



# **Gardening in Polluted Tropics: The Materiality of Waste and Toxicity in Olive Senior's Caribbean Poetry**

**Ysabel Muñoz Martínez**

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3195-5876>

## **Abstract**

While toxic substances continue increasingly, and unevenly, infiltrating the world, the new materialist turn invites us to examine the relationalities emerging between pollution and literature. This essay examines how Olive Senior's poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* portrays the imposition of waste and toxicity on Caribbean islands and the counter-narratives to toxic politics that emerge from non-hegemonic perspectives. The paper utilizes methodological contributions from the fields of waste studies, postcolonial and material ecocriticism, and addresses the need for more scholarship centering toxicity in cultural studies, especially through the lens of tropical materialisms. Moreover, the research engages with theorizations surrounding the concept of the Wasteocene as a novel interpretative framework. The main findings reveal that the poems "My Father's Blue Plantation", "The Immovable Tenant" and "Advice and Devices" identify how extensive pollution is enabled and perpetuated by colonial systems. The poems illustrate the environmental and socio-political tensions prompted by toxicity, its deleterious effects in organisms and landscapes, and embody how guerrilla narratives can confront widespread toxicity.

**Keywords:** Toxicity, Wasteocene, pollution, Caribbean poetry, tropical materialisms, Olive Senior, material ecocriticism, guerrilla narratives

Then words, no one's fiefdom, meet up with the materiality of the world. Relation is spoken.  
— Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 202

## Entering a Tropical Wasteocene

While the grand narrative of the Anthropocene eschews how massively heightened degrees of anthropogenic activities impact life on Earth (Armiero & De Angelis, 2017), recent academic enquiries have experimented with terms that refine this notion, such as *Capitalocene* (Parenti & Moore, 2016), *Chthulucene* (Haraway, 2016), and *Plantationocene* (Haraway et al., 2019). Likewise, political ecologist Marco Armiero (2021) highlights the centrality of waste and toxicity as an indelible mark of human presence with the newly coined term *Wasteocene*. Waste threatens to infiltrate every environment: from microscopic to global systems, as chemical substances, or garbage patches, and even surpassing the limits of the Earth's stratosphere. While its ubiquity cannot be contested, the dispersion of this *hyperobject* "massively distributed in time and space" (Morton, 2013, p. 1) impacts the globe in significantly disproportionate ways. The Wasteocene stresses precisely the mechanisms for this unequal distribution. Defined as "a narrative linking waste, justice, and the making of our present world" it considers waste not merely as an object, but rather, as "a set of socio-ecological relationships aiming to (re)produce exclusion and inequalities" (Armiero, 2021, p. 1).

Not surprisingly, these injustices appear frequently in areas where global economic forces have wreaked havoc through colonial violence, as evidenced in the long history of exploitation that has taken place in tropical regions (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 2). Here, the imposition of extraction and intensive agriculture, together with waste and toxicity, challenges Romantic tropes of tropical paradise (Grandia, 2019; Regis, 2020) which are so deeply rooted in our tropical imaginaries and touristic advertising. The imposition of toxicity can be illustrated, for example, in the infamous case of the *Khian Sea*, an American shipping vessel that dumped 4000 tons of toxic ash, disguised as fertilizer, in Haiti in 1988 (Cohen, 2010) – a scandal that accelerated the efforts to create an international accord regulating the trade of hazardous materials, known as the Basel convention. In more systematic ways, for decades the French government allowed and encouraged the use of carcinogenic pesticides in its Caribbean colonies – pesticides that had been long banned in Europe (Agard-Jones, 2013, pp. 189-190).

These examples, enmeshed in histories of colonialism and racism, demonstrate the relevance of thinking about the tropics through the politics of pollution, and vice versa, amid renewed scholarly interests in new materialisms. If classic Marxist materialism is distinguished from previous materialism in shifting the focus from the contemplation of the object to the practices and activities that the object enables (Marx & Engels, 2010,

p. 3), the new interest in materialisms turns its emphasis to the dynamism, “agency and performativity of matter” itself (Bragard, 2013, p. 459), together with the problematization of binarisms such as body/mind, nature/culture, and matter/language (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 111).<sup>1</sup>

As waste and toxicity increasingly appear in art and literature, the field of *material ecocriticism* – concerned with “movement[s] of matter across bodies” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 476) – pays detailed attention to the aesthetics and representability of pollution. Furthermore, the field sheds light on how all matter, including human bodies, can be rendered disposable. Thus, it draws connections into how things, land, people, and other animals, plants, and elements, are devaluated, exploited, and exposed to pollutants, and highlights the new relations derived from these wasting regimes. This resonates especially in tropical colonies and ex-colonies, where othering, devaluation, and willful exposure to harmful materials are entangled in the long history of colonialism and social struggles.

