

Traces and Footprints of a Cardinal Ecopoetics: Nature or the Other Character in *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff* of Patrick Chamoiseau

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Abstract

This study examines the eco-poetic dimension of the story *The Old Slave and the Hound* by Patrick Chamoiseau. This text-pretext explores the profound relationship between nature and literature and examines how, alongside the Old Slave, the Master, and the Mastiff, Nature is introduced by the author as much more than a classic referential element of the narrative. Patrick Chamoiseau, through his poetic narrative, makes it a literary character who bears particularly historical, cultural, symbolic, and commemorative traces.

Keywords

Nature, Eco-poetics, Nature Writing, Biodiversity, Martinique, Character, Literature, Poetry, Description, Narration

1. Introduction

“One cannot exist in the world in an abstract universal. One always comes from somewhere, a homeland that was given to us or that we chose for ourselves. One’s native land becomes a “Place” when it is not an absolute, but a source and a resource for inhabiting the Earth. Every “Place” has emergencies, problems, attacks on the human condition, or ancestral riches that an artist (precisely concerned with the human condition) cannot forsake.” Patrick Chamoiseau

What is the link between this explanation by biogeographer Philippe JOSEPH (Joseph, 1994):

In pre-colonial times, Martinique was covered with forest vegetation from the lowlands to the highest peaks. Naturally, where the sylvan formations could be maintained and perpetuated, the latter presented a great diversity of flora, physi-

ognomy, landscape, and ecosystems, reflecting plural underlying determinisms.

and this extract from *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff* by the writer Patrick Chamoiseau (Chamoiseau, 1997b):

“They were all immense. Each nourished an impalpable mystery. They gathered light from on high and conveyed it to their feet in ghostly smuggling. Their branches sealed alliances of shadows and luminescent gaps. The canopy of vegetation, braced against the earth, sent its straight and wild trunks towards the nourishment of the sky. Living trees, dead feet, green twigs, gnarled branches, hair, parasites, buds and rot, seeds and broken flowers, night and earth, solar fire were linked in the same momentum”?

Eco-poetics...

For several decades now, eco-poetry, eco-criticism, and nature writing have been helping to transform the way literature is perceived and the way literature perceives itself throughout the world (Blanc, Pughe, & Chartier, 2008).

In Martinique, at the confluence of poetry, ecology, and geography, there is this movement that explores the links and interactions between a literature that explores nature and a nature that questions literature.

The Place, in Caribbean literature, is the recipient of all expressions, all desires, fantasies, and imaginings: the ocean, the hill, the forest, the Factory, the plantation house, the city, the Creole garden (among others). So many places are suspended by writers between nature and culture, where literary topoi are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed to inhabit the Place. Global awareness of the ecological emergency, on the one hand, and the significance of recent ecological disasters (chlordecone, sargassum, coastal erosion), on the other hand, have accentuated the consideration of these issues in public debate and in literature, although this question of Place has already been haunting Martinican writers for a long time. The *doudouistes*, in their own way, already expressed a relationship to place which, if it were questionable, had the merit of raising the question of the relationship to oneself. Authors such as Aimé Césaire in his poetry and Suzanne Roussi Césaire in the magazine *Tropiques* contributed to the development of a Caribbean ecological and cultural consciousness, in particular by erecting symbolic places such as the *morne* (Curtius, 2017). Edouard Glissant, meanwhile, will lay the foundations for a reflection on the definition of Caribbean identity in relation to Place and Relationship, and will examine the resilience of Caribbean ecosystems and cultures in the face of environmental change. In *Les fruits du cyclone: une géopoétique de la Caraïbe*, Daniel Maximin (Maximin, 2006) helps to broaden the field by exploring the many facets of Caribbean identity, drawing on history, geography, literature, music, and the visual arts. Malcom Ferdinand reflects on the question of decolonial ecology (Ferdinand, 2015). This is how the *Lieu* questions and makes the imagination work. At once rooted in a violent history and looking towards an uncertain future, and marked by a present that is still painful but which seeks to be resilient, Caribbean eco-poetics highlights the complex re-

relationship between man and nature, often marked by the history of slavery and colonization and contemporary environmental challenges. The fields of exploration are vast: the links between landscapes and history, the inscription of suffering in landscapes, the interconnection between humans and nature, ecological awareness, biodiversity, the questioning of the anthropocentric vision of nature, sustainability, and so on (De Vriese, 2015).

In the fictional category, some works of eco-poetry are clearly structured around a militant and committed plot. Others, while including nature in their narrative, are more concerned with the novelistic dimension. *L'Esclave Vieil homme et le molosse* (The Slave, the Old Man and the Hound) by Patrick Chamoiseau (Chamoiseau, 1997b) is one of these. In all cases, whether in his essays or novels, the question of the place and role of Nature is often present, either very clearly or implicitly. It thus carries ideological implications where the question of biodiversity and the place of the living world are evoked. Nature is also a vehicle for cultural and literary issues, as in *Solibo Magnifique*, (Chamoiseau, 1988), where the visible and invisible, natural and supernatural worlds intermingle. In the Goncourt *Texaco* (Chamoiseau, 1992), the aspect explored is that of the links between city and nature in the heart of an urban jungle. His essays, such as *Éloge de la créolité* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, & Confiant, 1989) and *Écrire en pays dominé*, (Chamoiseau, 1997a), explore the complex links between man and his environment and highlight the need to preserve the biodiversity and fragile ecosystems of the Caribbean. The poetic tale *Le Papillon et la lumière* (Chamoiseau, 2011), on the other hand, allows for a philosophical reflection where the relationship with Nature sheds light on life and death.

