

Man and Landscape: Literary Biodiversity and Aesthetic Revolution in Aimé Césaire and Alfred Alexandre

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Abstract

This article examines biodiversity in Caribbean literary texts in terms of the subject's interaction with its environment. Using evocations of island and urban landscapes from *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, *Moi laminaire*, *Le bar des Amériques* and *Les villes assassines*, we show how the authors employ an environmental lexicon to express themselves while painting the world. The writing communicates a world devastated by a painful memory of slavery and a modern society stricken by extreme violence. The crisis of the living world, linked to the commodification of human beings from the slave trade to the neo-trafficking of drugs and prostitution, creates tensions and imbalances that the narrators try to rebalance through their reflections on the world. Literature enables us to reexamine these focal points of historical and contemporary domination in order to decry their mechanisms, in an innovative socio-poetic and aesthetic language, with a view to building a more viable and healthier society.

Keywords

Literature, Biodiversity, Caribbean Islands, Socio-environmental Landscape, Revolution in Aesthetic Language

1. Introduction

Biodiversity is a relatively new term in literature. Critical discourse rather uses ecocriticism, ecopoetics and ecofeminism as currents, theories and methods of

reading literary texts¹. It is therefore important, first of all, to define biodiversity in its historical component and its specificity, i.e. in the meaning that we give it in this article, based on the works of two Martinican writers, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), poet, essayist, playwright, politician and founding father of the Négritude movement, and Alfred Alexandre (1970-), poet, novelist, playwright and contemporary essayist.

When it first appeared in 1986, biodiversity replaced the notion of nature protection, which was “loaded with cultural references, impossible to define precisely, and too prone to conflicts in its implementation” (Bortolamiol, Brédif, & Simon, 2023). According to these authors, “the notion of biodiversity opens up the prospect of a more scientific approach, based on the measurement of entities and interactions within the biosphere. The first use of the term dates back to 1986, during a conference held in Washington. Biodiversity, then considered as a property of ecosystems, encompasses both a dimension of an inventory of forms of life at the genetic, specific and ecosystem levels, as well as a functional and evolutionary dimension. However, the concept soon underwent a number of changes. The Convention on Biological Diversity, signed at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, recognises biodiversity as a resource with value not only in its own right, but also in utilitarian terms. Integrating the role of human societies, the notion of biodiversity includes social, historical and cultural dimensions. It goes beyond natural spaces to examine the dynamics of ecosystems modified by humans, socio-ecosystems. This raises the question of its appropriation, use and access. Biodiversity is no longer just a property of ecosystems, but a resource and therefore a political object” (p. 11). The evolution of the notion has led some researchers to include the concept of the living world and to broaden the questioning by insisting “on the interdependencies that unite human and non-human organisms, without giving primacy to one or the other” (*Id.*). It is also important to remember that “the living world includes both the processes and dynamics that are both ecological and cultural in nature” (*Id.*). In other words, it involves all forms of intelligence within the biosphere and questions our relationship with the world.

It is on these ecological and cultural aspects, taken from a broader conceptual field and in interaction with the living world (human, non-human and supra-human), that our analysis will be based. Starting with the poems *Cahier d'un retour*

¹Originating in the United States in the 1990s, eco-criticism is characterized by “the study of the links between literature and our natural environment” (Glottfely & Fromm, 1996: p. 18). According to Gabriel Vignola, “eco-criticism problematizes literary activity from the perspective of the relationship between human beings and nature, as expressed by and in literary works, as well as—more marginally—in other forms of cultural production such as cinema, advertising, the visual arts or music” (Vignola, 2017: p. 5). In the Caribbean context, Malcom Ferdinand historicizes decolonial ecology in an intersectional approach that articulates the confrontation of contemporary ecological issues with those of women’s emancipation and the colonial divide (Ferdinand, 2015). Ferdinand uses the term ‘colonial cyclone’ to describe the millions of slaves who died in the holds of slave ships as a result of the devastating triangular trade for the bodies and psyches of enslaved people. Césaire, in CRPN, describes all the historical and mental stages linked to the tragedy of slavery, just as Alexandre will speak of the exploitation of men and women treated more vilely than goods within the neo-trafficking of sex and drugs, as we will show.

au pays natal (Césaire, CRPN, 1983) and *Moi, laminaire* (Césaire, ML, 1982), we will compare them to the poetic narratives *Les villes assassines* (Alexandre, VA, 2011) and *Le bar des Amériques* (Alexandre, BA, 2016) in order to show that their texts conjure fauna and flora, the countryside and the city, not to draw up an inventory, but to paint a self in constant interaction with the “landscape”, with others and with the world. In other words, in Césaire and Alexandre’s work, what is said passes through the medium of the environment (familial, historical, geopolitical, anthropological, social, literary) and cannot be said without saying something about the other and the surrounding world. This inextricable relationship that is woven between the self, the landscape and the world seems to us to constitute the pivot of the authors’ poetic narrative, as well as a condition of possibility of the Caribbean text. The notion of literary biodiversity that we put forward will mean a textual place drawn from a place that is both real (physical) and imaginary (the writer’s), where geological, geographical, physical and climatological instances and living beings interact to form a self-organising system (an ecosystem) of social conflict and harmony, social splendour and misery. Autonomy is measured in the self-regulating process of the literary text which, through figures such as oxymoron, metaphor and antithesis, integrates beauty into evil, death into life, the human into nature, nature into the human. Literary biodiversity as a textual socio-ecosystem will allow us to underline the essential role that literature plays as a vector of understanding and analysis of social mechanisms and the processes of conservation and destruction of human, non-human and supra-human biodiversity, as well as their impact on contemporary Caribbean societies.

