

## **Caribbean Environmentalisms: Rediscovering Agrarian Cultures in Endangered Ecologies**

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In his often prickly homage to the city of his birth, *San Juan, ciudad soñada* (San Juan, Dreamed City, 2005), Puerto Rican novelist Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's writes about the rapid and often devastating changes in the island's rural and urban landscape brought about by the shift from an agrarian to a manufacturing and tourism economy ushered by the Estado Libre Asociado (the Commonwealth) in the 1950s. "All the landscapes of my childhood have disappeared," he writes, lamenting the loss of once-familiar landscapes to make way for high-rise office buildings, condominiums for the middle classes, tourist hotels and casinos (3). He mourns the disappearance of the old road from Aguas Buenas to Caguas, "one of the most beautiful on the island, shadowed from one town to the other by a dense canopy of flame trees and jacarandas" before concluding that "the wound on [his] childhood's landscape sends shivers down [his] spine" (4).

Rodríguez Juliá's elegy to this old vanished road, which I remember for the lace-like patterns created on the hot tarmac by the sunlight filtering through leafy trees and the bright-red flowers of the flamboyant tree, reminds us of how, in the Caribbean region, profound and often vertiginous changes ushered by a variety of post 1950s events—the collapse of the sugar

industry, the shift from agrarian to tourism economies, urbanization and industrialization, deforestation and desertification—have turned Antillean geographies into unrecognizable landscapes, bringing some of the islands dangerously close to environmental collapse. The rapid deterioration of the environment in the Caribbean region, which has taken place within the lifetime of many of its residents, has led to a “sense of an ending,” to the apocalyptic dread of a potential ecological disaster that can erase the islands, their peoples, and cultures from the geographies of the *mare nostrum*.

This fear underpins the development of a Caribbean environmentalist philosophy that is inextricably tied to a critique of globalization as the latest expression of the forces of capitalism in whose grip the islands have remained since the Columbian encounter. In the Caribbean region, where post-colonial politics, foreign controlled development, and the struggle for economic survival has for many decades forced environmental concerns out of the mainstream of national discourse, Caribbean peoples have responded to increasing fears of global warming, food insecurity, habitat losses, mangrove destruction, and uncontrolled tourism-related development with eloquent defenses of the fragile ecologies of the islands in the name of the lost (and increasingly mythologized) agrarian nation. Post-colonial environmentalisms of the sort emerging from the Caribbean rest on an understanding of “the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse” (Huggan 702).

In the Caribbean region, the relationship between man and nature was restructured early in post-encounter history by the ecological trauma represented by the establishment of the sugar plantation. Pre-plantation Arawak culture—as described in Spanish chronicles and most vividly in Friar Ramón Pané’s *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* (An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians, 1571)—was dependent on a comparatively simple economy of subsistence agriculture and fishing centered on a symbiotic relationship between religion, culture, politics, and patterns of work and exchange. Although the assumed sustainability of pre-Columbian civilizations is still subject to debate, Pané’s collection of Arawak myths and legends articulates poignantly the quest of a harmonious relationship between man, nature, and the gods that was the foundation of pre-Columbian Caribbean cultures: man worked along with nature to produce the crops and claim the fish needed for the welfare of the community, and this labor was accepted as a pleasing offering by their principal deity, Yocahú, provider of yucca and fish.

This symbiotic (even perhaps sustainable) economy was shattered the very moment that nature became exploitable terrain in European eyes—not because exploitation of natural resources was not known in the region, but due to the marked shift in the scale of such exploitation. The moment Columbus and his men set eyes on the Caribbean signaled the instant the nature began an accelerated and substantially irrevocable decline. Their first

gaze inspired both a celebration of its “amazing,” “virginal” loveliness (a posture that required the textual erasure of native peoples and their environmental cultures) and the earliest assessment of the richness to be exploited. In his letter to Luis de Santangel, Columbus’s greedy eye scans the beautiful horizon, *maravedí* signs dancing before him: he saw rivers that would facilitate the transportation of the precious woods covering the tall mountains. He saw fruits aplenty to feed his men and others to come, he saw mines of the most diverse minerals, fertile lands to plant, deep and protected ports, good clean river water gleaming with gold. The irony of Columbus’s quick assessment of the profitability inherent in this beauty was not lost on his first biographer, Bartolomé de Las Casas, who would comment on how, from its inception, Spanish expansion was dependent on the economic, political, and cultural exploitation of the native populations and new environments. It is not lost on environmentalists who have noted the disappearance of the abundance reported by Columbus who would not be able to recognize the islands if he happened to return today.

