Caribbean Utopias and Dystopias: The Emergence of the Environmental Writer and Artist

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In his often prickly homage to the city of his birth, San Juan, ciudad sonada (2005; San Juan: Memoir of a City), Puerto Rican novelist Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá writes about the rapid and often devastating changes in the island’s rural and urban landscape brought about by the shift from an agrarian to a manufacturing and tourism economy ushered by the Estado Libre Asociado (the Commonwealth) in the 1950s. “Todo el paisaje de mi infancia ha desaparecido” (All the landscapes of my childhood have disappeared), he writes, lamenting the loss of once-familiar landscapes to make way for high-rise office buildings, condominiums for the middle classes, tourist hotels and casinos. He mourns the disappearance of the old road from Aguas Buenas to Caguas, “una de las más hermosas del país, con sombra de pueblo a pueblo a causa de su tupido dosel de flamboyanes y jacarandas” (one of the most beautiful on the island, shadowed from one town to the other by a dense canopy of flame trees and jacarandas) before concluding that “la herida en mi paisaje infantil estremece” (the wound on my childhood’s landscape sends shivers down my spine).

Rodríguez Juliá’s elegy to this old vanished road, which I remember for the lace-like patterns created on the hot tarmac by the sunlight filtering through leafy trees and the bright-red flowers of the flamboyant tree, reminds us of how, in the Caribbean region, profound and often vertiginous changes ushered by a variety of post 1950s historical events — the collapse of the sugar industry, the shift from agrarian to tourism economies, urbanization and industrialization, deforestation and desertification — have turned Antillean geographies into unrecognizable landscapes, bringing some of the islands dangerously close to their carrying capacity. The rapid deterioration of the environment in the Caribbean region, which has taken place within the lifetime
of many of its residents, has led to a "sense of an ending," to the apocalyptic dread of a potential ecological disaster that can erase the islands, their peoples, and cultures from the geographies of the mare nostrum. This fear underpins the development of a Caribbean environmentalist philosophy that is inextricably tied to a critique of globalization as the latest manifestation of the forces of rampant capitalism in whose grip the islands have remained since the Columbian encounter. In the Caribbean region, where post-colonial politics, foreign controlled development, and the struggle for economic survival has for many decades forced environmental concerns out of the mainstream of national discourse, writers and artists have responded to increasing fears of global warming, food insecurity, habitat losses, mangrove destruction, and uncontrolled tourism-related development with eloquent defenses of the fragile ecologies of the islands in the name of the nation. As Graham Huggan writes in his essay on "Greening Postcolonialism,"

From recent reports on the devastating impact of transnational corporate commerce on local/indigenous ecosystems (Young) to more theoretically oriented reflections on the efficacy of postcolonial literatures and/or literary criticism as vehicles for Green ideas (Head), postcolonial [literatures] and criticism [have] effectively renewed, rather than belatedly discovered, [their] commitment to the environment, reiterating its insistence on the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse.

One of the most urgent questions to emerge from ecocritical discussions in the Caribbean is that of whether fiction and the arts, despite their compelling exploration of the environmental dilemmas facing the islands, can indeed play a role in fostering the necessary changes in people's practices needed to save increasingly vulnerable environments prey to global forces outside local control. Can literature and the arts play a meaningful role in local and regional environmental struggles or must writers and artists move beyond their creative roles into ecological activism for their unique perspectives on the problems facing the region to be effective in propelling change?

The questionable success of literature in stemming ecological deterioration and effecting positive environmental change can be seen most poignantly in Haiti, where, despite its writers having made the nation's environmental crossroads a central leitmotif—a cornerstone, in fact, of the development of the national novel—the country is believed to have long ago breached its carrying capacity. (The concern with carrying capacity—a concept questioned in other contexts—remains relevant in Haiti given the collapse of the nation's production for export and its inability to import sufficient food for its population). The devastation brought upon the Haitian landscape by continued deforestation, desertification, failed tourism development, and the collapse of agro-business amidst governmental corruption, has become the country's most glaring socio-economic and political problem. Haiti's forests, already depleted for lumber to be sold in the international market in the early twentieth century, have in recent decades been cut down in catastrophic numbers for the charcoal used everywhere for cooking. With forest coverage below 1.5 percent of the national territory, topsoil has been washed to sea, where it threatens marine habitats. The loss of topsoil—as much a nonrenewable resource as oil" as Wes Jackson reminds us—has rendered large portions of the Haitian land permanently unproductive, exacerbating already serious levels of food insecurity. Its significantly reduced rates of rainfall have left the country prone to severe drought and a high rate of desertification; its vulnerable position in the path of hurricanes, on the other hand, has intensified the impact of severe rainfall, which in the last decade has caused thousands of deaths from flash floods and disastrous mud slides. Haiti is at the very edge of an environmental collapse that threatens its viability as a nation. The most frequent question prompted by its environmental crisis is whether something can still be done to help the land of Haiti regain its ability to sustain its people. The answer is increasingly a resounding "no."

