

Facing the Ecological Crisis in the Caribbean

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Introduction

“The nations of the world are not fighting a losing battle. But the nations of the world are losing this battle today. It is within our power to win it. The only question is ... will it be too late for the small nations of the world?”

—Barbados Prime Minister Mia Motley at the 2019 Climate Action Summit

Not a single year passes by without a major hurricane sweeping through parts of the Caribbean, causing catastrophic damage, injuries, death, as well as environmental destruction.¹ Irma, Maria, Dorian, and Iota are just a few of the names of the recent category 4 and 5 hurricanes that have left bitter memories. What was historically perceived as the mere ebb and flow of climate hazards is now understood as part of the global ecological crisis, especially global warming. Global climate change caused by human activities induces an increase in the intensity of hurricanes in the Caribbean. As a result, while the Caribbean region contributes very little to global warming, the region is among those bearing the brunt of its consequences. Rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and increased intensity of climatic events are just some of the ecological challenges that the Caribbean faces. Yet, in addition to generating more powerful hurricanes and climate change, the ecological crisis also negatively impacts water resources, biodiversity, food sovereignty, pollution, energy production, and cultural and natural heritage preservation. How do Caribbean countries and territories face and mitigate these challenges? In particular, in accordance with the overarching theme of this collective volume, what part does or can cultural heritage play in the ongoing Caribbean efforts to mitigate the ecological crisis?

We address these questions from our respective expertise on socioecological conflicts in the Caribbean. We join our theoretical gazes on the link between ecological preservation, culture, and politics with our respective fieldwork in the Caribbean including Bonaire and the Dutch Caribbean islands (Mac Donald) and the French Caribbean islands (Ferdinand). This paper is divided into four parts. Part one provides historical and epistemological considerations concerning ecological issues in the Caribbean highlighting a “double divide of modernity,” a historical

and theoretical understanding of the world that separates the environmental divide (humanity/nature) and the colonial divide (coloniser/colonised). Addressing ecological issues comprehensively in the Caribbean requires moving beyond this separation. Part two highlights the divide that has led to the oft referred to opposition between ecological preservation and cultural heritage on one side and the practice of peoples in developing countries on the other. Part three presents two case studies in the Caribbean with different perspectives on the relationships between environment and society, nature and culture. Finally, part four presents a prospective outlook regarding the main challenges facing the Caribbean in the coming decades.

Thinking Ecology in the Caribbean: A Double Divide

Thinking about the ecological crisis in the Caribbean may appear as evident. One would only need to use the methods, tools, concepts, and disciplines already established and apply them to the Caribbean as one would any other region of the world. While this certainly is a defensible approach, we argue that thinking about the ecology crisis from a Caribbean perspective requires fundamental preliminary historical and epistemological reflections regarding knowledge production in and about the Caribbean. If, indeed, the Caribbean is like any other region of the world, its history has a unique place in modernity. It is in this region that in 1492 an imaginary knot was tied between the so-called Old World and New World, marking not only the start of the economic globalisation but also the understanding of the Earth as a global and materially finite totality. In addition to the violence and dehumanising conquests, genocides, race-based slavery, and slave trades that followed, the coloniality of knowledge, which socially and politically defined who could be part of the world on equal footing, who could participate in knowledge and science production, and who could not, was established.² As a result, from the end of the fifteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, a significant part of what is considered scientific knowledge regarding the Caribbean region, its people, and its ecosystems was not produced by Caribbean peoples themselves. If the sciences have an inherent universal claim, the location and positionality of the sites of knowledge production may result in the introduction of biased knowledge. For the greater part of its modern history, the Caribbean has been understood as an exotic object of study by outside researchers and not as a site of theorising discourse or knowledge-producing voices. Why does the history of knowledge production matter when thinking about the ecological crisis in the Caribbean? It matters because it points to the historical and ongoing silencing of Caribbean voices in ecological thinking and ecological movements. This is evident in two fields.

