fitting protagonist of the quest for Caribbean alternative foundations. Initially a derogatory word for lower-class people of African and European ancestry, “shabine” reflects “the most problematical category of colour and ethnicity in the region. [...] [T]he *chabin* is an impossible human being, neither black nor white” (Arnold 45; see also Ismond 230). [5] For Walcott, “Shabine” simultaneously gives a vernacular name to the class of people who embody the contradictions of colonialism, and names the poem’s Odyssean protagonist who strives to give “voice to one people’s grief” (19)—to its complex history of ruptures and re-beginnings. Shabine himself, then, is an epic poet whose unending voyage is to find an articulation of a community that evinces this community’s aporetic genealogy and envisions its future.

While Shabine witnesses on his journey various historical events that chart the region’s harrowing history—including the Middle Passage and Carib suicide—the moment that especially interests me is a texture of underwater witnessing in the second part of the poem “Raptures of the Deep”:

I start salvage diving with a crazy Mick,  
name O’Shaughnessy, and a limey named Head;  
but this Caribbean so choke with the dead  
that when I would melt in emerald water,  
whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent,  
*I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans,*  
*dead-men’s-fingers, and then, the dead men.*  
*I saw the powdery sand was their bones*  
*ground white from Senegal to San Salvador* (7; added emphasis)

Echoing the Atlantic abysses of *The Sea Nymph* but foregrounding more sharply its aporias, Shabine’s descent into the emerald green of the Caribbean Sea “reveals the submerged burial ground of the Black Atlantic. What begins as a witnessing pledge—“I saw them corals”—marks in fact an undoing of the witnessing subject as a result of his very inability to tell coral from the human remains that the coral symbolizes. Following the witnessing pledge, the colon—rather than

establish equivalence between what follows and what precedes it—in fact confuses the distinction between the object of representation and the traumatic history it represents. Indeed, what is striking about this texture is that the punctuation mark functions as a transformative aperture through which multiple meanings of coral proliferate. Words that allow us to dwell on this scene as a foundational scene of agony—brain, fire, sea fans (also called sea whips), and dead-men’s-fingers—sprout after the colon, engendering a horrific memory entangled with the spectacular ecosystem of corals. This narration—which at no point can be ascribed solely to Shabine—testifies at one and the same time to the complex historical *poiēsis* taking place at the bottom of the sea *and* to the dissolution of the distinction between nature and history—the literal and the figurative—as the very distinction that regulates a unified and legible representation of historical being.

The complexity of this scene is compounded by the fact that while the witnessing subject is in crisis as a result of the confusion between the material and the figural, the historical circumstances of the Black Atlantic do indeed find a fairly accurate articulation in these lines. While living corals might *resemble* human body parts, they quite conceivably adhere to them in material ways as well. Although coral reef skeletons are generally self-produced by coral polyps, corals can also grow upon artificial substrate, such as sunken ships, tires, concrete blocks, or human bones. [6] Thus, the Atlantic slave trade—with sunken slave ships and slaves who were thrown overboard or jumped into the sea as an ultimate act of defiance—contributed its own peculiar skeleton for marine life. In this context, the coral ecosystem likely engenders human bodies at a material as much as at a symbolic level and—interwoven with Shabine’s historical sensibility—creatively sustains historical memory.

While in the first two highlighted lines (“I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans, / dead-men’s-fingers, and then, the dead men”) historical memory is created in part through a transformative activity of coral, thus exploring the textures of Black Atlantic memories through a markedly Caribbean environment, the next two lines (“I saw the powdery sand was their bones / ground white from Senegal to San Salvador”) rearticulate the conditions of possibility for inscribing historicity by retracing the routes of the Middle Passage back to Africa. Unlike the former lines that evoke material exuberance, the closing verses are permeated by the images of dispersal—powdery sand and bones ground white. Thus, while Shabine’s dive into the emerald waters of the Caribbean Sea brings to mind an epic descent into the underworld, where the hero typically becomes reacquainted with his origins and gains a sense of direction in his journey, Shabine’s descent into the underworld of his ancestors is anything but an ontological confirmation. This ground is literally *ground*, pulverized into bone dust and sea sand the whiteness of which recalls the bleaching of history, the objectification of black bodies and, consequently, the denial of their status as subjects capable of producing their own culture and history. For Shabine, this descent

cannot reaffirm filiation, and neither can it offer a teleological vision of an anticipated arrival. For what is scattered at the bottom of the ocean are two Black Atlantic genealogies that cannot be reconciled, or recuperated, or redeemed in the service of filiative continuity.

Walcott famously captures this genealogical aporia in the closing paragraph of “The Muse of History” (1974):

I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper “history,” for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. (64)

This essay ends with a “strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds” (64). The “soldering” of Africa and Europe is a very different image than the powdery sand indistinguishable from ground bones. Rather than as an incongruity, however, I propose to read the above passage and the verses from “The Schooner *Flight*” as staging a necessary contestation within Caribbean historical consciousness, an inexorable tension between a sense of possibility arising from the chaotic encounter of multiple histories, and a lingering sense of loss and privation. Thus what Walcott rejects is not so much the idea of Caribbean historicity, but rather a certain “idea of history”—a concept of temporal continuity—whereby the past becomes integrated within a historical narrative of a given society as a factor determining or orienting this society’s present and future. For Walcott, this is both a philosophical and an ethical question, for to accept either European or African genealogy would inevitably involve conceding to one’s own dehumanization as much as justifying and explaining—that is, explaining away—the history of the Middle Passage. Instead, the philosophy of history that unravels in “The Schooner *Flight*” resonates more with Spillers’ notion of Black Atlantic beginnings as marked by a rupture and a new idea of continuation: according to American grammar of the poem, history becomes an interruptive event, an event that disrupts rather than grounds, an event in the wake of which the future—unhinged from the past—is imagined as a potentiality, as is the case in “The Muse of History,” or as a question, as it emerges in “The Schooner *Flight*.”

A sense of this paradoxical historical continuity emerges likewise in the eco-epic texture I have been interpreting. While the bedrock of history appears constitutively shattered—the route from Senegal to San Salvador is traced by powdery sand and ground bones—a peculiar historical continuance is patterned poetically, through a recurrent use of the sibilant “s,” both a poetic sound pattern and an onomatopoeic sound suggestive of its elemental origin in the sea and wind. The winding, sinuous S tenuously ties the African point of departure with the American point of arrival as a poetic and material rather than subjective continuity. Rather than conceding to the

determining reification of historical injury or reinforcing subjective knowledge of real historical conditions, Walcott traces at the site void of controlling ancestry a poetic-material involvement that calls for a persistent reading of history and nature that weaves origins in and out of shape.

Reflecting on the variegated patterning of Caribbean beginnings, literary scholar Valérie Loichot helpfully glosses such practices as “patterns escap[ing] the agency of a central authority, whether a father or the author of a text,” suggesting that the severing of filiative lines in the Black Atlantic in fact led to practices of creative restitution of family lines not essentially along bloodlines (1). While such an “orphan narrative” (Loichot’s term) captures the notion of history that follows from Walcott’s repudiation of African and European genealogy, I find the term “eco-epic texture” more fitting when considering the poetic-material-historical entanglements in “The Schooner *Flight*.” One reason why this concept of texture is so central is because it helps us read literary passages where the natural environment emerges differently than a frame, a context, or a background. In the first texture, coral is integral—symbolically and materially—to the metaphoric transaction between corals and brains. This complex poetic texturing of the material and the figural displaces the human as a sole transformative agent of his or her historical environment. In foregrounding the impossibility of determining whether the source of transformation is Shabine’s creative mind or whether it originates in the coral, texture enables us to read in those spaces where the ontological separation between nature and history collapses, and where the formal and logical operations of the human mind cannot be taken as the sole structuring representation of the world. In textural readings we dwell on intricate, poetic patterns of mind and matter that give space to the contingency of nature as a shaping (rather than shaped) element of representation. What is important about this co-implication of mind and matter is that in their entanglement, their relationship is not one of a reversed hierarchy where the material is re-privileged over mind. Rather, creativity, imagination, innovativeness, and capacity for transformation, are dispersed across the larger ecological body, making political and historical change a much more nebulous but an infinitely livelier affair.

Another reason why I find it helpful to think about foundational figurations in Bearden and Walcott as textures is that texture holds poetic, natural, and historical transformations as inseparable. It centers the “voluminous and indefinite” skills of *poiein*—poetic practice (Gourgouris 7). Stathis Gourgouris approaches *poiein* simultaneously as an artistic and historical transformation, material more than abstract, that eludes the grasp of conventional historical knowledge and alters the relationship between form and matter:

*poiein* as history in the making [...] does not really have a precise temporality; hence traditional methods of historiography cannot grasp it. Its working is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, that would not spare even itself as an object of that work. (The clichéd notion of a poem always being at work on itself, on making itself into a poem, should be understood here as an elemental force of *poiein*.) The energy

of *poiein* is dramatic: Literally, to form is to make form happen, to change form (including one's own). [...] The political substance of *poiein* is thus not signified just by its constitutively transformative power, but by the fact that in its ancient meaning, it pertains to humanity's immanent (even if perpetually self-altering) encounter with the world. (10-11)

The Atlantic textures in the works of Bearden and Walcott evince this idea of a poetic remaking of history through an ecological involvement of humans and the world. This remaking is poetic not only because it becomes legible through art and poetry, but also because the transformative power of *poiein* refers to a socio-cultural imaginary and thus bears a poetic rather than analytical relation to knowledge (Gourgouris 9). Lastly, with the emphasis on the ecological character of these transformations, texture de-centers the human as a custodian of transformation, sustaining the site of change as continually open and contingent, and thus in a sense ultimately indifferent to and non-appropriable by specific socio-political interests and political projects. Therefore, thinking about the eco-epic as modulated by texture does not mean substituting the natural for historical origins but rather holding them in a productive tension where the epic recalibrates the ways in which history is written.

Taking the eco-epic texture as such an open, self-transformative space of beginnings involves then a thorough revision of inherited definitions of the epic. Notice how differently the relationship between the past and the present is figured in *The Sea Nymph* and "The Schooner *Flight*" when juxtaposed with the absolute distinction between "the presentness of the present and the pastness of the past" (14) that characterizes the epic in Bakhtin's account:

"beginning," "first," "founder," "ancestor," "that which occurred earlier" [...] are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories. [...] Epic discourse is a discourse handed down [...] solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself. [...] [I]t is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in [the epic world]. It is completed, conclusive, and immutable. [...] [W]ithin this [epic] time, completed and locked, all points are equidistant from the real, dynamic time of the present; insofar as this time is whole, it is not localized in an actual historical sequence; it is not relative to the present or to the future; it contains within itself, as it were, the entire fullness of time. (15-19; original emphasis)

Certainly, the notion of temporality subtending this characterization is structured by the oppositional descriptions of the novel and the epic in *The Dialogic Imagination*, where it is the former genre that strictly belongs to the present. But, more generally, Bakhtin's definition of the epic also reflects a traditional metaphysical thinking of temporality that posits—in a circuitous, repetitive, and policing manner—an unspoiled, ideal, and plentiful origins sheltered from any change or difference. In securing a particular cultural and political heritage, this metaphysical origin assumes a controlling and normative function; it determines the interpretation of present political events according to whether they lead towards a future state already prescribed by the imagined,

idealized origin. Thus, according to this logic, change is not really change for any truly new occurrence would signal an aberration, a tear, in the socio-political fabric of the community, threatening both the stability of its being and the epistemic organization of its world. In the classical epic, such a totalizing teleological ideology is emphasized for instance in Virgil's *Aeneid* where the quest for the fatherland is driven by the nostalgic obsession with the lost Troy and the promised land in Italy and where "the setting, action, imagery, and even the hyperbolic rhetoric [...] are patterned through the epic's focus on Rome as omphalos, the cosmic center that both orders the horizontal space around it and establishes a vertical *axis mundi* as a hierarchical index of being and value" (Cook 117).

In contrast, Bearden's and Walcott's Black Atlantic epics de-valorize ordinary categories to open the epic time to diasporic human and natural multiplicities. These epics—threaded from sea, wind, words, color, and coral—weave fragile homes out of diverse and often destabilizing elements, precarious but sustaining multiplicity, which I see as offering some traction for challenging inherited colonial patterns of thought. I thus want to suggest, following DeLoughrey, that the sea in *The Sea Nymph* and "The Schooner *Flight*" functions simultaneously as a fluid ground of historical affirmation and a critical space, offering

an alternative to the rigid ethnic genealogies of colonialism and nationalism. In other words, the ocean's perpetual movement is radically decentering; it resists attempts to fix a locus of history. Focusing on seascape rather than landscape as the fluid space of historical production allows us to complicate the nation-state, which encodes a rigid hierarchy of race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity for its representative subjects. (*Routes and Roots* 21)

This fluid ground allows us then to consider a different "basis of a different, other identity" Ismond evoked in her reading (232). What possibilities of political articulation and continuity follow from such aquatic foundations?

The sense of political belonging Shabine develops on his journey is as perplexing as the ground that underwrites it. In part nine of the poem, Shabine looks back at the petty politicking he has left behind and issues a warning to government officials:

All you fate in my hand,  
ministers, businessmen, Shabine have you, friend,  
I shall scatter your lives like a handful of sand,  
I who have no weapon but poetry and  
the lances of palms and the sea's shining shield! (16)

Although hardly a constructive political stance, the political valence of Shabine's threat to scatter the existing vision of the region's future lies precisely in his resolve to unsettle political projects in order to give space to the multiplicities and contradictions of the Caribbean experience. Derived

from the marine environment and from his poetic skill, Shabine's capacity to unsettle can be read as a peculiar form of agency drawn from his textured eco-epic beginnings. While the locus of agency at first rests with Shabine, as suggested by the sovereign articulation "I shall," the concluding lines of this passage suggest a slightly different distribution of agency. Indeed, poetry, palms, and sea enwrap Shabine in a peculiar material-poetic armor as if the region's very culture and geography rebelled against Caribbean post-independence political institutions and practices. This ecological form of political agency can be understood as underwritten by the eco-epic texture because the historical, the natural, and the literary entangled in the eco-epic texture are co-involved here engendering a radically new field of political possibility. What is striking about the image of Shabine armed with poetry, palms, and the sea is that all these entities have been either excluded from political participation, or considered as threatening to political activity, or thought of as existing outside of politics. Shabine cannot find place in the political space marked out by specific colonial and anti-colonial positionalities: "After the white man, the niggers didn't want me / when the power swing to their side" (8); poetry, for Plato, has detrimental effects on politics insofar as it speaks to the changeable and unprincipled aspects of the soul thus threatening the faculty of philosophical and political judgment; [7] and nature has been traditionally assumed to exist outside of politics as something to be overcome on the path towards progress and development. The texture of history, nature, and poeticity that marks Caribbean beginnings, then, underlies this peculiar form of identity—a radicalized version of what Gourgouris in the passage cited above described as "humanity's immanent encounter with the world"—the political valence of which lies in its ability to de-form recognized political institutions. Indeed, to mark this nexus of history and politics as indelibly poetic and ecological in character suggests that for Walcott multiplicity, indeterminacy, and difference—rather than stable, intelligible meanings of political categories—constitute the warp and woof of the political. This is a valued register of political contestation because this style of articulation thrives on and nourishes equivocality, honoring the inherent complexity (i.e. non-objectivity and non-appropriability) of diasporic communities and the worlds they inhabit.

To reiterate, the political valence of Shabine's claim on the present political configuration lies, first, in the gesture that attempts to make space for what has been excluded from the political terrain—for the hybrid identities that do not square with the binary alignment of political positionalities, for a poetic, equivocal articulation that confuses political register, and for nature's radical otherness that reopens political beginnings and demands a different configuration of the political community.

However, the textured socio-political formation engendered by Shabine yields "a new horizon of [political] possibility" (Scott 3) in a more fundamental way as well. Situated at a junction between history and politics, Shabine's gesture also compels a question about the place of the past within a

community's present. For historian David Scott, a thorough rethinking of this relation is crucial for marking out a space for a more radical political critique:

I wish to take issue with a prevalent way of conceiving this relation between community and history, one that makes the shape of the former dependent upon the story the latter tells about the past. [...] How we make a (political) determination about community today, so it is widely believed, ought to be derived from our knowledge of the nature of the pasts of such communities. The shape of the past ought to guarantee the shape of the present. (93)

I find Scott's use of the word "shape" to refer to the relationship between the past and the present highly evocative in the context of Shabine's threat to scatter political bureaucracy. For to scatter means precisely to de-form, to un-shape, to split open the community through, in our case, this community's past. Thus, when Shabine is forced out of the present alignment of political identities—black or white—what is at stake is not only a search for an alternative space of belonging for his equivocal identity, but also a thorough reassessment of how history matters for politics. It appears that for Walcott, the political valence of Afro-diasporic history is precisely *not* to shape political identities into fixed, reactive positions of guilt and blame, but to decouple politics from historical determinism through a historical "rupture and a different kind of continuation" (Spillers 68). This disruptive persistence of the past in the present derives from the open time-space of the eco-epic texture, radically unlike the "completed, conclusive, and immutable" epic past in Bakhtin's account. The temporality of the natural, while entangled with the time of history, weaves into the eco-epic texture a thread of radical temporal difference and continuity indifferent to human interests. As a result of this syncretic temporal conjunction, the historical time does not remain locked and completed, but rather overflows the present, indicating "that the political task [...] is to refuse to be governed by the *questions* of one's adversaries [in our context, by colonial ideologies], that the task in fact is to [...] risk *changing the problematic* in which those questions have appeared to us natural, legitimate, or even imperative" (Scott 103, original emphasis). I want to suggest here that perhaps what lies behind Walcott's desire to capture the tactile quality of the environment on the page, Glissant's idea that the environment is a character in Antillean history, or Wilson Harris's interest in articulating "a material vision of time in which whole societies conscripted themselves" (182) is this intuition that nature can radically alter historical trajectories and open up visions of life, community, and historical continuity not over-determined by colonial representations of African and Afro-diasporic humans.

While such "a material vision of time" reconfigures political possibilities, it also impinges upon how the future unfolds. "The Schooner *Flight*" invites an inquiry into what this material continuity might mean in the poem's concluding verses. While the narrative ends with Shabine's likely perishing in

the churning currents of the Caribbean Sea, the closing line is ambiguous insofar as it appears to escape the poem's ending:

My first friend was the **sea**. Now, is my last.  
I stop talking now. I work, then I **read**,  
cotching under a lantern hooked to the mast.  
I try to forget what happiness was,  
and when that don't work, I study the stars.  
Sometimes is just **me**, and the soft-scissored foam  
as the deck turn white and the moon open  
a cloud like a door, and the light over **me**  
is a road in white moonlight taking **me home**.  
Shabine sang to you from the depths of the **sea**. (20; my highlighting)

In his reading of this ending literary critic Edward Baugh also comments on its ambiguity: "The poem ends with [Shabine] sailing on, to no definite destination, although it may end more ambiguously, with the last line indicating that the voice of Shabine is the voice of a drowned sailor" (312). The uncertainty I would like to focus on has less to do with whether Shabine survives or drowns, and more on the vague location from which that last verse is articulated. The emphasized words of the passage highlight the poetic repetition of two vowel sounds that tie the sea with the person of the narrator—both his activities (*read*) and the trajectory of his journey (*road, home*). The very last line is thus an inextricable part of the narrative as it forms the closing arm of the friendly embrace anticipated in the first line of this fragment in which Shabine takes the sea as his first and last friend. And yet, with the shift in the narrative voice from the first to the third person, this line simultaneously escapes the narrative in that this last sentence seems to be spoken from an elsewhere, the precise location of which is unsettled by the undecidable origins of the voice. Following from my reading of the eco-epic texture in the section "Raptures of the Deep," which has shown that Caribbean beginnings are figured as a writing of history as much as of nature, I propose to read this concluding ambiguity as an effect precisely of this conjoined articulation. Lingering in excess of the narrative spun in the poem, this last verse turns us back towards the entanglement of matter, poetry, and history as it reminds us of the oceanic depths where Shabine's song originates. The very last word of the poem—sea—suggests that this last verse lingers as the narrative's own material surplus that warrants a future, but a radically unpredictable one as continuance depends here on the structure of address and inheritance (as marked by the second-person pronoun *you*)—and thus on a certain indeterminacy of how inheritance is claimed and spent. In this way, the aqueous matter entangled in the articulation of this poem exists as simultaneously inextricable and non-appropriable, entangling historical and future trajectories. In this non-appropriability, this lingering verse appears as scatter (but this time beyond human agency), driving off and rerouting the trajectory of the future in relation to the present. As scatter,

the sea thus appears to hold little in place. Walcott himself is interested in the sea as a space that cannot be appropriated for human projects: “Nothing can be put down in the sea. You can’t plan on it, you can’t live on it; you can’t walk on it. [...] The sea does not have anything on it that is a memento of man” (*Conversations with Derek Walcott* 158-159). If my reading of the fluidity of the sea as scatter might strike as an incongruity, it is to suggest that material scatter be understood not as a breakdown of solid entities into smaller, discrete particles, but rather as a non-appropriability of matter in general. As literary scholar Geoffrey Bennington suggests, *scatter* names this paradoxical ability of matter to linger over epistemic, ontological, and political categories as alterity impossible to assimilate:

- 2.1.1.4. Scatter *remains* (as scattered remains). Scatter is (what) remains. [...]
- 5.1. Scatter rhymes with (and entails) matter (this really is a kind of ‘materialism’). [...]
- 5.1.3. ‘Matter’ in the [materialist] tradition is *essentially* scatter.
- 5.1.3.1. Or rather, scatter is why matter has no essence, is ‘essentially’ noting.  
 (“Scatter” 7, 13; original emphasis)

Scatter, thus, remains other, disuniting identities more than solidifying their contours. It is something that resists formal enclosures and lingers as an excess that cannot be fully incorporated into the shape of historical and political identities. We could translate Bennington’s statement that matter has no essence as meaning that it is in the very essence of matter to escape, to scatter, to go into any direction without purpose or intention, thus escaping the predicative constraints that hook material bodies to their essential, reifying property traits.

