

# The Muse of Chaos: The Ethos of Ecology and the Poetics of Relation in Rachel Carson's Work and Derek Walcott's Poetry\*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the role of ecology in literary studies, especially in transcultural settings. It traces the ways in which the imperial ethos of ecology plays itself out in the writing of "nature," examining the evolution and the limitations of the botanical gaze in the context of American literature, and the subsequent critique of it from the loci of the desert wilderness and the entropic landscape of the poisoned garden. It then focuses on Rachel Carson's work, and then addresses the radical reinvention of the ecological ethos in the "geological gaze" that characterizes an important aspect of South African literature. I argue that, in this shift, the green imperial gaze which gives way to a deep reading from below the yellow earth also makes possible a more radical concern with the ecological bearing of literary representations. On this basis, I conclude with an analysis of the poetics of relation that informs much of Derek Walcott's early poetry. Walcott's poetry is most innovative and strong in the ways in which it brings about an openness of relations among the elements of being, transforming deep ecology into an open literary ethos where subjects are free to wander and subjectivities to metamorphose.

## KEY WORDS

botanical gaze  
chaos  
imperialism

geological gaze  
ethos  
postcolonial studies



## 1.

The relationships between humans and their environment have long been an integral part of the literary imagination.<sup>1</sup> But the environment itself has not merited much attention in and of itself, especially in its irreducible, ecological factuality, until recently, when ecocriticism became a viable critical approach in political, social and also literary studies in the 1990s. Whereas this paper is mainly interested in the roles of ecology in literary studies, it also seeks to open itself to the topic of ecology as ethos, as “openness of being” that allows the meeting, the relation of beings, face to face, as intersubjective terms of relating among elements of the world (Levinas 9–10).

Since the time of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “place” in literature has been taken to mean little more than the settings in which human actions take place and manifest their meanings. Even when such settings were sometimes taken to the level of symbols with which human actions and worldly events were writ larger than life on tribal, national and even cosmological boards, settings were rendered subservient to characters and plots (for which the terms of “pathos” and “mythos” were coined). Both of these terms evolve in the literary work around the ups and downs of human actions. But does the modern rise of ecocriticism mean simply a shift of attention from humans to place, from literary works that feature human experience to others that privilege nature, environment, or ecology? Does this shift of paradigm—if indeed it is one—treat nature, environment, or ecology only as mere spatial referents, as objects that are acted upon by humans, and not as an active,

productive subject with and against whom humans interact? Can it be possible to see ecology as *ethos*, as that in which one thinks critically against the violence of othering the other, against the violence that speaks so much about the dark gazes of power of which the environmental crises are but the least visible because they are the most fully naturalized, the most naturalizable and therefore the least thinkable? How can one think against the grain of "the environment" when it is always already "thought" as the transparent, natural, objective thing out there, thus remaining the given, unalterable space? What is there in ecocriticism, after all, that may help us see the history behind the "place," the power play on the apparently docile body of the land? And how can ecocriticism be enabling and productive, finally, in ways that may help radicalize the reading and the production of literature? What can the study of literature possibly offer to the flesh and blood of the environment out there, living tangibly or, very likely, suffering miserably, beyond the touch of literary texts?

This paper ventures into these interrelated issues from a transcultural point of view. It takes as its point of departure the fact that environmental critique is, in its first and last instances, social critique, as Ulrich Beck insists. It is so because "nature" as such has always already been projected from inside civilization for its own reflexive ingestion. This paper will first attempt to show that imperialism is fundamentally an ecological violence. In mapping or territorializing nature, empires alienate the place from its raw, elemental factuality and produce thereon a space for their own self-inscription. What makes ecology a deeply radical project is that it "presupposes amnesia," that the concept of nature, which in this case is antithetical to the project of ecocriticism at stake, "simulates a naivety that allows its utterer to lay claim to a naivety of the given, of the prior given, the immutable and good" (Beck 39). Ecology has thus remained for a whole century a mere variant of the project of modernity itself since the term was coined in 1868 by Ernst Haeckel.

