Le Jardin d'Allah: Ecological Sensibilities in the Francophone Caribbean

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Abstract

When gardening and Caribbean islands are mentioned, one cannot but think of Jamaica Kincaid and of the way in which she has articulated the complex relationship between colonialism and gardens, between people and notions such as place and situatedness. The very idea of nature in the Caribbean is strongly connoted, bearing the brunt of age-old associations with exoticism, mystery, unpredictability, or even madness. The symbolic meanings gardens take on in this region are therefore numerous and multifaceted, and if some have been lengthily discussed, others might still be worth exploring. Such is the case of backyards and vegetable gardens in Maryse Condé's *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux*: in a violence-torn, poverty-afflicted, and politically unstable Haiti, the orphaned Movar makes people's lives more bearable by recreating beauty around them, and by giving order to their unruly surroundings. His actions are more than a simple imposition of man over nature, they are also a metaphoric restoration of a lost balance, long forgotten because of other men's blind exploitation of both human and natural resources in an environment rendered all the more fragile by its fluctuating weather patterns. This paper presents some considerations on Caribbean soil ecologies, with a particular focus on Guadeloupe and Haiti, and on the ways in which the gardener-garden relationship might contribute to restoring damaged ecosystems. Through the character of Movar and the Jardin d'Allah he tends to, concepts such as care time, reciprocal gardening and plant agency are explored. The precarious contexts in which acts of gardening take place allow for the words of Maryse Condé to be read as a paradigm for finding rootedness and balance in a politically, socially, and ecologically suffering world. Finally, Movar's story is translated on a global scale, as an effective model of social sustainability and responsibility.

Keywords: Agroecology, francophone literature, gardening, soil ecology, the Caribbean.

Resumen

Cuando se habla de jardinería y las islas del Caribe, no se puede dejar de pensar en Jamaica Kincaid, especialmente en la forma en que articula la compleja relación entre el colonialismo y los jardines, entre las personas y las nociones de lugar y situación. La idea misma de la naturaleza en el Caribe tiene un fuerte significado, en la peor de las situaciones asociándola con el exotismo, el misterio, la imprevisibilidad, o incluso la locura. Los significados simbólicos que los jardines adquieren en esta región son, por lo tanto, numerosos y multifacéticos, y si algunos han sido discutidos a lo largo de la historia, otros aún podrían merecer ser explorados. Tal es el caso de los patios y huertos de *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux de* Maryse Condé, quien habla de un Haití desgarrado por la violencia, afligido por la pobreza y políticamente inestable, en el que el huérfano Movar hace que la vida de la gente sea más soportable al recrear la belleza a su alrededor, y dando orden a su entorno rebelde. Sus acciones son más que una simple imposición del hombre sobre la naturaleza, son también una restauración metafórica de un equilibrio perdido, olvidado hace mucho tiempo debido a la explotación ciega de otros hombres de los recursos humanos y naturales en un medio ambiente hecho aún más frágil por sus patrones climáticos fluctuantes. Este artículo presenta algunas consideraciones sobre las ecologías del suelo del Caribe con un enfoque particular en Guadalupe y

Haití, específicamente sobre las formas en que la relación jardinero-jardín pueden contribuir a la restauración de los ecosistemas dañados. A través del carácter de Movar y el Jardin d'Allah, se exploran conceptos como el tiempo de cuidado, la jardinería recíproca y la agencia vegetal. Los contextos precarios en los que tienen lugar los actos de jardinería permiten que las palabras de Maryse Condé se lean como un paradigma para encontrar enraizamiento y equilibrio en un mundo que sufre de manera política, social y ecológica. Finalmente, la historia de Movar se traduce a escala global, como un modelo efectivo de sostenibilidad y responsabilidad social.

Palabras clave: Agroecología, literatura francófona, jardinería, ecología del suelo, el Caribe.

