



# **Subjection and Resistance: Landscapes, Gardens, Myths and Vestigial Presences in Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics***

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that a selection of Caribbean writers has engaged an aesthetic that spotlights the idea of a living or divine landscape through a deployment of folkloric, mythological, magical or spiritual epistemological frames. This aesthetic foregrounds the expansive possibilities of nature and other life forms in the wake of empire and global modernity. By an engagement with these tools, the creative writer deconstructs the limits of colonial ecological damage and modern-day agricultural devastation, while simultaneously affirming the Caribbean landscape as an active and creative agent within articulations of community and belonging. Through a blend of eco-criticism as examined by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Wilson Harris's formulations of the "living landscapes" and Caribbean mythologies, this essay seeks to interrogate the manner in which Caribbean poet, Olive Senior, consciously deploys the literary imagination as a platform to plant seeds of reform and activism in the trail of environmental destruction. Senior accomplishes this through notions of mythic time and space that are unfettered by monolithic ideologies and linearity. This signposts an effort to posit a reliance on a spirit-infused universe—a deeply felt ideology which is pivotal to acts of environmental healing and societal recuperation.

**Keywords:** myth, ecocriticism, landscape, Caribbean, haunting, poetry, history, colonialism, culture

## Ecological Plunder in the Indies

**A**midst captivating advertisements and glossy travel brochures that portray the Caribbean region as fresh, untouched and exotic, lies the brutal reality of how the modern Caribbean was born out of an extremely violent collision. Mimi Sheller asserts in *Consuming the Caribbean* (2003) that this historical violence, couched in European imperialism and colonization, is manifest in the historical consumption of Caribbean resources, people and culture (2003, p. 3). Research such as Sheller's, among others, reveals that this violence ranges from the displacement and annihilation of the region's indigenous populations, and the initiation of slavery and indentureship, to the economic exploitation that characterizes the years following European imperial "discovery" of the New World. The history of the tropics as "rich" in natural resources still captures the fascination of wealthy eco-tourists, and foreign investors who continue to engage the territories mainly as an export processing zone.

Given this colonial and neocolonial context, the Caribbean landscape presents haunting paradoxes for Caribbean intellectual workers and creative writers who aim to recuperate an alternative history through an engagement with ecological metaphors. Indeed, for the many indigenous peoples and enslaved groups who historically worked the soil, island life was epistemologically and ontologically complex. There is enormous diversity among the communities of the Caribbean's first peoples, each of which had its own distinct culture, language, history and unique way of life. Despite these differences, they share the common value of being inseparable from the natural world. Traditionally, the Taino and Kalinago tribes relate to their ancestral past through the entertainment of spirits which emerge from the landscape. George Mentore, in his essay 'Of Vital Spirit and Precarious Bodies in Amerindian Socialities', interrogates the logic and interpretations of Caribbean landscape as a spirit-receptacle by pre-Columbian cultures (2018, p. 54-79). From this perspective, the landscape engenders memories and becomes a vessel of personal, cultural and historical negotiation. Incorporated into this symbiotic relationship with the land are also the operations of the enslaved groups shuttled into the New World to service the plantations. Failing to succumb to the grimness of separation, dispossession and physical torture, the newly transplanted labourers expressed reverence to the dead through conscious, physical rituals of remembrance by performing intimate rites around the plots and estates which they worked. The necessitated ritual intervention served to recover a sense of humanity and reconstitution of the self in the diaspora.