In a country that has experienced Doudouism, Négritude, Antillanité, Créolité; in a land of storytellers' sayings and then of Césairean, Glissantian, Chamoisian speech; in a territory that has experienced colonization, slavery, colonialism, and their children, this ecopoetics has a particular flavor, and Nature a singular place.

Reading *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff* from an eco-poetic perspective therefore raises the question: in this fiction, is Nature merely a backdrop, a poetic artefact, or can we consider it to be, due to the place it occupies and the imagination it evokes, the fourth character alongside the slave, the master, and the dog?

Traces. In the Creole language, this term refers to the idea of human traces, imprints, footprints, and vestiges, and evokes the indelible marks left by Nature in the narrative. It evokes the way in which the past is present in Nature. *Traces* also evokes the spontaneous path, unrelated to the urban—the sometimes illegal, unplanned, and natural path—and refers to the notion of line, path, and route, and suggests order, linearity, and geometry. These two terms already suggest that, in this story, Nature draws paths and opens ways/voices.

As for the term “*ecopoetics*”, it reveals the extent to which poetry, song, and aesthetics exude from this fiction, often with symbolic, and even political, issues subtly implied.

The adjective “*cardinal*” makes sense since it has the meanings of “principal”

and “fundamental”, and, at the same time, in geography and astronomy, it indicates the direction to go in, the point towards which to orient oneself.

First, analyzing the place of nature in the work was essential to fully understand how the author moves from physical reality to narratological literarization. If the man and the dog obviously belong to the biocene, it was necessary in this study to distinguish them, because they represent three distinct characters in the work.

It was then necessary to look at the narratological characterization of nature in order to determine what made it a character in its own right and entirely apart.

Finally, this study would have been incomplete if it had not endeavored to highlight the historical, anthropological, and symbolic dimensions that Nature brings to this work (De Vriese & Chamoiseau, 2015).

2. The Place of Nature in *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff* by Patrick Chamoiseau: From Physis to Poiesis

Nature and the environment thus remain constituent elements of a social imagination comprising conceptions of the world and its surroundings, of ways of living together between humans and non-humans. This understanding of ecology, including not only its physical and biological relationships but also its narrative and imaginary relationships with societies, pushes us to go beyond the modern environmentalist vision that reduces the Earth and nature to objects that are totally external and separate from humans, even if they are to be preserved. (...) These traces, sought out and followed by Caribbean writers and poets who, like true archaeologists of the imagination, give ecological inspirations new life in their writings, stage the relationships between humans and non-humans. Malcolm Ferdinand.

2.1. The Persistent Presence of Nature

“By naming them flora and fauna, in their strangeness, I participate in their strength; I share in their strength.” Aimé Césaire

At first, Nature seems to be nothing more than a simple, static element of the décor, with the numerous descriptions appearing to have a simple referential function (Jakobson, 1969). Nature—landscape, immobile nature that seems to exist only to be seen. And yet, it is there, omnipresent, first in the background, then emerging from the third stage—the transition from civilization to natural empire—increasingly present, irremediably there, fatally alive.

Based on Philippe Hamon’s criteria of differential distribution (Hamon, 1972) concerning the characteristics of the hero, there is no doubt that Nature is indeed present from the first line to the last; its presence sometimes manifests itself quietly and at other times expresses itself with a density and a luxuriance that are almost invasive and indecent. Not a moment goes by when it is not present. In cadence 1, we discover the “*isles-à-sucre*” and the dwelling. In the second cadence, in addition to the dwelling, the sea makes its appearance. Cadence 3: We are propelled into the low woods and then the Great Woods. Cadence 4: We are,

with the old slave and the dog, catapulted into the heart of the bush and then the forest. In cadence 5, make way for the millenary spring, the trees sprouting from the Martinican earth and the Unnameable before giving way in the antepenultimate cadence to the Stone and in the last to the bones.

The lexical field installs nature in every nook and cranny and in profusion. The narrator is the work of a biologist who inventories, lists, and proposes a poetics of biodiversity. Aside from the narration, we find, furthermore, Nature as the matrix of the work's plan: *Matter, living, waters, Lunar, Solar, Stone, Bones*. Mineral, vegetable, animal—all the kingdoms are present and invade description, narration, and characters. This omnipresence is part of the process of persistence intended to gradually impose this Nature in the narrative: it is Nature that sets the rhythm and offers its way of being in the world.

Thus, from the very first line, nature presents itself as embracing all possibilities and occupying all fields. The four elements are present in one form or another: “*Since the arrival of the settlers, this island has been transformed into a magma of earth, fire, water, and winds agitated by the thirst for spices*”. The enumeration here clearly emphasizes the interactions between the elements within an aggregate magma and their inextricably intertwined actions. The arrival of the settlers seems to have profoundly changed the nature of the island, which becomes movement, incandescence, and breath, recalling, in a more scientific way, the tectonic and volcanic origin of Martinique. In any case, we are a long way from a certain island “*in love with the wind! Where the air has the scent of sugar and vanilla! And which is lulled by the moving tropical sun! The warm blue tide of the Caribbean Sea.*” (Thaly, 1911)

Nature also mobilizes all the senses in a total spectacle, sometimes synaesthetic, to be seen with the explosion of colors and shapes, to be heard with the rhythm imposed by the cadences, present in the trickles, to be smelled and tasted with the spices, to be touched with the wind and these bones that run through the text. Moreover, the old man, disoriented and disoriented by his overstimulated senses, is forced to blindfold himself because the spectacle he offers is so confusing and invasive.