Throughout the Caribbean, colonialism’s exploitative expansion found its most efficient form in the economy of the plantation. Caribbean societies, Eric Williams has argued, “were both cause and effect of the emergence of the market economy; an emergence which marked a change of such world historical magnitude, that we all are, without exception still ‘enchanted’ imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality” (Wynter

95). This change was both demographic and ecological. Thousands of African slaves were brought to the new world with the sole aim of making it possible to create relatively efficient (albeit unsustainable) agrarian economies focused on producing a luxury monocrop for the international market in plantations that required the complete transformation of the Caribbean's tropical landscape. The sugar plantation grew at the expense of the dense and moist tropical forests that needed to be cleared to make way for the new profitable crop. This rapid deforestation led to soil depletion, landslides, erosion, and climatic changes that included significant decreases in levels of moisture and rainfall recorded as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Grove 64-70). The resulting environmental degradation was exacerbated in many areas of the Caribbean by ungulate irruptions—the introduction of domestic grazing animals alien to the pre-encounter Caribbean environment—that transformed the cultural and social landscape. Together, these rapid environmental changes brought about an ecological revolution, “an abrupt and qualitative break with the process of environmental and social change that had developed in situ” (Melville 12).

I would argue that a comparable ecological revolution began in earnest with the acceleration of the development of the tourist industry in the late 1950s, a process of “invisible violence” (the term in Rob Nixon's) of a magnitude only equal to that of initial period of plantation development in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In four decades of industrial and tourism

development in the Caribbean, mangroves have become endangered habitats due to unprecedented levels of coastal construction. Former plantations have become golf courses kept brightly green by extensive use of fertilizers, some of which are banned in the United States. Local food production has been literally run aground by cheap low-quality imported food—while most food served to tourist is imported. Fresh water has been rendered undrinkable from fertilizer and pesticide runoffs and sewer facilities inadequate to handle the output of hotels and resorts. The building of ports deep and broad enough to welcome cruise ships has destroyed coral reefs that had played a vital role in the sustainability of marine habitats. Global warming threatens rising sea levels and loss of crucial coastal land mass.

The questionable environmental legacy of the plantation—and of post-plantation autocracies—is evident most poignantly in Haiti, an island nation believed to have long ago breached its carrying capacity. (The concern with carrying capacity—a concept questioned in other contexts--remains relevant in Haiti given the collapse of the nation's production for export and its inability to import sufficient food for its population). The devastation brought upon the Haitian landscape by continued deforestation, desertification, failed tourism development, and the collapse of agro-business amidst governmental corruption, has become the country's most glaring socio-economic and political problem. Haiti's forests, already depleted for lumber to be sold in the international market in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, have in recent decades been

cut down in catastrophic numbers for the charcoal used everywhere for cooking. With forest coverage below 1.5% of the national territory, topsoil has been washed to sea, where it threatens marine habitats. The loss of topsoil—“as much a nonrenewable resource as oil” as Wes Jackson reminds us—has rendered large portions of the Haitian land permanently unproductive, exacerbating already serious levels of food insecurity. Its significantly reduced rates of rainfall have left the country prone to severe drought and a high rate of desertification; its vulnerable position in the path of hurricanes, on the other hand, has intensified the impact of severe rainfall, which in the last decade has caused thousands of deaths from flash floods and disastrous mud slides. Haiti is at the very edge of an environmental collapse that threatens its viability as a nation. The most frequent question prompted by its environmental crisis is whether something can still be done to help the land of Haiti regain its ability to sustain its people. The answer is increasingly a resounding “no” (see Diamond 329-357).