What such a material non-essentialism means in the context of a Caribbean eco-epic is that the moments of gathering eco-epic texture enables—such as the one when Shabine makes his political claim—allow for an evaluation and critique of specific political activities and projects. Such moments, however, do not themselves become reified into new prescriptive political goals that would over-write future insurgent and de-forming political claims. Linking the earlier passage where scatter de-forms political organization with the sea scatter of the closing verse, we can see that scatter is not simply a destructive activity, but also one which enables futures not determined by the present. Or, put differently, scatter is this possibility that history offers to open up the present to the futures it cannot foresee.

I proposed earlier to think of eco-epic textures as involving practices of *poiēsis*—historical, material, and poetic—the working of which “is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, that would not spare even itself as an object of that work” (Gourgouris 10). This foundational motility textures a complex mode of diasporic belonging, and a complex relationship between identity and place. The movement I have been tracing through “The Schooner *Flight*”—from the underwater eco-epic texture that figures historical memory through a transformative involvement of nature, history, and poetry, through the emergence of a political positionality this texture underlies, to a

textured future that sustains the eco-epic's transformative movements—resituates the Caribbean as a space involved in an ongoing process of making, unmaking, and remaking the cultural, political, and historical ties that bind the region's communities. In this way, "The Schooner *Flight*" offers a compelling counter-trope to the structuring image of the Black Atlantic—Paul Gilroy's "ship in motion." Rather than moving "*between* Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean" (4, added emphasis)—an emphasis on transnational movement that inadvertently inscribes a subtle opposition between place and motion—Shabine's schooner never leaves the Caribbean, probing in this way the textures of Caribbean internal multiplicity. Staying within the Caribbean, Walcott envisions new modes of historical and political being energized by the Caribbean environment rather than a departure from it.

### 3. Conclusion

In taking up Romare Bearden's invitation to think about what difference a touch of the Caribbean Sea makes, my aim was to offer readings that tap into energies of the material environment for thinking differently about cultural representation, historical identity, and political belonging. The main thrust of my argument was that eco-epic textures figured in *The Sea Nymph* and "The Schooner *Flight*" situate human historical and political world in a transformative relationship with the natural environment, a relationship enabling a paradoxical form of historical and political continuity that unhinges the present and the future from the over-determining grasp of the colonial past. To be sure, a Caribbean eco-epic cannot disavow the violence and dispossession of slavery and colonialism. Yet, in dramatizing creative interactions between history and nature, Caribbean eco-epic alter conditions of legibility through which cultural and material worlds are approached. This ecological reconfiguration demands not only a non-reductive engagement with—a reading of—racial and ethnic difference, but also a careful reading of the islands' writing—the text of the environment—not so much as a reminder of colonial dispossession, but as a historically and politically transformative script that resists absolute domination.

## Endnotes

[1] Bearden makes a few brief trips to the Caribbean in 1960s. In the 70s and 80s, he spends a couple of months each year in his home in St. Maarten. See Price & Price's comprehensive study on the significance of the Caribbean for Bearden.

[2] See "Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey." <http://www.sites.si.edu/romarebearden/video/index.html>

[3] 1979, when *The Star-Apple Kingdom* was published, marks the year of St. Lucian independence.

[4] Carenage is a bay in Trinidad.

[5] Nowadays, the word is used primarily to refer to light-skinned women in the Caribbean.

[6] See Steven Harrigan's "Artificial Reefs." DFIX (Design, Fabrication, Innovation for Xtreme Afforability)—an organization designing sustainable solutions—developed a Reef In Peace (RIP) initiative which assists with funeral expenses in exchange for human bone material as a substrate for artificial reef construction (<http://www.dfix2012.com/rip/>). Jason deCaires Taylor's underwater sculptures constitute another reef restoration project designed to foster coral accretion and growth (<http://www.underwatersculpture.com/>).

[7] Socrates discusses his view on poetry in books III and X of *The Republic*.

I am grateful to the Folk Research Centre in St. Lucia for offering writing space and research support as I was working on this article. (Ania Kowalik)

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### Suggested Citation

Kowalik, Ania. "A Song from the Depths of the Sea: Eco-epic Textures in Romare Bearden and Derek Walcott." *forum for interamerican research* 8.3 (Dec 2015): 20-43. Available at: <[www.interamerica.de](http://www.interamerica.de)>

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**Entanglements, Nature, and Inequalities in the Darien:  
Analyzing Interoceanity in Panama and Colombia**

**Abstract**

This essay explores the spatial turn in global history by analyzing portals of globalization, literature on the territorialism of capitalism, megaprojects as mechanisms of displacement, interoceanity, and postcolonial approaches to environmental history. The historical case of the Panama Canal and the contemporary proposals for a dry canal in Colombia are employed. The essay evidences its position with secondary sources, newspaper articles, NGO reports, and media sources. The results reveal that megaprojects for interoceanity include complex entanglements of actors and ideas about nature and local populations. The imperial role of the U.S. is key to understanding the emergence and construction of the Panama Canal. Even so, studies of the contemporary enlargement of the Canal include the interplay of other factors, such as patriotism and conservation policies used by the Panamanian government and enterprises to support interoceanity. The Colombian case reveals contradictions between the policies that grant territorial rights to local communities identifying them as forest stewards and those that seek capital support from China to construct a dry canal. Within neoliberal globalization, there is a trivialization of environmental ends and policies that has been articulated to coordinate with the construction of megaprojects.

**Keywords:** Interoceanity, Entanglements, Panama Canal, megacities, environment, nature

## 1. Introduction

The Caribbean is a region of entanglements. These entanglements have been advanced by, among others things, the construction of megaprojects to facilitate looting and global trade. The Darien region, currently comprising territories in Panama and Colombia at the Darien Gulf, was historically designed as a hinge of globalization to expedite the flow of goods, persons, and ideas. The region's colonizers constructed ports for transporting looted minerals and they viewed Central America as a land of cannibals (Arens 54).

The tropical region of the Darien was identified as "unhealthy" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tomes 129; Wong 229). Developed countries considered this an obstacle to regional modernization and civilization (Blaut) and justification of their intervention. In the early 1900s, the Panama Canal was built once disputes among European powers and the U.S. were settled. The Canal's builders believed they were superior and advanced humans, and they aimed to modernize territories and populations engaging in disputes over the territories with the local people, whom they treated as inferior. When the Canal was complete, many US workers remained in segregated neighborhoods at the Canal Zone and racially discriminated against the Panamanians (Donoghue).

Panama recently carried out construction projects to enlarge its Canal, proposals have emerged to build a dry canal in Colombia, and Nicaragua has begun construction on an interoceanic canal. However, international infrastructural projects have negatively influenced local populations; specifically, megaprojects imposed on local communities have downsized local knowledge and destroyed ecosystems. Megaprojects relevant to the Darien region are linked to the transformation of territories by the ongoing influences of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism (Amin). Some approaches to the discipline of global history have incorporated the idea of a "spatial turn" to study emerging issues using concepts such as "portals of globalization" (Middell and Naumann 162). Although this approach is useful, it lacks attention to the reproduction of global inequalities, including the inequalities that result from the entanglements of class, race, and nature (Braig, Costa, and Göbel 13) related to territorial transformations.

This essay's primary concern is in the discourses and images of nature and local populations that have been created to facilitate territorial transformations that ease the construction of megaprojects. To accomplish this, the case of the Panama Canal, its recent enlargement projects, and the proposals for a dry canal in Colombia are examined. Instead of reiterating a historical study of the region, this essay analyzes the evolution of the entangled types of territorial transformations, ideas about nature, and global inequalities from a sociological post-colonial perspective. The methodology comprises a critical appraisal of secondary sources, such as relevant research on the region and the Panama Canal and content analysis of data gathered from newspaper articles, governmental reports, and NGO documents. This essay analyzes so-called

“portals of globalization” (Middell and Naumann 162) by discussing studies on “megaprojects” (Gellert and Lynch 15-16), approaches to “transitism” (Castillero Calvo 35-36) and “interoceanity” (Allard 145), and postcolonial perspectives on environmental history (Alimonda 21). The entanglements and the effects of megaprojects are discussed regarding their relevance to culture, nature, and global inequalities.

The thesis under investigation is that global and/or national elites have produced and reproduced entangled discourses and assumptions about territories, populations, landscapes, and nature (e.g. by identifying them as primitive or underdeveloped) with the intent to facilitate construction and protection of megaprojects. Megaprojects directly influence local indigenous peoples, peasants, and their ecosystems. Projects, such as interoceanic canals, have historically reproduced inequalities, such as those that blend class, race, and the environment. However, over time, the discourses and mechanisms employed to dominate nature and populations, which are products of complexities among multiple actors from diverse regions, have evolved. These mechanisms include colonial racial categorizing, 19<sup>th</sup> century negative and romanticized views of nature and local people, racial/ethnic segregation of workers at the Canal Zone, recent conservation policies linked to megaprojects in Panama, and contradictions between policies that define collective territories and ethnic identities on the one hand and megaprojects’ goals (as in Colombia) on the other.

## **2. Global History and the Spatial Turn**

Global history is an empirical discipline that gained relevance in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to promote intellectual cooperation among history and other social sciences (Kocka). According to Conrad, Eckert, and Freitag, global history gathers an array of types of academic studies. Initially, studies on the history of the world economy’s movement away from the world-system perspective (Wallerstein) dominated the field together with studies on the processes of divergence. Other studies analyzed civilizations and multiple modernities (Eisenstadt) in contrast to Huntington’s concept of the clash of civilizations. The multiple modernities perspective was criticized because it neglected interdependencies between or among metropolises and/or colonies that sustain power asymmetries (Randeria). Some scholars responded with the concept of “entangled modernities” (Conrad and Randeria 9; Randeria 377) to investigate the complex processes and relationships of metropolises and colonies.

Global history is not world history with a global dimension; it emphasizes “interactions, exchanges and interrelations across boundaries between national states, regions, continents and cultures”

(Kocka 4) because the history of globalization is not merely the history of convergence; it is the history of “interdependencies,” including the:

mutual perceptions, interactions and exchanges between different parts of the world [...referred to] economic integration, empires and nations, and their relation to one another, cultural change between convergence and differentiation, interrelated perceptions of time and space, transport and communication, pattern of migration. (Kocka 3)

Global history assumes that the history of globalization began sometime in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century when Europe was colonizing and dominating a variety of world regions.

Since its inception, global history has involved the participation of scholars from non-European regions who were studying “asymmetric relations between the colonizers from the West and the colonized in the non-Western world” (Kocka 3). Examples are Said’s work on orientalism and Mignolo’s work on *La Idea de America Latina* that investigated the effects of European domination and colonization, the configuration of images of Others, and the idea of other continents as complete regions.

Osterhammel and Petersson contended that globalization has a longer history than its contemporary process that involves international trade networks since medieval times. These scholars proposed an organized history of globalization comprising four distinct periods. First, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and mid-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the European powers built empires characterized by transcontinental exchange, including slave trade. That was followed by the process of European industrialization, accompanied by increasing development of trade networks, communication, and migratory movement of people. Between about 1880 and 1945, there was a period of international rivalries and wars, deep trade, and capital flows. From 1945 until the end of the Cold War, increasing international leadership by the US, in competition and conflict with the Soviet Union, dominated the global stage.

Recent studies on global history have considered issues of territory and territoriality, following the so-called spatial turn (Middell and Naumann). The nexus between global history and the spatial turn is clarified in this explanation:

Globalization can be interpreted as a dialectical process of de- and re-territorialization. The challenges to existing borders that limit economic, socio-cultural, and political activities, and the establishment of new borders as the result of such activities, bring about certain consolidated structures of spatiality, while at the same time societies develop regulatory regimes to use these structures for purposes of dominance and integration. (Middell and Naumann 149)

Studies of territory have focused on the “historicity of regimes of territorialization and their permanent renegotiation over time” (Middell and Naumann 149). They propose and discuss three key concepts: regimes of territoriality and regimes of Territorialization (163), portals of globalization (162), and critical junctures of globalization (166). These studies argue that two dimensions of

historical spatialities have not been sufficiently studied: the simultaneity of spatial references of social action with their consolidation and the nexus of global crises with changing patterns of territorialization (Middell and Naumann 162).

## 2.1. Regimes of Territoriality

Regimes of territoriality concern the current international regime of nation-states as the outcome of historical processes, analyzed through the concepts of regimes of territoriality and regimes of territorialization; specifically, “globalization can be interpreted as a dialectical process of de- and re-territorialization” (Middell and Naumann 149). In the process of globalization, a political sovereign’s defense has been in constant dialectic tension with a plurality of spatial references, including flows and interactions (Middell and Naumann 162). Large-scale political transformations have manifested as the emergence, enforcement, and collapse of types of territoriality.

Middell and Naumann criticized previous approaches to territoriality, such as Maier’s. Maier understood the territory of the nation-state as a bounded political space and established a periodization of territorial regimes, based on nation-states, from the time of the 1648 Westphalia agreement. That approach contradicted the observed reality of “overlapping border zones, unclear property claims, freer cities, and weakly administered colonial spaces” (Middell and Naumann 164). Several nation-states were not effective in defending their colonized territories.

Several phases of the construction of “modern territoriality” and “regimes of territorialization” have existed (Middell and Naumann 164). These phases are “the world before and after the established European nation-states of the late nineteenth century” (Middell and Naumann 164). Since then and until the 1960s, a succeeding epoch was in place that was subsequently replaced with a new phase of globalization. In the post-1960s phase, nation-states’ territoriality did not decline; rather, the hierarchical superiority of the nation-state was contested by a proliferation of transnational actors, such as NGOs and transnational social movements.

Long-term analyses of regimes of territorialization demonstrate a tension between goals. On the one hand, there is the goal of sustaining the centrality of nation-states; on the other hand, there is a desire to create and control global flows of goods, people, power, and entanglements. Several European nation-states successfully organized their power to sustain their sovereignty, maximize benefits from entanglements, and link those successes to imperial expansion (Middell and Naumann 165–166). Thus, “the expansion of the principle of sovereign nationalization collided [...] with the attempt of the colonial powers to hold on to their supplementary imperial spaces” (Middell and Naumann 166). These conditions existed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2.2. Portals of Globalization

The concept of portals of globalization relates to processes of de- and re-territorialization during struggles over the imposition of new spatial patterns. The portals are places and subjects, such as ports, cities, international trade, handling exotica (such as places, museums, restaurants), and migration. According to Middell and Naumann, portals of globalization are:

those places that have been centres of world trade or global communication, have served as entrance points for cultural transfer, and where institutions and practices for dealing with global connectedness have been developed. Such places have always been known as sites of transcultural encounter and mutual influence. (162)

Portals of globalization also include economic and military expansion and cultural inventions, such as the social construction of “Ours” and the “Other,” which challenge national affiliations. National boundaries and stable territorial order are challenged, but the “elites try to channel and therefore control the effects of global connectivity” (162) by, for example, creating political structures and social control. At portals of globalization, spatial order is constructed that aims to connect pre-determined territorialities. Entanglements are tangible here through flows of goods, people, and ideas. Multiple actors strive to control the portals, motivated by economic, political, and/or social interests. Whereas regimes of territoriality refer to the general political structuration of a territory, such as a nation-state, portals of globalization refer to specific places that serve global interconnectedness. The actors that aim to control nation-states compete for control of the global flows.

## 2.3. Global Crises and Junctures of Globalization

Crises and conflicts that give impetus to new regimes of territorialization are global crises and junctures of globalization. Violent confrontations are related when they aim to control the pace and/or direction of new types of territorial organizations and markets. A global crisis or transition occurred between 1720 and 1820 that included, among others events and processes, the independence achieved by colonies in the Americas and some changes to European nation-state territoriality, which influenced land property patterns because feudal rights were abolished.

The re-territorialization processes are not limited to the formation of nation-states. For example, rebellion in Saint-Domingue pressured the French colonial power to end slavery and Haiti was established as a new nation-state. Colonies in Latin America achieved independence and Simón Bolívar sought to unify the Americas. Between 1840 and 1880, “many parts of the world reacted simultaneously [...] by competing over the most efficient forms of political, economic and cultural order” (Middell and Naumann 168). There is a permanent dialectic of de-territorialization and re-territorialization related to critical junctures of globalization, meaning, “periods or arenas in which

new spatial relationships are established as a reaction to the effects of globalization” (Middell and Naumann 169). Conflicts on a global scale are about power relations in which, “conflicts are [...] arenas where the form in which societies participate in world affairs is decided, arenas in which the most effective form to secure strong societal integration domestically and efficient entanglement internationally is fought about” (Middell and Naumann 169).

Regimes of territoriality, portals of globalization, and global crises and junctures of globalization are analytically useful for explaining changing struggles over global territories. Globalization “as a dialectical process of de- and re-territorialization” (Middell and Naumann 149) suggests that the historical construction of global inequalities can be analyzed through the configuration and imposition of territorial rationalities. However, the concepts should be critically approached and applied because they emphasize European or elitist processes or processes in ex-colonized regions. Middell and Naumann did not deeply delve into geopolitical processes that produce global inequalities. For example, they mention Latin American independence and the Haitian rebellion as processes immersed in critical junctures of globalization and as processes that transformed regimes of territoriality. However, they ultimately reproduced a type of sanctioned history that reinforces the hegemony of nation-state territoriality, in which actors, such as Simón Bolívar, overshadow all other actors in political transformations. Other populations, such as the Colombian indigenous and Afro-descent populations, are invisible from this perspectives despite the necessity of understanding how these minority populations achieved independence and thereafter were reproduced as unequal. Middell and Naumann criticize the global history focus on nation-states, but their concerns did not fully overcome the nationalistic methodologies. The expansion of nation-states’ global political order has imposed nation-state territoriality. That includes control over nature and local populations achieved through political and military means, power asymmetries between or among countries, and conflicts between or among governments and local populations.

### **3. Megaprojects, Interoceanity, and Postcolonial Approaches**

Capitalist globalization has a particular territorialism, which is, “the propensity to extend the area controlled by a single political centre,” [which is] “by nature territorially disembodied” [and which] “has guided the spatial relationship between its economic reproduction and its area of political control” (Amin 235). Metropolises, core cities, and nation-states are influenced “far beyond their frontiers” (Amin 235) by different sources of power. In the era of mercantilism, it was financial power. Later, governments and enterprises used political and economic power to facilitate accumulation and industrialization. Colonialism, led by European powers, spread with and

articulated the expansion of the colonizers' capitalist development (Amin 237), which demanded the control of large extra-national territories (Amin 240) to execute financial ventures, such as mines and plantations.

Colonialism, financialization, capitalism, and territorial expansion have been related to the so-called megaprojects, which Gellert and Lynch define as:

[P]rojects which transform landscapes rapidly, intentionally, and profoundly in very visible ways and require coordinated applications of capital and state power. They use heavy equipment and sophisticated technologies, usually imported from the global North and require coordinated flows of international finance capital. (15–16).

Gellert and Lynch identified four types of megaprojects: “(1) Infrastructure; (2) Extraction; (3) Production; and (4) Consumption” (16). These types of ventures have influenced places, regions that are marginal peripheries, and regions of refuge or frontier territories (Meza) to facilitate looting and capital accumulation.

Megaprojects relate to the reproduction of inequalities in knowledge production because they “serve the material interests of powerful actors in the process: notably capital accumulation, especially for financial institutions and construction firms, and modernization and territorialization ambitions for states” (Gellert and Lynch 20). Governments expect that local communities will sacrifice for the common good, which megaprojects purportedly are, and megaprojects exclude communities from the decision-making that produces rapid landscape changes (Gellert and Lynch 20). Furthermore, megaprojects involve “blatant and subtle forms of racial and other discrimination” toward indigenous peoples and peasants' livelihoods, values, and landscapes (Gellert and Lynch 20). Enterprises and outsiders impose their sense of urban and racial superiority. Thus, megaprojects produce primary socio-natural displacement of humans, geological formations, hydrological patterns, natural habitats, plants, fauna, and livelihoods (Gellert and Lynch 17) and secondary displacement arising from the production of contexts of inadequate water and sewer systems, increased crime and housing costs, and the displacement of “communities, biota and geophysical features” (Gellert and Lynch 19). Megaprojects imply an influx of outside workers and the entrenchment of structural inequalities of race, gender, class, and ethnicity that are manifested in unequal labor conditions and health problems (Donoghue; Gellert and Lynch 18). For example, the construction of the Panama Canal produced dispersed puddles that were habitats for mosquitos and yellow fever (Gellert and Lynch 18–19).

