

Wiebke Beushausen (Heidelberg University)

**‘Making Eden a Reality’:
Caribbean Eco-poetics and Ethnic Environment
in Andrea Gunraj’s *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha***

Abstract:

Literary scholars have only recently started to investigate the treatment of the environment as well as the interrelation of nature and culture in Caribbean fiction and poetry. Caribbean eco-poetics not only engages in ecological themes and strategies to aestheticize nature in fiction, but also takes into account the specific contexts of dispossession of the land and human bodies as well as colonial exploitation and the making of the postcolonial state. By applying an eco-poetical methodological approach, this paper contributes to the increasing scholarly field of postcolonial ecocriticism in Caribbean studies, foregrounding such pressing issues as environmental damage, ethno-politics and related processes of ‘othering.’ In addition, the juxtaposition of eco-poetics and ethnic environment helps to understand the way literature deals with human interaction with nature, access to resources, racial conflict and hierarchies of human and non-human bodies. This eco-poetical reading of Andrea Gunraj’s debut novel, *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* (2009), a vivid portrayal of the heartland of an unnamed Caribbean country that resembles Guyana in its geographic structure and ethno-political composition during the Burnham era, critically highlights the capitalist exploitation of land and people, but also foregrounds the aesthetic function of the vegetation in the problematization of this relationship. The novel creates a microcosm in which the socio-ethnic structures of power and oppression characteristic for large parts of the post-independence Caribbean are reproduced, in which the hierarchic relation of wilderness and civilization is deconstructed, and in which the dichotomous notion of nature and culture needs to be re-negotiated.

Keywords: Eco-poetics, Environment, Andrea Gunraj, Landscapes

“The *poetics* of landscape, which is the source of creative energy, is not to be directly confused with the *physical nature* of the country. Landscape retains the memory of time past. Its space is open or closed to its meaning.”
(Glissant 150)

“In the Caribbean, an engagement with the environment means an entanglement with the history of empire and postcolonial nation-building. This history of empire, diaspora, and resettlement necessarily foregrounds the ways in which the violence of plantation societies ruptured continuous human relationships to place.”
(DeLoughrey, “Ecocriticism” 265)

Poetics of Living Landscapes

The Caribbean region is frequently referred to as an extraordinary space of entanglements where, as this journal’s special issue prominently puts it in the title, culture is inextricably linked with nature, a link that has often been established without the consent of the people involved. Taking into account the region’s history and related processes of assimilation, creolization, and transculturation, this observation foregrounds the multiple ways human bodies and the environment interact with each other, or have been made to interact as a result of Western colonial and neocolonial impositions, the dehumanization of African people, as well as the romanticization of the Amerindian population’s natural, or at times even almost supernatural, closeness to land. Édouard Glissant introduces a “*poetics* of landscape,” which he embeds in this particular history that, in turn, feeds into the creative, literary imagination of the Caribbean, and, although distinct, it is never isolated from the “*physical nature*” but rather in relation to it. It resonates a particular rhythm, which for Glissant is genuinely creole, bearing witness to the Caribbean’s character of the cross-fertilization of cultural elements. Importantly, Glissant suggests explicitly that landscapes and nature are part of Caribbean identity and in this explicitness he slightly differs from other major identity approaches, which focus solely on subject formation both of the individual and collective, processes of cultural identification (e.g. Stuart Hall), or ethnic and racial identity discourses such as *coolitude*, *négritude*, or *créolité*.

Literary scholars have only recently started to investigate the treatment of the environment as well as the interrelation of nature and culture in Caribbean fiction and poetry from a postcolonial point of view. Caribbean ecopoetics highlights the “time past” imprinted in its landscape and brings into focus people’s relation with the land. Ecopoetics not only engages in ecological themes and strategies to aestheticize the physical albeit fictional nature, but also takes into account the specific contexts of dispossession of the land and human bodies as well as colonial exploitation and the building or making of the postcolonial state. The historicity of the landscape in Caribbean literature is identified also by Elizabeth DeLoughrey as the second introductory quote pointedly illustrates

and specifies that which Glissant terms “the memory of time past.” Caribbean ecopoetics, in incorporating a “politics of place” (DeLoughrey, “Ecocriticism” 265), takes into account the “historical, enforced remapping of the globe” and a myriad of “radical reconfigurations” (DeLoughrey, “Postcolonialism” 322) of the world order in the literary depiction of human relations to the natural world. [1] Wilson Harris, in one of his essays, aptly entitled “The Music of Living Landscapes” (1996), while wondering about the general perception of the landscape as passive and deprived of meaning, advocates its vitality, reminiscent in fact of Glissant’s landscape as source of creative energy. For Harris the landscape “is like an open book” actively engaging the reader, its alphabet symbolizes all elements of the environment, and, though difficult, when paying attention to its language one will be able to read and understand that book (*Selected Essays* 40). This particular lyrical sound of Harris’s writing about nature travels across the Americas and also finds resonance with the younger generation of diaspora writers who have taken up residence elsewhere. Canadian-born writer Andrea Gunraj, an activist and community outreach worker for the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children, lives in Toronto. Her parents migrated from Guyana to Canada in the 1970s. Important to note is that the politics and culture of Guyana have strongly influenced her work as writer of fiction. In addition, the fact that her parents left the country during Forbes Burnham’s Afro-centric decolonial rule contributes to and is important for an understanding of the underlying criticism of ethnic conflicts in the novel. However, it is important to note that hers is not an attempt to represent a reality of a country she neither grew up in nor currently lives in. Andrea Gunraj’s debut novel *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* (2009) can be located within the burgeoning field of Indian Caribbean women’s writing, but is less concerned with Indo-Caribbean self-representation, the diaspora discourse of the *kala pani*, and postmodern questions of fragmented, dislocated identities. Here, Gunraj departs from the writings of her counterparts who also write from outside of the Caribbean, such as Ramabai Espinet in *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), Niala Maharaj in *Like Heaven* (2006) or Peggy Mohan in *Jahajin* (2007). [2] More significantly, however, Gunraj writes about a living mythical landscape in the tradition of Wilson Harris. [3] She vividly portrays the heartland of a country that remains unspecified throughout the novel, which readers, and arguably so, may identify as Guyana. She refrains from an exoticizing representation of a postcolonial society often perceived as ‘authentic’ by unfamiliar readers, unlike, for instance, the neocolonial tourist gaze at Guyana offered by Indian writer Rahul Bhattacharya’s half fictional, half ethnographic account in *The Sly Company of People Who Care* (2011), a journey of self-discovery during which the protagonist re-discovers the “raw beauty of a forgotten colonial society” as the blurb promises. [4] In her depiction of troubled interpersonal relationships and examination of complex ethnic conflicts, Gunraj unravels power dynamics that are caught in between racialized social and spatial structures and envisions an alternative

