

**UCLA**

**UCLA Previously Published Works**

**Title**

ISLAND ECOLOGIES AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURES1

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0qb7k4h7>

**Journal**

Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie, 95(3)

**ISSN**

0040-747X

**Author**

DELOUGHREY, ELIZABETH

**Publication Date**

2004-07-01

**DOI**

10.1111/j.1467-9663.2004.00309.x

Peer reviewed

# ISLAND ECOLOGIES AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURES<sup>1</sup>

ELIZABETH DELOUGHREY

*Department of English, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA. E-mail: emd23@cornell.edu*

Received: August 2003

---

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which European colonialism positioned tropical island landscapes outside the trajectories of modernity and history by segregating nature from culture, and it explores how contemporary Caribbean authors have complicated this opposition. By tracing the ways in which island colonisation transplanted and hybridised both peoples and plants, I demonstrate how mainstream scholarship in disciplines as diverse as biogeography, anthropology, history, and literature have neglected to engage with the deep history of island landscapes. I draw upon the literary works of Caribbean writers such as Édouard Glissant, Wilson Harris, Jamaica Kincaid and Olive Senior to explore the relationship between landscape and power.

**Key words:** Islands, literature, Caribbean, ecology, colonialism, environment

---

## THE LANGUAGE OF LANDSCAPE

Perhaps there is no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of flora and fauna than the Caribbean islands. Although Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin had been the first to suggest that islands are particularly susceptible to biotic arrivals, and David Quammen's more recent *The Song of the Dodo* has popularised island ecology, other scholars have made more significant connections between European colonisation and environmental history. While the growing field of ecocritical studies is concerned with the relationship between literary production and the environment, few have taken into consideration the importance of island ecologies and histories, particularly in the wake of the colonial process. Thus I argue, against the popular grain of Euro-American ecocriticism, that the complex histories of colonisation, the imposition of the mystifying *terra nullius* (empty land) upon indigenous spaces, and the relationship between landscape and power are central to any discussion about literary inscriptions of island environments. In recent years, Crosby and Grove have shown that

the relationship between colonisation and ecology is rendered most visible in island spaces. This has much to do with the ways in which European colonialism travelled from one island group to the next. Tracing this movement across the Atlantic from the Canaries and Azores to the Caribbean, we see that these archipelagoes became the first spaces of colonial experimentation in terms of sugar production, deforestation, the importation of indentured and enslaved labour, and the establishment of the plantocracy system. Foregrounding the ways in which European, African, and Amerindian histories became rapidly entangled in the transatlantic colonial process allows us to destabilise the popular notion that islands are isolated geographic spaces from the larger forces of globalisation and modernity.

A growing body of scholarship has gestured to this complex creolisation process to suggest that the Caribbean became the first site of modernity; a concept that has been applied to human diaspora rather than the diasporan seeds of plants. What Crosby terms 'portmanteau biota', defined as the organisms that travelled with Europeans to their colonies, including animals,

plants, and disease, radically altered island landscapes (Crosby 1986, p. 89).

Portmanteau biota introduced to the Caribbean region included transplanted crops such as sugar cane, nutmeg, and coffee which, coupled with the slavery system and monocrop agriculture, significantly contributed to the near eradication of many indigenous peoples, flora, and fauna. Damaging ecological practices by Europeans in the Atlantic islands and the Caribbean were visible rather early in colonial history. For example, the deforestation of the Canary Islands was widely reported by 1300 (Grove 1995, p. 5), while British sugar production had exhausted Barbadian soil to the extent that attempts were made to import richer soil from Dutch Guiana in 1769. Yet most scholars have either examined the ecology of the Caribbean *or* the literature, without bringing these two disciplines together as I hope to do, lest we forget that the term 'culture' is derived from the Latin for 'cultivation'.<sup>2</sup> Literary productions from the Caribbean, I contend, are deeply engaged with the process of human and plant diasporas, rendering a complex cultural ecology of island spaces. The history of island colonisation, which is a narrative about the relationship between landscape and power, is thus vital to any discussion about literary inscriptions of Caribbean ecologies.

In his introduction to *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell defines landscape, 'not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed' (Mitchell 1994, p. 1). In other words, the landscape is not reducible to anthropocentric representation; the 'natural' environment is constituted and constitutive of human history. As a process rather than a passive template, this indicates a particular dialectic between the land and its residents. In the Caribbean, this dialectic is specifically rooted in the region's violent history; an unprecedented upheaval and relocation of European, Asian, and African peoples and cultures, rapidly condensed within the boundaries of island topoi. Edouard Glissant (Martinique), contends that due to the history of the plantation system, Caribbean cultural narratives have been unable to articulate a relationship to the landscape that is disentangled from forced agricultural labour. Because of the material compression of land/labour, 'people did not

relate even a mythological chronology of this land to their knowledge of this country, and so nature and culture have not formed a dialectical whole that informs a people's consciousness' (Glissant 1992, p. 63). Since the Caribbean has been so deeply informed by the history of diaspora, including the destabilisation and restructuring of diverse cultural practices, island narratives have struggled to articulate local 'space (as) a practiced place' (de Certeau 1984, p. 117). The hegemonic plantation system that banned African languages, cultural practices, and religions heavily determined the social contours of nearly every 'sugar island' in the Caribbean. Glissant reminds us that in the absence of African cultural recognition, the Caribbean 'landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history' (Glissant 1992, p. 11). Consequently he encourages Caribbean writers to reestablish dialectic between landscape and history, and between culture and the natural world.