2. Man and landscape

In a radio interview on France Culture, the Mauritian poet Édouard Maunick asked the poet Aimé Césaire, renowned and consecrated by a body of poetic work entirely published, with the exception of *Moi, laminaire*: “What is the significance of an island in the life of a man?” (Maunick, 1976). Césaire replied: it is first and foremost “this geographical phenomenon of land surrounded by water” (*Id.*). “I was born in Martinique. To be precise, in a small village called Basse-Pointe in the north of Martinique. A rather astonishing landscape, a bit like Brittany, of a very high cliff facing the raging Atlantic. [...] I believe that it is not without significance” (*Id.*). Césaire makes numerous references to the island landscape in his work, even if he implicitly underlines the painful memory, which led him to write, as if in one long poetic breath going from the first collection of poems (CRPN) to the last (ML), the story of the great drama of slavery through the prism of a self-writing with a plural ethos. It is as a poet, essayist, autobiographer and politician that CRPN paints the trajectory of a man in constant interaction with the Caribbean landscape.

Literary criticism on the work of Aimé Césaire has already noted the importance of the ecological references that run through his poetic universe (Kesteloot, 1982; Ngal, 2000; Diop, 2010; Hel-Bongo, 2019). Fauna and flora are men-

tioned in negative terms in “a city that has missed its calling, its resistance, mute, thwarted in every way, incapable of growing according to the juice of this earth, embarrassed, trimmed, reduced, at odds with the fauna and flora” (CRPN, 9). The critical discourse on the poetic work of Césaire emphasises a learned and even hermetic lexicon² to the point that it requires semantic decoding (Diop, 2010). Césaire’s ambivalent, oxymoronic depiction of the Caribbean landscape is one of deficiency and abundance, beauty and ugliness (Bisanswa, 2008), caught in the vice of its geography as well as its history (Walker, 1979; Wondji, 1985). “In this inert city, this crowd desolate under the sun, participating in nothing that is expressed, frees itself in broad daylight from this land of its own. Neither to the Empress Josephine of the French, high above the negraille. Nor to the liberator frozen in his liberation of bleached stone. Nor to the conquistador. Nor to this contempt, nor to this freedom, nor to this audacity” (CRPN, 10). Césaire’s telluric poetry will either be audacious or it will not exist. It is synonymous with revolt and action. “And above all, my body as well as my soul, beware of crossing your arms in the sterile attitude of the spectator, because life is not a spectacle, because a sea of pain is not a proscenium, because a man who cries out is not a bear who dances...” (CRPN, 22). It follows that the environment in Césaire’s work, as in that of many Caribbean authors such as Édouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Simone Schwartz-Bart, Daniel Maximin, Raphaël Confiant, Patrick Chamoiseau and Alfred Alexandre, is not limited to explicit borrowings from a landscape that imitates or transfigures nature taken in a literal sense. Nature carries History with it. “And my original geography too; the map of the world made for my use, not tinted with the arbitrary colours of scholars, but with the geometry of my spilled blood, I accept” (CRPN, 56). A poetry of acceptance, therefore, posed as a *sine qua non* for overcoming the historical conditioning of black African civilisation and its descendants. In these writings, a deep and fusional connivance is played out between the universe of the outside (the external, social, historical, geographical world of the islands) and that of the inside (the imaginary universe represented by the writing self). Consequently, in Césaire’s work and more broadly in Caribbean literature, a braid is woven between man, landscape and the world, making this literature an important place for the representation of literary biodiversity.

By this term, we mean a literature that summons man, the self, the world, into a multidimensional space-time where the diverse, heterogeneous, abundant and multiple elements that make up the Caribbean landscape interact. The areas of interaction are both harmonious and conflicting. The landscape must thus be understood

²Often commented on, Aimé Césaire’s first poem, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, has never ceased to provoke unease among critics. One of the first commentators on the work, Kesteloot (1982: p. 14), lists the elements of its complexity in these terms: “This long poem contains entire passages written in surrealist writing, which practically need to be ‘translated’ [...]. Furthermore, Césaire accumulates neologisms based on Latin and Greek; technical words relating to medicine or anthropology, not to mention zoology, botany or the specific geography of the Antilles and the South American continent; not to mention, allusions to the history and customs of both the Antilles and Africa. So many obstacles to immediate understanding...”. Kesteloot (1982). *Comprendre Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* d’Aimé Césaire, Éditions Saint-Paul (p. 14).

in a polysemic and extensive manner, since the texts of Césaire and Alexandre refer as much to the island landscape (paradisiacal or devastating) as to the rural, urban, historical, anthropological, political, economic, etc. landscape. They refer to what is beautiful and hideous about nature in the eyes of poet-writers; to the work that paints a picture and reconfigures nature; to the situation of enunciation of reality (taken in a broad sense) and finally, to the prospective universe imagined by the authors as they look to the future horizons. The texts activate all these senses at once in a chronotope that interweaves space, time and the action of the narrative (Bakhtine, 1978) with a triple temporality, where past, present and future coexist in the same textual terrain, which helps to place the work of Césaire and Alexandre in literary modernity (Hel-Bongo & Faulkner, 2016). It follows that landscape is a trope, in other words a word that changes meaning depending on the context in which it is enunciated and used in the utterance (Molinié, 1992).

