

## I

## Endangered Species

## Caribbean Ecology and the Discourse of the Nation

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Decimation from the aruac downwards is the blasted root of Antillean history, and the benign blight that is tourism can infect all those island nations, not gradually, but with imperceptible speed, until each rock is whitened by the guano of white-winged hotels, the arc and descent of progress.

Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory"

A line in Puerto Rican novelist Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's recent book of cantankerous nostalgia, *San Juan, ciudad soñada*, (*San Juan, dreamed city*) provides the point of departure for this essay. "All the landscapes of my childhood have disappeared," he writes, lamenting how familiar landscapes—both rural and urban—have vanished before his eyes in a rapidly developing, overpopulated, resort-intensive Puerto Rico (3). He mourns, for example, 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" (3). "The wound on my childhood landscape," he concludes, "sends shivers down my spine" (4). His lament prompts a question about the impact of disappearing landscapes on our perception of our personal and national histories, one that Derek Walcott addressed with poignant urgency in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, fearing the loss of those beloved spaces of St. Lucia that are neither hallowed nor invested with any significance, not even that of memory: "How quickly it could all disappear! And how it is beginning to drive us further into where we hope are impenetrable places, green secrets at the end of bad

roads, headlands where the next view is not of a hotel but of some long beach without a figure and the hanging question of some fisherman's smoke at its far end" (1998, 83).

From the earliest days of the European conquest and colonization of the Caribbean region, the identification with nature—with the deeply green hills shooting out of the sea, the lofty mountains draped with lush vegetation, the translucent azure seas—has played a salient role in the development of nationhood and nationalism. From poem to national anthem, singing to the beauty of the landscape and celebrating the most distinctive geographical features of the various islands have helped to foment an emotional link between the land and the people who inhabit it, thus helping to create and preserve the idea of "the nation" in the collective imagination. The people of Dominica sing in their national anthem to their "isle of beauty . . . the isle of splendor . . . so sweet and fair" that "all must surely gaze in wonder at thy gifts so rich and rare." St. Lucians, in turn, sing to their "land of beaches, hills and valleys, fairest isle of all the earth," celebrating the end of the days "when nations battled for this Helen of the West."

Recent ecological studies, such as Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* (1995) and Polly Pattullo's *Last Resorts* (1996/2004), have underscored the environmental revolution that was the result of conquest and colonization. The history of environmental degradation, from the deforestation needed for the development of the plantation economy in the seventeenth century to the destruction of fragile marine habitats for the construction of all-inclusive resorts and cruise ship ports in the twenty-first, has brought the relationship between natural landscape and nationhood to a crisis point. As Pattullo writes of the Caribbean at the beginning of the twenty-first century, "In a generation, land and seascapes have been transformed: the bays where once local fishermen pulled in their seine nets, where villagers went for a sea bath or where colonies of birds nested in mangrove stands now provide for the very different needs of tourists" (2004, 131). Given the ecological degradation demanded by rapidly accelerating tourism development, can a sense of nationhood and a national culture built partly on the celebration of unparalleled natural beauty emerge unscathed from the destruction of the landscape that served as their foundation?

I would like here to trace the impact of the discourse of environmentalism and ecological conservation on the changing interpretation of the links between nature and nationhood as seen through some examples of Carib-