Introduction: Caribbean Agroecologies

In a 2017 study, Briana N. Berkowitz and Kimberly E. Medley observed how gardenscapes on the Caribbean island of St. Eustatius contributed to enriching degraded land and to sustainable landscape management. Their 14 case studies showed high species density and diversity, with a total of 277 species in about five acres of land (1). The diversity of both biotic and abiotic components is essential, not only in terms of ecosystem health but also with reference to resource use: diversifying means making farms more autonomous, more stable, and less reliable on external energy inputs, such as fossil fuels or chemical fertilisers (Caporali 30). As a consequence, heterogeneity positively affects the water cycle and contrasts soil erosion and loss of fertility, besides contributing to the aesthetic quality of the landscape (41). Furthermore, Berkowitz and Medley's study emphasised how human communities were created around gardens, and how local knowledge was shared, preserved, and enriched by these exchanges, which in turn fostered the physical and psychological wellbeing of gardeners (3). This study foregrounds the importance of backyards and vegetable patches as both physical refuges and as nonmaterial spaces, capable of hosting a variety of flora and fauna while also satisfying humans' needs in terms of fulfilment and beauty.

These sites of emergence stand out in opposition to landscapes of extinction and erasure, such as those of single-crop plantations, which characterised the colonial past as well as the present of many Caribbean islands. In Guadeloupe, for instance, sugarcane is the most common crop, followed by grasslands for livestock production and banana fields. Both sugarcane and bananas are export crops, intended for European markets (Sierra et al. 255). Export crops represent an important limiting factor to the sustainability of agroecosystems, due to the pollution caused by the intensive use of pesticides and N fertiliser (Don Roger; Sierra et al.). In a 2022 article on Polynesian oil palm plantations, anthropologist Sophie Chao interestingly equates extensive monocultures with extractive industries, arguing that extraction is a "central operative" of such sites of displacement and emplacement, characterised by a large-scale, regulated, and industrial regime aimed at yanking out as much value as possible from the land and its inhabitants (170). "The plant's biotic vitality (its genes, growth, germination, and more)", Chao writes, "are worked upon and put to work as a form of vegetal labour" (173). The human labour force is subjected to this regime of extraction too, rooted in the colonial logic of violence that

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permeates the Plantationocene, a term denoting the "devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations" (Haraway 206).

These two poles—colonial violence and exploitation of natural resources—characterise what scholar Malcom Ferdinand names "the double fracture" (2). The colonial and environmental double fracture calls for new ways of thinking to highlight the extent to which "both historical colonization and contemporary structural racism are at the center of destructive ways of inhabiting the Earth" (11). Thinking about and with the Caribbean means bringing these fractures together.

The Caribbean is the main setting of Maryse Condé's 2010 novel *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux*. The author, born in Guadeloupe in 1937, has been awarded many respected literary prizes, including the Alternative Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018. *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* narrates a dynamic and multi-layered story that moves across a wide range of spaces and time frames, thanks to the memories and recollections of its diverse characters. In "De la parole-racine à la parole-rhizome: La Voix de la nature comme guide chez Maryse Condé", Ellen Munley defines this novel as a "rhizomatic book that answers to a world in crisis" (187).[1] This rhizomatic structure allows for multiple storylines to intersect, with most events taking place first in Guadeloupe and then in Haiti. Babakar Traoré, the protagonist, is an obstetrician from Mali, the son of a headteacher in a small Malian village and of a Guadeloupean émigré. His story is related in successive chapters, each taking a step back from the main narrative to cast a light on a particular aspect of his previous life, or on his reasons for being in Guadeloupe, far from his native land and from the years of violence and strife that characterised his life in the village of Éburnéa. Guadeloupe is, however, not described as a safe place either: the increasing number of Haitian refugees causes tensions and suspicion, and the atmosphere seems suffocating. The awareness that "one day, everything will disappear" (Condé 21) under the rising sea levels accretes the sinking motion which gradually engulfs the story and its characters. The voice of nature is indeed an important element in many of Condé's storyworlds (Munley 178), and emerges with force in her 2010 novel, where nature is both described as a threat and a safe space. The present paper proposes to analyse the latter by focusing on gardenscapes, and how they fit in the historical, cultural, and agroecological context of the Caribbean islands in question.