Living the island therefore means more than contemplating it, or observing it, even from a distance, to describe its realities or recall its landscapes.³ It means merging with it, in it, to the point that it is no longer you who inhabit the island, but it who inhabits you. A poetics of place emerges from Alexandre which can be read in a euphoric and dysphoric duplicity of the landscape, marked as much by the seal of beauty as by pain. “How much blood in my memory! In my memory are lagoons. They are covered with skulls. They are not covered with water lilies” (CRPN, 35). The poet chooses to confront his past, to end the alienation after centuries of slavery, colonisation and assimilation that distanced him from himself. “I force the vitelline membrane that separates me from myself” (CRPN, 34). He is ready to move mountains to rise above the brainwashing caused by centuries of brutal domination: “I force the great waters that surround me with blood” (CRPN, 34). Nonetheless, in all despair lies a glimmer of hope. Thus, the poet makes frequent use of oxymoron, as if to extract a memory from the “joyful stench and songs of mud!” (CRPN, 37), and to draw from the depths of disaster “the strength to look to tomorrow” (ML, 163). The antithesis contained, for example, in the exclamation “*Eia for pain* with udders of reincarnated tears” fades in view of the poetic segment of pure happiness which precedes it: “*Eia for joy / Eia for love*” (CRPN, 48). This obligatory passage of ambivalence allows the poet to turn the page on his “old negritude, which is progressively becoming cadaverous”. Starting anew, he sings:

“et voici au bout de ce petit matin ma prière virile
que je n’entende ni les rires ni les cris, les yeux fixés
sur cette ville que je prophétise belle”

(and here, at the end of this early morning, is my virile prayer
may I hear neither laughter nor cries, my eyes fixed
on this city that I prophesy to be beautiful) (CRPN, p. 49). In the play *La Tra-*

³What Aimé Césaire is doing, standing on a cliff facing the sea, in Martinique, in the documentary by Euzhan Palcy. Palcy, E (1994-2006). Aimé Césaire. Une parole pour le XXI^e siècle, France, 1994-2006, box set of three DVDs: Part 1: “L’île veilleuse”. France. (The second part of the documentary is called “Au rendez-vous de la conquête” and the third, “La force de regarder demain”).

gédie du roi Christophe (Césaire, 1963), Christophe, a famous Haitian historical figure, observes the citadel, which he sees as a symbol of the pride of his people, thanks to the hard work it took to build it as an edifice overlooking the sea. In the play *Et les chiens se taisaient* (Césaire, 1958), the rebel dreams of a magnificent country, full of sunshine, parrots, fruits, fresh water and breadfruit trees. We can note through these examples the predominance of the plant register, a land of honey, bliss and ecstasy that Édouard Glissant will call the *Pays rêvé* (Glissant, 1985)⁴:

“Je bâtirai le ciel, d’oiseaux, de perroquets, de cloches, de foulards, de tambours (...) un monde notre monde

mon monde aux épaules rondes de vent de soleil de lune de pluie

de pleine lune

un monde de petites cuillers

de velours

d’étoffes d’or

de pitons de vallées de pétales

de cris de faon effarouché

un jour

autrefois”

(I will build the sky, of birds, of parrots, of bells, of scarves, of drums (...) a world our world

my world with round shoulders of wind of sun of moon of rain

full moon

a world of teaspoons

velvet

gold fabrics

of peaks of valleys of petals

of cries of a frightened fawn

one day

once) (Césaire, 1958: p. 41).

In this passage, we can see the interplay of proximity and distance that binds man to his environment. The subject evokes “a world our world my world”. We also observe the emanation of hopes expressed with words and images of a supra-human universe (“the sun”, “the moon”). Even in his dark prison, where he awaits his fateful hour, the Rebel dreams of this luminous country that he wanted to build: “I dreamed of light, of golden signs, of sleep purple with awakenings / Of

⁴In Glissant’s poem (1985), the real country and the dream country refer to the archaic African ancestor, the West Indies, and the poet’s imagination of these two spaces, which often merge. In *Un dimanche au cachot*, Patrick Chamoiseau also plays on the confusion between a real place (the room in the boarding school where young Caroline is confined) and the dream place of L’Oubliée’s dungeon at the time of slavery. He intervenes in the novel as a social worker and tells Caroline the story of L’Oubliée, which is called *Un dimanche au cachot*, the novel we are reading. The narrative creates a gigantic blur by splitting the author, the H/history, space, time, the narrative and the characters (Cailler; Hel-Bongo). Césaire, Glissant and Chamoiseau all seem to have the same intention behind this narrative strategy: to propose an imaginary identification with reality so that the subject can come to terms with his past and present and envisage a future.

sparks and lynx skins”. A profusion of light, an abundance of bright colours, of rainbows, a yearning for a land where luminosity dissolves the shadows of slavery and colonialism. These birds, these chandeliers are images of abundance, happiness and freedom to which every man aspires.

3. Real Country, Dream Country

Alfred Alexandre, younger brother of Aimé Césaire and also a writer, seems to have a poetic writing style comparable to that of the poet of the Négritude movement. In his book of criticism devoted to the poetic work of Aimé Césaire (*Alexandre, ACPI, 2014*), Alexandre maintains that “in all the collections, the general structure of the Césairian poem presents this conception, assumed to the end, of a poetry as a cadastre of the interior territory” (ACPI, p. 90). The two authors map and associate intimate, insular and universal geographies by sifting through the living conditions of the self and of the Caribbean subjects who evolve in a world by taking note of history (slavery, colonisation) and the immediate present. Separate yet co-present, the islands in the prose of the two writers contain cities, with their share of splendours and miseries.