environment to rebuild indigenous, Amerindian culture.

By applying an ecopoetical methodological approach, this paper contributes to the increasing scholarly field of postcolonial ecocriticism in Caribbean studies. At the same time, the approach of ecopoetics and ethnic environment, which is loosely informed by Sylvia Wynter's formulation of ethnopoetics and sociopoetics (cf. Wynter 1976), foregrounds such pressing issues as environmental damage, ethno-politics and related processes of 'othering,' addressed, as well, in *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*. The juxtaposition of ecopoetics and ethnic environment helps to understand the way the novel deals with human interaction with nature, access to resources and power hierarchies of human and non-human bodies. The analysis focuses on "Part Two" of the novel's total of four parts, on precisely those scenes that are taking place in the resort ironically called Eden Development, located in the interior of the country. I argue that Eden is a microcosm in which the socio-ethnic structures of power and oppression – as in a Hegelian master-slave dialectic – characteristic for large parts of the post-independence Caribbean are reproduced; in which the hierarchic relation of wilderness and civilization is deconstructed; in which the dichotomous notion of nature/culture needs to be re-negotiated. I will also show to what extent Wilson Harris's writing acts as inspiration for her spiritual take on the fictional landscape or 'bushscape,' as I choose to term it. [5]

Theoretical Implications of Ecopoetics

The approach of ecopoetics and ethnic environment is particular for Caribbean literature. [6] It is a suitable tool to analyze fictional representations of environmental conflicts, natural alteration, and disasters. It departs from rather traditional ecocritical approaches in American studies in that it is not strictly anti-anthropocentric, outside of the human, and apolitical, but very much concerned with the relation of literature, nature, and mankind as well as being engaged in a criticism of politics and capitalism (cf. Nixon 2005). [7] While this is the departing point for this article, I wish to turn also to Sylvia Wynter's essay "Ethno or Socio Poetics" (1976) and her understanding of the terms poetics in combination with the ethnic and processes of 'othering' (which is similar to what Edward Said described as the Western and non-Western 'other' two years later in his famous *Orientalism*). Wynter uses poetics as a way of naming the world, in an Aristotelian sense, pointing out that an artistic "making" of a self takes place in very specific socio-historical and cultural contexts, namely a western ethnocentrism in which an 'us' has been constructed in relation to the ethnos of the 'other' ("them people" in the novel) however bound in mutuality in the social environment of the "economic world system" (78). [8] Environment, hence, means the social environment, referring to the cultural space in which individuals live, the people and institutions with whom they interact, and

the global economy of which they are part; it refers to the physical environment, meaning nature, the rural, urban, or oceanic; and lastly to the landscape which Helen Tiffin defines as “a product of a combination of relationships between living beings and their surroundings” (199). Environmental conflicts have their roots in colonial history and slavery, have subsequently spread out into the de- and postcolonial era of nation building, and are further nurtured by neo-imperial forms of domination and development. Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s seminal work on environmentalism in literature is highly relevant for the understanding of ecopoetics in Caribbean writing. Her work illustrates that “Caribbean literature is deeply engaged with the history of human and plant diasporas, rendering a complex cultural ecology and a dialogical imagination” (“Ecocriticism” 266). In a similar vein, Elaine Savory’s ecopoetic reading explores the extensive use of plant imagery and the aesthetic representations of the bond between flora and human in Derek Walcott’s work, concluding that the “interplay between poetry and plants is of vital importance in raising consciousness about sustainable change appropriate for social and environmental conditions in the Caribbean” (Savory 81). In addition, as noted earlier, borrowing from Edouard Glissant’s poetics of landscape, an ecopoetic approach takes note of the people’s relations to and living with the land as a dialectic process. It thus goes beyond simply nature writing and a general concern with environmentalism (cf. Nair 2011). It highlights that these relations, of course, are subject to change, and have been altered both naturally and forcefully over the course of the region’s less extensively recorded ‘pre-Colombian’ era, colonial conquest and plantation economy, slavery, mass migration, and tourism (what Wynter refers to as the economic world system). This development has brought forward over the centuries first the implementation of racist hierarchies, and later, in some parts, ethnic compartmentalization fostered by the newly elected postcolonial governments, and has further contributed to a reconfiguration of the landscape through deforestation, the construction of sugar plantations, tourist sites or urban ghettoization. [9] At the same time, (de-)colonial geographies of resistance emerged – what Katherine McKittrick terms “cartographies of struggle” (2006) – such as the installation of the provision ground system, the mountainous areas as site of maroonage, as well as the heavily vegetated interior, the hinterland or ‘bushscape’, as spaces of refuge and escape. The latter has evolved into the alluring heartland in particular of Guyana and major destiny of the mythical search for ‘El Dorado’ and is an important setting in Gunraj’s novel.