Particular attention will be devoted to the character of Movar Pompilius. Movar is an orphaned Haitian immigrant who grew up in the unsettling climate of Haiti in the 1990s. Then, the country was just emerging from a long period of Duvalierism, which J. Michael Dash defines as "one of the most vicious manifestations of the Haitian state and eighteen years of civil strife and political machinations" (8). Lavalas' party, with its "unrestrained wielding of state power" and president Aristide's "attempt to mobilize the masses behind a patrimonial leader" (8) turned out to be the cause of further bloodshed. It is in this context that Movar, first working as an escort for Aristide's militiamen and then as a watchman in a depot of illegal firearms, resolves to run away, and arrives in

[1]All translations from French are my own, if not otherwise stated.

Guadeloupe. Not only does he meet Babakar there, but he also discovers his love for trees, vegetables, and flowers. Through gardening, he starts a process of liberation from his own and his country's authoritarian past.

Garden Plots: Human-Soil Relations

As mentioned above, Caribbean lands are scarred by the colonial past of the region both in terms of soil impoverishment and of their history of slavery and exploitation. Understanding this double fracture is paramount to framing current projects and approaches to landscape administration. This section aims to analyse in more detail the characteristics of soils in Guadeloupe and Haiti, and to explore how Movar's story fits into these varied contexts and landscapes. With reference to soil classification, both islands present heterogeneous soil types, ranging from Vertisols and Ferralsols in the former (Chopin, Sierra 2) to Cambisols and Luvisols (Gardi et al. 162) in the latter.[2] Their varied characteristics require different management strategies that take into account the pressures of intensive agriculture and of past improper land use. Vertisols, for instance, are clayey soils that, because of a dry-wet climatic regime, show deep fractures during dry seasons. Because of their peculiar properties, they require special cultivation practices, also considering that their behaviour constitutes a limit to root growth (IUSS Working Group WRB 180-181). However, the high urbanisation rate, coupled with an export agriculture system, does not always allow for appropriate and sustainable farming techniques to be deployed, thus leading to significant land degradation in the region (Hylkema 8). Furthermore, monocultures have often been accompanied by land-clearing, an activity which, by provoking the reduction of plant cover, entails a decreased accumulation of organic matter and a greater risk of soil erosion (R.K. Cunningham 342). The characters in *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* do not fail to notice signs of impoverished soil health. The Haitian landscape, for instance, is likened both to a "lunar expanse" with "sparse, brownish tufts of grass" (209), to a spectacular landscape (165), and to a lost paradise, where the banana, mango, and kapok trees that were once part of it do not grow anymore because of intensive deforestation (166). Deforestation, defined by Ferdinand as an "act of colonial inhabitation" (30), is the cause of depleted and drier soil profiles, besides being one of the major drivers of biodiversity loss (Giam 5777). In order to contrast soil erosion and restore fertility, agroecological practices can be applied, being agroecology a farming technique based on the diversification and valorisation of natural resources (Rabhi, loc. 821).

Even though diversity can also be achieved in complex agroecosystems, it is more easily monitored in small-scale plots. In this sense, gardening could be seen as a path toward both soil restoration and recovery of new meanings in the Caribbean region. Gardens do indeed resonate with multiple and contrasting meanings, being both spaces

[2] The IUSS Working Group WRB has defined Vertisols as "heavy clay soils with a high proportion of swelling clays", and Ferralsols as the "red or yellow soils" typical of "the humid tropics". The term Cambisol denotes "soils with at least an incipient subsurface soil formation", while Luvisols are soils with a high "clay content in the subsoil" due to processes of clay migration (152-180).

of imperial desire (as in botanical gardens) and slave resistance (Bourg Hacker 6-10). With reference to the latter, resistance to the plantation regime flourished in "mountain ranges, mangrove swamps, provision grounds" (DeLoughrey et al. 3), all spaces of regeneration and re-assertion of the self in relationship with the land. Provision grounds, in particular, provided slaves with the material and imaginative means to restore connections with their root cultures, through the cultivation of "indigenous and African [...] subsistence foods such as yams, cassava, and sweet potatoes" (DeLoughrey 58). Often unfertile or deemed unfit for the cultivation of export crops, these plots represented a way of keeping alive the connection with the soil, despite the alienating experience of diaspora and transplantation that supported the region's economy. "This excavation of the provision grounds'', DeLoughrey writes, "reflects the historical plot of cultural sustainability amid the terrors of plantation capitalism, vital ground for the post-emancipation period" (59). It was indeed in and around these peripheral spaces, at the same time physically within and imaginatively beyond the controlled plantation boundaries, that identities were reshaped and self-assertion took form. Through provision grounds, "slaves themselves created and controlled a secondary economic network [...] which allowed for the construction of an alternative way of life" (Tomich 69), while also allowing for a possible escape route to take form via an individual or a collective liberation process. Thus, provision grounds were both sites of ecological resistance to coffee, sugar, or rubber monocultures, and of "cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system" (Wynter 100).

