

Caribbean Eco-fictions: Multilayered Stories of the Caribbean Environment

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In “Frogs,” a chapter from her 2013 novel *Claire of the Sea Light*, Edwidge Danticat tells of Gaëlle, a young woman who—while pregnant with a daughter whom she knows will not survive—collects and buries the remains of some of the many frogs that have fallen victim to a deadly viral epidemic. Drawn to the frogs, she ignores her husband’s warnings that their death represents “a sign that something more terrible is going to happen,” and swallows a tiny frog that will remain forever within her. Both her empathy for the threatened frogs and her consumption of one tiny specimen—the salient cruxes of this poignant and enriching bond—point to a turn towards multispecies thought in fiction and art addressing environmental and biodiversity losses in the Caribbean region in the past two decades. In the hybrid organism that results from the union of Gaëlle, her doomed unborn daughter, and the small frog, Danticat reminds us of how in a world threatened with massive biodiversity losses, as Thom van Dooren has argued, “we are required to cultivate new competencies for seeing and understanding how living beings make sense of their worlds, perhaps even to develop new modes of human/animal intercultural co-becoming.”¹

Danticat claims fellow Haitian artist and writer Frankétienne as one of the authors who inspired her writing career, underscoring in Gaëlle’s story what Frankétienne has described as the interconnectedness of everything and everyone. Long concerned about the “ecological ruin he believes the planet is hurtling toward,”² he has served as a model for writers who, like Danticat, have turned their attention to the question of how communities—human, vegetal, and nonhuman animal—must face socioecological disasters together to survive in damaged ecosystems. My interest in Danticat’s dialogue with Frankétienne stems particularly from what it tells us about how the understanding of species extinctions in the Caribbean has evolved in the last two decades, from a focus on the protection of local examples of charismatic megafauna (endangered parrots, extinct seals, for example), through a growing attention to the protection of the broader habitats that sustain endangered species, to, most recently, a view of the planet as, in Emanuele Coccia’s words, “a complex interaction of different life forms, in which human beings are just one among many other species” that must coexist—other animal and non-animal living beings, plants, trees, or even viruses—if we are to survive.

¹ Van Dooren, Thom. “Mourning as Care in the Snail Ark.” In *Multispecies Care in the Sixth Extinction*. Society for Cultural Anthropology, 2021. Edited by Sara Asu Schroer, Thom van Dooren, Ursula Münster, and Hugo Reinert. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/mourning-as-care-in-the-snail-ark>

² Frankétienne quoted in Archibold, “A Prolific Father of Haitian Letters.” See Frankétienne’s 2010 play *Melovivi ou le piège*, the author’s premonitory pre-earthquake work, with its dystopian, nightmarish, apocalyptic representation of an already devastated Haitian landscape following a natural disaster: “Tous les arbres brûlent jusqu’aux racines. Il ne reste plus rien sur la planète rasée tondue zéro” (All the trees burn down to the roots. There’s nothing left on the eroded planet razed to the ground). Archibold, Randal C. “A Prolific Father of Haitian Letters, Busier than Ever.” *New York Times*, April 29, 2011.

Underpinning this conceptual evolution is the reality that the Caribbean is one of the world's hotspots, a concept developed by conservation biologists to identify "particular areas of the world that contain high levels of endemic species that are highly threatened or endangered."³ With around 7,000 species of plants and 160 bird species found nowhere else in the world, the Caribbean is a critical area for intervention to preserve "not only the number of species but also the number of individuals within that species, and all the inherent genetic variations."⁴ Biodiversity, which Julia Whitty defines as "the sum of an area's genes (the building blocks of inheritance), species (organisms that can interbreed), and ecosystems (amalgamations of species in their geological and chemical landscapes)" (Whitty), is a critical element in maintaining ecological viability, particularly in threatened small island ecologies ("Sharing the Same Dream"). A rich biodiversity—"life's only army against the diseases of oblivion" (Whitty)—is the key to the "tough immune system" needed for maintaining Caribbean flora, fauna, peoples and cultures.