Drawing upon theories of “cultural alterity/difference” (Gandhi, 1996, p. ix) and combining postcolonialism’s critique to Western epistemologies with critical readings of human and nonhuman environments, the field of *postcolonial ecocriticism* focuses on the aftermath of imperialist endeavors so frequent in tropical scenarios (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010; Roos & Hunt, 2010; DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011; Iheka, 2022). Since pollution follows colonialist logics of sacrificing the land as resource to extract materials *from* and to deposit *in* the leftovers of “progress” (Liboiron, 2021, p. 41), postcolonial ecocriticism has much to offer in understanding the politics and representability of the Wasteocene.

While contemporary scholarship examines the critical depictions in art and literature of waste and toxicity in the tropics (DeLoughrey, 2019; Campbell, 2019; Bucknor, 2020), it remains necessary to cultivate more dialogues between literary criticism and political ecology to move from notions of mere representation, to a more dynamic and materialist understanding of the vitality of things in themselves. Thinking of waste and toxicity in terms of a Wasteocene opens unexplored doors within new materialisms as it continues moving towards less anthropocentric perspectives. This motivation incites the present paper, focused on how the poem collection *Gardening in the Tropics* by Jamaican poet Olive Senior contributes to the contextualization of Wasteocene’s frameworks in postcolonial and tropical contexts.

Throughout this paper, I argue that Senior inscribes waste and toxic matters in the genealogy of new materialisms in the Caribbean. Firstly, Eduard Glissant’s emphasis

---

<sup>1</sup> Gamble *et al.* (2019) discuss how new materialism is not a homogenous field and has been criticized for its distance from cultural materialism and Marxism. They identify at least three trends: negative, vital, and performative new materialisms. For this study, I am interested in the latter.

on rhizomatic<sup>2</sup> relations for approaching interconnectedness and plurality in Caribbean geo-cultural spheres, with its constant variations and interdependence (Glissant, 2010, p. 142-144), is central for understanding tropical ontologies through a materialist approach. But zooming in towards molecular levels to explore the genetic makeup inscribed on lands and cultures of the tropics also offers unforeseen possibilities to explore tropical relationalities. Hence, I examine how Senior's poetry stresses the ways in which plantation landscapes and wasting relations are inscribed in bodies, memory, and communities through chemical alterations and wasting practices. In this postcolonial context, discarded and toxic materials roam across bodily boundaries and poetic realms, impossible to be contained. In order to rethink this hegemony, the poet revises practices from the traditions and knowledges of indigenous and naturalized black communities as alternative modes of relating to nature.

### **Olive Senior: Materialist Voice from the Tropics**

Although frequently homogenized due to the intense processes of conquest and colonization that took place on its islands, the Caribbean represents a diverse multilingual and multicultural space whose heterogeneity and commonalities have been frequently grounded in its materiality. As Ben Etherington (2012) explains regarding the works of Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, a Caribbean literary tradition of rootlessness and errantry problematizes Western ideas of the material as a universal category (p. 545). More importantly, Glissant (2010) recognizes in these nomadic elements the importance of the interconnectedness of matter for tropical ontologies, affirming that, after European attempts to exterminate the indigenous populations, the "Antillean soil could not become a territory, but rather a rhizomatic land" (p. 146).

Historically, the Caribbean's material affordances determined the interest of several European powers in the area during the C15, mainly for purposes of mineral extraction, although islands like Jamaica, with scarce gold reserves, became more strategic for the plantation system (Gardner, 1938, p. 20). But the economic success of products like sugar, coffee and bananas came with an excessive environmental and human cost to the colonized land. The ecological challenges imposed by waves of European control in the various islands of the archipelago notably appears in the salient writings of Caribbean authors such as Wilson Harris, Kamau Brathwaite, Dereck Walcott, Fernando Ortiz, Maryse Condé, Mayra Montero, and Jamaica Kincaid, among many others.

---

<sup>2</sup> Glissant borrows from Deleuze and Guattari the image of the "rhizome" – as opposed to the "root" – as a metaphor for illustrating the decentralization and interconnections of the archipelagic geographies and ontologies of the Caribbean. See Lundberg *et al.* (2021).

Common themes have been the extractive and agricultural industries that destroyed – and continue to destroy – local ecosystems, introduced invasive species, and subjugated racial groups, namely indigenous populations and millions of black slaves forcefully relocated for production purposes, together with numerous indentured workers. These events carry other substantial problems related to the insidious chemicals utilized to maintain the production, which left the subaltern bodies so closely connected with the production vulnerable to the perils of hazardous substances. Thus, the old colonial plantation connects directly with modern forms of pollution, as Olive Senior's poetry dramatically encapsulates, by bringing into her poetry close accounts of childhood memories and a poignant critique of production models that perpetuate wasting practices.

Currently based in Canada, Olive Senior was born in rural Jamaica in 1942. Her work has frequently been the object of ecocritical analyses since it showcases the complex ecological dynamics of the postcolonial Caribbean. This scrutiny usually focuses on native and invasive flora, and the subjugation of land and human groups. Elaine Savory (2011) describes how "Senior's ecological imagination encourages the reader to connect gardening and plant life with a history and a present that are not devoid of the social but rather register ongoing violence against people" (p. 83). In another reading of her oeuvre, Michael Bucknor (2020) recognizes that "though [her work] has been more critically scrutinized for its engagement with nature, the connection between waste and discursive damage requires further exploration" (p. 39).