The literature of Haiti has bemoaned the environmental calamity that has befallen its people, denounced the practices that led to this catastrophe, and offered inspiration and ideas for solving the nation's most central problem. It has counseled, above all, political action against exploitative governments as a path towards environmental safety, focusing on the state's inaction as evidence of the slow violence of environmental neglect. From Jacques Roumain's Gouverneurs de la rosee (1944; Masters of the Dew), a seminal text in the development of the Haitian novel, to Pierre Clitandre's Cathedrale du mois d'août (1979; The Cathedral of the August Heat), the Haitian novel has been, above all, a chronicle of the nation's unimaginable ecological catastrophe. Roumain brings his hero, Manuel, back to a land parched and dying to water in an increasingly desertified environment. Jacques-Stephen Alexis in Les Arbres musiciens (1957; The Musician Trees), speaks of the trees of Haiti's embattled forests "as a great pipe organ that modulates with a multiple voice ... each with its own timbre, each pine a pipe of this extraordinary instrument," hoping to endow them with a mythical protection against escalating destruction. Marie Chauvet, in Amour (from Amour, Colère et Folie, 1968; Love, Anger, Madness: A Haitian Trilogy), dissects the forces that led to the ecological revolution produced by deforestation as a factor in Haiti's internal politics and international economic relationships, especially during the nineteen years of American Occupation, which lasted from 1915 to 1934.
Clitandre chronicles the misery and hope of an exploited peasantry seen as one more cheap commodity to exploit locally or export as labor, as peons in the protracted game of ecological and political mismanagement that has resulted in Haiti's despoiled landscape.

All to little avail. Despite decades of literary denunciation, despite countless foreign interventions and reforestation plans, the Haitian landscape has continued its rapid decline, proving, in the process, that in Haiti, as "throughout the world, environmental hazards have been unequally distributed, with poor people and people of color [the formerly colonized] bearing a greater share of the burden than richer people and white people."8 Because the Caribbean shares Haiti's history of colonial exploitation and subordinate economic development, the ghost of Haiti haunts the Caribbean imaginary. Its ecological disintegration has become the focal point for meditations on the region's environmental options. It is not surprising, then, that as events have proven convincingly to the world that Haiti's ills could not be cured through foreign aid, investment, or technology—that it would take more than a democracy and a change in leadership to save the nation—we have witnessed growing levels of popular engagement in local environmental movements elsewhere in the Caribbean islands, many of them led by writers, artists, and musicians ready to use their local fame and reputation in the service of stemming the tide of environmental degradation in their home nations. The post-Duvalier period has been marked in the region by the emergence of the Caribbean artist and writer as a committed environmentalist.

The debate over solutions to the region's environmental dilemma is a complex one, however, given that many of the causes of local environmental degradation—global warming, cruise ship pollution, marine-life depletion, to name a few—fall so far outside local control. Local actors in the environmental dilemma have taken note of their inability to control some crucial aspects of their country's environmental situation, seeking instead to focus on the more limited set of problems that are open to local solutions. These have ranged from joining forces with NGOs supported by international environmental groups (although this has often led to clashes between goals formulated in response to outside concerns as opposed to local needs) to forming political organizations to combat measures proposed by local governments (that of fostering tourist development at the expense of local environmental concerns, more often than not). What these local solutions have in common across the region has been an emphasis on four issues related to the recovery of the islands' agrarian past: restoring pre-development landscapes and habitats associated with a real or imagined past of post-plantation agricultural sustainability (the type of nostalgia Rodríguez Juliá writes about in San Juan, ciudad soñada); fostering the return of arable land to small farms that used to produce local foods as the means to alleviate the present state of food insecurity; the return to the remnants of the agrarian past (from former plantations to small cocoa and coffee farms) as sites for eco-tourism; and the creation of social movements to defend landscape resources that served as national symbols. The salient theme in these efforts is that of a return to an often-imagined prior sense of national identity rooted in an agrarian economy that is the pre-requisite for an environmentally sustainable national wholeness.

The nostalgia for lost landscapes of which Rodríguez Juliá writes in San Juan, ciudad soñada has led to a number of landscape restoration projects throughout the Caribbean, most of them linked to literary or cultural projects. The restoration of landscapes and habitats of the pre-industrial/tourist development period in the Caribbean has been of particular importance in the islands that remain in close political relations with former colonizing powers, such as Puerto Rico and the French departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe. These are islands where the United States and France, through direct state investments in industrial, tourism, and infrastructure development, have supported relatively high standards of living and high levels of consumerism. They are also islands with relatively active anti-colonial/pro-independence movements that often rely on nostalgia for the post-plantation agrarian past as the foundation of alternative notions of the nation. The Creolité movement, for example, has made the bétonisation (cementification) of Martinique a rallying cry in their appeals for political support for the pro-independence cause. The movement, initially focused on fostering the use of the Creole language in the islands' literature, has expanded its areas of interest to environmental protection and landscape restoration. They have supported projects like Les Ombrages, a landscape restoration project in the northern Martinique community of Ajoupa-Bouillon. It is typical of restoration projects aimed at recreating aspects of local colonial history and includes a Creole garden—a laboratory for the reintroduction, preservation, and display of a wide range of herbs and spices, many of them with curative properties, brought from all parts of the world and cultivated locally by slaves. It is also the site for the reintroduction of indigenous parrots that were eradicated from the zone through intense poaching and land development.