Iles annelées, unique carène belle
Et je te caresse de mes mains d’océan. Et je te vire
de mes paroles alizées. Et je te lèche de mes langues
d’algues.

(Islands ringed, one beautiful oak tree
And I caress you with my ocean hands. And I turn you away
with my trade wind words. And I lick you with my tongues
of algae) (CRPN, p. 55).

The poet shows us the problems of a tense cohabitation between the call of a happy life and the revocation of “an old life, lying smiling” (CRPN, p. 8) and unhappy (“And I turn you away from my trade wind words”). Similarly, the city is a social hell for the characters in the work of Alexandre, hence their desire for a dream life. For the poet Aimé Césaire, the dream is part of the search for something beyond. When the oppressed leave their condition after centuries of slavery and “brutal and silent domination (*Chamoiseau, 1997*), “the seated negraille” is

“inattendûment debout,
debout dans la cale,
debout dans les cabines
debout sur le pont
debout dans le soleil
debout dans le sang
debout
et
libre”
(unexpectedly standing,
standing in the hold,
standing in the cabins

standing on deck
standing in the sun
standing in the blood
standing
And

Free) (CRPN, pp. 61-62).

The oxymoron “standing in the hold” and “standing in the blood” speaks of the tension that coexists between the past and the present, the time of submission and that of revolt, indignity and dignity regained thanks to an embraced negritude, but which rebels by standing proudly. For Alfred Alexandre’s characters, such as Winona and Evane (VA), the dream consists of wanting to leave the urban hell of drugs and prostitution and go, even for a short time, to the high cliffs of the upper classes. “And Winona said then that here, up there, far from the city, there would never be, on her skin, as in her head and in her heart, neither makeup nor false light, just her eyelids with no pretence, no vain attempt at evasion” (p. 58). Connected to the archipelago, the characters cannot avoid the evocation of the island landscape. Nor can they close their eyes to what is creating an imbalance between man and his environment. Four centuries of slavery and the slave trade, the exploitation of slave labour, the blood spilled, the shackles on people’s minds, a collective psycho-social disaster, an internalisation of the complex of the colonised (Fanon, 1952) have resulted in people living in a state of absolute alienation and self-shame. In *Le bar des Amériques*, the narrator Hilaire refers to the naval police, who nevertheless continue to turn a blind eye to trafficking at sea because “a patrol with five minutes left of its shift generally did not bother to launch a pursuit against traffickers with, in addition, the risk, always real, of getting their arteries clogged. (...) And it was clear then to all those who had an eye, that our islands were once again stretching out like a string of trading posts open to all the winds. For weapons. For drugs. For workshops and factories every day disgorged of full of illegal immigrants” (BA, pp. 36-37). The smuggling circuit in the Caribbean and Pan-American zone is in turn reminiscent of this poetic extract from Césaire, which maps the geography of the triangular trade but at the same time entangles the global historical damage done to local island populations by the institutionalisation of slavery and the slave trade: “And my unfenced island, its clear audacity standing at the back of this Polynesia, in front of it, Guadeloupe split in two by its dorsal stripe and of the same misery as us, Haiti, where negritude stood up for the first time and said that it believed in its humanity, and the comical little tail of Florida, where a black man’s strangulation is completed, and Africa, gigantically crawling up to the Hispanic foot of Europe, its nakedness where Death mows down in wide swaths” (CRPN, p. 24). The geographical inventory is coupled with a highly subversive layer of significance relating to those tortured in slavery through “strangulation” and a devastating “Death” which “mows down in wide swaths” (Ki-Zerbo, 1978).⁵

⁵A swath is a regular row of mown grass. Deliberately redundant, the image accentuates death, as does the capital letter that presents it as a monster that has, in fact, historically raided and exterminated nearly 400 million African slaves during the slave trade and slavery.

4. The Crisis of the Living World

Césaire and Alexandre invoke an environmental geography at the same time as a painful history to tell themselves and the world. We only need to recall this other more intimate passage from the *Cahier* where the child cannot concentrate at school

“car sa voix s’oublie dans les marais de la faim
 et il n’y a rien, rien à tirer vraiment de ce petit
 vaurien qu’une faim qui ne sait plus grimper aux agrès de
 sa voix
 une faim lourde et veule,
 une faim ensevelie au plus profond de la Faim de
 ce morne famélique”

(for his voice is forgotten in the marshes of hunger
 and there is nothing, nothing really to be gained from this little
 scoundrel than a hunger that no longer knows how to climb the ladders of
 his voice
 a heavy and weak hunger,
 a hunger buried deep within the Hunger of
 this starving dreary one) (CRPN, p. 12).

