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### **Extinctions: Chronicles of Vanishing Fauna in the Colonial and Postcolonial Caribbean**

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

This article examines the extinction of some animals in colonial and postcolonial Caribbean region, including the Caribbean monk seal and the Creole pig, which became victims of human predatory behavior, unchecked coastal development, and the ecological changes unleashed by colonialism and postcolonial tourism development in the Caribbean basin. This article also discusses the ecological revolution measured in terms of biodiversity losses that have led to the disappearance of thousands of flora and fauna species in the region, some dating back to the earliest decades of the colonization and conquest of the Indies.

Keywords: animal extinction, Caribbean region, Caribbean monk seal, Creole pig, human predatory behavior, coastal development, ecological changes, tourism development, biodiversity losses

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For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

IN 2008, the Caribbean monk seal (*monachus tropicalis* or West Indian seal)—the only subtropical seal native to the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico—was declared officially extinct by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). The last recorded sighting of this gentle creature—which once lived in large pods of between 50 and 500 on beaches throughout the region—was in 1952, when “a small colony” was spotted at the Seranilla Bank between Jamaica and the Yucatan Peninsula. Despite reports a year later of “remnants of this species” still living “somewhere within their former range” (King 218), and after five years of futile efforts to find or confirm sightings, in June 2008 the monk seal finally joined the growing list of

victims of ecological changes unleashed by colonialism and postcolonial tourism development in the Caribbean basin. It has gone the way of the dodo of Mauritius and has become in the process the only seal in recorded history to vanish due to human exploitation and unrelenting encroachment even in its remotest habitats. Its disappearance sent a minor ripple throughout the conservationist world, where the seal is now mourned as a symbol of the fate of animals that fall victim to human predatory behavior and unchecked coastal development.<sup>1</sup>

Given the Caribbean monk seal's cameo role in one of the earliest texts about the conquest and colonization on the region, its disappearance is a natural point of departure for my analysis of the meanings of extinction for a postcolonial Caribbean as chronicled in our literatures. The seal enters literary and recorded history in Christopher Columbus's (p. 342) diary of his second voyage to his newly discovered territories. At the end of August 1494, with his ship anchored by the rocky islet of Alta Vega off the southern coast of Haiti, the men he sends ashore kill eight of what the Admiral called "sea wolves" to feed the crew (Columbus 69; King 215). Less than ten years later, in 1513—as Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas will record in his *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos en las islas y tierra firme del Mar Oceano* (History of the deeds of the Castilians in the islands and mainland of the Ocean Sea, 1601–1615)—Juan Ponce de León, having just discovered the Dry Tortugas Islands, sent a foraging party that returned with fourteen dead seals. So begins the narrative of the relentless slaughter of the mellow and slow-moving creatures, which at its peak approached a hundred deaths per night (King 215–216).

The killings of Caribbean Monk Seals recorded in some of the region's oldest proto-literary texts represent one of the earliest indications of how quickly the Columbian encounter would evolve into an ecological revolution, a concept that Elinor Melville describes in her book about the environmental consequences of the conquest of Mexico, *A Plague of Sheep*, as "an abrupt and qualitative break with the process of environmental and social change that had developed in situ" (Melville 12). In the face of catastrophic habitat collapse, small island ecologies experienced "substantial species loss" from the earliest stages of European colonization (Miller 61). This ecological revolution can be measured in terms of biodiversity losses that have led to the disappearance of thousands of flora and fauna species in the region, some dating back to the earliest decades of the colonization and conquest of the Indies.

Barbados, one of the earliest plantation settlements in the Caribbean, is perhaps the best example of the impact of habitat collapse in the region in the first centuries of the European conquest. Colonized by English Royalists sent "beyond the sea" by a victorious Oliver Cromwell in the early seventeenth century, it was completely deforested in a little

over twenty years as planters submitted nearly 80 percent of the landmass to sugar cultivation—a fate that the small colony would quickly share with neighboring islands (Miller 85). As Shawn Miller explains in *An Environmental History of Latin America*:

Scores of plants, mammals, reptiles, and birds were unique to each island, and an uncounted number of species, possibly ranging in the thousands, without their forest habitats, disappeared forever without the slightest human notice. On Barbados, a few deletions were noted: the palmito palm, the mastic tree, the wood pigeon, a few species of conures, the yellow-headed macaw, and one variety of hummingbird—all vanished. No monkey species survived sugar’s colonization, and of the 529 noncultivated species of plants found on Barbados today, only 11 percent are native to the island.

