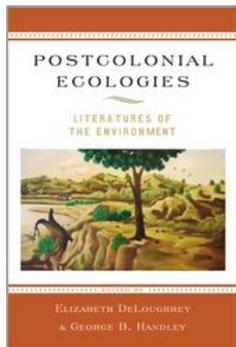


Deforestation and the Yearning for Lost Landscapes in Caribbean Literatures

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the forest as a site of multiple power struggles in the Caribbean over time. Drawing from an extensive body of Caribbean literature and history in the major language areas of the region (Spanish, English, and French), it describes how forests in the early colonial days represented spaces of fear. It also considers how the forest and rural spaces in general have been recuperated as sites of refuge for the escaped slave and places of folk authenticity in nationalist movements. The chapter cites works, including the travel narratives of Sir Walter Raleigh and Bartolomé de Las Casas and the environmental activism of Puerto Rican poet Juan Antonio Corretjer, to discuss the ways in which forests and spaces outside the plantation complex symbolize the cultural continuities of diasporic and indigenous populations in the Caribbean.

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Keywords: forests, Caribbean, Caribbean literature, rural spaces, travel narratives, Walter Raleigh, Bartolomé de Las Casas, environmental activism, Juan Antonio Corretjer, plantation complex

Early descriptions of the West Indies speak of a region of exotic and bounteous beauty, with its profusion of dense tropical forests, abundance of fresh water, and diverse and wondrous fauna. The notion of the Caribbean as new Eden, drawn from biblical and classical iterations of the *locus amoenus*,¹ found its earliest expression in Christopher Columbus's own letters and ship logs, where he describes the islands as "most beautiful, of a thousand shapes," noting, above all, how they were "filled with trees of a thousand kinds and tall, so that they seem to touch the sky" (Columbus). For sailors like Columbus, accustomed to an increasingly deforested Europe, the densely wooded islands of the Caribbean recalled a primeval, pre-Adamic world. The encounters with wild landscapes seemingly little altered by man, along with the variety and abundance of new plant species, meant that the region entered the European imaginary as a virginal space vulnerable to "colonisation by an ever-expanding and ambitious imaginative symbolism" (Grove *Green Imperialism* 5). Embracing the "cultured nature" they found in the Indies as a "natural landscape," as Emanuele Amodio explains, the conquistadors "naturalized" the environment they found, an assumption that allowed them to claim the land without due recognition of prior indigenous rights.

At the center of this "naturalized landscape" were the region's ostensibly inexhaustible forests. "Before sugar, before tobacco, before livestock," Manuel Moreno Fraginals has argued, "precious woods were the very symbol of the Far Antilles" (quoted in Funes Monzote 20). The history of how these once dense forests moved from abundance to scarcity can be (p.100) traced through the development of Caribbean literatures. From a very early stage in the development of the region's literature, its writers have explored the relationship between colonialism and the environment, unveiling the threat posed by continued colonial exploitation. Historically, Caribbean writing has continuously addressed "rather than belatedly discovered, its commitment to the environment,

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reiterating its insistence on the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse” (Huggan “Green Post-Colonialism” 702). This is a point also argued by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée Gosson, and George Handley in their introduction to *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, where they write that “unlike the white settler culture of nature writing, Caribbean writers refuse to depict the natural world in terms that erase the relationship between landscape and power” (4). In the work of these writers, the fate of the Caribbean forests—as they move from fertile symbols to dwindling realities—is inextricably linked to colonialism and its metaphors. It stands for the environmental burden colonialism has placed on the islands of the Caribbean and points to the challenges facing the region’s island nations as they confront the compromised deforested environments that have been one of the chief legacies of colonialism.

My analysis of the ways in which the literatures of the Caribbean have addressed the forests—and the waves of deforestation that came in the wake of the Columbian encounter—underscores their centrality to any discussion of environmental colonialism in the region. As Vandana Swami writes about the history of forestry in colonial India, the fate of the forests can serve as “more than a subtext” in the narrative of the consolidation of power in colonial societies—it can “itself enable a reassessment of the nature of imperial power” and “provide insights into issues of wider historical significance” (Swami 118). The discussion that follows explores a number of recurring approaches and themes: the connection between the forests and notions of indigeneity throughout the Caribbean basin; the related theme of the immersion in the forests as the means of recovering a cultural authenticity that was lost on contact with the plantation; the idealization of the plot system of agriculture (especially of the small farm on the edge of the forest or bush) as an alternative to the plantation system; the threat that deforestation during the colonial period poses to present-day Caribbean nations; and the importance of the forests as symbols and realities in postindependence national formations. These themes underscore a central focus of postcolonial environmentalism—that the social and political framework of colonial

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administration was anchored in the assumption that the colonies' natural resources were subject to the demands of the colonial powers. The forests of the Caribbean were "the sites on which several conflicting relationships of power were enacted" (Swami 124) and where the violence of colonial environmentalism left its most profound mark. As one of the most salient casualties of colonial expansion, they emerge in the literatures of the Caribbean as both (p.101) tangible presences and multivalent, protean symbols—as new Edens, as alternatives to the sugar plantation, as vital elements in environmental sustainability, as sites of indigeneity, or as ghostly remnants of ancestral presences.