This paper will try to examine whether ecocriticism can be other than naïve and innocent. It is interested in the active forgetting, rather than the unconscious amnesia, of the transcultural enterprises of the

empires, and it does so by visiting literary studies and the production of literary production *on-site*, to wit, on the site of the ecological breaks that must inevitably give “the given” away. In what follows, then, this paper ventures into the ecological cores of imperial sociologies to see how modernity may in fact be more fractured than coherent or continuous. It seeks to bring to light the different ethnocentric gazes with which “nature” is concocted to prepare for the subjection of the environment, and to think how such an understanding of the heterogeneity of ecological imagination may be conducive to the conception of ecocriticism as a foundational term of alternative literary representation.

## II.

Take, for instance, Edward Abbey, one of the most radical environmentalists of our age, who voiced his critique of the deep cultural inscription over and above the ecological facts in the beginning of *Desert Solitaire*. On the first day of his job as a park ranger in Arches National Monument in Utah, he stands awed by a huge 50-foot boulder balanced on a pedestal of the same size, which he then compares to “a head from Easter Island, a stone god or a petrified ogre.” But immediately he interrogates himself:

Like a god, like an ogre? The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself, to eliminate for good. I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus, but also to confront, immediately and directly if it is possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a

non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock. (6)

In this manifesto of “radical environmentalism,” one not only sees a critique of the Thoreauvian view of “nature” as a site for the evasion of “the clamour and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus,” indeed for the performance of anti-urban civil disobedience, but also a revision of “nature as myth” into nature as the raw and elemental that is out there beyond human ingestion. Such a revision, however, does not mean the total relinquishment of culture in the presence of nature. Instead, it voices recognition of the dialectics between the two, between “the bedrock” of the natural and the elemental, of which the humans are an integral part, and “the paradox” of having to imagine the environment beyond human terms *in human terms* such as “a hard and brutal mysticism.”

Abbey’s insistence on inevitable “mysticism” is meant to be a call for action of the radical kind rather than an appeal for any occult faith of the Thoreauvian sort. His novels like *Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Fool’s Progress* chronicle such environmentally fundamentalist actions in elaborate detail. On the level of environmental consciousness, however, such an insistence should be understood in line with the ever-evolving conceptions of nature in the American literary tradition, of which Abbey is both an informed critic and a radical break. Lawrence Buell’s influential study *The Environmental Imagination* sees this quincentenary tradition of American environmental discourse as a triple-layered palimpsest that features “the old world desire of the pastoral” at the bottom, topped in the medium layer by the American cultural nationalism that celebrates the Edenic wilderness, until it is “reconstructed” since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “in a latter-day scholarly discourse of American exceptionalism” (5–6). Deeply inscribed in such a tradition of cultural topography, “the territorial facticity of America has always been both blatant and opaque,” Buell laments (6).

Abbey’s loud cries in (and also for) the dying wilderness thus signify an apocalyptic break from the millennial mercantilism that

dominated the view of nature for a good part of American cultural history (300–01). By imagining such an apocalyptic confrontation between raw nature and the machine culture, and enacting it, in the words of Buell, “with a raffish panache that unsolemnizes his jeremiads,” however, Abbey’s call for the preservation of the wilderness becomes directly antithetical, in both the style and the contents of discourse, to Rachel Carson’s critique of environmental degradation from the perspective of biological interconnectedness. Whereas Abbey would pit the anarchistic weapon of the monkey wrench against the deforesting machines of bulldozers and cranes, Rachel Carson would radicalize the Thoreauvian critique of machinery *as such* and replenish the landscape-imaginary (of the Thoreauvian kind) with real bodies, human and otherwise, who are threatened by poisons and pesticides. Leo Marx has detailed how machine technology has taken hold of the good old American ideal of the pastoral in his monumental study *The Machine in the Garden*. In “the garden of ashes” that America must inevitably become along this line of industrial development, Marx advises that one start to imagine how to get beyond “the system that makes men the tools of their tools” (355). In the same vein of critique, however, Carson warns that the machine has in fact broken out of the garden of the American pastoral imagination, and has infected both the land and all organic bodies to a cancerous, irrevocable degree. The American garden has in fact become a wasteland of chemical poisons, a desert and “a howling wilderness” void of life (Norwood 338; 348, n. 33).