What Glissant refers to as 'the language of landscape' is apparent in the literary works of a number of Anglophone Caribbean writers including Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua) and Olive Senior (Jamaica). Here I examine the ways in which the historical process of biotic transplantation is rendered in cultural narratives, tracing a trajectory between agriculture in the Caribbean to the cultivation of particular flora as outlined in Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*. Kincaid offers a political 'language of landscape' which is inseparable from colonisation. In a similar vein, Olive Senior's poetry collection, *Gardening in the Tropics*, particularly the section entitled 'Nature Studies', queries the process of cultural and biological rootedness by declaring, 'plants are deceptive. You see them there/looking as if once rooted they know/their places; not like animals, like us/always running around, leaving traces' (Senior 1994, p. 61). Senior and Kincaid address the creolisation and hybridity of biotic transplants, depicting a culturally complex island community and inscribe 'the language of landscape' in a number of natural metaphors. This suggests that the natural world is not simply a backdrop for human subjectivity and history. In both authors, flora and fauna are inscribed as diasporan settlers, highlighting the ways in which the landscape mitigates the complex process of human transplantation and sedimentation.

Through their examination of the relation between transplanted and indigenous biota, these authors respond to Wilson Harris's (Guyana) call for writers to 'to deepen out perception of the fauna and flora of a landscape of time which indicate the kind of room or space . . . in which whole societies conscripted themselves' (Harris 1995, p. 48). Following the lead of ecocritic Lawrence Buell, I read these Caribbean texts as 'environmentally oriented work(s)' in that they demonstrate that 'the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history' (Buell 1995, pp. 7–8.) Like most ecocritics, Buell bases his study on US landscapes and has not considered the more tumultuous aspects of (island) colonisation. Therefore if we reposition Buell's definition of the environmental imagination with the Caribbean context, we might very well ask if the transplantation of dozens of varieties of sugar cane and the millions of slaves across the Atlantic to cultivate this crop could be called 'natural', even if cane, breadfruit, coffee, nutmeg, ackee, mango, coconut and countless other staple crops of the region have become deeply *naturalised*. Unlike the white settler production of nature writing, particularly the genre produced in the US, these island writers refuse to depict the natural world in terms that erase the relationship between landscape and power. In fact, the complex diasporas of plants and peoples in the Caribbean, and these writers in particular, problematise the notion of 'natural history' and its segregation from human agency.

### ISLANDS OF HISTORY<sup>3</sup>

Before I turn to these contemporary Anglophone texts, I would like to sketch out the ways in which tropical islands have been depicted across a broad spectrum of British narratives so that we can more fully understand the colonial context from which Caribbean writers have diverged; as a whole, recent poetry from the Caribbean challenges exotic narratives that mystify the relationship between island landscapes and imperial power. Yet this does not mean that the colonial legacy has dissipated in any meaningful way. In an era where size becomes synonymous with might, the cultural, historical, and material

importance of islands to world history has been generally ignored. The sun never did set upon the British empire in a large part due to its extensive island colonies from the Caribbean to the Pacific in one hemisphere, and from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean in the other. Consequently it is not a surprise that colonial island adventure narratives were one of the most popular genres produced in the British metropole. British colonial activity in island spaces became mystified through the literary construction of isolated islands, which presumably were awaiting European material and narrative 'development.' Texts from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (and the thousands of 'Robinsonades' that adopted this narrative of island colonisation) were important precursors for reductive representation of tropical islands over the centuries.

Broadly speaking, these narratives produced a contradictory binary that is also visible in the language of island biogeography. This aporia, an insoluble contradiction evident in both disciplines, suggests that islands are simultaneously isolated yet deeply susceptible to migration and settlement. This is why for instance, much of *Robinson Crusoe* circulates around the tension between the protagonist's decades of isolation and his persistent paranoia that he will be visited by ocean-voyaging cannibals. Crusoe's fear of *indigenous* migrant consumption belies the ways in which the *European* migrant consumption of island landscapes and labour was exacted through the movement of those wooden floating islands: the British maritime empire. Here we might reflect on the notion of island remoteness; nearly every scientist, botanist, geologist, anthropologist, and travel writer has come to the conclusion that islands are remote by *travelling* there. The material and ideological accessibility of tropical islands to Euro-American colonialism suggests that perhaps they are not so remote after all. We have to question who benefits from the persistent myth of island isolation, particularly in the wake of over a century of technological developments in communications and transportation. Island tourism has taken this isolation axiom to hyperbolic levels – in this paradigm, the tourist departs from his or her modern, temperate continent (or British archipelago), travels to the tropics in comfort and ease, arrives at a 'remote' island conveniently

inhabited by 'natives' who are somehow isolated from the same forces of modernity and globalisation that mark the tourist. Or, in the case of one modern media Robinsonade, the US television programme *Survivor*, actual natives need not apply. The contestants travel by helicopter or motorboat in order to access supposedly remote and ahistorical islands. When indigenous history does appear, it is rendered evolutionarily 'primitive', in strikingly similar ways to the nineteenth-century colonial European landscape paintings that Stepan examines in her excellent study, *Picturing Tropical Nature*. As she points out, colonial landscape paintings incorporated ancient flora such as fern palms, suggesting 'a vegetative existence belonging to an older, more primitive world than the temperate world of the present' (Stepan 2001, p. 11). As with the colonial British constructions of islands, the timeless and atemporal isle can only signify as such when it is constructed in binary opposition to the modern history and urbanised geography of its continental visitors. Since this binary is based upon unequal relations, it derives from metropolitan colonialism and thus has contributed to the erasure of what islanders might inscribe about their own landscapes and histories.

In the Western imagination, 'island' and 'islandness' have metaphorical nuances that are highly contingent upon the repercussions of European colonialism and continental migration towards island spaces. Although this paper examines cultural forms, this colonial desire for islands also has a concrete material basis. In his analysis of European colonial documents of the Medieval and Renaissance era, Crosby concludes that experiments in the Canaries and Madeira taught the Europeans that they must seek lands that were:

1. remote enough to discourage European epidemiological susceptibility,
2. isolated from large mammals such as horses to ensure European military advantage,
3. distant enough to prevent native defence against introduced disease,
4. lands that were not inhabited by ocean-voyaging peoples (Crosby 1986, p. 102).