To penetrate this nature is to enter a new land, geographically close, but at the same time terribly far culturally from the Habitation that adjoins it: “*The undergrowth was still the prey of a thousand-year-old night. It looked like a cocoon of sucking saliva. Another world. Another reality.*” Nature has the power to be, within its own boundaries, whatever it wants to be and whatever facet of itself it will offer to the old man and the reader.

Make no mistake: Nature is staged, and its omnipresence is part of the process designed to gradually give it stature, versatility, and richness that enable it to move from the realm of physis—an object that is described and observed—to that of poiesis, a living and changing subject.

Alternating between medium shots and wide shots, description is the gateway to scripting and literarization. Of course, it takes on the classic missions of de-

scription: setting the spatial framework, allowing a pause in the narrative, providing details (Adam & Petitjean, 1982: pp. 93-117). Often, it is done in the present tense with a descriptive value, of course, but the strong dimension of actualization should not be neglected. Its role is not limited to giving the illusion of reality. As the reader progresses through the text, Nature reveals who it really is. What it is not: static, motionless, a *backwater*. It cannot, strictly speaking, be described as objective, since we realize, along the way, that the physis is only a pretext, and its description, filtered through the act of writing, is the gateway to diving into an imaginary world, allowing a total and unique sensory experience. We therefore start from a realistic landscape, a frame of reference, to lead to dreamlike journeys, touching on metaphysical or even philosophical intuitions and passing through incursions that are sometimes psychic or hallucinatory.

The descriptive text is completed, in terms of literary processes, by two dominant and recurrent figures of style: enumeration, which often translates abundance, profusion, and generosity. Like Aimé Césaire before him (Constans, 2013), Patrick Chamoiseau names to give life, to bring into existence, and perhaps to restore visibility. Then, the function of metaphor is to link the natural world and the abstract and sometimes cultural world, as can be understood when the narrator says at the end of the story:

“A beautiful race, all meaningful in its very simple beauty, and infinitely open to it. Very often, in the dream of this stone, thinking of this shinbone, I free myself from militant urgencies. I take measure of the substance of bones. Neither dream, nor delirium, nor chimerical fiction: the immense detour that goes to extremes to return to the struggles of my age, charged with the unsuspected tables of a new poetry.”

2.2. What Types of Nature?

“Here the poets [...] see the tropical flames no longer kindled by the flamboyant, the gerberas, the hibiscus, the bougainvillea, but by the hunger, the fear, the hatred, the ferocity that burn in the hollows of the hills. Thus the Caribbean fire blows its silent vapors, blinding only those eyes that know how to see and [...] if my West Indies are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has been a success; it is because it is certainly too beautiful that day to see.” Suzanne Roussi Césaire, *Tropiques*.

What nature is not in *The Slave, the Old Man, and the Dog* is a nature that would conform to the standards, expectations, and other fantasies of a cuddly-toy literature where natural elements and landscapes would be scandalously exotic and far removed from any historical reality. It is therefore not a literature of fantasized colonial imagination. But neither are we dealing with the topos of the rough, rugged nature of marronage, as it has been described in other works evoking the escape of the maroons. Rather, we are dealing with a Nature that has not yet been tamed, cultivated, or dedicated to production. If the slave *on the run* had

not ventured there to run away, it would have remained unknown, unexplored, and would have remained meaningless and insignificant to the old slave and the reader.

The Large Woods, the sea, with their natural environment typical of Martinique and even the Caribbean, are all the richer and more beautiful for the diversity and biodiversity that have been transformed into poetry and creative language. For example, in cadence 3, we can read: “*The day had dawned. Luminescent glues cascaded down from the tall trunks. A misty aurora shrouded the trunks and drowned the milky whiteness.*” The poetic and somewhat strange scene offers us a palette of lights that radiate in various forms (gaps, mists). The natural phenomenon of the sunrise is thus described in a phantasmagorical, unreal way, contrasting with the impression of an almost brutal will of the light to emerge.

In terms of natural diversity, lovers of the biotope and biodiversity of Martinique will be well served, as the work is full of evocations of diverse and varied endemic species. On page 90, for example, the old man offers a real course in local pharmacopoeia through his description:

“*Here are the mahogany trees, armored with grayish bark, their powder often closing my wounds (...) here are the oleanders, long anxious leaves, whitish hairy, so stimulating in tea, I had used them to soothe my sores.*”

This knowledge through experience is an opportunity for a true deciphering of what is sometimes called the “rimed razié” and the means of presenting the old man no longer as an empty, ignorant, indifferent being, as everyone has always believed or as it was convenient to believe, but rather as a knowledgeable being. Nature confers knowledge on him; it gives him the position of expert; it ordains him as a connoisseur. “*So I, who had coveted their impassive postures, recognized them, I wanted to name them, to create them, to recreate them.*”: as he says, by naming these plants, the newly born “I” reappropriates its nature through the verb, in the manner of a poet who creates with words.

Within this nature, life and death, as in the human experience, exist side by side:

“*Living trees, dead feet, green twigs, gnarled branches, parasitic hair, buds and rot, seeds and broken flowers, night of earth, solar fire were linked in the same momentum. Plant life and death followed this same momentum, complementary but undifferentiated cycles.*”

Each plant element, from the largest to the smallest, from the strongest to the most fragile, has its place and its reason for existing according to its own rhythm and cycle while always maintaining interaction with the other elements, thus maintaining overall harmony.