The plantation-plot dichotomy and gardens' multiple connotations resonate in the work of Antiguan-American novelist Jamaica Kincaid, which has been essential in framing the interplay of history, culture, and ecology in the region. In particular, her contributions to the topic of gardening have become pivotal in any discussion in and around (colonial) gardens. In an interview, she claimed that "the real beginning of the empire was [the] relationship between labour and plants" (Lund, 6:07-6:14), and stresses the importance that naming had in the colonisation process. Her 1999 book, titled *My Garden (Book):* is devoted to exploring such issues: the author re-imagines the Caribbean landscape, and the home garden in particular, as a material space where to reclaim her identity and culture. Through the garden the past is re-negotiated in a sort of "exercise in memory", as she writes in the first pages of her book: "The garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (The Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings)" (7-8). Remembering also entails a deconstruction of "imperialist environmental discourses and plantation's mass commercial production and alienation" (Bourg Hacker 4), both enabled by the act of tending to gardens, figuratively and materially.

In *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* these tensions between past violence and present reappropriation become visible in the scarred landscapes where dirt, dryness, and beauty coexist. Haiti is alternately described as displaying "sumptuous landscapes" (246), "tawny mountains with barren slopes" (264), and garbage dumps on beaches (46). By contrast, the gardens and backyards tended by Movar are thriving and biodiverse

spaces, filled with the colours of orchids (77), hummingbirds (145), and various vegetables, such as peas and peppers (202). In this sense, these gardens could be interpreted as sites where the colonial and environmental double fracture gets healed.

This process of liberation does not solely involve the Caribbean's past, but also personal experience. After years spent in fear and solitude, Movar's acts of gardening and kinship-making perform a healing function. Once in Guadeloupe, he manages to find balance and fulfilment only by connecting simultaneously with Reinette (an immigrant like him, who dies in childbirth at the beginning of the novel), the Malian doctor Babakar, and his natural surroundings, as represented and enclosed in the different backyards he tends throughout the story. What distinguishes these patches of land from others is the peculiar relationship Movar establishes with and in them, thanks to his role as gardener or *homo gardinus* (Rodrigues 95), which charges him with a heightened sense of responsibility and purpose. The same effect is not produced in the "Ferme Modèle" where he is employed to raise chickens, turkeys, and guinea fowls; around fifty employees work there, and no mention of a meaningful connection between humans and non-human animals is made (Condé 54). During his free time, however, Movar discovers that other ways of being-in-the-world are possible:

> Above all, I worked in the garden. There, I discovered that I love trees, vines, plants, flowers. I should have been born in another country, and not in a slum made of corrugated iron and planks. With the rain that wouldn't stop falling, I had much to do. In two days, if I wasn't careful, weeds would surround us.[3]

The above passage marks the entrance of *homo gardinus* into the story. Homo gardinus embodies, in Rodrigues' formulation, the attitude of "gardeners from all times who, by taking care of others—the plants—have helped build a Paradise on Earth" (95). This attitude, instantiated by Movar, bears a number of consequences. First of all, as Diogo et al. point out, values such as care and engagement often characterise the relationship between humans and the garden space they tend to (10), a relationship that, in spite of its anthropocentric essence, can also be mutually beneficial. Secondly, the multi-species encounters that become possible in highly biodiverse patches of land contribute to shaping a future-oriented and more sustainable world vision. Movar's being-in-the-world (or, in this case, his being-in-the-garden) is, as in the Heideggerian sense of the term *Dasein*, also a being-with. The first person plural, "nous", in the last sentence, could refer to Movar and Reinette alone, but also to the community that has emerged through his own acts of tending a small patch of land; weeds, if not controlled, could indeed choke the other plants that are trying to grow. Pulling out weeds is defined by indigenous biologist and thinker Robin Wall Kimmerer as one end of a bargain between planter and plants (126). Care is reciprocated with fruits, vegetables, and flowers. It is a partnership, a give-and-take exchange able to "restore relationship between land and people" (126) but also, in Movar's case, able to restore his own sense of belonging and self-confidence. Hence, his