To mark this nexus of history, politics, and Caribbean identity as indelibly poetic and ecological in character, Olive Senior, in her collection of poems entitled, *Gardening in the Tropics* (2005), engages the metaphors of gardening and nature to chronicle the region's environmental upheaval in an attempt to demonstrate that the islands persist

as sites for consumption and ecological plunder. Through a blend of eco-criticism as delineated by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Wilson Harris's formulations of "living landscapes" and Caribbean mythologies, this essay seeks to interrogate the manner in which poet Olive Senior consciously wields the literary imagination as a platform to potentially plant seeds of reform and activism. This is achieved through a spatializing of realms and time, unfettered by monolithic ideologies and linearity, to posit a reliance on a spirit-infused universe. This literary innovation is pivotal to acts of environmental healing and societal recuperation. The landscape, as delineated in the poems, 'Brief Lives', 'The Immoveable Tenant', 'The Tree of Life', and 'Seeing the Light' (2005), subsumes an inner, spiritual gateway that orbits with visceral energies which are recovered poetically in service for the affirmative articulations of Caribbean lives. The goal is to resituate nature in positive terms as a space and agent of flourishing, rather than a resource for appropriation. Caribbean landscape is probed not only as a site of historical trauma but also as a space of agency, sustenance and continuity.

To interrogate the serious issues of ecocide, destruction of indigenous ecosystems, ecological plunder, and unbridled attitudes of conquest and industrialization, Caribbean poets like Olive Senior in *Gardening in the Tropics* (2005) and *Over the Roofs of the World* (2005), Lorna Goodison in *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses: Poems* (1995), Eric Roach in *The Flowering Rock: Collected Poems 1938-1974* (2012), Grace Nichols in *I is a Long Memored Woman* (1990) among others, have long engaged the concepts of Caribbean mythic imagination (where time and space become plastic), Caribbean syncretism, and cosmic motifs, to craft an alternative discourse. This alternative, discursive enterprise, serves to counter the supposition that nature is incapable of regenerating itself. Despite the negative consequences of humanity's destructive and exploitative behavior the poems reveal hidden life. The Caribbean landscape has come to function actually and symbolically as a repository of ghostly forces and energies that permeate the region. It is a locus that represents potentialities for transcendence.

Enlisted in Senior's artistic mission is the aim of freeing Caribbean peoples from the embalment of imperial history and an oppressive past. Senior sees the Caribbean landscape as the original archives. A recalibration of the conceptions of community alongside nature reveals a new manner of aesthetic practice, which gives primacy to matters of ancestral faiths and cosmologies. In other words, the Caribbean landscape is presented as a vulnerable character and surviving witness to the colonial past; it becomes a fount of symbolic etheric matter. This is embedded in the notion of cultural syncretism, which enables the spectres of the past to seep into mundane and natural realities. Intellectual architects like Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Edouard Glissant, Wilson Harris, as well as Mary Lou Emery (2012) and Lizabeth Paravisini (2008), have explored this symbiotic relationship between ancestral civilizations and nature.

## Re-conceptualizing Caribbean Ecology through the Mythic Imagination

Elizabeth DeLoughrey's and George B. Handley's introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* provides a fitting example of this re-conceptualization. In this work, the critics describe the purpose of blending a Caribbean mythic imagination with postcolonial ecocriticism. They assert that this conceptual tool is:

more than a simple extension of postcolonial methodologies into the realm of the human world; it must reckon with the ways in which ecology does not always work within the frames of human time and political interest, [thus] the definition reflects a complex epistemology that recuperates the alterity of both history and nature, without reducing either to the other (2011, p. 4).

DeLoughrey's and Handley's definition of a resurging ecological consciousness in the Caribbean resonates with a material-spiritual and cultural condition. The material-spiritual quality emerges from the historicity of the Caribbean landscape that is read as a latent cemetery in which many enslaved groups were interred on the land itself. The land is a visible and symbolic reminder of the presences of ancestors subsequent to which mystical relations among the living and the dead emerge. The underlying principle of a return to an immaterial realm engenders historical links between corporate capital systems, industrial toxics, deforestation, climate change and modern progress. Edouard Glissant's notions of relation and identity as delineated in his seminal work, *The Poetics of Relation*, comes to mind in which Glissant posits that the Caribbean soil is inextricably linked to one's sense of identity and narratives of origin (2010, p. 27). Glissant's postulation is a theoretical response, emphasized through literature, by which the past and the present maintain a plastic relationship. This fissure or hole in history, that is epitomized by a wounded landscape, unites man and spirit in a secret bond. It permits the accretion of time through simultaneous layers of history and gives freedom to the creative imagination. This finds a textual demonstration in Olive Senior's creative enterprise as she probes the landscape in service of articulating a more meaningful sense of ontological grounding. DeLoughrey emphasizes this perspective in her text, *Routes and Roots*. For the scholar, this aesthetic turn involves the excavation of remnant energies, which are imbricated in the soil of the Caribbean, in order to incorporate a submerged history into a sovereign future for the Caribbean (2007, p. 207). This conceptual framing disentangles the contemporary world from neocolonial determinism. Through the images of cultivating and nurturing the wounded landscape, creative writers are positing therapeutic processes for working through the fragmentation of Caribbean identity and belonging.