In his study, Bucknor comments on the presence of waste in Senior's work, and especially examines corporeal excretions and their connotations. Meanwhile, other forms of waste in her writing continue demanding attention. Senior's interest in Caribbean ecology necessarily leads her to disturbed environments, finding the rupture between pristine and damaged scenarios rooted in the plantation system, whose functioning demands the wasting of land and people in the name of productivity. The search for limitless growth binds the plantation to "excess" and, as the poet references, toxicity is thus an inherent outcome of colonial processes. Senior's approach to the topic combines the denouncement of, and poetic resistance against polluting practices, and presents how islands, lands, and bodies are rendered disposable.

In the poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (2005), Senior exposes different forms of pollution in the Caribbean colonies while also reinterpreting indigenous, slave and indentured peoples' practices, as a countercultural movement in the face of damaging techniques related to toxification. Therefore, she illustrates forms of living in a Wasteocene in which subaltern subjects and the materiality of the archipelago itself, reclaim agency and challenge the Western canon of dominating the land through chemicals and science. A main aspect the poet reflects upon throughout the collection

is the role of colonialism as the enabler of pollution, systematizing the disposability of human bodies and the sacrifice of nature. The lyrical speakers in the poems are often indigenous characters, or the voices of African people kidnapped from their ancestral homes who confront the “other” that came, extracted, and exploited, thus uncovering the violence, incomprehension, and erasure suffered by the conquered. Senior fiercely critiques the depredation of Caribbean landscapes by colonial forces, especially condensed in her poem “Meditation on Yellow”, where the poetic subject embodies both black and indigenous identities and moves throughout histories of exploitation in pungent rants directed towards the perpetrator:

silver the still in your countenance  
silver the glint of your sword  
silver the bullet I bite  
(Senior, 2005, p. 13).

While the speaker “can’t take no more” after “five hundred years of servitude” (p. 16), the poem summarizes through continuous evocations of this ongoing violence, a complex history of “colonialism, tourism, and transnational capitalism” (Deloughrey, 2004, p. 298). Recognizing the material implications of the first “contact” following the Europeans’ arrival, Senior turns to images of poison to state that “Had I known I would have/ brewed you up some yellow fever-grass/ and arsenic” (Senior, 2015, p. 11). Thus, the poem foregrounds both the topics of the natives’ knowledge of their environment and its properties, and the materiality and agency of substances that appear in the following poems.

### **Blue Tropics: Plantation as Toxic Landscape**

Considering the disproportionated effect of toxicity on rural populations (Esquerro, 2016), poetry also bears witness to the way the bodies sustaining the tropical plantations become entangled with toxic substances. Here, numerous people have been degraded and left vulnerable to the challenges of the Great Acceleration<sup>3</sup> that requires the radical transformation of land for keeping pace with global markets. In this process, fertilizers and pesticides poison both land and humans, all the while proclaiming to enhance the former for the benefit of the latter. The agrochemical industry impregnates substantial toxicity into everyday products, and yet it is frequently welcomed as progress. Arguments against this belief are famously epitomized in Rachel Carson’s seminal text *Silent Spring* (1963), which, according to Lawrence Buell (1998), initiates the “contemporary toxic discourse” by uncovering the flaws of our reliance on pesticides. The scholar Gisella Heffes (2021) has suggested that

---

<sup>3</sup> The term refers to the period from the 1950s onwards characterized by the rapid growth of affluent economies. Some scientists maintain that this marks the beginning of the Anthropocene (Steffen, 2015); other researchers establish the beginning of the Anthropocene with the massive changes brought about by extractivist colonialism involving slave trade, plantations, mining etc.



contemporary writings depicting these toxic scenarios utilize a “toxic language” or semiotics (p. 362), and thus turns to the specific linguistic codes for alluding to the phenomenon.

Recently, a renewed focus on the materiality of language has also contributed to the emphasis on matter and its central space in understanding the tropics.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Olive Senior aptly reconciles this apparent dichotomy between matter and linguistics. Her poetry embodies the set of exploitative relations in the colonial system that appears in “Meditation on Yellow”, and the materiality of the subjects and objects that constitute the plantation, worn down by these wasting logics. She does so by relying on the plasticity of language to embrace the ethos of what Armiero denominates “guerrilla narratives”, a term that, opposed to “toxic narratives”, works to “reveal the Wasteocene and dismantle its wasting logic” (2021, p. 23). This practice of guerrilla narrative takes unique shape within Senior’s poetry to actively resist pollution, conveying various aesthetic devices to depict and confront toxicity.