[3] Surtout, je travaillais dans le jardin. C'est là que j'ai découvert que j'aime les arbres, les lianes, les plantes, les fleurs. J'aurais dû naître dans un autre pays et pas dans un bidonville en tôles et en planches. Avec cette pluie qui n'en finissait pas de tomber, j'avais beaucoup à faire. En deux jours, si je ne faisais pas attention, les herbes nous encerclaient. (56)

acts of gardening establish a sort of dialogue with the islands' colonial legacy: thanks to this activity, performed in his free time, he re-enacts the fight for freedom and for the affirmation of the self against a hostile and violent society.

Planting Connections

The bond that is established between Movar and his more-than-human surroundings is a *fil rouge* throughout the story, and the author's way of inscribing beauty on a violence-torn scenario. As Rabhi writes in *Manifeste pour la Terre et l'Humanisme* (2008), it is in the very middle of horror that some men manage to show the beauty and power of compassion, sharing, self-restraint, and respect of life in all of its forms (loc. 1148-1167). The main characters' lives in Guadeloupe are indeed marked by increasing internal tensions and by ongoing violence directed against Haitian immigrants. This island was in fact one of the landing places for Haitians during the diaspora that started in the mid-1970 and continued in the following decades (Brodwin 389). Exclusion, mistrust, or even open hostility and deportation, legalised by the 1993 Pasqua laws, marked the experiences of migrants. Condé manages to convey this atmosphere of discomfort and insecurity by relating a succession of events that culminates in a sudden fire that reduces Movar's house, and plausibly the garden too, to ashes. Babakar does not hesitate to help and to offer his friend a shelter. As if following Movar's migrations from one house to another, the garden imposes its material presence once again, resurfacing in Babakar's backyard more beautiful than before:

> Soon, Movar showed he was not ungrateful. He set to work and transformed a plot where weeds grew into a real Garden of Allah. People came from distant neighbourhoods to admire his orchids. In addition, he set up a vegetable garden and picked tomatoes, pumpkins, carrots, and aubergines as heavy as women's breasts.[4]

Plants do not solely contribute to the characters' sustenance, but also to the garden's aesthetic qualities. The garden could indeed be described as a space of aesthetic engagement, in which appreciation is not static or passive but requires instead active involvement in the natural processes of plant growth. It is noteworthy that the aesthetic potential is here actualised by the orchids, a symbol of magnificence and luxuriousness. In addition to their attractiveness, these flowers are renowned for the obsession they stirred in European voyagers and plant collectors who turned, during the 18th and 19th centuries, into the real orchid-hunters of the tropics (Anghelescu et al. 524). If the Caribbean garden can be configured as a "space of imperial desire" (Knepper 42), the presence of orchids makes it ambiguously so, being these flowers figuratively and etymologically related to the male reproductive organ and, consequently, to sexual intercourse (Singh and Duggal 400). Their power of seduction, resulting from the "belief that the larger tubers of orchids had stimulatory, generative and curative benefits for the

[4] Movar prouva bientôt qu'il n'était pas un ingrat. Il se mit à l'œuvre et transforma un périmètre où poussaient librement chiendent et herbes de Guinée en un véritable Jardin d'Allah. Les gens sortirent d'aussi loin que Vieux-Habitants pour venir admirer ses orchidées. En outre, il aménagea un potager et récolta des tomates, des jiromons, des carottes et des aubergines aussi lourdes que des seins de femmes. (77-78)

male genitalia" (Anghelescu 522), connects them in turn to the aubergines growing in the garden, which are "as heavy as women's breasts".