A similar habitat restoration project in Ciales, Puerto Rico—associated with the "agrarian" poetry of noted independentista writer Juan Antonio Corretjer (1908–1985)—is built on the same set of environmental values and stems from a similar political foundation. The project, located in Puerto Rico's central mountain range, was inspired by Corretjer's environmental activism and poetry. The poet, long known for his nacionalista political beliefs and for his celebration of the richness and diversity of Puerto Rico's mountain
ecology and history of subsistence agriculture, wrote of his delight at entering “los campos húmedos de crespos pastizales / por donde el río traza su torva geometría” (the moist fields with their crisp grassy greenness / through which the river traces its sinuous geometry) and of penetrating forest groves where he could rub against the bark of the trees and “aspir[ar] el el humo sagrado / que hace la boca profeta” (inhale the sacred smoke / that makes the mouth capable of prophecy). His environmental activism, rooted in countering the slow violence that had been perpetrated on the environment by American agricultural corporations, had focused on the impact of agro-business on the island’s interior. In essays and interviews he decried “the overwhelming encroachment of concrete and the use of poisonous chemicals [insecticides and synthetic fertilizers] in Puerto Rican farming,” that had led not only to massive deforestation in the interior, but also to the disappearance of bird, lizard, and butterfly species that had been plentiful in the landscape of his youth and young adulthood. Habitat loss was the most radical impact of rapid urbanization in San Juan’s metropolitan area, and concern for vanishing species was shared by Corretjer and fellow writer Enrique Laguerre, both of whose work is associated with rural culture in Puerto Rico.

By the end of his life, Corretjer’s beloved “greenblack highlands,” especially the lands through which flows the Encantado River with its grand cascades and crystalline pools—the inspiration for many of his poems—had been severely deforested to allow for the intensive cultivation of coffee. Land and water had been contaminated by insecticides and fertilizers. In an ambitious project of habitat restoration, the former plantation is now being returned to its former “complex, healthy and productive ecosystem” by friends and neighbors of the late poet, “using Corretjer’s poetry in combination with the most advanced concepts of ecological farming and environmental protection.” Now known as Corretjer’s Forest, the lands have been planted “with the trees mentioned in Corretjer’s poetry, and with numerous native species”—citrus trees, teak, cedar, royal palms, star apples, guava and guamo trees. The aim of the restoration is that of returning the landscape to one the poet would live in caves, had gone, but since we stopped using chemicals they are back. Once again we can hear the múcaros [screech owls] at night.” The project reflects a shift (also observed elsewhere) towards “focusing conservation strategies on the restoration of habitat, and not simply on its protection.” It also intends to serve as a center for the education of young students in the values and rewards of returning to pre-industrial agrarian spaces as places of practical instruction in the need for achieving food security and reconfiguring the idea of the nation as rooted in the principles Corretjer’s poetry addressed.

The restoration of the rural setting loved by Corretjer is designed upon environmental principles that acknowledge the power of certain spaces in the national imaginary—many of them made hallowed by their connection to literary works. The defense of these spaces as “sacred” to the wholeness of the nation endows them with special significance when they are threatened by development, as was the case in St. Lucia when the Hilton chain was given permission by the state to build the Hilton Jalousie Plantation Resort in the valley sloping down to the sea between the Pitons, the two great volcanic cones on the west coast of St. Lucia—“one of the great landscapes of the Caribbean” and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Echoing Enrique Laguerre’s notion of the environment as “the nation’s most valuable patrimony,” St. Lucian poet and Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott joined in vocal opposition to the project on the grounds that The Pitons was undeniably a natural space of great national significance where a hotel would be “aesthetically like a wound.” In an interview with George B. Handley, he explained his opposition to the Jalousie scheme as having derived from his perception of the Pitons as a “sacred space,” a “primal site” that emanates power and which, having become the object of the people’s devotion, should have remained inviolable. The building of a resort in such a space was tantamount to “blasphemy.” Writing in a local paper, Walcott argued that “to sell any part of the Pitons is to sell the whole idea and body of the Pitons, to sell a metaphor, to make a fast buck off a shrine.” He equated the economic arguments in favor of the resort—that it would provide extra income and jobs—to proposing building “a casino in the Vatican” or a “take-away concession inside Stonehenge.” The loss of such a pristine space was the loss of a place that could help people regain a feeling of “a beginning, a restituting of Adamic principles.”

The development of the Jalousie resort—which opened in 1994—is emblematic of the tensions that arise when different notions of what constitutes the nation and of how to exploit its resources are pitted against each other. As a site of national significance that was also a prime locale for potential tourist development, the Pitons became the focus of struggle between foreign developers, a local government seeking to increase foreign investment and foster employment, and a large number of conservation-minded citizens who understood the significance of the space in myriad ways. The debate involved the Hilton Corporation, the Organization of American States (which supported an alternative proposal for a Jalousie National Park at the site), the St. Lucia development control authority, and numerous members of the
community — Walcott included — with differing views of the role of the “nation’s most valuable patrimony” in the nation’s development. The arguments marshaled against the selling of this symbolic space had as a backdrop the growing value of land in St. Lucia fostered by the increasing encroachment of tourism construction and agro-businesses, which threatens the access of St. Lucian farmers and would-be farmers to prime cultivable land. (Local groups, as a result, were unable to buy the Pitons property away from the Hilton Corporation.) The Jalousie resort was duly built, nestled in a “sacred” space from which St. Lucians are now banned, thereby separating the local population from its natural patrimony. Ironically, despite great initial interest, the Jalousie resort has met with questionable success. Although still managed by the Hilton Corporation, the resort is now primarily financed by the St. Lucian government, despite a dwindling tourist base and indifferent returns.