In addition to being typical, Nature is also Edenic. Until now, the different faces of nature, if we can put it that way, have mainly been related to its primary dimension as a living environment for flora and fauna. However, we must focus on an important element of literarization, namely the question of rewriting.

Thanks to a pastiche in a serious mode, the narrator offers us a revisiting of the

Garden of Eden in 7 stages, each time with the literary exploration of a natural element through the filter of the vision of the old man slave and/or the mastiff. These 7 times therefore recall the 7 days necessary for the creation of the world. This literary topos of the rewriting of Genesis is carried in this fiction by elements such as the light, which, when it came to be, illuminated both the exterior and the interior of beings; the discovery of a natural space, even if it is not, strictly speaking, a garden; and the birth of a Man. Light, the natural element that inaugurates the creation of the world in the Bible, runs through the text in multiple forms with various purposes and would alone merit a study.

Note that 7 is considered in numerology to be the number of introspection, meditation, wisdom, and spiritual awakening.

Note also that these 7 times are *rhythms* of some kind: the term is not insignificant; it inscribes this creation of the world in a movement, a rhythm of its own that summons all the senses.

Despite this genesis-like (the noun “*genesis/s*” is used several times in the text) and Edenic atmosphere, we perceive small dystopian touches from the incipit with the oxymoron “*the bitter lands of sugar*” or the dysphoric description of the Habitation: “*The Habitation is—like everything else in these times—disenchanted, without dreams, without any conceivable future*”. From the start, and despite the appearance of paradise, the air is foul; the worms of slavery and dehumanization are in the fruit. Eden, in fact, conceals a reality of unprecedented violence and ugliness: *an absurdly failed version of paradise (...) much worse than hell*. The narrator offers us a baroque cosmogony that anchors the story in the reality of the earth and, at the same time, clearly reveals the character’s tumultuous relationship with his place.

Alongside this biblical reference, it is difficult to ignore the Glissantian or Césairian intertexts that give an additional density to this Nature. How can we not think of Glissant’s *Lieu*, a point of anchorage, identity, totality, and creation, and, at the same time, of the universal and creolization, or of Césaire’s sulphurous and pro(li)ferent *Calendrier Lagunaire*, whose passion for botany and biodiversity is well known? How can we not think of Wilfredo LAM in this lush, dense, saturated, bushy, mysterious interlacing, filled with (anc)beings and symbols?

It is a nature that owes to physis but is also of literary and artistic memory.

2.3. The Nature or the Other Side of the Characters

*“Nature is a temple where living pillars
Sometimes let confused words escape
Man passes through forests of symbols
That observe him with familiar looks.
Like long echoes that from afar merge
In a dark and profound unity,
Vast as night and as clarity,
Scents, colors and sounds respond to each other.”*

Charles BAUDELAIRE, Correspondances, Les Fleurs du Mal

The last element of literarization to be taken into account is nature's ability to become one with the other characters, to lend them a little of its materiality, their animal or plant character, thus becoming a kind of extension of human and animal bodies (Le Monde, 2009). Nature in *The Slave, the Old Man and the Mastiff* is not to be understood as otherness but rather as an extension: human-character and Nature-character complement each other, extend each other, are mirror images of each other. This is the case, for example, with the dog, who, after falling into the water source and struggling violently in it, shows us a natural being in transformation that becomes more plant-like as the work progresses and seems gradually to return to its natural state.

“Covered in mud. Covered in leaves. Covered in humus. (...) It is stained with life, with sweat, with crumpled petals. Devil s-thread has knotted itself to its paws. It drags them like jellyfish hair. The texture of its fur is no longer distinguishable. Moss, orchid pistils, wood-pineapple fibers have grafted themselves onto its coat.”

The animal, which, as mentioned earlier, “becomes a reptile in the venerable bush”, sometimes seems to *mofwazer*¹ both a plant—a strange and motley mass—and an animal, since he is compared to a crawling crab, a molokoye turtle, or other reptiles, which reinforces the impression of cunning that emanates from the animal.

Moreover, the first tangible trace of the presence of Nature from the opening paragraph is the character of the old man who bears its traces inside him:

“He was a mineral of immobile patience. An inexhaustible bamboo. He was said to be rough like a southern land or like the bark of a tree that had lived for a thousand years (...) A magnetic foreknowledge allowed him to be a trunk, a moss, a branch, a spring, a tree (...) He had the feeling of becoming water in the water of patient leaves (...) In the calm, his heart had adjusted to the curves of a tranquil wind, strong like a river that flows down, but calm.”

The metaphor linking physis and the invisible sets the scene: a natural being both mineral and vegetal, the old man is physically solid, dense, and at the same time borrows from nature its immemorial placidity—longanimity?—Living to the rhythm of the elements, he is a being of Nature who carries Nature within him and whose destiny is linked to Nature. Throughout the text, he goes through almost all the natural states:

“A magnetic foreknowledge enabled him to be a trunk, a moss, a branch, a spring, a tree. He flowed into their interlacing. He no longer felt their shocks or passed through them like a cloud of pollen. He had the impression of being a shadow, then a breath, then a fire, then an opaque flesh that brutally restored to him the horde of sensations of the world”.

¹In Creole, *Mofwazé* refers to the physical transformation of a being into an animal or vice versa.

It is in the enclosed space of the great woods, passing through all these states of nature—solid, liquid, vaporous—that the old man rediscovers the primal nature of things and the sensations associated with them, sensations he was deprived of when he was a slave. He is part of the whole; he is the whole. He who has always lived in the closed and deadly universe of the dwelling—he knows, in a short time and in an accelerated way, a life and then a death that human society would never have allowed him to glimpse. Paradoxically, this frantic race towards death brings him back to life and makes him more animated than all the years spent on the estate: this journey allows him to experience total harmony with Nature, and this intuitive connection makes him an *incredibly* alive being (Gil, 2014).