These elements contribute to creating a sense of abundance and bliss, which could explain the reference to Allah's garden. Not only are the words paradise and garden etymologically related through old Persian (A. Cunningham 39), but religious texts are rich in garden-related imagery, such as the Garden of Eden in the Bible and the various representations of Paradise in the Quran. Thus, making a garden means creating a paradise on earth. If in the Christian tradition the Paradise is lost, in Islam dwelling in a garden is the reward for the faithful (41). Paradise in the Quran is indeed depicted as a fecund garden, where fruits are abundant and never out of season, where there is fresh water and plants provide extensive shadow (Khattab, Surah Al-Waqi'ah 56:27-33). As Amitav Ghosh observes, "plants, flowers, herbs, and trees recur again and again as objects of desire and admiration" in different religious traditions (Ghosh 91). However, such religious resonances are not simply assimilated, but also adjusted to the context. Commenting on postcolonial Caribbean literature's "tendency to mimic the European Edenic paradigm", Annie Rehill writes that the trope of a paradisiacal nature is reappropriated by local writers and transformed by the addition of "specifically Caribbean flavours" (135). The vegetables listed are, in fact, distinctive: tomatoes and aubergine grow well in sunny and warm conditions, and tomatoes are the second most cultivated vegetable in Guadeloupe (Agreste Guadeloupe 16). Jiromon, or giraumon, is the local name given to some varieties of cucurbitaceae, such as squash and pumpkin.

Besides being pleasing to the eye and providing food for sustenance, this variety of species also shows its own sort of agency in the story. Movar's orchids and vegetables attract people from other villages, thus creating a web of entanglements and connections. However, if the garden draws attention for its beauty, it also makes some people suspicious as they start noticing the strangeness of Movar and Babakar's situation, living together under the same roof, and surrounded by luxuriant greenery. Their relationship intrigues, shocks, and makes people whisper (Condé 148), to the point that they decide to move and to start looking for Reinette's relatives in Haiti.

The Comeback of the Master of the Dew

The story moves back, as if with a circular motion, to Haiti. The reasons that lead both characters to leave Guadeloupe are various and, even though it cannot be claimed that the garden is either the sole or the foremost responsible, it can be certainly stated that it contributes to Movar's feeling-at-homeness in the very place he had escaped from:

> By contrast, Movar was in his element. He carried out the work he loved, becoming again a "Master of the dew". He cleared out the surrounding lands and uncovered the gully of a ravine. Without any knowledge of civil engineering, he had built an irrigation system. The land started giving not only tomatoes, but also salad, aubergines, peppers, and all kinds of peas, because, as he stated with all seriousness: people do not really have something to eat unless they can make some sticky-pea rice.[5]

[5] Movar, quant à lui, se retrouva dans son élément. Il accomplissait le travail qu'il aimait, redevenu un "Gouverneur de la rosée". Il déblaya les terres environnantes et fit surgir le cours enfouid'une ravine. Lui

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There are two main observations that could be made about this passage, one on the gardener as "Gouverneur de la rosée", and the other concerning instinct, or, the gut feeling that leads Movar to perform the right actions without any training in civil engineering. Starting from the latter, the question could be framed in terms of *ecological intimacy*: the gardener learns by doing, by observing, and by attuning to soil ecology. These actions foster deep and meaningful connections. Therefore, Movar's kin-making is simultaneously a becoming-with, as he becomes attuned to the garden's needs and to the best possible ways of sustaining life within its enclosed space. It could be defined as a new form of relationality which, in Glissant's words, is not "the absolute ontological possession regarded as sacred but the complicity of relation" (147). Glissant uses this definition to explain a new relationship with the land, one born of experiences of misplacement and mistrust in plantation regimes. The violence encountered by the novel's characters is not that of plantation regimes, but it is still rooted in a definite historical and geographical context, marked by the legacy of colonial land management. The experience of gardening adds to this form of connectedness, transforming it into an ecologically intimate experience. The intimacy is here emphasised through the use of Haitian Creole, which, for native Haitians, is the language of everyday use (Govain 8). Through the activities of seeding, tending, and transplanting, humans connect with soil and establish relations of care, which result, in Puig de la Bellacasa's words, in 'alterontologies' opposed to technoscientific approaches only aimed at increasing productivity (692). Different views of time can be explored by simply "squinting at birds in the sky or digging below the surface" (Heine 2). Hence, the care-time that gardeners devote to soils is the basis for "creating liveable and lively worlds" (Puig de la Bellacasa 708), as there can be no innovation or growth without the acts of "everyday maintenance and repair" (708) that constitute the practice of gardening.