The repetition of the words *remote* and *isolated*, presumed synonyms for island space, suggests that they are central to the ideological pro-

cess of colonisation. The imposed concepts of remoteness and isolation are closely aligned to the colonial imperative to erase islanders' migratory histories, particularly their maritime capacities. Islands and their inhabitants are paradoxically positioned as 'contained' and 'isolated' yet this belies the consistent visitation by colonials, shipwreck, anthropology, and tourism. As I have argued, the narrative of island isolation is constituted by these visitors. Not surprisingly, there are few if any historical testimonies from Pacific or Caribbean islanders bemoaning their isolation from Europe.

The term 'island' does not simply signify a small tract of land surrounded by water but 'something resembling an island especially in its *isolated or surrounded position*' and 'an isolated group or area; especially: *an isolated ethnological group*' (my emphasis, *Webster's Dictionary*). The latter definition is dependent upon Western evolutionary and anthropological axioms suggesting that the construction of the remote island is contingent upon the metropolitan centre that employs it. For instance, Kirch explains that (Pacific) island societies have been 'fertile intellectual terrain for anthropology . . . [and] have long provided inspirational material for the advance of anthropological method and theory' (Kirch 1986, p. 1). Kirch cites a number of important anthropological theories, including functionalism, which arose from the conflation of island cultures with their bounded topographies. As in other discursive fields, the islands are inscribed as isolated and contained 'laboratories'. In *The Song of the Dodo*, Quammen explains that for nineteenth-century Western scientists, 'islands in general were *repositories* for the rare and the peculiar' (my emphasis, Quammen 1996, p. 82). His encyclopedic study of island biogeography barely problematises island isolation, even when in most cases the studies he examines are based on *archipelagoes*. As such, Quammen's work reflects the ways in which island biogeography is founded upon the unexamined assumption that islands are defined simply by 'inherent isolation' (Quammen 1996, p. 19), which leads to an additional presumption that islands 'are natural laboratories of extravagant evolutionary experimentation' (Quammen 1996, p. 18). The associative terms 'repository', 'museum' and 'laboratory' suggest the mobilisation of the colonial gaze upon a

passive and static object – an artifact often rendered without contextual history.<sup>4</sup>

Although British island narratives are notorious for emptying island spaces of history, some critics have pointed out the ways in which other disciplines, such as the archeology and anthropology of island spaces and peoples, have tended to ‘focus exclusively on a “systemic” approach which disregards history’ (Kirch & Green 1992, p. 162). Significantly, Kirch contends that scholars have been so entrenched in the discourse of island boundedness, isolation and atemporality (‘shallow time depth’) that archeological inquiries were hardly made in the Pacific until recently. Interpretations of heavily scrutinised islands such as Tikopia were so concerned with ‘internal processes of change . . . [that] regional (archipelagic) exchange networks’ were completely overlooked (Kirch 1986, p. 4). This is a glaring omission if one considers the geographically extensive Pacific seafaring capacities which, before Europeans had ventured from their shores, led to the settlement of nearly every island in this vast ocean.<sup>5</sup> This example has ample precedence in anthropological studies. The reductive division of the Pacific islands into Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia highlights the ways in which migration and exchange between the islands were either inconceivable or simply threatening to the continental arrivants, who had a vested interest in maintaining a stable tax-paying, church-going, and labouring population. Arbitrary cultural divisions were also made between the ‘peaceful Arawaks’ of the Caribbean and the supposedly fierce Caribs. Recent scholars have traced the linguistic similarities between the Carib and Arawak/Taíno and demonstrate that, like Oceania, the region had been interconnected by indigenous trade routes for centuries before European arrival.<sup>6</sup>

When island peoples are inscribed historically, too often this is rendered in evolutionary terms that deny modern continuities and complexities. Like the presumably primitive native visited by the western anthropologist, islanders are often perceived as symbols of the evolutionary past. Appadurai asserts that the ‘native’ association with place has resulted in an image of native ‘confinement’ and ‘incarceration’ (Appadurai 1988, p. 37). These constructions derive from the ‘quintessentially mobile’ anthropologist who visits the native in his or her ‘natural environ-

ment’. In this sense, natives and islanders become ‘creatures of the anthropological imagination’ (Appadurai 1988, p. 39). In the case of many island anthropologies, the bounded landscape has served as a metaphor for bounded and limited culture. Other scholars have demonstrated that Enlightenment ideology and anthropological praxis position indigenous peoples in a homogenous, prepositional time prior to the narrative of European, linear-based progress.<sup>7</sup> It is in this way that island societies are dehistoricised and represented as undeveloped and premature, in stark opposition to the trajectory of Western biological and cultural evolution. Although it seems counter-intuitive, the deep geological and biological history that both Darwin and Wallace were able to pinpoint in island spaces seems to have become frozen in time and then ideologically grafted onto *modern* island peoples and landscapes. As a result, geological primitivism became synonymous with primitive islanders, who became icons of cultural stasis even while the spaces they inhabited were generally recognised as dynamic.

This construction of isolated island space is an implicit consequence of European colonialism and has a tremendously complex history. The island has functioned ideologically in various historical eras as a ‘new Eden’, a socio-political utopia, a ‘refreshment’ stop for long maritime journeys, and the contained space where shipwrecked men (or boys) may reconstruct their metropolitan homes. The rise of the British novel in the nineteenth century was sustained by exceedingly popular texts such as JM Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* and Robert Lewis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, just two of the hundreds of island adventure narratives that were published in Britain alone.<sup>8</sup> Island narratives have travelled extensively even if islanders themselves were positioned in bounded terms. The island archipelagoes of the Canary and Madeira islands were the first ‘laboratories’ for European maritime colonialism and the first sugar plantations of the Atlantic.<sup>9</sup> This continental experiment in island colonisation, deforestation, sugar plantocracy and slavery was then relocated throughout the Caribbean. The use of one archipelago (represented as an isolated island) as an ideological template for the next, reveals the ways in which this continental discourse travelled along a westward trajectory. For

example, the Canaries were not only ideological and colonial laboratories of Europe, but also an important cartographic point that caused Christopher Columbus to situate his 'discovery' of the Caribbean as 'off the Canary Islands'. The ideological mapping is rendered materially visible when we remember that Columbus picked up sugar cane in the Canaries and transported it to the Caribbean.