(Miller 85)

Throughout the Caribbean, deforestation to clear the land for sugar plantations led to the loss of a variety of unusual native rodents like the *hutía* and shrew-like insectivores, many of them ancient species that have now not been seen for several centuries. The Martinican Amazon parrot became extinct due to habitat loss as the island was cleared for agriculture in the seventeenth century; it has not been recorded since 1722. In 1699, Père Labat, in the memoir of his voyage to the Caribbean (*The Memoirs of Père Labat 1693–1705*), described a large population of small parrots living in Guadeloupe, named *Arantiga labati* in his honor, of which no specimens have been recorded since the mid-eighteenth century. Fifteen mammals have become extinct in Hispaniola—the highest number of mammal extinctions of any Caribbean island—due to the severe deforestation of Haiti. Jamaica was home to a monkey, the *Xenothrix mcgregori*, lost when its forest habitat was cut by European colonists. It died out in the 1750s. The Cuban Red Macaw was reasonably common around 1800 in Cuba. Human encroachment in its habitats increased dramatically in the early nineteenth century, when Cuba intensified its sugar production to meet the demand created by the collapse of the St. Domingue sugar mills after the Haitian Revolution. The bird was hunted for food and nests were plundered or disturbed to acquire young birds to keep as pets. The last one is believed to have been shot in 1864 at La Vega in the vicinity of the Ciénaga de Zapata swamp, which seems to have been the last stronghold of the species. Nine species of Antillean iguanas and snakes became extinct after Europeans introduced mongoose and rats to protect sugar cane workers in the nineteenth century, joining the uncounted species that have disappeared due to the introduction of invasive alien species (“Sharing the Same Dream”). The current invasion of the Caribbean Sea by lionfish released accidentally in Florida, it is feared, will account for a number of future extinctions.<sup>2</sup>

Should we be troubled by the fact that, until efforts were made recently to reintroduce parrots to Martinique, there were no endemic species left on the island? How much should we grieve for the Cuban Red Macaw? Should we mourn the Caribbean monk seal? These lost creatures are the closest the Caribbean region has come to having the “charismatic megafauna” that attracts worldwide attention—Polar bears, American Eagles, Panda bears, Bengal tigers, in short, those animals whose endangerment was “‘foremost in the minds’ of those who drafted the Endangered Species Act” (Boudreaux 773). The loss of these proto-charismatic Caribbean megafauna, however, are just the proverbial tip of the iceberg, harbingers of more serious—albeit perhaps less dramatic—biodiversity losses threatening the diverse island ecologies dotting the region.

The Caribbean is (alas!) one of the world’s hotspots, a concept developed by conservation biologists to identify “particular areas of the world that contain high levels of endemic species that are highly threatened or endangered” (Bernau 617). With around 7,000 species of plants and 160 bird species found nowhere else in the world, the Caribbean is a critical area for intervention to preserve “not only the number of species but also the number of individuals within that species, and all the inherent genetic variations” (Whitty May/June 2007). Biodiversity, which Julia Whitty defines as “the sum of an area’s genes (the building blocks of inheritance), species (organisms that can interbreed), and ecosystems (amalgamations of species in their geological and chemical landscapes)” (Whitty April 2007), is a critical element in maintaining ecological viability, particularly in threatened small island ecologies (“Sharing the Same Dream”). A rich biodiversity—“life’s only army against the diseases of oblivion” (Whitty May/June 2007)—is the key to the “tough immune system” needed for maintaining Caribbean flora, fauna, peoples and cultures.<sup>3</sup>

(p. 344) Environmentalism has brought much-needed attention to the problems biodiversity losses pose to human survival on the planet. As a recent poll by the American Museum of Natural History revealed, “7 in 10 biologists believe that mass extinction poses a colossal threat to human existence, a more serious environmental problem than even its contributor, global warming, and that the dangers of mass extinction are woefully underestimated by most everyone outside of science” (Whitty April 2007). In the small island developing states of the Caribbean, the biological diversity is “extremely fragile” and is particularly threatened “by a combination of natural and anthropogenic factors” (UNEP). Exacerbating that threat is the reality that, globally, 80 percent of post-1600 extinctions have happened, disproportionately, on islands (“Sharing the Dream”). In the Caribbean, the threat of extinction looms even over the coral reefs so crucial to the health of the surrounding environment. As Fred Pearce argued in a *New Scientist* article in 2003, “the coral reefs of the Caribbean are close to extinction,” due to disease, over-fishing, “sewage pollution, damage from cruise ships and divers, topsoil

washing into the sea following deforestation, and record sea temperatures caused by global warming and El Niño” (Pearce 9).

Central to my concerns about biodiversity is an understanding of how the Caribbean region’s subordinate entry into global mercantilism in the sixteenth century continues to haunt us. As the Caribbean islands—and to a lesser degree the continental territories of the Caribbean basin—adapted to their new realities after the start of the conquest, their roles were defined as bound with the extraction of natural resources and the production of commodities for metropolitan consumption. With scant care for the welfare and development of the local population, the territories fell into patterns of exploitation that paid little attention to their impact on local inhabitants or environments. As many plants and animals fell victim to earlier forms of environmental misuse (the plantation, mining, deforestation, overfishing), the region’s newest form of resource exploitation—tourism development, particularly on our coasts—threatens mangroves and other coastal fisheries, coral reefs, seagrasses and their dependent species, turtles who have seen significant losses in access to former nurseries, marine mammals like the West Indian manatee dependent on coastal habitats, migratory birds dependent on disappearing coastal watersheds, and countless remaining species.