An example of a megaproject is the Panama Canal. Canals are aspects of “transitism” (Castillero Calvo) and interoceanity (Allard; Porrás). Transitism is the function or role assigned to a nation-state, such as Panama, in the globalization process as a place where connection or transit of ships occurs to transport goods, commodities, and people based on its geographic convenience for

transit. Departing from dependency theory (Cardoso and Faletto), Castellero Calvo claimed that Panama was not devoted to or specialized in the extraction of raw materials. Instead:

[I]ts productive activity was electively outset specialized in the sector of services, to promote overseas communications through its territory [...]. The mechanism of our external dependency worked [...] through the imposition of a bond of internal domination in terms of a specific local power structure, and its status of extremely open economy. (Castillero Calvo 35–36)

The notion of transitism contrasts with the cultural perspective of interoceanity. The *Dependentistas* (Latin American dependency theorists) stressed the economic aspects of the Canal and ignored the role of culture. Porrás coined the concept of “culture of interoceanity” to indicate a system of narratives that gives meaning to Panama’s situation as a place of interoceanic transit (qtd. in Allard 147–148). Thus, the Panamanian identity was relatively less physiocratic and relatively more grounded in transnational connections.

Following the culturalist approach, Allard coined the term “subaltern interoceanity” (146). From her perspective, Castellero Calvo viewed Panama as situated in the modern world-system since the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the “landscapes and narratives that characterized the economic activity of transit” emerged (Allard 146). Thus, “modernity and coloniality gave form to the idea of interoceanity” (Allard 145–146). However, dependency theory (Castillero Calvo), socioeconomics, environmental approaches (Castro), and cultural approaches (Porrás) all pointed to the origin of the interoceanity and transitism in Europe (Allard 148). Conversely, Allard argued that these views and processes emerged in entanglements.

Moreover, Allard is critical of Mignolo’s views on interoceanity. Mignolo stated that, during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States and European powers assaulted societies in the Southern Hemisphere and Central America. The emergence of the idea of *latinidad*, or the difference between North America and Central/South America, can be traced to this period. The choice of where to build the infrastructure that would link the Atlantic to the Pacific was framed in discussions and disputes among the powers hoping to control the Canal. The U.S. was victorious during the California Gold Rush, and it has intensified its presence in Panama since the 1850s. Thus:

the situation of Panama was a concentrated version of the tension between two opposite forces that received the name of ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ and ‘Latin race’ [...]. This epoch was crucial, because the continental disputes of 1850 were the exact moment when Bolívar’s dream of the ‘Confederation of Hispano-American nations’ was transformed into Latin America in the sense of a zone dominated by the ‘Latin race’. (Mignolo 102)

Allard criticized such a stark division between the imperial and the dominated countries by noting the role of entanglements in the relationships. Arguing that separation of the idea of interoceanity

from its correlative imagery stemming from 16<sup>th</sup> century European cartography is impossible (Allard 150–151), Allard pointed out that we cannot understand the configuration of the Americas without accounting for the entangled stories of conquest and colony. The arrival of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa to the *Mar del Sur* in 1513 marked the origin of the modern/colonial world-system (Allard 149). The Spanish crown defined the function of the Panamanian isthmus as a place of transit or, at least, had interoceanic goals as it sought to strengthen its European hegemony (Allard 149). The epistemic as well as geopolitical distinctions made through interoceanicity, seen through the lens of the *herida colonial* (colonial wound), were derived from maps. However, they also emerged from the stories and images of the explorers. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the explorers provided ideas, symbols, and inventions of their understandings of the Other. Interoceanicity is an idea that includes, “the articulation among economy, gender and race, or among cultural/ethnic identities, and gender identities, as well as the relation among the nation-state, racism, imperialism and practices of patriarchal ideologies” (Allard 149).

Yet, the debate on interoceanicity lacks a discussion on the role of nature. A postcolonial view of environmental history (Alimonda) noted the role of territory to integrate humans with nature. Generally, colonial processes have produced negative effects on nature; in Latin America, nature was:

biophysical reality [...] and as territorial configuration [the socio-cultural dynamics that articulates those ecosystems and landscapes] appears in the hegemonic global thought, and for regional elites, as a subaltern space that can be exploited, razed, reconfigured, responding to the necessities of the prevailing accumulation regimes. (Alimonda 22).

Orthodox Marxism and liberal approaches defended the idea of progress based on the scientific and technological mastery of nature and did not consider the hidden costs (Alimonda 33).

In Latin America, many regions have been “subalternized” (Alimonda 34) by the dominant rationale of nation-state territoriality. Others are not within the control of political centers because of geomorphological and/or climatic factors and elites’ lack of requisite interest or resources to integrate areas such as the “Amazonas comprising various countries, the Pampa, Patagonia and Chaco in Argentina, Araucanía in Chile, Yucatan in Mexico, Petén in Guatemala, Darien in Panama and Colombia, and lowlands in Colombia” (Alimonda 34). The ignored areas are refuges for communities, although they are influenced by political conflicts. The political centers created the idea of marginal places to control those that lack political autonomy. The analysis of the situation of those areas is that they are a type of “internal colonialism” (Alimonda 35) because they and their inhabitants are controlled through violence and public policies, as was the case in the 1950s and 1970s when Latin American governments favored human settlement in forests to spread the agricultural frontier. Since the 1980s, policies have defined national parks and collective territories

in line with the goals of environmental conservation. These policies are related to “neoliberal environmentality” (Fletcher), which emerged from Foucault’s concept of biopower (41), because governments exert systematic biopower through “biopolitical conservation policies” (Fletcher 175). Biopower policies determine the ways that local communities can legitimately make demands, obtain benefits, and negotiate or contest policies. Biopower policies exist where governments and corporate interests meet to build megaprojects.

#### 4. Megaprojects and Interoceanicity in the Darien Region

The Darien region is an example of territorial transformation that facilitates globalization. The Darien was transformed into a portal of globalization and chosen for the construction of the Panama Canal. The Darien historically included a portion of Panama and a portion of Colombia. This region has been overtaken by global, national, and local elites for purposes of global connectivity or transit (Allard). Previously, the Darien integrated the greater region of Panama state when it was part of the “United States of Colombia.” At present, it comprises the Darien Panameño and Darién Chocoano in Colombia.

During the colonial period, the Spanish conquerors sought control of this area to transport gold extracted from Perú and Colombia. They faced several difficulties including indigenous resistance. The conquerors struggled to control production inequalities, such as racial subordination of the indigenous population and the use of African slaves in mining. Spain created a system of harbors by linking Portobelo to Cartagena and other ports in the Caribbean region to transport extracted minerals (Uribe de Hincapie).

The notion of connecting the oceans through the Panamanian isthmus emerged after the colonial period. The French conducted studies to determine how to build an interoceanic canal through Panama, relying on experience gained in the construction of the Suez Canal. However, lack of funding delayed the project, and the goal was not materialized until the intervention of the U.S. in its capacity as an emerging global power. Then, in 1903, Colombia was re-territorialized when Panama seceded. The secession occurred during the *Guerra de los Mil Días*, a bloody and harsh civil war between the key “political subcultures” (Pécaut 32) – the liberal and conservative political parties. The war, with impetus from U.S. political intervention, ultimately led to Panama’s secession. Outside pressures, caused by the global powers’ search for expanding capitalist opportunities, took advantage of the political situation to encourage the creation of the new nation-state of Panama.

The forces in the background of the Canal’s construction were U.S. imperial expansion and the

taking of Panama. This event was described in the U.S. as an “act of sordid conquest” and as a “vulgar and mercenary venture” (Hanson 1). As President Theodore Roosevelt stated:

[T]he Panama Canal would not have started if I had not taken hold of it [...] the beginning of work on the canal would be fifty years in the future. Fortunately [the opportunity] came at a period when I could act unhampered. Accordingly I took the Isthmus, started the canal and then left Congress not to debate the canal, but to debate me. (Hanson 1)

From Middell and Naumann’s perspective, the U.S. aimed to consolidate its domestic sovereignty by colonizing the territories of its continental indigenous populations (American Indians) and their ecosystems during the California Gold Rush. Those accumulation processes favored the imperial expansion of the country beyond its borders; and this expansion, in terms of Amin, demonstrated the internal and external territorial expansionism of U.S. capitalism.

## 5. The Panama Canal

Global and national elites created an image of Panamanian territories and a set of discourses to facilitate the control of nature and populations and to facilitate the construction and maintenance of the Canal. These discourses evolved in conjunction with the political and economic processes related to the Canal, and they included entanglements of ideas and economic competition that linked the Darien to imperial powers such as the U.S.

Ideas about nature and culture in the Darien originated in the colonial period when explorers and conquerors constructed and spread the idea that the Caribbean indigenous people of Central America were cannibals (Arens). Some evidence supports the theory that the idea of cannibalism was invented by conquerors to label indigenous people who resisted colonization (Arens 49). After the independence period and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, North American travellers to Central America constructed positive and negative narratives about those tropical peoples and areas. The positive ones alluded to “sensual and exotic beauty” (Frenkel, “Jungle Stories” 325) in contrast to:

[A] negative narrative about Panama's tropics became increasingly common as travelers more thoroughly explored and worked in the region. Panama’s tropics were often presented as a region of danger and discomfort, of snakes, malarial mosquitoes, and rank, dank vegetation. (Frenkel, “Jungle Stories” 324)

Narratives also identified a perception that transforming the landscapes to be more suitable for habitation was necessary. According to Tomes, “Walls of jungle had to be struck down, and treacherous swamps, in which man had never before ventured, had to be made firm as a foundation of rock.” (qtd. in Frenkel, “Jungle Stories” 324)

At that time, the representations of the tropics and environmental determinism were related

(Frenkel, "Geography, Empire"). The characteristics of the tropics were perceived as obstacles to modernization and civilization (Blaut 71). Tropics were associated with unhealthy conditions and diseases. The moist and warm climate and the frequent rainfall were associated with life-threatening diseases, such as yellow fever (Tomes). This notion that the region was unhealthy and dangerous spread, particularly throughout the Canal Zone, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during construction of the Canal. The workers faced diverse health problems:

Due to poor sanitation and deficient medical knowledge, outsiders [workers] came to Panama and its "Fever Coast" only to die from diseases thought to be caused by "miasmatic mists" from the local swamps. These diseases were primarily yellow fever and malaria. (Wong 229)

However, these problems are an example of power and knowledge asymmetries. Gellert and Lynch pointed out that the proliferation of diseases did not originate in the local swamps, but were spread because of conditions related to Canal construction. By 1903, when the high death toll began including workers and executives, the scientists discovered that the origin of malaria and yellow fever was mosquitoes. A mosquito eradication program, an important scientific advance beyond the scope of the Canal, stemmed the death rate and facilitated the Canal's completion (Wong 229).

By 1912, the construction and operation of the Canal had produced a major territorial transformation. The territory was divided between the Canal Zone and the rest of the territory of Panama. Settlements and neighborhoods were built for the American workers, which created a racial, cultural, and socioeconomic segregation. American workers in the Canal Zone, so-called "Zonians," viewed the Panamanians as the Other and, "American perceptions of Panama and its inhabitants [...] reveal the racism and environmental determinism of the Americans in Panama" (Frenkel, "Geography Representations" 85).

The Canal builders believed that they were superior humans and discriminated against the local people (Donoghue). The inferior Others included the West Indian Panama Canal labor force, Spanish-language workers, and the natural environment outside of the Canal Zone (Frenkel, "Geography Representations"). Portions of the Canal Zone were racially segregated because American suburbs were built in an "Americanized" style geographically separated from Colon and Panama City by forests, railroads, hills, and roads (Frenkel, "Geography Representations" 85). Similar to colonial cities, company towns, and military bases where the characteristics of place reflect the beliefs and power of the designers, the Canal Zone was "an expression of the imperialistic ideas of a cadre of American Canal administrators and planners" (Frenkel, "Geography Representations" 86). According to Frenkel, the Canal Zone was built in a colonial fashion (86). The Americanization of the Canal Zone demonstrates the imposition of the U.S. government through this megaproject (in association with the local elites), in which the

Panamanian people were given “little input” (Frenkel, “Geography Representations” 86). Thus, the U.S. workers laboring in the canal “stigmatized Panamanians as racial inferiors” (Donoghue abstract).

A key issue regarding nature in the Canal concerns the use and management of the water. According to Carse, “a staggering 52 million gallons are released into the Atlantic and Pacific oceans with each of the 35–45 ships that transit the canal daily” (1). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several infrastructural projects were built in the Canal Zone, including hydrographic stations, dams, and locks to control the water and the watershed around the Canal. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the government aimed to integrate the rainforest into the nation-state by prompting peasant colonization (Carse 15). The vision was that watershed forests would function for cultivation, but that changed after 1977 when the Canal Treaties were signed and the Canal was transferred to Panamanian control. Peasants had previously benefited from the expansion of the agricultural frontier. However, after 1977, peasants became a problem because the new goal was to maintain the forests around the canal to protect the water supplies and agriculture and livestock production were counterproductive to that end (Carse 15).

More recently, regulations have emerged that manage the water flow by restricting agriculture in areas near the Canal and forests. The government sought to manage the current and potential water shortage in the area by managing land use and the environment through the articulation of “techno-politics” and “environmental policy” (Carse 1). Thus, “the forests (the peasants) lived and worked in were not exclusively theirs, but part of a hydrological support system for shipping” (Carse 15). The forests now function to store water. The new regulations imposed upon the farmers a new role as conservators of the forests, which sometimes conflicts with their agricultural practices (Carse).

By 1984, the government created Chagres National Park, which enclosed almost 30% of the basin areas of the upper watershed lands. Today, the Park covers almost 130,000 ha. The related policies included reforestation regulations and identification of secondary forests in which peasants could exploit trees, regulated by Forest Law 13 of 1987. However, enforcement of the environmental law included the participation of the military during Manuel Noriega’s rule (Carse 16). Peasants were jailed and their tools were confiscated to end forest exploitation. It is estimated that, before the 1980s, the forest area was reduced by about 50% because of farmers’ exploitation activities, ranchers, and state policies, but, after the policies in the 1990s, forest cover increased. (Carse).

The *Autoridad del Canal de Panamá* (Panama Canal Authority) has been administering the Canal since 1997, and it has controlled the conservation and management of the hydrological resources. The watershed has been managed through policies that encouraged a “water culture” among the people by emphasizing local participation and environmental education (Carse 16). However,

despite this participatory approach, inequalities persist. Many people were displaced to urban labor markets, and the model of dispossession (initiated in the 1980s) has not changed although it wears different vestments.

New outside actors are interested in the regional watershed and forest cover, such as NGOs, governmental agencies, natural scientists, and social scientists. They are part of the neoliberal environmentality described by Fletcher. The agricultural frontier has been converted into a natural infrastructure and social services, such as electricity and potable water, arrived slowly to the region (Carse). A key point regarding inequalities is that the pursuit of environmental ends by these outside actors ignores the fact that the landscape includes people. The reversion of land and forests from agricultural to transit uses implies that the construction of megaprojects has, among other things, limited neighbors' access to resources and social services (Carse).

Recently, Panama began a project to enlarge its Canal, led by the international consortium Sacyr, and chiefly funded by Spanish capital. At the local level, the project is controlled by Panamanian administrators and workers through the *Autoridad del Canal de Panamá*. Discourses that justify the megaproject relate to discourses about Panama's interests and responses to increasing global demands for transportation services and to maintaining the value and future competitiveness of the route. A worker explained:

The canal expansion aims to increase the capacity of the canal in response to the present and future demands of the global maritime industry, to maximize our biggest asset that is our geographical location. Similarly, we seek to maintain the sustainability of the canal operations. (Reyes)

Another worker stated:

As the sluice cannot grow, and now has nearly 100 years, the answer is to build a new sluice, one more entry in the Pacific and one more entry into the Atlantic. But much larger than at present, in order to meet those ships of the future. Most customers today are looking for larger ships, enabling them to optimize their operations, leverage resources with economies of scale. We will grow with the customer, and to stay in business. (Robleto)

The enlargement project comprises five megaprojects: (1) dredging to deepen the entries at the Pacific and Atlantic; (2) widening and deepening the navigational canals in Gatun Lake; (3) constructing access to the new Pacific sluices; (4) dredging and deepening the Canal; and (5) performing the main work of constructing the new sluices (Reyes).

The project managers expect that these megaprojects will increase Canal capacity threefold and have a similar effect on the country's profits. The project is tied to parallel industrial projects in other countries. The shipping industry is building Post-Panamax vessels (that are longer, wider, and deeper than the largest (Panamax) ships that can pass through the existing locks) to accommodate 12,600 containers compared to Panamax capacity at 4500 containers. The U.S.

east coast harbors are being adapted to receive those ships (Reyes) and Canal authorities anticipate that the Canal will be working at the higher capacity by 2025.

A sense of nationalism and patriotism exists among the leaders of the Canal authority as they work to demonstrate their abilities to complete the megaproject. They have stated that they expect foreigners who visit the projects to exclaim that, “the people in Panama are doing well, they have overcome” (Robleto). A representative of Grupo Unidos por el Canal S.A., a contractor that supervises compliance with environmental and labor standards, stated that:

In all areas of the project we share with all field workers. They are people who work with body, soul and heart. They feel very enlarged for sharing, for working on the project for the *patria* [homeland]. (Bernard)

A manager of the project stated that:

Currently there are working on the project more than 39 nationalities. Something similar happened in 1904 and 1914 when the world came together to build a canal for the Republic of Panama. The difference is that now Panamanians lead it. (Reyes)

Those who manage the project have further noted the role of sustainability as a key goal in the enlargement projects, “Before starting the work, environmental impact studies were made; inventories and wildlife rescue, forest inventories, and compliance in air and water monitoring” (Reyes). A representative of Grupo Unidos por el Canal S.A. stated:

What we do is inspecting the environmental impacts, the compliance of environmental plans and procedures. We verified that the project areas are clean, tidy, workers have environmental responsibilities within the project. [...] Once we have observations, we followed them until are met. (Bernard)

These statements suggest that environmental sustainability is a goal that has been trivialized in the protocols of the construction companies to meet a bureaucratic requirement. However, megaprojects are built despite the results of studies that point out their negative environmental implications. For example, the area of construction of the new sluice is a vast hole, a giant excavation, filled with mud, heavy machinery, workers and, on either side, forests and other natural features. The constructors have altered the regional ecosystems by digging this vast hole, producing primary and secondary displacement. A major effect of the construction is the salinization of Lake Gatun (Vargas).

Simultaneously, the establishment of conservation area boundaries has become instrumental for the functioning of the megaprojects. Environmental policies, emerging in entanglements among countries and actors, such as NGOs, governments, experts, and communities, have been integrated into neoliberal environmentality (Fletcher). Despite the primary and secondary displacement effects produced by the enlargement projects, the projects are defended by a

patriotic discourse. Thus, the justification for the Canal enlargement has emerged in entanglements arising from the belief that the project is justified by the purported necessity to accommodate bigger ships for the bigger ports (in the U.S.) that will receive those ships. Domination of nature emerges from entangled ideas on, and policies related to, global transportation, trade, progress, and environmentalism.

## 6. Dry Canal Proposals in Colombia

The Panama secession in 1903 was a traumatic event that produced a variety of Colombian governmental proposals for canals to compete with the Panama Canal. These plans included an Inter-Oceanic Dry Canal to join the Atlantic to the Pacific across the Darien region. That proposal has been in the agendas of several Colombian administrations, including Belisario Betancourt's (1982-1986), which considered building the Atrato-Truandó canal through the Department of Chocó under Law 53 of 1984. President Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) proposed the so-called Interoceanic Land Bridge. President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) created the Interagency Advisory Committee for the Study of Construction Project of the Interoceanic Canal and the Bio-Park of Darién. Currently, President Santos has a new proposal under Law 70 of 1993 regarding the collective territories of Afro-descent communities in Chocó.

In Colombia, there are complex relationships among the lack of state control over the entire national territory, the expansion of the *latifundio* (large properties), private interests, and the spread of forced displacement due to armed conflict. Frontier territories, such as the Darien, have suffered from those processes and their complex relationships. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, struggles over territories at the Darien demonstrated that several actors are interested in controlling that area. Previously, the region served as a refuge for peasants escaping the bi-partisan violence of the *La Violencia* period between 1948 and 1965 (Uribe). The 57th Front of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas (composed of about 250 combatants, mostly in Chocó) has controlled the area on behalf of their drug trafficking. The paramilitary groups that emerged in 1989 spread into this region in the 1990s, allied with the army, to attack the guerrillas. Since 1997, more than 10,000 peasants have been displaced (Defensoría del Pueblo).