bean literature. I look briefly at how profound and often vertiginous changes in the environment brought about by industrialization and tourism-related development have turned the geographies of the Antilles into unrecognizable landscapes, creating voids where the symbols of nationhood used to stand. In *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid 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 in the world, but where did they all go?” (57). It is the same hotel on whose beaches the locals are not allowed, and she fears that “soon the best beaches in Antigua will be closed to Antiguan” (58). Her concerns are echoed by Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé of the Créolité movement in Martinique and Guadeloupe, who in the documentary *Landscape and Memory* deplore the “cementification” of their islands (Gosson and Faden) and the disappearance of what Chamoiseau has described as the Creole neighborhoods that traditionally limited “the damage caused by sudden periods of massive urbanization” and tourism development and perpetuated “the environmentally friendly cultural practices of Martinique’s rural past” (Prieto 242). The growing efforts of Caribbean writers to link imperialism and political chaos to environmental degradation, to mark the absence of formerly recognizable geographical spaces, to chronicle how and why they have disappeared, or to engage audiences about the need to preserve endangered species speak both to a continuation of the tradition of linking nature to nationhood and to a recognition that that link is not sustainable without concerted political action to preserve our natural landscapes. Are local governments, in their rush to bring employment and modernization to their islands, destroying the very nature that brings tourists to visit, risking leaving the islands despoiled of their beauty and filled with the unmanageable garbage of tourist consumerism, their fragile landscapes unrecognizable? In an environmental conundrum in which “global has become the scale du jour” and national concerns are seen as “increasingly passé” (R. White, 980), how can the Caribbean islands struggle to protect their environments in the name of the nation?

In the Caribbean region, the relationship between man and nature was determined 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 simple economy of subsistence agriculture and fishing centered on “a harmonious relation-

ship between religion, culture, politics, and patterns of work and exchange” (Paravisini-Gebert 2004, 670). Although the assumed sustainability of pre-Columbian civilizations is still subject to debate, Pané’s collection of Arawak myths and legends articulates poignantly the symbiotic 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, the provider of yucca and fish.

This symbiotic relationship was shattered the very moment that nature became landscape in European eyes. The moment Columbus and his men set eyes on the Caribbean signaled the instant the landscape began an irrevocable and speedy 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:

In it, there are many havens on the sea-coast, incomparable with any others I know in Christendom; and plenty of rivers so good and great that it is a marvel. The lands thereof are high, and in it are very many ranges of hills, and most lofty mountains . . . and full of trees of a thousand kinds . . . since I saw them as green and as beautiful as they are in Spain during May. And some of them were in flower, some in fruit, some in another stage according to their kind. . . . There are wonderful pine-groves, and very large plains of verdure, and there is honey, and many kinds of birds, and many various fruits. In the earth there are many mines of metals; and there is a population of incalculable numbers. Española is a marvel; the mountains and hills, and plains, and fields, and the soil, so beautiful and rich for planting and sowing, for breeding cattle of all sorts, for building of towns and villages. There could be no believing, without seeing, such harbours as are here, as

well as the many and great rivers, and excellent waters, most of which contain gold. (Columbus, 11)

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.

Throughout the Caribbean, this 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" (paraphrased in Wyster, 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 produce a luxury crop 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 seventeenth 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). It is often said that Dominica, whose dizzying cliffs and difficult terrain made plantation development nearly impossible and which, therefore, remains covered in verdant rain forests, is the only island Columbus would recognize from his encounter. It is, significantly, the only one that still retains a substantial Carib population living in an autonomous territory.

The history of how the dramatic changes undergone by the Caribbean landscapes were recorded in memoirs and other proto-literary writings between Columbus's letter and the development of Caribbean literatures re-

mains to be written. A brief example, taken from a foundational text from nineteenth-century Puerto Rican literature, however, can illustrate how intricately connected was the identification with nature to the process of national formation. In José Gautier Benítez's poem "Puerto Rico" (1846), the most lyrical and exalted of celebrations of the beauty and sweetness of the Puerto Rican land and landscape, required reading in every Puerto Rican classroom, the young poet writes from the vantage point of the ship that takes him away to Spain, describing the landscape as it disappears in the distance:

There is . . . sugar cane on the fertile savannah,  
a lake of honey rippling in the breeze,  
while its spume, the gentle *guajana*  
sways in the air like white gossamer plumes,  
and on the broad slopes of your mountains  
crowned by cedar and mahogany,  
the coffee trees boast their tender garlands  
while their sturdy boughs bow to the earth,  
their bouquets of carmine and emerald. (6, my translation)

This landscape of identification, the invitation to celebrate—to lift to the category of national symbol—the glories of the *guajana*, the undoubtedly beautiful flower of the sugar cane plant, amounts to a celebration of the plantation, of a landscape that has already undergone an ecological revolution and is far from the virginal territory of Columbus's description. As a poem to "nature," it also begs the question of whether the cane field can be a landscape of national recognition for all Puerto Ricans; could a slave, or later an exploited peasant, wax lyrical about the beauties of the cane field? Or are these landscapes that echo a vision of the nation that does not include slaves or peasants?