The ecopoetic approach presented here brings into dialogue an environmentally engaged close reading of the novel, highlighting the aesthetization, for example, of the rainforest’s vitality indicated by “the bush’s steady, undaunted breath” (186) or the sheltering foliage of its “taut weave of waxy brown leaves” (123), with a postcolonial criticism of the novel’s representation of socially constructed ethnic hostility as well as a more context-oriented cultural studies approach to the

writing of nature and culture. The following analytical part of *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha* sheds light on the inter-/relationship of the human bodies with their social and physical environment. In the Eden resort we find an 'original' environment imposed on which is a social order that establishes gender inequality and a racialized hierarchy of thusly termed "black", "brown," and "red-skinned" people, respectively called "them people" (105) in the novel, to which I refer as ethnic environment.

Fiction of Eden and the Search for El Dorado

"El Dorado is fabulous but it is not only a legend of relived memory... It is a grave and blood-stained canvas of greed for gold and territory across centuries." (Harris, *Palace* 10)

Andrea Gunraj's *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*, set in a fictive, tropical country in the Anglophone Caribbean, presumably located on the South American mainland, combines generic features of the coming-of-age narrative, family saga, elements of magical realism with social criticism. [10] Next to the small town called Marasaw and the unnamed capital city, an area surrounded by "palm trees and expansive bushes" (11) and separated by a large river, especially the country's lush interior as well as the unspecified cold North, hinting at Canada or the United States, are two further relevant settings in the novel. The setting resembles Guyana in its geographic structure and ethno-political composition during the Burnham era, as Mariam Pirbhai, too, notices "the Burnham era as the socio-political catalyst for the bitter derailment of the protagonist's romantic ideals, inter-racial friendships and personal ambitions" (Pirbhai 41). However, the novel, in not mentioning a state, evokes the impossibility of national belonging in a transnational, diasporan space such as the Caribbean, and deconstructs the myth of unity built on artificial boundaries or borders, thus placing emphasis on the relational (dis-)unity of social and physical environments.

The story reconstructs roughly ten years of the life of the protagonist Neela Keetham. The narration starts with the kidnapping of her daughter Seetha and a reference that Neela has been in possession of a magical power that has failed her just like it had failed her mother before (cf. 47). This magic develops into the plot's leitmotif, turns out to be her particular, inexplicable bond with nature and intensifies during her stay in the rainforest's interior, in some instances being referred to as "mysterious abilities" (49), "sinister power" (112), or her "magical talents" (193). Neela proceeds with an account of her childhood days, depicting her younger self at the age of ten as rebellious and reckless always in rivalry with her brother Navi and other boys at her school. At one point the protagonist describes a dream in which

she was running through a jungle so fast that her bare feet kicked into the air and leaped in expanded arcs. Soon she broke into the netted foliage, launching herself over treetops and soaring into the sky. She split through the atmosphere and tore it apart; plunging deep into the ocean, she splashed back out and skimmed over its clear surface, gliding smoothly, bouncing off the edges of enormous foaming waves. It felt as if she were running for many days and nights on end, conquering fanciful, mysterious landscapes with her bounds and transcending distance, time and fatigue. (57)

In her dream, Neela already foresees her journey deep into the country's interior. The quote presents a strong female character unstoppable in her desire for freedom and illustrates her connection to the natural environment which contains an empowering moment for her. It evokes a seemingly boundless nature and unfolds the mysteries of the rainforest.

She further unveils a transnational family constellation, living alone with Navi and her grandmother in Marasaw since their mother has gone overseas to work as an "*in-home child-care provider*" (33) unable to return due to her falsified documents. [11] Also at issue throughout the novel are gendered patterns of inequality, societal strictures, and moral expectation that impede in particular the lived sexuality of the women characters and their individual development. While Navi receives a scholarship for a university overseas, Neela stays behind under the unbearably strict surveillance of her grandmother, from which she longs to escape. Navi starts a career in finance abroad at the Ministry of Foreign Investment that is proud to "bring needed infrastructure to the developing world, infrastructure that we will supply [...], we can build our economy, our nation and our world. *To progress*" (157). Navi, at the beginning, becomes complicit with a system of 'white charity' within the global capitalist system of conquest and exploitation. As such, his is only at the surface the successful migrant story of the American dream.

Neela, meanwhile, out of duty to have a respectable career, enrolls at a teachers' training school which still bears the imprint of British imperialism: the influence of the colonizers and missionaries particularly on education is still present as seen in the slogan "*Higher Knowledge leads to Higher Ground*" (88). What follows are depictions of social unrest, political protests as well as an atmosphere of hostility, racism, and open distrust of the government. Signs in the streets read: "*New Builder Party government: built on lies and corruption! and New Builders: profit first, people last!* [...]" – the crowd split itself down lines of skin and class, casualties on every side becoming martyrs" (90). This alludes to the composition of a multi-ethnic environment characterized by conflicting relations among the oppositional groups and "sparked bitterness and accusations, fostered by the party itself, encouraging people to turn against each other as never before" (90). Within this atmosphere of poisonous racist prejudice, interethnic friendships like Neela's and Lenda's are met with rejection "*Eh-eh, since when a brown and black girl can friend-up each other so? Like they don't know what going on in dis country!*" (98). [12] What resonates here is a critique