Like Death, the poet personifies hunger by humanising and dehumanising it at the same time. He re-presents it in reverse as an abstraction, in other words as an allegory, through the capital letter that visually crushes the lowercase letters of the poetic segment. This typographical effect can be read metaphorically as the oppression of a global system that crushes the proper functioning of the local system and generates a genocide (in the case of Death) and an impoverishment of the islands (in the case of Hunger) on a collective scale. The I in this last excerpt draws from its individual experience an experience that concerns a part of the community. Hunger becomes part of a whole (a metonymy) that makes up the social landscape, where the intimate self acts as a microcosm of the surrounding world. Other examples can be drawn from the text, such as the metaphors of illness that serve to designate the unsanitary state of the rue Paille, where the poet’s paternal home is located, with its “hut cracking with blisters”, the feet of the bed made of “kerosene crates” that look like they have “elephantiasis”⁶, the misery revealed by the rust of “clumsy houses”, the grandmother’s ragged mattress (CRPN, pp. 18-19); the city itself is designated by “the exacerbated stench of corruption”; its institutions of oppression are compromised in the slave system. Césaire evokes the “monstrous sodomies of the host and the victim” which have engendered a humanitarian and social disaster. He then lists the disastrous consequences of slavery for people’s consciences: “the insurmountable burdens of prejudice and stupidity, prostitution, hypocrisy, lust, betrayal, lies, forgery, bribery—the exhaustion of insufficient cowardice” (CRPN, p. 12).

⁶Elephantiasis is a skin disease characterised by a significant increase in volume in certain parts of the body such as the legs and genitals.

Alfred Alexandre's novels deal with the same themes. Very little commented on to date, critical discourse has glimpsed a kinship between the poetics of the two writers (Simasochi-Bronès, 2016; Bandy, 2018), without analysing it. It appears that the authors share the same disenchanted universe, which attaches their subjects to the memory of history, to the present (Simasochi-Bronès, 2016), to the future and to the writing in progress. However, within the thematic disenchantment we read the enchantment of language. In the poem "foyer", Césaire invites us to a "Memory honouring the landscape" (ML, 139). The painful traces of the past are concentrated in the dignity of an image, the sea, bearer of troubles generated by the transatlantic slave trade. The sea, in Alexandre's poetic writing, carries stowaways, as well as drugs and contraband. The crisis of the living world takes the form of the commodification of men and women who occupy the status and function of objects, some of them caught up in the hell of sex trafficking, prostitution and drug networks. Nonetheless, the sea is also a source of great poetry in the stories (Walcott, 1986).

5. The Interior Revolution

Published in 2011, *Les villes assassines* tells the story of Evane, a smuggler who is clear-sighted about his fate and that of the urban landscape in which he lives. Evane falls in love with Winona, a dancer who works in a bar owned by Slack, a pimp who sows terror in the city and in the girls "in the rue Fièvre and the rue Veille-aux-morts and the rue Sans retour" (VA). The names of the streets are repeated profusely in the novel and form a syntactic and phonic link that cannot be undone. It is impossible to break the circle. The poeticity of repetition is coupled with monstrosity, since the young girls are caught in an invisible chain that attaches them to Slack's collar and to sex trafficking. Slack has the letter S (echo-memory of the fleur-de-lys) tattooed on the buttocks of his favourites, whose names are Winona, Lady B. and Marvilyne, who were considered to be "movable property." (Louis XIV, 1685). The language translates the slave palimpsest. The social landscape of these women refers to an absent figure, the prison in which they are confined. It is not surprising that Winona dreams of exile with Evane, whose name's consonance in French recalls escape (évasion) and elevation to a healthier and happier life. Since childhood, Winona has dreamed of Eden-Ouest, the upmarket cliff-top neighbourhood where the city's wealthy people live, and where she imagines they gaze out over the seascape towards the future. Evane takes Winona for an afternoon, then a few more, then they spend an entire night. But guilt and terror hover over them constantly. Slack's shadow haunts them. The men of his militia watch them and end up revealing to him the intimate affair between the young couple. Slack sets about cruelly punishing Winona by burning her lips with acid. Winona nevertheless returns to her oppressor's arms, but Slack, unable to bear the fact that she has escaped his control in the slightest, sends his "macoutes" to finish the job and assassinate her. Winona's father recounts the scene to Evane. "They broke down the door. They threw themselves on her. There

was a whole group of them. Slack's militia. Slack is no longer here to protect your body, they took my little girl out, giving her big slaps, right there, before my eyes. [...] And there she was, on the ground, my darling little girl. Dishevelled. Beaten. Bruised. Murdered." (VA, p. 109).

Slack himself is moved by an invisible hand, working for those "hypocritical officials", who want to get rid of "the wretches of our kind" (p. 32), relates Evane; we, the "rejects of life", "we other recluses" (p. 131), "renegades left behind", who are locked up in the area "of the rue Fièvre and the rue Veille-aux-morts and the rue Sans Retour", with no possibility of escaping, because the police, that "padlock", comes to "cloister our rebellions" (p. 15). Evane decides at the end of the novel to avenge the death and honour of Winona. He goes to the bar where Slack is, overprotected by his bodyguards. He anticipates his coming death in an acceptance of his condition. "I knew that seeing me enter the dead end, gun in hand, Slack's militias would have every chance of stopping me before I shot their boss like a dog. But I had nothing left to lose" (VA, p. 135). His heroic death is reminiscent of that of Toussaint Louverture locked in his prison in the Jura. Césaire used a lexicon of elevation rather than disenchantment in the face of death to elevate the hero of the Haitian revolution to the rank of superman:

"La mort décrit un cercle brillant au-dessus de cet homme
 La mort étoile doucement au-dessus de sa tête
 La mort souffle, folle, dans la cannaie mûre de ses bras
 La mort galope dans la prison comme un cheval blanc
 La mort luit dans l'ombre comme des yeux de chat"
 (Death describes a brilliant circle above this man
 Death stars gently above his head
 Death blows, mad, in the ripe cane of his arms
 Death gallops into the prison like a white horse
 Death shines in the shadows like cat's eyes) (CRPN, p. 26).