It is this apocalyptic vision of the environmental body, indeed one of *the whole environment as one body*, that sets Carson apart as a radical ecologist. How Rachel Carson’s organic ecological critique may be related to the eco-feminist movement that since the 1970s has emphasized the femininity of nature (as opposed to the masculinity of culture) is an issue too large to elaborate here, but in this context, as far as femininity has been inscribed into scientific, literary and even ontological discourses of landscape (cf. *Earthcare*), Rachel Carson’s ecological *pathology* has shown more powerfully than others how the environmental body is much more than a metaphor. “Mother Earth” is

a viable ecological term of critique only insofar as it pertains to the organic interconnectedness between life forms.

But Carson may have shed more light than has been allowed on the organic interconnectedness, not just between different life forms, but between nature as such and the cultural signification of it that always remains a powerful framework of influence upon human behavior. Long-term causes of our ecological crises can be better understood by looking into the anthropocentric cognitive framework that determines human behavior toward nature. In proposing her organic view of the environment, Carson has in effect re-situated humans in the grand ecological cycle of being, making them one of the many *objects* that are vulnerable to environmental forces, rather than simply the supreme subject that acts upon them from beyond. Even if they remain both tool-users and machine-makers in modern civilization, humans are in Carson's view also objects of the grand machine of the environment. Carson's critique thus signifies a return from the perception of the environment as an epistemological entity to one of ecology as an ethical, intersubjective mode of action. It features a radical break from the domain of topography and seeks instead to construct an ecocentric imaginary in writing the landscape. In her portrayal of the entropic landscape in *Silent Spring*, Carson demystifies the American topoi of the green garden and the prelapsarian wilderness, imploding them from inside the industrial machine of progress. As the green American garden turns gangrenous with an overdose of pesticides, Carson launches her radical ecocentric critique—Wallace Stevens had mused upon some decades ago:

After the leaves have fallen, we return  
 To the plain sense of things. It is as if  
 We had come to an end of the imagination,  
 Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective  
 For this blank cold, the sadness without cause.  
 The great structure has become a minor house.

No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.  
 The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.  
 A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition  
 In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of the imagination had  
 Itself to be imagined. The great pond,  
 The plain sense of it, without reflection, leaves,  
 Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
 The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this  
 Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,  
 Required, as a necessity requires.

(“The Plain Sense of Things”)

Language fails when adjectives other than “green” are unavailable for the “blank cold” or the “sadness.” The “great structure” of the “greenhouse” is already reduced to the entropic, inanimate objecthood of the “inert savoir” that goes by the name “Nature.” The “blank cold” that defies the power of language also cuts deeply into the redundancy of men’s “fantastic efforts” of civilization. And so in the post-historical ennui of finding “no turban walking across lessened floors,” we see men and flies returned to the same state of things, indeed the same sense of things, nature. Men and flies become kith and kin to each other, for they are both things that must inevitably fade back into the raw “out there.” Stevens’s subsequent call for “the imagining of the absence of imagination” is therefore a call for an ecocentric imaginary. The pond is a pond, a subject that has the “inevitable,” ineffaceable, automatic force as an ecological fact, precisely in its plain, non-reflective, silent state.

Thus understood by way of Wallace Stevens, the ethical, intersubjective mode of Carson’s critique allows one to conceive of an



ecocentric humanism in which the environment can and should be re-imagined as an alternative knowledge about the plain sense of things, about facts that range from the silence of “the great pond and its waste of the lilies” to human imagining respective of such silence. Thus reclaiming the environment from the fallen leaves of the American garden, Carson also opens up an ethical/ecological domain in the field of literary imagination.