I use the example of Gautier Benítez's "Puerto Rico," however briefly, because the poem is so closely linked to the Puerto Rican process of national formation, and because it maintains its relevance as a foundational text through its prescribed reading in the local school system and its never-ending recitations in school events. It stirs echoes of Jamaica Kincaid's bitterly narrated episodes of endless recitations of William Wordsworth's poem on daffodils in *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), except that unlike the British poet, Gautier Benítez was incontrovertibly a Creole. The problems of the text are exacerbated when subjected to a reading that asks questions about

the role of the physical setting in a literary text, the consistency of the values expressed in the text with ecological wisdom, how the metaphors of the land reveal the way it has been treated, and, more fundamentally in this text, how the text articulates the people's relationship to the natural world. The text of "Puerto Rico" celebrates a landscape that can only be beautiful to a very small segment of the population and posits, not surprisingly, a defense of Spanish colonization and of the Creole elite and a reminder to the masses that they must be placid and tranquil, restful and bountiful like the island, if they are to be good Puerto Ricans.

Rosario Ferré, writing from a comparable vantage point in her novella *Sweet Diamond Dust* (1988), chooses the garden, not the cane field, as "a landscape of nostalgia for a declining Hispanic aristocracy" (Lynch, 112); but her conception of the people's relationship to the landscape is just as class-bound and plantation centered:

Guamani's main crop has always been sugarcane, and the townspeople lived from the bustling commerce produced around half a dozen small sugar mills that had sprung up around it during the nineteenth century. But cane sugar was not the only dry staple they traded in. From our orchards and vegetable patches at the time there grew . . . exuberant profusions of fruits and vegetables . . . the claret-red yautia as well as the paled, sherried golden one . . . the tumultuous tom tom taro roots, brought by African slaves on the wailing ships of death . . . the poisonous, treacherous cassava streaked with purple orchid's veins, which the Tainos and the African slaves used to drink when they were about to be tortured by the Spaniards. . . . (Ferré, 5)

As Barbara Deutsch Lynch argues, "Ferré's baroque description captures in a detached and ironic way the garden's productivity, its sheer biodiversity, and the cultural diversity that went into its creation . . . to produce a diverse array of pleasures for the self-made landed elite of the Spanish colony" (112). It is deeply ironic, then, that Ferré's privileged garden space is that of the provision grounds where slaves were allowed to produce food for their own consumption or to sell at market. What Lynch calls, in her discussion of *Sweet Diamond Dust*, Ferré's "environmental nationalism" echoes Gautier Benítez's celebration of the cane land and the *guajana* as the embodiments of the nation. They are both texts by writers who, although separated by a century, "lament the disappearance of the garden with the advance of

industrial sugar production and their own marginalization as a [planter] class" (114). Ferré's Arcadia, "adorned" and "embellished" by the toil and labor of the black and mulatto masses, assumes as "natural" a relationship to the environment rooted in structures of class and race institutionalized by colonialism.