Extinctions—past and threatening ones alike—pose a large number of questions: biological, environmental, cultural, literary, and national. Here, I look at one of these questions, that of the ways in which these biological losses have impacted the ways in which the Caribbean region has been imagined and reimagined textually as writers have begun to ponder the extinction of Caribbean islands and peoples as the ultimate result of global warming, continued deforestation, galloping desertification, and rising sea levels. Ultimately such threats should prompt us to reconsider what it means to be postcolonial in the twenty-first century.

Derek Walcott poignantly ponders the apocalyptic question of whether the destruction of the Caribbean’s ecosystems could signal the loss of the people who inhabit them—the end of island nations and their peoples—in his essay “Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”: (p. 345)

The Caribbean is not a [tourist] idyll, not to its natives. They draw their working strength from it organically, like trees, like the sea almond or the spice laurel of the heights. Its peasantry and its fishermen are not there to be loved or even photographed; they are trees who sweat, and whose bark is filmed with salt, but every day on some island, rootless trees in suits are signing favorable tax breaks with entrepreneurs, poisoning the sea almond and the spice laurel of the mountains to their roots. A morning could come in which governments might ask what happened not merely to the forests and the bays but to a whole people.

(“Antilles” 83)<sup>4</sup>

The concern for the impact of biodiversity losses in writings about the Caribbean can be found in some of the earliest literary and proto-literary texts written about the region. Aphra Behn, in her novel *Oroonoko*, published in 1688, already pondered what the increasingly intense clearing of the Caribbean forests would mean for the indigenous peoples and animals relegated to the diminishing woods. Behn’s sojourn in Suriname in 1653 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 102–3). The geography of Behn’s novel—which reflects the history of the development of the plantation economy in British-held territories in the first half of the seventeenth century—is built on the social and economic separation between the cleared land of the sugar plantation to which the narrator belonged as an Englishwoman and the dense woods that are the domain of the indigenous inhabitants. It is a division that forces the planters—already dependent on food importations for their survival—to rely on the indigenous forest dwellers who “supply us with that ‘tis impossible for us to get: for they do not only in the woods, and over the savannahs, in hunting, supply the parts of hounds, by swiftly scouring through those almost impassable places, and by the mere activity of their feet run down the nimblest deer and other eatable beasts” (12). Behn’s text alludes repeatedly to the increased pressure placed on the forest fauna by the demand to help feed the growing plantation population, recognizing the forests as an endangered liminal terrain. Implicit in her query about the fate of the forests is the question of where the natives will go if the clearing of the forests continues at the established accelerated pace and how the colony will fare without access to forest animals as food. Writing in 1701, just a few decades after Behn’s departure from Suriname, German entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian will echo similar concerns in her *Insects of Surinam*, pointing to the planters’ errors in eschewing food security in their obsession with sugar cultivation. Wishing that the colony “were inhabited by a more industrious and less selfish population” (93), she offers a number of crops that would lay the foundation for sustainability, only to be mocked “for seeking anything but sugar in the country” (Merian 117).<sup>5</sup>

Behn’s Creole contemporary, Cuban writer José Martín Félix de Arrate y Acosta, celebrates the island’s biodiversity while recording one of the earliest acknowledgments of creeping extinctions. In his *Llave del Nuevo Mundo* (Key to the New World, published in 1666), one of Cuban literature’s most important early foundational texts, he offers an implicit Creole-led project for the conservation of Cuba’s remarkable biodiversity (p. 346) against the forces of the Spanish empire, which, as the eighteenth century opens, seek to move towards a mono-crop system, following the successful example of the

French and British Caribbean colonies. Cuba's mountains, Arrate writes, "abound with rich and wild fruit, precious woods—cedar, mahogany, passion-fruit trees, *guayacos*, *lingum vitae*—and other broad and valuable trees" (Arrate, n.p.). 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 a narrative 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, writes of the "beautiful variety of flowering trees in the countryside, of fragrant herbs and plants," of the abundance of singing birds—nightingales, mockingbirds, manakins, bellbirds, and cotingas—of game birds like ring doves, quail, partridges, of the diversity of ducks in rivers and lagoons, and of the "birds of flashy and varied feathers, such as the flamencos, tanagers, parrots, and parakeets" (Arrate, n.p.). He 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 produce "besides tobacco and sweet cane, which are the most useful crops, a profusion of manioc, sweet potatoes, ginger, corn, rice, cocoa and coffee" (Arrate, n.p.). Amid this abundance, he also records noted extinctions, writing that "before the Spaniards populated the island there were no more quadrupeds than certain *hutías* and certain types of mute dogs, which are now extinct" (Arrate, n.p.).