The crisis of extinction facing the Caribbean region has been exacerbated in recent years by the surging impacts of climate change—stronger and more deadly hurricanes, catastrophic biodiversity losses, loss of topsoil, deadly mudslides, and the bleaching of coral reefs—which have left the land, as described by Frankétienne, "scarred by a cascade of natural and man-made disasters."⁵ Frankétienne's multispecies approach echoes van Dooren's experiences with the preservation of the Hawaiian forest snail, *Achatinella lila*: "We are called to care as a work of mourning; a work of bearing witness, of keeping faith with the dead and dying, of reckoning with what has been and will still be lost." Most importantly, perhaps, van Dooren's experiences anticipate and embrace Emanuele Coccia's interpretation of the process or metamorphosis as "not just the key to understand the identity of an individual but also to understand the identity of all the individuals belonging to a single species, as well as all the species altogether."⁶

This is the focus of Rita Indiana's prescient 2019 novel *La mucama de Omicunlé/Tentacle*,⁷ which posits a pan-Caribbean world where the poor—threatened by sea-level rise, devastating viruses, rapid desertification, and crippling food shortages—can perhaps find salvation through the protagonist's speculative transformations. *La mucama* is set in a near dystopian future (2027) in which the protagonist, Alcide Figueroa, sustained by his faith in a spectrum of African-derived Caribbean religiosities and their foundational ecological principles (Vodou and Santería chief among them), holds the potential to restore

³ Bernau, Bradley M. "Help for Hotspots: NGO Participation in the Preservation of Worldwide Biodiversity." *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 13: 2 (Summer 2006):617–643.

⁴ Whitty, Julia. "Animal Extinction—The Greatest Threat to Mankind." *Independent* (London). 30 April 2007. <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/animal-extinction-the-greatest-threat-to-mankind-397939.html>

⁵ Archibold.

⁶ Coccia, Emanuel and Jorge Godoy. "Coexistence between Different Species: Emanuele Coccia in Conversation with Jorge Godoy." *ARQ* 106 (2020): 12-28.

⁷ Indiana, Rita. *La mucama de Omicunlé*. Cáceres, Spain: Periférica, 2013. *Tentacle*. Translated by Achy Obejas. Sheffield: And Other Stories, 2018.

a poisoned and lifeless Caribbean Sea—a “caldo oscuro y putrefacto” (“dark and putrid stew”) —to health. At the heart of Indiana’s novel is Alcide’s avatar, Giorgio Menicucci, a “man of water” born from the placement of the last remaining sea anemone (*Condylactis gigantea*) on Alcide’s shaven head as part of his religious initiation. Depicting the conjoining of humans and sea anemones as a potential solution to the region’s environmental crises underscores the need to sustain the interdependence of human and nonhuman animals that is so central to Indigenous and Afro-diasporic beliefs in the region. As Paul Humphrey has argued, “The restoration of [Haiti’s] waters and habitats is of paramount importance . . . not only for the future economic viability of the Caribbean, but also to permit the continued practice of religious traditions that are so closely tied to a functioning and diverse ecosystem.”⁸ This ecological restoration is ultimately dependent on the preservation of species like the sea anemone, whose last remaining specimen could decide the future of human and nonhuman creatures alike.



Tamika Galanis, *Into the Ether* (2018). Mixed-media collage with archival phototransfer, mango leaves, conch shell, seaweed, 13 x 13 in

Celia Sorhaindo’s *Guabancex*;⁹ written in the wake of Hurricane Maria in 2017, crystallizes the threat posed by the specter of the intensification of hurricanes as an erasure of friends, species of flora and fauna, and natural spaces, particularly the coastal landscapes that are disappearing throughout the region, and those features of the landscape that can either celebrate local cultures and creativity or reinscribe the markers of colonialism as reminders of a too-long history of extraction and ecological destruction. In *Guabancex*, the worst erasure is that of memory, the element vital to recovery and endurance. And throughout the collection, especially in poems like “After the Hurricane,” memory is embodied in women—mothers and grandmothers—whose reenactment of traditions and care for the minutia of everyday life offers the most direct path to renewal, the clearest iteration of hope across the

⁸ Humphrey, Paul. “El manto que cubre el mar’: Religion, Identity, and the Sea in Rita Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé*.” *Sargasso* (2016–2017): 109–125.