Islands have not only functioned as colonial or socio-political spaces of experiment, but have facilitated tremendous ecological, biological, and social theory. As Grove explains, European deforestation of the Canary and Caribbean islands created the first environmental conservation laws of Spain, Britain and France. It was primarily due to the island environments of Mauritius and the Galápagos that Darwin was able to theorise *The Origin of Species*; Wallace made similar evolutionary observations in the Malaysian archipelago; the Caribbean (and later the Pacific) islands were some of the first sites of European ethnography; and Atlantic, Indian Ocean and Pacific islands were the templates upon which Jean-Jacques Rousseau based his vision of the *homme naturel*. Nunn contends that oceanic islands were vital to Alfred Wegener's theory of continental drift as well as later discoveries about sea-floor spreading and plate tectonics (Nunn 1994, pp. 22–25). More disturbingly, many Pacific and Caribbean islands have become nuclear and live ordinance test sites and the 'repositories' of toxic waste due to US and French imperialism. As such, some Pacific islands have the dubious distinction of being the first unapproachable 'museums' of millennial toxicity. The variant poles of island utopia (the 'noble savage') and dystopia (nuclear eschatology) suggest that islands have long served as the philosophical and material foci of the fears and desires of continental arrivants.

The geographic categorisation of islands into oceanic (an emergence from the sea floor) and continental (a fragment of the mainland) privileges scientific and philosophical concerns with island origins. As Grove explains, the idea of island isolation 'directly stimulated the emergence of a detached self-consciousness and a critical view of European origins and behaviour' (Grove 1995, p. 8). Due to this association between islands and origins, it is not surprising

that the influential botanist Carolus Linnaeus contended that Mount Ararat was the terrestrial world's originary island: 'if we therefore enquire into the original appearance of the earth, we shall find reason to conclude . . . one small island was in the beginning raised above the surface of the waters'. Linnaeus concluded that this primordial island was 'a kind of living museum' and the site of Eden (quoted in Quammen 1996, p. 35). Although I have barely skimmed the surface, it is clear that island topographies have not only materially benefited Europe, but have also provided the botanical, anthropological, biological, environmental, and ideological space for European laboratories, experimentation, and development. As Sahllins explains, 'the heretofore obscure histories of remote islands deserve a place alongside the self-contemplation of the European past – or the history of "civilizations" for their own remarkable contributions to an historical understanding' (Sahllins 1985, p. 72).

I am interested in comparing the ways in which island studies, particularly the natural sciences, articulate the fraught relationship between migrant colonists and the endemic. In this case scientists use these terms to designate the process of species evolution, but certainly it is no coincidence that Darwin, Wallace, and others began using these terms during the peak of European colonisation of tropical islands all over the globe. The online *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the word 'colonist', adopted by the British from its Roman origins, initially signified a *human* process during the height of European colonisation in the eighteenth century. With the rise of natural science as a nineteenth-century discipline, the term seems to have 'travelled' into island biogeography, employed to suggest the migratory process of flora and fauna to island spaces.<sup>10</sup> The language of island biogeography is thus strikingly symbolic of the process of European colonisation of island spaces. For instance, if we take the observations of the nineteenth-century evolutionist, Moritz Wagner, on the consequences of the geographic isolation of fauna, we might easily assume he is speaking of humans: 'the formation of a new race will never succeed in my opinion without a long continued separation of the colonists from the other members of their species' (quoted in Quammen

1996, p. 131). Given the very palpable debates at this time about the evolution of a specifically creole culture in the Caribbean and other colonies, and the construction of non-European peoples in terms of racial difference, Wagner's choice of language can hardly be coincidental. Due to these historical and discursive entanglements, crude adaptations of Social Darwinism were employed in Western literary production as biological justifications for the colonisation of non-European peoples, a point that did not escape Darwin's contemporaries, including Karl Marx.<sup>11</sup>

### ROOTS: GARDENING IN THE TROPICS

Just as Darwin 'refused to set man over and against the rest of the natural world' (Beer 1986, p. 215) and was deeply concerned with the fraught relationship between migrants and the endemic, Caribbean writers have also explored biotic colonisation in island spaces. Olive Senior's poem 'Plants' observes, 'the world is full of shoots bent on conquest,/invasive seedlings seeking wide open spaces' (Senior 1994, p. 61). This brings us back to the ways in which the 'natural' world, too often ideologically segregated from the social practices of human beings, has been of profound concern to many Caribbean writers. Thus far I have mentioned that both cultural and biogeographic studies of islands are caught between discourses of migration and island isolation, and I have tried to destabilise some of the narratives that emphasise bounded cultures and material practices by gesturing to the complex histories of island colonisation. To sum up the previous section, I contend that both cultural and scientific island discourses have their roots in the upheavals of the European colonial era – the establishment of island biogeography, botanic gardens, the plant trade, and nature studies, like the tropical landscape paintings and island castaway novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are all 'modes of representation which were developed in the process of colonial expansion' (Stepan 2001, p. 35). At this point I would like to turn to the process of migration, to reinvigorate the etymological roots of the term 'diaspora', defined as the dispersal of (human) 'seeds'. Although most scholars tend to segregate the ways in which peoples and plants were

traded as commodities, the writers I examine hinge their work on the simultaneous 'uprooting' of plants and peoples and their transplantation to colonial botanical gardens and sugar plantations across the Atlantic. In the Caribbean, the island landscape into which these labourers were acculturated was as 'routed' in trade networks as the human arrivants. Here I quote at length from writer Jamaica Kincaid:

What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time [the] famous adventurer (Christopher Columbus) first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua now will not supply a clue. The bougainvillea . . . is native to tropical South America: the plumbago is from southern Africa; the croton is from Malaysia; the hibiscus from Asia and East Africa; the allamanda is from Brazil; the poinsettia . . . is from Mexico; the bird of paradise is from southern Africa; the Bermuda lily is from Japan; the flamboyant tree is from Madagascar; the casuarina comes from Australia; the Norfolk pine comes from Norfolk Island . . . the tamarind tree is from Africa and Asia. The mango is from Asia. The breadfruit is from [Tahiti] (Kincaid 1999, p. 135).