These institutions and their approach to the environment remain viable despite the collapse of the plantation economy in mid-twentieth-century Puerto Rico and the advent of tourism as one of the pillars that sustains the new urban-centered economy. *Felices días, tío Sergio* (1986; *Happy Days, Uncle Sergio*, 1994) by Magali García Ramis, that most urban of contemporary Puerto Rican novels, chronicles the violent deforestation and digging into the entrails of the land—into the blood-red mud of the fertile valley surrounding the "área metropolitana"—to build a modern San Juan in the 1960s. García Ramis had no intention of writing a novel of ecocritical dimensions, but her book is perhaps the most eloquent revelation of the destruction of natural landscapes necessary for the expansion of San Juan; her characters celebrate the digging into the land to build a new airport, the carving out of a water reservoir, the new *urbanizaciones*, roads, *autopistas*, hotels, and resorts—all developments that destroy Rodríguez Juliá's beloved landscapes, forcing him to seek refuge in landscapes of the mind that stand for the changing nation. The loss of natural and urban signposts pushes Puerto Ricans into a dynamic relationship with their geography, constantly threatened by anyone with a few cinder blocks and a bag of cement.

*Felices días, tío Sergio* chronicles but does not question the priority of modernization and urbanization over environmental conservation. Set against the historical background of Operation Bootstrap during the 1950s and 1960s, the novel, from its professional middle-class perspective, exults in the implicit modernity exemplified by the national project of Governor Luis Muñoz Marín and his Partido Popular Democrático. The project, which involved the building of extensive facilities for tourism, was accompanied by a broad program of infrastructure development that included extensive highway construction, the building of water reservoirs and hydroelectric plants, and the modernization of sewage systems. During the 1960s, the manufacturing sector would shift from clothing, tobacco, leather goods, and apparel to capital-intensive industries such as oil refineries, pharmaceuticals, and electronics. These are changes recorded by the young protagonist of the novel—whose Uncle Roberto works for the government-run Puerto Rico Develop-

ment Corporation—as a background to the tale of the changes brought to her family by the arrival of a long-exiled uncle with a different notion of the nation.

The Uncle Sergio of the title brings with him a concept of the nation drawn from the independence-by-any-means stance of Pedro Albizu Campos, leader and president of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. Despite being denounced for its advocacy of violence against the United States, which included an attempt to assassinate President Harry Truman in 1950, the party drew support for its firm anti-colonial stance, its defense of national sovereignty and cultural independence for Puerto Rico, and its ideal of an economic restructuring built upon a decolonized relationship between the people and the land. The presence of Uncle Sergio in the text does not speak overtly to the environmental consequences of the alternative concept of the nation implied in the ideological stance he represents, but it alludes to its connection to the values of a pre-plantation agrarian society that repudiates the development agenda of the burgeoning Commonwealth. It points, through the character's ideological centrality, to the serious environmental ramifications of the debate over decolonization and national sovereignty represented in the text by Muñoz Marín and Albizu Campos.

The agrarian dimensions of this debate had been at the center of the development of the novel in Puerto Rico, from Manuel Zeno Gandía's *La charca* (The stagnant pond, 1894) to Enrique Laguerre's *La llamarada* (The burning cane fields, 1939), a masterpiece about American control of Puerto Rican sugar production. The latter, the tragic tale of a young agronomist torn between his personal ambition as the employee in charge of a U.S. *central* and his sympathy for the plight of the cane field workers whose exploitation he must maintain, struck a chord among Puerto Rican readers and intellectuals, who recognized in the character's dilemma a portrait of the national quandary. His protagonist's renunciation of ambition as a salve to his conscience and his feelings of impotence against colonial and corporate institutions reflect Laguerre's ideological opposition to continued foreign-controlled economic development, a position Laguerre embodied as he emerged as an advocate for the environment, becoming in the process the first Puerto Rican public figure to link nationalism to a commitment to ecological conservation (Paravisini-Gebert 2005a). As a self-described "ecological humanist," he argued incessantly that Puerto Rico had followed a very shortsighted vision of socioeconomic development that had sacrificed the environment to the pres-

ures of urban sprawl and consumerism. He campaigned indefatigably against the destruction of forests and mangroves to make way for broader highways, luxury hotels, and middle-class housing developments, arguing that true nationalism had to be linked to a respect for the geographical spaces that were the nation's most valuable patrimony. He fought against the turning of the coastal areas into one long strip mall, and through his efforts became a hero to conservationists for his leadership role in the campaign to maintain Puerto Ricans' free access to the island's beaches.