Alexandre's *villes assassines* (murderous cities) represent a landscape of great social tension, just as the islands, in Césaire, are plagued by "hunger", disease, alcoholism and geographical isolation: "At the end of the early morning, budding with fragile coves, the Antilles which are hungry, the Antilles pockmarked with smallpox, the Antilles dynamited with alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this city sinisterly stranded." (CRPN, p. 8). The poet's gaze is tinged with a feeling of revolt, perceptible in the enumeration of the social ills that are gangrening the islands, and in the bitterness that we hear in the phonic crushing of the paronomasia "the mud of this bay" ("la boue de cette baie"). The landscape is nevertheless described in a lofty language that speaks of social misery under the objectifying eye of the poet.

After the painful memory of the rue Paille, Césaire projects himself into a happier future that marks a break with the past with the help of a single verb: "To leave" (CRPN, p. 20). In *Les villes assassines*, Winona turns to Évane to "leave" too, even if Evane says to herself in an interior speech: "Several times, she had

asked me to stop the motorcycle in the middle of the sun, and she had gotten off to walk along the blinded sea. And sometimes she remained standing there, without moving a muscle, in the thick and silent warmth of these landscapes given over to oblivion” (VA, p. 69). The landscape, forgetting itself, is as if struck by alienation, like Césaire’s “inert city, this screaming crowd so surprisingly unaware of its cry” (CRPN, p. 9). Other characters from the city come to dream in the heights: “But it was obvious,” writes Evane, “that they were tired of watching her trample all over herself each day. In addition, by dint of remaining motionless like the sea, by dint of living embedded in the stone, they had ended up resembling the landscape that enclosed them” (VA, p. 69). The girls in the bar are victims of mistreatment under the indifferent eye of a system that shamefully turns a blind eye to the deplorable living conditions of a section of its population. Evane lives under the yoke of a dangerous and silent domination, which can end his life at any moment. The scenes of violence are numerous and eloquent in Alexandre’s stories; they aggravate the lives of the characters, “dynamited with alcohol” (CRPN, p. 8), drugs, madness and death.

6. The Revolution of Poetic Language

Césaire and Alexandre use a particular language to configure a rich landscape crossed by fauna and flora, poetry and drama, oxymorons and antitheses, allegories and personifications, where the writing self enters into relationships with others and the “*tout-monde*”⁷, brilliantly anticipated by Édouard Glissant as a “*chaos-monde*” (Glissant, 1997). Thus, atmospheric images (such as tornadoes and volcanoes) announce psychological, social, and economic torments in the texts, which widen the gap between the island’s haves and have-nots. The aesthetic and pragmatic effects are heavily felt and have repercussions on both the writing and the act of reading. The aesthetic revolution of language in these authors affects meaning and rhythm, disrupts the verse and the sentence, contributing to a poetic renewal. If *Le bar des Amériques* bears the genre name “novel” on the cover, it nonetheless contains highly poetic passages. The novel relates in four “notebooks” written by Hilaire, the story of Bahia, stranded aboard a boat transporting illegal immigrants. Rescued by Leward, a former smuggler of illegal immigrants, she rediscovers in him an old love. A romantic relationship binds the two characters to the narrator Leward, who becomes their friend. Leward is secretly in love with Bahia and will dedicate his four notebooks to her, “thrown like four bottles into

⁷“I call *Tout-monde* our universe as it changes and endures in exchange and, at the same time, the ‘vision’ that we have of it. The *totalité-monde* in its physical diversity and in the representations that it inspires in us: that we can no longer sing, say or work on suffering from our place alone, without diving into the imaginary of this totality. Poets have always sensed this. But they were Cursed, those of the West, for not having consented in their time to the exclusivity of place, when it was the only form required. Cursed also, because they felt that their dream of the world prefigured or accompanied the Conquest. The conjunction of the histories of peoples offers today’s poets a new way. Globality, if it can be seen in the oppression and exploitation of the weak by the powerful, can also be guessed at and experienced through poetics, far from any generalisation.” Glissant (1997). *Traité du Tout-Monde. Poétique IV* (p. 176), Gallimard.

the sea. Where, in a single wave, a single continuous and unfinished sentence, the word, between the din of the shipwrecked islands and the silence of dying days, searches for itself in the tatters of memory. The islands, as a metaphor for the places in the world that imperial powers find it in their interest to maintain in chaos and dependence, thus opening up an imaginary world of oceans and continents adrift, port areas, capes and strategic straits, maps and maritime routes, migrations, exile, and resistance through which peoples, and particularly the Caribbean peoples, despite everything, demonstrate their astonishing capacity to stand up to the forces bent on completely subjugating them” (Alexandre, 2020: p. 11). These words, spoken by Alexandre himself in a review of his novel, show that behind the poetic language lies a strongly committed statement on the maintenance of the domination of the islands, the unfailing resistance of the people and the sea as playground for all kinds of trafficking. The trio of characters thus paves the way for a global reflection on the community of the trans-Caribbean and Pan-American islands.

The epigraph to the first and subsequent notebooks is no less intimate:

“Pour Bahia.

Ces quatre cartes d’îles

Leurs pages de sables et de sel

Détachées de nos mémoires en mille

Et une vague en archipel”

(For Bahia.

These four island maps

Their pages of sand and salt

Detached from our memories in a thousand

And an archipelago wave) (BA, p. 5).