The imaginative excavation of precolonial history, symbolised by the landscape, poses a particular problem for the Caribbean writer attuned to the temporal and spatial relations of power. Kincaid asks, before Columbus, 'What herb of any beauty grew in *this place*? What tree? And did the *people who lived there* grow them for their own sake? I do not know, I can find no record of it. I can only make a guess in this way: the frangipani, the mahogany tree, the cedar tree are all native to the West Indies, and Antigua is in the West Indies' (my emphasis, Kincaid 1999, p. 137). In this passage Kincaid has marked a significant slippage from what she initially calls 'this place' – the space of the contemporary Caribbean subject – to the objectified query about 'the people who lived there'. This suggests a profoundly *discontinuous* temporal landscape, which cannot be categorised in the same spatial terms due to the tremendous alteration and rupture of the island's flora, fauna, and human populations. In other words, the precolonial Caribbean and the contemporary island of Antigua are radically divided between 'here' and 'there'; Kincaid has semantically



separated each space, refusing to establish a conceptually unified narrative of time. As such, Kincaid reiterates Glissant's contention that Caribbean history is characterised by 'ruptures' and 'brutal dislocation', where 'historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment' (Glissant 1992, pp. 61–62). The narrative result is not only a 'tormented chronology of time' and space, but suggests that the (subjugated) past, suppressed in dominant historiography, becomes 'obsessively present' (Glissant 1992, p. 63).

By examining the colonial process, we see that two key tropes were 'central to the task of giving a meaning and an epistemology to the natural world and to western interactions with it. These were the physical or textual garden and the island' (Grove 1995, p. 13). There has been an established tradition linking work such as gardening with the writing process, and scholars have increasingly turned to the colonial narratives of garden utopias (Eden) and positioned them alongside postcolonial renditions of island dystopia. Grove explains that by the fifteenth century, 'the task of locating Eden and re-evaluating nature had already begun to be served by the appropriation of the newly discovered and colonized tropical islands as paradises' (Grove 1995, p. 5). The pervasive image of the island paradise is probably one of the most obvious mystifications of centuries of slavery and colonisation. Grove suggests that the rise of the island Eden in European narratives has a material origin in that it was a product itself of 'the realisation that the economic demands of colonial rule . . . threatened [the islands'] imminent and comprehensive degradation' (Grove 1995, p. 5). In other words, at the height of the process of altering and damaging island landscapes, tropical islands were interpellated in Edenic terms, removed in space and time from the urbanisation of Western Europe, which of course had been constituted by the labour of the colonies.

If there is a point of similarity between the notion of island utopias and the writing process, it would be that both conceptualise the process of creation with the materials at hand, creating historical meaning out of particular spaces. Kincaid, a novelist and avid gardener, explains that this is why both her writing and gardening are 'exercises in memory, a way of remembering

[her] own immediate past (the Caribbean) and the past as it is indirectly related to [her] (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings)' (Kincaid 1999, p. 8). For Kincaid, island history, embedded in the landscape itself, is a meditation about relations of power. In *The Garden (Book)*, long passages are devoted to plants such as the casuarina, hibiscus, and the wisteria. Cotton and sugar cane, on the other hand, signify the ways in which both plants and peoples became commodities under the slavery system. As Kincaid explains, 'the people on Antigua have a relationship to agriculture that cannot please them at all. Their very presence on this island hundreds of years ago has to do with this thing, agriculture'. Reiterating Glissant's theory that nature and culture have formed a dialectical split, Kincaid concludes, 'it seems so clear to me, then, that a group of people who have had such a horrible historical association with growing things would try to make any relationship to (agriculture) dignified and useful' (Kincaid 1999, p. 140). But this is not simply a division between horticulture and agriculture, or aesthetics versus commodity capitalism. Kincaid has written extensively about the ways in which the flowers of empire, like the daffodils in William Wordsworth's poem 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud', were utilised in the British colonial education system in ways that alienated Caribbean students from their own tropical surroundings. Her protagonist in the novel *Lucy*, forced to memorise and publicly recite this poem as a schoolgirl, has no idea what a daffodil looks like until she moves to New York in her adult years. Based on her own experience of colonial education, Kincaid has highlighted the ways in which the 'roots' of (horti)culture are transplanted in ideological and material terms. Now residing in Vermont, Kincaid's own complex patterns of migration allow her to cultivate both imported and endemic flora with a heightened cognisance that 'perhaps every good thing that stands before us comes at a great cost to someone else' (Kincaid 1999, p. 152). *The Garden (Book)* outlines the entanglement between diasporan 'routes' and the 'roots' of sedimentation in new landscapes. Growing plants for the sheer beauty of it, rather than for material consumption, is as much a part of this process of acculturation as this growing body of landscape literature itself.