The failure of the Haitian state to address the nation’s rapidly developing environmental crisis contrasts sharply with the sustained focus of Haiti’s writers and intellectuals on the perils of continued deforestation, which is the thematic cornerstone of the Haitian novel. Writers have bemoaned the environmental calamity that has befallen the Haitian people, denounced the practices that led to this catastrophe, and offered inspiration and ideas for solving the nation’s most central problem. It has counseled,

above all, political action against exploitative governments as a path towards environmental safety, focusing on the state's inaction as evidence of the "slow violence" of environmental neglect (see Nixon).

From Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* (1944), a seminal text in the development of the Haitian novel, to Pierre Clitandre's *The Cathedral of the August Heat* (1979), the Haitian novel has been, above all, a chronicle of the nation's unimaginable ecological catastrophe. Roumain brings his hero back to a land parched and dying from a persistent drought caused by acute and unrelenting deforestation and to a village mired in a violent dispute over inheritance of the land and access to water in an increasingly desertified environment. Jacques-Stephen Alexis in *Les Arbres musiciens* (1957), speaks of the trees of Haiti's embattled forests "as a great pipe organ that modulates with a multiple voice . . . each with its own timbre, each pine a pipe of this extraordinary instrument" (qtd. in Benson 108), hoping to endow them with a mythical protection against escalating destruction. Marie Chauvet, in *Amour* (from *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 1968), dissects the forces that led to the ecological revolution produced by deforestation as a factor in Haiti's internal politics and international economic relationships, especially during the 19 years of American Occupation, which lasted from 1915 to 1934. Clitandre's work chronicles the misery and hope of an exploited peasantry seen as one more cheap commodity to exploit locally or export as labor, as peons in the



protracted game of ecological and political mismanagement that has resulted in Haiti's despoiled landscape.

All to little avail. Despite decades of literary denunciation, despite countless foreign interventions and reforestation plans, the Haitian landscape has continued its rapid decline, proving, in the process, that in Haiti, as “throughout the world, environmental hazards have been unequally distributed, with poor people and people of color [the formerly colonized] bearing a greater share of the burden than richer people and white people” (Adamson 1259). Since the Caribbean shares Haiti's history of colonial exploitation and subordinate economic development, the ghost of Haiti haunts the Caribbean environmental imaginary. Its ecological disintegration has become the focal point for meditations on the region's environmental options. It is not surprising, then, that as events have proven convincingly to the world that Haiti's ills could not be cured through foreign aid, investment, or technology—that it would take more than a democracy and a change in leadership to save the nation—we have witnessed growing levels of popular engagement in local environmental movements elsewhere in the Caribbean islands, many of them led by writers, artists, and musicians ready to use their local fame and reputation in the service of stemming the tide of environmental degradation in their home nations.

The debate over solutions to the region's environmental dilemma is a complex one, however, given that many of the causes of local environmental

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

efforts is that of a return to an often-imagined prior sense of national identity rooted in an agrarian economy that is the pre-requisite for an environmentally sustainable national wholeness. Let me elaborate.

The nostalgia for lost landscapes of which Rodríguez Juliá writes in *San Juan, ciudad soñada* has led to a number of landscape restoration projects throughout the Caribbean, most of them linked to eco-tourism or environmental education ventures. The restoration of landscapes and habitats of the pre-industrial/tourist development period in the Caribbean has been of particular importance in the islands that remain in close political relations with former colonizing powers, such as Puerto Rico and the French departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe. These are islands where the United States and France, through direct state investments in industrial, tourism, and infrastructure development, have supported relatively high standards of living and high levels of consumerism. They are also islands with relatively active anti-colonial/pro-independence movements that often rely on nostalgia for the post-plantation agrarian past as the foundation of alternative notions of the nation. The Creolité movement, for example, has made the *bétonisation* (cementification) of Martinique a rallying cry in their appeals for political support for the pro-independence cause. A local landscape restoration project in the northern Martinique community of Ajoupa-Bouillon, Les Ombrages, not only includes a Creole garden—a laboratory for the reintroduction, preservation, and display of a wide range of

herbs and spices, many of them with curative properties, brought from all part of the world and cultivated locally by slaves—but is also the site for the reintroduction of indigenous parrots that were eradicated from the zone through intense poaching and land development.