Laguerre's ardent defense of what he termed "the nation's most valuable patrimony" was echoed by Derek Walcott in his vocal opposition to the building of 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. The Pitons, undeniably a natural space of great national significance, was threatened by the construction of a hotel that would be, in Walcott's words, "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" (quoted in Pattullo, 4). He equated the economic arguments in favor of the resort—that it would provide extra income and jobs—to proposing to build "a casino in the Vatican" or a "take-away concession inside Stonehenge" (quoted 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 in-

volved 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 authorities, 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 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, there is comfort in the notion of nature’s capacity to obliterate “history” when it appears in the shape of buildings and monuments. Living in the still verdant St. Lucia, he holds to the hope that in time nature will swallow the ruins of the Jalousie complex. In his poems and essays, Walcott has often alluded to the Adamic idea, which for him means “the feeling that one can rechristen things, rename things” (Handley, 133). It is a notion that leads him to see “the grass that emerges from the ruins” as “the grass that says it’s a beginning again” (133)—an idea that allows him to place the construction of the resort as one more event in a long line of historical events that have left no “ruins and mementos” on Caribbean landscapes. From this perspective, Walcott would trust that despite all the frenzy of tourist-resort development, nature may still prevail if St. Lucians succeed in taking control of their island’s development before it moves from environmental vulnerability to ecological crisis, before its carrying capacity is breached and all hope is gone. It is a notion akin to that expressed by Jacques-Stephen Alexis in his novel *Les Arbres musiciens*, where he 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” (quoted in Benson, 108). Walcott’s blade of grass emerging from the ruins is like the voice of Alexis’s musician trees, which “collapse from time to time, but the voice of the forest is always as powerful as ever. Life begins” (quoted in Benson, 108). As Walcott writes in his most recent collection of poems, *The Prodigal*:

What if our history is so rapidly enclosed  
in bush, devoured by green, that there are no signals  
left, since smoke, the smoke of encampments

by brigand and the plumes from muskets  
are transitory memorials and our forests shut  
their mouths, sworn to ancestral silence. (2005, 99)

In this, he trusts to two phenomena: the capacity of Caribbean nature to turn everything in its path to bush if left to itself and the power of literature to confer significance on spaces, making of them hallowed markers of nationhood that would behoove everyone to conserve. Walcott’s proposal, outlined in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, speaks to the possibility of those places made significant by our literature turning into the loci of Caribbean nationhood and identity:

Our cities . . . dictate their own proportions, their own definitions in particular places and in a prose equal to that of their detractors, so that now it is not just St. James but the streets and yards that Naipaul commemorates, its lanes as short and brilliant as his sentences; not just the noise and jostle of Tunapuna but the origins of C.L.R. James’s *Beyond the Boundary*, not just Felicity Village on the Caroni plain, but Selvon Country, and that it’s the way it goes up the islands now; the old Dominica of Jean Rhys still very much the way she wrote of it; and the Martinique of early Césaire; Perse’s Guadeloupe, even without the pith helmets and the mules. . . . This is not a belligerent boast but a simple celebration of inevitability. . . . (73)

Walcott’s Adamic idea, his faith in nature’s ability to renew itself, and his belief in the sacredness bestowed on places either by their intrinsic power or by the power vested upon them by being the settings of classic texts of Caribbean literature are the foundations of an ecological stance rooted in a moral relationship to the landscape. He has argued, from this standpoint, that ignoring the moral question of how we relate to the environment can lead to incalculable damage. “So the person who is protecting the sacred piece of earth,” he concludes, “is doing more than the person who thinks that right now concrete and steel are going to do more for some other generation coming” (Handley, 129).