Taking on various forms, a mirror or a negative hollow of the other three characters, Nature cannot be forgotten if only because of its omnipresence in the landscape, in minds, and in bodies—so much so that one might wonder whether Nature should not be considered a character in its own right.

3. Nature: The Fourth Man (Woman?)

“History does not fade at sunrise. It is there, present in the geography of the Caribbean, in the vegetation. The sea sighs with the drowned of the Crossing, agonizes with the massacre of the Caribbean, Arawak and Taino Aborigines, bleeds in the flower of the immortelle and even the incessant wave on the sand cannot erase the memory.” La poétique du paysage chez Derek Walcott, Dominique Aurélia

3.1. An atypical Character

“Our landscape is its own monument: the trace it signifies can be seen from below. The landscape is a key character in the history of the West Indies. Therefore, describing the landscape is not enough. It must be understood in its depths.”

Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*

Nature obviously does not obey the classic characterization of human types, since it has, strictly speaking, no age, sex, body, memory, sensitivity, or character. However, we know that it has existed since time immemorial, that it is typical of the Martinique biotope, that it is a multiplicity of colors and shapes, that it is lush, and that it carries within it the history and culture of the lands over which it reigns. The narration is based first and foremost on the classic actantial schema: it makes Nature an adjuvant of the old man, for whom it is a refuge and an ally, and, at the same time, it is also an opponent for the Molosser and the Master, for whom it is a brake and an enemy: that it can be both beneficial and destructive.

As for the question of its gender, we will see later that it gives food for thought. This characterization, which does not say its name but can be guessed, is constructed in fits and starts throughout the evolution of the narrative, allowing us to construct the image of this nature and arrive at Vincent Jouve’s famous character effect (Jouve, 1992), in other words, in this narrative, the legitimacy and credibility that we grant to Nature as a character.

In this story without dialogue and without internal focus related to Nature, it is exclusively through the voice of the extradiegetic and then heterodiegetic narrator that the reader's perception of this Nature is conveyed: it is sometimes maternal and welcoming, sometimes destructive of both body and soul. Its field of action is broad, since it is capable of summoning the invisible part of the world.

In *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*, as we have seen, Nature is not just a backdrop (Bontout, 2011). On the contrary. It even seems to be animated by a will of its own. A recurring figure of speech in the story clearly expresses how the forest is a vital force, moving and driven by its own determination: it is, of course, personification, present throughout the work. By lending human characteristics and desires to nature, by making it active, we see Nature become moved and act. Take, for example, this sentence, written in Creole syntax: *Little by little, the Great Woods wrapped themselves tightly around him* »; it emphasizes the tender yet firm grip, with a capital letter that obviously accentuates the impression that we are dealing with a character with a will of his own. Another example, a variation on the same theme: *“Before a plant hand grabs him again” (...)* *vegetable slaps* »: here, the anthropomorphic reference is clear: Nature has a body—its body—and confronts it with that of the old slave and the dog throughout. In addition to the physical perception of beings and things, emotions run through nature, disrupting it and humanizing it: the landscape becomes subjective.

The use of anthropomorphism is part of the personification of Nature. It is based on action verbs associated with the lexical field of emotions. Thus, trees can “whisper”, make an “omniscient prayer”; rivers “cry”; the forest “smells”, “sees”, “hears”, “acts”. Nature has moods and intentions; it is active and sensitive. This humanization of Nature is not just a simple literary description: behind the aesthetic challenge of making Nature appear accessible to human feelings, there is also the contrast with the cold, neutral Residence, enclosed in its geometric and implacable logic. This anthropomorphism is supported by the narrator's poetization of the world. Things are no longer just a matter of biology or botany; they are also part of the beauty of the discourse:

“I, who believed in nothing, felt faith in everything. in these trees with their hairy creepers, in these pale orchids on their shameless roots, in these silent birds, nesting, huddled together in the low fork”.

In this maelstrom of human emotions attributed to animals and plants, it is almost impossible to distinguish the human being from the natural being. From this imbroglio of plants, animals, silences, and words emerges an impression of strangeness and beauty.

Moreover, one may wonder about the gender of this Nature. It could be masculine: it is often referred to as *“The Great Woods”*. Virile, erect, their phallic form is imposing:

“They were all immense. Each one nourished the impalpable of a mystery. They gathered light from very high up and conveyed it to their feet in ghostly smug-

gling. Their branches sealed alliances of shadows and luminescent gaps (...) These are the Mahogany trees (...) These are the Oleander trees, these are the Courbaril trees (...) Ironwood trees, Gwan-ironwood trees, yes, it is you yourselves. Oh, Acomas (...) Here are the Carapates (...) Here are the Filaos (...) and the Pieds Fromagers (...) Here are those that the light dresses in secrets, or those that envelop themselves in a halo of blackness. All emerged from the earth as if from a ruptured belly with the same power.”

The anaphora of the presentative and deictic adverb “*Voilà*” invites us to understand the scene as a performance. Moreover, the choice of “*Voilà*” rather than “*Voici*” in the French text may suggest that the scene the eye takes in is large and wide. The ekphrasis also gives the impression that the old man is introducing members of his family. Moreover, each tree whose name begins with a capital letter, like a proper name, is presented with its characteristics, a bit like a pedigree. These woods are anchored, present; they are raw power, solid and vertical force.