of racial politics and ethnic compartmentalization which predominates this postcolonial society as depicted in the novel. Steve Garner and Shona Jackson, looking at contemporary Guyana, describe this as ethnopoliticization (cf. Garner 2008) and ethno-political violence (cf. Jackson 2005) fostered by the former colonial empire in her own interest and reinforced by contemporary governmental authorities. These terms are apt descriptions of “what going on in dis country.” Against this background of ethnic violence, rumours of a rich and prospering town in the remote area of the rainforest, yet associated with “myths and ghost tales [...] *about de bush spirits*” (91), fall on fruitful ground. One day at Neela’s teachers training school, her professor announces the new government program for the development of the hinterland: Eden, the construction of a new town and tourist resort in the Nasee-Ki region in the interior of the country. Quite critical of the project and the corrupt ruling elite that promotes disunity among the population, he warns the students not to leave Marasaw to work at the construction site. However, working at Eden, for many seems to be the only way out of unemployment and hopeless poverty fostered by a racialized system of favourism. For Neela’s boyfriend Jaroon, who calls it “paradise” (92), it is the only option since “nobody’s really hiring brown people from dis town no more. They say we too mixed up with all kind-a other people” (92). Neela ignores her professor and although he disappears after loudly voicing criticism, she decides to offer her services as teacher to the Party and runs away from her family, her confinement, to be with her boyfriend Jaroon. Her flight has disastrous outcomes. The only person who is left to help Neela in the end is her brother with his influence abroad at the Ministry of Foreign Investment.

Eden Development, however, turns out to be a governmental failure mostly due to inexplicable, mysterious natural forces hindering any sign of progress. I quote the announcement by the government in length for its disclosure of the politics behind the Eden project that is driven by the urge to create prosperity for the indebted economy and poverty stricken population:

‘Our newly elected government has embarked on a new project for de betterment of de nation [...]. It is de creation of a new town in de heart of de interior of dis great country. [...] In partnership with Omega Global Ventures, a world renowned leader in travel-tourism, [...] the Eden Resort Development will be a state-of-the-art ecotourism destination. It will bring unprecedented growth to our economy.’ [...] The memo explained that Eden was to stretch along the Nasee-Ki River near the landing of the great national waterfall, a fully functional resort town with private residences, schools, hotels, restaurants and its own airport. *The democratically elected New Builders Party is fulfilling our promise of prosperity to all citizens. Your service is necessary to make Eden a reality. We are looking for aspiring young citizens to establish quality child-rearing and educational services.* [...] The announcement concluded with the popular New Builders Party motto, *Prosperity for citizens built on a prosperous tomorrow.* (96-97)

The scene of the teacher's speech is remarkable for several reasons: Gunraj makes intertextual reference not only to Wilson Harris but also to Trinidadian Lakshmi Persaud's *For the Love of My Name* (2000), precisely to the scene that describes the deforestation of the fictional Caribbean island called Maya, which is doomed to sink beneath the sea. The procedure of "Hinterland Development" is a measure undertaken by a short-sighted government to reduce unemployment and "involved the cultivation of land cleared of its rainforest, [resembling] the destructive plunder of eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial 'developers' on tropical lands. And so it was that Maya was being governed by a system that was blind to the fact that it was digging the country's grave" (Persaud 211). In their novels, both writers denounce the neocolonial intervention in the landscape, natural exploitation and ecological disaster in the name of a civilizing mission and capitalist profit generated by plantation economy.

Furthermore, the quoted lines highlight the economic significance of the hinterland for the progress of the country. The project with the biblical name Eden alludes to an untouched feminized space of fertility and abundance, a virginal paradise welcoming the neocolonial intruders to overflowing riches and seduction, reminiscent of the journey to El Dorado undertaken by Donne and his crew in *Palace of the Peacock*. The myth of El Dorado, as Shona N. Jackson explains, after independence continues to depict the region and especially the hinterland as "endlessly yielding for both material and cultural production" (Jackson 85). El Dorado, the "difficult and violent conquest of the territory," described by Antonio Benítez-Rojo in *The Repeating Island* (2006), is driven by a colonial desire of expansion and possession:

[...] the search for El Dorado continues, and will surely continue for many years. It is now carried out by present-day Guyanese society beneath the slogan of 'repossessing the interior,' which refers to the economic exploitation of the inland territory, potentially rich in natural resources, as well as to the discovery of a collective psychic state which would allow a feeling of cultural identity, extended toward the hinterland, which Guyanese society has lacked. (Benítez-Rojo 188-189)

In the novel, the continuity of exploitation and extraction of the riches of the interior is disguised as a postcolonial repossession of the land along the Nasee-Ki River. Arguably, this alludes to Forbes Burnham's project to develop the hinterland through an agrarian reform and education (meaning 'civilization') of the Amerindian population in order to build the "ideological apparatus" of what he called the Co-operative Republic (cf. Jackson 97). Likewise, in the novel the government proclaims a nationalist discourse of prosperity and unity through the development of the interior and creation of a singular national land-scape. Gunraj's novel (and Persaud's novel alike) thus inscribe themselves in the tradition of a postcolonial ecological writing dedicated, amongst others, to the deconstruction of El Dorado – a myth that first served the colonial imagination and later became

“*the origin narrative for the entire region*” (Jackson 87).