## ROUTES AND BIOTIC MIGRANTS

This complex exchange between routes (the process of migration) and roots (the process of settlement) is also evident in Olive Senior's book *Gardening in the Tropics*. Author of an earlier collection entitled *Talking of Trees*, Senior's corpus is concerned with the ways in which people and plants are naturalised in island spaces. If, as biogeographers explain, islands are susceptible to immigration, then Senior examines these in both human and botanic terms. The connection between migration and 'natural' (read: endemic) forms of life is immediately apparent in her book's structure. The first section is entitled 'Traveller's Tales' and examines historical migrants to the region, beginning with Columbus. The second section, 'Nature Studies', includes fourteen poems predominantly named after endemic Caribbean plants such as guava, pineapple, and pawpaw. Her concern with diaspora and movement is evident in the titles such as 'Illegal Immigrant' and 'Stowaway', which explore the complex (and subaltern) trajectories of island arrival and departure. Responding to biogeographical studies that depict the trajectories of island landfall in terms of air- or sea-borne migration, Senior inscribes these biotic travellers as metaphors of empire. She warns of the 'colonizing ambitions of hitchhiking burrs', the 'surf-riding nuts/bobbing on ocean', and the 'parachuting seeds and other/airborne traffic dropping in', including 'those special agents called flowers' (Senior 1994, p. 61). Given the ways in which 'special agents' of the CIA have armed political parties in Jamaica for decades, Senior is particularly concerned with how 'gardening in the tropics' leads to the excavation of 'skeletons', where Jamaican 'cemeteries are thriving' (Senior 1994, p. 83). The 'colonizing ambitions' of flora and fauna suggest the discursive entanglement between island biogeography and empire, as well as the disturbing continuities between fifteenth and twenty-first-century colonisation of island spaces.

Just as the trade of peoples and plants characterised the colonial settlement of the Caribbean, Senior highlights the ways in which endemic crops of the region become entangled in this early mercantile economy. In the first section, her indigenous (Arawak) narrator addresses Columbus, critiquing the obsession of

'gold on (his) mind' (Senior 1994, p. 13). The narrator explains that Columbus brought 'plenty of bananas/oranges/sugar cane' and in turn, the native subject provided 'maize/pineapples/guavas'. The speaker concludes, 'in that respect/there was fair exchange' (Senior 1994, p. 12). This first poem, titled 'Meditation on Yellow', functions as a critique of two gold commodities of the Caribbean islands – first, Columbus's search for this precious metal, and second, tropical island sunshine, vital to the modern tourist industry. It was the first commodity that contributed to the decimation of indigenous Caribbean peoples, forced to work in the sixteenth-century gold mines established by early European colonists. After the exchange between Columbus and the indigenous speaker, Senior jumps ahead in time to the modern tourist industry, highlighting the ways in which a similar form of migrant is threatening cultural, economic, and environmental stability. As such, she anticipates Kamala Kempadoo's later study, *Sun, Sex, and Gold*, an important collection that examines the ways in which the Caribbean tourist industry has exploited local peoples and landscapes for metropolitan interests in ways that date back to Columbus' arrival. I quote at length from this section of Senior's poem:

At some hotel  
overlooking the sea  
you can take tea  
at three in the afternoon  
served by me  
skin burnt black as toast  
(for which management apologizes)

but I've been travelling long  
cross the sea in the sun-hot  
I've been slaving in the cane rows  
for your sugar  
I've been ripening coffee beans  
for your morning break  
I've been dallying on the docks  
loading your bananas  
I've been toiling in orange groves  
for your marmalade  
I've been peeling ginger  
for your relish  
I've been chopping cocoa pods  
for your chocolate bars  
I've been mining aluminium  
for your foil

And just when I thought  
 I could rest  
 pour my own  
 – something soothing  
 like fever-grass and lemon  
 cut my ten  
 in the kitchen  
 take five  
 a new set of people  
 arrive  
 to lie bare-assed in the sun  
 wanting gold on their bodies  
 cane-rows in their hair  
 with beads – even bells

So I serving them  
 coffee  
 tea  
 cock-soup  
 Red Stripe beer  
 sensimilla  
 I cane-rowing their hair  
 with my beads

But still they want more  
 want it strong  
 want it long  
 want it black  
 want it green  
 want it dread

Though I not quarrelsome  
 I have to say: look  
 I tired now

I give you the gold  
 I give you the land  
 I give you the breeze  
 I give you the beaches  
 I give you the yellow sand  
 I give you the golden crystals

And I reach to the stage where  
 (though I not impolite)  
 I have to say: lump it  
 or leave it  
 I can't give anymore (Senior 1994, pp. 14–16).

If island ecologies are largely determined by patterns of migration and settlement, Senior is making an obvious parallel between the ways in which late fifteenth-century teleologies of conquest have become reformulated in the

contemporary tourist industry. Like her poetic colleagues such as Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados) and Derek Walcott (St. Lucia), Senior positions these unequal exchanges in historical context, rendering this presumably premodern and isolated isle in terms that condense five-hundred years of colonialism, tourism, and transnational capitalism – all rendered apparent by the heightened visibility of the continental migrants. The repetition of the speaking subject's assertion 'I've been', coupled with a dizzying litany of introduced crops such as sugar, ginger, orange, banana, coffee, and cocoa, suggest a tautological experience of history; a cycle of entrapment where local peoples labour over imported plants for imported tourists. The section written in Jamaican creole, which does not employ the past tense, ('I give you the land/I give you the breeze') complicates linear notions of time that, as many scholars have explained, were constructed through transatlantic capitalism. But if capitalism depends upon a utopian teleology, in Senior's poem there is no temporal narrative of progress; she suggests very little has changed in economic terms for the island citizen. In this case, the Caribbean subject perpetually 'gives' the land, breeze, and gold without reciprocity. The present tense articulation suggests a tautological history of furnishing material and environmental commodities to the metropolitan centre. If I can return to Buell's assertion that an 'environmentally oriented work' demonstrates that 'human history is implicated in natural history', we can see from Senior's example that human and natural history in the Caribbean are inextricably entangled, caught between narratives of the cultural consumption of both nature and labour.