However, the regional government of Antioquia has simultaneously aimed to transform the Urabá region (which is part of the Darien) into the best corner of America, by integrating infrastructural megaprojects (namely, the dry canal and the Transversal de las Americas road) with agribusiness (mainly banana and palm oil cultivators). A variety of regional elites has benefited from the displacement of the local peasants. Agro-entrepreneurs, paramilitaries, and their allied elites aimed

to control the lands in which the megaprojects are planned by supporting paramilitary control of the territory. These activities have generated resistance from the indigenous, Afro-descent, and mestizo communities.

One recent dry canal proposal includes studies by Chinese companies that would support and finance a project. China proposed a 220 km railway to open the so-called *Tapón del Darién* (Darién Gap) through an area rich in biodiversity. In early 2011, the Colombian government discussed the project with the Chinese entrepreneurs, who further proposed a new city near Cartagena in an effort to compete with Panama, which was working on its Canal enlargement. China's goal was to boost its trade within Asia and it further negotiated to build railroads 791 miles long and an expanded port at Buenaventura. The estimated cost of the project was 7.6 million USD, financed by the Development Bank of China and managed by the China Railway Group (Portafolio.co).

From President Santos' perspective, the financial and fiscal goals of the project were his priorities:

The studies that they (the Chinese)'ve made on the costs of transporting per tonne, the cost of investment, it all works out. [...] But again it depends on how it's going to be financed. My ideal – and here the sky is the limit – is to attract foreign investment via concessions. I've told the Chinese, "If it's so profitable and so important, okay, come here via this mechanism of concessions." Because [of] that, from my fiscal point of view, makes my life much easier. (Rathbone and Mapstone)

There have been continual discussions about the economic, environmental, and social effects of the China railway project (e.g. Defensoria del Pueblo). The project has been developed toward protections from financial and technical risks, and governmental officials have further noted the negative effects that the project could have on the ecosystems of the region, which has one of the highest levels of biodiversity on the planet (Defensoria del Pueblo). From the perspectives of governmental officials and the involved enterprises, the Darien Gap is a natural obstacle (Molano and Ramírez).

That the Embera and Katío indigenous communities, which have territorial rights, exist in this area, is a further entanglement. However, the Darien mostly is inhabited by Afro-descendants and mestizo peasants who were granted territorial rights through Law 70 of 1993 that focused on conservation by securing those collective lands. It is clear that the indigenous populations would be negatively influenced by the completion of a dry canal because it would result in primary displacement through the destruction of ecosystems and dispossession of communities (Defensoria del Pueblo).

Dispossession was used to introduce single-crop agriculture and livestock production into the Darien in Riosucio (Defensoria del Pueblo). Capitalism is continuing its advancement in the region at the cost of forced displacement. The Afro-descent, mestizo, and indigenous communities have

been de-territorialized, and livestock production and monoculture have changed the structures of land property and land use. Even so, local communities have demanded rights, based on state-sanctioned territorial rights and, thus, the identification of Afro-descent and indigenous peoples as stewards of the forests has become the center of resistance to these megaprojects.

The regional landscapes of the Darien include waterscapes, such as wetlands and rivers. The expansion of agribusinesses and livestock production is a process that facilitates the construction of megaprojects because cattle ranchers and landowners grab the lands at the same time that those lands increase in value to the planned megaprojects. The plantations and livestock estates advanced through the destruction of the forests, drained the water from the wetlands, diverted the rivers, and, thus, have prepared the land for future megaprojects' construction.

Contrary to the Panamanian case, the Colombian dry canal would not produce a new sense of national identity in Colombia. Instead, it would complement the existing national identity that was strengthened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the coffee economy. The dry canal may be an additional way to modernize, although that modernization would be at the cost of primary and secondary displacement. Territories that are imagined by the global and/or national elites as at the edge of civilization or empty, would be used by governments to generate revenue by integrating international financial institutions (such as the Development Bank of China) with actors from diverse multi-polar centers (such as the China Railway Group).

China's interests in building megaprojects in the Darien have spread to encompass other regions in Central America. For example, at the end of 2014, the Nicaraguan government began construction on an interoceanic canal. It is working with HKND (Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development) Group, a private infrastructural development firm based in Hong Kong, to construct and operate the canal (initially for 50 years) in competition with the Panama Canal. The megaproject comprises a canal of 278 km with a network of roads and an aquatic path. Nicaragua's government expects that the megaproject would create more than 50,000 jobs. Even so, the project has met resistance from the population because it is expected to displace almost 29,000 persons and negatively influence the regional ecosystems, such as Lake Nicaragua and the precious mangroves. President Daniel Ortega was accused of selling the country to China and Chinese technicians have been violently attacked in the local counties (Semana.com).

## 7. Conclusions

This essay argues that additional study and analysis are necessary to understand the inequalities related to the so-called spatial turn in global history. It discusses megaprojects and interoceanic canals generally and employs the Panama Canal as an example of portals of globalization. The

discussion clarifies how multiple types of inequalities emerge and the ways that some of them are constructed in entanglements (Braig, Costa, and Göbel). Interoceanity has been a product of entangled social processes, such as colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Today, inequalities emerge from the domination that enterprises and governments have over nature and populations through the construction of megaprojects. Those inequalities have been facilitated by the construction of ideas about nature and local populations, a construction that has occurred in entanglements.

Accounting for portals of globalization in the analysis of megaprojects is a useful way to analytically understand the inequalities that emanate from the structuration of territorial forms, such as the nation-state, that generate power asymmetries. Moreover, it assists in the analysis of nation-states' struggles to dominate among world powers, struggles that aim to control global flows of goods, people, and ideas, such as those related to interoceanic canals. Despite the potential, there are inherent challenges in the application of this concept regarding the multiple elements that Middell and Naumann define as portals. Although they indiscriminately referred to places (such as ports and canals) and processes (such as trade), the nature and extents of power asymmetries of and the environmental effects on these places/processes likely vary. Furthermore, the extent of the agency of local populations and their capacities to resist must be considered when studying portals of globalization.

The recent process of the enlargement of the Panama Canal (and the Nicaraguan canal) demonstrates the need to emphasize entanglements in our efforts to understand the process and its consequences beyond internal racial or ethnic divisions (Mignolo). Historical processes influencing Panama have featured entangled processes that manifested the notions of transitism and the broader idea of interoceanity. Today, we can identify complex entanglements in discourses that aim to justify the construction of megaprojects. These discourses include elements (and goals) of nationalism, patriotism, development, progress, and global engagement. The discourses assist the maintenance of the supremacy of nation-state territoriality over alternative territorialities, such as those of peasants who oppose megaprojects (as in Colombia and Nicaragua) (Semana.com). The colonization of nature is reproduced, together with ideas about cultural difference to inferiorize local communities and control the resources within their territories.

Entanglements have been used to justify the construction of interoceanic canals since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 1900s, U.S. imperial expansion was crucial to Panamanian secession and the construction of the Panama Canal. Eighty years later, the Canal was transferred to Panamanian control. In recent decades, the construction enterprises have created a discourse to justify Canal enlargement and to secure the water supply for the Canal by merging discourses on nationalism and patriotism with environmental ends (conservation). Recent environmental regulations have emerged that consider conservation goals in conjunction with the

Canal. Two entangled trends, interoceanity and neoliberal environmentalism, have been articulated to transform landscapes for the enlargement of the Canal.

In terms of the spatial turn in global history, the Panama Canal has strengthened the territoriality of the nation-state through a sort of *patriotismo anti-yanqui* (anti-American patriotism). It is an ironic outcome because the anti-American discourse co-exists with the Canal authority's claims that enlarging the Canal meets global demands for the interoceanity of the vessels of the future, which are built to fit U.S. ports. Thus, the Canal simultaneously bases its expansion on and rejects the U.S.

This essay's analysis of the Colombian case reveals other contradictions, embedded in recent governmental policies. On one hand, the government gave territorial rights to Afro-descendants and indigenous communities. On the other hand, it is actively searching out financial support from China to construct a dry canal at the Colombian Darien. The recent expansion of livestock production and monoculture favors the future construction of megaprojects in the disputed and prized lands.

Following Guha and Martínez Allier, varieties of environmentalism are found in these processes. One type is neoliberal environmentalism (Fletcher), which is promoted by governments and enterprises; another type is the "environmentalism of the poor," in which minority populations may use their official territorial rights to resist megaprojects, supported by NGOs and global campaigns. In addition, entanglements among perspectives on nature are present within oppositions to megaprojects.

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**Suggested Citation:**

Baquero Melo, Jairo. "Entanglements, Nature and Inequalities in the Darien." *forum for interamerican research* 8.3 (Dec 2015): 45-67. Available at: <[www.interamerica.de](http://www.interamerica.de)>

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## **La mer, de la prison aux nouveaux modes d'appropriation : de l'esclavage au tour des yoles rondes de la Martinique**

### **Résumé**

La localisation géographique et les atouts climatiques de la Martinique vont faire du littoral le principal atout pour le développement touristique de l'île. La plage et la mer à la Martinique deviennent donc la raison de la venue des populations touristiques qui se les approprient notamment pour se détendre et pour s'adonner au bronzage, contrairement aux locaux pour qui la plage n'est encore qu'un espace de convivialité que l'on fréquente qu'à de rares occasions. Toutefois, force est de constater que le regard porté sur le littoral a évolué. Désormais, la plage ne sert plus seulement à s'adonner aux joies des bains de mer et des repas familiaux, elle est désormais le lieu, par excellence, de la déambulation festive.

**Mots Clés:** littoral, tourisme, milieu maritime, géographie culturelle, aménagement

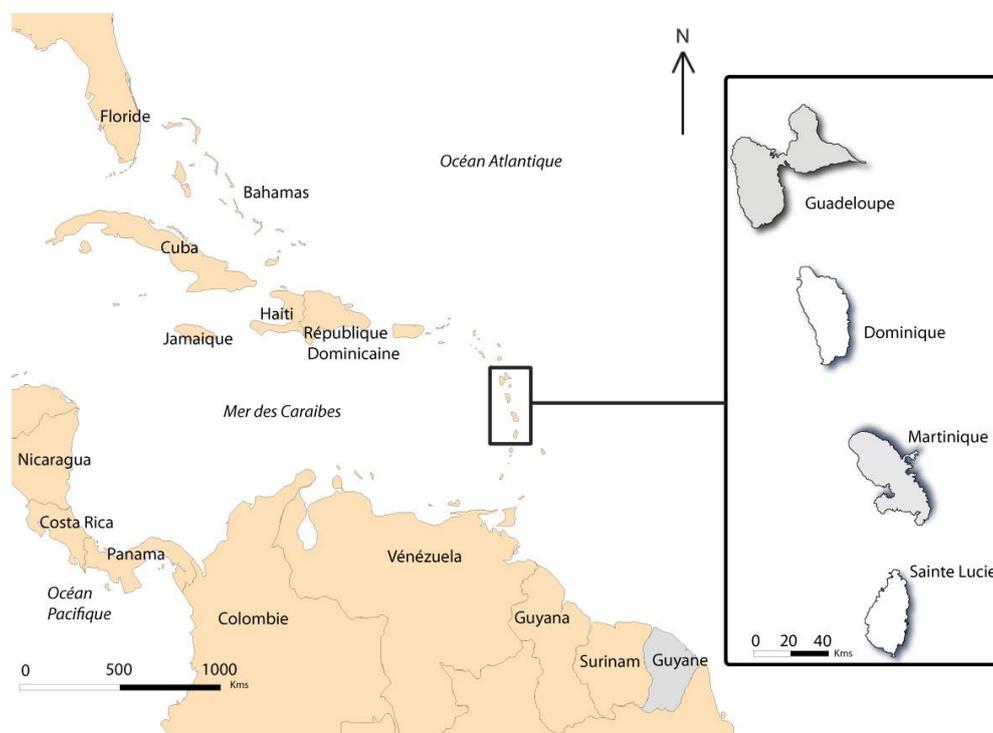
## Introduction

La Martinique est une île située au cœur de l'arc antillais entre la Dominique au nord et la Sainte-Lucie au sud. Elle est baignée par la mer des Caraïbes à l'ouest et par l'Océan Atlantique à l'est (Illustration 1). La Martinique est une île volcanique qui dispose d'un linéaire côtier de 350 km. Au milieu du XXe siècle, le littoral martiniquais s'est imposé comme un espace prioritaire, pour les populations occidentales en quête du triptyque „soleil, mer, sable“. Ce sont d'ailleurs les pratiques touristiques qui vont entériner la conquête de l'espace balnéaire. Elles vont également assurer l'émergence d'un désir commun du rivage chez la population locale. En effet, pour les habitants de l'île l'espace littoral a longtemps été assimilé à un cadre naturel hostile. Depuis, le milieu marin côtier a connu une double évolution : celle de la représentation que se fait la population de ces lieux et celle des pratiques sociales. Longtemps déconsidéré par la population locale, le milieu marin martiniquais est désormais au cœur d'un processus de valorisation sans précédent. Il devient un lieu de prédilection des antillais invités à y faire la fête. En effet, depuis quelques années, on voit l'apparition de nouveaux événements festifs. Ces nouveaux temps festifs ont la capacité de cultiver les singularités, et de participer à la construction de l'identité territoriale. Très appréciées, elles privilégient l'unité et l'identité du groupe territorialisé (Di Méo „La géographie en fêtes“). Ces temps festifs ont, entre autres, comme point commun le fait de se dérouler sur les plages qui deviennent dès lors des haut-lieux porteurs de géosymboles. Le littoral s'inscrit dans une dynamique de conquête. Il s'impose comme un espace de „l'entre-soi“ vécu et approprié collectivement. Selon quelles modalités les fêtes de création récentes participent-elles au récent mouvement de réappropriation des littoraux par les populations locales ? Nous tenterons également de comprendre de quelle manière le Tour des yoles rondes de la Martinique, événement sportif et culturel massivement suivi, prend part de manière déterminante à cette nouvelle valorisation de la mer et du littoral.

Ainsi, cette étude rendra compte de la progressive construction du rapport à la mer et aux littoraux à la Martinique. Elle s'attachera également à souligner comment l'émergence de nouvelles pratiques sportives et festives a contribué à renverser les représentations et les usages de l'espace littoral.

### Illustration 1

La Martinique, un territoire insulaire, situé au cœur de l'Arc Antillais



Nicolas-Bragance 2013

### La mer: historiquement, un cadre naturel hostile

La mer s'envisage d'abord comme un cadre physique. Elle peut alors se définir comme une „vaste étendue d'eau régie par les lois de la mécanique”, qui „ne s'anime que par les éléments extérieurs qui l'entourent“ (Klein 20). Elle s'inscrit surtout dans un cadre symbolique puisqu'elle se décline essentiellement en littérature d'imagination. La mer constitue „une véritable catharsis collective” (Yellès 193), comme en témoigne son assimilation, pendant longtemps, à un „territoire du vide” (Corbin 1). En effet, eu égard à l'immensité qui la caractérise, elle fascine, suscitant à la fois crainte et respect. Dans un premier temps, l'image répandue de la mer fut celle d'un milieu hostile à l'homme. Charles Baudelaire, dans son poème *L'homme et la mer*, va s'attacher à dépeindre la force destructrice de cette dernière qui, à la fois secrète et insondable, aime le „carnage et la mort“ (Baudelaire). La mer est un élément dangereux qui attise l'angoisse de quiconque se prépare à effectuer une longue traversée. „Le marin qui n'est séparé de la mort que par la coque fragile du navire, aura conscience là, plus que partout ailleurs, de la fragilité de son existence” (Arcocha-

Scarcia 270).

Dans un autre registre, le géographe Jérôme Lageiste (2009) va mettre en avant la dualité de la mer. Dans un premier temps, elle captive, „excite l’imagination et renvoie volontiers à quelques aspirations du genre humain: rêve, évasion, attraction du mystère” (Lageiste 6). Puis, dans un second temps, elle effraie, tant elle est synonyme pour l’homme de souffrance et de mort. C’est ainsi qu’historiquement, les relations entre l’homme et la mer vont se résumer à une „chape d’images répulsives“ (Corbin 11).

Cette tendance se confirme sur le territoire martiniquais. Le rapport ancestral à la mer est marqué par le désintéret et la crainte de la population. Cette dernière s’est effectivement, dans sa très grande majorité, détournée des pratiques littorales (Desse „Perception et pratiques territoriales des littoraux de la Caraïbe”, „La plage”). Les causes sont à rechercher dans le peuplement de l’île durant la période esclavagiste, et plus particulièrement, dans les conditions avec lesquelles s’est réalisée la traversée de l’espace marin. La mer a matérialisé le passage du statut d’homme libre à celui de marchandise forcée de s’installer sur l’île pour devenir „une main d’œuvre servile abondante, peu coûteuse et d’un rendement maxima pour le travail de la terre” (Entiope 15). La mer fût donc le théâtre d’une dramatique déportation dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle. Elle fait d’abord office de prison pour les nombreux esclaves déportés. Ces derniers effectuent la traversée de l’Atlantique, enchaînés dans l’entrepont de navires négriers. La mer s’impose rapidement comme un tombeau pour ces nombreux captifs sur-entassés dans des conditions inhumaines d’existence. Nombre d’entre-eux seront jetés par-dessus bord par les membres de l’équipage tentant d’enrayer les épidémies qui se déclaraient. La dysenterie, la fièvre jaune, puis les maladies contagieuses comme la variole, font partie des premières causes de la mortalité des esclaves (Klein et Engerman). Aux épidémies, s’ajoutent de nombreux naufrages causés par la vétusté des navires ou encore par les combats navals. Entre l’interdiction de la traite et l’abolition de l’esclavage, les équipages dans l’illégalité n’hésiteront pas à se débarrasser de leur chargement à l’approche des gardes-côtes. La première perception de la mer sera alors celle d’une „traversée de violence, de promiscuité, de séparation, de peur, de privation” (Desse 1). La mer restera longtemps un espace en marge, chargé de valeurs négatives. Le littoral n’était en aucun cas un lieu de plaisir. Il réveillait plutôt les pires angoisses. C’est d’ailleurs cette perception du littoral qui est souvent transmise aux enfants à travers les contes martiniquais. Les contes sont porteurs de l’identité, des coutumes et des croyances populaires. Or, dans la littérature enfantine martiniquaise, le littoral est d’abord présenté comme un lieu manquant d’hospitalité. Il est assimilé à un espace dont il faut se méfier, synonyme de séparation, de perte et d’insécurité. À titre d’exemple, Alex Godard, dans le conte *Maman-dlo*, cristallise nombre d’appréhensions liées au milieu marin. Loin de présenter le littoral sous un aspect ludique, ce conte met en avant tout ce qu’il

recèle d'inquiétant. Le personnage clé de l'histoire a besoin de sable et de coquillages pour décorer la lettre destinée à sa mère partie vivre en France hexagonale. Pourtant, elle attendra l'absence de sa grand-mère pour s'aventurer sur la plage qui lui est interdite: „Là-bas, la mer est agitée et il n'y a jamais personne pour fouler le sable. Il est bien plus beau. Cécette ne parlera pas de cela à Man Ninie, parce qu'elle lui interdirait d'y aller. Elle attendra un jour où sa grand-mère ne sera pas là” (Godard 15).