The Caribbean's colonizers brought to the new world a set of cultural assumptions regarding forests, their meanings, and their uses that would impact significantly the ways in which the new territories would fare under colonial control. Michael Williams, in *Deforesting the Earth*, argues that "from the time of the first farmers, almost anywhere in the world, forests had been seen as wild and hostile, and human progress had seemed to be viewed in some proportion to the amount of woodland cleared, or at least used" (145). In the Caribbean, the preference for cleared, usable land was linked to prevailing European notions of economic profit in an age of mercantilistic expansion. Sailing into the interior of Guiana in 1594 through what he feared were endlessly dense and forbidding forests, Sir Walter Raleigh saves his delight for his first encounter with extensive grassy plains: "On both sides of the river, we passed the most beautiful countrie that ever mine eies beheld ... plaines of twenty miles in length, the grasse short and greene, and in divers parts groves of trees by themselves, as if they had been by all the art and labour in the world so made of purpose" (Raleigh 57). Raleigh's culture-bound appreciation of a natural beauty that appears created by "art and labour" is not only an expression of English aesthetic sensibilities *vis à vis* the landscape, but voiced an impulse to reform the landscape by turning it into a space of agricultural production that recreated the known British model.

Between British expansionism and this potential for exploitation stand not only the forests, which emerge from the

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descriptions in Raleigh's *The Discovery of Guiana* as dark, eerie spaces into which his men venture gingerly, but those very indigenous inhabitants who the "naturalization" of the landscape sought to erase. His sensitivity to landscape rooted in British agrarian economy, Raleigh cannot intuit the importance of the forest as a habitat and place of refuge to indigenous peoples and native fauna in the way, for example, that we find in the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Las Casas, who arrived in the Indies in 1502, wrote in his *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* of how those among the Taíno Indians of the Antilles "who could flee would seek refuge in the forests or climb to the mountains to escape the Spanish soldier's inhumanity" (Las Casas 19). His account recognizes that as early as the first decade of the sixteenth century, the need to control the indigenous population had joined the pursuit of profit as an important motivation for the clearing of the Caribbean's forests. His writings are imbued with his apprehension that full control of the colonies—which meant "that the world was to be used and its products could be exploited, sold, and traded" (Grove *Green Imperialism* 144)—required an ecological revolution of the "natural" landscape. As Beth Fowkes Tobin argues in *Colonizing Nature*, "the vast plantations devoted to the monoculture of sugar in the Caribbean and (p.102) Pacific, and the cotton, tea, and indigo estates of India not only transformed these regions but also radically altered their populations through genocidal policies and the massive movements of people from one region of the globe to the another" (10).

The forests "discovered" in the Caribbean region had already been impacted by the indigenous population, but the newcomers' arrival would bring radical and irrevocable changes to the environment. Françoise Hatzenberger argues convincingly that "with the European conquest, humans become an important factor in the (Caribbean) environment" (66). The assault on the Caribbean forests was a major contributor to the ecological revolution—the "abrupt and qualitative break with the process of environmental and social change that had developed *in situ*" (Melville 12)—that followed the colonization process. Portions of the coastal forests were cleared to establish settlements, as well as for

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fuel and ship repairs. As the first century of the European conquest progressed, wood was used in large quantities for the construction and repair of the fleets that moved goods and people between the Latin American mainland, the Caribbean, Africa, North America, and Europe. Land quickly began to be cleared for the planting of provisions to feed a growing population, and the forest fauna came under pressure from the intensification of hunting. The forest ecology was transformed within years of the arrival of the Spaniards in many of the Caribbean islands by the release of hundreds of pigs meant to assure that the Europeans would have plenty of protein available on return trips. With the dawn of the seventeenth century, shipments of precious woods to Europe grew frequent as West Indian woods became prized materials for the construction of the palaces and manor houses of those involved in the Indies trade. Exports of Brazilian wood, coveted for their red dye, Mauro Agnoletti reported, “reduced the coastal forests of this species to a very small area by the 18th century” (15). Despite an early recognition of the role the mangroves played in the organization of the islands’ defenses, mangroves were cleared to expand ship landing facilities and trees were debarked for tanning extracts, a procedure that killed extensive portions of mangrove forests.

By far the greatest damage to the forests, however, was done by the development of the plantation economy. Throughout the Caribbean, coastal mahogany forests were completely cleared to make room for sugarcane plantations. In Haiti, coffee plantations were created “on previously forested territories” whose rapid deforestation led to “the destruction of certain tree species” (Agnoletti 15). Timber was used for housing and for the daily fuel requirements of the boiling machines in the sugar mills, which led to endemic species becoming scarce as early as the mid-seventeenth century. The assault on the forests can be measured in terms of biodiversity losses that have led to the disappearance of countless species in the region, which so far number in the hundreds. Such was the environmental impact of the production of sugar in the region that by the time Aphra Behn visited the English colony of (p.103) Surinam in 1663, the geographies of Caribbean territories were clearly divided between plantations that were

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home to colonists and enslaved Africans and forests that remained the embattled domain of those among the indigenous populations to have survived the violence and epidemiological assault of the European encounter.

Behn's months in Surinam coincided with what has been called "the Great Clearing," the period between 1650 and 1665, marked by devastating deforestation throughout the British and French Caribbean that resulted in significant soil erosion and "the scarcity and high price of timber for construction and fuel wood, particularly for refining the sugar" (Williams *Deforesting* 102). Behn novelized the events she had witnessed during her sojourn in the Royalist colony in *Oroonoko*, published in 1688. The geography of Behn's novel reflects the history of the development of the plantation economy in British-held territories in the first half of the seventeenth century. Behn underscores the historic interdependence between the plantation and the forest-dwelling indigenous inhabitants who "supply us with that 'tis impossible for us to get" (12) and are therefore vital to the Europeans' survival. She, however, also recognizes that their continued control of the forests is threatened by their having "an intrinsic value above common timber; for they are, when cut, of different colors, glorious to behold, and bear a price considerable, to inlay withal" (51). The forests also represent a psychologically liminal terrain that the indigenous people navigate easily but which remains as much a barrier to the cowardly European soldiers that support Governor Byam in the text as it had seemed to Raleigh's men. Of those dwelling on the plantation side, only the African protagonist Oroonoko and his wife Imoinda embrace the forest as offering an approximation to a return to Africa, a transitional space onto a death they embrace as their only escape.