In his 1992 Nobel speech, Walcott, recalling the performance of the Indian Epic *Ramleela* in Trinidad, re-envisioned the role of nature within collective articulations of identity and belonging.

We had to...go through the creeks of the Caroni Swamp, to catch the scarlet ibises coming home at dusk. In a performance as natural as those of the actors of the *Ramleela*, we watched the flocks come in as bright as the scarlet of the boy archers, as the red flags, and cover an islet until it turned into a flowering tree, an anchored immortelle (1999, p. 68).

The routine flight of the red ibis is integral, both literally and metaphorically, to the entire conceptual shape of the West Indian collective unconscious as it yields the birth of metaphor itself. Here, a metaphor is conceived on the swampy terrain where the poetic mind is entangled with the material world as the islet comes to be written over by the material scribbling of birds only to appear as a tree. It is a performance of the uncanny, non-human energies that feed into Walcott's poetic reflections. Couched in the interpretive framework of an Indian ancestral ritual (the *Ramleela*), the metaphor suggests a recovery of lost cultural traditions, which are activated and transmitted through the Caribbean literary imagination. This expression offers the accumulating force and possibility of re-assembling and reconnecting with old-world cosmologies. It is a manner of experimental writing that reveals alternative strategies for excavating the deeper essences of the self and of things, by a return to the natural world.

The Caribbean philosopher and creative thinker, Wilson Harris, throughout the corpus of his works, has unfailingly argued that to enter into the Guyanese hinterlands means to step into a whole universe of temporal pockets where stones, trees, bushes, birds or rivers thicken time and open up new links between the past, present and future that disavow historical and linear determinism. A. J Bundy (1999) notes Harris's advocacy for cultural ecology via the use of myth in West Indian Literature:

Harris's sense [is] that the conventional novel, especially as it came to be realized in the nineteenth century, did not altogether fit, [and] that other resources were called for [...]. Harris experienced the interior of Guyana as a river and land surveyor in the 1940s. The interior *speaks* through a music of silence, a language of silence. The interior is also a living organism, an organum of forest, rocks, rivers and cataracts. The experience of the interior brought home to Harris the picture we hold of reality, and its reification in the conventional novel. (1999, p. 3. Emphasis mine).

Harris develops a parable of the Caribbean individual "that is to be found in the music of living landscapes, seascapes and skyscapes" (1999, p. 10). Caribbean mythology, then, incorporates the deposits of various cultures in the New World including deities, mythical avatars and ancestral presences, which can be reconstructed within discourse and intuited within a modern world for recuperative purposes. In Senior's poems, healing is achieved through the narrative technique of polyphonic associations, which blur the line between human and non-human consciousness, and a language that becomes repossessed with the ghosts of memory. Through such transgressive writing, time is re-positioned. It reflects an effort to reach for a language which reframes temporal angles and simultaneous experience to break through sterility and impotence. Senior engages voices and echoes from history, as is further demonstrated in her use of divine landscapes and anthropomorphism, which present an alternative way of measuring time. The aim is to prevent the permanent destruction of life and allow the possibility of rebirth of peoples and environments that would otherwise remain hidden or forgotten.