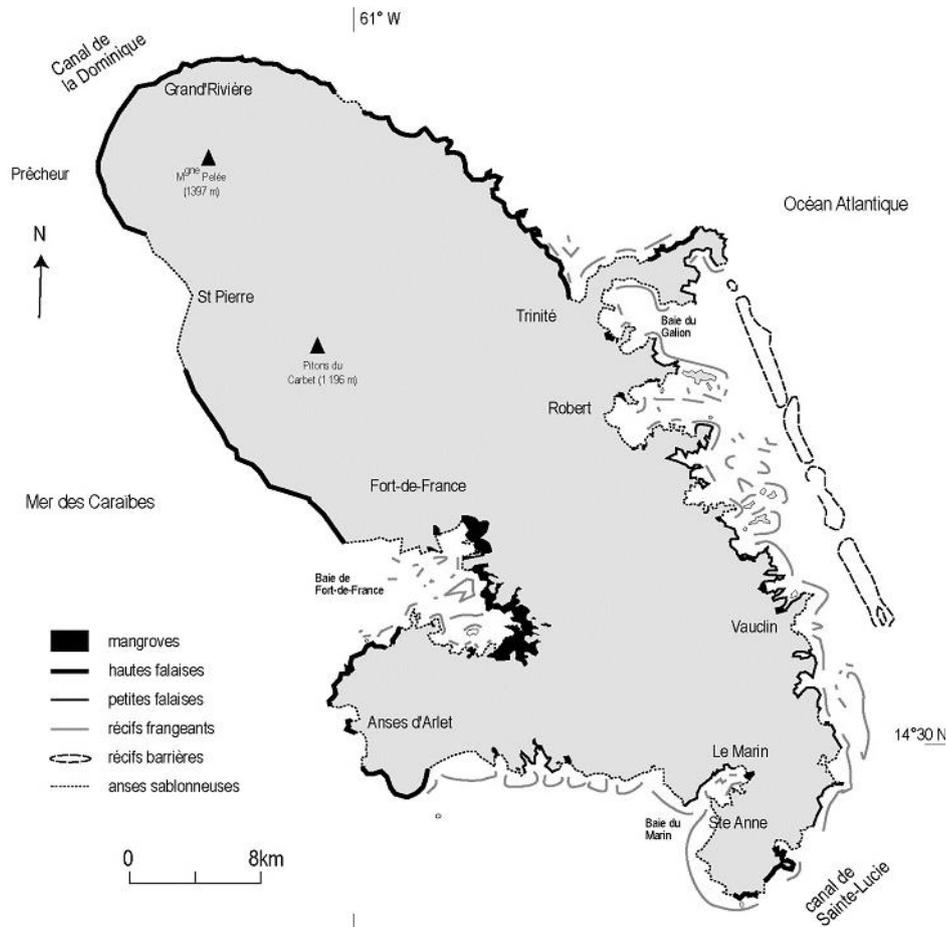
Ainsi, jusqu'au début du XXème siècle, les populations n'auront qu'une faible familiarité avec le milieu marin, encore considéré comme le domaine de la pêche et des pratiques illicites (Desse „Perception et pratiques territoriales des littoraux de la Caraïbe.”). „Exclu de toute spéculation agricole, espace en marge et périphérique, le littoral accueille dès les premières années de la mise en valeur européenne, les exclus; le marchand trop pauvre pour posséder la terre, le petit blanc artisan [...]; l'affranchi qui quitte les régions de plantation [...] pour s'installer pêcheur [...]” (Desse 27). En outre, Raphaël Confiat (1999) assure que les maisons des pêcheurs de la ville de Sainte-Marie tournaient le dos à la mer.

Seuls les pêcheurs se confronteront réellement à l'environnement marin. Ces derniers appréhendent la mer, leur espace de travail, comme „un espace de dérive à conquérir” (Dubost 125). Même les pêcheurs qui utilisent le milieu marin pour en exploiter les ressources ne sont pas à l'abri des dangers de la mer. Le titre même du conte de Godard, „*Maman-dlo*”, fait référence aux sirènes. Ces „Reines des Eaux” promettent fortune aux pêcheurs et les attirent dans l'eau. Les *Maman-dlo* représentent ainsi les risques du métier de pêcheur.

Pour autant, les pêcheurs se sont installés sur le littoral, soit dans la mangrove qu'ils ont défrichée, soit dans la zone dite „des cinquante pas géométriques”. Cette bande littorale trouve son origine dès le milieu du XVIe siècle. C'est une réserve de terrains correspondant à 81,20m, qui s'étend le long du rivage, sur le pourtour de l'île. La présence des pêcheurs y sera alors considérée comme indispensable au maintien de la colonie, tout comme celle des maçons et des charpentiers (Thebaud). Les pêcheurs s'attacheront à fournir à la population locale, „les poissons rouges” dont elle raffole, c'est-à-dire l'ensemble des poissons, mollusques et crustacés qui peuplent les herbiers ainsi que les récifs coralliens” (Saffache et Ramdine). Un grand nombre d'espèces, constituant la faune ichtyologique de la région, sont en effet déconsidérées par la population qui ne les consomme pas (Farrugio et Saint-Félix).

En réalité, les écosystèmes marins martiniquais se composent de trois entités: des récifs coralliens, des herbiers de phanérogames benthiques et des mangroves (Illustration 2). Ces écosystèmes abritent une faune diversifiée qui leur est inféodée. Ils sont par conséquent traditionnellement exploités par les pêcheurs (Saffache et Ramdine).

Illustration 2  
Aperçu synoptique du littoral martiniquais



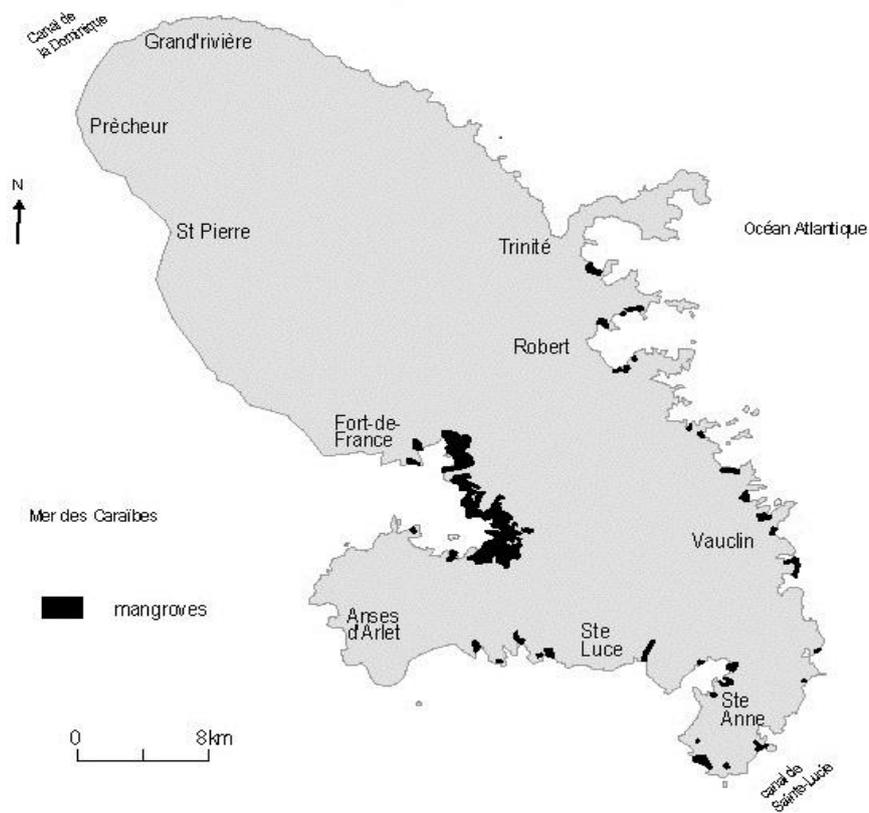
Saffache 2000

La pêche pratiquée en Martinique revêt un caractère artisanal. Elle se pratique particulièrement sur la façade Est atlantique de l'île, à l'aide d'embarcations de petite taille, les canots traditionnels. Cette région se caractérise, en effet, par sa richesse relative en espèces sédentaires de poissons et de crustacés. C'est ainsi que de la ville de Sainte-Marie, au Nord, à celle du Vauclin, au sud, les fonds seront l'objet d'une intense exploitation (Farrugio et Saint-Félix). Les ressources démersales du plateau insulaire seront quotidiennement exploitées en raison notamment du manque de moyens et de réelles connaissances nautiques des pêcheurs martiniquais (Desse „Martinique et Archipel guadeloupéen”).

Les pêcheurs occuperont donc cet espace limité à la fois comme lieu de vie et de travail. Ils vont initier, dans une large mesure, le peuplement du rivage martiniquais. Ils vont s'y implanter; y construire leurs cases et le transformer progressivement en un lieu de vie et d'échanges. Comme a pu l'observer Isabelle Dubost, "chaque soir, les pêcheurs se réunissent dans les cafés, sur les places ou au bord de mer pour discuter, jouer aux dominos ou à la pétanque" (Dubost 127).

Alors que les pêcheurs exploitent et apprivoisent la mangrove, cet espace va aussi cristalliser la peur de l'espace littoral. Elle couvre 1840 hectares et se situe dans le centre et le sud de l'île (Illustration 3). La mangrove la plus vaste de la Martinique se localise dans la Baie de Fort-de-France (Thebaud). Dès le début de la colonisation, ces forêts littorales ont attirées l'attention des Européens à cause de leurs racines enchevêtrées formant de véritables labyrinthes (Saffache „Les mangroves”). Il est désormais communément admis que les mangroves sont garantes d'un certain équilibre écologique. Occupant des espaces protégés – fond de baies, culs-de-sac marins, etc. – ces forêts marécageuses littorales abritent une faune nombreuse et variée. Ainsi, entre les racines entrelacées des palétuviers se développent de véritables nurseries permettant le renouvellement des espèces. Si la faune aquatique (poissons, mollusques, etc.) prolifère dans les mangroves, les oiseaux y trouvent aussi un habitat parfaitement adapté à leurs besoins. Enfin, les mangroves ont une double fonction purificatrice, puisqu'à l'image des forêts, elles absorbent le gaz carbonique et rejettent l'oxygène. En outre, elles absorbent de grandes quantités d'éléments polluants et jouent donc le rôle de véritables stations d'épuration naturelle (Saffache „ Les mangroves”).

Illustration 3  
Localisation des mangroves de la Martinique



Saffache 2000

Pourtant, en dépit de l'importance de leurs fonctions écologiques, les mangroves ont longtemps été accusées d'être des zones insalubres, putrides et mal odorantes. Seules des populations marginales exploitaient les mangroves. Au début, elles n'en extrayaient que de quoi assurer leur subsistance quotidienne. C'est avec l'accroissement de la pression démographique, que ces populations ont pris conscience des profits qu'elles pourraient tirer de la vente des produits de la mangrove (charbon de bois, crustacés, etc.). Dès lors, la capacité de régénération de ces milieux a été dépassée, laissant place à un déséquilibre durable. En réalité, toutes ces dégradations résultent d'une entrée brutale de l'île dans la modernité, et plus précisément dans l'économie de marché (Saffache „Les mangroves”).

### **La littoralisation des hommes et des activités**

Ainsi, parce que méconnues, les mangroves seront constamment défrichées et récupérées par poldérisation, notamment à des fins agricoles et urbaines.

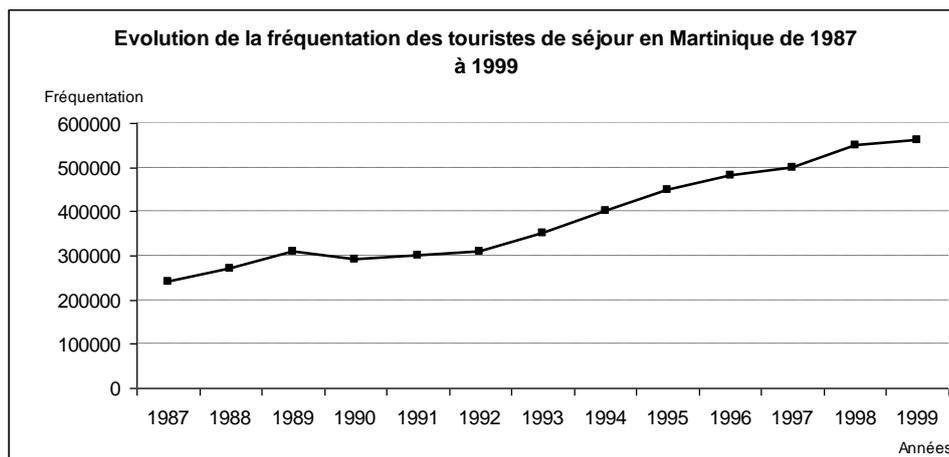
En réalité, la zone des cinquante pas géométriques va rapidement être mise en valeur, notamment pour favoriser le développement d'agglomérations. D'ailleurs dès le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'édification de bourg sera une priorité majeure. La Martinique rentre dans une phase de densification littorale, d'abord parce que la population martiniquaise s'accroît, passant de 239 000 habitants en 1954 à 320 000 en 1967 (Thebaud). Ensuite, la crise de l'industrie sucrière propulse l'île dans une économie tertiaire et urbaine, fondée sur l'afflux de transferts publics externes. Le peuplement du rivage va dès lors s'intensifier. En effet, le déclin du système des plantations, combiné au rapide développement du littoral, va entraîner un important phénomène d'exode rural. Entre 1950 et 1960, 30 000 ouvriers agricoles (Burac et Hartog), vont quitter l'intérieur des terres pour le littoral en quête d'un emploi et de meilleures conditions de vie. La littoralisation des hommes et des activités sur la frange côtière martiniquaise sera telle qu'elle engendrera une „mal-littoralisation” due au développement d'une urbanisation diffuse, et incontrôlée, dans les zones naturelles (Goiffon).

Aujourd'hui, en Martinique, les agglomérations et les zones denses d'habitat diffus s'étendent sur 34,4 kilomètres de côtes. Les routes littorales, souvent bordées d'enrochements, occupent 9.6 kilomètres de côtes. Les zones industrielles littorales et les infrastructures portuaires (commerce, pêche et plaisance) occupent 5 kilomètres chacune. Les aménagements touristiques, souvent mis en cause dans la dégradation du littoral, ne s'étendent pourtant que sur 2000 mètres et se concentrent essentiellement en un endroit. On retrouve les mêmes constantes dans les autres îles de la Caraïbe (Desse et Saffache).

En réalité, la fin du XXe siècle a marqué l'avènement du tourisme dans les Caraïbes et d'une plus grande diffusion des flux touristiques à l'intérieur de la région. Le développement des activités touristiques dans les territoires de la Caraïbe s'impose comme l'alternative aux traditionnelles économies de plantation en difficulté. Si les produits de l'agriculture continuent d'être une importante source de revenus pour les États de la région, force est de reconnaître que leur déclin se précipite: les derniers marchés protégés s'ouvrent et les microéconomies insulaires sont confrontées à des concurrences internationale et intrarégionale qui les condamnent. Le tourisme, avec ses ressources locales, „si faciles à exploiter”, s'impose alors naturellement comme en témoigne la croissance soutenue des flux à l'échelle régionale (Dehoorne et al.). Le chiffre d'affaires du tourisme international de la région est estimé à 22 milliards de \$ US en 2000, soit plus d'un doublement en l'espace d'une décennie. Les emplois touristiques seraient désormais de l'ordre de 2,5 millions (World Travel and Tourism Council) contre 400 000 en 1990 (Gayle et Goodrich). Le tourisme s'affirme donc comme une activité primordiale pour la plupart des économies de la région.

C'est d'abord grâce à sa localisation géographique, et donc à ses atouts climatiques, que la Martinique voit son attractivité se renforcer sur le marché du tourisme international (Maurin et Raboteur). La diversification des moyens de transports, l'extension des zones urbaines, des stations balnéaires et des marinas vont propulser l'île dans l'ère du tourisme de masse. Les touristes vont se concentrer sur les littoraux, faisant de ces zones géographiques le socle de cette activité. Ainsi, la mise en valeur des zones côtières martiniquaises, et surtout celles du sud de l'île (Illustration 5), va s'accompagner de nouvelles perceptions de l'espace côtier.

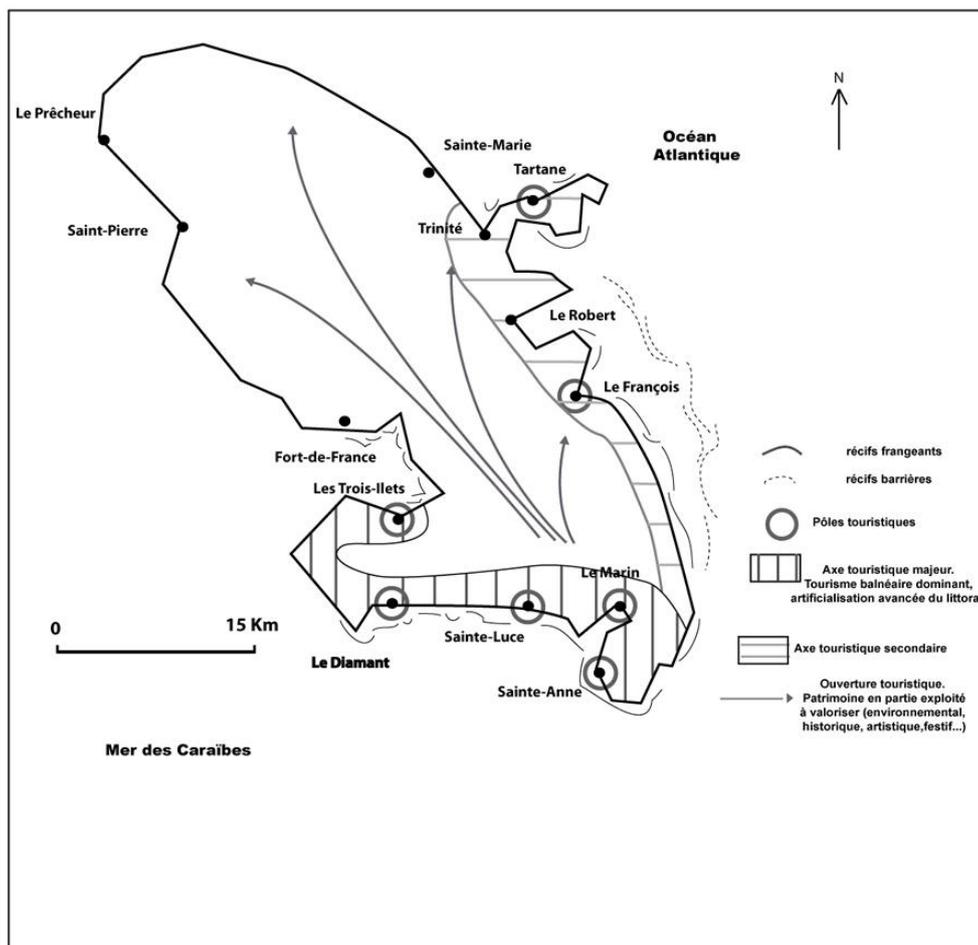
Illustration 4



D'après l'ARDTM, Les données chiffrées du bilan 1998 du tourisme à la Martinique, statistiques livre II, p. 68.

La période allant de 1960 à 1980 a ainsi connu un démarrage spectaculaire des aménagements touristiques. De 1987 à 1999, la fréquentation annuelle des touristes de séjour a été en évolution constante. En moins d'une décennie, elle a plus que doublé passant de 238 600 en 1987 à environ 564 000 touristes de séjour en 1999 (Illustration 4). C'est à partir de cette période que se construisent d'imposantes infrastructures hôtelières comme le *Bakoua*, le *Martinique Hilton*, le *Méridien* ainsi que bien d'autres infrastructures touristiques de la Pointe du Bout (Trois-Ilets) et de la Pointe-Marin (Sainte-Anne). Les lois de défiscalisation aidant, beaucoup de multinationales ont effectivement investi dans l'île. Pour développer rapidement l'activité, le nombre d'infrastructures touristiques a primé sur leur qualité, c'est-à-dire sur l'intégration de ces dernières dans le paysage. Les aménagements touristiques ont été calqués sur ceux réalisés en la France hexagonale. Aucune réflexion préalable n'a donc été menée concernant les pathologies socio-économiques et environnementales que pouvaient engendrer ce genre d'aménagement sur les littoraux du sud de l'île (Nicolas).

Illustration 5  
L'emprise touristique sur le littoral Martiniquais



Nicolas-Bragance 2014

Le tourisme en Martinique, c'est essentiellement le soleil, la plage et la mer (Satta). L'île n'échappe pas à l'attrait du classique mythe territorial, qui en fait un paradis, un lieu placé hors de la marche irréductible du temps (Péron).

Les plages constituent d'ailleurs le paysage emblématique des îles de la Caraïbe. Elles sont le support matériel et idéal des activités de tourisme et de loisir (Desse et Saffache). Les populations touristiques se sont appropriées les plages et la mer, les plaçant au cœur de leur temps libre. Par leurs différentes pratiques, elles ont été les agents clés de la transformation de ces espaces. Les touristes ont eu la faculté de marquer durablement l'espace de leur culture et de leurs mœurs. Ils ont fait de la plage „un lieu de détente pour bronzer, se montrer, séduire par la beauté du corps“ (Desse 141). En façonnant les littoraux des usages qu'ils y mirent en pratique, les touristes contribuèrent à leur conférer une „identité touristique“ (Lageiste). Ils y appliquèrent leur vision de ce que doit être la pratique de la plage sur une île tropicale.

Pourtant, le regard que portent les habitants sur le littoral et l'espace marin diffère de celui des touristes. Force est de reconnaître que l'environnement côtier ne fera que plus tardivement l'objet d'un enthousiasme jovial pour les martiniquais (Grand-Clément). La notion de plaisir sera donc plus tardivement associée à la mer.

Pendant longtemps la plage sera considérée comme un espace de convivialité, fréquentée qu'à de rares occasions: lors des fêtes de Pâques et de Pentecôte notamment. Durant ces temps traditionnels festifs, les martiniquais se retrouvent massivement sur les plages, en famille et entre amis. Les plages ainsi investies deviennent, le temps d'une journée, un espace de „l'entre-soi“. C'est souvent l'occasion pour des familles de se retrouver autour d'un repas à l'ombre de la végétation littorale. Le bronzage et la baignade, pratiques héritées des populations touristiques, n'entreront que progressivement dans les mœurs (Desse „Les littoraux antillais“).