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Père Labat, in his extensive report of his visit to the Caribbean, written at a time of fast plantation development in Martinique and Guadeloupe, writes of his concerns with the loss of biodiversity. In Guadeloupe he had encountered the *diablotin*, an ungainly bird the size of a pullet that lived in "hole in the mountains, like rabbits." Their flesh is dark, with a "rather fishy flavor," but "good and nourishing." Their trajectory as a species has already been inexorably derailed by colonial agricultural expansion:

These birds are a veritable manna sent by God every year for the settlers and negroes, who live on little else during the season. It is only the difficulty of getting them which preserves the species, and these birds would be killed out completely in a few years owing to the bad custom of the French, were it not for the fact that they choose the most inaccessible places for their homes. (65)

His concern, ironically, does not impede his going out with a hunting party into the volcanic area that is the birds' habitat and killing 150 of them, which they ate on the spot. Enhancing the irony is Labat's juxtaposition of the tale of this threatened extinction with

a chapter on “A Carib Carbet in Martinique,” which relates his visit to the “last carbet remaining in Martinique,” the last sad stronghold of the indigenous Martinican Caribs.

(p. 347) Their habitat destroyed, the forests on which they depended for their livelihood cleared, Labat describes them as they prepare to abandon the island and join equally dwindling groups in St Vincent and Dominica—becoming, in the process, one of the earliest environmental exiles whose plight is captured in the region’s literature.

US naturalist Frederick Ober, looking for a specimen of the diablotin nearly 200 years later, has to return home empty handed. Following in the steps of Père Labat, whose book he uses as a guide in his own travels through the Caribbean (which result in his 1907 book *Our West Indian Neighbors*), Ober writes:

My first hunt for the bird was in the island of Dominica, which has a mountain about 5000 feet in height; but I did not find it, because, as I was told, it had been exterminated by the manacou, a native possum which had sought it out in its holes and devoured its eggs. Neither was I successful in Guadeloupe...The bird I never saw—or, at least, never knew it if I saw it—was the impelling motive for many a hard climb up the steep sides of those Caribbean volcanoes, and in my search I ascended them all...I passed a night one time on the brim of Saint Eustatia’s perfect crater-cone for the sole purpose of observing the nocturnal sounds, and if possible scenes, as I lay wrapped in my blanket, with the fierce winds whistling around me. I thought I heard the voice of the little devil, in the air above me, and anxiously peered into the darkness, gun a-poise; but no form of bird rewarded my vigil, and in the morning I returned empty handed to the coast. (328)

Ober’s is not the only echo of Père Labat’s concern with the losses the plantation would bring to Martinique and Guadeloupe. In Maryse Condé’s novel *Traversée de la Mangrove* (*Crossing the Mangrove* 1989)—a text that looks at a community’s continued efforts to live in harmony with the rhythms of a life between mangrove and forest—a father speaks to his son of “a time before jealousy and hatred poisoned the world” around them, “before the brutal hand of man had deflowered the trees and the forests of Guadeloupe were bursting with all sorts of birds” (70). Condé’s community is imagined as grounded in the peasantry’s “natural” relationship with the forest, 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). Poignantly, Aristide knew about these birds only 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 pre-plantation time.<sup>6</sup>

The intertextual dialogue between these three writers—Père Labat, Ober, and Condé—is characteristic of how biodiversity concerns have been articulated in the literature of the region. These writers' preoccupation with expressing through writing the threat to endangered species posed by habitat encroachment gives us but a glimpse of a rich vein of similar "conversations" open for further critical exploration. The thematic (p. 348) continuity between earlier writers and contemporary works is a critical element in the development of a regional literature that has always been aware of the fragility of environments that are both finite and easily disrupted. These anxieties about the impact of habitat destruction naturally shift to concerns with the displacement and potential extinction of the living things (flora, fauna, and human beings) dependent on those habitats for their survival. In Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, for example, she bemoans how a "big new hotel ... with its own port of entry" has been built on a bay that "used to have the best wilks [*Cittarium pica*, a West Indian snail] in the world"; their habitat destroyed, she ponders the question of "where did they all go?" (57). Of these more recent texts I want to look at two examples of how they approach issues of extinction—V. S. Naipaul's *The Loss of El Dorado* and Mayra Montero's *In the Palm of Darkness* before moving on to Haiti's Creole pig and its sad extinction tale.

In an essay entitled "V.S. Naipaul and the Interior Expeditions," Sandra Pouchet Paquet argues "that in respect to the way he shapes the history and character of indigenous peoples over a span of some thirty-nine years, Naipaul moves away from the traditional imperial models of cross-cultural exploration he identifies in the travel narratives of Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, and Evelyn Waugh, through a more rigorous imaginative inquiry into history, to something approaching what Wilson Harris might describe as 'an art of compassion' ("Interior of the Novel" 140) that unravels the blocked formations of a colonial relationship" (Paquet n.p.). Her study looks at various texts by Naipaul, teasing out the changing nature of his approach to indigeneity and its disappearance, but I would like to focus here more narrowly on how he uses the disappearance (shall we say "extinction") of the Chaguanes Indians in *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) and his Nobel Prize lecture.