Take for instance the beginning chapter of *Silent Spring*, where the physical fact of infected American townscapes is read vis-à-vis the western tradition of literary landscape. The hazard of insecticides is given a clear vision in an analysis that entertains a greater depth of history than is generally entertained in scientific expositions:

The world of systemic insecticides is a weird world, surpassing the imaginings of brothers Grimm—perhaps most closely akin to the cartoon world of Charles Addams. It is a world where the enchanted forest of the fairy tales has become the poisonous forest in which an insect that chews a leaf or sucks the sap of a plant is doomed. It is a world where a flea bites a dog, and dies because the dog's blood has been made poisonous, where an insect may die from vapors emanating from a plant it has never touched, where a bee may carry poisonous nectar back to its hive and presently produce poisonous honey. (32–33)

Remaining a devoted biological scientist all her life, Carson was nevertheless always skeptical about whether humans in general could bring scientific expertise to bear on the development of proper scientific ethics. This is why *Silent Spring* appears to give a grimmer view than did her earlier works, such as *The Sea Around Us*, about nature's independence from human exploitation (Norwood 335–36). Throughout her career, Carson maintained a humanistic perspective toward the environment, always seeking a more sanguine comprehension of what is involved in the sustenance of nature than the violent impulse of sheer scientific discovery. That is why she is always consistent in *bringing science into the imaginary and vice versa*, so that

her scientific diagnoses and her literary vignettes can remain in her works as "linked yet antithetical microcosms" (Buell 291) of the larger picture of life on earth.

"Mother Sea" is one of the key concepts that she thought could accommodate such a holistic investigation into the grand mechanisms of nature. The ocean is a womb of life in both geological and biological senses, and in this larger frame of study she established a biocentric view of systemic ecology:

When they went ashore the animals that took up a land life carried with them a part of the sea in their bodies, a heritage which they passed onto their children and which even today links each land animal with its origin in the ancient sea. Fish, amphibian, and reptile, warm-blooded bird and mammals—each of us carries in our veins a salty stream in which the elements sodium, potassium, and calcium are combined in almost the same proportion as sea water. This is our inheritance from the day . . . when a remote ancestor, having progressed from the one-celled to the many-celled stage, first developed a circulatory system in which the fluid was merely the water of the sea. In the same way, our lime-hardened skeletons are a heritage from the calcium-rich ocean of Cambrian time. . . . And as life itself began in the sea, so each of us begins his individual life in a miniature ocean within his mother's womb, and in the stages of his embryonic development repeats the stages by which his race evolved, from gill-breathing inhabitants of a water world to creatures able to live on land. (*The Sea Around Us* 13-14)

Although she is equally concerned with all forms of life and all venues of the biosphere, Carson was most original in her biocentric view of ecology that breaks life down to an organic whole of elements, elements that metamorphose into and out of one another. As sodium, potassium and calcium are to ocean water and human blood, so is plankton to squids, sharks and life of larger form of life in the ocean. And the same ecocentric approach was also applied to her geological

study of the origin and demise of life forms on islands, deriving from it a holistic ecological ethos that is premised upon a detailed grasp of interconnectedness among elements of the ecosystem.

It was with this systemic view of the ecology on earth that Rachel Carson distinguished herself as a leading thinker in radical environmentalism. Central to such a view was the theme of "the Mother Sea," for with it she detailed the fluid permeability that governs the interactions between different life forms, between life forms and their environment, and, within the scope of her *oeuvre*, between the knowledge of physical science and literary discourse. Her idea of the sea as a womb of life commands a panoramic view of geology, bio-science, human history and literary reflections, each of which comes within her ecocentric criticism, which modeled itself on what she called "the gray beginnings"—namely, the grand "void" or "chaos" that characterizes, or indeed governs ecological mechanisms on earth (3).

If, as Neil Everden has argued, "nature" has always already been so concocted as to "naturalize" social policies of control and domination in the West, then Rachel Carson may have reversed the cultural logic of "naturalization." For with Carson's vision of "the elemental" and the "organic permeability between the elements," cultural production concerning the environment can be done differently, on ecocentric, rather than anthropocentric, bases. Such a discursive reversion, from dominance and control for cultural-political purposes toward organic confluence, contains within it a radical departure from the Judaeo-Christian core of the capitalist ethos that has inscribed itself deeply into the modern globalization of cultures. Other scholars owe much to her work. For example, Richard Grove's monumental study, *Green Imperialism*, gives an elaborate survey of environmental control in the modern colonial mechanism of trans-cultural signification, of which the American myths of the garden and the wilderness are integral parts. Alfred Crosby's ground-breaking work *Ecological Imperialism* also delves deeply into the biological texture of modern imperial expansions, finding in them a huge mechanism of investigative ingestion that plays itself out in the

territorial, geo-political, and commercial-colonial spheres of Western imperial enterprises. Despite the biblical overtones of many of her epigraphs, Rachel Carson's ecological studies have done a great deal to re-situate the thinking of the environment in secular, virtually animistic contexts in which alternative ecological imaginations are possible.