Notably, the predominance of toxicity disguised under neoliberal labels of development is accurately represented in the poem “My Father’s Blue Plantation”, where the poet showcases a racialized and polluted Jamaican landscape, specifically in the context of banana plantations:

My father’s land  
was blue. In his prime, his banana  
plantation came right to our doorstep.  
We lived deep in this forest of leaves  
made blue by the treatment against  
Leaf Spot Disease which he humped around  
the fields in a battered spray-pan.  
(Senior, 2005, p. 86)

In this poem, pesticides transform the Jamaican countryside into “a source of growth and inspiration, as well as disease and contamination” (Stouk, 2005, p. 21). Divided into two stanzas, the first one refers to a past in a Caribbean banana plantation. Written in the first person, the speaker recollects childhood memories in which bodies are in constant interaction with the pesticides which persistently cross imagined thresholds of human space. These exchanges also open up a conversation on agency and reciprocal influences, as the plantation “*came* right to our doorstep” while the “forest of leaves [was] *made* blue” (emphasis mine). The poem presents the quotidian life in a countryside in which material precarity is featured and the social and economic entanglement between farmer and chemicals is made manifest. In this regard, the

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, papers in this *eTropic* special issue on Tropical Materialisms.

poem clearly states the family's dependency on the chemical's effectiveness, as they "fervently prayed [the bananas] would find/ acceptance in the eyes of the Inspector/ for every bunch was earmarked to pay/ for something" (Senior, 2005, p. 86). This remark uncovers the fragility of the commodity's chain of production due to the perpetuation of the plantation as colonial structure.

In her study *Racial Capitalocene* (2017), which involved "A Cartography of Invisible Lives" (2015) (human, animal, plant, and microbes), Françoise Vergès reminds us that the slave trade that relocated millions of Africans to the Caribbean also meant "a massive transfer of plants, animals, diseases, soil, techniques, and manufactured goods from Europe" (Vergès, 2017, p. 81) in order to maintain the colonial status quo. "It was [also] a turning point in environmental history: imposition of monocultures, deforestation, circulation of diseases, famines" (2015, p. 24). The banana tree is one example of how these commodities actioned radical transformations. Originally from southern Asia, it was first introduced to the Caribbean during the early stages of conquest and, in subsequent centuries, became one of the archipelagoes' principal exports. Not surprisingly, monocrop fields are likely to stimulate the spread of plant diseases, as was the case in Jamaica with Leaf Spot Disease due to the dispersion of the fungus *Mycosphaerella musicola* in the first half of the C20 (Hayden et al., 2003, p. 714). In response, the Jamaican government subsidized the spraying of copper sulphate and hydrated lime, also known as Bordeaux mixture, a blue-colored fungicide.

The plantation reveals its inherent contradictory nature when these chemical remedies are applied to increase productivity. First, the plantation's structure facilitates the proliferation of such maladies since monocrop systems cannot recover quickly from fast-spreading infections; quite the opposite, they provide more resources for pests to thrive and mutate. As Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing clarify: "plantations destroy their own base, exhaust soils, exhaust peoples, exhaust plants and animals, and proliferate pathologic pathogens" (Mittman, 2019). Second, humans continue short-sighted experimentation with toxic substances without fully considering their dangers, thus the eternal faith in the technological fix silently perpetuates within both *Plantationocene* and *Wasteocene* logics. In "My Father's Blue Plantation", these topics appear interwoven with damage, pain, and the testimony of those forever bearing the burdens of pollution.

Toxicity is reconstructed visually and poetically through the natural and artificial chromatic elements of the landscape, providing the material texture that resurfaces constantly in the poem. Stressing the contrast between the marvelous "Hot Tropical Colours" and the cold blue derived from the fungicide, the persona refers to the pervasiveness of chemicals as something suffocating that requires escape since the "children fled the blue" (Senior, 2005, 86). In the second and final stanza the speaker



attempts to distance him/herself from the polluted land, stating that the events occurred “ages ago”, and the rest of the story is “told” to the diasporic subject. Notably, in these final verses the speaker is far from the tropics, and the most compelling images of corporeal relations and toxicity’s embeddedness in bodies and histories appear through the figure of the father, long time worker and owner of the small-hold plantation.

Mirroring the landscape, the body of the father demonstrates the blue mixture’s ubiquity and persistence. The intersection of his alveoli with the metals applied to the banana plantation illustrates the “viscous porosity” of pollutants and bodies, anticipating Nancy Tuana’s articulation of how substances constantly mediate and interact in the world (2008, p. 198). It is within this viscous context that the speaker identifies within tropical elements the palliative remedies to intense contamination:

Alone, fanning sand and stoning breeze,  
my father lets in all that air, lets that  
Hot Tropical Sun pour down to fill his  
blue lungs and warm his old and vegetating  
bones.