By the time of Behn's visit to Surinam, descriptions of the Caribbean had shifted from broad depictions of *the islands* as generic paradise to island-specific accounts, underscoring not only shifts in European sovereignty over the territories but the first glimmers of a Creole consciousness that begins to assess colonial policies in terms of how they use or abuse the colony's environment. Such is the case of the 1647 "*Descripción de la Isla de Puerto Rico*," a proto-literary text by a Catholic

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prebendary, Diego de Torres Vargas, a native of the island and the first to express in writing his *criollo* pride in its beauty and the density of its forests. In his *Descripción*, the young writer exults in the richness and variety of the island's wood preserves, equating them with the land's identity as a self-contained natural and political space. His concern for the preservation of the local forests offers one of the earliest indications of a developing region-wide concern—that of a coherent region-wide acknowledgment of the problems posed by environmental degradation. Although the earliest Spanish legislation for the protection of mangroves and forests dates from the beginning of the eighteenth century, observations of microclimate changes, erosion, and reductions in the supply of fresh water had already been noted in the (p.104) mid-seventeenth century. As Richard Grove argues in *Green Imperialism*, the “full flowering of what one might term the Edenic island discourse during the mid-seventeenth century closely coincided with the realization that the economic demands of colonial rule over ... island colonies threatened their imminent and comprehensive degradation” (5).

For Torres Vargas, writing from an island that was still marginal to the plantation economy, the Puerto Rican forests, dense and rich, represent a complex space, penetrable and rich in possibilities, both botanical and cultural. In his text, he is responding to new assessments of the utility of the forests that stemmed from medical expeditions like that of Francisco Hernández in 1570, which revealed a “living forest” that contained indigenous people with knowledge of “vegetable substances” that could treat medical problems and edible fruits and vegetables unknown to newcomers. Some of these representations of the forests, as Amodio has argued, “derived their identification from a complex system of representations, in which the forest was seen as a place inhabited by protective spirits” (56). “This ‘living forest’ and its associated spirits,” as Amodio explains, “were not very different from those imagined by the Spanish peasants, who also believed in spiritual guardians of the forests and of the springs” (56). Torres Vargas, moreover, belonged to a peasant culture that had already witnessed its first religious miracle: a child had been lost in the woods, “which in that part of the island are most

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dense and frightfully steep,” and when found reported “that a woman had given her to eat during all that time, pampering and caressing her like a mother, whom we understood to be Our Lady of Montserrat, to whom her father was devoted” (185–86). Torres Vargas’s miracle underscores the social and economic realities of the relationship between the Puerto Rican peasantry and the woods in the mid-seventeenth century, when the islands had lost their centrality in Spain’s colonial enterprise, and large numbers of colonizers had resettled in the mainland. Subordinated to a peripheral way station for the Spanish fleet, the island had developed a subsistence economy in which the peasantry lived on small farms on the edge of the forests. Villagers like those of Hormigueros, where the miracle occurs, lived on the crops they planted, which they supplemented with fruit and game from the surrounding forests. Hormigueros, moreover, was then a village settled on the site of Horomico, an earlier Taíno village that, according to archeological remains, dated back to 820 B.C.—an ideal space for the syncretism of cultural elements Amodio describes. The creolized Catholicism that had evolved amidst this peasant population, syncretized with Amerindian practices as Spanish and Taíno populations intermarried, offered a blend of animism and the miraculous, both elements that Torres Vargas reflects in the narratives he inserts in his *Descripción*. His “miraculous” narrative offers the reader an entry into the central role of the forests in a different type of agrarian development than that represented by the plantation.

(p.105) *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*, by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, published in 1690, evidences a similar affirmation of Creole identity. The testimonial narrative of a young man who circumnavigates the world, as narrated to Sigüenza y Góngora, it opens with what is perhaps the earliest pronouncement of a Puerto Rican nationhood in literature: “My name is Alonso Ramírez and my country is the city of San Juan de Puerto Rico, capital of the island” (Buscaglia-Salgado). Ramírez disassociates his narrative from that of the *locus amoenus* of the encounter narratives, underscoring instead the travails of the local population in their struggle to escape the lives mired in poverty of which Torres Vargas had written just

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a few decades earlier. In *Los infortunios*, as José Buscaglia Salgado argues, “the island world is not ... the placeless site where the ideal is shaped in the most elaborate moral or utopian versions of the (nation) state, or the space of adventure where the human condition is defined from the perspective of a European subject who has free reign of action in an exotic realm. ... Quite the contrary, in the *Misfortunes* the island, specifically the fortified harbor town of San Juan, is a very real place that holds no promise and that must be fled at the earliest possible age. It is as if the island placed a curse on the native-born” (Buscaglia-Salgado).