### **Eco-Divine Perspectives: Ancestral Cosmologies and Social Contestations**

In the poem, 'Seeing the Light', the persona compares the modern-day destruction of the landscape to the annihilation of the first peoples. The poetic voice in the opening stanza contemplates the dynamics of historical genocide and modern ecocide: "Gardening in the tropics nowadays means/letting in light: they've brought in machines/that can lay waste hundreds of hectares/in one day, they've brought in (since we have/already passed this way) other peoples to hack/and burn through.../the jungle" (2005, p. 95). Senior puns on the use of "light" to illustrate the political and racial tension between the pale Spanish invaders and brown-hued Taino natives. She is also illuminating the fallen natural state of the local forests due to the neo-imperial forces at work in the Caribbean during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Subject-verb ambiguities and enjambment highlight the simultaneous historical and contemporary violence to human bodies and forests as evidenced in the hacking and burning images, and double valence of "passed". In a calm, matter-of-fact voice, the speaker channels the phantom tongue of the collective native population:

We cleared just enough for our huts/and our pathways, opened a pinpoint in the canopy/to let the sun through. We made the tiniest scratch/on Mother Earth (begging her pardon). When we moved/on, the jungle easily closed over that scar again./ We never took more than we needed [...]. Never failed to provide/ tobacco smoke for the spirits (2005, p. 95).

Several interesting ideas emerge at this point. The unnamed native speaker notes the intimate connection that existed between the local tribes and their environment. Importantly, the persona also describes the jungle as a garden of "yuca and maize" (2005, p. 95), which was carefully cultivated to feed the people who lived in small clearings that accommodated huts and paths. The "green (and dark) terrain" (p. 95) symbolizes a nonviolent, non-exploitative way of interacting with nature. Significant is the point that traditions of ancestral faiths, mysticism and divinity are invoked to induce favourable elemental and atmospheric conditions for agriculture. Gianluca Delfino observes the implications of this bond between the first peoples and their natural environment: "The...Amerindian tribes of modern Guyana believe[d] itself to have sprung from the ground; and [felt] as if it were enchained to the earth [...]. The powers of nature...are the first objects of worship" (2011, p. 134). This integration with indigenous gardens and cultural daily practices allows for a thriving ecocritical awareness where the value is placed on nature. In the significant presence of sacred trees, "tobacco smoke," "green and tropical lands," and the "dark terrain" (2005, p.95) divinity resonates among the communities. Yet, as delineated by the speaker, military and capitalist intrusion, which disregard responsibility and ecological balance, have spread their ideals across the modern landscape.

The speaker laments, "[N]owadays... there are not enough trees to pull down/ [...]. The animals are gone too/ [...]. By the time they've cut/ the last tree in the jungle only our bones/will remain" (2005, p. 95). The reference to the lack of animals unpacks ideas of vulnerable eco-systems and food chains in which many of the endemic species have been destroyed. It signposts another dimension of violence upon nature and Senior's polemical undertones cannot be missed. Secular progressivism and post-industrial orders that disembowel the earth and threaten extinction have been criticized by Caribbean thinkers such as Kamau Brathwaite in his prominent work, *History of the Voice: The Development of the Nation in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984) and J. Michael Dash in *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (1998). As Senior's grim but evocative poem illustrates, the Caribbean is far from Edenic and is a space that is not devoid of conflict. In fact, its history is embedded in larger panoramas of resource extraction, (neo)-colonial governance and neglect, and the peoples' ongoing struggles to survive. It is through literary endeavours, which require an excavation of the ways in which nature is bound up in the colonial history of place that fresh understandings are gleaned and pursued for healing in the aftermath of colonialism.

To this extent, the emphasis on closely analyzing the metaphor of gardening is meant to deconstruct attitudes of menacing excess. The thematic premise of the environment which emerges in Caribbean writing eschews essentialist understandings that posit

the natural world as an atemporal realm. Creative works like Olive Senior's overturn presuppositions of a fixed ontological and epistemological framework for Caribbean being, and instead enable an affirmative re-articulation of a tenuous, fluctuating ontology that is interlaced with the natural, historical and poetic world. The landscape as demonstrated in this poem is entangled with issues of survival, creativity and the future. Such a position illuminates how articulations of Caribbean being and belonging in relation to the natural world challenge colonial ontological, epistemic and political appropriations of the region.