### III.

Both Richard Grove's and Alfred Crosby's researches point to the colonial underpinnings of modern environmental studies. Deep in the physiocratic and medical practices of modern empires, as both Grove and Crosby maintain, there lies an anthropocentric vision of history that constantly demands to be naturalized, indeed to be territorialized into the writing of the landscape. But, is historicity always the irreducible given that governs the practice of historiography? Is the ecological "sense of things" always "plain," always ignorant of the maneuvers that have walked the forest floors of modern imperial civilizations? Or is there in fact a radical, postcolonial edge in the ecological approach of literary studies? If indeed Edward Abbey has signaled a radical break from the "wilderness" and the "garden" imaginations in American culture, what alternative landscapes can we find in cultures outside Anglo-American topographies? What place does ecology have in these alternative imaginations? And what may be read out of such literatures to help us think about the radical status of the ecological ethos?

In his critique of the South African culture of letters in *White Writing*, J. M. Coetzee calls for a departure from "the botanical gaze" in readings of the South African landscape, for, as the botanical reading of South Africa names it "as non-Europe," "it remains Europe, not Africa, that is named" (164). The South African veld, Coetzee explains, demands not a green gaze of a universal sort, but a deep reading of the stony particulars:

There is a strain of landscape poetry, particularly strong in South Africa . . . which grows out of the venerable figure of nature as

God's book . . . "The Universe in the most literal sense is [God's] written language . . . and which therefore foregrounds the problem of the meaning of the landscape and claims for poetry above other arts the craft of descrying meanings in the landscape. The questions that trouble white South African poets above all are . . . whether the land speaks a universal language, whether the African landscape can be articulated in a European language, whether the European can be at home in Africa." . . . [T]he veld speaks an incomprehensible language. (166–67)

Coetzee's essay goes on to identify an alternative, geological gaze on the South African landscape in a poem by Charles Eglington, entitled "Old Prospector," which

presents an emblematic reader of the land in the person of a prospector who eschews the "eagle's view," the all-encompassing overview of Africa, in favor of a close poring over the earth. . . . In effect [the prospector] turns away from the comprehensive prospect-view of an older, colonial pictorial art linked to conquest and domination, in favor of a humbler homegrown art of closely rendered particulars, grounded on love of and intimacy with the land-as-soil. This poem . . . is noteworthy not only for the claim it stakes for a new landscape art not founded on the imperial gaze, but for reemancipating a recurrent theme of South African landscape writing: that the true South African landscape is of rock, not of foliage; and therefore that the South African artist must employ a geological, not a botanical, gaze. (167)

Such an alternative reading in fact originated with the prototypical South African novelist Olive Schreiner, with whom the stones of Karoo "speak to those trained to read them" (167). "This geological turn to South African landscape poetry is particularly intriguing," Coetzee emphasizes, because of "its claim that vegetation disguises landscape, that traditional landscape art is superficial by nature," and that it "cannot tell the true story of the land, the story that lies buried, or

half-buried, beneath the surface" (167-68). "Calling on old analogies between distance and superficiality, closeness and depth," Coetzee concludes, the new landscape art thus becomes "above all an art of deep reading" (167-68).

Such a call for deep and close reading of the landscape is akin in spirit to Carson's insistence on the eco-geological gaze, but it also departs from that in strict ecological terms. "What lies buried beneath the unpromising surface of Africa, besides lifeless metals?" Coetzee insists on asking, and he answers himself by referring specifically to poems that feature botanical truths essentially different from what Buell, Grove and Crosby have asserted in regard to the "botanical gaze." Coetzee explains:

Apprehended not by the eye but by the more primitive tongue . . . drunk in a reverential kneeling posture, the life-giving underground water of Africa offers itself to Africa's true children: the native, the primitive, the lonely diviner. In other poems, the stony truth of Africa emerges in the form of a flower. . . . The rocky interior thus has a living heart, revealed only to the closely attentive observer, the lone walker of the wilds. The *locus classicus* of this epiphany in the veld is the moment in *The Story of an African Farm* when a tree utters its truth, or is on the point of uttering its truth, to Waldo. (168)

I have quoted Coetzee at some length to demonstrate the ways in which an alternative gaze, indeed an alternative, ecologically-deep vision of historiography is possible, and how literarily productive such an ecological ethos can be. Behind Coetzee's radical reading of South African literature, one can discern an enabling poetics of literary production that he later calls a "geological gaze."<sup>2</sup>

By thus reading against the grain of the literary landscape in South Africa, Coetzee has in fact proposed a concept of the "subjectivity of the place" in the production of literature. J. Hillis Miller discusses such a land-based literary ethos from inside the great tradition of Anglo-American "topography." "Place" signifies to Miller

a site of critical literary study because there lies a tension between the creative force of place in the production of literature and the revealing of it in the literary work as a static, objective entity. Such a tension is inscribed, according to Miller, in the Greek concept of "prosopoeia," which ascribes, in a literary work, "a voice or a face to the absent" and "brings forth the presentation of a subject . . . and vice versa," as it is in the domain of ethical, intersubjective relations (*Topographies* 57). This aspect of the reciprocal configuration between place and subjectivity is at the core of the ecological ethos in transcultural settings. If Rachel Carson has brought literary landscapes and ecological crises in the real world to collide with each other, Coetzee has brought ecology itself into a state of crisis in the production of South African literature, making it a prime prosopoeic subject in literary production.

#### IV.

This paper began with an inquiry into the apparent naivete of landscape, asking if in fact there are deep histories behind the flat faces of the land. And it has ventured to show that ecology will speak volumes if given attentive ears. In what follows I shall ask whether place also articulates itself in textures of lines and colors as much as it does in voices or, as in the cases Coetzee analyzes, in silence that haunts the land and the people. Derek Walcott's famous "The Sea is History" (1979) employs a catechistic dialogue that breaks the silence of the silent landscape, allowing ecological facts to speak in answer to the biased inculcation of the colonial cultural regime. The poem begins:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that grey vault. The sea, the sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History.

Walcott's rebuttal goes on, in a language that is as audacious as it is autochthonous:

First, there was the heaving oil,  
 heavy as chaos;  
 then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a caravel,  
 and that was Genesis.  
 Then there were the packed cries,  
 the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.  
 Bone soldered by coral to bone,  
 mosaics  
 mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow,

that was the Ark of the Covenant.  
 Then came from the plucked wires  
 of sunlight on the sea floor

the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage . . .

In alternating unrhymed triplets and quatrains, the wave of refutation goes on in rolls, welding facts to fiction, nature to culture, and ecology to scholarship, allowing the seascape of the archipelago to orchestrate itself, in the manner of chaos, into a whole symphony of strong irreducible elements:

but the ocean kept turning blank pages

looking for History.

Then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors  
 who sank without tombs . . .

.....

but where is your Renaissance?



Sir, it is locked in them sea-sands  
 out there past the reef's moiling shelf,  
 where the men-o'-war floated down;

strop on those goggles, I'll guide you there myself.  
 It's all subtle and submarine,  
 through the colonnades of coral,

past the gothic windows of the sea-fans . . .

In 21 further triplets plus two odd-standing singles to punctuate the punch lines, the poem ushers in "the onyx-eyed bald queen" through "the gothic windows of sea-fans," parading through "the brown reeds of villages mantling and congealing into towns," tuning to the evensong of "the midge's choirs" underneath "the [schooners'] spires lancing the side of God as His son set. . . ." And as "each rock broke into its own nation, then came the synod of flies [. . .] and the secretarial heron . . . and the bullfrog bellowing for a vote," etc., all of which succeed and complement one another, there come, into "the dark ears of ferns," "the salt chuckle of rocks with their sea pools," a sound "like a rumor without any echo of History, really beginning" (366–67). The poem gives a whole healthy body—in all manners of its sensuality—to the many histories confronting one another in the great vault of the depths. Ecology is literally the subject of enunciation throughout the poem, as it is in many other Walcott poems before 1979.<sup>3</sup>