A similar habitat restoration project in Ciales, Puerto Rico—associated with the “agrarian” poetry of noted *independentista* writer Juan Antonio Corretjer (1908-1985)—is built on the same set of environmental values and stems from a similar political foundation. The project, located in near a small town in Puerto Rico’s central mountain range, was inspired by Corretjer’s environmental activism and poetry. The poet, long known for his *nacionalista* political beliefs and for his celebration of the richness and diversity of Puerto Rico’s mountain ecology and history of subsistence agriculture, wrote of his delight at entering “the moist fields with their crisp grassy greenness/through which the river traces its sinuous geometry” and of penetrating forest groves where he could rub against the bark of the trees and “inhale the sacred smoke/that makes the mouth capable of prophecy” (Corretjer, “Pared de la soledad” and “Yerba bruja”). His environmental activism, rooted in counterbalancing the slow violence that had been perpetrated on the environment by American agricultural corporations, had focused on the impact of agro-business on the island’s interior. In essays and interviews he decried “the overwhelming encroachment of concrete and the use of poisonous chemicals [insecticides and synthetic fertilizers] in Puerto

Rican farming” (Ruiz Marrero) that had led not only to massive deforestation in the interior, but also to the disappearance of bird, lizard, and butterfly species that had been plentiful in the landscape of his youth and young adulthood. Habitat loss was the most radical impact of rapid urbanization in San Juan’s metropolitan area, and concern for vanishing species was shared by Corretjer and fellow writer Enrique Laguerre, both of whose work is associated with rural culture in Puerto Rico.

By the end of his life, Corretjer’s beloved “greenblack highlands,” especially the lands through which flows the Encantado River with its grand cascades and crystalline pools—the inspiration for many of his poems—had been severely deforested to allow for the intensive cultivation of coffee. Land and water had been contaminated by insecticides and fertilizers. In an ambitious project of habitat restoration, the former plantation is now being restored to its former “complex, healthy and productive ecosystem” by friends and neighbors of the late poet, “using Corretjer’s poetry in combination with the most advanced concepts of ecological farming and environmental protection” (Ruiz Marrero). Now known as Corretjer’s Forest, the lands have been planted “with the trees mentioned in Corretjer’s poetry, and with numerous native species”—citrus trees, teak, cedar, royal palms, star apples, guava and guamo trees. The aim of the restoration is that of returning the landscape to one the poet would have recognized, and its success has been measured in part by the return of the birds and insects whose absence

Corretjer himself had noted with dismay. "The singing bees are already back, we had not seen them for a long time," explains the former coffee planter whose friendship with the poet spearheaded the project, "the *sanpedritos*, which are like miniature parrots and only live in caves, had gone, but since we stopped using chemicals they are back. Once again we can hear the *múcaros* at night" (Ruiz Marrero). The project reflects a shift (also observed elsewhere) towards "focusing conservation strategies on the restoration of habitat, and not simply on its protection" (Colston 251). It also intends to serve as a center for the education of young students in the values and rewards of returning to pre-industrial agrarian spaces as places of practical instruction in the need for achieving food security and reconfiguring the idea of the nation as rooted in the principles Corretjer's poetry addressed.

The restoration of the rural setting loved by Corretjer is designed upon environmental principles that acknowledge the power of certain spaces in the national imaginary. The defense of these spaces as "sacred" to the wholeness of the nation endows them with special significance when they are threatened by development, as was the case in St. Lucia when the Hilton chain was given permission by the state to build the Hilton Jalousie Plantation Resort in the valley sloping down to the sea between the Pitons, the two great volcanic cones on the west coast of St. Lucia—"one of the great landscapes of the Caribbean" (Pattullo 1) and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Echoing Enrique Laguerre's notion of the environment as "the nation's most

valuable patrimony,” St. Lucian poet and Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott joined in vocal opposition to the project on the grounds that The Pitons was undeniably a natural space of great national significance where a hotel would be “aesthetically like a wound” (Handley 129). In an interview with George B. Handley, he explained his opposition to the Jalousie scheme as having derived from his perception of the Pitons as a “sacred space,” a “primal site” that emanates power and which, having become the object of the people’s devotion, should have remained inviolable (128). The building of a resort in such a space was tantamount to a “blasphemy.” Writing in a local paper, Walcott argued that “to sell any part of the Pitons is to sell the whole idea and body of the Pitons, to sell a metaphor, to make a fast buck off a shrine” (qtd. in Pattullo 4). He equated the economic arguments in favor of the resort—that it would provide extra income and jobs—to proposing building “a casino in the Vatican” or a “take-away concession inside Stonehenge” (qtd. in Pattullo 4). The loss of such a pristine space was the loss of a place that could help people regain a feeling of “a beginning, a restituting of Adamic principles” (Handley 131).