### **The Textured Caribbean Earth: Growing Magical Gardens from Ruins**

To further explore the value and complexities of the Caribbean natural world the themes of collective memory, and the startling will to survive via the domestic garden, are engaged. In the poem, 'Brief Lives', the gardener-persona digs up the bones of the "disappeared ones" (2005, p. 83), a recurring, yet active trope, which is a symbol for the first peoples who have been annihilated by European expansionism and violence. The Amerindian holocaust is a point of entry into many of Senior's considerations. In 'Brief Lives', ancestral blood and skeletons refuse to remain buried and resist permanent erasure. The environment is an active, transformative, anthropomorphic agent that shapes contemporary, cultural identity. The persona declares, "In some places they say when volcanoes/erupt, they spew out dense and monumental...skulls of *desaparecidos*" (2005, p. 85). The narration testifies to the advent of the Spanish invaders who are consumed by a raging earth. Senior's garden bed is covered with bones. It communicates the deeply felt ideology that the landscape has memory and can yield an uninterrupted flow of healing knowledge into the stream of everyday occurrences (Harris, 1999, p. 201). To buttress the concept of the "living" landscape, Wilson Harris, in the essay, 'Profiles of Myth and the New World', argues that the Caribbean environment subsumes vestigial traces, thus signifying and evoking an established line of communication between the region's heartlands and human communities (1999, p. 201).

The sprouting of skulls from volcanic eruptions engenders a horrific memory that is entangled with the ecosystem. One can therefore assert that interwoven in the speaker's historical sensibility is the memory of the landscape littered with human bones. This is in part re-created through the activity of gardening. The speaker asserts, "Mine is only/a kitchen garden so I unearth.../occasional skeletons" (2005, p. 85). The bitter pain of those lives imagined to have sunken into the Caribbean soil becomes a part of the energy which produces the new crops that are grown, harvested and consumed in contemporary times. The poet then shifts the focus away from the memory of the Amerindian genocide to modern-day acts of gang violence and warfare.

There is a diversity of stories and histories that Senior brings together in the poem. The keeper of the modern kitchen garden notes, "The latest [skeleton]/was of a young man from the country who/ lost his way and crossed the invisible/ boundary into rival political territory./ I buried him again so he can carry on/ growing" (2005, p. 85). It can be argued that Senior is deploying a metaphysical reading of the persistent sequence of trauma, territorial contestation and wounding in Caribbean societies through the signification and life-cycles of gardening.

The garden is fittingly depicted as a timeless, organic gravesite. For example, the speaker calls attention to aspects of social death and disease, as s/he draws reference to the "young girls [with] their short skirts [who will live] even briefer lives" (2005, p. 85). Death, in this sense, is imagined to have its grips psycho-socially, as the gardener envisions the lives of the young women, whose existences have been curtailed by sexual exploitation and abuse, as forming a part of the energy in the domestic tropical garden. Yet, the tone of the piece is not pathologically grim, for Senior offers glimpses of a reclaiming vision through the symbol of the life-affirming field, a juxtaposed image to the melting and aggressive image of the volcano that opens the piece. The poetic voice imagines that the life force of the young man and young women will be able to rejoin the ecological cycle and grow again. Senior is positing that history is cyclical; it is a perspective that allows for the possibility of a rebirth of lives through the environment. The image of the cyclical processes of nature transforms death into life, which the keeper of the garden wields to recuperate those voices that have been imprisoned by a seemingly disinterested and unfair social system. Nature is thus sustained as a powerful, healing repository in the Caribbean imagination. It is a signifier of both the dislocation and re-articulation of Caribbean lives. Such a reading is essential to resituate the environment as a space of flourishing rather than a resource for appropriation.