### **Le littoral approprié : évolutions des perceptions et des usages**

Le littoral est devenu, en l'espace de quelques décennies, un territoire „du plein“, voire du „trop plein“ (Duhamel et Knafou). La décadence de l'économie traditionnelle a amorcé la déprise de l'intérieur de l'île. L'économie se tertiarisant, la population a été attirée par les villes littorales qui offraient les emplois dans la fonction publique, l'enseignement, le commerce, la santé, le transport et le tourisme. C'est ainsi que l'urbanisation des côtes, pour l'établissement des villes et des zones d'activité a accéléré la dégradation de l'environnement côtier.

Le tourisme, bien que n'étant qu'un facteur secondaire de la dégradation du littoral (Duvat) a aussi causé un appauvrissement des ressources naturelles. En effet, la construction massive d'infrastructures touristiques sur la côte méridionale de la Martinique a détérioré la qualité des

paysages et des milieux. Ainsi, dans de nombreuses stations balnéaires, les hauts de plage ont été cimentés pour faciliter l'accueil et le déplacement des populations. Des boulevards de front de mer et des digues-promenades ont été aménagés, limitant les transferts sédimentaires s'effectuant traditionnellement entre le haut et le bas de plage; ces secteurs n'étant plus alimentés en sédiments, ils se replient inéluctablement. Le piétinement répété des populations, les prélèvements sableux réalisés à des fins ludiques (constructions de pâtés et de châteaux de sable, etc.) et la coupe d'arbustes sont autant d'éléments qui s'associent aux précédents pour accroître la dégradation de la frange côtière et plus généralement l'érosion du trait de côte (Saffache „De l'érosion à la protection”).

Par ailleurs, force est de constater que le front de mer et la vue sur mer sont de plus en plus recherchés par la population locale. À l'évidence, le développement du tourisme qui tend à surévaluer les plaisirs de la mer et du soleil a entraîné les Antillais vers les plages et son style de vie. La valorisation du littoral par le biais de la publicité pour attirer les touristes américains et européens a aussi modifié la perception des lieux du quotidien et le regard que les Antillais portent sur les paysages et les modes de vie (Desse et Saffache). „Le littoral et ses deux éléments constitutifs plage et mer ont été investis sans cesse de nouvelles pratiques reflètes de nouvelles valeurs” (Duhamel et Knafou 54).

Pour autant, les littoraux aménagés ont perdu leur caractère naturel et sauvage et donc l'attrait qu'ils exerçaient auprès des touristes. Force est de constater que la situation de l'île est paradoxale. L'industrie touristique a favorisé le développement d'une infrastructure bétonnée. Or, les ressources naturelles sont particulièrement fragiles et sensibles aux transformations spatiales et structurelles. C'est ainsi que les changements et modifications, qu'ils soient environnementaux, visuels, sociaux ou économiques, affectent immédiatement l'espace naturel de l'île.

C'est un fait, le parc hôtelier construit grâce à la défiscalisation est vieillissant et a peu bénéficié de rénovation. Il n'offre plus le confort, les équipements et services attendus par une clientèle qui trouve dans la zone géographique une offre plus conforme et à un moindre coût. La faible rentabilité conduit d'ailleurs les exploitants à la fermeture, et bien plus rarement à la remise à niveau. D'autres font le choix de vendre leurs établissements à la découpe. C'est ainsi que des structures hôtelières, qui ont fait l'histoire du tourisme martiniquais, sont laissés à l'abandon, sans qu'aucune action de démolition n'ait été entreprise. Prenons, à titre d'exemple, les ruines de l'hôtel Méridien de la Pointe du Bout aux Trois-Ilets, devenu Kalenda Resort en 2005 (Nicolas-Bragance). Le groupe Kalenda a décidé de racheter ce complexe hôtelier considéré alors comme le fleuron du tourisme martiniquais. Mais c'était sans compter sur la dégradation de l'offre et sur la baisse de la fréquentation touristique. Entre gel des travaux de réhabilitation et placement en redressement judiciaire, le Kalenda Ressort, loin de rouvrir ses portes, est devenu une friche touristique, un

squat. La présence de ce „délaisé touristique“ (Bachimon) marque, de manière permanente, le paysage de l'île. Philippe Bachimon utilise le terme de „délaisé touristique“ pour signifier „la désaffectation partielle ou totale, plus ou moins durable, d'un espace approprié *in fine* par une activité touristique, sans démolition des installations et sans reconversion effective des lieux“ (Bachimon non paginé). Laissé à l'appréciation et à la vue de tous, cet hôtel abandonné, depuis près d'une décennie, matérialise l'évolution du tourisme balnéaire à la Martinique. La végétation reprend ses droits et témoignent de l'abandon du lieu. La plage attenante, jadis occupée que par les touristes résidents de l'hôtel, est aujourd'hui délaissée par la population touristique. Les martiniquais ont réinvesti cette plage et profitent maintenant de ce lieu construit pour coller à l'image de la plage paradisiaque faite de sable blanc, de cocotiers, avec une eau limpide et sans vagues (Photo 1 et 2).

Photo 1 et 2  
Friche hôtelière de la Pointe du Bout, Martinique



Nicolas-Bragance 2013

En Martinique, les trois „S” – *sea, sand, sun* : mer, sable, soleil – ne suffisent plus pour assurer la satisfaction des clientèles touristiques. Depuis la fin des années 1990, la Martinique et la Guadeloupe sont confrontées à l'amplification du contexte concurrentiel régional et aux nouvelles évolutions de la demande touristique internationale. L'enclavement, la concurrence des pays à bas coûts de main d'œuvre, l'image dégradée à l'extérieur sont autant de handicaps qui freinent le développement touristique des Antilles françaises. Les chiffres sont particulièrement éloquentes: ils attestent du lent processus de dégradation qui affecte le tourisme martiniquais. Plus d'un million de touristes visitèrent l'île en 1999. En 2005, ils n'étaient plus que 639 000, pour n'être que 577 164 en 2009, soit presque moitié moins qu'en 1999. En Martinique, 1000 chambres et 26 hôtels ont

fermé en 10 ans (Dupont et Salzedo).

La complexification des attentes est telle que c'est désormais la recherche de la couleur locale, de l'épanouissement physique par la pratique d'activités corporelles, mais également le désir de fête et de distractions familiales ou collectives qui dominent la tendance actuelle. Parce que les vacances n'obéissent plus seulement à un profil-type, les ressources culturelles patrimonialisées sont identifiées, par les grandes instances internationales, ainsi que par les acteurs touristiques locaux, comme un volet stratégique essentiel capable de diversifier les produits touristiques.

### **Le patrimoine festif, un nouvel ingrédient pour un tourisme balnéaire revisité**

Le littoral est au cœur d'un processus de valorisation sans précédent. Jadis réservées aux visiteurs, il s'impose de plus en plus comme le lieu de prédilection des Antillais invités à y faire la fête (Nicolas-Bragance et Saffache). Les fêtes accompagnent presque toujours les mouvements d'appropriation de masse du littoral. Qu'il s'agisse de la fête de Pâques ou de Pentecôte, c'est souvent en famille et autour d'un repas que les martiniquais se regroupent sur l'espace littoral. Les plages sont désormais socialisées (Crozat et Fournier) par une communauté locale fondée sur des bases amicales ou familiales.

La fête locale, et singulièrement le Tour des yoles rondes de la Martinique, est l'archétype de la ressource territorialisée. Le tour est une compétition sportive dans laquelle les membres d'équipage des yoles rondes se livrent une lutte acharnée pour atteindre la ligne d'arrivée en vainqueur (Photo 3). La yole ronde est un „bateau en bois robuste, mais très difficilement manœuvrable. Léger, sans quille, sans lest, sans dérive, ni gouvernail, a faible tirant d'eau, pouvant naviguer a une ou deux voiles, il est conçu par assemblage de planches ou bordes fixes horizontalement sur une ossature faite de membres“ (Société des Yoles Rondes de la Martinique 3). La yole ronde, embarcation traditionnellement utilisée par les pêcheurs, a connu des évolutions techniques qui en font aujourd'hui un engin sportif dont la construction est régie par des règles strictes, dans un souci de respect de la tradition, d'une part et d'optimisation de leurs performances d'autre part.

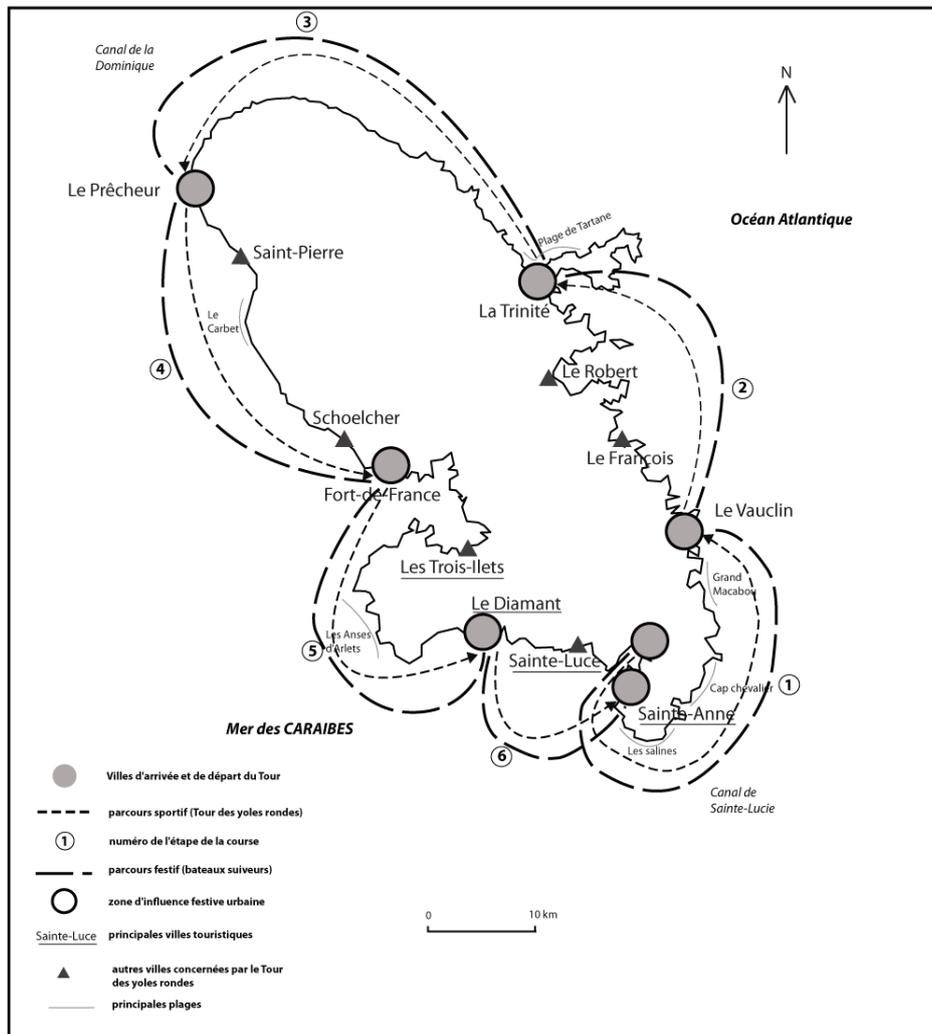
Photo 3  
Tour des yoles rondes de la Martinique, 2010



Nicolas-Bragance 2010

Cette compétition unique est très prisée des Martiniquais pour qui elle représente une source de joie et de fierté, une occasion de faire la fête autour d'un intérêt commun. Elle fait effectivement partie des manifestations qui matérialisent et stimulent le sentiment d'appartenance à une identité collective. Cette manifestation sportive démontre, année après année, son aptitude à mobiliser l'affectivité. Elle fait sens pour la communauté qui y projette des sentiments et des émotions (Bourdin). Elle a donc une indéniable essence patrimoniale sous-tendue par des valeurs historiques, culturelles et idéologiques. Ce temps festif se déroule en plusieurs phases, sur plusieurs jours et en investissant plusieurs lieux, quoiqu'avec un fonctionnement et une portée différente (Illustration 6).

Illustration 6  
 Une appropriation sportive et festive du littoral: Tour des yoles rondes de la Martinique



F. Nicolas-Bragance 2014

Il s'y découvre un éventail d'ambiances, d'un lieu à l'autre. L'occupation de la frange littorale martiniquaise est poussée à son paroxysme lors du tour. La yole ronde est une fierté locale, le patrimoine par excellence auquel la population se réfère et pour lequel elle voue une véritable admiration. En effet, les habitants se déplacent en très grand nombre pour assister au départ et à l'arrivée des courses de yoles.

Lors du tour des yoles rondes, le littoral quitte son statut d'espace physique limité et convoité. Il devient, pour le temps de la fête, un espace social requalifié (Corlay), en d'autres termes, un espace vécu, approprié et utilisé collectivement. En Martinique, les habitants en se rassemblant et

en s'unifiant, s'approprient et se réapproprient symboliquement, chaque année, l'espace littoral, devenu pour ces occasions lieu de rassemblement, en les investissant de leurs liens sociaux (Photo 4 et 5). Il s'envisage dès lors, comme un espace qui renvoie à des représentations collectives populaires.

La fête n'est désormais plus le propre de la ville, qui fête son saint patron, et ne se déroule plus seulement au cœur de l'espace urbain. Le tour des yoles rondes ainsi que les fêtes qu'il initie sont autant de temps festifs qui ont comme point commun le fait de se dérouler sur les plages.

Photo 4 et 5 :  
Appropriation populaire du milieu marin côtier de la Martinique lors du tour des yoles rondes



Fabiola Nicolas-Bragance 2012

C'est durant le Tour des yoles rondes que l'occupation de la frange littorale martiniquaise est poussée à son paroxysme. La plage devient, en effet, un espace emblématique chargé de représentations où la population martiniquaise se donne à voir comme une communauté unie et moulée dans son territoire. La connivence perceptible sur les plages où se regroupent tous ceux qui s'intéressent aux régates de yoles ou tout simplement, ceux qui sont attirés par l'ambiance, peut-être comparée à celle perçue lors des fêtes patronales. On peut y voir une certaine forme de transposition du modèle festif de rigueur durant les fêtes patronales.

La plage de l'arrivée du Tour rend d'ailleurs compte des différentes formes d'emprises qui y sont exercées. Dans l'attente des embarcations et de la fin du suspens quant à la yole gagnante de l'étape, les plages s'animent, souvent grâce aux artistes qui assurent l'ambiance sur un podium. Différents intervenants issus de divers horizons se côtoient, pour mettre en valeur leurs produits issus de l'artisanat, de la gastronomie, ou encore pour communiquer, se faire connaître et faire de la prévention. L'impression d'unité et d'une parfaite cohésion sociale est exacerbée par la présence d'une foule serrée qui s'entasse sur le littoral, dans une ambiance amicale et familiale. C'est d'ailleurs l'occasion pour de nombreuses familles de se réunir avec leurs proches venus de la France métropolitaine pour quelques semaines. Elles s'installent sur un coin de plage avec leurs tables, leurs chaises et leur parasol pour partager un repas, à l'image de ce qu'elles peuvent vivre le lundi de Pâques. Sur le village du Tour, la vie économique et culturelle est effectivement valorisée. Ce sont les lieux où les foules déambulent, en un incessant va et vient, vers les animations annexes proposées ou vers les échoppes dans lesquelles des vendeurs ambulants proposent à la vente des mets locaux (grillades, brochettes, acras) indispensables au bon déroulé de toute ambiance festive antillaise (Société des Yoles Rondes de la Martinique). La présence de pôles d'attractivité est bien réelle. Les animations sur les podiums, les différents stands, les restaurateurs ambulants, etc., sont autant d'occasion d'apprécier ces lieux de la fête.

Le tour des yoles est même devenu l'événement majeur des grandes vacances que beaucoup ne raterai pour rien au monde. Au côté des fervents supporters, on retrouve tous ceux qui viennent pour l'ambiance du tour, celle qui se vit généralement aux abords des régates, dans les bateaux suiveurs. Car en plus d'être un événement sportif et culturel majeur, le tour des yoles est un temps festif, une occasion pour des milliers de jeunes de faire la fête. En quête d'expression, au cœur de „la labilité et la multiplication contemporaines des référentiels identitaires” (Di Méo 3), ils ont en effet créé leurs propres réjouissances faisant du littoral, le lieu de rendez-vous incontournable des vacances. L'originalité avec le tour des yoles rondes, c'est qu'il a été le déclencheur de l'idée selon laquelle, on pouvait s'amuser autrement avec les plages et la mer en toile de fond. Il a exacerbé la volonté d'appropriation du littoral, désormais englobé dans l'espace vécu insulaire. Les fêtes, parce qu'elles sont matérialisées, cartographiées et donc visibles, „créent un régime de lisibilité

particulièrement efficace des identités sociales de tous ordres” (Di Méo 4). Le littoral, support de nouvelles fêtes, devient un lieu propice aux loisirs et à la distraction. Il est vécu comme un espace de liberté dans lequel les jeunes marquent leur présence et y affirment leur existence et leur identité. Les fêtes exprimant „la capacité de la communauté à intégrer de nouveaux signifiants identitaires” (Meintel et Hily), l’espace littoral devient un espace social, un miroir de leurs valeurs telles que le plaisir, le souci du corps, la convivialité, etc. Il est donc le lieu où se lit aisément cette tension entre l’héritage des valeurs et des pratiques transmises et l’attrait de réalité et de valeurs nouvelles.

Ces lieux où la fête „bien commun” est à son paroxysme renforcent, même symboliquement, le sentiment d’appartenance et d’identification des populations locales. Ces manifestations culturelles festives participent donc à l’élaboration du lien social.

Le littoral, et les deux entités qui le composent: la mer et la plage, deviennent des lieux anthropologiques. Selon Marc Augé (1992), ces sont des lieux chargés de sens, dans lesquels s’inscrivent l’identité, les relations et l’histoire des martiniquais, des guadeloupéens et des guyanais. Le lieu anthropologique est donc une „construction concrète et symbolique de l’espace [...] à laquelle se réfère tous ceux à qui elle assigne une place, si modeste soit-elle.” (Augé 68). Le littoral, dans cette perspective, s’impose, au moins pour le temps de la fête comme un espace symbolique. Il s’assimile alors à un espace porteur “ géosymboles” puisqu’il prend aux yeux de la population locale une dimension symbolique qui l’ancre dans une identité héritée et sacrée (Bonnemaison). „Collectivement nommés, appropriés, signifiés et vécus” (Di Méo „Composantes spatiales” 340), le milieu marin côtier change de statut. D’un lieu domestique, il devient un „haut lieu“, fruit d’une implication collective. La définition du géographe Pierre Gentelle (1995) aide à saisir l’importance de la dimension symbolique caractéristique des hauts lieux qui s’imposent indéniablement comme les fondements de la territorialité d’une communauté. Ainsi, Pierre Gentelle (1995) décrit le haut lieu, de manière très précise, comme „ un lieu localisé (dans le réel ou le mythe) et nommé“. Il est haut, c’est-à-dire „ élevé dans l’échelle des valeurs“ (Gentelle 135). L’originalité avec le tour des yoles rondes, c’est qu’il a été le déclencheur de l’idée selon laquelle on pouvait s’amuser autrement avec les plages et la mer en toile de fond. Ce sont donc autant d’occasions qui sont données aux populations locales de se manifester publiquement. Parallèlement, ce sont des dispositifs suffisamment souples pour permettre le développement de l’offre touristique, ou du moins, une adaptation de l’offre aux attentes d’un public demandeur.

## Conclusion

Il s'agissait ici d'aborder au travers de l'exemple de la Martinique, la question de l'évolution de la perception de l'espace marin côtier. Avec le développement des villes puis l'essor du tourisme et enfin de la société de loisirs, les littoraux ont changé de statut. De „territoires du vide“, ils sont devenus des territoires du plein, voire du trop plein. En somme, les représentations jouent un rôle fondamental dans l'attractivité du littoral. Elles déterminent également l'usage et la pratique des plages et de la mer. Force est de reconnaître que l'utilisation du littoral par les populations locales diffère des pratiques des visiteurs. Jadis craint par la population locale, le littoral martiniquais s'est mué en un espace économique attractif, vecteur de modernité. Désormais, la plage et la mer sont des lieux d'*hybridation* (Desse „Les littoraux antillais“) où se côtoient les touristes et les locaux qui se sont appropriés l'espace littoral, à des fins de loisirs.

L'évolution est réelle: pour les Martiniquais, le littoral représente un cadre qui rend possible l'affirmation d'une identité collective. À bien des occasions, ils se l'approprient et le chargent de valeurs symboliques et identitaires. Le littoral est désigné pour les „entre-soi“ communautaires. Cette valeur sociale du littoral est par ailleurs, exacerbée lors des temps festifs qui donnent à voir de nouvelles formes d'appropriation récréatives et festives de la plage et de la mer.