The “curse” Buscaglia Salgado identifies in the text is linked by its narrator to two environment-related concerns; the depopulation of the island, which Torres Vargas had already identified as linked to war, epidemics, and the departure of so many of its inhabitants to the mainland, and the natural hazards to which the island forests were vulnerable, both its virginal woods and its domesticated species: “The wealth ... today has been transformed into poverty, due to the absence of the original inhabitants to work them, and because of the force with which the tempestuous hurricanes cleared the cacao trees that in the absence of gold provided those engaged in the business, and consequently the rest of the islanders, with the bare necessities” (Buscaglia-Salgado). His allusion to the cacao trees is particularly significant in our context, as it confirms Torres Vargas’s assessment of the role of the forests in the peasants’ ability to eke out a living through sustainable farming in the unfortunate colony. As an understory tree, cacao grows best within the overhead shade provided by the forests and as a cash crop was ideally suited to the symbiotic relationship between subsistence farming and the woods on which the peasantry depended for their livelihood before the widespread entrenchment of the plantation.

In the eighteenth-century histories and descriptions of the islands that pave the way for the emergence of a Creole literature in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century, the narrative of the domestication and planting of cacao for profit—which Ramírez highlights as central to the seventeenth-century Puerto Rican economy—will parallel that of the

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destructive intensification of sugar cultivation in the region. As we enter the eighteenth century, sugar moves into the ascendancy while cacao is pushed to the fringes of commercial production. In the highly profitable sugar-producing (p.106) colony of St. Domingue, for example, it was relegated to being planted “in the middle of the forests, in the interior,” whereas in Martinique it was grown on cleared forest lands on steep hills unsuitable for the cultivation of sugar (Clarence-Smith 121). The marginalization of cacao also signals the loss of the possibilities it opened to indigenous peoples, smallholders, freed slaves, and people of mixed race to incorporate themselves into the life of commercial agrarian development as an alternative to the plantation (Clarence Smith 129–131).

These tensions between a commercial crop that grew within the protection of the forests and the deforestation needed for the growth of the sugar plantation becomes a thematic strain in the histories and descriptions of the islands in which we begin to glean the foundations of Creole literary traditions, as it does in Père Labat’s *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l’Amerique*. In his memoirs, Labat finds himself straddling the vanishing world of the indigenous inhabitants and the developing world of the plantation. It is a struggle waged against the backdrop of the Caribbean’s disappearing forests, as we see most clearly in his discussion of the culture and habits of the Caribs in Martinique and Dominica and the inroads of plantation development in Barbados. Labat’s voyage through the Caribbean takes place between 1693 and 1705, several decades after “the Great Clearing” and at a time when climate changes and species extinctions associated with deforestation had already begun to be registered. Labat records both the growing human presence encroaching on the forest reserves and the price exacted from nature and the indigenous population in the form of habitat losses and vanishing species of trees and fauna. In Labat’s narrative, the sustainability of Carib culture is connected as much to the surrounding plenty as to the small size of their communities. With villages located primarily on the coast or alongside rivers, seventeenth-century indigenous communities had put little strain on the island’s forests. However, at the time of Labat’s writing, the Caribs had joined the ranks of the

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endangered species in Martinique, and he writes poignantly of visiting “the last Carib carbet remaining in Martinique.” Their rapid disappearance is portrayed in the text against the growing number of African slaves that accompanied the development of the plantation. Of Barbados he writes that “the number of black slaves in the island is very great. I was told that there are more than 60,000. ... This is a large number for so small an island” (126).² Labat’s text offers a snapshot of a Caribbean in flux. As the disappearing forests take with them the region’s original inhabitants, attention shifts to the struggle against the plantation, which will be waged, not by the remnants of the indigenous populations, but by those among the newcomers who “go native” and find in their Creole identity the resolve to defend their environment against the forces of colonialism.

We see this emerging Creolité most clearly in José Martín Félix de Arrate y Acosta’s *Llave del Nuevo Mundo (Key to the New World 1761)*, where it is linked to a literary celebration of the environmental richness of his native Cuba. It is also linked to an implicit project for the conservation of (p.107) this diversity against the forces of the Spanish empire, which, deep into the eighteenth century, seek to move toward a mono-crop system, following the successful example of the French and British Caribbean colonies. The focus of his text, which he expects will be read by Crown officials in Spain, is to underscore the difference, diversity, and implied self-sufficiency and sustainability of the island as an environmental system different from that of Spain. His text is both a description and a boast of an enviable abundance that is the foundation for a proto-national identification, of an expression of an incipient *cubanía* that will begin the separation (of which twentieth-century Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz will write in *Cuban Counterpoint*) between producers of sugar living in the deforested plains and those able to plant and profit—yet still conserve and live—on the edge of the abundance and protection of the forests, planting cacao, coffee, and tobacco. Arrate, in his effort to emphasize this difference, establishes a clear distinction between these lands of natural abundance and the “tierras de labor” (literally, “lands of labor,” or plantations that require a labor force) that

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produce “besides tobacco and sweet cane, which are the most useful crops, a profusion of manioc, sweet potatoes, ginger, corn, rice, cocoa and coffee.” In his narrative, Arrate implies the existence of three distinct groups in Cuban society—all with a different relationship to the landscape: the Spaniards who have brought irreversible changes to the landscape in the form of new crops and animals; the *isleños*, or islanders (the peasantry that represents both Spanish and indigenous ethnicities), whom he sees as belonging to the landscape in an especially authentic way as they live off the bounty of the forests and sea; and those like him—upper-class and Cuban-born but not indigenous—inextricably connected to a new definition of the landscape, seeking to profit from the landscape without altering it inexorably.