Alexandre’s story draws us into a demanding narrative. In addition to the confusion of the characters’ voices and the indecision of certain pronouns (“we”, “he”, “she”), there is a stylised use of apposition. “Bahia” and “Leward” are constantly addressed by the narrator Hilaire, but also, it seems, by Bahia and Leward themselves remembering their past with melancholy, a melancholy that they drown in the artificial paradises of alcohol and drugs. The constant apostrophe in names creates a syntactic-semantic confusion. We do not always know for sure whether the first name Bahia, or Leward, refers to the phrase that precedes it or follows it, because of the anacoluthons repeated in the story. “The most astonishing thing is that his body, Leward, had begun, one would say, to feel dizzy too, incapable yet, perhaps, of taking on the chaos that Bahia, in vain, was healing in his flesh. Sucked in, perhaps, Leward, by the dark eye, the dark love, the dark desire that, from the beginning, had kept us braided to the miraculous presence of Bahia” (BA, p. 84).

The confusion created by the interpellation is undoubtedly a pledge of poeticity that is coupled with a clever play on the work of memory. For tirelessly invoking the names of the characters in apposition, is it not making them live again in the present of writing and reading? Evane seems to give an explanation for this literary

device: it is “as if, by giving her her own first name, I had agreed to take upon myself or, rather, to take with her, without faltering, the part of the wandering from which she had been absent for years. As if I had expelled her from the silence and the void that enclosed her from the inside and all the time filled her without ever fulfilling her” (VA, p. 66). We could go further and see in the apostrophe a new way of short-circuiting the description (that of the portrait) without breaking completely with the well-known literary device of ekphrasis. Thus, in the following example, the reader-spectator of the scene watches, as if helpless, as the loved one falls into decay, perceptible in the repetition of “Bahia” “And her head exploded by alcohol, coke and the pain of the solitudes in which she had been dying for thirty years, Bahia... in the repeated thread of images where she enlarged, by multiplying it, her pale, motionless existence... Bahia” (BA, p. 76).

Thus, Césaire and Alexandre do much more than conjure up a landscape of fauna and flora, or an urban landscape. The landscape in question is *complicit* in a history and a geography, a poetry of the social, a dark and melancholic self that implicitly denounces the failings of society and the sordid and mercantile human commodification that is rampant in the islands. These different components constantly interact in the texts. “And as I saw that it almost brought tears of fearful astonishment to her eyes, all these landscapes that I hid in my reserves, that it made her legs all weak, so I continued to talk to her, Winona without stopping, even to catch my breath” (VA, p. 44). Men and women were once, and still are in some respects, regarded as commodities, in profit-driven societies whose operating principle is based on competition and speed, leading straight to alienation (Rosa, 2014). The I and the game of the poet-writers consists in exchanging the fixed forms of poetry for prose, the laudatory representations of the islands and their people for contrasting and oxymoronic portraits where the light contains its share of shadow and the city, its share of disaster. The city is transformed into a monster, “into a filthy beast” (BA, p. 45), metaphorically referring to “us navigators of the illegal... that’s what, in fact, they called us, the preachers whose fever raged from morning to night on the bar TV” (*Id.*). “And filthy beast or anti-world, anti-world or anti-christ, for them (the Pan-American Coast Guard) it was the same thing. In their big mouths as in his, Leward’s, it meant that our region was fornicating against the planet and its rules of operation” (BA, p. 46).

The poetry of disenchantment is based on verbal violence and the register of abjection that deliberately contaminates the writings of Césaire and Alexandre. From the Latin, *ab-jecere* (to throw away), ab-jection is characterised by a lexicon of dejection (a term used for the evacuation of excrement such as that spewed out by volcanoes). Thus, factories regurgitate their illegal immigrants (BA, p. 37), traffickers expurgate their bad manure (BA, p. 38), “the sea pours out its filth, its dead cats and its dead dogs” (CRPN, p. 19). Bahia, in *Le bar des Amériques*, is an illegal immigrant who ends up on the beach aboard a container in atrocious crossing conditions. The poeticity of the story also spills over and spreads throughout the narrative fabric to the point of obscuring the clarity of the message, but this mes-

sage remains no less powerful and essential to the representation of the social in the texts. While Césaire spoke directly of the terrible conditions of the hold, Alexandre relates the experience in a more sibylline manner due to the poetic density of his statements. Bahia experiences the anguish of the crossing: that of having to hide without knowing where she is or where she is going. She must live in the dark, without air, in fear, hunger, thirst, salt, the smell of the sea and seasickness. “Clinging to the air holes through which incomplete rays of light pierced. Clinging to her pulled-back hair, Bahia. As if clinging to the distant days when she had been happy. As her body... understanding that the container had left the Panamanian coast and set sail again... As, yes, her body, once again, experienced in the inner swaying that gave her migraines, the unfolding of the waves that now followed, from afar, the dotted line of lighthouses where the roads of the small islands brought her to us, Bahia” (BA, p. 52). Here again, we can read a palimpsest between history and the present, like those parchments that still retain certain marks of ancient texts imperfectly scratched. The crossing unites in a historical continuum the fate of the slaves and that of the illegal immigrants and even the traffickers called by certain cynical characters in Alexandre’s novel “happy slaves”. Hilaire remembers the first time he saw Bahia disembark on the island: “Bahia... oh, her naked, sun-kissed body, asleep in my eye... In those capsized afternoons when life breathed the blue oxygen of the waves jostling for a grain of sand...” (BA, p. 111). The narrator here intertwines the intimacy of his gaze, sublimated by Bahia, with a double island landscape, because the blue of the waves and the grain of sand speak not only of idyll but also of the suffering linked to exile at sea and uprooting.