The development of the Jalousie resort—which opened in 1994—is emblematic of the tensions that arise when different notions of what constitutes the nation and of how to exploit its resources are pitted against each other. As a site of national significance that was also a prime locale for potential tourist development, the Pitons became the focus of struggle

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

For Walcott, the relinquishing of “sacred spaces” like that of the Pitons to the pressures of development for tourism—and the risk it poses to St.



Lucian local food production--threats the very survival of Caribbean peoples. In "Antilles," he likens the Caribbean native to the sea almond or the spice laurel—"trees who sweat, and whose bark is filmed with salt"—threatened by "rootless trees in suits . . . signing favorable tax breaks with entrepreneurs, poisoning the sea almond and the spice laurel of the mountains to their roots" ("Antilles" 83). "A morning could come," Walcott warns, "in which governments might ask what happened not merely to the forests and the bays but to a whole people ("Antilles" 83). It is a sentiment echoed by Enrique Laguerre, one Puerto Rico's most respected 20th-century novelist, a self-described "ecological humanist," dedicated the last decade of his long life (he died just short of his 100th birthday in 2005) to the struggle against the destruction of forests and mangroves to make way for broader highways, luxury hotels, and middle-class housing developments. He used his prominence as a writer as a platform from which to argue that Puerto Rico had followed a very shortsighted vision of socioeconomic development that had sacrificed the environment to the pressures of urban sprawl and consumerism. In one of his last interviews he spoke of dreaming "of a Puerto Rico that known how to contain a rampant urban growth . . . that precludes a sad fate for future generations" (Alegre Barrios). True nationalism, he argued, had to be linked to a respect for the geographical spaces that were the nation's most valuable patrimony.

A salient feature of the emerging literary environmentalism—as Laguerre and Walcott’s involvement and Corretjer’s influence indicates—is an understanding that struggles in the Caribbean, as they are in poor and dependent societies around the world, are ultimately about environmental justice for the peoples of the region. First world environmental solutions that speak of reduced consumption and wilderness preservation, for example, assume options that are not open to Caribbean peoples in small post-colonial economies with few resources other than fertile soil and a highly coveted natural beauty whose exploitation they cannot always control. Their struggles are often as much against outside forces as they are about the tensions between environmentally-sound options and a livelihood. These tensions often translate into local political struggles as governments seek income-bearing investments from abroad to produce employment and profit. Huggan identifies the “ambivalent role of the post-independence state in brokering national economic development” as a crucial factor in the struggle for environmental justice while pointing to “the value of imaginative writing”—to which I would add artistic creativity in general—“as a site of discursive resistance to authoritarian attitudes and practices that not only disrupt specific human individuals and societies, but might also be seen as posing a threat to the entire ‘ecosphere’ and its network of interdependent ‘biotic communities’” (Huggan 703).

I would like to look here more closely at two examples of environmental struggles in the Caribbean in which the idea of an agrarian sustainability based on achieving local food security and the restoration of lost farms has been a sustained theme—those of the Creolité movement’s struggle against the *bétonisation* (cementification) of Martinique and Guadeloupe and the 2001-2003 campaign against the continued bombardment of the small island of Vieques (a part of the territory of Puerto Rico). In both cases, one of the dimensions of the environmental struggle has focused on reimagining the local space as a sustainable agrarian community.