The contract system on which the Eden Development project is based evokes violent memories of the system of indentureship, the contract labor of hundreds of thousand Indians in the Caribbean in the 19th and early 20th centuries (cf. 102). The state authorities fool the citizens in a false promise of prosperity while in fact their workforce is exploited. The novel explicitly mentions the bad working conditions, food rationalization and retention of wages. Quite similar to the fate of the indentured laborers, for many of those who like Neela signed up for Eden, this contract is a one-way ticket to the rainforest without return. Although the workers do not cross entire oceans but only fly to the interior of their own country they nevertheless find themselves in an environment perceived as hostile and entirely different to what they have known. They feel ultimately entrapped in the bush. Adding to this are neo-imperial claims to the territory by the transnational corporation Omega Global Ventures. The mission of the enterprise in the heart of the rainforest to tame the ‘beast of nature’ is to satisfy the global North’s longing for an exotic paradise. An ecocritical interpretation here highlights the inherent global capitalist hegemony. Omega Global Ventures has the financial means and puts pressure on the government. The company withholds much needed wages for the workers when the construction for mysterious reasons does not show any signs of progress, “it looks like they ain’t getting to finish building anything much for Omega” (127), as Karha, Neela’s new friend in the Resort, observes. Tourism is seen as threat and opportunity for the country. There is an ambivalence for nature needs to be destroyed first and then reconstructed or ‘man-made.’ To create ecologically sustainable tourism Tiffin’s essay “Man Fitting the Landscapes” points both to the colonial restructuring of the Caribbean landscape modelled on a European imagination of a Garden of Eden as well as the attitude of humans towards the environment. In fictional representations of landscapes, she argues, “writers are obliged to negotiate historical, cultural, political, climatic, and biological factors” (Tiffin 200), if they wish to trace the relationships between culture, nature and post- or neocolonial history. An ecopoetical reading of the novel not only critically highlights the capitalist exploitation of land and people, but also foregrounds the aesthetic function of the vegetation in the problematization of this relationship. Plants, leaves, and trees as well as birds and insects populating the hinterland react differently to the imposed presence of strangers like Neela, Jaroon, the workers, or an army of soldiers – communicating with and embracing the one, while screaming spitefully at the others (cf. 165). The stunning beauty of the natural environment captivates protagonist and reader alike. The panoramic view down on the rainforest from the plane resembles the images of the mystical landscape of Neela’s childhood dream and seems as unreal. She is breathless observing how “treetops melted into a seamless layer of green fluff, weighty yet feathered; slithering brown rivers broke through the tree cover like hairline fractures. [...] The waterfall dropped into a tremendous valley where countless shades of

green overlapped and tangled into a web” (119). The perfection and grace of the natural setting, emphasized by the lyrical language, lies in the comforting rich greenness, but is suddenly disturbed by the plane “rolling gracelessly beside the river on a strip of *beaten* soil” (119; *emphasis added*). Gunraj chooses the term *beaten* in order to verbalize the violation of the soil, the passive form further emphasizes nature’s loss of agency to the intruding development project. In addition, upon arrival, instead of finding a flourishing new settlement, Neela encounters a place far from being a functioning establishment and is hit by a “wave of shock before a full flood of disillusionment” (123) overcomes her. Her vulnerability increases as she feels that her supernatural-magical powers are failing her and she is no longer able to command them. In an already alienated and fragile environment, her alienation is in fact that of her surrounding of a marginalized nature heavily altered in this novel by attempts at deforestation and building measures.

The interior itself is associated with natural wonders, myths, and ghost tales of bush spirits in which Neela, too, believes until she meets Karha, a young woman from one of the villages in the rainforest who also works as teacher. The bush is feared by the rest of the country’s population, especially the workers in Eden do not dare to leave the construction site to enter the bush. Neela, before getting to know Karha, “had scarcely considered the people who were born encircled by bush, inhabiting a world that seemed unthinkable remote to her. They were rarely spoken of in the rest of the country” (121). The novel is explicit about the subjection and obliteration of Amerindian people as well as a prevalent racialized social order and marginalization stemming from economic systems of exploitation that have shaped much of Caribbean’s history until today. The hinterland is transformed into the peripheral and “*them people*” become the ultimate others. Within the Eden Resort a similar gender and ethno-political hierarchy as in the remote urban areas of the country is rebuilt – a hierarchy based on skin color in which the indigenous people of the Nasee-Ki valley are forced to occupy the bottom, deprecatingly called “them people” and “red-skin” (121) by “brown men” who perceive themselves as superior defining themselves, their “own kind” (163), in relation to this Other. This superiority in this ethnic environment is largely built upon misperceptions of the Nasee-Ki people’s close connection to the physical nature. “They talk pure jumbie-story, spirits in de bush... Trust brown-man... These Nasee-Ki people believe pure nonsense, man, pure superstition” (165-166). The quote alludes to the workers’ prejudice against the indigenous people and their own superstitious fear in bush spirits who are haunting the urban imagination of the hinterland. These folk tales and half-beliefs are degrading for both the social and physical environment of the bush causing a clash of the so-called pre-Colombian culture and the postcolonial society that relies on “economic policy of dependence” (Jackson 97).

Neela, contrary to common prejudice against the people who inhabit the hinterland as well as superstitious belief connected to the haunted place, feels magically drawn to it. Despite her first

impulse of fear she opens up to the surrounding and listens to the bush. The surrounding vegetation in turn begins to react to her emotional agitation and communicates with Neela in order to transmit a warning. “She felt the bush’s intensifying anger rubbing her spine, its desire to promote human chaos and, at the same moment, to be relieved of it” (167). Implicit in this exchange between Neela and the natural environment are the consciousness of ecological concern and urgency to learn to understand the place. The land’s anger is hers, too. “She had felt something strange about the river, the valley, the waterfall... *dis whole bush is haunted, fed up with dis lying government and dis damn development and these reckless people [...], de bush can’t by tamed, it gon’ always fight back...*” (167). The valley’s fight against the people and the development project is a restaging of an age-old conflict and sheds light on environmental damage caused by the brutalities of slavery and the monoculture of plantation economy. It is emblematic for a highly disturbed relationship of the human with the natural environment. Neela’s responsiveness to and understanding of this living landscape makes her an ally to the environment against a power that is harmful to both nature and indigenous culture. The novel can thus be read as documenting the legacy of a violent past which still affects the present Caribbean (and the rest of the globe) and with which the region needs to come to terms.