⁹ Sorhaindo, Celia. *Guabancex*. Roseau (Dominica) and London: Papillote Press, 2021.

book: “We join hands around the table; say grace; give God thanks.” This thematic thread is poignantly retrieved in Tamika Galanis heartbreaking mixed-media collages in *Into the Ether*, which chronicles—through the incorporation of symbolic objects from Caribbean nature (mango leaves, conch shells, and seaweed over archival phototransfers) that are an inextricable element of their lived lives, the fading memories of the artist’s dementia-suffering grandmother. After the hurricane, Galanis collected conch shells,

So I could reap their variations of pink and gold in memoriam of all the sea ecology impacted when Hurricane Irma’s low-pressure center, acting like a vacuum, temporarily reshaped the ocean and dried up the seabeds. This work is an amalgamation of things that have gone the same way of my grandmother’s memories, carried into the ether by the water and the wind.¹⁰

Galanis’ practice in this lovely series about multiple iterations of extinction—the economy of narrowly-defined significant materials through which she builds her collages—unify the work thematically and visually. Meaning is added to the family’s old photographs through the placement and manipulation of just three natural materials directly connected to the impact of Hurricane Irma: mango leaves (from a tree belonging to her grandmother, whose yield dwindled to almost nothing after the storm); seaweed from beds that temporarily dried after the hurricane; and the conch shells that had brought “the ungodly stench of decomposition to our front door” (Galanis). The three elements are used to construct and frame the images, cocooning the familial lives and experiences within their natural settings, unifying them into one poignant image, their losses punctuated in *Into the Ether* by the losses of generational memories. The photos used in *Into the Ether* and Galanis’ video *A Thousand Points of Light* are drawn from a family photo archive through which she thought over the years “to piece myself back together”—and in the process to piece together “versions of my grandmother’s life that are now evasive in the face of recollection” (Galanis).

Galanis, like Indiana and Danticat in *Claire of the Sea Light*, has turned her attention to the Caribbean’s extinction crisis as the space from which to narrate the political and environmental violence that has brought the region to its present predicament. As contemporary writers/artists concerned with the environmental decay of both the region and the planet, they voice a growing awareness of how an unsustainable past haunts the Caribbean. They write and create within an artistic tradition whose roots are to be found in the peasantry’s struggles to live sustainably in their environmentally compromised land amid an extinction crisis that threatens human and nonhuman life alike.

As we look at Danticat’s use of Haiti’s threatened frogs as symbols of a fauna at risk, the surprising rediscovery in the Massif de la Hotte in 2011 of six species of endemic Haitian frogs thought to have gone extinct brings new hope of environmental renewal and multispecies justice. As Robin Moore,

¹⁰ Galanis, Tamika. *One Hurricane Season*. <https://cdsshortwave.org/spotlight/?one-hurricane-season>

one of the scientists who found the lost frog, argues, “The ecosystems these frogs inhabit, and their ability to support life, [are] critically important to the long-term well-being of Haiti’s people, who depend on healthy forests for their livelihoods, food security and fresh water.”¹¹ Their rediscovery is a sign of hope echoed by Frankétienne in his “Dialect of Hurricanes,” where he writes:

The sound of a step, a glance, a touching voice would be enough for me to live happy in the hope that awakening is still possible among humans. Take me! It wouldn't take much for me to speak the sap that flows through the core of the cosmos in motion.

Dialect of hurricanes. Patois of rains. Languages of storms. I speak the unravelling of the spiraling life.¹²

¹¹ IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). “Mozart and Ventriloquial Frogs Sound a Note of Hope and Warning for Haiti’s Recovery.” January 12, 2011. <https://www.iucn.org/content/mozart-and-ventriloquial-frogs-sound-a-note-hope-and-warning-haitis-recovery>.

¹² Frankétienne. “Dialect of Hurricanes.” Translated by André Naffis-Sahely. Poetry Translation Centre. <https://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/dialect-of-hurricanes>.