But Nature could also be female: taking up the literary topos, the forest is thus presented as virgin at the beginning of the story. A little later, this virginity seems to have been lost, as evidenced by the episode of the escape. At the beginning of the scene, the old man’s act of rising and falling, as well as the allusions to the female sex, are clear:

“Around him, everything shuddered shapeless, black with vulva, carnal opacity, smells of weary eternity and hungry life. The vegetal envelope pressed against him, elastic and sucking. It rose. It fell. It rose and fell. (...) He then collapsed into pools of cold water gurgling with emotion.”

Associated with the moment when the old man has an erection, this episode, which evokes pleasure, makes it possible to understand that the woman in this story (which has no woman) could well be this voracious nature, hungry for pleasure.

“He felt overcome with desire, the turgid coconut, the seed charged with twelve-six dazzling discharges, enjoy fertilized suns fertilizing, lunar straws of the seeds; a la-shame took hold of him, to clasp his nakedness, to bury old fears, to cover up this anguish”.

After a detour to Eros and Thanatos, we find ourselves at the end of this paragraph in the Edenic topos of the temptress Nature-woman. Moreover, once the carnal act that allows knowledge is consummated, shame invades the old man just as it invades Adam in the Bible when he discovers at the same time that he is naked, that he has knowledge, and that he has sinned.

The characters and the woods are also constantly crossed by water, as is the story, which contains references to amniotic fluid and childbirth. In the text, the character repeatedly passes through water of various types, temperatures, and depths.

It can take the form of a powerful and energizing gushing shower.

“The invisible water dripped in showers from some large leaves; at other times, it turned into sweat that lubricated his skin; he then appeared to be covered in scales. An uncontrollable energy agitated him. He felt neither hot nor cold.”

Some passages evoke the bain-démaré of the Martinican tradition: stagnant this time, the water is regenerating and purifying. This immersion is reputed to allow one to cleanse oneself physically and spiritually and to abandon in the water all evil thoughts and past actions in order to turn towards the future, ready and serene.

Moreover, Nature could even be a mother, as these extracts suggest: *“He then expected the vomiting of the lava or fires that are said to be born in the cunt of zombie women”*, *“He went like a vessel at the mercy of a liquid womb”* or *“They (the Maroons) had taken refuge in it as if in a mother’s womb”*. It is, moreover, from Mother Earth that the great woods, so virile and powerful, spring forth. It is not uncommon to find this topos of Mother Earth in Caribbean literature. Following in the footsteps of myths such as those of Gaia, Terra Mater, Dana, Prithvi, or Pachamama, this birth story also makes this land a legend that gives birth to trees, myths, revolts, and men. Sometimes volcanic, sometimes ocean, sometimes refuge, Nature is in any case perceived as the one who (re)gives life (Monrose, 2013). Anthropomorphized and even inscribed in a certain corporeality, Nature is both masculine and feminine in *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*.

Furthermore, Nature in this story is a Creole nature, which is, moreover, what mainly characterizes it according to the principle of differential characterization, according to Benoit HAMON (Hamon, 1972). Creole in essence, due to the endogenous flora and fauna of which it is composed, but also Creole in form. In fact, the Creole language, sometimes present in the background in the presentation of Nature, is one of the techniques used by the author to make it a unique character. We can thus read: *“The molosser was at the bottom of the swampy eye”*, *“My prey was foaming in the middle of the spring”*, *“Siwawa of bats with folded wings”*, *“A manman hole”*. The Creole structure interwoven into the French language is a work of resistance: it is there, present, at the very heart of the language of the Other. The text of *The Old Man and the Dog* thus lends itself to a double reading, with a first level of reading for non-Creole speakers and a second, richer and denser level for those who understand the language. The nouns *“Fondoc”*, which means depth, and *“siwawa”*, which means an incalculable number of times, and the adjective *“manman”*, which means a very large area and depth, are all Creole ways of emphasizing lexical meaning. Chamoiseau has chosen to include the Creole language alongside culture as a characteristic marker of Nature; this is not the case for all writers who have featured Nature in their novels.

3.2. A Character, Agent and Driving Force of the Narrative

*“No! By calculation it cannot be
beauty cannot be divided!
one more step into the magic forest,*

*the tree grows, the branches lengthen,
towards the north-west wind
towards the north-east wind
secret whispers, wind of life.”*

MONCHOACHI

An animated character, Nature is also an agent of narration and can be an adjuvant character, as in that moment in the story when it slows down the progress of the hound chasing the old man: the fall into the backwater, the dog struggling for many minutes before regaining its footing, as if a force were trying to keep it down; all these elements may suggest that Nature is on the old man's side. This famous spring, which, depending on whether Nature wants to punish or teach, slows down or makes grow, will play two different roles for the slave and the mastiff. Each time, a long hypotyposis allows the scene to be described in a striking way, incorporating an unexpected suspense. When it is the old man who falls in, this is what is said:

“He had fallen into one of those old springs that fed the deep woods (...) But at the bottom of the spring, he had turned black. (...) Intense like certain women. And the spring itself, as he drowned, turned black. It engulfed him in black. An obscure clarity seized him as he gasped for air. He understood what death was: this dizziness, of course, this endless sinking, but also this projection of primitive matter into which one is going to be undone. He wanted to cry out in pain. Oxygen tragedy. He wanted to curl up with pleasure at so much bliss in the erasure of his suffering. He was dying. Finishing-beating. White earth. Hot mud. (...) The old man who was a slave was going with the flow of the ultimate mystery. (...) A hiccup. Where all light and shadow dissipate, there was a sending-up. An elementary will-to-live. The old man who was a slave began to struggle. His chest became a forge-made accordion. His feet convulsively sought support on the blind roots that crossed the spring. He found support for propulsion. He shot out of the hole to take a breath of air. He fell back into it and sank deep into a pool of mercury. He bounced up again, gasped for air. Then another and another. With each ascent, he filled himself with a greater desire to live. He leapt, his body arched, launched. Screaming at the top of his lungs.”