Furthermore, in an attempt to rewrite the living landscape, Gunraj at times adopts a highly poeticized, symbolic style to convey the bush’s own language and rhythm. One aspect of this particular style is the personification of nature as the short quote illustrates: “Mirroring her [Neela] upset, the wind gusted unpredictably, whirling tree limbs in its thrust. Branches moved eerily, like trembling arms” (135). Neela perceives the vital signs of the rainforest which differ from human’s breath like her own, but are real nevertheless,

she didn’t hear rhythmic respiration of lungs. Instead, her surroundings hummed a connected breath, a long exhale [...]. She squinted to perceive silhouettes of foliage, eerie images undressing in cloud-covered moonlight [...]. In the shades of the night, Neela sensed that the Nasee-Ki had its own breath, that it was indeed alive” (166).

This observation instantaneously brings to mind Wilson Harris’s impression of the Guyanese heartland which he fictionalizes in *Palace of the Peacock* and introduces as follows: “I became aware of a vibrant, secret life in the arteries [...] in landscapes, riverscapes, oceanscapes, skyscapes. That life differed from the human pulse but it gave range, mystery, cross culturality, unique music, to the language...” (Harris, qt. in Maes-Jelinek 248). Gunraj, too, discerns what Harris describes as the music of the living landscape sung by “preternatural voices in rivers, rapids, giant waterfalls, rock, tree” (Harris, *Selected Essays* 40). The bush is depicted in her novel as “sentient and lurking” (167).

Far from being the Eden-esque idyll one would picture behind its name, Eden Development emerges as an extra-legal territory of vigilantism, violence, and corruption. Jaroon has turned himself into the despotic leader of the workers and “built a kingdom for himself and has everybody answering to him” (227). He resembles more and more demigod-like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s classic *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Like Kurtz, who is the embodiment of imperialist greed for possession, Jaroon is manipulated by power. Both characters offer a glance into the abyss of human psyche showing how in a colonial setting of exploitation and in isolated places individuals become corrupted and deprived of morality. His influence both among the workers in the camp as well as among the authorities in the government increases beyond Eden. Neela is first blinded by his growing power “so quick to enjoy the spoils of being untouchable, so intoxicated by the respect that came from being in a place like Eden with a man like Jaroon, that its hazards had rarely troubled her at all” (186), also her school benefits from the additional allocation. Only Karha remains skeptical and refuses to accept Jaroon’s offerings, willingly attracting his resentment. When two village boys have gone missing, the bush foreshadows the tragedy by its silence, its refusal to react to Neela’s pleading. Karha discloses the terrifying truth about Jaroon who has kept the boys from school, made them steal liquor and provisions from the cargo planes: “He use de boys to do his business ‘cause they quick and young and know how to hide. And he think de soldiers won’t aim gun and shoot mad at them in de bush...” (185). Eden has its own laws, the individual’s existence in the end is a struggle for survival of the fittest and the most corrupted – “Eden does do dat to people” (191). It changes people, a curse that comes not from the valley, not from the natural environment but “from people alone” (192), who are not in tune with the music of the living landscape, as Wilson Harris reminds us.

In terms of an ecocritical reading the following passage highlights environmental empowerment and the joined forces of the natural elements directed against unsustainable neocolonial and neoliberal intervention trying to impose itself forcefully on the bushscape:

But no matter how hard they worked or didn’t work, there was no escape from the Nasee-Ki Valley. Wood ants bored into freshly cut planks and split them along their grain, rain pelted ugly pits into concrete before it could dry, overnight winds shattered recently erected building frames. *Dis place is cursed ... De waterfall is rebelling against us.* (162)

The natural space is not a passive entity, rather the wind, rain, and insects rebel against the appropriation and alterations in the landscape perpetrated by a corrupt local government and foreign investors and their mission to bring progress to an allegedly ‘underdeveloped’ region. Being “[c]ursed from long time... [d]e valley don’t let people do what they intend to do” (165). The curse has been brought upon land and people through the colonial conquest which violently affected the whole region and heavily altered the existing interrelations of nature and culture. The bush resists

this colonial continuity of exploitation quite literally from the grass roots level refusing to be mastered and supplanted. The destructive force of the Eden Development becomes apparent yet in another instance when Neela and Karha walk further into the bush. Karha notices the absence of the birds that used to populate the area around the waterfall, but as “people [are] crowding them out” (179) they now “fly far into de interior” (179) which leads to an imbalance in the ecosystem of the valley.

When Neela finds out about her pregnancy, she separates from Jaroon who considers this an offence against his masculine authority and begins a crusade of threat and sabotage against Neela and her friend in order to “*take away everything she got*” (196). The two friends find support with the women native to the Nasee-Ki valley, who help Neela during her pregnancy and attune her further to the particular soundscape of the bush. The two women visit Karha’s village, together they “follow [...] untraceable paths in the bush, weaving amongst the covering trees and spacious plants and creeping insects” (179). Again, the rich vegetation and living landscape contrast with the destructive energy that poisons the camp. In addition, Neela notes that neither the soldiers nor the workers, not even Jaroon, dare to enter the thicket. She eventually gives birth to her daughter Seetha in the village close to Eden. She later remembers how “[s]he fainted into a deep, overwhelmed and comforted sleep, dreaming of the valley’s greenness more alive and breath-filled than ever” (194). This highlights not only the breathing vitality of the rainforest but also its healing power quite contrary to the general assumption by the urban ‘civilization’ that the valley is haunted and dangerous. Nevertheless, with this scene, the novel reconstructs an opposition between a feminine space of lush vegetation as a symbol for the maternal womb and, on the other side, the male-connoted penetrating development project of Eden, far from being a paradisaically idyllic place. Indeed, Gunraj fails to completely deconstruct this rather traditional binary, based to a certain degree on a Cartesian logic of the mind and the body, yet she succeeds in a hierarchical reversal as she indicates that the rainforest and the people inhabiting it may eventually be victorious.