Even though, as Richard Grove pointed out, Caribbean colonies—as well as Mauritius in the Indian Ocean—have been the places of the first environmental policies, the Caribbean and its peoples have been left out of the history of environmentalism.³ To this day, many environmentalist thinkers in the United States and Europe cultivate the idea that concerns for the environment originated in the minds of solitary walkers and nature lovers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry Thoreau, two White men in (post)slavery societies.⁴ With concepts such as the “wilderness” still very present in environmental thought, one was led to believe that neither Native Americans nor enslaved Black Africans had developed practices or knowledge regarding environmental preservation. Furthermore, this racially charged conception of nature conservation was explicitly implemented in many parts of the world, including Africa, on the condition of the removal of indigenous peoples.⁵ Essentially, environmentalism has been constructed to a fault to be a White male and middle-class affair. How many times have we heard environmental NGOs whose headquarters are based in Europe or the United States state that they aim to preserve the environment in the global South but that the population is not receptive or is too poor or is lacking in some other way to support their endeavours, thereby implying that the people in the South do not care? This biased constitution of environmentalism has led to numerous blind spots in the conceptualisation of ecological issues. It is quite remarkable that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in an era marked by the rise and fall of imperialism and the statutory decolonisation of countries in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, it became self-evident to conceive of environmental issues as distinct from the history of colonialism and the myriad resistances to it and the need to preserve the cultural heritage of these resistances. Conversely, it has become equally self-evident to conceive anticolonialism, anti-slavery resistance, and struggles for postcolonial emancipation as completely distinct from environmental issues. This separation between the history of environmental damage caused by humans and the history of colonisation, slavery, and imperialism constitutes the *double colonial and environmental fracture of modernity*.⁶

This divide is problematic because of the dualistic ontology separating the fate of humans from the fate of the environment, but most of all because it silences the colonial and slavery roots of the ecological crisis. One telling example concerns the recently introduced concept of the “Anthropocene” as promoted by, among others, Dutch chemical scientist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen. In his effort to encompass the recent history of the globe and humanity and its geological consequences with this term “Anthropos,” the geological era of humanity, Crutzen overlooks the history of slavery and colonisation in his own country, the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This is a country whose colonialisms and slavery from South America (Surinam) to Indonesia via South Africa and back to the Caribbean

(Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Bonaire, Saba, Sint Eustatius, Aruba) has also contributed to global environmental destruction. In fact, colonisation, slavery, and imperialism have been the conditions for the destructions of environments. While such blind spots may go unnoticed in Europe, it becomes detrimental when such a perspective is adopted in the Caribbean.⁷ Policies and practices that focus solely on the environmental preservation or management of the islands not only run the risk of overlooking the often precarious social conditions, lack of food sovereignty, and health problems caused by different sorts of pollution, but also may fail to consider the different kinds of emancipation aspired to by Caribbean people in the wake of colonisation and slavery. This is one more reason why Caribbean ecological issues must be understood “beyond sand and sun.”⁸

Moving beyond this double fracture also requires moving beyond a damaging misunderstanding between disciplines within the field of human and social sciences and the field of Earth and life sciences. On the one hand, it has become common for scholars in social and human sciences to study the complexities and pluralities of issues regarding the social, cultural, political, and psychological realities of societies while assuming a very homogenous and often unchanging background called the environment. On the other hand, it similarly remains common practice by scholars in Earth and life sciences to study the complex elements



Banana plantation in Marinique (photo Malcom Ferdinand)

of the Earth, its flora and fauna, the chemical and physical cycles of life from its origin in the geological past to the effect of solar flare and greenhouse gas emissions, while considering the resulting gross impact on the planet of the human population as if it were a single unit. In sum, scholars tend to study the Earth in all its heterogeneity but consider the human population as a single homogeneous whole. Engaging comprehensively with ecological issues requires engaging with the complexities on both sides of the divide, to tell the stories of how different actions by different groups of humans following particular ideologies—for instance capitalism—impacts different elements of the web of life. Such complexities allow us to steer away from the oversimplifying statement “humans should preserve the environment,” and delve more concretely and minutely into all the actions, big or small, which are conducive to the building of a common world, with dignity, justice, equality, care, and consideration for humans and non-humans.