For Walcott, the relinquishing of “sacred spaces” like that of the Pitons to the pressures of development for tourism — and the risk it poses to St. Lucian local food production — threatens the very survival of Caribbean peoples. In “Antilles,” he likens the Caribbean native to the sea almond or the spice laurel — “trees who sweat, and whose bark is filmed with salt”— threatened by “rootless trees in suits ... signing favorable tax breaks with entrepreneurs, poisoning the sea almond and the spice laurel of the mountains to their roots.”20 “A morning could come,” Walcott warns, “in which governments might ask what happened not merely to the forests and the bays but to a whole people.”21 It is a sentiment echoed by Enrique Laguerre, one of Puerto Rico’s most respected twentieth-century novelists, a self-described “ecological humanist” who dedicated the last decade of his long life (he died just short of his 100th birthday in 2005) to the struggle against the destruction of forests and mangroves to make way for broader highways, luxury hotels, and middle-class housing developments. He used his prominence as a writer as a platform from which to argue that Puerto Rico had followed a very shortsighted vision of socioeconomic development that had sacrificed the environment to the pressures of urban sprawl and consumerism. In one of his last interviews he spoke of dreaming “of a Puerto Rico that knows how to contain a rampant urban growth [...] that precludes a sad fate for future generations.”22 True nationalism, he argued, had to be linked to a respect for the geographical spaces that were the nation’s most valuable patrimony.

A similar critique of uncontrolled development brings writers like Jamaica Kincaid into the discourse of environmentalism. In *A Small Place* (1988) she bemoans the disappearance of a species of snails — “the best wilks in the world,” as she describes them — during the constructions of hotels on the islands’ best beaches, beaches from which the locals are now banned. Her concern for threatened species is echoed in the region’s first avowedly-environmentalist novel, Mayra Montero’s *Tú, la oscuridad* (1995; *In the Palm of Darkness*). This tale of an American herpetologist and his Haitian guide on a quest for an elusive and threatened blood frog, extinct everywhere but on a dangerous, eerie mountain near Port-au-Prince, allows Montero to unveil how the troubled landscape of Haiti has decayed precipitously due to political corruption, violence, institutional terror, murders, brutality, and religious turmoil. The vignettes about the troubling disappearance of frog species throughout the world that we find interspersed throughout the narrative remind us that the price of the continued abuse of the local environment is ultimately extinction.

A salient feature of the emerging literary environmentalism — as Laguerre and Walcott’s involvement and Corretjer’s influence indicates — an understanding that struggles in the Caribbean, as they are in poor and dependent societies around the world, are ultimately about environmental justice for the peoples of the region. First world environmental solutions that speak of reduced consumption and wilderness preservation, for example, assume options that are not open to Caribbean peoples in small post-colonial economies with few resources other than fertile soil and a highly coveted natural beauty whose exploitation they cannot always control. Their struggles are often as much against outside forces as they are about the tensions between environmentally-sound options and a livelihood. These tensions often translate into local political struggles as governments seek income-bearing investments from abroad to produce employment and profit. Huggan identifies the “ambivalent role of the post-independence state in brokering national economic development” as a crucial factor in the struggle for environmental justice while pointing to “the value of imaginative writing” — to which I would add artistic creativity in general — “as a site of discursive resistance to authoritarian attitudes and practices that not only disrupt specific human individuals and societies, but might also be seen as posing a threat to the entire ‘ecosphere’ and its network of interdependent ‘biotic communities.’”23

I would like to look here more closely at two examples of literary and artistic environmental activism as indicative of the multi-faceted nature of local environmental struggles in the Caribbean — that of the Creolite movement’s struggle against the *betonization* (cementification) of Martinique and Guadeloupe and the 2001–2003 campaign against the continued bombardment of the small island of Vieques (a part of the territory of Puerto Rico). In both cases, a very vocal and committed participation by writers and artists — who both engaged in community-led protest activities and turned the subject of their writing and art to the support of the cause — has been a crucial
factor in engaging a larger community in the process and bringing international attention to the resolution of their environmental dilemma.

In Landscape and Memory: Martinican Land-People-History, a documentary by Renée Gosson and Eric Faden, three of Martinique’s most salient contemporary authors—Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau—argue for an understanding of the island’s marked environmental degradation as the most disturbing result of France’s continued political control—as the disturbing by-product of enduring colonialism. The anxiety over the sustainability of Martinique’s physical territory allows these three proponents of the Creolité movement to bridge the gap between the local specificity of their movement’s concerns and the increasing interconnectedness brought about by intensifying globalization about which their colleague Edouard Glissant writes in his Poétique de la relation (Poeitics of Relation). In Landscape and Memory, Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé identify the environmental problems facing Martinique as those same issues confronting the rest of the archipelago to which they belong: food insecurity, since Martinique produces only 2 percent of the food its population consumes; the increasing bétonisation (cementification) of the land as more land is taken away from agriculture for the building of hotels, supermarkets, shopping centers, and other infrastructure typical of tourism development; the pollution of land and rivers with fertilizers and insecticides used for agro-businesses on the island; the production of larger quantities of garbage than the island landfills can reasonably absorb; the destruction of mangroves and of the wildlife they support from a failure to understand their uniqueness as a “cradle of life”; and the disconnection of the Martinican population from its land and culture, as French television and French-owned media control access to information and entertainment and promote a desire for consumer items that the islands’ economy cannot sustain.