(Senior, 2005, p. 86)

Entrenched in a troubled melancholia, the poem attests to the systematic degradation of the land and Caribbean community. The father’s body – also symbolically tied to the plantation in its “vegetating” state – permanently carries these pollutants. His saturated lungs inevitably resonate with the famous image of the “proletarian lung” through which Alaimo explain how bodies can “know” of politics and class (2010, p. 28) and thus become a legible text of Wasteocene narratives. Inspired by Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s work, Vanessa Agard-Jones similarly remembers the importance of taking the body as a starting point from which to explore outwards to political relationships, and inwards the porous interconnection with other substances (2013, p. 192). As I have argued in this section, Olive Senior clearly articulates and materializes these ideas in “My Father’s Blue Plantation”, a central poem towards a new materialism of the tropics.

### **“The Immovable Tenant”: Imperial Garbage and the Rights to Pollute**

Similar to Senior’s depiction of the polluted Jamaican countryside through the ubiquity of the color blue, Haitian storyteller Rodney Saint-Éloi uses this subversion of blue – so often commodified as synonym of paradisiacal beaches – to refer to pollution. His short story “The blue hill”, doubtlessly inspired by the *Khian Sea* ship scandal, depicts how foreign soldiers dump toxic substances with impunity, and the subsequent effects on the town’s population. He also unravels less conspicuous forms of imposing waste and toxicity by militarization and neocolonialism. This form of “toxic imperialism”

(Hellegers & Narayanan, 2019) equally resonates in the poem “The Immovable Tenant”, in which Senior reflects on the monopolization of resources, and in which the notion of the right to pollute appears prominently.

The poem questions the rights and legislation that undermine islanders’ agency since: “everyone in this area is mortgaged/ to the limit up north/ –or bankers across the sea” (Senior, 2005, p. 101). As in Saint-Éloi’s story, in Senior’s poem, the presence of a Northern neighbor that “relegates [the Caribbean] to a backyard and (often literal) junkyard” (DeLoughrey, 2019, p. 104) is critically examined. In addition to the colonial endeavors of Spain, France and Britain – lurking and looting since Columbus’s arrival; since the C19 the United States has been asserting a growing dominance in the Greater Antilles due to their maritime control and naval prominence (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 30).

The poem is an outstanding example of spoken word, as the written text accomplishes a convincing sense of material performativity and orality. It opens with an accusatory tone, that seems to resonate aloud in a court room, persuading the audience (the reader/jury) through storytelling. Vivid images appear for the readers, who are compelled to “feel” not only in the sense of arousing emotions, but also affecting and stirring the body through shifting intensities. Throughout the poem, the form “he’s” is reiteratively used, creating repetitions that DeLoughrey (2004) has identified with the “tautological experience of history” (p. 307), surveillance, violence and appropriation in the Caribbean:

he’s rented our air spaces, taken  
control of our seas and beaches;  
underground he’s taken mining leases  
and overhead he’s set up satellite dishes.  
We all live in dread that we can’t  
mash ants without his knowing.  
(Senior, 2005, p. 102)

The poem depicts how this masculine figure takes ownership and describes its omnipresence by indicating the extent of their power: above and below, on land and sea; and conjures in the islanders a state of fear and submission. After reciting multiple ways to sacrifice the island nation – its land, sea, and even its air, the right to pollute represents the ultimate form of colonialism:

On top  
of it all, he’s acquired rights (from  
God knows where) to dump (if he wishes)  
his garbage on our shores.

(Senior, 2005, p. 103)

The poem also criticizes the myopic attitudes of Caribbean politicians and proprietors who prioritize monetary incentives over the region's wellbeing, thus making more vulnerable an economy already paralyzed by complex dependencies and colonial remnants. This appears in the unexpected development of the speaker who, even if "when...was younger joined in some protests" and signed petitions, later starts collaborating with this mogul and was "paid to see the wisdom of/ supping with the enemy" (p. 103). Across these archipelagoes, many governments follow the neoliberal predicaments that compels them to sell the land with disregard to the consequences for local communities and environments. Senior's poem shows how pollution is the last step in this neocolonial escalation of power as the tone evolves, building up from an initially banal matter of a neighbor reluctant to sell her property, into an uproar against appropriation and foreign control.

Hence, the "immobility" alluded in the title ironically calls attention to the need for standing up and mobilizing in opposition by staying put and rejecting wrongful evictions and dispossession. Notably, the subject that embodies this resistance is described as an elderly lady who refuses to remain silent. Representing ancestral knowledges and more-than-human collaboration, she acknowledges the material agency of the land and unapologetically undertakes decolonial endeavors that rely not in empty gestures, but in material restitution. The final verses give voice to this central figure who closes the poem invoking a multispecies assemblage. Thus, within these dynamics of shared "agency and empowerment" (Regis, 2020, p. 162), there is a reaffirmation of the need of practicing "guerilla narratives" by dismantling the normalization of wasting practices through continuous demands and reckonings:

Strangers might occupy my house and my land

from time to time, but from this redoubt,  
I always repossess it, inch by inch.  
With the help of the steadfast tropical  
sun, wind, and rain, with the help of the  
termites, the ants, the wood lice, and  
the worms, I always reclaim. I can wait,

unforgiving.