Nature is often—even brutally—at his side or within him to show him the way, whether it is a path to follow, to avoid, or to turn back from. The drowning of the dog is described in a much more tumultuous way by the monster from an internal focus:

“The water. A pool of water sucked him in. He descended deep. He who had crossed rivers and streams, faced insane stretches of sea; who knew how to cut through difficult currents and explore underwater flows; he who knew the water and did not fear it, did not understand the phenomenon into which he had fallen. It was a suction. It was water of rock of fire of earth of wind and roots. An all-living hose eager to digest. A dangerous trapdoor. The mastiff felt threatened. He

went on a rampage. Jumping. Leaping. Snatching at the sucker.”

Whereas the old man’s acceptance leads him to resurrection, the dog’s brutal obstinacy leads him to a hellish fight against the water, which tries, to his great surprise, to grab him, as evidenced by the lexical field of confrontation with which the extract is saturated. He will emerge victorious, but shaken by the lesson taught by Nature.

The duels/duos of nature with the characters of the slave and the mastiff are undeniable proof of nature’s ability to act and to advance the diegesis. Nature thus carries the silent dialogues, certainly, of the characters with each other, but also of each of the main characters (except the Master) with it.

The Master’s relationship with Nature speaks for itself: he is the only one with whom the bond is not forged, because Nature does not recognize the Master. It is she who decides what is to become of him in the story, contrary to what happens in reality. With the dog being almost exclusively preoccupied with his relationship with the old man slave, who is himself primarily face-to-face with Nature, the Master is the only one to experience physical and moral solitude in the woods. The latter is, in fact, accustomed to the organized, rationalized, and rational universe of the Habitation: the only order that reigns there is the social and economic order according to which the Habitation is spatially arranged. That is why he is completely disoriented when he finds himself in the heart of the forest. First of all, spatial and sensory disorientation: the Great Woods seem strange, even exotic to him because he rarely ventures there to hunt for Maroons. He does not feel at home there. Accustomed to the comfortable, legible, and reassuring division of space of the Habitation, he feels either lost or uncomfortable, oppressed because Nature seems foreign to him; he feels it is hostile:

“Oh dear, the Master feels uncomfortable, the good-angel disturbed. He becomes aware that the trees are really whispering. They are not addressing him, but he feels these murmurs so strongly that he feels them in the very light of his mind. Without admitting it to himself, or really understanding it, the Master believes he can no longer turn back. He feels compelled to move forward forever in this ever-deepening darkness. The Master feels alone (...) So the Master walked straight ahead. But he was overwhelmed by the most severe loneliness. It detached itself from the trees to weigh down on his shoulders. His steps were heavy. His steps were slow. His steps were guilty. He did not know if it was fatigue or really the mystery of these trees that tortured him so much (...) Solitude ooo ye! ... This silence growing as he grew older. This solitary poison in the shadow of his victories. This fatality that undid his steps.”

Between Master and Nature, there is no harmony, no alchemy, no movement: moral and spiritual disorientation, therefore. Nature helps the old man, takes notice of the dog, but ignores the Master, who is reduced to the state of a simple natural being because Nature, omniscient, knows the Master’s original sin. That is why, during his solitary walk, she forces him to face up to who he is and to take

stock of the tortuous path he has taken, to confront his contradictions, his doubts, his cowardice, and his cruelty:

“These places had known damnation. She was there. Haunting him. He imagined that she emanated from him. It also gnawed at him. He didn’t understand. He had fought so hard to clear this land, to oppose the savages, to look after these black people, to offer the barbarities the beauty of the plantations and the science of sugar. His life had been nothing but courage and suffering, work and fatigue, overheated minds and worries of the heart. Yet, despite this exhaustion, the Master slept very badly. He detected within him a tumultuous shame unrelated to the courage he had shown or to his heroism as a powerful builder. He had put this down to the original sin revealed in his Book, but masses had not appeased anything. Nor had confessions. The feeling of shame remained coiled up on the unspeakable, the unmentionable, on the invisible and the unmentionable of which he knew nothing. He was proud of himself, but at certain times, this pride would fall apart like a magician’s ornament. There he was, alone in the middle of these trees and these places, and his heroism, of which he kept a chronicle, did not carry much weight (...) He had never doubted the divine legitimacy that sanctified his actions. (...) The Large Woods were powerful, they laid you bare, in strength or in misfortune, bare, rough. In their shadows, the Master saw himself overwhelmed by shame. He was afraid. His pioneering gesture faltered. His march of conquest trembled. He must not look back. Nor look around him. (...) So the Master walked in penance.”

This is followed by a list of all the actions committed against Nature in the name of colonization and civilization: the construction of slave ships and ports, the burning and exploitation of land and water, the arbitrary division and distribution of land in the interests of profit, the demonization of the great forests to frighten the slaves and keep them away from nature and their culture, within the perimeter and under the control of the plantation. In the master’s relationship to nature and conquest, one could draw a parallel with certain passages from *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Césaire, 1939) in which the tainted joy of the conquistadors and the accursed science of the colonists are contrasted with the serene certainty of those who never invented anything and their awareness of the perfect symbiosis they have with the universe:

*“Those who invented neither gunpowder nor the compass
those who never learned to harness steam or electricity
those who explored neither the seas nor the sky
but those without whom the earth would not be the earth
a hunchback all the more beneficial as the deserted land
more the earth
silo where what is most earthly in the earth is preserved and matures.”*

Just like in Césaire, the true Master in these woods, the one who dictates its laws and commands its beings, is Nature. Loneliness, culpability, remorse, doubt,

shame: this is what Nature has decided to inflict on the Master.