Arrate wrote with an understanding that although Cuba was moving rapidly toward capital intensive plantation agriculture, which would form the basis of its path toward nationhood, this type of agriculture, “based on slave labour, promoted very rapid environmental change in terms of deforestation and subsequent soil erosion, flooding, gullying, local aridification and drying up of the streams and rivers” (Grove “The Culture of Islands”). The experience of Spanish and Portuguese sugar producers in early cane plantations in the Canary Islands and Madeira was that these islands “were devastated in this way by the effects of deforestation for sugar cultivation as early as the fifteenth century” (Grove “The Culture of Islands”). This potential devastation was also evident, as far as the Caribbean region itself was concerned, in the writings of Martinican historian Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry in his two books on Hispaniola, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint Domingue* and *Description topographique et politique de la partie espagnole de l’isle Saint-Domingue*, published in 1796. Moreau de Saint-Méry’s texts offer the most comprehensive account of the impact of the intensification of sugar production on a Caribbean island in the (p.108) eighteenth century. His text chronicles the impact of deforestation on threatened or vanishing species and is particularly eloquent on the nature and fate of the forests of Hispaniola, noting not only their beauty and “inexhaustible

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fecundity” but also the forces that threaten their very inexhaustibility. “Their utility is proved by continual experience, though their distance from the places where they might be advantageously employed, is often the cause of their remaining in tranquility” (31). Moreover, he explicitly notes the environmental impact of the island’s too-rapid deforestation, especially on the intensification of soil erosion and the reduction in rain levels. In Haiti, the French colonists “who have aided these depredations by the cultivation of coffee, and by a system which counts the time to come as nothing,” he writes, “have cut down even the trees that covered the summits of the mountains and attracted the rains, insomuch that a diminution of the rains is now perceivable in the French part, where they were formerly very considerable and regular” (20).

Moreau de Saint-Méry’s observations on the state of the forests of Hispaniola are of particular interest here because of the backdrop they offer to one of the most salient literary traditions in Haiti—that of the celebration of the beauty and extension of the island’s deep forests, which becomes an essential element in the development of the national literature following the revolution. It is a thematic strand that emerges in Haitian poetry from the earliest literary efforts in the nineteenth century and includes a rich vein of poetry on the topic of Haiti’s “musician trees.” Alcibiade Fleury-Battier, in his *Sous Les Bambous: Poésies* (1881), writes of how he “love[s] the deep forests quivering with the songs / of those winged bards we mistook for flowers” (32) and celebrates Haiti’s centuries-old *mapous*, sacred trees of Haitian Vodou, in a poem in French that includes lines in Haitian Creole. Likewise, Massillon Coicou, the novelist, poet, dramatist, and politician executed in 1908, writes in the poem “Vents et Flots” about Haiti’s musical trees: “his path / vibrates, in endless hymns, the wild music / of the trees, of the birds, of all the voices / that make up the dazzling fanfare of the forest” (Coicou 95). This love for the forests and delight in the coolness of its groves and musical quality of their presence stands in dramatic contrast to the rapid disappearance of the trees that Haitian novelists like Jacques Roumain or Marie Chauvet will mourn in the twentieth century.

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Throughout the nineteenth century, the idealization of the diminishing forest environment in the emerging literatures of the Caribbean responds to Romantic sensibilities and the adaptation of European models that turned the forests into highly symbolic spaces. Romanticism was linked—especially in Haiti and the Hispanic Caribbean—to processes of national definition in islands that had already gained their independence in the early nineteenth century and were, literally, postcolonial (such as Haiti and the Dominican Republic) or were engaged in protracted ideological battles against continued colonial control and functioned as pre-independent political spaces (such as Cuba and Puerto Rico). In the literatures of these (p.109) islands, the celebration of the forests as significant national spaces acknowledges their symbolic role in preserving the integrity of the nation (or proto-nation), a role based on an acknowledgment of scientific notions of climate change and land preservation. It is true that many Caribbean writers of the nineteenth century, most of them emerging from the Creole elites, “naturalized” the social and ecological landscape of the plantation, waxing nostalgic about the flower of the sugarcane tree (as Puerto Rican poet José Gautier Benítez does in his 1879 poem “Puerto Rico”) or returning to old notions of the forest as the mysterious environment for Obeahmen, healers, or Vodou spirits.³ It is also true, however, that this “naturalization” was in the service of identifying the developing national character with notions of the indigenous or autochthonous in which the “primeval” forest stands for a precolonial space of “national” authenticity.

The importance of the forests in the discourse of national and cultural formation in the Caribbean is most clearly seen in the twentieth century, as the islands begin to articulate the parameters of their postindependence identities. They also begin to measure the forests in terms of what natural resources have survived the colonial onslaught, looking environmentally at how the remaining woods fit into the overall pattern of national development—economically as well as culturally. This process is evident most clearly in Haiti, where the literary role of the forests moves from the depiction as places of reflection and inspiration (the poet’s *locus*

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amoenus with its musician trees) to the symbols for the rapacious nature of the postindependence exploitation hoisted on the Haitian people by the alliance between foreign powers and the local elites. Following the 1914–36 U.S. Occupation, the intensified destruction of the Haitian forests becomes the most serious threat to the viability of the nation. 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.

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 toward environmental safety, focusing on the state’s inaction as evidence of the slow violence of environmental neglect. Jacques Roumain’s 1944 *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (*Masters of the Dew*), Jacques-Stephen Alexis’s 1957 *Les Arbres musiciens* (*The Musician Trees*), Marie Chauvet’s 1968 *Amour* (from *Amour, Colère et Folie*), and Pierre Clitandre’s 1979 *Cathédrale du mois d’août* (*The Cathedral of the August Heat*) (p.110) all demonstrate that the Haitian novel has been, above all, a chronicle of the nation’s unimaginable ecological catastrophe.