In *Landscape and Memory: Martinican Land-People-History*, a documentary by Renée Gosson and Eric Faden, three of Martinique’s most salient contemporary intellectuals—Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau—argue for an understanding of the island’s marked environmental degradation as the most disturbing result of France’s continued political control—as the disturbing by-product of enduring colonialism. The anxiety over the sustainability of Martinique’s physical territory allows these three proponents of the Creolité movement to bridge the gap between the local specificity of their movement’s concerns and the increasing interconnectedness brought about by intensifying globalization about which their colleague Edouard Glissant writes in his *Poetics of Relation*. In *Landscape and Memory*, Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé identify the environmental problems facing Martinique as those same issues

confronting the rest of the archipelago: food insecurity, since Martinique produces only 2% of the food its population consumes; the increasing *bétonization* (cementification) of the land as more land is taken away from agriculture for the building of hotels, supermarkets, shopping centers, and other infrastructure typical of tourism development; the pollution of land and rivers with fertilizers and insecticides used for agro-businesses on the island; the production of larger quantities of garbage than the island landfills can reasonably absorb; the destruction of mangroves and of the wildlife they support from a failure to understand their uniqueness as a “cradle of life”; and the disconnection of the Martinican population from its land and culture as French television and French-owned media control access to information and entertainment and promote consumer behaviors that are incompatible with local resources.

Both Chamoiseau and Glissant share Walcott’s sense of a potential apocalypse if the region cannot resolve its environmental dilemmas and move to a sustainability only possible with a greater degree of local political and economic control over land resources and environmental management. Despite the clear differences in their approach to Martinique’s relationship to the global, both writers agree on the importance of activism as a path to environmental security. In his *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant, although proclaiming his belief in “the future of little countries,” finds in “the politics of

ecology” the best protection “for populations that are decimated or threatened with disappearance as a people” (Glissant 125, 146).

Chamoiseau, in his turn, writes in *Écrire en pays dominé* of “the difficulty of writing in and about Martinique when what constitutes the island physically and, more importantly, in the realm of the imagination is threatened with extinction” (Watts, “Toutes...,” 114). A “cultural ecologist” (Gallagher) separated from Glissant by “a desire for some measure of control over the cultural and economic commerce between Martinique and the rest of the world” (Watts, “Wounds...,” 125), Chamoiseau does not only live a life of multifarious activism in Martinique, which has the environment as a principal focus, but has dedicated his third and most recent novel, *Biblique des derniers gestes* to the recreation of a life of environmental activism focused on access to water in Martinique. In the novel, Chamoiseau seeks to give life to ideas he had expressed often in connection to his participation in groups like ASSAUPAMAR, the Association for the Protection of the Martinican Patrimony, an environmental group particularly concerned with agricultural issues, most notably with the increasing declassification of agricultural lands to give way for the construction of shopping malls and gas stations. This declassification, according to Raphaël Confiant, threatens “our economic survival” and leaves “our very food autonomy endangered” (Gosson 144). The concern about food supplies is a particularly serious one in Martinique, which has only a week’s worth of food reserves and where the

panic occasioned by the gap in the flow of food supplies caused by the revolts in France in 1968 is still vividly remembered.

Both Chamoiseau and Confiant trust to greater local political autonomy in the restoration and reorganization of land and water supplies as a necessary step towards an environmental balance that ultimately rests on creating a strong agrarian sector devoted to the cultivation of local foods for the local market. Chamoiseau uses his novel *Biblique...*, which has been described by Richard Watts as “an impassioned rant against ecological degradation,” to ponder how the island’s status between colonization and independence complicates environmental issues, particularly those related to control over resources such as land and water. Like land, in an island that is not politically autonomous and has become a “privileged site for the fulfillment of metropolitan fantasies of vacations in paradise, “water is a local commodity” access to which has become “a global issue” (Watts 900). Ultimately, for Chamoiseau as for Confiant, the development of a sustainable agrarian nation appears as the only solution to an economic impasse in which Martinique has only an “Économie-Prétexte” that subsists only on French state subsidies—a pretense, as Confiant has argued, “to give the appearance of an economy, that there are people who go to work, etc., but in reality, our country has been, and is, economically ruined” (Gosson 145).