Naipaul narrates his seminal encounter with the history of the Chaguanes, to whom he returns again and again his writings, in the first pages of *The Loss of El Dorado*, where he describes coming across a letter from the King of Spain to the governor of Trinidad dated 12 October 1625 asking for "some information about a certain nation of Indians called Chaguanes, who you say number above one thousand, and are of such bad disposition

that it was they who led the English when they captured the town” (11-12). Intrigued by this moment in which the colony of Trinidad was touched by “history,” he ponders the erasure of these Indians who “acknowledge no master save their own will” (12) but who have vanished from subsequent historical records. He will return to the tale—with slight but important variations in the telling of the story—in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2001:

What the governor did I don't know. I could find no further reference to the Chaguanes in the documents in the Museum....What is true is that the little tribe of over a thousand—who would have been living on both sides of the Gulf of Paria—disappeared so completely that no one in the town of Chaguanas or Chauhan knew anything about them. And the thought came to me in the Museum that I was the first person since 1625 to whom that letter of the king of Spain had a real meaning. And that letter had been dug out of the archives only in 1896 or 1897. A disappearance, and then the silence of centuries.

(*The Loss of El Dorado*, 12; “Nobel Prize Lecture,” n.p.)

(p. 349) In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Naipaul pauses to lament this erasure of the Chaguanes from the consciousness of those who succeeded them in the land they had occupied, referring to them as a “dispossessed” people whose particular relationship to the landscape had been “obliterated”:

The people who had been dispossessed would have had their own kind of agriculture, their own calendar, their own codes, their own sacred sites. They would have understood the Orinoco-fed currents in the Gulf of Paria. Now all their skills and everything else about them had been obliterated.

(“Nobel Prize Lecture,” n.p.)

This obliteration, whose importance is marked by the loss of a specific kind of familiarity with the surrounding landscape and its currents and cycles, separates these “natural” inhabitants from the immigrants who have replaced them. The latter—like the Indian community to which Naipaul belonged—are described as alienated from that landscape, pretending that they had brought “a kind of India with us, which we could, as it were, unroll like a carpet on the flat land” (“Nobel Prize Lecture,” n.p.). With no familiarity with the surrounding landscapes, they are also dispossessed from a land that has been given over to “sugar-cane, estate land up to the Gulf of Paria” and to a soap factory whose pervasive smell erases all other scents.

Naipaul's concern with indigenous erasure—later in his speech he will use the word “extinction”—is emblematic of how writers in the Caribbean imagine postcoloniality in an

environmentally endangered world. Postcolonial theory is, by definition, an optimistic approach to the problems posited by Caribbean history: it assumes recovery from an affliction of sorts, hence the vocabulary of empowerment that it brings to cultural analysis in the region. In a postcolonial state—under certain circumstances, given certain conditions, if some actions can be taken—we can transcend the negative impacts of colonialism; we can redefine our identities, reframe our institutions, empower our people. (This is the approach against which Naipaul rallied with his pessimistic assessment of a West Indies in which nothing was created, which made him the understandable *bête-noire* of postcolonialists.) The narrative of extinction, on the other hand, presents obstacles to this kind of postcolonial thinking, as the silence of absence—as in the disappearance of the Chaguanes—represents a foundational void, which Naipaul fully recognizes in *The Loss of El Dorado* when he writes that the disappearance of the Chaguanes was “unimportant...part of nobody’s story” (12). The fundamental difference between the tale as told in *The Loss of El Dorado* in 1969 and his 2001 Nobel Prize account is that of the transformation of that “unimportant” loss into the “unbearably affecting story” that tells of how

...at certain times aboriginal people came across in canoes from the mainland, walked through the forest in the south of the island, and at a certain spot picked some kind of fruit or made some kind of offering, and then went back across the Gulf of Paria to the sodden estuary of the Orinoco. The rite must have been of enormous importance to survive the upheavals of 400 years, and the extinction of the aborigines in Trinidad. Or perhaps—though Trinidad and Venezuela have a common flora—they had come only to pick a particular kind of fruit. I don’t know. I can’t remember anyone inquiring. And now the memory is all lost; and that sacred site, if it existed, has become common ground.

(“Nobel Prize Lecture,” n.p.)

(p. 350) This tale of the loss of the sacred is—despite its disjointed articulation in the text—a narrative that links the puzzling disappearance of the Chaguanes to the destruction of Trinidad’s primeval forest, an event that deprived nature of the capacity for hierophany—of the power to produce, as Mircea Eliade describes so eloquently in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1961), a manifestation of the sacred through sensory experience. Naipaul, whose focus is primarily historical and not ecological, does not conceive of the elements of his story as a narrative of environmental loss and its consequences. Yet the ecological foundations of this historical tragedy are clearly there to be read in Naipaul’s chronicle of an indigenous community that disappeared from the land after its forest habitats were destroyed to plant sugar cane and which was replaced in turn by an immigrant

population of the dispossessed who can no longer experience (see, feel, smell or taste) any manifestation of the sacred in the surrounding nature.