This last issue of the meeting of histories in the writing of place, of ecology confronting the imperial gaze, is rendered in Walcott's poem with an autochthonous vision of a place-specific imaginary that dives deeply into the texture of the place's oceanic topology. This deep diving is done by both the persona and the animistic rendition of the elements in the natural and the human realms. This poem proposes an ecocentric ethos of aesthetics that may best be characterized in the words of Édouard Glissant, Walcott's personal friend and the poet laureate of French-speaking Martinique:

What will historical consciousness be then, if not the chaotic pulsing towards these meetings of all histories, none of which can claim (thanks to the inherent qualities of chaos) to have an absolute legitimacy? . . . I call Creolization the meeting, interference, shock, harmonies and disharmonies between the cultures of the world, in the realized totality of the earth-world. . . . Creolization has the following characteristics: the lightning speed of interaction among its elements; the “awareness of awareness” thus provoked in us; the revelation of the various elements brought into contact . . . unforeseeable results. Creolization is not a simple cross breeding that would produce easily anticipated results. (Glissant 1998, 4; qtd in Mignolo 41)

“Creolization” is thus chaos fleshed out in a succession of images that transform into one another. It is elements subjecting themselves to the hydraulic drag of the big element pool. It interrogates the vision of closure and opts instead for a sensual proximity of relations across biospheres of being. Take for instance the following poem by Walcott, in which humanity blurs into the oceanic depths below the horizon:

My race began as the sea began,  
with no nouns, and with no horizon,  
with pebbles under my tongue,  
with a different fix on the stars.

But now my race is here,  
in the sad oil of Levantine eyes,  
in the flags of the Indian fields.

I began with no memory,  
I began with no future,  
But I looked for that moment  
when the mind was halved by a horizon.

I have never found that moment

when the mind was halved by a horizon—  
 for the goldsmith from Benares,  
 the stonecutter from Canton,  
 as a fishline sinks, the horizon  
 sinks in the memory.

Have we melted into a mirror,  
 leaving our souls behind?  
 The goldsmith from Benares,  
 the stonecutter from Canton,  
 the bronzesmith from Benin.

A sea-eagle screams from the rock,  
 and my race began like the osprey  
 with that cry,  
 that terrible vowel,  
 that I!

Walcott's oceanic topography may have risked some tint of racial essentialism in the beginning stanzas, and yet it is precisely against the gravity of such colonial historicity in the landscape that the ecological motifs then begin to take flight: the mind that gets "halved" by the horizon may in fact have "doubled" into each other in much the same way as the sky doubles the ocean and vice versa. The osprey that enunciates the racial self does it in the pre-Oedipal sign of a bird cry. Then, in the next stanzas, the primitive environment closes in from all around to dissolve whatever has attempted to multiply itself in the oceanic landscape:

Behind us all the sky folded,  
 as history folds over a fishline,  
 and the foam foreclosed  
 with nothing in our hands

but this stick

to trace our names on the sand  
 which the sea erased again, to our indifference.

And when they named these bays  
 bays  
 was it nostalgia or irony?

In the uncombed forest,  
 in uncultivated grass  
 where was there elegance  
 except in their mockery?

Where were the courts of Castile?  
 Versaille's colonnades  
 supplanted by cabbage palms  
 with Corinthian crests,  
 belittling diminutives,  
 then, little Versailles  
 meant plans for a pigsty,  
 names for the sour apples  
 and green grapes  
 of their exiles. (Walcott 305-08)

Human historicity is thus both mocked and ironized in the colonial landscape that refuses to fit in seamlessly. The fact and the act of naming—and let us remember this is precisely the topic of this poem—is therefore betrayed by the very *things* that are named. It is thus most fitting for the “cabbage palms” to “supplant Versaille’s colonnades” because their “crests” may still look “Corinthian” when they in fact are simply palm crests. Names in French creole are returned by way of lexical inversion to the ecological elements of “sour apples” and “green grapes,” to say nothing of the “diminutive” image of the pigsty.