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

The use of Vieques as an area for target practice for the US Navy, which had been going on continuously since the 1940s despite continued local protests, was challenged by the larger Puerto Rican community through a campaign of civil disobedience following the death in 1999 of a local man, David Sanes Rodríguez, killed by an errant bomb. At the heart of the protest were the expropriation of land from local residents, the environmental impact of weapons testing, which had been linked by epidemiologists to cancer and other ailments linked to exposure to ordnance and contaminants, and the closing of large portions of the islands to farming and other activities that could contribute to sustainable development. Over the years, the EPA had cited the Navy for 102 violations of water quality standards on Vieques, identifying excessive concentrations of such chemicals as cyanide and

cadmium in the coastal waters near the bombing range. The people of Vieques are plagued by unusually high levels of lung, heart, and liver disease, asthma, diabetes, lupus, anxiety, and depression. These are believed to stem from possibly irreparable damages to the environment, which include contamination of the surrounding waters and the poisoning of numerous species that have formed the basis for the local diet for decades. By 1999 it had been amply demonstrated that the Navy's presence threatened the continued existence of the flora, fauna, and people of the island.

The multi-pronged approach of the campaign against the Navy in Vieques included an environmentally focused movement centered on the restoration of the land to cultivation whose articulation was left primarily in the hands of writers, artists, and musicians. From the early efforts of AU+MA (Acción Urgente Mail Art) Collective, whose project "Postcards for Vieques" (June 2000) called for the "bombardment" of the White House with creative postcards asking for "Peace for Vieques" to the "Song for Vieques" project, the call for solidarity with the people of Vieques rested on their depiction as displaced farmers eager for the return of their cultivable lands and the resumption of their "natural" agrarian lives. The people of Vieques were systematically described as "a farming community" throughout the campaign, despite the fact that the Navy occupied most of the lands that had previously been farmed and the farming population left was minuscule (in 1942 the Navy had expropriated 26,000 of Vieques' 33,000 acres). This



depiction effectively set aside the arguments proposed by the Navy and its supporters that behind the struggle to end the target practice was a desire to capitalize on the high value of coastal lands to the construction and tourists markets in the region. The efforts of artists involved in the “I Believe in Vieques” project (August 28, 2000) had a similar thematic focus—the fundamental importance of returning the land to the local population, of reaching an agreement with the Navy for thorough decontamination, and of establishing a plan for sustainable economic development based on the creation of small farms and eco-tourism. The artists participating in the project, developed with the support of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques and Peace and Justice Camp of Vieques, entered lands restricted by the Navy in an act of civil disobedience to produce a “human mural” recreating the landscape of the “Isla Nena” (the Baby Island, as Vieques is often called) and proclaiming how “from the esthetic point of view the landscape has been, and will be a vital source of inspiration of artistic creation” (<http://www.peacehost.net/Vieques/latest.html>). A second group displayed its support from outside the restricted zone through a second “human mural,” this one a recreation of Picasso’s famous anti-war painting Guernica.

One of the most effective contributions to the struggle against the Navy’s continued bombing, measured in terms of its broad international reach and enthusiastic reception, was “Canción para Vieques” (Song for

Vieques), an ambitious musical project initiated in mid-2001 by Tito Auger, lead singer for the Puerto Rican group Fiel a la Vega. Inspired by projects like Band Aid ("Do They Know It's Christmas?/Feed The World"), where artists gathered to combat hunger in Ethiopia, USA for Africa ("We Are The World"), Live Aid, and Artists United Against Apartheid ("Sun City"), the project was linked to other agrarian-focused relief efforts. Auger's "Canción para Vieques" is a six-minute music video of political and environmental support featuring a stellar cast of international music stars that included Ruben Blades, Olga Tañón, Gilberto Santa Rosa, Lucecita Benítez, Alberto Cortez, Danny Rivera, the late Tony Croatto, and many of the stars of the Nueva Trova, like Roy Brown, Antonio Cabán Vale ("El Topo"), Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Mercedes Sosa, and Joan Manuel Serrat. "Canción para Vieques" uses the same lyrical format of "We Are the World," which builds in intensity and dramatic effect as the song moves to its climax. This crescendo is accompanied by images that include a variety of seascapes displaying the small island's natural beauty, shots of fishermen that remind us of the villagers' "traditional" occupation, crowd scenes from some of the many demonstrations in solidarity with the people of Vieques, white crosses standing on a hilltop cemetery as a reminder of the many deaths linked to the island's polluted environment, the word "peace" (paz) written across a sandy beach, and repeated images of children and the elderly looking hopefully towards the camera as the chorus sings of the ultimate triumph of