Naipaul's mourning for the loss of the sacred in a land degraded by colonial exploitation finds an unlikely echo in Mayra Montero's *In the Palm of Darkness*, the Caribbean region's first avowedly environmentalist novel. It narrates the tale of American herpetologist Victor Grigg who, with the aid of his Haitian guide, Thierry Adrien, a devout Vodou practitioner, is on a quest for an elusive and threatened blood frog, *eleutherodactylus sanguineus* or *grenouille du sang*, extinct everywhere but for a mountain near Port-au-Prince. In the volatile and bloody setting of the Haitian mountains Montero uncovers a haunted postcolonial space in the interstices between Griggs scientific perspective and Adrien's animistic Vodou-inspired worldview. Montero uses this binary to unveil how the extinction of species is the direct outcome of an environmental collapse as the forests that were the frogs' habitat disappear. She shows, concomitantly, how the troubled landscape of Haiti—and the very environment on which the Haitian people depend for survival—has decayed precipitously due to colonial exploitation, postcolonial political corruption, violence, institutional terror, and religious turmoil—conditions now exacerbated by the aftermath of the deadly January 2010 earthquake.

In the Caribbean imaginary, Haiti has emerged as despoiled terrain, a warning of the direst consequences facing those Caribbean nations that do not make a concerted effort to reverse ecological degradation and biodiversity collapse. In spaces as small as many Caribbean island-nations, the ecological balance is fragile, the level of vulnerability very high. As a result, the viability of the nation itself and the survival of its people are marked by an unimaginable urgency. Nowhere in the Caribbean is this revealed more heartrendingly than in Haiti. 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, bringing it to the very edge of environmental despair.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, these developments had been already identified in the eighteenth century by Médéric Moreau de St. Mery, who, in *A Topographical, Political Description of St. Domingo*, had already noted the impact of heedless deforestation on Haiti's rain patterns and on the disappearance of once-common fauna. Today, with only 4 percent of the Haitian territory covered in forests, previously fertile fields are now desert-like. Most of the topsoil has been washed to sea, where it has contributed to the destruction (p. 351) of breeding habitats for marine life. The resulting decreases in rainfall have significantly reduced agricultural production.

In *In the Palm of Darkness*, Montero posits the possibility of the extinction—not only of the frogs whose last specimen dies in the final pages of the novel—but of a nation and its people:

You want to know where the frogs go. I cannot say, sir, but let me ask you a question: Where did our fish go? Almost all of them left the sea, and in the forest the wild pigs disappeared, and the migratory ducks, and even the iguanas for eating, they went too. Just take a look at what's left for humans, just take a careful look: You can see the bones pushing out under our skins as if they wanted to escape...to leave behind that weak flesh where they are so battered, to go into hiding someplace else. At times I think, but keep it to myself, I think that one day a man like you will come here, someone who crosses the oceans to look for a couple of frogs, and when I say frogs, I mean any creature, and he will find only a great hill of bones on the shore, a hill higher than the peak of Tête Boeuf. Then he will say to himself, Haiti is finished, God Almighty, those bones are all that remains. (p. 11)<sup>8</sup>

Haiti, scientists tell us, is “on the brink of an era of mass extinctions similar to the time when dinosaurs and many other species suddenly disappeared from Earth” (“Haiti’s Wildlife”). Blair Hedges, a member of a group of biologists engaged in the development of a species-rescue program for Haiti’s endangered frogs, has argued that

...during the next few decades, many Haitian species of plants and animals will become extinct because the forests where they live, which originally covered the entire country, are nearly gone. The decline of frogs in particular, because they are especially vulnerable, is a biological early-warning signal of a dangerously deteriorating environment, just as a dying canary is an early-warning sign of dangerously deteriorating air in a coal mine.... When frogs start disappearing, other species will follow and the Haitian people will suffer, as well, from this environmental catastrophe.

(“Haiti’s Wildlife”)

Montero’s novel envisions precisely that suffering of the Haitian people against which Hedges warns us through the specific links it establishes between the fate of the beleaguered frogs in their dwindling habitats and the possibilities of survival for a population adrift between a despoiled environment and the political brutality of the *tonton macoutes* and their battles for territorial control. Her tale is that of a postcolonial nightmare marked by state corruption, institutionalized brutality and almost casual and senseless violence. Mired in violence, Thierry’s life is as endangered as that of the elusive frog, as Victor comes to understand after he listens to his guide’s own life story:

Thierry sat looking at me and began a sad monologue, it was like a confession, he talked about the man he had stabbed to death and about his entire family. I

realized that he too was a dying species, a trapped animal, a man who was too solitary. (178)

(p. 352) Montero's assessment of Haiti's postcolonial quandary points to colonialism as an irreversible ill, as a force that once unleashed onto the region becomes like a dormant infection—ready to strike at any instance of a weak immune system. It posits a different concern with postcoloniality, one that runs counter to the possibilities of recovery at the heart of postcolonial theories. Haiti—despoiled by colonial greed and prey to a legacy of violence and exploitation—emerges from Montero's narrative as a place where the gods have asked the animals to flee, a space in which a religious faith rooted in nature does not trust itself to be able to continue to sustain life:

They say that Agwé Taroyo, the god of waters, has called the frogs down to the bottom. They say they have seen them leave: Freshwater animals diving into the sea, and the ones that don't have the time or strength to reach the meeting place are digging holes in the ground to hide, or letting themselves die along the way. (95)

The flight of the frogs into the depth of the waters where the ancestors live—their fleeing to the region known *en bas de l'eau* or *anba dlo* in Vodou—signals a retreat to waters that are still capable of the hierophany the land has lost through abuse and mismanagement. As the space from which the power and blessing of the ancestors can be reclaimed for the benefit of the living—as it is done in the *retirer d'en bas d'leau* ceremony performed a year and a day following a person's death—the sea stands in opposition to the deforested mountains that used to shelter the sacred *mapou* trees and the depleted and often abandoned family land that included the *heritaj* where the ancestors are buried. In Montero's rendition—which echoes Naipaul's concerns with the loss of sacred spaces in Trinidad—Agwé claims not only the frogs (among them the last remaining species of the *grenouille du sang*), but also Victor Grigg and Thierry Adrien, lost in the shipwreck of the boat taking them from Jérémie to Port-au-Prince, their bodies never recovered from the shores of Grand Goave, where their spirits await reclamation.

The history of fauna extinctions as recorded in the literature of the Caribbean region chronicles the impact of what Rob Nixon has called “slow violence...a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Hostages to the economic demands of metropolitan centers not always aware of the environmental damage caused by their policies and production expectations, the islands of the Caribbean have experienced successive waves of ecological assault chronicled in fiction and nonfiction alike through countless narratives of extinction. Rob Nixon argues in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) that we need

to rethink “conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound ... and devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effect” (3). The stories I have discussed here belong among those much-needed chronicles of slow violence. I would like to conclude my discussion, however, with the story of the quick extermination of Haiti’s Creole pig, a tale more easily recognized as “violent” and which points to the continued impact of colonialism and new forms of neocolonial oppression on threatened species and the peoples whose very lives depend on them.

(p. 353) The 1982–83 “eradication” of Haiti’s creole pig, which responded to USAID/Haiti fears that an outbreak of swine flu in Hispaniola could spread from the Dominican Republic through Haiti to the United States, has been described by former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide as “a classic parable of globalization” (Aristide). Haiti’s extremely hearty black pigs were “at the heart of the peasant economy,” contributing on the one hand to the preservation of the fertility of the soil while functioning as literal “piggy banks” for the Haitian peasantry, allowing for the accumulation of small savings to pay for weddings, seed, medical emergencies, and children’s schooling. The eradication of the Creole pig was, in Aristide’s words, “a moment of neo-colonial trauma” for Haiti as a nation. The pigs, although not indigenous to the island, had evolved a working ecological accommodation with the landscape since being dropped by Columbus on the island to feed Spanish colonizers. Well adapted to Haiti’s despoiled terrain, sparse vegetation and scarcity of fresh water, the history of their eradication was unique in its effectiveness and devastating impact: “With an efficiency not since seen among development projects, all of the Creole pigs were killed over a period of thirteen months” (Aristide).

The deliberate, forced extinction of the Creole pig brought incalculable loss to Haiti’s already embattled peasantry. It was an extinction that could not easily be withstood by the survival economy that characterizes Haiti’s rural realities. In Aristide’s own assessment,

...in monetary terms Haitian peasants lost \$600 million dollars. There was a 30 percent drop in enrollment in rural schools, there was a dramatic decline in the protein consumption in rural Haiti, a devastating decapitalization of the peasant economy and an incalculable negative impact on Haiti’s soil and agricultural productivity. The Haitian peasantry has not recovered to this day.

(Aristide)

Compounding the irony of the Creole pig calamity was the farce of the United States’ efforts to repopulate the Haitian countryside with “better pigs” from Iowa that “required

clean drinking water (unavailable to 80 percent of the Haitian population), imported feed (costing \$90 a year when the per capita income was about \$130), and special roofed pigpens” (Aristide). Christened *les princes aux quatre pieds*, they were ill suited for the realities of Haiti’s degraded environment and survival economy. As a peasant told Colin Dayan, “they have soft stomachs, delicate feet, and thin skin” (Dayan). Recently, through a joint repopulation effort, Haitian and French agronomists have bred a new variety of pig that closely approximates the environment-suitable characteristics of the extinct Creole pig. The impact on Haiti’s wildlife of the extirpation and reintroduction of pigs is not yet clear.