Because the Caribbean shares Haiti’s history of colonial exploitation and subordinate economic development, the Haitian experience with deforestation echoes across the archipelago. As events have proven convincingly to the world that Haiti’s ills could not be cured through foreign aid, investment, or technology, we have witnessed growing levels of popular engagement in local environmental movements elsewhere in the Caribbean islands, many of them led by

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writers, artists, and musicians ready to use their local fame and reputation in the service of stemming the tide of deforestation and environmental degradation in their home nations. Haitian concerns over the damages of deforestation are echoed, for example, in the “agrarian” poetry of noted Puerto Rican poet Juan Antonio Corretjer (1908–85), known for his celebration of the richness and diversity of Puerto Rico’s mountain ecology and its history of subsistence agriculture. Corretjer wrote of his delight at entering “the moist fields with their crisp grassy greenness / through which the river traces its sinuous geometry” (“Pared de la soledad”) and of penetrating forest groves where he could rub against the bark of the trees and “inhale the sacred smoke / that makes the mouth capable of prophecy” (“Yerba bruja”). His environmental activism—which evolved in the 1950s, predating by some years the similar concerns expressed by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962)—aimed at counterbalancing the violence that had been perpetrated on the environment by American agricultural corporations, had focused on the impact of agribusiness on the island’s interior. In essays, poems, 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 (Ruiz Marrero).

What Corretjer’s poetry unveils, in its concern for the preservation of the Puerto Rican woods, is how wedded his notion of the relationship between the Caribbean peasantry and the woods remains to the ideal of agrarian development described by both Alonso Ramírez and Diego de Torres Vargas in the seventeenth century, when the most desirable plot of land went from seashore to the wooded hills, with the planted fields providing a variety of subsistence crops to complement the protein from the sea’s fish and the animals that graze at the edge of the forest.⁴ This peasant ideal, present already in the earliest literary texts produced in the Caribbean region, persisted into the twentieth century through its inclusion in the “counter-plantation system” that was part of most of the

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region's decolonizing projects. It became the cornerstone of theories of the nation that gave root to land reform programs such as that of Governor Luis Muñoz Marín in Puerto Rico (1898–1980) and Prime Minister Eric Williams in Trinidad and Tobago (1911–1981). Williams, as Teruyuki (p.111) Tsuji has argued, expanded this idea “into a cultural theory” that made free peasant villages “autonomous of either urban-based or plantation-based colonial modes of production” the “prototypes of his imagined nation of Trinidad and Tobago” (Tsuji 1150). Williams's project involved a process of “villaging the nation” that was responsive to articulations of national identity built on the ideal symbiosis between the plot system of agriculture and the bush (see Wynter).

These processes of national formation—defined and narrated in our earliest literary texts—also proposed a more environmentally benevolent role for the Creole planter away from the cane fields and into the production of coffee, tobacco, or cacao as alternatives to the oppressive foreign-controlled sugar plantation. This redefinition of the Creole planter is explored in Enrique Laguerre's 1935 novel *La Lllamarada*, a work that examines the contrasting spaces of the Creole coffee producing regions and the U.S. corporation-controlled cane fields. Its protagonist—the agronomist son of a local coffee producer who gets seduced into the patterns of exploitation of the American *central*—must be awakened from his stupor into an understanding of a just and environmentally sound alternative for the island's economic development. The novel returns us to notions of the symbiotic relationship between coffee production and forest preservation that we had found in Arrate's *Llave del Nuevo mundo* and had formed the basis of Torres Vargas's ideal of a new nation. In *La Lllamarada*, the protagonist's growing awareness of the price that the island's environment had paid for its plantation development includes an acknowledgment of the problems posed by deforestation. Early in the text, when invited to a hunt, he observes the dwindling forest coverage and relates it directly to the production of sugarcane:

Juan Pedro took us to the site of an ancient ausubo forest. There remained only a very few ausubos, a

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resistant and haughty tree, and, as Moreau told me, these had already been ‘marked for the ax, to make way for cane.’ The harsh announcement pained me, and despite my being head of production at the mill, I stared rancorously at the canefield, with its flexible and wounding leaves, like a million swords. (58)

The concern for the island’s deforestation is woven throughout the novel to the idea that the Puerto Rican peasant is “natural” to the subsistence plot cleared on the edge of the forest. The peasant “places the seed in its furrow and feels he is witnessing a religious feast,” he explains, echoing the descriptions of Taíno agricultural rites described by Ramón Pané in the early sixteenth century, and therefore his “unnatural” work of the plantation is tantamount to “the chain of slavery” (137). The disillusion with the environmental consequences of the development of agribusiness throughout the Caribbean in the mid-twentieth century—of which *La Lllamarada* is a salient example—is echoed in works as varied as Herbert De Lisser’s *The White Witch of Rose Hall* (1928), Édouard Glissant’s *La Lézarde* (1958), Juan Bosch’s *Cuentos escritos en el exilio* (1962), Pedro Mir’s *Hay un (p.112) país en el mundo* (1949), Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* (1974), and Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove*, among numerous others.