(Senior, 2005, p. 106)

## Poetics of Material and Spiritual Regeneration

Senior repeats the topics of pollution from “My Father’s Blue Plantation” and “The Immovable Tennant” in the poem “Advices and Devices”, articulating more clearly other perspectives that can help to counteract the damaging practices described in the poems. It is noticeable how gardening, “important in reclaiming and maintaining socio-political and spiritual power in the Caribbean” (Morrison, 2012, p. 16) appears here – as throughout the collection of poems – as the meditative activity from which the poet critically observes the region’s most urgent matters. She advocates for a small scale and far less invasive approach to the land, suggesting more sustainable methods comparable to modern permaculture practices.

The primary driver of the poem “Advice and Devices” is to encourage the use of alternative agricultural models. While in “My Father’s Blue Plantation” the topic was pesticides, here the centrality is the use of fertilizers in food production, which, as explained in previous analyses, is supported by national policies, and thus applied throughout the country. In this poem, the images of gardening concur with Sylvia Wynter’s groundbreaking work on plot and plantation, where the former is described as the parcels where the emancipated slave turned peasant “grew crops both to feed himself, and to sell to the [local] market” (1971, p. 100). The plot, as Wynter aptly argues, represents radically different values from that of the plantation and thus it is a space of “resistance to the [global] market” (p. 99). Likewise, in “Advices and Devices”, the persona presents the food garden as a space from which to challenge the logics of the plantation since s/he appears with the “prizes” of organic production in the agricultural fair, surprising other farmers that “take advice from the government man/ and use a whole heap of sprays/ and fertilize out all the taste/ from the pumpkin and yam” (Senior, 2005, p. 111).

The strong correlation between material and spiritual practices in Senior’s work – thoroughly explored in Hanna Regis’s paper “Subjection and Resistance” (2020) – appears centrally in this understudied poem. Calling upon the artificiality of modern agriculture, the text suggests other forms of approaching the land. The speaker praises the shamanistic rituals for respecting and revering the earth before demanding its fruits, advising that “before you fell/ a tree or pull a weed, be sure/ to ask pardon to dig” (Senior, 2005, p. 112). The text confirms the author’s concern over the danger of fertilizers and pesticides and juxtaposes the Western methods used by the official institutions with the teachings and knowledges of indigenous peoples – Arawak in the case of the island of Jamaica – and naturalized black cultures, whose relationship with the land is considered less destructive:

There are other recipes and devices  
to use for protection but my main  
advice is: never explain,  
especially to those who rely on  
the plan of the government man  
with the book. They are the  
chief ones in need of your wisdom,  
for their fields (with  
all that fertilizer and spray)  
will never stay healthy.

(Senior, 2005, p. 112)

This nonconventional adviser also evokes fundamental forms of relating to the land, especially through practices of care, with the premise of always approaching it in terms of reciprocity. Through symbolic elements such as motherhood, the persona suggests inviting a pregnant woman to inspire the growth of the crops and singing to the fields to keep them happy (2005, p. 113-114), all while practicing an ethos of “Liv[ing] Right and Do[ing] Good” (p. 114). Moreover, by opposing the plantation’s production systems through gestures imbued with spirituality and non-rapacious ethics, the speaker also opposes a model of the market economy that still holds modern societies “‘enchanted’, imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality” (Wynter, 1971, p. 95). This task echoes Glissant’s claims that “any appeal for self-sufficiency grounded solely in economics and good sense is doomed to failure” (2010, p. 149), and thus cultivating new “sensibilities”, as Senior attempts to do, becomes paramount.

The fertilizers in this poem are the shortcuts sentencing the soil to noxious states while claiming progress, and it is possible to compare this re-presentation to the polluted air that appears in the poem “Seeing the Light”. Here, the colonizers’ attempts at clearing, cutting, and depriving nature of its own rhythms follows the same ambitions of civilization and enlightenment, leading to a darkness begotten by pollution: “smoke obscures the sun/ for months now, there not enough trees to pull down/ the rain” (Senior, 2005, p. 95). In the face of the consumerism and acceleration that prompts these disruptions, indigenous knowledges offer a powerful counter-discourse. The poet uses the collective pronoun “we” to represent a community that practiced less damaging agricultural procedures and considered humility in the context of nature’s equilibrium as essential: “We made the tiniest scratch/ on Mother Earth (begging her pardon)/ ... We never took more than we needed” (p. 96).

This poem remembers that the indelible mark that humans are inscribing on Earth is not the responsibility of all humans equally. There are healthier approaches in the

“indigenous rituals of interpretation, reorienting our conceptual horizons beyond imperialist hegemony” (Bucknor, 2020, p. 40). These unorthodox epistemologies and undisciplined narratives become more relevant in the face of the toxic discourses that perpetuate the normality of the Wasteocene and numb our senses in the presence of toxicity. In this sense, Senior contributes to “uncover[ing] the traces of toxicity exposing the injustice embedded in the Wasteocene” (Armiero, 2020, p. 24) and actively demands its transformation. Senior’s proposal embraces concepts of biological cycles and regeneration, also demonstrated in her emphasis on re-using and applying a “transformative imagination”; and seeing “value where others saw nothingness or worthlessness” (Bucknor, 2020, p. 34).