L'originalité avec le tour des yoles rondes, c'est qu'il a été le déclencheur de l'idée selon laquelle, on pouvait s'amuser autrement avec les plages et la mer en toile de fond. Ainsi, le tour des yoles rondes de la Martinique, dans sa facette festive, n'est certes pas un évènement touristique, mais l'idée de mêler activités nautiques et fêtes privées en mer, avec la présence de plusieurs bateaux, est d'une grande pertinence dans le cadre d'une multiplication de l'offre de produits touristiques. Le tourisme balnéaire peut assurément se penser autrement que par la simple pratique du bronzage ou de la baignade. Il n'est donc très certainement pas utopique de penser que la jonction entre tourisme et nautisme festif est une solution capable de participer à la pérennisation du tourisme des Antilles. Le littoral peut dès lors se penser comme le support de la rencontre entre population locale et touriste.

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#### **Suggested Citation:**

Nicolas-Bragance, Fabiola and Pascal Saffache. "La mer, de la prison aux nouveaux modes d'appropriation: de l'esclavage à tour de yoles rondes de la Martinique." *forum for interamerican research* 8.3 (Dec 2015): 70-90. Available at: <[www.interamerica.de](http://www.interamerica.de)>

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**‘Making Eden a Reality’:  
Caribbean Eco-poetics and Ethnic Environment  
in Andrea Gunraj’s *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha***

**Abstract:**

Literary scholars have only recently started to investigate the treatment of the environment as well as the interrelation of nature and culture in Caribbean fiction and poetry. Caribbean eco-poetics not only engages in ecological themes and strategies to aestheticize nature in fiction, but also takes into account the specific contexts of dispossession of the land and human bodies as well as colonial exploitation and the making of the postcolonial state. By applying an eco-poetical methodological approach, this paper contributes to the increasing scholarly field of postcolonial ecocriticism in Caribbean studies, foregrounding such pressing issues as environmental damage, ethno-politics and related processes of ‘othering.’ In addition, the juxtaposition of eco-poetics and ethnic environment helps to understand the way literature deals with human interaction with nature, access to resources, racial conflict and hierarchies of human and non-human bodies. This eco-poetical reading of Andrea Gunraj’s debut novel, *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* (2009), a vivid portrayal of the heartland of an unnamed Caribbean country that resembles Guyana in its geographic structure and ethno-political composition during the Burnham era, critically highlights the capitalist exploitation of land and people, but also foregrounds the aesthetic function of the vegetation in the problematization of this relationship. The novel creates a microcosm in which the socio-ethnic structures of power and oppression characteristic for large parts of the post-independence Caribbean are reproduced, in which the hierarchic relation of wilderness and civilization is deconstructed, and in which the dichotomous notion of nature and culture needs to be re-negotiated.

**Keywords:** Eco-poetics, Environment, Andrea Gunraj, Landscapes

“The *poetics* of landscape, which is the source of creative energy, is not to be directly confused with the *physical nature* of the country. Landscape retains the memory of time past. Its space is open or closed to its meaning.”  
(Glissant 150)

“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.”  
(DeLoughrey, “Ecocriticism” 265)

## Poetics of Living Landscapes

The Caribbean region is frequently referred to as an extraordinary space of entanglements where, as this journal's special issue prominently puts it in the title, culture is inextricably linked with nature, a link that has often been established without the consent of the people involved. Taking into account the region's history and related processes of assimilation, creolization, and transculturation, this observation foregrounds the multiple ways human bodies and the environment interact with each other, or have been made to interact as a result of Western colonial and neocolonial impositions, the dehumanization of African people, as well as the romanticization of the Amerindian population's natural, or at times even almost supernatural, closeness to land. Édouard Glissant introduces a “*poetics* of landscape,” which he embeds in this particular history that, in turn, feeds into the creative, literary imagination of the Caribbean, and, although distinct, it is never isolated from the “*physical nature*” but rather in relation to it. It resonates a particular rhythm, which for Glissant is genuinely creole, bearing witness to the Caribbean's character of the cross-fertilization of cultural elements. Importantly, Glissant suggests explicitly that landscapes and nature are part of Caribbean identity and in this explicitness he slightly differs from other major identity approaches, which focus solely on subject formation both of the individual and collective, processes of cultural identification (e.g. Stuart Hall), or ethnic and racial identity discourses such as *coolitude*, *négritude*, or *créolité*.

Literary scholars have only recently started to investigate the treatment of the environment as well as the interrelation of nature and culture in Caribbean fiction and poetry from a postcolonial point of view. Caribbean ecopoetics highlights the “time past” imprinted in its landscape and brings into focus people's relation with the land. Ecopoetics not only engages in ecological themes and strategies to aestheticize the physical albeit fictional nature, but also takes into account the specific contexts of dispossession of the land and human bodies as well as colonial exploitation and the building or making of the postcolonial state. The historicity of the landscape in Caribbean literature is identified also by Elizabeth DeLoughrey as the second introductory quote pointedly illustrates

and specifies that which Glissant terms “the memory of time past.” Caribbean ecopoetics, in incorporating a “politics of place” (DeLoughrey, “Ecocriticism” 265), takes into account the “historical, enforced remapping of the globe” and a myriad of “radical reconfigurations” (DeLoughrey, “Postcolonialism” 322) of the world order in the literary depiction of human relations to the natural world. [1] Wilson Harris, in one of his essays, aptly entitled “The Music of Living Landscapes” (1996), while wondering about the general perception of the landscape as passive and deprived of meaning, advocates its vitality, reminiscent in fact of Glissant’s landscape as source of creative energy. For Harris the landscape “is like an open book” actively engaging the reader, its alphabet symbolizes all elements of the environment, and, though difficult, when paying attention to its language one will be able to read and understand that book (*Selected Essays* 40). This particular lyrical sound of Harris’s writing about nature travels across the Americas and also finds resonance with the younger generation of diaspora writers who have taken up residence elsewhere. Canadian-born writer Andrea Gunraj, an activist and community outreach worker for the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children, lives in Toronto. Her parents migrated from Guyana to Canada in the 1970s. Important to note is that the politics and culture of Guyana have strongly influenced her work as writer of fiction. In addition, the fact that her parents left the country during Forbes Burnham’s Afro-centric decolonial rule contributes to and is important for an understanding of the underlying criticism of ethnic conflicts in the novel. However, it is important to note that hers is not an attempt to represent a reality of a country she neither grew up in nor currently lives in. Andrea Gunraj’s debut novel *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* (2009) can be located within the burgeoning field of Indian Caribbean women’s writing, but is less concerned with Indo-Caribbean self-representation, the diaspora discourse of the *kala pani*, and postmodern questions of fragmented, dislocated identities. Here, Gunraj departs from the writings of her counterparts who also write from outside of the Caribbean, such as Ramabai Espinet in *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), Niala Maharaj in *Like Heaven* (2006) or Peggy Mohan in *Jahajin* (2007). [2] More significantly, however, Gunraj writes about a living mythical landscape in the tradition of Wilson Harris. [3] She vividly portrays the heartland of a country that remains unspecified throughout the novel, which readers, and arguably so, may identify as Guyana. She refrains from an exoticizing representation of a postcolonial society often perceived as ‘authentic’ by unfamiliar readers, unlike, for instance, the neocolonial tourist gaze at Guyana offered by Indian writer Rahul Bhattacharya’s half fictional, half ethnographic account in *The Sly Company of People Who Care* (2011), a journey of self-discovery during which the protagonist re-discovers the “raw beauty of a forgotten colonial society” as the blurb promises. [4] In her depiction of troubled interpersonal relationships and examination of complex ethnic conflicts, Gunraj unravels power dynamics that are caught in between racialized social and spatial structures and envisions an alternative

environment to rebuild indigenous, Amerindian culture.

By applying an ecopoetical methodological approach, this paper contributes to the increasing scholarly field of postcolonial ecocriticism in Caribbean studies. At the same time, the approach of ecopoetics and ethnic environment, which is loosely informed by Sylvia Wynter's formulation of ethnopoetics and sociopoetics (cf. Wynter 1976), foregrounds such pressing issues as environmental damage, ethno-politics and related processes of 'othering,' addressed, as well, in *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*. The juxtaposition of ecopoetics and ethnic environment helps to understand the way the novel deals with human interaction with nature, access to resources and power hierarchies of human and non-human bodies. The analysis focuses on "Part Two" of the novel's total of four parts, on precisely those scenes that are taking place in the resort ironically called Eden Development, located in the interior of the country. I argue that Eden is a microcosm in which the socio-ethnic structures of power and oppression – as in a Hegelian master-slave dialectic – characteristic for large parts of the post-independence Caribbean are reproduced; in which the hierarchic relation of wilderness and civilization is deconstructed; in which the dichotomous notion of nature/culture needs to be re-negotiated. I will also show to what extent Wilson Harris's writing acts as inspiration for her spiritual take on the fictional landscape or 'bushscape,' as I choose to term it. [5]

### **Theoretical Implications of Ecopoetics**

The approach of ecopoetics and ethnic environment is particular for Caribbean literature. [6] It is a suitable tool to analyze fictional representations of environmental conflicts, natural alteration, and disasters. It departs from rather traditional ecocritical approaches in American studies in that it is not strictly anti-anthropocentric, outside of the human, and apolitical, but very much concerned with the relation of literature, nature, and mankind as well as being engaged in a criticism of politics and capitalism (cf. Nixon 2005). [7] While this is the departing point for this article, I wish to turn also to Sylvia Wynter's essay "Ethno or Socio Poetics" (1976) and her understanding of the terms poetics in combination with the ethnic and processes of 'othering' (which is similar to what Edward Said described as the Western and non-Western 'other' two years later in his famous *Orientalism*). Wynter uses poetics as a way of naming the world, in an Aristotelian sense, pointing out that an artistic "making" of a self takes place in very specific socio-historical and cultural contexts, namely a western ethnocentrism in which an 'us' has been constructed in relation to the ethnos of the 'other' ("them people" in the novel) however bound in mutuality in the social environment of the "economic world system" (78). [8] Environment, hence, means the social environment, referring to the cultural space in which individuals live, the people and institutions with whom they interact, and

the global economy of which they are part; it refers to the physical environment, meaning nature, the rural, urban, or oceanic; and lastly to the landscape which Helen Tiffin defines as “a product of a combination of relationships between living beings and their surroundings” (199). Environmental conflicts have their roots in colonial history and slavery, have subsequently spread out into the de- and postcolonial era of nation building, and are further nurtured by neo-imperial forms of domination and development. Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s seminal work on environmentalism in literature is highly relevant for the understanding of ecopoetics in Caribbean writing. Her work illustrates that “Caribbean literature is deeply engaged with the history of human and plant diasporas, rendering a complex cultural ecology and a dialogical imagination” (“Ecocriticism” 266). In a similar vein, Elaine Savory’s ecopoetic reading explores the extensive use of plant imagery and the aesthetic representations of the bond between flora and human in Derek Walcott’s work, concluding that the “interplay between poetry and plants is of vital importance in raising consciousness about sustainable change appropriate for social and environmental conditions in the Caribbean” (Savory 81). In addition, as noted earlier, borrowing from Edouard Glissant’s poetics of landscape, an ecopoetic approach takes note of the people’s relations to and living with the land as a dialectic process. It thus goes beyond simply nature writing and a general concern with environmentalism (cf. Nair 2011). It highlights that these relations, of course, are subject to change, and have been altered both naturally and forcefully over the course of the region’s less extensively recorded ‘pre-Colombian’ era, colonial conquest and plantation economy, slavery, mass migration, and tourism (what Wynter refers to as the economic world system). This development has brought forward over the centuries first the implementation of racist hierarchies, and later, in some parts, ethnic compartmentalization fostered by the newly elected postcolonial governments, and has further contributed to a reconfiguration of the landscape through deforestation, the construction of sugar plantations, tourist sites or urban ghettoization. [9] At the same time, (de-)colonial geographies of resistance emerged – what Katherine McKittrick terms “cartographies of struggle” (2006) – such as the installation of the provision ground system, the mountainous areas as site of maroonage, as well as the heavily vegetated interior, the hinterland or ‘bushscape’, as spaces of refuge and escape. The latter has evolved into the alluring heartland in particular of Guyana and major destiny of the mythical search for ‘El Dorado’ and is an important setting in Gunraj’s novel.

The ecopoetic approach presented here brings into dialogue an environmentally engaged close reading of the novel, highlighting the aesthetization, for example, of the rainforest’s vitality indicated by “the bush’s steady, undaunted breath” (186) or the sheltering foliage of its “taut weave of waxy brown leaves” (123), with a postcolonial criticism of the novel’s representation of socially constructed ethnic hostility as well as a more context-oriented cultural studies approach to the

writing of nature and culture. The following analytical part of *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* sheds light on the inter-/relationship of the human bodies with their social and physical environment. In the Eden resort we find an 'original' environment imposed on which is a social order that establishes gender inequality and a racialized hierarchy of thusly termed "black", "brown," and "red-skinned" people, respectively called "them people" (105) in the novel, to which I refer as ethnic environment.

### **Fiction of Eden and the Search for El Dorado**

"El Dorado is fabulous but it is not only a legend of relived memory... It is a grave and blood-stained canvas of greed for gold and territory across centuries." (Harris, *Palace* 10)

Andrea Gunraj's *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*, set in a fictive, tropical country in the Anglophone Caribbean, presumably located on the South American mainland, combines generic features of the coming-of-age narrative, family saga, elements of magical realism with social criticism. [10] Next to the small town called Marasaw and the unnamed capital city, an area surrounded by "palm trees and expansive bushes" (11) and separated by a large river, especially the country's lush interior as well as the unspecified cold North, hinting at Canada or the United States, are two further relevant settings in the novel. The setting resembles Guyana in its geographic structure and ethno-political composition during the Burnham era, as Mariam Pirbhai, too, notices "the Burnham era as the socio-political catalyst for the bitter derailment of the protagonist's romantic ideals, inter-racial friendships and personal ambitions" (Pirbhai 41). However, the novel, in not mentioning a state, evokes the impossibility of national belonging in a transnational, diasporan space such as the Caribbean, and deconstructs the myth of unity built on artificial boundaries or borders, thus placing emphasis on the relational (dis-)unity of social and physical environments.

The story reconstructs roughly ten years of the life of the protagonist Neela Keetham. The narration starts with the kidnapping of her daughter Seetha and a reference that Neela has been in possession of a magical power that has failed her just like it had failed her mother before (cf. 47). This magic develops into the plot's leitmotif, turns out to be her particular, inexplicable bond with nature and intensifies during her stay in the rainforest's interior, in some instances being referred to as "mysterious abilities" (49), "sinister power" (112), or her "magical talents" (193). Neela proceeds with an account of her childhood days, depicting her younger self at the age of ten as rebellious and reckless always in rivalry with her brother Navi and other boys at her school. At one point the protagonist describes a dream in which

she was running through a jungle so fast that her bare feet kicked into the air and leaped in expanded arcs. Soon she broke into the netted foliage, launching herself over treetops and soaring into the sky. She split through the atmosphere and tore it apart; plunging deep into the ocean, she splashed back out and skimmed over its clear surface, gliding smoothly, bouncing off the edges of enormous foaming waves. It felt as if she were running for many days and nights on end, conquering fanciful, mysterious landscapes with her bounds and transcending distance, time and fatigue. (57)

In her dream, Neela already foresees her journey deep into the country's interior. The quote presents a strong female character unstoppable in her desire for freedom and illustrates her connection to the natural environment which contains an empowering moment for her. It evokes a seemingly boundless nature and unfolds the mysteries of the rainforest.

She further unveils a transnational family constellation, living alone with Navi and her grandmother in Marasaw since their mother has gone overseas to work as an *"in-home child-care provider"* (33) unable to return due to her falsified documents. [11] Also at issue throughout the novel are gendered patterns of inequality, societal strictures, and moral expectation that impede in particular the lived sexuality of the women characters and their individual development. While Navi receives a scholarship for a university overseas, Neela stays behind under the unbearably strict surveillance of her grandmother, from which she longs to escape. Navi starts a career in finance abroad at the Ministry of Foreign Investment that is proud to *"bring needed infrastructure to the developing world, infrastructure that we will supply [...], we can build our economy, our nation and our world. To progress"* (157). Navi, at the beginning, becomes complicit with a system of 'white charity' within the global capitalist system of conquest and exploitation. As such, his is only at the surface the successful migrant story of the American dream.

Neela, meanwhile, out of duty to have a respectable career, enrolls at a teachers' training school which still bears the imprint of British imperialism: the influence of the colonizers and missionaries particularly on education is still present as seen in the slogan *"Higher Knowledge leads to Higher Ground"* (88). What follows are depictions of social unrest, political protests as well as an atmosphere of hostility, racism, and open distrust of the government. Signs in the streets read: *"New Builder Party government: built on lies and corruption! and New Builders: profit first, people last! [...]* – the crowd split itself down lines of skin and class, casualties on every side becoming martyrs" (90). This alludes to the composition of a multi-ethnic environment characterized by conflicting relations among the oppositional groups and *"sparked bitterness and accusations, fostered by the party itself, encouraging people to turn against each other as never before"* (90). Within this atmosphere of poisonous racist prejudice, interethnic friendships like Neela's and Lenda's are met with rejection *"Eh-eh, since when a brown and black girl can friend-up each other so? Like they don't know what going on in dis country!"* (98). [12] What resonates here is a critique

of racial politics and ethnic compartmentalization which predominates this postcolonial society as depicted in the novel. Steve Garner and Shona Jackson, looking at contemporary Guyana, describe this as ethnopoliticization (cf. Garner 2008) and ethno-political violence (cf. Jackson 2005) fostered by the former colonial empire in her own interest and reinforced by contemporary governmental authorities. These terms are apt descriptions of “what going on in dis country.” Against this background of ethnic violence, rumours of a rich and prospering town in the remote area of the rainforest, yet associated with “myths and ghost tales [...] *about de bush spirits*” (91), fall on fruitful ground. One day at Neela’s teachers training school, her professor announces the new government program for the development of the hinterland: Eden, the construction of a new town and tourist resort in the Nasee-Ki region in the interior of the country. Quite critical of the project and the corrupt ruling elite that promotes disunity among the population, he warns the students not to leave Marasaw to work at the construction site. However, working at Eden, for many seems to be the only way out of unemployment and hopeless poverty fostered by a racialized system of favourism. For Neela’s boyfriend Jaroon, who calls it “paradise” (92), it is the only option since “nobody’s really hiring brown people from dis town no more. They say we too mixed up with all kind-a other people” (92). Neela ignores her professor and although he disappears after loudly voicing criticism, she decides to offer her services as teacher to the Party and runs away from her family, her confinement, to be with her boyfriend Jaroon. Her flight has disastrous outcomes. The only person who is left to help Neela in the end is her brother with his influence abroad at the Ministry of Foreign Investment.

Eden Development, however, turns out to be a governmental failure mostly due to inexplicable, mysterious natural forces hindering any sign of progress. I quote the announcement by the government in length for its disclosure of the politics behind the Eden project that is driven by the urge to create prosperity for the indebted economy and poverty stricken population:

‘Our newly elected government has embarked on a new project for de betterment of de nation [...]. It is de creation of a new town in de heart of de interior of dis great country. [...] In partnership with Omega Global Ventures, a world renowned leader in travel-tourism, [...] the Eden Resort Development will be a state-of-the-art ecotourism destination. It will bring unprecedented growth to our economy.’ [...] The memo explained that Eden was to stretch along the Nasee-Ki River near the landing of the great national waterfall, a fully functional resort town with private residences, schools, hotels, restaurants and its own airport. *The democratically elected New Builders Party is fulfilling our promise of prosperity to all citizens. Your service is necessary to make Eden a reality. We are looking for aspiring young citizens to establish quality child-rearing and educational services.* [...] The announcement concluded with the popular New Builders Party motto, *Prosperity for citizens built on a prosperous tomorrow.* (96-97)

The scene of the teacher's speech is remarkable for several reasons: Gunraj makes intertextual reference not only to Wilson Harris but also to Trinidadian Lakshmi Persaud's *For the Love of My Name* (2000), precisely to the scene that describes the deforestation of the fictional Caribbean island called Maya, which is doomed to sink beneath the sea. The procedure of "Hinterland Development" is a measure undertaken by a short-sighted government to reduce unemployment and "involved the cultivation of land cleared of its rainforest, [resembling] the destructive plunder of eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial 'developers' on tropical lands. And so it was that Maya was being governed by a system that was blind to the fact that it was digging the country's grave" (Persaud 211). In their novels, both writers denounce the neocolonial intervention in the landscape, natural exploitation and ecological disaster in the name of a civilizing mission and capitalist profit generated by plantation economy.