Environmental Preservation and Cultural Heritage Preservation

The double divide of modernity between environmental issues and histories on the one hand, and (post)colonial issues and histories on the other hand, lies at the root of the opposition between environmental preservation and the needs and interests of developing countries and/or poor populations. At first, such opposition seems to be obvious. An ecosystem is threatened by a human activity, such as fishing or pollution, and a part of the local population or industry is responsible for this degradation. Yet this is only a small part of the picture. The problem arises when that simplistic opposition is held as *the whole and only* narrative about the ecological crisis by a sociologically specific group of people who seldomly include the local peoples, who are perceived as being at fault. This particular conceptualisation of ecological issues separates nature and culture, or environment and society. In other words, ecosystems, the so-called natural spaces, are conceived of as independent of human societies and cultures, the latter often included in environmental narratives only as foreign and threatening elements. In the Caribbean, this modern divide between nature and culture reinforces the historical colonial process whose main action has been and is precisely to separate (local) indigenous peoples from their lands.

The problem with the historical and colonial silencing of Caribbean voices is not just the absence of local perspectives. It is also the absence of the *participation of local Caribbean voices* in the conceptualisation of the ecological issues, problem definition, and narratives. Who gets to decide how an ecological issue should be understood, narrated, and mitigated? What is the real extent of participation? While today many ecologists hastily acknowledge the need for *consulting* local inhabitants, there often remains a condescending and disciplinary chauvinistic

core belief that their analysis of the issue is the most important one. As a result, the voices and participation of the local others are considered only as long as they do not fundamentally challenge the already established narrative on ecological issues.

However, conceptualising Caribbean ecological issues in a manner that includes a wider range of people from more diverse backgrounds and social positions—and not just the scientific “experts”—is not a miracle “solution.” In fact, evaluating such democratization of ecological issues’ conceptualisation and management only in terms of their “efficacy” misses the point, because it falls back again on the notion of including the local population only to solve a problem that has been predefined without that population, without the possibility of another view of environmental issues. Paradoxically, in such instances, the inclusion of local communities still maintains a form of silencing of local voices. A true democratization of ecological issues is not only necessary for its own sake, as a principle guiding the way a society collectively chooses to inhabit the Earth, but also for the way it often makes other kinds of conceptualisation of ecological issues visible—kinds that very often do not follow the same divide between nature and culture. Such conceptualisations include those where it is no longer possible to separate livelihood and culture needs, social justice, gender equality, demands for (post)colonial emancipation, humane treatment, and dignity from the evolution of the ecosystems. Such an entangled sociopolitical and environmental understanding of ecological issues does not mean that all problems will be solved instantly. It mostly means that whatever decision or environmental policy is chosen, it is one that would intricately and openly associate both the environmental and sociopolitical dimensions of the experience of life on Earth. The problem is then no longer about such ecosystems, or such conservation zones per se, but rather about the type of world and relationships with humans and non-humans that is sought or made possible by such conservation practice.

Case Studies: Bonaire’s Fishery; Martinique and Guadeloupe Pesticide Pollution

One case where the oversimplification “humans should preserve the environment,” the silencing of Caribbean voices, and the tensions between nature conservation and cultural heritage are visible is in the fisheries sector of Bonaire. Bonaire’s fisheries sector is a small-scale, artisanal, low-value, multispecies fisheries sector in which little technological development or growth has ever occurred.⁹ Despite its relatively low economic value, the sector is greatly valued within the local community. In Bonaire, fishing is one of the oldest professions and means of livelihood. The historic and cultural value of Bonaire’s fishers is strongly visible on the island. Fishers are celebrated every September 8 during the festival of the Virgin del Valle (Virgin of the Valley), the patron saint of the fishers and other seafarers.