Both Chamoiseau and Glissant share Walcott’s sense of a potential apocalypse if the region cannot resolve its environmental dilemma. In his Poétique de la relation (Poetics of Relation), Glissant, although proclaiming his belief in “the future of little countries,” finds in “the politics of ecology” the best protection “for populations that are decimated or threatened with disappearance as a people.”24 He sees the politics of ecology as “the driving force for the rational interdependence of all lands, of the whole Earth.”25 Chamoiseau, in his turn, writes in Ecrire en pays dominé (Writing in an Oppressed Country) of “the difficulty of writing in and about Martinique when what constitutes the island physically and, more importantly, in the realm of the imagination is threatened with extinction.”26 A cultural ecologist separated from Glissant by “a desire for some measure of control over the cultural and economic commerce between Martinique and the rest of the world,” Chamoiseau does not only live a life of multifarious activism in Martinique, which has the environment as a principal focus, but has dedicated his third and most recent novel, Biblique des derniers gestes (2002; Scripture of the Last Gestures) to the recreation of a life of environmental activism focused on access to water in Martinique.27 In the novel, Chamoiseau seeks to give life to ideas he had expressed often in connection to his participation in groups like ASSAUPAMAR, the Association for the Protection of the Martinican Patrimony, an environmental group particularly concerned with agricultural issues, most notably with the increasing decalification of agricultural lands to give way for the construction of shopping malls and gas stations. This decalification, according to Raphaël Confiant, threatens “our economic survival” and leaves “our very food autonomy endangered.”28 The concern about food supplies is a particularly serious one in Martinique, which has only a week’s worth of food reserves and where the panic occasioned by the gap in the flow of food supplies caused by the revolts in France in 1968 is still vividly remembered.

Both Chamoiseau and Confiant trust in greater local political autonomy in the restoration and reorganization of land and water supplies as a necessary step towards an environmental balance that ultimately rests on creating a strong agrarian sector devoted to the cultivation of local foods for the local market. Chamoiseau uses his novel Biblique des derniers gestes, which has been described by Richard Watts as “an impassioned rant against ecological degradation,” to ponder how the island’s status between colonization and independence complicates environmental issues, particularly those related to control over resources such as land and water. Like land, on an island that is not politically autonomous and has become a “privileged site for the fulfillment of metropolitan fantasies of vacations in paradise,” “water is a local commodity,” access to which has become “a global issue.”29 Ultimately, for Chamoiseau as for Confiant, the development of a sustainable agrarian nation appears as the only solution to an economic impasse in which Martinique has only an “Économie-Prétexte” that subsists only on French state subsidies—a pretense, as Confiant has argued, “to give the appearance of an economy, that there are people who go to work, etc., but in reality, our country has been, and is, economically ruined.”30

The idea of an agrarian nation, which from an environmentalist perspective looms as the only possible space from which Martinique can sustain itself as an autonomous island, emerged in the prolonged struggle of the Puerto
Rican municipality of Vieques against the Navy as the quasi-utopian goal of a political movement that found in environmental arguments a more effective weapon than that of sovereignty over local spaces in the international arena. One of the salient features of the prolonged struggle against the U.S. Navy's presence in Vieques was the ultimate success of the environmentally-focused political campaign after years of a campaign focused on political sovereignty failed to yield the expected results.

In the struggle against the Navy in Vieques, the intense engagement of writers and artists shows the possibilities open when literature and the arts join an environmental justice movement. The use of Vieques as an area for target practice for the U.S. Navy, which had been going on continuously since the 1940s despite continued local protests, was challenged by the larger Puerto Rican community through a campaign of civil disobedience following the death in 1999 of a local man, David Sanes Rodríguez, killed by an errant bomb. At the heart of the protest were the expropriation of land from local residents, the environmental impact of weapons testing, which had been linked by epidemiologists to cancer and other ailments linked to exposure to ordinance and contaminants, and the closing of large portions of the islands to farming and other activities that could contribute to sustainable development. Over the years, the EPA had cited the Navy for 102 violations of water quality standards on Vieques, identifying excessive concentrations of such chemicals as cyanide and cadmium in the coastal waters near the bombing range. The people of Vieques are plagued by unusually high levels of lung, heart, and liver disease, asthma, diabetes, lupus, anxiety, and depression. These are believed to stem from possibly irreparable damages to the environment, which include contamination of the surrounding waters and the poisoning of numerous species that have formed the basis for the local diet for decades. By 1999 it had been amply demonstrated that the Navy's presence threatened the continued existence of the flora, fauna, and people of the island. The intensification of protests that followed the death of Sanes in 1999 included an unprecedented literary and artistic presence. The resumption of bombing after the accident was greeted with proclamations of solidarity from artists, musicians, and writers that would signal the beginning of a sea change in the way local writers and artists have incorporated a concern for the environment in their work. The resulting burst of creativity in the service of an environmental cause marked the Vieques struggle as a unique moment in the history of the fight for environmental justice.

Among the first organized responses to the intensification of the Vieques struggle was that of the AU+MA (Acción Urgente Mail Art) Collective. Their mail–art project, called "Postcards for Vieques," was initiated in June 2000 and consisted of an international call disseminated through the internet and echoed by a variety of mass media to "bomb" the White House with creative postcards asking for "Peace for Vieques." The international collective, linked to Boek 861, an established member of the mail-art network, appealed to the public to send artisanal postcards through the post or creative e-cards through e-mail in a show of solidarity with the environmentally-focused political action organized by the residents of Vieques. As is characteristic of such calls for solidarity, the collective encouraged participants to use art as a weapon against "the very circles of power where important decisions are made." The response was thousands of electronic and artisanal postcards sent to the White House, many of which were broadcast through the media and displayed on a virtual exhibit site on the web.

Of interest to our discussion is the collective's perception of their action as limited in the face of the magnitude of the obstacles facing the people of Vieques. Recognizing the difficulties in trying to oust the U.S. Navy, a powerful institution in one of the most powerful nations in the world, it conceived its efforts as merely "another link in the chain of solidarity." The success of their campaign, then, rested on its promotion of an international creative response in the humanistic tradition to a political situation that may have seemed beyond the scope of individual action. The sponsoring of this creative response, even among people without artistic training or aspirations, was seen by the collective as an indication of how the democratization of art, its "decontextualization from the traditional elitist space" art normally occupied, could become a powerful weapon in support of political and environmental action. To mail-art collectives around the world, the postcard, whether produced through artisanal elaboration or the use of the latest technological resources, remains an accessible creative form, inexpensive to produce and exchange, and "open" in its message. Formally, it saw the use of the postcard, with its local links to a foreign-controlled tourist industry that had replaced the plantation as an economic source of labor exploitation in the region and had contributed to the region's environmental deterioration, as a subversion of the impact of globalization on the people of the Caribbean.