This ecological landscaping goes on in the rest of the poem’s stanzas, bringing to bear many sensual details to orchestrate a post-

Oedipal world where “naming” has been corrupted into an autochthonous vision of the Caribbean ecology:

Their memory turned acid  
 but the names held;  
 Valencia glows  
 With the lanterns of oranges,  
 Mayaro’s  
 Charred candelabra of cocoa.  
 Being men, they could not live  
 Except they first presumed  
 the right of everything to be a noun.  
 The African acquiesced,  
 repeated, and changed them.

Listen, my children, say:  
*moubain*: the hogplum,  
*cerise*: the wild cherry,  
*baie-la*: the bay,  
 with the fresh green voices  
 they were once themselves  
 in the way the wind bends  
 our natural inflections.

These palms are greater than Versailles,  
 for no man made them,  
 their fallen columns greater than Castile,  
 no man unmade them  
 except the worm, who has no helmet,  
 but was always the emperor. . . . (“Names” 305–08)

Historicity dissolves and corrupts in the presence of the raw. In the literary landscape where senses cross their distinctive boundaries to blur the ultimate line between the human and the natural, Walcott has radicalized the writing of ecology and finds in it a new basis for poetry.

So when one hears the literary landscape drizzle in the following poem, one also sees history sing itself in the lines that are, in the plain sense of the thing, the island rain:

At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.  
At the rain's edge, a sail.

Slowly the sail will lose sight of islands;  
into a mist will go the belief in harbors  
of an entire race.

The ten-years war is finished.  
Helen's hair, a grey cloud.  
Troy, a white ashpit  
by the drizzling sea.

The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp.  
A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain  
And plucks the first line of the Odyssey.

(“Map of the New World” 413)

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a rising concern with the representation of landscapes since the late 1980s when new interest was found in the spatial critiques of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey. One of the first systematic study on the subject is *Writing Worlds*, in which the histories of landscape representation in the western civilization are analyzed as image, metaphor and discourse. There is a radically interdisciplinary approach in and between each of the contributed essays, ranging from literary to world-economical and further to ethnic and anthropological concerns. There is a considerable revision in this book on what is the environment, how it affects humanity and how it can and should be

studied in relation to literature, distinct from the static, mimetic conception of it as mere settings, as can be found in earlier studies like *Literary Landscapes of the British Isles: A Narrative Atlas*, authored by David Daiches and John Flower in 1979. A very different approach toward the subject, indeed a critique of Daiches's project in spirit, can be found in J. Hillis Miller's *Topographies*, where "place" is taken to the level of a spatial subject from and around which emerge pathos and ethos that is human, social, historical, geographical and even cosmological. Miller cites the Greek concept of "protopoieia" for the rationale of this book, taking it to mean the ethos from which the place, the characters and the spirit of the age, etc., are proposed or presented. Other preeminent studies that are concerned with the environment as discourses of power and management include Adrian Franklin's *Nature and Social Theory* and Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*. For studies of the environment as discourses of power and management in colonial-globalizing contexts, one can go to Derek Gregory's *Geographical Imaginations*.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Coetzee himself boasts a long career of ecological consciousness in his novels and literary criticism. His first novel, *Dusklands* (1975), breaks into the dark, ecologically vicious psyche of the imperial gaze of both the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century American and the colonial Dutch imperialists. In *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), he represents a deep, radical, ecology in flesh and blood, with the character Michael K who retreats, literally, into the bosom of the earth as his ultimate move of resistance against the sociology of colonization. In a later novel, *Disgrace* (1999), Coetzee has his professor-hero "fall" from the disgrace of a sex scandal, and in the hero's subsequent retreat into the care of his daughter in the countryside, he learned to live with an acquired, humble sense of grace in taking care of injured animals in the clinic of his daughter's lesbian lover.

<sup>3</sup> In another essay (Luo, "Writing/Riding") I have analyzed how Derek Walcott's poems underwent a change of themes in 1979, when he resigned from the Trinidad Theatre Group and left for USA to assume a teaching post at the University of Boston. Poems that were ecologically very sensitive to the Caribbean settings were written before this period. "The sea is history" is one of the major poems in the representative volume of poems published in this period, *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1979).

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