### **Mapping Displacement, Transformation and Belonging in Caribbean Scapes**

Senior's poetic handling of eco-violence addresses not only indigenous massacres but mundane forms of ecological plunder vis-à-vis the unsafe rebuilding of island life and modern architecture. In the poem, 'The Immovable Tenant', the exploitation of Caribbean raw materials by Western investors is challenged. The poet sustains the motif of ecological ruin, which is rendered as a result of population growth and highly inequitable distribution of resources. As a consequence of these circumstances, life is lived on a thread, indicating that upheaval and dislocation are always imminent for the lower socio-economic class. The poem lends a commentary on how infrastructure and architectural development become instruments of power that enable a recasting of systems of land ownership and occupancy. The sequence of events spotlights the

manner in which subaltern populations are forced into even smaller living spaces. The irony is that governments are complicit in projects that increase profit by installing substandard buildings and housing facilities to curb overpopulation, which results in tragedy. The poetic voice declares:

Everyone in this area is mortgaged/to the limits of the landlords.../And, as my old-daddy used to say,/he who plays the piper calls the tune/...You see me/here?.../I came to hold him dear. If you play/ball, he'll treat you fair, throw things/your way, include you in the game (2005, p. 102-3).

Senior is commenting on the influence of temptation of neocolonial forces whereby a number of local people are enticed into colluding with the wealthy landowner to enforce dispossession of fellow citizens in the hope of promised prosperity and partiality. The persona confesses:

I'm not lying: when I was younger, /I joined in some protests/ [...] I'm not boasting but/[...]I tell my people now to cool it. For/I've been paid to see the wisdom of/supping with the enemy/...he's/asked me as a favour to talk to my/neighbour for she's messing up his plans/for the property. He's spent a lot/of money fixing up the place. He wants/to attract tourists, investors and/extractors, for the garden is full of/trees ripe for felling and the house/of treasured priced for selling and there/are minerals to be mined [...]/It's just this miserable old lady living.../in the basement now.../She's/ constantly undermining him, screaming/at his tenants and everyone within/hearing (even over his airwaves): "Beware!" (2005, pp.103-4).

Challenging the hegemonic control of the "lord of the manor" (2005, p. 103), the poet inserts the strong-willed energy and political valence of the woman who threatens to expose the vices of corrupt, corporate and infrastructural projects. She, like the other sidelined tenants, is threatened by impending eviction. Moreover, she is opposed to the plundering of a nurturing and life-giving landscape. She is described as one who "wraps her head in red, puts on/her mourning garments and stalks the/streets disguised as the dread Warner/Woman calling out "Fire! Blood! Repent," that made "the tourists and investors/jittery" (2005, p. 104). The overarching poetic voice interprets her as erratic and a nuisance. The speaker's attitude of scorn echoes European colonialism that criminalized the native and syncretic spiritual practices in the New World. This

syncretic spirituality encompassed ancestral veneration and embodied agency through a close interaction with a spirit-infused universe.<sup>1</sup>

In the character of the warner woman, Senior retains and mediates a sense of social duty, which is to warn the nation of its misdeeds. In the poem, the woman is depicted as an undaunted spiritual mother whose apocalyptic messages of neocolonial invasion and mismanagement of resources, illumine the depletion of the natural world and human spirit. She warns:

Uncle tearing/down the old places and rebuilding with/...unseasoned  
lumber and other/inferior material.../these hurry-come-up schemers  
build on sand/...them fill up their pockets/but...once the going gets  
rough,/the digging too tough, they'll leave/...jettison their efforts to the  
jungle. As soon as/they spy next door the fabulous new/virgin  
territory—they'll move on (2005, p.105-6).