While still in Eden Jaroon sets the school and their hut on fire, trying to kill Neela and her friend Karha; he later manages to steal Seetha from her sleeping mother’s arms after she has long left the interior and resettled in her home town Marasaw. Wounded, both women escape Jaroon, saved by the bush in a magical moment: “the leaves curling in behind them, cradling their escape and sweeping them deeper into the interior. *Oh, thank you, she thought, even though you vexed, you hearing me, you choosing to help us. Only you can keep us safe now...*” (201). Neela directly addresses the bush that surrounds and cradles them, thus the perception of its liveliness is increased. At the same time, this stresses the role of nature as the ultimate retreat, which one may interpret as a call for ecological awareness and a sustainable, ‘back to the roots’ movement. Neela

is granted access to this space of resistance through Karha who embodies the dialogic relation of human and nature, the relationality of physical and social environment. Apparently, Karha and her people work and live in tune with their surroundings and make use of the high functionality of the natural material and resources, for instance using the leaves as protection against torrential rain washing away much of the constructed buildings: “We work with them leaves good, nah. [...] De leaves are waterproof when you put them together like dat...when you weave them...they form a seal. Rain can’t get through” (123, 128). It is through her that the novel voices ecological concerns and gives insight into alternative forms of conviviality realized within a community that however is not unaffected by the country’s overall economic stagnancy and ecological regression. In this way the novel refrains from an overly romanticized picture of indigenous life in the interior. Her profession as a teacher adds to the didactic tone of the novel to educate and communicate the disastrous outcomes of environmental pollution and destruction – a development that in this novel is hardly ever detached from racialized conflict.

The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha successfully recovers indigenous voices and unveils racist patterns of violence fostered by the local elite. Unfortunately, the novel remains silent about the finalization of the development project, its probable failure, and the ultimate destruction of “dat Eden hellhole” (314), as the reader may quite easily conclude. It does not counter a still prevalent binary of the ‘First’ and ‘Third’ World nor the damaging exploitation from within, precisely because the main characters still rely on the corrupting foreign aid system, using the money to their own ends. Also, in the happy ending, sister and brother finally reconciled, the novel reproduces a patronizing image of the return of the patriarch, Navi, who uses his influence and the Ministry’s money to bribe the government and eventually bring Seetha back to her mother.

Concluding Remark

As Lisa Perfetti states, “much Caribbean fiction interrogates the colonial legacy *through* its representation of the human place in nature, and thus looking closely at how nature and the land are represented in fiction can help us to understand how people resist colonial and neocolonial ideologies” (Perfetti 89). Ecopoetics and ethnic environment as analytical categories can be applied to novels that foreground environmental issues as well as the relationships of humans with nature and social surroundings to uncover or even deconstruct those same ideologies that have forcefully shaped these relationships. The novel, as it conveys a local sense of place, challenges common tropes of an exotic, paradisiac Caribbean landscape for the consumption by the masses. The novel, furthermore, is explicit in its critique of national politics that foster dependence on foreign investment, conflict among its citizens, and the exclusion of the majority of the population.

Hence, what resonate in the novel are a critique of racial politics and ethnic compartmentalization as well as the subordinate status of the Amerindian population. In creating a magical realist setting in an unspecified location that resembles Guyana, Andrea Gunraj reconstructs an environment of 'maroonage' in which alternative forms of conviviality are possible and the bush "*knows how to fight for itself*" (201). The failed Eden project and with it the unsuccessful 'domestication' of the hinterland reverses the colonial project and neo-imperial claims to the land. As a backlash against the radical transformation of the landscape by developmental projects and natural disaster in today's century, the interior space re-appropriates what has been lost. To conclude with a last line from the novel: "*People don't get what they want in life [...], but at least de bush know how to get its own way...*" (167).

Endnotes

[1] For in-depth discussions on postcolonial ecocriticism see, for example, Nixon 2005; DeLoughrey/Gosson/Handley 2005; Cilano/DeLoughrey 2007; Graham/Tiffin 2010; DeLoughrey/Handley 2011; DeLoughrey 2014. The methodological framework of Caribbean poetics of landscape or ecopoetics has been applied, for instance, to the poetry of Derek Walcott (cf. Savory 2011) and the fiction of Wilson Harris, V. S. Naipaul and George Lamming (cf. Supriya 2011).

[2] The anthology *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women's Writing* (2013), edited by Joy Mahabir and Mariam Pirbhai, discusses current trends in Indo-Caribbean writing. It explores the works of a number of new and established writers, with a thematic focus on (Indo-)Caribbean identities and politics, feminist poetics and subjectivity, as well as transnational, diaspora spaces. The anthology is a further step towards the canonization and genre definition of Indo-Caribbean women's writing, contributing to its visibility in Caribbean literary and cultural studies; see also Pirbhai (2010).

[3] A comparative reading of Gunraj's and Harris's works is not the main objective of this article. Nevertheless, there exist certain similarities in the ways in which natural settings and invisible worlds as well as the search for immeasurable wealth in the interior are described. Here, Gunraj attempts to establish a connection not only to a literary tradition but also to what she imagines to be her roots, taking literature as key in both the transmission of culture and identity as well as the circulation of knowledge between the Caribbean and its diaspora (cf. Camp/Thomas 2008).