Condé’s novel portrays a community settled between the sea and the forest that has turned away from the enslavement of the cane fields to build cultural traditions centered on the woods. “Traditionally,” Condé writes, “the people of Rivière du Sel worked with wood,” looking among the “giants of the dense forest” for materials to build their homes—Caribbean burwood or *gommiers blancs*—or for cashews and rosewoods to make fine cabinets, or oleanders from which to carve delicate tables inlaid with magnolia” (*Traversée* 38). Condé’s community is imagined as grounded in the peasantry’s “natural” relationship with the trees, as we see in her character Aristide’s description of the sense of peace he finds in the forest: “It was only among the big trees that he felt a sense of well-being, among the *marbri*, the big-leafed chestnut, the *gommier blanc*, the burwood, the *bois la soie* bush. He glided among their serene and silent shadows, barely pierced by the chirping of the birds” (70). In the forest he recalls how his father spoke to him of the time “before jealousy and hatred poisoned the air around them ... when the

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brutal hands of man had not deflowered the trees and the forests of Guadeloupe were bursting with all sorts of birds” (70). Aristide knew about these birds from the pages of a book his father often perused with him, Père Labat’s *Nouveau voyage aux Isles de l’Amerique*. Condé acknowledges, through his reference to Labat’s seminal text, the priest’s early realization of the losses the plantation system would bring to Guadeloupe as measured in deforestation and habitat destruction, and builds her fictional community as one anchored by the notion of a possible return to that idealized preplantation time.

Labat, in his *Nouveau voyage*, wrote of a moment when the Caribbean forests were succumbing to the push for an incipient capitalist premodernity in which the plantation represented the colony’s entry into a mercantile economy. In postcolonial Caribbean literature, this symbolic relationship between the forests and modernity continues to be articulated through the representation of the forests as the “natural” domain of the indigenous or the Creole. Jean Rhys, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, addresses this understanding of this cultural role of the forest when she immerses Rochester in the dark and (to him) hostile world of Dominica’s dense forests as the means of narrating his discomfort in his Creole wife’s world. The forests’ capacity to exclude those not belonging to the national space has become a common motif in recent texts by Caribbean writers—it appears prominently, for example, in texts like Mayra Montero’s *In the Palm of Darkness* (1995) and Eunice Richards-Pillot’s *Les Terres noyées* (2006)—a development that appears to respond to the growing importance of the forests as places of reflection and leisure for Caribbean peoples as the tourist industry continues to exclude them from beaches and coastal lands.

This return to the age-old theme of the forests’ capacity to exclude those who do not belong—which entered the region’s literature with the earliest writings of explorers and visitors—is linked in more recent texts to that of (p.113) the forest’s potential for obliterating the remnants of colonial history, a subject the region’s photographers and painters have rendered in response to the common sight of plantation

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buildings and machinery partially obliterated by the bush. Derek Walcott, in *The Prodigal*, reflects on the potential for historical amnesia in this power of the forest to erase history; he ponders what would happen “if our history [were] so rapidly enclosed / in bush, devoured by green / that there are no signals ... and our forests shut / their mouths, sworn to ancestral silence” (99).⁵

In recent decades, as environmental concerns have moved to the forefront of social and political debates in the Caribbean region, concerns with the obliteration of the plantation have given way to the need to protect the forests from continued attack by international and local forces that see in the exploitation of the forests an opportunity for regional development. As a result, recent literature draws on the growing understanding that deforestation is the Caribbean basin’s primary environmental threat. In Trinidadian writer Lakshmi Persaud’s *For the Love of My Name* (2000), which follows the story of the fictional Caribbean island of Maya before it sinks beneath the sea, the text focuses on the clearing of the forests as the historical event most responsible for the nation’s decline, as it has been in Haiti and threatens to be in other Caribbean nations if deforestation is not halted:

“Hinterland Development” involved the cultivation of land cleared of its rainforest, then furrowed, its loose top soil open to the coming of the first heavy tropical rains. Our inexperienced, urban youths were being asked to repeat 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. (211)

Persaud’s text is firmly anchored on a new understanding of the interrelation between environmental protection and economic development that has been extremely critical of continued deforestation throughout the region, focusing instead on integrative conservation approaches that rely “on the enhanced participation of local populations to achieve a sustainable management of natural resources” (Esposito 53).

This integrative conservation approach has been particularly critical of continued reliance on the use of wood as fuel for

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cooking or for the production of charcoal as contributing factors in the Caribbean region's postplantation deforestation. Texts like Trinidadian-born Ismith Khan's semi-autobiographical novel *The Jumbie Bird* (1985) acknowledge the centrality of coal as a source of fuel in Caribbean societies, mourning for the trees destroyed in this process. In this tale of three generations of Indian men trying to make their way from the plantation to a modest measure of financial stability, the use of a coal shop as a setting allows the young grandson to soulfully meditate on the processes through which the environment has been ravaged to sustain life on his adopted homeland:

(p.114) And a feeling of sadness, of vast loneliness fell upon him as Binti raked away the fine metallic dust of coal that had come and gone. He thought of the coal men and of the silence of the jungles; he thought of the thick long vines that hung from the tall trees to the ground; he thought of the shafts of sunlight cutting through the trees; he thought of how they fell in a forest silence that no one heard; he thought of the long journey of the trees that went to coal. (184-85)

Khan's imagination integrates coal men, coal-bound trees, and the young man raking away the coal dust into one single tragedy that is personal as well as national, seeking in his sadness a way out of the cycle of coal production that can free the trees, the coal men, and himself from the ecolonial bind in which they seem caught.⁶ The yearning for the lost forests in Caribbean literature—and the reiterated emphasis on finding a way to conserve and restore forested areas throughout the region—has as its core the possibility of recapturing the potential for a cultural maroonage that has, since the earliest texts of the region's literature, offered an alternative to colonialism in the region's imaginary. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, the little girls in Torres Vargas's miraculous tale, Ramírez's cacao planting peasants, Arrate's Cuban Creoles, Labat's Caribs, Gómez de Avellaneda's Sab, and Laguerre's troubled agronomist are just a few of the characters who have found in the forest a symbolic space for cultural identification and national affirmation.