Naming Movar a Master of the Dew, Condé references one of the classics of Haitian literature, Jacques Roumain's 1944 *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, translated into English by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook in 1947, with the title of *Masters of the Dew*. In 1975, Roumain's novel was also turned into a movie by film director Maurice Failevic. *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* tells the story of Manuel, a young Haitian who, after years spent working on sugar plantations in Cuba, comes back to his native land to find its landscape altered by deforestation and dryness, and its inhabitants divided by a family feud. He sets to remedying to both by starting a peasant movement that he calls the Masters of the Dew. Thus, he becomes a sort of "ecological hero" and, by the end of the novel, also a martyr to the cause (Bonvalot). Together with Jacques Stephen Alexis' *Les Arbres Musiciens* (1957), these two Haitian classics portray a landscape scarred by social conflicts and ecological degradation, where land misuse is exacerbated by local and international speculation. In this same landscape Movar, like Manuel, comes back as a Master of the Dew, bringing water where it was missing and restoring a patch of land.

qui n'avait aucune notion de génie civil, il avait réalisé un système d'irrigation. Désormais, la terre donnait outre des tomates, de la salade, des aubergines, des poivrons, toutes sortes de pois, car affirmait-il avec le plus grand sérieux: pa gen mon manjé, si pa gen diri ac pwa kolé. (202)

However, the title of master or governor calls forth additional images from the island's colonial past. Colonial governors were high-rank civil servants who represented the king of France or the English crown in colonies, and who exercised authority over the local population. This is not, however, the kind of relationship Movar seems to establish in the garden space: as previously highlighted, the garden shows its own agency and is one of the forces that guide him as the story unfolds. As Emanuele Coccia claims in his *Metamorphoses*, the world is a relational entity in which every species and every organism is "both garden and gardener of other species" (158). The Italian philosopher disputes the idea of planet Earth as a "planetary garden" we are collectively called to tend to and protect. The concept was introduced by garden theorist Gilles Clément who writes:

> A terrifying revelation: the earth, understood as a territory reserved for life, is a closed space, limited by the limits of living systems (the biosphere). It is a garden. Once said, this statement obliges all human beings, as passengers on earth, to shoulder our responsibility to protect the living organisms whose steward we are. So we are gardeners. (Clément 135)

Clément's view of the Earth as a planetary garden and of humans as its gardeners strengthens the human vs. nature hierarchical dichotomy. In contrast to it, Coccia argues that humans are objects of gardening too, being one of the "cultural and agricultural products" (154) of plants. This interpretation of garden relationalities subverts the vertical and dichotomous structure that sees plants as lifeless and helpless receivers, and reinstates agency to the more-than-human world. Not only are plants sentient and communicative beings, but they can even manipulate other species, humans included. For instance, Head and Atchison talk about plant charisma, claiming that "in changing form, plants change their capacity to draw an affective response from humans" (237), and define the garden as a biogeography enabling "embodied encounters with plants" (240). Consequently, vegetal agencies play an important role in creating and defining both the garden and the gardener's attitude; Movar is a governor in that he shapes the space around him, but he is in turn shaped by it. Back in Haiti as a *homo gardinus* and a Master of the Dew, he looks at the barren landscape with no more fright, but wondering who is responsible for that, and how it can be remedied (Condé 264).

The attachment and connection that links Movar to the garden is, however, not enough to keep him grounded. Toward the end of the novel, seized by the necessity of rejoining Reinette, he contacts a psychic, who asks him for a large sum of money. His time and entire being become devoted to this pursuit, to the point that he starts neglecting the garden (Condé 260). In search of a job that could help him find the money he needs, he decides to try his luck in Labadee, a private resort where cruise ships full of foreign tourists stop. The area is fenced-off and the access restricted to authorised personnel only (Condé 261). In spite of his friends' warnings, Movar leaves the safety of his human and more-than-human community, with fatal consequences: he is robbed and kicked, and dies alone and unnoticed in the streets of a shanty town. This sudden and tragic ending might be seen as contradicting his path of personal growth and the struggle for finding rootedness, both of which he accomplished in connection with the vegetal world. However, as Kincaid claims in *My Garden (Book):* "A gardener, any gardener, is not a stable being; that gardener, any gardener, is not a model of consistency" (224). Movar is no