### **Conclusions: Caribbean Materialities**

In sum, this study explains how Olive Senior’s work actively engages in debating the challenges of the Wasteocene, evidencing that colonialism plays a central role in imposing toxicity upon these islands, where the plantation system has wasted lands and lives for centuries. She effectively identifies the culprits of pollution in the Caribbean context: enabled by colonial mechanisms and enforced by militarism and imperialism. Thus, her poetry contributes to understanding the politics of waste and toxicity in the Caribbean from a cultural perspective. Her works share a sense of spatiality that demarcates their belonging to a Caribbean geography, highlighting, however, more general issues pressing the postcolonial tropical world.

This selection, of course, cannot holistically condense the complex and fractured realities of the Caribbean archipelagoes, but they certainly represent how the common traumatic history of domination can be encapsulated by a semiotics of waste, wasting and toxicity. Likewise, these poems also pinpoint the various temporalities associated with these colonial and contemporary phenomena, highlighting their permanence, simultaneously projecting them into the future and the longing for a pre-polluted past. Senior reminisces upon a time when indigenous practices could coexist sustainably with nature, a balance violently interrupted by the conquest and colonization of the islands.

Her poetics confirm the constant interconnections between physical matter and power relations by showing a world with more porous boundaries than strict divisions. Senior dissects the human body to reveal the organs forever tainted with toxic substances, demonstrating that even when invisible, toxicants’ persistence defies human temporalities. However, the suggestion of such scenarios does not limit these works to a pessimistic depiction since they mainly underline the tensions and challenges arising from deeply disturbed scenarios and invite readers to explore their origins and alternatives. The spirit of guerilla narratives is also vividly present, elucidating how



unconventional narratives actively oppose the dispersion and normalization of waste and toxicity.

Senior's poetry encourages the substitution of harming techniques that threaten the wellbeing of nature and people, favoring ancient forms of working with and not against the land, as done by indigenous communities in the Caribbean and through the teachings of African ancestors. She denounces the strategies of silence and normalization aiming to naturalize toxic waste in the bodies and environments of the tropics. Hence, her poetry presents a commitment to constantly resist toxic narratives, suggesting turning towards indigenous and local knowledges and breaking of toxic normativity.

This paper has identified how pollution is presented in Olive Senior's Caribbean poetry, and it has confirmed the relevance of rethinking toxicity in these islands through the lens of the Wasteocene. Reflecting on waste and wasting relations provide appropriate tools since they emphasize the importance of social and political relationships defining the regimes of disposability of stuff, places, and people. This essential framework allows us to critically explore the movements of residual and toxic matter in tropical areas suffering from colonialism, globalization, and militarization, as reflected Olive Senior's poems. While wasteful and toxic acceleration maintains its upward trend, its exploration in cultural production becomes more necessary in order to dissect the mechanisms through which pollution becomes steadily normalized, and ultimately, to create alternative narratives of resistance and survival on a planet increasingly and unequally polluted.

## References

- Agard-Jones, V. (2013). Bodies in the System. *Small axe*, 42, 182-192.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2378991>
- Alaimo, S. (2010). *Bodily natures: science, environment, and the material self*. Indiana University Press.
- Armiero, M. (2021). *Wasteocene: stories from the global dump*. University of Cambridge Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108920322>
- Armiero, M. & De Angelis, M. (2017). Anthropocene: Victims, Narrators, and Revolutionaries. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116(2), 345-362. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3829445>
- Bragard, V. (2013). Introduction: Languages of Waste: Matter and Form in our Garb-age. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20(3), 459-463.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/ist059>
- Bucknor, M. (2020). Conceptual Residues of Imperialist Ruination: Waste, Weeds and the Poetics of Rubbish in Edward Baugh's Black Sand and Olive Senior's Gardening in the Tropics. *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 1(28), 33-45.
- Campbell, A. (2019). 'Atlantic exchanges: the poetics of dispersal and disposal in Scottish and Caribbean seas. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55(2), 195-208.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2019.1590622>
- Cohen, M. (2010) Haiti and toxic waste, *Counterpunch*. Retrieved 8/02/2022 from <https://www.counterpunch.org/2010/01/22/haiti-and-toxic-waste/>
- DeLoughrey, E. (2004). Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures. *Sociale Geografie*, 95(3), 298-310. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2004.00309.x>
- DeLoughrey, E. (2007). *Routes and roots*. Navigating Caribbean and Pacific islands literature. University of Hawai'i Press.
- DeLoughrey, E. (2019). *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005582>
- DeLoughrey, E. & Handley, B. (Eds.). (2011). *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, Oxford Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195394429.001.0001>
- Esquerro, A. (2016). Poisoned, Dispossessed and Excluded: A Critique of the Neoliberal Soy Regime in Paraguay. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 16(4), 702-710.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12164>
- Etherington, B. (2012) What is materialism's material? Thoughts toward (actually against) a materialism for "world literature", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48(5), 539-551.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2012.720801>
- Gamble, C., Hanan, J. & Nail, T. (2019). What is New Materialism, *Angelaki*, 24(6), 111-134.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684704>
- Gandhi, L. (1996). *Postcolonial theory: a critical introduction*. Allen & Unwin.
- Gardner, W. J. (1938). *A history of Jamaica from its discovery by Christopher Columbus to the year 1872*. Fank Cass and Co.
- Glissant, E. (2010). *Poetics of Relation*. (B. Wing Trans.). University of Michigan Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10257>
- Grandia, L. (2019). Toxic Tropics: Purity and Danger Everywhere in Everyday Life. *Journal of Ecological Anthropology*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.5038/2162-4593.21.1.1243>
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25g>
- Hayden, H., Carlier, J., & Aitken, E. A. B. (2003). Population differentiation in the banana leaf spot pathogen *Mycosphaerella musicola*, examined at a global scale. *Plant Pathology*, 52, 713-719. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-3059.2003.00929.x>