During the weekend close to the saint's day, the fishing community gathers to ask for her blessing. Not only do fishers and their families and friends participate in the celebrations, but also the coastguard and government representatives. Long before colonial times, fishery practices took place in the waters surrounding the island. Still today, legacies from the Amerindian periods, from 1370–1325 BC onwards,¹⁰ form part of Bonaire's culinary heritage and rapport with sea creatures. Fishing has been a form of food provision for residents through the centuries but never developed into a true industry for the island.¹¹ There have always been (professional) fishers (in 1975 about 6% of the working population was employed in fisheries or agriculture, often both).¹² While there are no recent official numbers, today it is estimated that Bonaire has approximately twenty full-time fishers and several dozen part-time fishers.¹³

Over the years, the sector has gained increasing attention from a nature conservation perspective, as marine resources are one of Bonaire's biggest economic assets in terms of (dive) tourism. There have been several notable changes in the marine environment and stocks of certain species surrounding Bonaire. While Bonaire's coral reef ecosystem is in better condition than in most places in the Caribbean, it too has degraded substantially.¹⁴ Despite the argument brought forward by some policymakers that fishing has remained artisanal and is 'therefore' not harmful to the environment *per se*, certain targeted species have visibly declined.¹⁵ While it cannot be concluded that the decline of pelagic, seasonal, migrating fish species is due solely to overfishing by Bonairean fishers, it is true that the decline of targeted reef species, such as the Nassau Grouper, Queen Conch, and Snappers, is at least partially due to fishing activities by Bonairean fishers.¹⁶ Fishers tend to be reluctant to admit that certain species are no longer present in large numbers, especially when they believe this will directly affect them.

A former marine park manager explained that the reluctance of fishers to admit that they are responsible for declining fish stocks is because they are poor. Because many of Bonaire's (commercial and subsistence) fishers live in poverty, they need to cover the basics before they can collectively worry about the environment. The manager explained:

It takes intellectual advancement to understand that all other basic needs are easier to fulfill if your environment is in check. The number one element for the problem with the environment and environmental protection, especially [protection of] coral reefs, is poverty. You cannot expect people to understand the power of conservation when they are surviving.¹⁷

When asked, some fishers confirm that making a living from fishing has become more challenging due to fewer and smaller catches, and a few fishers even openly

admit they are (in part) responsible for this decline.¹⁸ Most fishers, however, also rightfully emphasise other factors, such as climate change, changes in currents, pollution, and industrial fishing practices.

The past three to five years you don't see the big fish anymore. In the past ten to fifteen years, you could easily catch ten of the big fish in one go. Now you should be happy if you only catch one or two. How did this happen? Well, they say the temperature of the water and the currents. But what we also see here are the big industrial Japanese and Korean fishing boats who fish on the borders of our waters.¹⁹

Non-fisher stakeholders (e.g., marine park officials, scientists, and consultants) share these beliefs. They too argue that the diminishing fish stocks and general degradation of the marine environment are not the fault of the fishers, even though their fishing activities also contribute to this. Instead, they claim that pressures such as coastal development, increasing amounts of sunscreen in the waters, wastewater, and pollution cause detrimental damage to the ecosystem, affecting fish stocks. However, the lack of consistent monitoring of fish landings and fish



Old fisherman's hut on Bonaire "Rancho Ilse", with signs stating, 'Fishermen's Heritage Bonaire' (middle), 'Back to Nature' and 'Don't abuse our hospitality' (left). All signs indicating the complicated relationship between fishermen and nature (photo Stacey MacDonald 2012)

stocks does not mean that fishing is a negligible pressure on the ecosystem and does not require managerial attention, especially fishing that takes place on the reefs.²⁰ Generally, the voices of the Caribbean fishers are silenced or dominated by those of nature conservationists, divers and diving operators, and scientists who argue for the preservation and conservation of nature in favour of the tourism sector. This is also evident in the island's policy, for example, as stated in the Nature and Environment Policy Plan (NMPB) 2020-2024 highlighting the growth and importance of "nature tourism" (i.e., tourism wherein nature is central). The policy plans of the Tourism Corporation Bonaire also emphasised the importance of nature (see Strategic Tourism Plan Bonaire 2017-2027). These strategic policy plans also clearly state that nature is not only important for the economy in relation to tourism, but also for the general well-being of the community and the preservation of culturally relevant professions such as fisheries. However, the concrete actions derived from these policies tend to (financially) neglect the immediate needs of the fishers and their livelihoods. This phenomenon reflects the silencing of Caribbean voices pointed out in the introduction of this chapter.