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model of stability and consistency and neither is his Jardin d'Allah a point of arrival: it is part of his story, a story in which blossoming, as in the vegetal world, is followed by decay and quiescence. With reference to the garden space, it seems to quietly fade into the background as Condé focuses on the last catastrophic events in Haiti. In spite of that, the series of cyclones and the final earthquake that close the novel do not necessarily signal the end of Movar's gardens. It could be possible to imagine seeds scattered by the strong winds, or other gardeners setting up their own Jardin d'Allah in the aftermath of the earthquake. As claimed by Wall Kimmerer, any relationship with and within the soil "becomes a seed itself" (127).

Conclusions: Unearthing Stories

In spite of the fact that *En Attendant la Montée des Eaux* seems to be mostly preoccupied with human relations and entanglements, landscapes in the novel are more than mere backgrounds. Nature in both Guadeloupe and Haiti is represented as lively and as actively participating into the characters' lives. It manifests its agency in multiple ways, from the threat of rising waters recalled by the novel's title to the final earthquake, which shakes the very foundations of Haiti. By focusing on a specific example of engagement with the environment, the aim of this article was that of showing how ecological awareness and sensitivity might emerge from a close reading of texts. In this particular instance, the character of Movar has enabled reflections and considerations on how gardening might be an effective response to impoverished soils and precarious lifestyles.

Restoring soil ecologies does indeed impact the environment as a whole: as stated in the opening sentence of the IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land, "land, including its water bodies, provides the basis for human livelihoods and well-being" (79). In addition, "some land-related actions [...] contribute to climate change adaptation, mitigation and sustainable development" (18). The benefits thus concern both the biotic (of which humans are part) and abiotic community that forms in and around garden spaces. Being a *homo gardinus* in the Anthropocene means adapting one's perception of time to the timescapes of nature: growth requires quality time (the care time Puig De La Bellacasa talks about) and often happens imperceptibly, undetected by human eyes.

However, these timescapes become more complex in the Caribbean, where the contaminated histories of plants and animals need to be taken into account. Imperial biopolitics, soil exploitation, and unrestrained deforestation have impacted soil health and, compounded by the loss of indigenous practices, have resulted in impoverished landscapes. Through the character of Movar, Condé shows that literature can be both aesthetically pleasing and ecologically aware: by creating new stories, authors draw attention to local knowledge and to the germination of new forms of enmeshedness which blur dichotomies and boundaries between humans and more-than-humans. The "Jardin d'Allah" is both an idealised space and a grounded, material reality in the novel, whose agency is displayed on several levels. Apart from its most immediate effects on the wellbeing of the human characters, it also contributes to the circularity of Movar's story, which starts and ends in Haiti, passing through Guadeloupe. Even the last, abandoned

garden is not purposeless, because the flowers, vegetables, and herbs planted are the seeds that will germinate after the cyclones have hit the island. These same seeds have the power of circulating even farther, embedded as they are in a story, thus generating knowledge and "alterontologies".

Hence, gardening in literature not only needs to be positioned within larger timeframes, but also within wider geographies. As highlighted at the beginning of this article, soils have characteristics that are place-specific and their development is influenced by a number of variables, such as the climate, elevation, and parent material. There are, however, some common patterns that have emerged during particular historical periods, such as land-clearing in colonies, or the use of chemical fertilisers during the Green Revolution. Practices of soil restoration thus need to be shared and discussed across geographies: organic farming, for instance, could positively affect "bio-physical and psycho-socio-economic balances at any space and time scale by enhancing natural elements and processes of the native environment" (Caporali 89). Gardening, since it involves small plots and is not (exclusively) production-oriented, has benefits in terms of environmental sustainability. As shown by Berkowitz and Medley's study, gardenscapes contribute to land sustainability, to biodiversity, and to the wellbeing of the community that constitutes these spaces. The representation of such multi-species communities, made of encounters and of relations of emergence, is perhaps one of the most significant ways in which literature can appeal to our ecological sensibilities, and pave the way for more sustainable ways of co-dwelling on Earth.

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