- Hellegers, D. & Narayanan, P. (2019). Toxic Imperialism: Memory, Erasure, and Environmental Injustice in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant, Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 50(2-3), 81-104. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2019.0015>
- Huggan, G. & Tiffin, H. (Eds.) (2010). *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203498170>
- Iheka, C. (Eds.) (2022). *Teaching Postcolonial Environmental Literature and Media*. MLA.
- Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S. (2012). Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 19(3), 476-493. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/iss087>
- Liboiron, M. (2021). *Pollution is colonialism*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478021445>
- Lundberg, A., Regis, H. & Agbonifo, J. (2021). Tropical Landscapes and Nature-Culture. Entanglements: Reading Tropicality via Avatar, *eTropics*, 21(1), 1-27. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.1.2022.3877>
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (2010) *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collective Works*, vol. 5, Lawrence & Wishart.
- Mittman, G. (2019). Reflections on the Plantationocene. A conversation with Donna Haraway & Anna Tsing. Edge effects. Retrieved 14/07/2021, from <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>
- Moore, J. W. (Ed.) (2016). *Anthropocene or capitalocene?: nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism*. PM Press.
- Morrison, D. (2012). *Ecowomanist Endeavors: Race, Gender, and Environmental Ethics in Contemporary Caribbean Women's Literature* [University of Miami].
- Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Regis, H. (2020) Subjection and Resistance: Landscapes, Gardens, Myths and Vestigial Presences in Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics*, *eTropics*, 19(1), 151-166. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8240-8741>
- Ross, B. & Hunt, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*, University of Virginia Press.
- Saint-Éloi, R. (2010) The Blue Hill. In Danticat, E. (Ed.), *Haiti Noir*, 274-281. Akashic.
- Savory, E. (2011). Toward a Caribbean Eco-poetics Derek Walcott's Language of Plants. In E. Deloughrey & G. B. Handley (Eds.), *Postcolonial ecologies: literatures of the environment*, 80-98. Oxford Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195394429.003.0004>
- Senior, O. (2005). *Gardening in the Tropics*. Insomnia Press.
- Steffen, W. et al. (2015) The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration, *The Anthropocene Review*, 2(1), 81-98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019614564785>
- Stouk, J. (2005). Towards a Caribbean-Canadian Post-National: Olive Senior and Gardening in the Tropics, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 14(1), 13-34.
- Tuana, N. (2008). Viscous porosity: witnessing Katrina. In S. Alaimo & S. Hekman (Eds.), *Material Feminisms*, 188-213. Indiana University.
- Vergès, F. (2015). A Cartography of Invisible Lives. *eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics*. 14(2), 22-29. <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.14.2.2015.3378>
- Vergès, F. (2017). Racial Capitalocene. In G. T. Johnson & A. Lubin (Eds.), *Futures of Black radicalism* (pp. 72-82). Verso.
- Wynter, S. (1971). Novel and History, Plot and Plantation. *Savacou* 5, 95-102.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my former supervisors Dr. David Borthwick and Dr. Alexandra Campbell for their constant guidance and always insightful contributions. I also thank to the anonymous reviewers who notably improved this work through their expertise and recommendations.

**Ysabel Muñoz Martínez** is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Trondheim, Norway), where she works with the transdisciplinary project *Narrating Sustainability*. She holds a bachelor's degree in Letters from the University of Havana (2017) and is the recipient of a Chevening Scholarship (2020). She completed the MLitt. Environment, Culture and Communication at the University of Glasgow (2021) with a dissertation on pollution in Caribbean art and literature. Muñoz is an environmental humanities scholar whose research interests include STS, critical sustainability, Caribbean culture, material ecocriticism, ecofeminism, post/decolonial studies and affect theory. Her writings have appeared in online publications such as *Edge Effects* and *Environmental History Now*.