7. Conclusion

Literary biodiversity, in the work of Césaire and Alexandre, should be understood in terms of the constant and plural interactions of heterogeneous elements, brought into a relationship of co-presence and tension. The two writers fertilise images of beauty in evil, combine the poeticity of language (Cohen, 1979) with the need to name the dysfunctions of life, linked to an invisible but real system of oppression that crushes individuals, especially the most vulnerable (sex slaves, illegal immigrants, petty *djobbers*) in the trans-Caribbean islands. They intertwine these elements with their intimate way of seeing and portraying a world. The critical and poetic spirit that they instil in their characters gives them the power to speak out and to rise up through the revolt of a lucid conscience in the face of a politically accepted and morally indefensible social decline, to use the words of Césaire in his *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Césaire, 1955). The crisis of the modern subject is to be alternately chained in a lethargy that rhymes with an absence of revolt on the part of oppressed individuals, or on the contrary, to have to live in a frenetic rhythm where speed and violence are imposed by economies that govern us in the name of competition and the race for money for the greatest profit of a few to the detriment of an ever larger and more impoverished mass. But, as Hilaire declares at the end of his American notebooks: “I realised that all

this filth and this light that delimit a path of existence, had not been sown in vain” (BA, p. 108). In fact, the Césairean poet of the “Judgement of the light” evokes “a jet of victorious sunlight by which justice will be done and all morgues dismissed” (ML, p. 67).

The prose of Césaire and Alexandre provokes unease in the pleasure of words. The different components of the landscape (human, environmental, socio-economic, political) in the works require constant rebalancing on the part of lucid bodies such as fictional characters, poetic-fictional mediators of the writers’ voice. To link decolonial thought to the environment, Malcolm Ferdinand draws on the works of the writers Fanon, Césaire and Glissant. In fact, these essayist-poets envisaged the phenomenon of literary biodiversity even before the word emerged in our disciplines. In our view, they broaden the notion of ecological awareness insofar as it does not respond to an external constraint, to a contemporary emergency that would only be negative (such as the deterioration of our climate). It obeys an inner law that consists in having to say in order to reveal, to state in order to denounce, to uproot in order to eradicate in a sometimes sublime aesthetic language the evil that plagues societies and the psyche of individuals oppressed by a system that crushes them by dint of centuries of conquest and domination of all kinds. Following in the footsteps of Baudelaire and the Surrealists, Césaire and Alexandre reiterated the need to re-present a plural and dual landscape, both actor and victim of destruction (the hold, the plantations, the cyclones) and regeneration for the new man (‘standing in the hold’, Toussaint’s and Evane’s heroic death). The landscape thus gives birth and death to the individual, whatever the vicissitudes of life, since, as Heraclitus knew six centuries before our era, ‘discord and concord are father and mother of all things’ (Morin, 2020: p. 10). Sarah Bortolamiol, Hervé Brédif and Laurent Simon, researchers in the field of biodiversity, note that “reconnecting citizens, now mostly urban, to biodiversity requires reintroducing biodiversity into the city. But the utopia of the garden city, today called a ‘biodiverse’ city, is not without contradictions: the compact city versus the green city, the choices are never without undesirable effects, both for biodiversity and for city dwellers. The conflicts observable in the metropolises of emerging countries bear witness to this” (Bortolamiol, Brédif, & Simon, 2023: p. 8). The stories studied revealed the complex spaces of conflict that play out between human and non-human actors in biodiversity in the Caribbean.

What can literature ultimately do in terms of biodiversity and, more broadly, within the different disciplines of knowledge? By imagining a world that transfigures the real world, literature can warn of the dangers of the world. Through the poetry of its language, it pluralises meaning, aestheticises the world and sublimates evil. By addressing man directly, it informs him and soothes him of his ills through words charged with a reflexive awareness of Caribbean societies that share a threefold experience: the experience of language, the experience of singularity, and the experience of reading and writing. Roland Barthes had his own way of putting it, when he emphasised the threefold power of literature through the fundamental con-

cepts of *mimesis*, *mathesis* and *semiosis* (Barthes, 1978). Mimesis is strong in its power of representation. If literature cannot achieve reality, it can invent it, imagine it. In doing so, it can seek to achieve the impossible, and go beyond reality to envisage solutions that have not yet been thought of in the face of the crisis. As *mathesis*, literature expresses a diversity of knowledge: historical, geographical, social, political, anthropological and technical. Barthes argued that if all our disciplines were to disappear from the curricula, literature would have to be saved in any case, as it can contain all the sciences. As an instrument of knowledge, literature is in this sense encyclopaedic; it draws on knowledge without any preference. It allows us to examine the mechanisms of society and to reconfigure history. Finally, as *semiosis*, it is concerned with language, staging it, seeking to reproduce the diversity of societies and sociolects from which it can put into practice an object-language, referring it back to reflexivity. This third power of literature, properly semiotic, displays a desire to play with signs. The texts of Césaire and Alexandre combine, in our opinion, these three powers of literature as a transversal discipline of the human sciences and as a powerful instrument for exploring social mechanisms, particularly with regard to the issue of biodiversity. The novelist-poets have thus been able to work with their “miraculous weapons” (Césaire, 1946), using words as projectiles, acts of language and revolution with the pleasure and enjoyment of words.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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