Furthermore, the quoted lines highlight the economic significance of the hinterland for the progress of the country. The project with the biblical name Eden alludes to an untouched feminized space of fertility and abundance, a virginal paradise welcoming the neocolonial intruders to overflowing riches and seduction, reminiscent of the journey to El Dorado undertaken by Donne and his crew in *Palace of the Peacock*. The myth of El Dorado, as Shona N. Jackson explains, after independence continues to depict the region and especially the hinterland as "endlessly yielding for both material and cultural production" (Jackson 85). El Dorado, the "difficult and violent conquest of the territory," described by Antonio Benítez-Rojo in *The Repeating Island* (2006), is driven by a colonial desire of expansion and possession:

[...] the search for El Dorado continues, and will surely continue for many years. It is now carried out by present-day Guyanese society beneath the slogan of 'repossessing the interior,' which refers to the economic exploitation of the inland territory, potentially rich in natural resources, as well as to the discovery of a collective psychic state which would allow a feeling of cultural identity, extended toward the hinterland, which Guyanese society has lacked. (Benítez-Rojo 188-189)

In the novel, the continuity of exploitation and extraction of the riches of the interior is disguised as a postcolonial repossession of the land along the Nasee-Ki River. Arguably, this alludes to Forbes Burnham's project to develop the hinterland through an agrarian reform and education (meaning 'civilization') of the Amerindian population in order to build the "ideological apparatus" of what he called the Co-operative Republic (cf. Jackson 97). Likewise, in the novel the government proclaims a nationalist discourse of prosperity and unity through the development of the interior and creation of a singular national land-scape. Gunraj's novel (and Persaud's novel alike) thus inscribe themselves in the tradition of a postcolonial ecological writing dedicated, amongst others, to the deconstruction of El Dorado – a myth that first served the colonial imagination and later became

“*the origin narrative for the entire region*” (Jackson 87).

The contract system on which the Eden Development project is based evokes violent memories of the system of indentureship, the contract labor of hundreds of thousand Indians in the Caribbean in the 19th and early 20th centuries (cf. 102). The state authorities fool the citizens in a false promise of prosperity while in fact their workforce is exploited. The novel explicitly mentions the bad working conditions, food rationalization and retention of wages. Quite similar to the fate of the indentured laborers, for many of those who like Neela signed up for Eden, this contract is a one-way ticket to the rainforest without return. Although the workers do not cross entire oceans but only fly to the interior of their own country they nevertheless find themselves in an environment perceived as hostile and entirely different to what they have known. They feel ultimately entrapped in the bush. Adding to this are neo-imperial claims to the territory by the transnational corporation Omega Global Ventures. The mission of the enterprise in the heart of the rainforest to tame the ‘beast of nature’ is to satisfy the global North’s longing for an exotic paradise. An ecocritical interpretation here highlights the inherent global capitalist hegemony. Omega Global Ventures has the financial means and puts pressure on the government. The company withholds much needed wages for the workers when the construction for mysterious reasons does not show any signs of progress, “it looks like they ain’t getting to finish building anything much for Omega” (127), as Karha, Neela’s new friend in the Resort, observes. Tourism is seen as threat and opportunity for the country. There is an ambivalence for nature needs to be destroyed first and then reconstructed or ‘man-made.’ To create ecologically sustainable tourism Tiffin’s essay “Man Fitting the Landscapes” points both to the colonial restructuring of the Caribbean landscape modelled on a European imagination of a Garden of Eden as well as the attitude of humans towards the environment. In fictional representations of landscapes, she argues, “writers are obliged to negotiate historical, cultural, political, climatic, and biological factors” (Tiffin 200), if they wish to trace the relationships between culture, nature and post- or neocolonial history. An ecopoetical reading of the novel not only critically highlights the capitalist exploitation of land and people, but also foregrounds the aesthetic function of the vegetation in the problematization of this relationship. Plants, leaves, and trees as well as birds and insects populating the hinterland react differently to the imposed presence of strangers like Neela, Jaroon, the workers, or an army of soldiers – communicating with and embracing the one, while screaming spitefully at the others (cf. 165). The stunning beauty of the natural environment captivates protagonist and reader alike. The panoramic view down on the rainforest from the plane resembles the images of the mystical landscape of Neela’s childhood dream and seems as unreal. She is breathless observing how “treetops melted into a seamless layer of green fluff, weighty yet feathered; slithering brown rivers broke through the tree cover like hairline fractures. [...] The waterfall dropped into a tremendous valley where countless shades of

green overlapped and tangled into a web” (119). The perfection and grace of the natural setting, emphasized by the lyrical language, lies in the comforting rich greenness, but is suddenly disturbed by the plane “rolling gracelessly beside the river on a strip of *beaten* soil” (119; *emphasis added*). Gunraj chooses the term *beaten* in order to verbalize the violation of the soil, the passive form further emphasizes nature’s loss of agency to the intruding development project. In addition, upon arrival, instead of finding a flourishing new settlement, Neela encounters a place far from being a functioning establishment and is hit by a “wave of shock before a full flood of disillusionment” (123) overcomes her. Her vulnerability increases as she feels that her supernatural-magical powers are failing her and she is no longer able to command them. In an already alienated and fragile environment, her alienation is in fact that of her surrounding of a marginalized nature heavily altered in this novel by attempts at deforestation and building measures.

The interior itself is associated with natural wonders, myths, and ghost tales of bush spirits in which Neela, too, believes until she meets Karha, a young woman from one of the villages in the rainforest who also works as teacher. The bush is feared by the rest of the country’s population, especially the workers in Eden do not dare to leave the construction site to enter the bush. Neela, before getting to know Karha, “had scarcely considered the people who were born encircled by bush, inhabiting a world that seemed unthinkable remote to her. They were rarely spoken of in the rest of the country” (121). The novel is explicit about the subjection and obliteration of Amerindian people as well as a prevalent racialized social order and marginalization stemming from economic systems of exploitation that have shaped much of Caribbean’s history until today. The hinterland is transformed into the peripheral and “*them people*” become the ultimate others. Within the Eden Resort a similar gender and ethno-political hierarchy as in the remote urban areas of the country is rebuilt – a hierarchy based on skin color in which the indigenous people of the Nasee-Ki valley are forced to occupy the bottom, deprecatingly called “them people” and “red-skin” (121) by “brown men” who perceive themselves as superior defining themselves, their “own kind” (163), in relation to this Other. This superiority in this ethnic environment is largely built upon misperceptions of the Nasee-Ki people’s close connection to the physical nature. “They talk pure jumbie-story, spirits in de bush... Trust brown-man... These Nasee-Ki people believe pure nonsense, man, pure superstition” (165-166). The quote alludes to the workers’ prejudice against the indigenous people and their own superstitious fear in bush spirits who are haunting the urban imagination of the hinterland. These folk tales and half-beliefs are degrading for both the social and physical environment of the bush causing a clash of the so-called pre-Colombian culture and the postcolonial society that relies on “economic policy of dependence” (Jackson 97).

Neela, contrary to common prejudice against the people who inhabit the hinterland as well as superstitious belief connected to the haunted place, feels magically drawn to it. Despite her first

impulse of fear she opens up to the surrounding and listens to the bush. The surrounding vegetation in turn begins to react to her emotional agitation and communicates with Neela in order to transmit a warning. “She felt the bush’s intensifying anger rubbing her spine, its desire to promote human chaos and, at the same moment, to be relieved of it” (167). Implicit in this exchange between Neela and the natural environment are the consciousness of ecological concern and urgency to learn to understand the place. The land’s anger is hers, too. “She had felt something strange about the river, the valley, the waterfall... *dis whole bush is haunted, fed up with dis lying government and dis damn development and these reckless people [...], de bush can’t by tamed, it gon’ always fight back...*” (167). The valley’s fight against the people and the development project is a restaging of an age-old conflict and sheds light on environmental damage caused by the brutalities of slavery and the monoculture of plantation economy. It is emblematic for a highly disturbed relationship of the human with the natural environment. Neela’s responsiveness to and understanding of this living landscape makes her an ally to the environment against a power that is harmful to both nature and indigenous culture. The novel can thus be read as documenting the legacy of a violent past which still affects the present Caribbean (and the rest of the globe) and with which the region needs to come to terms.

Furthermore, in an attempt to rewrite the living landscape, Gunraj at times adopts a highly poeticized, symbolic style to convey the bush’s own language and rhythm. One aspect of this particular style is the personification of nature as the short quote illustrates: “Mirroring her [Neela] upset, the wind gusted unpredictably, whirling tree limbs in its thrust. Branches moved eerily, like trembling arms” (135). Neela perceives the vital signs of the rainforest which differ from human’s breath like her own, but are real nevertheless,

she didn’t hear rhythmic respiration of lungs. Instead, her surroundings hummed a connected breath, a long exhale [...]. She squinted to perceive silhouettes of foliage, eerie images undressing in cloud-covered moonlight [...]. In the shades of the night, Neela sensed that the Nasee-Ki had its own breath, that it was indeed alive” (166).

This observation instantaneously brings to mind Wilson Harris’s impression of the Guyanese heartland which he fictionalizes in *Palace of the Peacock* and introduces as follows: “I became aware of a vibrant, secret life in the arteries [...] in landscapes, riverscapes, oceanscapes, skyscapes. That life differed from the human pulse but it gave range, mystery, cross culturality, unique music, to the language...” (Harris, qt. in Maes-Jelinek 248). Gunraj, too, discerns what Harris describes as the music of the living landscape sung by “preternatural voices in rivers, rapids, giant waterfalls, rock, tree” (Harris, *Selected Essays* 40). The bush is depicted in her novel as “sentient and lurking” (167).

Far from being the Eden-esque idyll one would picture behind its name, Eden Development emerges as an extra-legal territory of vigilantism, violence, and corruption. Jaroon has turned himself into the despotic leader of the workers and “built a kingdom for himself and has everybody answering to him” (227). He resembles more and more demigod-like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s classic *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Like Kurtz, who is the embodiment of imperialist greed for possession, Jaroon is manipulated by power. Both characters offer a glance into the abyss of human psyche showing how in a colonial setting of exploitation and in isolated places individuals become corrupted and deprived of morality. His influence both among the workers in the camp as well as among the authorities in the government increases beyond Eden. Neela is first blinded by his growing power “so quick to enjoy the spoils of being untouchable, so intoxicated by the respect that came from being in a place like Eden with a man like Jaroon, that its hazards had rarely troubled her at all” (186), also her school benefits from the additional allocation. Only Karha remains skeptical and refuses to accept Jaroon’s offerings, willingly attracting his resentment. When two village boys have gone missing, the bush foreshadows the tragedy by its silence, its refusal to react to Neela’s pleading. Karha discloses the terrifying truth about Jaroon who has kept the boys from school, made them steal liquor and provisions from the cargo planes: “He use de boys to do his business ‘cause they quick and young and know how to hide. And he think de soldiers won’t aim gun and shoot mad at them in de bush...” (185). Eden has its own laws, the individual’s existence in the end is a struggle for survival of the fittest and the most corrupted – “Eden does do dat to people” (191). It changes people, a curse that comes not from the valley, not from the natural environment but “from people alone” (192), who are not in tune with the music of the living landscape, as Wilson Harris reminds us.

In terms of an ecocritical reading the following passage highlights environmental empowerment and the joined forces of the natural elements directed against unsustainable neocolonial and neoliberal intervention trying to impose itself forcefully on the bushscape:

But no matter how hard they worked or didn’t work, there was no escape from the Nasee-Ki Valley. Wood ants bored into freshly cut planks and split them along their grain, rain pelted ugly pits into concrete before it could dry, overnight winds shattered recently erected building frames. *Dis place is cursed ... De waterfall is rebelling against us.* (162)

The natural space is not a passive entity, rather the wind, rain, and insects rebel against the appropriation and alterations in the landscape perpetrated by a corrupt local government and foreign investors and their mission to bring progress to an allegedly ‘underdeveloped’ region. Being “[c]ursed from long time... [d]e valley don’t let people do what they intend to do” (165). The curse has been brought upon land and people through the colonial conquest which violently affected the whole region and heavily altered the existing interrelations of nature and culture. The bush resists

this colonial continuity of exploitation quite literally from the grass roots level refusing to be mastered and supplanted. The destructive force of the Eden Development becomes apparent yet in another instance when Neela and Karha walk further into the bush. Karha notices the absence of the birds that used to populate the area around the waterfall, but as “people [are] crowding them out” (179) they now “fly far into de interior” (179) which leads to an imbalance in the ecosystem of the valley.

When Neela finds out about her pregnancy, she separates from Jaroon who considers this an offence against his masculine authority and begins a crusade of threat and sabotage against Neela and her friend in order to “*take away everything she got*” (196). The two friends find support with the women native to the Nasee-Ki valley, who help Neela during her pregnancy and attune her further to the particular soundscape of the bush. The two women visit Karha’s village, together they “follow [...] untraceable paths in the bush, weaving amongst the covering trees and spacious plants and creeping insects” (179). Again, the rich vegetation and living landscape contrast with the destructive energy that poisons the camp. In addition, Neela notes that neither the soldiers nor the workers, not even Jaroon, dare to enter the thicket. She eventually gives birth to her daughter Seetha in the village close to Eden. She later remembers how “[s]he fainted into a deep, overwhelmed and comforted sleep, dreaming of the valley’s greenness more alive and breath-filled than ever” (194). This highlights not only the breathing vitality of the rainforest but also its healing power quite contrary to the general assumption by the urban ‘civilization’ that the valley is haunted and dangerous. Nevertheless, with this scene, the novel reconstructs an opposition between a feminine space of lush vegetation as a symbol for the maternal womb and, on the other side, the male-connoted penetrating development project of Eden, far from being a paradisaically idyllic place. Indeed, Gunraj fails to completely deconstruct this rather traditional binary, based to a certain degree on a Cartesian logic of the mind and the body, yet she succeeds in a hierarchical reversal as she indicates that the rainforest and the people inhabiting it may eventually be victorious.

While still in Eden Jaroon sets the school and their hut on fire, trying to kill Neela and her friend Karha; he later manages to steal Seetha from her sleeping mother’s arms after she has long left the interior and resettled in her home town Marasaw. Wounded, both women escape Jaroon, saved by the bush in a magical moment: “the leaves curling in behind them, cradling their escape and sweeping them deeper into the interior. *Oh, thank you, she thought, even though you vexed, you hearing me, you choosing to help us. Only you can keep us safe now...*” (201). Neela directly addresses the bush that surrounds and cradles them, thus the perception of its liveliness is increased. At the same time, this stresses the role of nature as the ultimate retreat, which one may interpret as a call for ecological awareness and a sustainable, ‘back to the roots’ movement. Neela

is granted access to this space of resistance through Karha who embodies the dialogic relation of human and nature, the relationality of physical and social environment. Apparently, Karha and her people work and live in tune with their surroundings and make use of the high functionality of the natural material and resources, for instance using the leaves as protection against torrential rain washing away much of the constructed buildings: “We work with them leaves good, nah. [...] De leaves are waterproof when you put them together like dat...when you weave them...they form a seal. Rain can’t get through” (123, 128). It is through her that the novel voices ecological concerns and gives insight into alternative forms of conviviality realized within a community that however is not unaffected by the country’s overall economic stagnancy and ecological regression. In this way the novel refrains from an overly romanticized picture of indigenous life in the interior. Her profession as a teacher adds to the didactic tone of the novel to educate and communicate the disastrous outcomes of environmental pollution and destruction – a development that in this novel is hardly ever detached from racialized conflict.

*The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* successfully recovers indigenous voices and unveils racist patterns of violence fostered by the local elite. Unfortunately, the novel remains silent about the finalization of the development project, its probable failure, and the ultimate destruction of “dat Eden hellhole” (314), as the reader may quite easily conclude. It does not counter a still prevalent binary of the ‘First’ and ‘Third’ World nor the damaging exploitation from within, precisely because the main characters still rely on the corrupting foreign aid system, using the money to their own ends. Also, in the happy ending, sister and brother finally reconciled, the novel reproduces a patronizing image of the return of the patriarch, Navi, who uses his influence and the Ministry’s money to bribe the government and eventually bring Seetha back to her mother.

### **Concluding Remark**

As Lisa Perfetti states, “much Caribbean fiction interrogates the colonial legacy *through* its representation of the human place in nature, and thus looking closely at how nature and the land are represented in fiction can help us to understand how people resist colonial and neocolonial ideologies” (Perfetti 89). Ecopoetics and ethnic environment as analytical categories can be applied to novels that foreground environmental issues as well as the relationships of humans with nature and social surroundings to uncover or even deconstruct those same ideologies that have forcefully shaped these relationships. The novel, as it conveys a local sense of place, challenges common tropes of an exotic, paradisiac Caribbean landscape for the consumption by the masses. The novel, furthermore, is explicit in its critique of national politics that foster dependence on foreign investment, conflict among its citizens, and the exclusion of the majority of the population.

Hence, what resonate in the novel are a critique of racial politics and ethnic compartmentalization as well as the subordinate status of the Amerindian population. In creating a magical realist setting in an unspecified location that resembles Guyana, Andrea Gunraj reconstructs an environment of 'maroonage' in which alternative forms of conviviality are possible and the bush "*knows how to fight for itself*" (201). The failed Eden project and with it the unsuccessful 'domestication' of the hinterland reverses the colonial project and neo-imperial claims to the land. As a backlash against the radical transformation of the landscape by developmental projects and natural disaster in today's century, the interior space re-appropriates what has been lost. To conclude with a last line from the novel: "*People don't get what they want in life [...], but at least de bush know how to get its own way...*" (167).

## Endnotes

[1] For in-depth discussions on postcolonial ecocriticism see, for example, Nixon 2005; DeLoughrey/Gosson/Handley 2005; Cilano/DeLoughrey 2007; Graham/Tiffin 2010; DeLoughrey/Handley 2011; DeLoughrey 2014. The methodological framework of Caribbean poetics of landscape or ecopoetics has been applied, for instance, to the poetry of Derek Walcott (cf. Savory 2011) and the fiction of Wilson Harris, V. S. Naipaul and George Lamming (cf. Supriya 2011).

[2] The anthology *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women's Writing* (2013), edited by Joy Mahabir and Mariam Pirbhai, discusses current trends in Indo-Caribbean writing. It explores the works of a number of new and established writers, with a thematic focus on (Indo-)Caribbean identities and politics, feminist poetics and subjectivity, as well as transnational, diaspora spaces. The anthology is a further step towards the canonization and genre definition of Indo-Caribbean women's writing, contributing to its visibility in Caribbean literary and cultural studies; see also Pirbhai (2010).

[3] A comparative reading of Gunraj's and Harris's works is not the main objective of this article. Nevertheless, there exist certain similarities in the ways in which natural settings and invisible worlds as well as the search for immeasurable wealth in the interior are described. Here, Gunraj attempts to establish a connection not only to a literary tradition but also to what she imagines to be her roots, taking literature as key in both the transmission of culture and identity as well as the circulation of knowledge between the Caribbean and its diaspora (cf. Camp/Thomas 2008).

[4] See, for instance, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998) on the representation of cultural authenticity in a postcolonial context and the problematics of essentializing notions of ethnic identity as markers of difference.

[5] Next to Harris's essay "The Music of Living Landscapes" (1996), the novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) is well suited for a comparative reading.

[6] In "Against Authenticity," Cilano and DeLoughrey state that "[t]he visible history of the plantation economy in the Caribbean generally tempers any tendency to romanticize the natural landscape. Because the monocultural plantocracy violently altered the natural and social environment of the Caribbean, the region has provided an especially important space for theorizing the vexed relationship between nature and culture" (78).

[7] With reference to Cilano and DeLoughrey, Huggan and Tiffin argue that "the crossover field of postcolonial ecocriticism [...] involves an 'aesthetics committed to politics' [...], with its historical understandings of the socio-political origins of environmental issues overriding the apolitical tendencies of earlier forms of ecocriticism that often seemed either to follow an escapist pastoral impulse or to favour an aesthetic appreciation of nature for its own sake" (Huggan/Tiffin 12). A critique of global capitalism and imperial behavior towards nature has so far not been taken into account adequately by ecocritical studies.

[8] In this essay, Wynter asserts "that *Ethnopoetics* can only have validity, if it is explored in a context of *sociopoetics* where the *socio* firmly places the *ethnos* in its concrete historical particularity" (ibid. 78). She further criticizes the Eurocentric epistemological hegemony related to how we discuss and theorize literature.

[9] Sylvia Wynter's article "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" (1971) as well as her novel *The Hills of Hebron* (1962) both explore the conflicting relation between the 'racially encoded' spaces of the plantation and the provision ground.

[10] Wilson Harris, in the second preface to *Palace of the Peacock*, mentions the "creative ferment" of magical realism, musical elements, and the fascination with pre-Columbian culture and civilization in the literature of the Americas.

[11] An unsent letter by their mother reads: "I'm far from you. I can't picture what you look like. I have to look at the photos your grandmother sends me to see you. What kind of mother can't see her own children's faces in her heart? But I can't, not even when I try my hardest. I am so sorry" (47). These lines disclose the painful circumstances of absent motherhood, when parents are forced to leave their children due to precarious conditions and poverty.

[12] Neela's friendship to Lenda is eyed with suspicion: "She and her family ain't like our people [...]. Neela knew what her grandmother, what the whole town thought of her friendship with Lenda nowadays. And even as they avoided speaking about what brewed around them, naively hoping the other couldn't perceive it, both Lenda and Neela felt the blades of eyes boring into them" (98).

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**Suggested Citation:**

Beushausen, Wiebke. "'Making Eden a Reality': Caribbean Eco-poetics and Ethnic Environment in Andrea Gunraj's *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*." *forum for interamerican research* 8.3 (Dec 2015): 94-110. Available at: <[www.interamerica.de](http://www.interamerica.de)>