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I started this discussion with a historical event—that of Columbus’s discovery of the islands of the Antilles, a moment that initiated an assault on the forests from which the region is still struggling to recover. His “naturalization” of the deeply forested lands he “discovered” was instrumental in the attempt at dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants, many of whom appear in the pages of the books I’ve discussed here as ghosts of a past that seems irretrievable. I want to end with a tale of recovery and affirmation involving the remarkable forests of Surinam and Guyana, nations whose forest coverage remains the highest in the world, with 92 percent and 88 percent, respectively. The forests of Surinam and Guyana, which we first encounter in the literatures of the Caribbean in Walter Raleigh’s *The Discovery of Guiana* and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, were central to a precedent-breaking 1997 case involving the Saramaka people of Surinam, the descendants of the indigenous people of Behn’s narrative—and of the African slaves brought to the territory to work the sugar and coffee plantations and who, like Oroonoko, fled into the forest. Since 1762, following a treaty with the Dutch colonizers, this community of maroons had been living in their state-within-a-state in the forests of Surinam. In the 1980s, however, the pressures of Surinamese development began to be felt in their territory. A civil war between maroons—among them the Saramakas—and Surinam’s government led to thousands of them seeking refuge in French Guiana. Large timber and mining concessions were granted to foreign multinational corporations (Chinese, Indonesian, (p.115) Malaysian, and others) in Saramaka territory without consultation. Peace Corps volunteers descended upon the territory in numbers that threatened the cultural practices of the Saramakas. Brazilian gold miners began operating in indigenous-controlled territories, bringing prostitution, gambling, and drug smuggling to the region. The pressures led the Saramaka to submit a complaint before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights to validate their land rights. In November 2007, in a landmark decision, the commission ruled in favor of the Saramaka people, who were granted collective rights to the lands in which their ancestors had lived since the eighteenth century, including full control over their natural resources (which in the region include timber and gold), and

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compensation from the Suriname government for damages caused by previous timber grants issued to foreign companies.

The continuities between the indigenous peoples we encounter in the works of Walter Raleigh and Aphra Behn, living in the deeply forested domain they controlled, and the success of the Saramakas' struggle to retain those still-forested lands, point to the symbiotic relationships established through a long history of colonial and postcolonial writings between the rights of the region's peoples and their presence in our texts. The myriad ways in which writing from and about the Caribbean has addressed its forests—whether as earthly Eden in Columbus's letters and diaries or as nightmarish absences in contemporary works like Mayra Montero's *In the Palm of Darkness*—always return to the articulation of a deep connection between the woods and what Derek Walcott, in "The Myth of History," called the indissoluble "ego of the race" (354). This connection, in an era of postcolonial environmental activism, now transcends the page, as the peoples of the Caribbean region, which astoundingly still possesses nearly a quarter of the world's extant forests, come together to defend their patrimony in the name of connections that our literatures have articulated and fostered through the centuries.

Notes

Notes:

(1.) The *locus amoenus*, perhaps the most familiar and typical landscape topos in the classical world, formed "the principal motif of all nature descriptions" from the Roman Empire to the sixteenth century (Barasch 309). The quintessential idyllic space, the *locus amoenus*, is an environment that includes a variety of elements—a grove of trees, a meadow, a spring or brook, birdsong, and a warm breeze.

(2.) Barbados, he noted, was severely deforested, a fact that a planter had noted as far back as 1653, when he wrote that "this island of Barbados cannot last in an height of trade three

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years longer especially for sugar, the wood being almost already spent" (quoted in Kurlansky 161).

(3.) See, for example, the 1827 Jamaican novel by Cynric R. Williams *Hamel, the Obeah Man* and Cuban novelist Emilio Bobadilla's 1903 work *A fuego lento* (At Low Heat).

(4.) This ideal forms the core of peasant aspirations in novels like Jan Carew's *Black Midas* (1962), where his gold-panning characters dream of returning to their "natural" life of subsistence farming in the shadow of the forests. As one character comments, "I'm going to buy ... a piece of land that will stretch from the sea to the forest and I'm going to grow coconuts and rice and ground provisions. I'm a village boy, and I know the land just like my grandpa knew it" (Carew 272).

(5.) On the subject of landscape and amnesia, see also DeLoughrey et al. The connection is also explored in Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation* (1988), where the trees retain the power to exclude as well as to erase a history of the plantation, as one of her characters explains as he points to the forests that have engulfed former plantations: "They used to have plenty Dutch plantation up the river. African slave rebellion and river finish them off one by one. This is the last plantation left here in Canefields" (40).

(6.) It is a concern echoed by Patrick Chamoiseau, in his 2002 novel *Biblique des derniers gestes*, which sets the stage for its exploration of Martinique's environmental quandary by linking the problems the island is facing to the deforestation caused by ecocolonial policies, what he calls the "deforestation caused by Progress." As a mass of clouds drops massive amounts of rain on the communities near Mont Pelée, the narrator comments that "the annoying thing about this is that, because of the deforestation caused by Progress, the water in the clouds has free rein to tear down the hills. The deluge can roll down any hillside, rushing through houses, dropping loads of mud on the most unexpected places" (19).

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