Cultural heritage presents a paradox regarding the present ecological challenges and the need/willingness to address these. It appears this debate is twofold. On the one hand, there is a strong belief and consensus that traditional fishing practices are sensitive to and wary of sustainability to ensure the health of fish stocks and ecosystems. As one fisher explained:

Back in the day we saw corals and could catch fish everywhere. There used to be so many corals. There used to be so many fish in the past and we don't see that anymore ... We didn't harm our environment; we took care of our environment because that is our livelihood ... We only caught what we needed and left the rest in the ocean to catch another day.²¹

At the same time, the fact that the fishery is seen as a significant part of Bonaire's heritage creates resistance among government officials and fishers to change even the more harmful practices, even though these changes are believed to be required to preserve the sector. Moreover, cultural practices underscore a belief that people used to live in harmony with nature; some practices do require a change to safeguard the ecosystem. Fishers clinging to culture and cultural heritage refuse to think about change or solutions (e.g., fishing spawning aggregations of certain fish species). Thus, the importance placed on the retainment of local cultural practices can be detrimental to the environment and illustrates that the relationship between environmentalism and cultural heritage complicates the struggle towards climate justice.

The factor that drives this divide and reluctance among stakeholders to address the challenges Bonaire's fishery sector faces seems to lie in the participation or lack

thereof of local Caribbean voices both informing and deciding the measurement measures required. Another fisher stated:

But they [the government] have come up with certain measures because of the system of the Netherlands. And that is where the problem lies. Because in the Netherlands you have a lot of pollution and overfishing going on ... and they damaged the entire ecosystem there. And then they came here [on Bonaire] and they saw a beautiful place and they want to protect it. But if you want to protect it you shouldn't just do whatever. You have to go in the field and get your information there. Only then you know why fishers do certain things. But now they are protecting so much that they are damaging the survival of the livelihood of the Bonaireans themselves.²²

The key is that measures and management must be developed and implemented with caution, by considering visible and essential differences between resource users.²³ As one fisher shared:

If you want your kids to also fish, you must participate in certain things. If just keep fishing and fishing and don't take into consideration that they are no longer there, well maybe not in the entire world, but around Bonaire for sure. I don't think fishers will get angry, but they just must get used to measures because we never had them.²⁴

Fishers are generally poorer than, for example, divers and diving companies, which comprise a critical stakeholder group in the tourism economy, and conservation measures tend to negatively affect the income of fishers—for example, prohibiting or limiting the catch of certain species. A final difference pointed out by the researchers was the visible racial difference between resource users: fishers tend to be Black and Antillean, whereas divers or tourists are white and foreign. Giving the latter “privilege use” of the resources based on the presumption that they contribute more to the economy and cause minor damage—the latter not necessarily true²⁵—exacerbates the pains of colonialism that exist on the island.²⁶

Besides overfishing and climate change, pollution in the Caribbean is a major issue. While often associated with tourism industry waste, container ship malpractice, and the emission of islands that are still heavily dependent on fossil fuels for energy, there is also significant pollution associated with agriculture-intensive countries that make heavy use of chemicals. Evidently, such pollution is not specific to the Caribbean, but there is something specific to enduring pollution on small and densely populated Caribbean islands. In contrast to the images of large, far-removed plantations, agriculture in the Caribbean often adjoins residential areas, schools, and other urban spaces.