On August 28, 2000 a group of artists, with the support of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques and the Peace and Justice Camp of Vieques, entered lands restricted by the Navy for an art installation and performance entitled "I Believe in Vieques" whose thematic focus was the fundamental importance of returning the land to the local population for the establishment of an agrarian community, of reaching an agreement with the Navy for thorough decontamination, and of establishing a plan for sustainable economic development. The call for solidarity rested on a depiction of the people of Vieques as displaced farmers eager for the return on their cultivable lands and the resumption of their "natural" agrarian lives.
The event, sponsored by Artists for Peace, was divided in two parts. Those who entered the Navy’s restricted zone in an act of civil disobedience produced a “human mural” recreating the landscape of the “Isla Nena” and proclaiming how “from the esthetic point of view the landscape has been, and will be a vital source of inspiration of artistic creation.” A second group displayed its support from outside the restricted zone through a second “human mural,” this one a recreation of Picasso’s famous anti-war painting Guernica. A third group boasting some of the most salient Puerto Rican painters and sculptor of recent decades — among them Rafael Tuñón, Antonio Martorell, Lorenzo Homar, Myrna Báez, and Luis Hernández Cruz — issued a simultaneous proclamation of support from the main island. In a press release, the artists explained that their goal was that of “questioning the limits between a traditional work of art and a political act of clear humanist intentions” and of “creating” the “necessary conditions in which the people of Vieques can enjoy their land in peace.”

These artistic efforts coincided with a number of literary projects focused on the intensification of protests that followed upon the death of Sanes Rodríguez. Among these was the production in Vieques of Romeo y Julieta: un amor de protesta (Romeo and Juliet: A Love of Protest), a version of Shakespeare’s play adapted and directed by Juan Carlos Morales in which Romeo, the son of a family of fishermen, falls for Julieta, the daughter of a Navy Commander. The use of the popular and well-known play in its new ideological framework allowed for the dramatic articulation of the island’s political dilemma for a broad audience. Romeo’s occupation, in its turn, underscored the identity of the people of Vieques as fishermen and farmers, an identity that had become central to the campaign for restoration of the land and the beaches to the local population. Likewise, Jorge González’s drama Vieques, produced in New York City just a few months later by Repertorio Español and set in the early years of the U.S. occupation, used the ideological framework to highlight the impact of the Navy’s presence. This story of a young local woman in love with a Navy sergeant allows González to probe the various responses to the loss of the island’s territory to the Navy, while underscoring, among other themes, that of the environmental impact of the occupation, seen here through the health repercussions of the Navy’s relentless spread of insecticides to kill the mosquitoes that constitute a health hazard for the Navy personnel. The same ideological framework offers a point of departure for a short story included in the journal Cultura’s testimonial issue celebrating the cessation of the bombing in 2003. “Hubiera sido más fácil” (It Would Have Been Easier), a story by Leonor E. Quirorges, pits two childhood friends against each other — one a protester against the continued military occupation of the island, the other a Navy seaman who must watch his friend being beaten by his colleagues as he murmurs repeatedly that he had entered the restricted grounds as a protest to safeguard the health of the children of the island.

As an additional gesture of artistic solidarity, Augusto Marín’s “Vieques amado,” a serigraph based on an earlier painting commemorating the struggle, was sold as part of a fundraising program to cover the local population’s mounting legal costs. In this homage to a “beloved Vieques” strong geometrical forms and earth and sea colors convey both the vortex of the long-running struggle and the hope for a peaceful resolution to the conflict that will restore the small island’s ecological balance. Its flowing furrows remind us of the movement’s insistence on describing the people of Vieques as a “farming community,” despite the fact that the Navy occupied most of the lands that had previously been farmed and the farming population left was minuscule (in 1942 the Navy had expropriated 26,000 of Vieques’s 33,000 acres). The insistence on a the return of the Vieques land to a community of farmers that would restore it to sustainable agrarian production was an important claim against the argument proposed by the Navy and its supporters that behind the struggle to end the target practice was a desire on the parts of the local population to capitalize on the high value of coastal lands to the construction and tourist markets in the region.

Similar arguments in favor of the people of Vieques were expressed through the caricatures by the Puerto Rican artists that contributed to Bieké desde otra perspectiva: Caricaturas por la paz (Vieques from Another Perspective: Caricatures for Peace) and through the multiplicity of t-shirt designs analyzed by Ramón López. In both cases one finds allusions to the environmental dimensions of the Vieques struggle. The use of caricatures in Vieques included the creation of comic books as vehicles for the dissemination of notions of a post-occupation sustainability. The t-shirts, as López argues, included a variety of motifs, among which we find images alluding directly to the environmental problems facing the island even after the cessation of the bombings. One of the t-shirts analyzed by López, shows in its message “Paramos el bombardeo” (We stopped the bombardments) and its slogan “La lucha continua” (The struggle continues) an awareness that the cessation of the bombing has left the island environmentally devastated. Its simple depiction of the submerged or buried ordnance, the damaged tree, and torn fencing summarizes the environmental catastrophe that has been the legacy of the bombings.