In this rant, she intimates that unsafe enclosures and living conditions are part of the ongoing genocidal structures contributing to death in the region. The underlying concern is with the historical construction of Jamaica's landscape and its colonial legacies. According to Tony Weis in his article, 'Restructuring and Redundancy: The Impacts and Illogic of Neoliberal Agricultural Reforms in Jamaica', the island sits on an ecological precipice, with large numbers of people having to clear and cultivate excessively steep, unstable and highly erodible spaces (2004, p. 462-3). As Weis notes, the neocolonial forces of deforestation in Jamaica continue to decrease aquifer recharge systems and underground water levels, alter the hydrological cycle which contributes to harsher droughts, and increase surface runoff (2004, p. 467-9). Consequently, the genuinely natural ways of Jamaica's ecosystems continue to be irretrievably undone by the demands of neocolonial forces.

This awareness also weighs heavily among other Caribbean islands and perhaps most poignantly on the island of Haiti. According to a report by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), even prior to the infamous 2010 earthquake, Haiti was the "poorest most environmentally degraded country in the Caribbean" (2010, par. 3). The article cites extensive deforestation as a major problem, exacerbated by the earthquake and more importantly, its aftermath. The UNEP posits that "before the earthquake, the total forest cover was approximately 2% in a country where 75% of energy demands were satisfied by wood fuel, and a lack of trees had, in turn, caused

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Montgomery in his essay entitled, 'Gothic "Voodoo" in Africa and Haiti' (eTropic 2019), connects the concepts of Vodun and African syncretic religions to the gothic tradition. Montgomery identifies the principles of ritual, spirit possession and divination as hidden epistemological resources, which empower various subaltern groups towards self-reclamation, healing and transcendence from the pain and distortion of the postcolonial world.

significant soil erosion" (2010, par. 4). Some commentators have placed the blame for this pre-earthquake ecology on the poor leadership of the Haitian government, citing poor oversight or outright corruption. However, while Haiti's unsteady political climate may have contributed to its ecological instabilities, a sole focus on this factor tends to obscure the fact that many of the island's environmental vulnerabilities are rooted in the history of colonialism, to which Senior broadly refers in her creative pieces. In the article, 'Haiti's Elusive Paradise', LeGrace Benson argues that Haiti's present weakened, environmental fate was set even before its independence (2011, p. 68). She asserts that "Saint Dominique, Haiti's cane fields...[were] probably the most altered ecosystem on earth" (2011, p. 68). Benson's argument rests on the notion that colonial profit and gain had indeed enfeebled the island's environmental and natural structure, which impacted the ability to assemble robust infrastructures that would steadily resist natural disasters and threats. Additionally, in the post earthquake period, the island continues to be in flux. Current epidemics of cholera, the spread of tent cities, and the neglect of much of the country's infrastructure are but some of the contemporary maladies, which intersect with its ecological, colonial and traumatic past.

Writers like Senior revision and inverse the pain of history through creative expression. The half-mortal, half-divine presence of the warner woman who is fixated on collaborating with the "steadfast tropical/sun, wind, and rain, with the help of the/termites, the ants, the woodlice, and/the worms" to reclaim a sense of place and identity (2005, p. 104), provides a new framework to negotiate environmental value and ethics. Senior is re-affirming the role and transformative function of nature in the speaker's psyche. Symbolically, the warner woman is a primordial mother who aims to nurture a reconnection with the landscape and foster social bonding that will renew a citizenry responsibility and collective purpose amidst the nightmare of global modernity. This connection with the tropics feeds her rebellious, national pride and voice, which arguably becomes more effective than "protests," and "petitions" in challenging the exploitation of the islands' raw materials. Nature provides her with the resources required to re-construct identity outside of dominant discourses that denigrate and stifle the local inhabitants. The spectacular powers of the tropics become a subversive repertoire by which its people are able to conjure agency and empowerment.