What is the importance—in my context—of the extinction of the Creole pig? It is one in a long line of past and future extinctions that, like the demise of frogs worldwide, and the aggressive invasion of the Caribbean Sea by lionfish, signal that (environmentally) all is not well with our small corner of the world. In the case of the Haitian Creole pig, however—a planned and efficiently managed eradication of an introduced semi-domestic species—we see the transparency of colonial presuppositions still at work. The possibility of infection coming out of the Caribbean region may have seemed an intolerable (p. 354) risk to a larger and stronger economy such as that of the United States. The potential for infection represented by the pigs, coincidentally, came at a time when Americans feared that the AIDS epidemic had its origin in Haiti—these were the times when AIDS was believed to be caused by the four Hs: homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians. The costs of extinction—in this very quick and neocolonially engineered incident—show a specific type of vulnerability for a population overly dependent on one species for their well-being. It shows, in a fast, “violent” instance, the damage that the slow violence of habitat destruction and species extinctions has and continues to inflict on the Caribbean region.

The loss of the Creole pig, like the vanishing of the Caribbean Monk Seal that opened this discussion and the losses of so many species that writers have chronicled since the fifteenth century—in short, “the disappearance[s] , brought about by natural or unnatural means, of entire species” (Whitty May/June 2007)—are instances of environmental trauma that remains as cautionary tales of what environmental mismanagement has wreaked in Caribbean societies. With them we have lost their natural habitats, their contributions to biodiversity, their specific roles in island ecologies, their quirks and idiosyncrasies, their particular beauty, their capacity for hierophany.<sup>9</sup> As the Haitian peasantry awaits some form of environmental justice that will restore to them their extinct pigs—needed more than ever now, as Haiti struggles to recover from its devastating earthquake—so does the region await environmental reparations, apologies, oil spill and cruise ship garbage cleanups or someone to take responsibility for the lionfish debacle. Some reparation, indeed, for the havoc wreaked on

their ecologies through centuries of exploitative colonialism and its main manifestation—the deforesting plantation and the equally destructive massive tourism development. The Caribbean’s path to environmental justice reveals, indeed, that environmental problems are a manifestation of other, larger problems endemic to culture, society, and economic structures in colonized societies struggling to continue to exist in a globalized world—and so our writers have been telling us, for a few hundred years.

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(p. 358)

## **Notes:**

(1) . The idea of environmental mourning has been discussed very movingly by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands in "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010) and by Scott Slovic in *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (2008).

(2) . For more on the Caribbean's lionfish invasion's threat to other marine species see Freshwater, Wilson, Hines, Parham, Wilbur, Sabaoun, Woodhead, Akins, Purdy, Whitfield, Paris "Mitochondrial Control Region Sequence Analyses Indicate Dispersal from the US East Coast as the Source of the Invasive Indo-Pacific Lionfish *Pterois volitans* in the Bahamas" (2009) and "Lionfish Decimating Other Tropical Fish Populations, Threaten Coral Reefs (2008).

(3) . For more on the environmental health metaphor see Greg Garrard, "Nature Cures? or How to Police Analogies of Personal and Ecological Health," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19:3(Summer 2013): 494–514.

(4) . In "Antilles," as in other writings and interviews on environmental issues in his native St Lucia and the rest of the Caribbean, Walcott proposes the "rootless tree" as emblematic of Caribbean residents (particularly government officials and entrepreneurs) who consistently choose economic development over the preservation of local environments and cultures. The metaphoric possibilities of the notion of rootlessness allows Walcott to engage political, economic, cultural and environmental critiques simultaneously.

(5) . The multilayered nature of Merian’s commentary in *Insects of Surinam* underscores her assessment of the colony as a beleaguered space in which the symbiosis between insects and the plants they feed upon—extended to the relationship between indigenous and African populations and nature—is ruptured by the plantation’s unsustainable approach to the environment. Merian’s binary depiction of the stress between the “natural” symbiotic relationships between insects and plants and the planters’ refusal to engage sustainably with the landscape mirrors the racial and class tensions intrinsic to the plantation system. For a fuller discussion of this rupture see Paravisini-Gebert’s “Maria Sibylla Merian: The Dawn of Field Ecology in the Forests of Suriname, 1699–1701.”

(6) . One wonders if John James Audubon (1785–1851)—that would-be preserver of birds through art—had learned the urgency of recording the existence of threatened birds from the plight of the birds of his childhood in his increasingly deforested native Haiti.

(7) . For an overview of Haiti’s environmental crisis (including an enlightening comparison with the neighboring Dominican Republic), see Jared Diamond’s “One Island, Two Peoples, Two Histories: The Dominican Republic and Haiti,” from his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Penguin, 2011).

(8) . The disappearance of frogs throughout the world is presented by Montero in this novel as a phenomenon beyond the comprehension of both faith (Thierry) and science (Victor). Here, through Thierry’s words, we can see—implicit in his Vodou practitioner’s approach to life and death, magic and rationality—an implicit critique of the Judeo-Christian belief in the subordination of other species to man. Haiti’s endangered species emerge from the text as conscious of the deterioration of their habitats and authorized by the Vodou lwa or spirits to depart before their annihilation is accomplished by humans.

(9) . For in-depth looks at island biogeography, see David Quammen’s *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinction* (1997).

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