The moral question of the preservation of the Caribbean’s sacred spaces emerges with urgent poignancy in Haiti, where ecological tragedy has led to the erasure of locales hallowed by their connection to history and the spirits. If Walcott’s St. Lucia is a still verdant tropical paradise—threatened by

development yet still substantially covered in “forests . . . sworn to ancestral silence”—Haiti is the despoiled terrain that stands as a warning of the direst consequences that could face Caribbean nations that do not make a concerted effort to put a stop to environmental degradation. In spaces as small as many Caribbean island-nations (Dominica, for example, is thirty miles long by fifteen miles wide), the ecological balance is fragile, the level of vulnerability too high. As a result, the viability of the nation itself and the survival of its people are marked by an urgency unimaginable in continental settings. Nowhere in the Caribbean is this revealed more heart-rendingly than in Haiti. The devastation brought upon the Haitian landscape by continued deforestation, desertification, failed tourism development, and the collapse of agro-business amid governmental corruption has become the country’s most glaring socioeconomic and political problem. Haiti’s forests, already depleted for lumber to be sold in the international market in the twentieth century, have in recent years been cut down in catastrophic numbers for the charcoal used everywhere for cooking. As Haiti entered the twenty-first century, the country’s extreme deforestation and the concomitant soil erosion, droughts, and disastrous flash floods have ravaged the countryside and led it to the very edge of environmental despair. With only 1 percent of the land covered in forests, previously fertile fields are now desert-like. Most of the topsoil has been washed to the sea, where it has contributed to the destruction of breeding habitats for marine life. The resulting decreases in rainfall have significantly reduced agricultural production. The fishing industry has long been in crisis. It is a situation exacerbated by the devastating loss of the sustaining connection between the people and the *lwa* or spirits of Vodou who reside in the family’s plot of land or *heritage*. The most frequent question prompted by Haiti’s environmental crisis is whether something can still be done to help the land of Haiti regain its ability to sustain its people. In *Collapse*, Jared Diamond describes Haiti’s ecological condition in succinct terms, putting into question the country’s continued viability as a nation:

Its perennially corrupt government offers minimal public services; much or most of its population lives chronically or periodically without public electricity, water, sewage, medical care, and schooling. There is extreme polarization between the masses of poor people living in rural areas or in the slums of the capital of Port-au-Prince and a tiny population of rich elite in the cooler mountain suburb of Pétionville. . . . Haiti’s

rate of population growth, and its rate of infection with AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, are among the highest in the world. The question that all visitors to Haiti ask themselves is whether there is any hope for the country, and the usual answer is “no.” (329–30)

At the root of these troubles is an unimaginable ecological catastrophe that speaks eloquently to writers across the Caribbean. Haiti’s symbolic position as the region’s first republic and as a land whose history has been emblematic of the economic and political vicissitudes that have plagued other islands in the area gives the embattled nation a central position in Caribbean environmental discourse. Its ecological conundrum, in the hands of its writers, becomes the focal point for meditations on the region’s environmental options.

Haitian writers have made the nation’s environmental crossroads a central leitmotif. Understanding the centrality of Haiti’s environmental situation—both as a historical reality and as a metaphor for addressing this history in literature—they have made it a cornerstone of the development of the national novel. Their vision of the nation is closely intertwined with the acknowledgment that the nation itself is in peril if Haitians cannot find a way to restore to the land its fertility and its forests, making it again a proper place for the people and their *lwa* to inhabit. The literature of Haiti has bemoaned the environmental calamity that has befallen its people, denounced the practices that led to this catastrophe, and offered inspiration and ideas for solving the nation’s most central problem. Can literature, then, in any way lead to the saving of the Haitian land and nation?