One of the most effective contributions to the struggle against the Navy’s continued bombing — measured in terms of its broad international reach and enthusiastic reception — was “Canción para Vieques” (Song for Vieques), an ambitious project initiated in mid-2001 by Tito Auger, lead singer for the
Puerto Rican group Fiel a la Vega. Auger found his inspiration in projects like Band Aid ("Do They Know It's Christmas?/Feed the World"), where artists gathered to combat hunger in Ethiopia, USA for Africa ("We Are the World"), Live Aid, and Artists United Against Apartheid ("Sun City"). Solidarity with the Vieques movement revived the Nueva Trova or song of protest tradition in the region, leading to musical expressions of solidarity from a significant number of world-class musicians. Just within weeks of Sanes Rodríguez's death, in April 1999, King Changó, a musical group from Venezuela, incorporated a "Peace for Vieques" message in their concerts and in June of that year joined one of the first of many protests to come before the White House in Washington. They would later perform a "King Changó for Vieques Concert" and would record "Al rescate de Vieques" (To the Rescue of Vieques) with Ismael Guadalupe, leader of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques. Puerto Rican Nu metal rock group Puya's song "Pa ti, pa mi," a track in their characteristic mix of salsa and rap metal, protested the U.S. occupation of Vieques and called for environmental justice, linking the Vieques situation to global decolonization movements. Latin jazz flutist Nestor Torres "Paz Pa' Vieques," which drew its inspiration from Afro-Puerto Rican bomba/plena tradition, is among numerous tracks dedicated to bringing the plight of the island to an international audience. "Canción para Vieques" ("Song for Vieques," written by Tito Auger and Ricky Laureano) is a six-minute musical video of political and environmental support featuring a stellar cast of international music stars that included Ruben Blades, Olga Tañón, Gilberto Santa Rosa, Lucecita Benítez, Alberto Cortez, Danny Rivera, the late Tony Croano, and many of the stars of the Nueva Trova, like Roy Brown, Antonio Cabán Vale ("El Topo"), Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Mercedes Sosa, and Joan Manuel Serrat. It responded, as salsa superstar Santa Rosa described it at the time, to the need to respond as a musical community to an issue that had "brought consensus to all sectors in Puerto Rico." Victor M. Rodríguez sees the return to politically conscious music as a welcome move away from the "homogenized identities" of a global music market. The artists of my generation," he argues, "are reconnecting with the activism which, because of their commercial success, they had left behind." Unlike projects such as Band Aid and USA for Africa, however, "Canción para Vieques" was not produced for sale, but was distributed free as a declaration of solidarity. "Copyrights were not an issue," Auger explains, "because nobody [was] making money." Like "We Are the World," the most successful of its predecessors, the musical video shows the solo portions of the performances by the lead singers as recorded in the studio. Unlike in "We Are the World," the entire group does not sing together, as the musicians that appear in "Canción para Vieques" recorded their contributions individually. Like "We Are the World," however, "Canción para Vieques" uses the same lyrical format, building in intensity and dramatic effect as the song moves to its climax. The crescendo provided in "We Are the World" by the gradual appearance of all the artists in the same studio is provided in "Canción para Vieques" by the images that appear interspersed with those of the singers. These include a variety of seascapes displaying the small island's natural beauty, images of fishermen that remind us of the villagers' traditional occupation, crowd scenes from some of the many demonstrations in solidarity with the people of Vieques, white crosses standing on a hilltop cemetery as a reminder of the many deaths linked to the island's polluted environment, the word "peace" (paz) written across a sandy beach, and repeated images of children and the elderly looking hopefully towards the camera as the chorus sings of the ultimate triumph of their hopes for a future without the Navy's presence. The song's emotional impact is further reinforced by privileging the presence of Danny Rivera and Lucecita Benítez in the final moments of the video. Rivera and Benítez, Puerto Rican singers long associated with a political commitment to the pro-independence movement on the island, have been at the forefront of solidarity movements of this type throughout their long careers. They are backed by digital voice multiplication and a studio chorus, both of which stress the moral authority their presence brings to the project. The environmental foundation of the renewed campaign to stop the bombardments is addressed directly by the singers in the third of nine stanzas: "Sesenta años con lluvia / De uranio y de municiones / Limpiando ventanas con pólvora sucia / Esperando que el cáncer reaccione" [Sixty years of raining / Uranium and ammunition / Of cleaning windows with dirty gunpowder / Waiting for cancer to kick in.] The environmental topic is underscored through multiple reiterations of the verb "proteger" (to protect), particularly in the final verses, which express, through an increasingly dramatic arrangement, the notion of sustainability—the obligation of those living in the present to safeguard the environment for generations to follow. Ironically, the correspondences between "We Are the World" and "Canción para Vieques" highlight the differences in the ideological foundations of the two projects. "We are the World" has been criticized as a "colonial" project through which pop music royalty celebrated itself while showing their inability to reflect upon how the people they are seeking to help may "hear" them. Their project could be read simultaneously as an inspired act of splendidly successful philanthropy or as "a stunning act of narcissism for an industry so invested in a democratic image of collaboration." "Canción para Vieques," on the other hand, speaks from a position of subalternity; as a home-grown effort, its organizers appealed to the international music com-
I will depend has retained its fertility despite the slow violence to which the structed, rather than imagined, from symbols of national identity invoked by ers of the newly liberated Vieques lands will be remains to be seen. 