One of the most notorious examples of this is the contamination of the French islands Martinique and Guadeloupe with an organochlorine compound called chlordecone, which is an endocrine disruptor and a carcinogenic agent. This chemical compound was used as a pesticide in banana plantations from 1972 to 1993, which caused long-lasting, generalised, and harmful contamination. One sixth of the world's global production of this toxin was used on twenty thousand hectares of land on the two densely populated islands. Parts of Martinique and Guadeloupe may be contaminated for up to seven centuries. Today, it is estimated that more than 90% of the inhabitants of Martinique and Guadeloupe are contaminated. Furthermore, the contamination has been proven to dangerously reduce pregnancy length, slow infant motor, cognitive, and visual development, and increase the chances of prostate cancer.²⁷ As a result, many farmers and coastal fishermen had to stop their activities or go into early retirement because the land they farmed or the inland and coastal water was polluted. Being on an island, it is not possible to move to another space. While it was known at the time that this compound was toxic, dangerous to both the environment and human beings, it was knowingly authorised by the French Ministry of Agriculture, which prioritised the financial interest of a few banana producers over the care of the population and their environment. To this day, almost fifty years after the toxin was first used, no person or company has been indicted. Justice is still denied to Antilleans.

While this case is one of the many unjust treatments of the people of Martinique and Guadeloupe, where the health and environmental state agencies of France turned a blind eye, it also resulted in one of the most remarkable social mobilisations regarding environmental issues on the islands. In February 2021, more than ten thousand people marched in Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, to denounce a potential non-judgment in the chlordecone case. How is it that local social mobilisation on ecological issues occurred on this island and less so on other Caribbean islands?²⁸ For more than forty years a fairly important ecological movement in Martinique led by local inhabitants achieved numerous victories regarding the preservation of mangroves and the denunciation of pollution.²⁹ The scale of contamination is not sufficient to explain the development of a social protest movement. One of the keys has been recognising the relationship between environmental preservation and postcolonial equality, human rights, and the preservation of cultural practices. Local activists recognised that the struggle against pesticide pollution is not only important for the environment and public health, but also to assert equal citizenship in the postcolonial relationship between the former colonised and the former coloniser. As such, the struggle for the environment becomes an integral part of the struggle for dignity in the aftermath of colonisation and slavery. In other words, it is the “un-separation” of nature and culture, of ecology and politics, that has made possible the birth

of a local movement concerning various ecological issues including pesticide pollution. While this movement by itself did not stop the pollution, it did manage to force the French government to allocate funds for depollution, environmental and health research, and ensure that food consumed on the island was not contaminated.

More than a classic story of corruption, capitalism, and green revolution (i.e., the rise of industrial agriculture, using intensive methods, high yield crops, lowering biodiversity and increasing pesticides that led to similar chemical pollution around the world), the cases of Martinique and Guadeloupe are also the story of a particular way of inhabiting these islands: *a colonial inhabitation*. This violent way of inhabiting the Earth exploited both the environment and humans—women in particular—to the benefit of a few shareholders. Since their French colonisation in the seventeenth century, these islands have been conceived of as plantations, providing exotic products for the French mainland market, such as bananas. While numerous social, economic, and political changes have taken place since the seventeenth century, the most fertile ground of these islands is still home to sugar cane and banana plantations. This has been going on for so long that doing otherwise seems inconceivable. Yet uprooting such an exploitative colonial inhabitation of the islands, the cause of many environmental and social issues, is one of the islands' most important ecological and political challenges.

All in all, these two case studies confirm that the Caribbean is of particular importance in considering historic events that shaped local culture and examining how individuals and groups perceive and act to solve environmental problems. There is no place in the world that has been shaped by its colonial history as much as the Caribbean, and every social and cultural trait is related to colonialism.³⁰ Gregory Rabess described the Caribbean as “an artificially created society made to fit the design of colonial expansionism and economic imperatives. It is still in the process of decolonialisation, identity formation or consolidation.”³¹ Similarly, Jaffe, de Bruijne, and Schalkwijk pointed out that “[g]lobal flows and colonial powers that shaped the Caribbean in the past are continued in the form of present-day dependencies”.³² Consequently, just as it is impossible to categorise Caribbean culture as either “Western” or “Non-Western,” the distinction between global versus local processes is not clear-cut in the Caribbean.³³ To this day, the environmental legacies of colonialism (i.e., the long-term socioecological and psychological consequences of human interactions with the environment during the colonial era) continue to shape modern social and environmental challenges. These legacies have been neglected. Yet the specific history that shaped the culture of the Caribbean is essential in explaining what efforts are made or are not made and by whom to mitigate the ecological crisis the region faces.