Senior's emphasis on the tourist industry is all the more revealing when we consider that most Caribbean states, economically crippled by World Bank and IMF lending practices, are forced to maintain tourist and service sectors that are remarkably like exploitative plantation economies. In *Sun, Sex, and Gold*, Kempadoo points out that by 1996 'formal tourism employment' (exempting the vast informal tourist network) represented over 25 per cent of the Caribbean region and was one of fastest growing sectors (Kempadoo 1999, p. 20). Alarmingly, between 70 and 90 per cent of foreign capital earned in tourist industry is not invested

in the Caribbean itself but rather is extracted through foreign goods and services (Kempadoo 1999, p. 21). Like the plantation system, the tourist industry does little to sustain the local economy while fattening the wallets of industrialised Northern states and multinational corporations. In Mimi Sheller's words, the 'Caribbean island has become a global icon which encapsulates a deep history of relations of consumption, luxury, and privilege' (Sheller 2001). Echoing the connections made in Senior's poem, Sheller explains, 'following in the footsteps of the explorers, the planters, and the armed forces, the tropical "holiday in the sun" became a safe new means of consuming the Caribbean environment' (Sheller 2001).

We must question to what extent the conceptualisations of islands as isolated and remote are appropriate, when, as Senior's poem so cogently explains, black diasporan subjects, 'natives' of the Caribbean for over 500 years, continue labouring with introduced commodities for the benefit of metropolitan interests. As Sidney Mintz and C.L.R. James have pointed out, the Caribbean, due to its complex history of forced migration and plantocracy, was one of the first sites of the world's modernity. As such, we could conclude that time/space compression, perceived as intrinsic to the globalised, postmodern era, was long familiar to the Caribbean due to centuries of fragmentation and reassembly in the landscape, economy, and culture. To pursue this logic, tropical islands, far from representing the remote and archaic past, embody the earliest structures of capitalist modernity as well as its contemporary global inequities. As the first spaces of forced 'hybridisation', these islands provide a palimpsest or layering of cultural and economic histories. 'Gardening in the tropics', Senior tells us, 'you'll find things that don't/belong together often intertwine/all mixed up in this amazing fecundity' (Senior 1994, p. 86).

Although economists have tended to assume that globalisation (generally associated with Western metropolises) puts undue pressures on small states, Easterly & Kraay (2000) suggest that the conflation of 'fragile' economies and political systems with the small (island) environment has been inaccurate. Interestingly, the dismissive economic categorisation of 'fragile', 'isolated', and small (island) states sounds

remarkably like the colonial and biogeographical studies that were explored in the beginning of this paper.<sup>12</sup> Yet Easterly and Kraay convincingly argue, 'small states have on average higher income and productivity levels than large states, and grow no more slowly than large states' (Easterly & Kraay 2000, p. 2014). Far from being isolated, ahistorical, and static, small states such as islands have higher 'quality of life indicators' (Easterly & Kraay 2000, p. 2017), which is 'largely due to their greater trade openness' (Easterly & Kraay 2000, p. 2024). This suggests a positive future for island peoples and landscapes only if it is coupled with a serious reevaluation of World Bank and IMF policies. It is no secret that 'for many developing countries, IMF assistance has failed to make a significant contribution to a sustained recovery of the financial sector and economic growth' due to 'misguided policy', which has all too often made a devastating impact upon social, environmental, and 'political stability' (Kirkpatrick & Tennant 2002, p. 1947).

Since the title of this paper evokes the term 'ecology', I would like to conclude this paper by turning to the online *Oxford English Dictionary* definition: 'the science of the economy of animals and plants; that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and modes of life, etc.' These poets, and the Caribbean island histories they explore, outline clear relationships between those who introduce, cultivate, or benefit from the horticulture and agriculture of the island environment. As such, these authors follow Glissant's theory that the island 'landscape is its own monument . . . It is all history'. The complex diasporas of plants and peoples in Caribbean history render the term 'natural history' into an oxymoron if we define it as a space hermetically sealed from human alteration. Reading imperialism into the environmental imagination of the Caribbean shows the ways in which natural history is implicated in and in fact cannot be disentangled from the multiple settlements of human history. Thus it demystifies the conflation of islands with timeless isolation by foregrounding the convergence of global forces onto island spaces, rendering both human and natural narratives *as part of* rather than *outside of* the modern historical process.

## Notes

1. An initial version of this paper was presented at the Islands of the World Conference (June 2002) sponsored by the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA) and the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada. I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments made on this manuscript by Godfrey Baldacchino.
2. See DeLoughrey, Handley and Gosson *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (forthcoming), which explores the intersection between Caribbean literature and eco-criticism. A bibliography for the project (including the Pacific) can be found at <www.people.cornell.edu/pages/emd23/home.html>.
3. I adopt this subtitle from Sahlins's important work (1985). Parts of this section are derived from DeLoughrey (2001).
4. See Terrell *et al.* (1997). This article makes astute connections between the myth of island isolation and the US military establishment of island studies in the Pacific.
5. The literature on Pacific navigational capacities is tremendous. See Finney (1994) for a helpful overview of historical and scholarly trends.
6. On the ethnological and cartographic divisions imposed on Pacific island communities, see Thomas (1989). On the Caribbean, see Hulme (1986).
7. Clifford (1988) and Fabian (1983).
8. See Beer (1989), Carpenter (1984) and Loxley (1990).
9. See Azner Vallejo (1994).
10. Beer contends that after Darwin observed British colonialism in the Falkland Islands 'the struggle between inhabitants and incomers continue[d] to haunt Darwin and became part of the argument about adaptation and sudden environmental change in *The Origin of Species* twenty years later' (Beer 1998, p. 133).
11. There is ample scholarship on Social Darwinism in literary and colonial discourse; Stepan (1982) is a helpful starting point. My approach has been influenced by Beer's scholarship, including her edition of *The Origin of Species*. In her introduction to Darwin's work, Beer quotes this passage from Marx: 'It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening-up of new markets, "inventions", and the Malthusian "struggle for existence"' (Darwin 1996,