[4] See, for instance, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998) on the representation of cultural authenticity in a postcolonial context and the problematics of essentializing notions of ethnic identity as markers of difference.

[5] Next to Harris's essay "The Music of Living Landscapes" (1996), the novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) is well suited for a comparative reading.

[6] In "Against Authenticity," Cilano and DeLoughrey state that "[t]he visible history of the plantation economy in the Caribbean generally tempers any tendency to romanticize the natural landscape. Because the monocultural plantocracy violently altered the natural and social environment of the Caribbean, the region has provided an especially important space for theorizing the vexed relationship between nature and culture" (78).

[7] With reference to Cilano and DeLoughrey, Huggan and Tiffin argue that "the crossover field of postcolonial ecocriticism [...] involves an 'aesthetics committed to politics' [...], with its historical understandings of the socio-political origins of environmental issues overriding the apolitical tendencies of earlier forms of ecocriticism that often seemed either to follow an escapist pastoral impulse or to favour an aesthetic appreciation of nature for its own sake" (Huggan/Tiffin 12). A critique of global capitalism and imperial behavior towards nature has so far not been taken into account adequately by ecocritical studies.

[8] In this essay, Wynter asserts "that *Ethnopoetics* can only have validity, if it is explored in a context of *sociopoetics* where the *socio* firmly places the *ethnos* in its concrete historical particularity" (ibid. 78). She further criticizes the Eurocentric epistemological hegemony related to how we discuss and theorize literature.

[9] Sylvia Wynter's article "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" (1971) as well as her novel *The Hills of Hebron* (1962) both explore the conflicting relation between the 'racially encoded' spaces of the plantation and the provision ground.

[10] Wilson Harris, in the second preface to *Palace of the Peacock*, mentions the "creative ferment" of magical realism, musical elements, and the fascination with pre-Columbian culture and civilization in the literature of the Americas.

[11] An unsent letter by their mother reads: "I'm far from you. I can't picture what you look like. I have to look at the photos your grandmother sends me to see you. What kind of mother can't see her own children's faces in her heart? But I can't, not even when I try my hardest. I am so sorry" (47). These lines disclose the painful circumstances of absent motherhood, when parents are forced to leave their children due to precarious conditions and poverty.

[12] Neela's friendship to Lenda is eyed with suspicion: "She and her family ain't like our people [...]. Neela knew what her grandmother, what the whole town thought of her friendship with Lenda nowadays. And even as they avoided speaking about what brewed around them, naively hoping the other couldn't perceive it, both Lenda and Neela felt the blades of eyes boring into them" (98).

Works Cited

- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Transl. by James E. Maraniss. Durham/London: Duke UP, 2006 [1992]. Print.
- Campt, Tina and Deborah Thomas. "Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and Its Hegemonies." *Feminist Review* 90 (2008): 1-8. Print.
- Cilano, Cara and Elizabeth DeLoughrey. "Against Authenticity: Global Knowledges and Postcolonial Ecocriticism." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14 (2007/1): 71-88. Print.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "Ecocriticism: The Politics of Place." Ed. Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell. *Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. London/New York: Routledge, 2011. 265-275. Print.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "Postcolonialism." Ed. Greg Garrad. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*. Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 2014. 320-340. Print.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, Renée Gosson and George Handley. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Charlottesville/London: U of Virginia P, 2005. Print.
- Garner, Steve. *Guyana 1838 – 1985: Ethnicity, Class and Gender*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2008. Print.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989. Print.
- Gunraj, Andrea. *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2009. Print.
- Harris, Wilson. *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*. Ed. A.J.M. Bundy. London/New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- . *Palace of the Peacock*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010 [1960]. Print.
- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London/New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Jackson, Shona N. "Subjection and Resistance in the Transformation of Guyana's Mytho-Colonial Landscape." Ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and Georges B. Handley. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Charlottesville/London: U of Virginia P, 2005. 85-98. Print.
- Maes-Jelinek, Hena. "From Living Nature to Borderless Culture in Wilson Harris's Work." Ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and Georges B. Handley. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Charlottesville/London: U of Virginia P, 2005. 247-260. Print.
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. Print.
- Nair, Supriya. "Caribbean Eco-poetics: Dwellings in *The Castle of My Skin*, *Palace of the Peacock* and *A House for Mr Biswas*." Ed. Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell. *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. London/New York: Routledge, 2011. 173-180. Print.

- Nixon, Rob. "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism." *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Ed. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 233-251. Print.
- Perfetti, Lisa. "The Postcolonial Land that Needs to Be Loved: Caribbean Nature and the Garden in Simone Schwart-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14 (2007/1): 89-105. Print.
- Persaud, Lakshmi. *For the Love of My Name*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd., 2000. Print.
- Pirbhai, Mariam. "The Jahaji-Bhain Principle: A Critical Survey of the Indo-Caribbean Women's Novel, 1990-2009." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45 (2010/1): 37-56. Print.
- Savory, Elaine. "Toward a Caribbean Eco-poetics: Derek Walcott's Language of Plants." Ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. 80-96.
- Tiffin, Helen. "Man Fitting the Landscape." Ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée Gosson and George Handley. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Charlottesville/London: U of Virginia P, 2005. 199-212. Print.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Ethno or Socio Poetics." *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics* 2 (1976/2): 78-94.

Suggested Citation:

Beushausen, Wiebke. "'Making Eden a Reality': Caribbean Eco-poetics and Ethnic Environment in Andrea Gunraj's *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*." *forum for interamerican research* 8.3 (Dec 2015): 94-110. Available at: <www.interamerica.de>