Key Challenges Moving Forward

Rather than focusing on specific environmental issues or consequences of global warming, we want to highlight three key challenges regarding the ability and capacity of Caribbean countries to act: 1. Seeking global environmental justice; 2. Fighting disaster capitalism; 3. Recognising Caribbean ecologies.

Seeking Global Climate Justice While Finding Local Solutions

As small island states and/or non-sovereign territories, Caribbean countries are particularly impacted by climate change. They are facing the ecological tempest of the twenty-first century from subaltern positions with little ability to apply economic/political pressure. This is particularly the case in the aftermath of category 4 or 5 hurricanes. Many environmental issues cannot be mitigated solely by actions of Caribbean countries but require the active engagement of countries larger in both population and area and with greater economic, military, and political power. It is a dire reality that the Caribbean region is dependent upon the engagement of other governments regarding global warming. Pursuing a stronger form of solidarity (like the Green Climate Fund—a global platform established to respond to climate change by investing in developments focused on limiting or reducing greenhouse gases) and stronger commitments to reduce GHG emissions are steps toward global climate justice.³⁴ However, it would be naïve to think that the only solution will come from the global community. There are many actions and initiatives that can be undertaken to mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis, including revising urban planning, protecting coasts, and implementing insurance plans at the local and regional levels. It is imperative to work on the global community level while fostering local and regional initiatives, as was illustrated in the case of the fisheries sector in Bonaire.

Prey of Disaster Capitalism

While the need for economic development of small island states and territories is well recognised, neoliberal markets and capitalism are not the answer. Indeed, capitalism, particularly racial capitalism, is one of the major drivers of climate change and other environmental, social, and sanitary ills. Caribbean islands are vulnerable to disaster capitalism, the practices by which disasters such as the destruction caused by hurricanes become profitable for a number of companies and multinationals.³⁵ While the temptation may be strong to rebuild as quickly as possible after a disaster, how can one ensure that such processes do not give in to greedy privatisation and still protect public services such as access to water,

education, and food? Evidently, this challenge is not just a matter of Caribbean government attitudes but also those of global communities, their institutions (UN, IMF, World Bank, EU) and the way solidarity and relief funds are channelled.³⁶ It would be very imprudent to blindly follow the very economic agenda that has led the Caribbean to being overly exposed to the consequences of climate change.

Towards Caribbean Ecologies

Echoing the late Sylvia Winter's work, "ecology," much like "humanity" or "man," is a word that has been occupied by a particular group of people who get to define it. With the privilege of defining ecological and environmentalist practices comes the silencing of local and historical practices and discourses that, although they are not called ecological per se, do provide ecological wisdom. It is time to move away from a dangerously homogenous way of thinking about ecologies, and to recognise, document, and advance the different varieties of Caribbean environmentalism that have long been in place. This is not a chauvinist call, but the pragmatic realisation that an ecology that is embedded in the cultural and even mythical stories of a society becomes much more powerful and operational than a mere wishful injunction expressed from a distant abroad. Cultural heritage and ecological policies should no longer be thought of separately, as the modern divide between nature and culture has led many to do.³⁷ What is culture other than a set of relationships among humans, non-humans, and the environment, including the spirits and ancestors? Does this not mean that traditions or cultural practices should be taken as ecologically embedded? In fact, consumption patterns and rituals may need to be critically examined in light of the need to preserve the web of life in the Caribbean. It means, most of all, that ecological practices and policies should not be considered exterior to the cultural imaginary of societies. It is precisely the dialogue between nature and culture, environment and society, ecology and politics that can not only ensure a place to live for future generations but also lay the ground for a common world vibrant with plural histories and cultures. It is precisely from this line of reasoning that demands for reparations for slavery should be taken up with the same level of attention as demands for environmental justice.