- p. xxvii). Importantly, Beer points out that the reductive interpretations of Darwin's work, including Marx's response, neglected the fact that Darwin 'emphasized also that survival depends upon variability, and that diversity is essential to the island of the world' (Darwin 1996, p. xxviii). Darwin was not necessarily the isolationist that later scholars have suggested. In *Origin* he writes, 'although I do not doubt that isolation is of considerable importance in the production of new species, on the whole I am inclined to believe that largeness of area is of more importance, more especially in the production of species, which will prove capable of enduring for a long period, and of spreading widely' (Darwin 1996, p. 87). See also the discussion on geographic isolation in relation to species evolution in Quammen (1996, pp. 130–137).
12. See Selwyn (1980) who contends that 'the extension of "islands" as a useful category from the concerns of naturalists and ecologists to those of social scientists thus seems to me illegitimate . . . The biological peculiarities of islands are an insufficient foundation for any plausible social or economic theory' (Selwyn 1980, p. 950).

## REFERENCES

- APPADURAI, A. (1988), Putting Hierarchy in its Place. *Cultural Anthropology* 3, 36–49.
- AZNER VALLEJO, E. (1994), The Conquests of the Canary Islands. In: S. SCHWARTZ, ed., *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, pp. 134–156. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BEER, G. (1986), 'The Face of Nature': Anthropomorphic Elements in the Language of *The Origin of Species*. In: L.J. JORDANOVA, ed., *Languages of Nature: Critical Essays on Science and Literature*, pp. 207–243. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- BEER, G. (1989), Discourses of the Island. In: F. AMRINE, ed., *Literature and Science as Modes of Expression*, pp. 1–27. Boston: Kluwer Academic Press.
- BEER, G. (1998), Writing Darwin's Islands: England and the Insular Condition. In: T. LENOIR, ed., *Inscribing Science: Scientific Texts and the Materiality of Communication*, pp. 119–139. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- BUELL, L. (1995), *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- CARPENTER, K. (1984), *Desert Isles and Pirate Islands*. Frankfurt: Frankfurt am Main.
- CLIFFORD, J. (1988), *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- COLUMBUS, C. (1992), The Letter of Columbus (1493). In: P. HULME & N.L. WHITEHEAD, eds., *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day*, pp. 9–16. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- CROSBY, A. (1986), *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DARWIN, C. (1859/1996), *The Origin of Species*. G. BEER, ed., New York: Oxford University Press.
- DE CERTEAU, M. (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. S. RENDELL. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DELOUGHREY, E. (2001), 'The Litany of Islands, The Rosary of Archipelagoes': Caribbean and Pacific Heterotopias. *Ariel Special Issue: Small Cultures: The Literature of Micro-states* 32, 21–51.
- DELOUGHREY, E., G. HANDLEY & R. GOSSON (Forthcoming) *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- EASTERLY, W. & A. KRAAY (2000), Small States, Small Problems? Income, Growth, and Volatility in Small States. *World Development* 28, 2013–2027.
- FABIAN, J. (1983), *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- FINNEY, B. (1994), *Voyage of Rediscovery: a Cultural Odyssey Through Polynesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- GLISSANT, E. (1992), *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. M. DASH. Charlottesville: Caraf Books/University Press of Virginia.
- GROVE, R.H. (1995), *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HARRIS, W. (1995), The Composition of Reality. Interviewed by V.M. KUTZINSKI. *Callaloo* 18, 15–32.
- HULME, P. (1986), *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean*. London: Methuen.
- JAMES, C.L.R. (1992), *The C.L.R. James Reader*. A. GRIMSHAW, ed., Oxford: Blackwell.
- KEMPADOO, K. (1999), *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- KINCAID, J. (1999), *My Garden (Book)*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- KIRCH, P. (1986), Introduction: The Archeology of Island Societies. In: P. KIRCH, ed., *Island Societies: Archeological Approaches to Evolution and Transformation*, pp. 1–5. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- KIRCH, P. & R. GREEN (1992), History, Phylogeny, and Evolution in Polynesia. *Current Anthropology* 33, 161–186.
- KIRKPATRICK, C. & D. TENNANT (2002), Responding to Financial Crisis: The Case of Jamaica. *World Development* 30, 1933–1950.
- LOXLEY, D. (1990), *Problematic Shores: the Literature of the Islands*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- MINTZ, S. (1985), *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking.
- MITCHELL, W.J.T. (1994), *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- NUNN, P. (1994), *Oceanic Islands*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- QUAMMEN, D. (1996), *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- SAHLINS, M. (1985), *Islands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- SELWYN, P. (1980), Smallness and Islandness. *World Development* 8, 945–951.
- SENIOR, O. (1994), *Gardening in the Tropics*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- SHELLER, M. (2001), Natural Hedonism: The Invention of Caribbean Islands as Tropical Playgrounds. *The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers* 2. <<http://www.sconline.freereserve.co.uk/olv2p7.pdf>>.
- STEPAN, N. (1982), *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*. Hamden: Archon Books.
- STEPAN, N. (2001), *Picturing Tropical Nature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- THOMAS, N. (1989), The Force of Ethnology: Origins and Significance of the Melanesia/Polynesia Division. *Current Anthropology* 30, 27–34.
- TERRELL, J.E., T.L. HUNT & C. GOSDEN (1997), The Dimensions of Social Life in the Pacific: Human Diversity and the Myth of the Primitive Isolate. *Current Anthropology* 38, 155–195.
- WALLACE, A.R. (1880/1975), *Island Life; or, the Phenomena and Causes of Insular Faunas and Floras, Including a Revision and Attempted Solution of the Problem of Geological Climates*. New York: AMS Press.