their hopes for a future without the Navy's presence. The environmental foundation of the renewed campaign to stop the bombardments is addressed directly by the singers in the third of nine stanza: "Sixty years of raining/Uranium and ammunition/Of cleaning windows dirty with gunpowder/Waiting for cancer to kick in." The environmental topic is underscored through multiple reiterations of the verb "proteger" (to protect), particularly in the final verses, which express, through an increasingly dramatic arrangement, the notion of sustainability—the obligation of those living in the present to safeguard the environment for generations to follow.

The emphasis of these projects on the restoration of an agrarian community to its lands and its roots was echoed throughout all aspects of the campaign against the Navy in Vieques and was instrumental in garnering international support for the movement. It was, nonetheless, based on a community constructed, rather than imagined, from symbols of national identity invoked by both the left and the right in Puerto Rican political and intellectual life, chief among them that of the *jíbaro* or subsistence farmer from the island's interior who came to represent, as José Pedreira phrased it, the "stadiest branch" of the tree of Puerto Rico's society (see Guerra 74). As José Luis González has argued, Puerto Rican intellectuals who lament the disappearance of an agrarian past in which the homegrown *hacendado* class controlled the nation's political and economic destiny, do so by "consciously creating an ideology of things past and gone, i.e., *jibarismo* or cult of the

jíbaro, to oppose the imagined virtues of an idealized past to the real or imagined evils of a present, characterized (among other things) by the destruction of many of the traditional values of a now marginalized creole bourgeoisie” (qtd in Guerra 67). Hence the recasting of the people of Vieques as *jíbaros-manqués*, as representatives of a constructed collectivity whose victory over the Navy would uphold the quest for sovereignty of the unfulfilled nation.

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

Indeed, who the farmers of the sustainable agrarian societies of the Caribbean region imagined by environmentalists will be is less crucial a question than whether the land on which that sustainability will depend has retained its fertility despite the slow violence to which the islands have been subjected through centuries of unsustainable colonial exploitation. Haiti's despoiled land, as we have come to see, has lost its potential for productivity with the devastating loss of its topsoil. The vision of a post-Navy Vieques constructed during the campaign against the bombing, with its focus on decontamination, restoring public health, and fostering the sustainable development in the island, responded to the quasi-utopian aim of environmental justice in which happy farmers would return to their "natural" role in agrarian production.

Ironically, what was transformative about the successful Vieques struggle—in May 2003 the Navy withdrew from Vieques—was the ultimate defeat of the agrarian project. The lands held previously under US Navy control were not returned to the people of Vieques but were instead designated a wildlife reserve under the control of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and remain closed to the local population. The land in Vieques, as subsequent studies have demonstrated, is toxic, too contaminated for use without a costly cleanup project that may take years and still not result in soil suitable for agricultural use. The land's high level of toxicity renders the political victory meaningless, at least in so far as the aim of the protests was

to restore/create a sustainable agrarian space. Like the land of Haiti, the potentially agrarian spaces of Vieques may never be suitable for cultivation. A study released on October 2008 found “dangerous levels of toxic metals in produce grown on the island,” as much as 20 times the acceptable levels of lead and cadmium. The findings underscore the illusive foundations of the agrarian project that was so prominent in the environmentalist arguments of the people of Vieques and the many activists who worked with them in solidarity.

The loss of what Laguerre called an island’s “most valuable territory”—the beauty and fertility of its land—is to Caribbean territories like that of Vieques more than just a pretext for poetic nostalgia, for bemoaning, like Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá does, the loss of childhood landscapes that sends shivers down his spine. It reminds us of the vulnerability of small island nations whose ability to restore and sustain their environments seems suspended between local action and global powers. Hence the growing apocalyptic strain in the region’s environmental thought, born of fears of that day of which Walcott speaks in which we may have to ask what happened not only to the trees or the land, but to the region’s people.

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