### **Yearning for Paradise Lost: Poets as Mythic Architects**

Another poem that is representative of the shedding of colonial fear and anxiety is 'The Tree of Life'. The poet turns attention to a cross-cultural sense of Caribbean mythologies by revisiting the Edenic garden and the original foundation of

transgression and anxiety—the tree of life. Biblically, the first man and woman, Adam and Eve are banished from the garden and from a life of peace and goodwill as Eve eats from the forbidden tree of knowledge (Genesis. 3:6-24 *King James Version*). When Wilson Harris describes the tree of life in relation to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), he recognizes the integral Christian mythology. Yet, he ultimately asserts that Rhys's work is an attempt to show the intersections of three Caribbean mythologies: Christian, pre-Columbian and African (1999, p. 114-117). Senior's narrative of origin traces these patterns. Indeed, the poem refers to the Christian myth of the Great Flood as the persona notes: "Gardening in the Tropics was easiest/before the Flood. We had just one tree/to care for" (2005, p. 93). However, it is Senior's deconstruction of the Christian tree mythology, which is especially interesting in relation to a postcolonial, eco-critical assessment of global modernity. Similar to the Christian tale of Adam and Eve, albeit divergent in Senior's rendition, all life forms are alienated from the lavish tree after eating their fill. Contrary to the Christian myth, however, the inhabitants of Senior's tropical garden have not sinned in any way. In fact, even before eating from the tree, they "fell down/and praised Him" (2005, p. 93). It is for no clear reason, and certainly not for sin, that they are separated from the ravishing tree. Instead, the speaker tells of "agricultural officers/(those long-sleeved white-shirt boys)" who "have been coming around to try/and persuade us to chop everything down" (2005, p. 94) so that it might be used to enrich the rest of the earth. According to Jordan Stouck in 'Gardening in the Diaspora: Place and Identity in Olive Senior's Poetry', Senior is delivering a strong warning on the manner in which globalization extends colonial agricultural practices in the poem, 'The Tree of Life' (2005, p.122). Stouck is illustrating the susceptibility and vulnerability of native Caribbean landscape to the prosperity that is promised by the agricultural officers for the replacement of indigenous fruits, such as starapple, naseberry, hot peppers, tomatoes and cassava, with imported commercial species such as apples, grapes and pears.

Moreover, in her intellectually-insightful essay 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', Sylvia Wynter opines that the plantations were the "superstructure of [Caribbean] civilization; and the plot was the roots of culture" (1971, p. 100). Wynter continues, "But there was a rupture between them [as] the superstructure [began to] respond to the demands of external shareholders and metropolitan markets" (1971, p. 100). Taking a lead from Wynter, one notes the manner in which localized agrarian folkways were undermined by pervasive capitalist markets and systems of monopoly. The idea of ecological imperialism seems appropriate to the discussion at hand, since it theorizes the invasion of foreign species into localized ecosystems. Biopiracy – the taking of resources from the native land and the substitution of local life with imported products – subsequently created another dimension of colonialism. This is certainly interrogated by Senior, who probes how global processes have long interacted with the spatial

marginality of farmers and the ferocious demand to shift scales from a national to a global context.

Not only is the poem an allusion to the dangers of mono-crop production for contemporary local farmers, but it is a polemic on the importance of environmental equity. Rather than holding power over plant and animal life, Senior's paradisiacal scene depicts all living species' mutual engagement in the tree's varied bounty and the common will to share resources. This desire to share resources positions humans in a space of parity with other living beings on the planet—an idea common to Amerindian lore. From such a position, there would hardly be a unilateral depletion of resources as has been the case in the colonial, Christian-influenced, history of the New World. By reviving indigenous folkways via the creative and mythic imagination, Senior aims to contribute new understandings on Caribbean environmental and territorial justice. A major facet of this approach is the illumination of the vulnerabilities of Caribbean small-island ecology from the looming threats of foreign capitalism, trade and investment, which can devastate agriculturally-based landscapes and economies. A discursive return to historical information can be regarded as a tool of dialogue, mediation, and environmental ethics. To read nature in Caribbean literature is to dialogue with the archival, textural remains of ancient civilizations alongside modern-day human communities. Such spaces of intersection may be poetically mobilized, as Senior has done, to make visible the new faces of contemporary environmental threats and to facilitate more effectively a poised, collective sense of environmental activism and intervention. It is precisely through this alternative approach to restore historical presences through literary practices that ecological healing is afforded.

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