Throughout the nineteenth century the island had been an efficient producer of sugar, averaging 8,000 tons of sugar a year in production. The history of the Vieques population was not that of subsistence agriculture but rather of a sustained struggle against the local sugar oligarchy which in 1915 led to a four-year strike that paralyzed the industry. The construction of the Navy base in 1941 ended sugar cultivation and led to the uprooting of about two-thirds of the island’s population, of which moved to the neighboring island of St. Thomas. Ironically, Puerto Rican government efforts to re-establish an agricultural economy in the non-occupied sector of Vieques between 1945 and the early 1960s failed rather miserably. Since the late 1960s, manufacturing (primarily in the local General Electric plant) and the tourist sector have been the most consistent sources of employment on the island. Who the farmers of the newly liberated Vieques lands will remains to be seen.

Indeed, who the farmers of the sustainable agrarian societies of the Caribbean region imagined by environmentalists, writers, and artists will be is less crucial a question than whether the land on which sustainability will depend has retained its fertility despite the slow violence to which the islands have been subjected through centuries of unsustainable colonial exploitation. Haiti’s despoiled land, as we have come to see, has lost its poten-
la noche las estrellas), a "maternal island" (isla maternal) with a "fertile and courageous beach" (playa fértil y brava) whose "womb of sand / cannot be reached by nesting turtles" [a tu vientre de arena no llegan las Tortugas] (59).

For Etnairis Rivera, the island had been invaded by "the demons of war" (los demonios de la guerra), who "usurp the island, the fish, the space / and in this intimate human territory spread bombs / cancer, mistreatment, the macabre number of death" [y usurparon la isla, los peces, el espacio / y en el íntimo territorio humano regaron bombas, / cáncer, maltrato, el macabro número de la muerte] (59).

Ironically, what was transformative about the successful Vieques struggle — in May 2003 the Navy withdrew from Vieques — was the ultimate defeat of the agrarian project. The lands held previously under U.S. Navy control were not returned to the people of Vieques but were instead designated a wildlife reserve under the control of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and remain closed to the local population. The land in Vieques, as subsequent studies have demonstrated, is toxic, too contaminated for use without a costly cleanup project that may take years and still not result in soil suitable for agricultural use. The land's high level of toxicity renders the political victory meaningless, at least in so far as the aim of the protests was to restore/create a sustainable agrarian space. Like the land of Haiti, the potentially agrarian spaces of Vieques may never be suitable for cultivation. A study released in October 2008 found dangerous levels of toxic metals in produce grown on the island, as much as twenty times the acceptable levels of lead and cadmium. The findings underscore the illusive foundations of the agrarian project. The lands held previously under U.S. Navy control were not returned to the people of Vieques but were instead designated a wildlife reserve under the control of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and remain closed to the local population. The land in Vieques, as subsequent studies have demonstrated, is toxic, too contaminated for use without a costly cleanup project that may take years and still not result in soil suitable for agricultural use. The land's high level of toxicity renders the political victory meaningless, at least in so far as the aim of the protests was to restore/create a sustainable agrarian space. Like the land of Haiti, the potentially agrarian spaces of Vieques may never be suitable for cultivation. A study released in October 2008 found dangerous levels of toxic metals in produce grown on the island, as much as twenty times the acceptable levels of lead and cadmium. The findings underscore the illusive foundations of the agrarian project that was so prominent in the environmentalist arguments of the people of Vieques and the many activists — among them writers, artists, and musicians — who worked with them in solidarity.

The reality of Vieques's toxicity — like the growing infertility of the land of Haiti — signals the precarious condition of many of the Caribbean territories and underscores the urgency of the region's environmental quandary. Given their prominence in Caribbean societies, it has fallen to the lot of writers, artists, and musicians to articulate this predicament and to popularize the need for widespread community support in addressing what in many islands is an environmental emergency. As this discussion shows, writers, artists, and musicians across the Caribbean region accepted this challenge — both as activists and in their own creative endeavors. The loss of what Laguerre called an island's "most valuable patrimony" — the beauty and fertility of its land — is to Caribbean territories like that of Vieques more than just a pretext for poetic nostalgia, for bemoaning, like Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá does, the loss of childhood landscapes that sends shivers down his spine. It reminds us of the vulnerability of small island nations whose ability to restore and sustain their environments seems suspended between local action and global powers. Hence the growing apocalyptic strain in the region's environmental thought, born of fears of that day of which Walcott speaks when we may have to ask what happened not only to the trees or the land, but to the region's people.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 3-4.
4. Jackson, "Fertility and the Age of Soils."
5. See pages 329–357 of Jared Diamond's study Collapse.
10. Ruiz Marrero, "The Poetry that Saved a Forest."
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 128
17. Quoted in Pattullo, Last Resorts, 4.
18. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Alegre Barrios, "Enrique Laguerre: Prójimo y palabra (sus fundamentos)."
24. Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 125, 146.
25. Ibid., 146
27. Ibid., 125.
28. Confiant, "Cultural and Environmental Assimilation in Martinique," 144.
29. Watts, "Toutes ces eaux!" 900.
31. AUMA, "Convocatoria Acción Urgente Mail Art / Postales por Vieques."
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. "Vieques Libre."
35. "Acción de arte 'Creo en Vieques.'"
36. See López, "Las camisetas de Vieques: Mitología y militancia de una lucha popular."
38. See Cumpiano, "Artistas levantan sus voces por la Paz para Vieques."
39. See Gurza, "New Bombings of Vieques Re-Energize Political Protest Songs."
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40. Ibid.
41. Quoted in Luna, "All-Star Single Highlights Problem in Vieques."
44. Quoted in Guerra, 67.

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