In Jacques Roumain’s *Masters of the Dew* (1944), a seminal text in the development of the Haitian novel, the hero, Manuel, returns after years of working on the Cuban sugar plantations to the village of Fonds Rouge (a microcosm of the Haitian nation) only to find it parched and dying from a drought caused by acute and persistent deforestation (see Paravisini-Gebert 2005b). Mired in a violent dispute over inheritance of the land, the villagers must come together if they are to find a solution to their ecological (and by definition national) crisis. Led by their revered priest Papa Ogoun, who counsels during a Vodou ceremony that the villagers must dig a canal to bring water from the still-forested mountains—where “the vein is open, the blood flows” (Roumain, 190)—Manuel realizes that a *coumbite*, a bringing together of labor of all the villagers, will be necessary to accomplish the task.

Despite Manuel's untimely death, the villagers unite and "a thin thread of water advanced, flowing through the plain, and the peasants went along with it, shouting and singing" (190). Roumain's understanding of the desperate ecological situation faced by the villagers of Fonds Rouge as a metaphor for Haiti's national plight turns his fable of Christian sacrifice and communal action into a prescription for facing the potential demise of the nation. A concerted effort, a national *coumbite*, but perhaps also a messianic leader willing to undergo the ultimate sacrifice, are the chief elements in his proposal for national renewal, a proposal congruent with Roumain's political goals as founder of the Communist Party of Haiti and his fervent call to the poor of Haiti to come together to fight against exploitation, poverty, and environmental degradation.

Marie Chauvet develops the link between Haiti's environmental crisis and the survival of the nation one step further in *Amour, Colère et Folie* (1968) through her condemnation of the neocolonial (U.S.) forces complicit in Haiti's twentieth-century deforestation. In *Amour*, she dissects the forces that led to the ecological revolution produced by deforestation as a factor in Haiti's internal politics and international economic relationships, especially during the nineteen years of American occupation, which lasted from 1915 to 1934. Claire, the clear-sighted narrator of *Amour*, describes how the devastation caused by deforestation by U.S. corporations operating in Haiti threatens the peasantry's hold on their *heritage*, endangering their survival and severing their connection to their history and their sustaining spirits:

It has been raining without check, and what is worst is that the rains came after the intensive clearing of the woods. Monsieur Long's electric saw has been buzzing without interruption for the last fifteen days. A tree falls every five minutes. Yesterday, I took a long walk down the length of the coast to take a look at the damage. I saw huge trees falling to the ground, making the most awful noise, as if they were roaring before letting out their last breath. . . . Avalanches of soil stream down the mountains, forming mounds below. There is no longer any coffee, except in our memories. Mr. Long is no longer interested in coffee. He now thinks of nothing but the export of lumber. When the lumber is gone, he'll go after something else. Maybe he'll start exporting men. He can have his pick from among the beggars and easily ship them out. (Chauvet, 132)

In Chauvet's incisive analysis of Haitian politics in *Amour, Colère et Folie*, the competing forces laying claim to representing the nation—the U.S. occupiers convinced that their civilizing mission in Haiti and investment in its infrastructure will help them foster a powerful and loyal ally, the small elite bent on establishing their fortunes through trade and corruption, and the exploited peasantry seen as one more cheap commodity to use or export as labor—all become, willingly or unwittingly, pawns in the protracted game of ecological mismanagement that has resulted in Haiti's despoiled landscape. The Haitian national anthem encourages its people to work together joyfully for their country and for their ancestors on fertile fields with courage and strength:

For our forebears,  
For our country  
Let us toil joyfully.  
May the fields be fertile  
And our souls take courage.

But in Haiti, environment and nation have declined at the same pace, placing the nation and its people at risk.

The ghost of Haiti haunts the Caribbean imaginary in myriad ways. Will its example, the loss of what Laguerre called an island's most valuable patrimony, the beauty and fertility of its land, lead the island nations into an increasingly protective stance vis-à-vis their own land? It is a question that increasingly troubles the relationships among Caribbean nations, their governments, their landscapes, and their peoples, as it troubles Walcott, who ponders the question of whether the destruction of the Caribbean landscapes could signal the loss of the people who inhabit them—the end of island nations and their peoples:

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. (1998, 83)