Furthermore, Nature acts on the memory of the characters, since it is often the starting point for episodes triggering analepsis, during which the characters are plunged back into the great History or into their own history, such as the episodes in the forest where the old man is propelled into other times and glimpses other peoples, those from before slavery.

Nature also has a hand in the rhythm of the story, as it repeatedly causes the story to progress, accelerate, regress, or stagnate. Without it, there would have been fewer plot twists, and the plot would have consisted of a fairly linear story of escaping. In terms of narrative construction, without the freeze frame of the sea in beat 1, there would be no flashback that would allow us to go back in time through the marine physis. Another example is the emergence of the Unnameable, which allows for a pause and slows down the pace of the story and the old man's race, but from which he learns a lesson: even if he has lost time, he has put into practice the calmness and serenity he learned previously.

We can even go further and see, in the place that Nature occupies in the work, something that resembles omnipotence: it has the power to give life, as evidenced by the numerous allusions to childbirth, but also to give death, carried, in different measures, by the Unnameable, the source, and, of course, the dog.

Nature also has a definite influence on the psychological development of the characters. She turns the bland, neutral, immobile slave into a warrior of light, forcing him to face his fears through various ordeals: the brutal discovery of the great labyrinthine woods, the agonizing darkness, the painful light, the face-to-face with the Unnameable, the plunge into the source and into his fears, the final duel with the hound. Under the impetus of Nature, the character whose escape seemed doomed to failure is gradually transformed, to such an extent that the hound no longer recognizes the slave he had met on the plantation. In the meantime, Nature has opened his eyes, both literally and figuratively:

“And there again, he saw the formidable being emerge through the haze of his eyes. A prism of lunar clarity and total darkness. The being had been transformed into pure energy.”

Even the mastiff feels this internal radiance, of which even the slave himself seems to have only a limited awareness. What the dog perceives frightens him to the utmost: he is aware that if the old man were to show clairvoyance and confidence and become aware of even the tiniest part of his power, the order of things would never be the same again. Moreover, from the moment the old man decides to no longer flee but to face the dog as a warrior guardian of the light that Nature has placed within him, the codes become blurred: prey and predator are no longer exactly the same as at the beginning of the hunt.

When it comes to confronting the Unnameable, the old man's first reaction is pure terror—an immemorial, primal terror. But it only takes Nature, with an almost religious impulse, literally to send him a light for his state of mind to change radically: *“This light came to me to face the monster. It was a will of life.”* The old

man faces and abandons his fears. The same thing happens when he faces the mastiff: Nature allows the old man to go from a state of frightened rage—“*My arms had stiffened. I was enraged and in holy terror*”—to a serene and fierce determination:

“The air penetrated me like a soufflé, a lullaby with the maternal lull of a lullaby, a banjo strumming the pink of a new day. I exhaled, and for a long time, and slowly, my turmoil and my fears. It intoxicated my vigilance. I was ready. Completely exhausted. And relaxed too.”

The unexpected combination of the power of the air and the lightness of the banjo leads the character to a complete change in state of mind and helps him to go from being prey to being a predator.

The hound, for its part, is confronted with and subjected to the power of nature, which overwhelms and disorients him: it covers its tracks, and the hound finds it extremely difficult to follow the trail of the fugitive old man. The noises, the smells, the traps of the forest put him to the test and reveal his vulnerability. He thinks of himself as dominant, master of the elements, and is disconcerted by the hostility he perceives, particularly when he is caught by the spring. Nature contradicts the omnipotence that the Master had granted him and forces him to rethink his relationship to the world and to become once again what he had forgotten to be: a simple animal.

3.3. A Character of Fantasy, Mystery, and Magic

“But this is no fairy tale (...) it cannot be called a fairy tale, no, even if this man speaks of vague dreams that gradually come to terms with the dark reality; just as if a man said he had seen crops growing in the ground, it could not be called a fairy tale. for the reason that the earth speaks to each one, like a pillow to the ear that is on it, and if a man says that he has seen this or that, no one can contradict him, on the condition that this or that is in the earth, embedded in the deepest part of its entrails, like a dream that is the mirror of the depths of the earth, a dream with roots twisting in the earth, and not a dream in smoke, not even born from the torch of the last flame.” Edouard Glissant, *La Lézarde*.

Nature in *The Slave, the Old Man and the Mastiff* is not limited to a realistic representation of things and beings, of the visible world. Perfectly anchored in the physis, it is nevertheless often the bearer of a poetic blur that blurs the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, thus leaving the question of place in suspense and creating another place, an other place: a dreamlike elsewhere that maintains the blurring of the lines between the real, the imaginary, the marvellous and the fantastic.

Thus, the moment when the old man slave puts on the blindfold to protect himself from the blinding light of the great woods is an extraordinary moment caused by a natural reason but leading to supernatural effects. The man, forced into darkness, plunges into himself and discovers a maelstrom of memories, sensations,

disorders, terrors:

“His mind is distorted. Slowly. He glimpses forms that are unclear, disturbing, threatening. Impossible to identify. They emerge from nothingness. They flock towards him. There is this. There is that. There are all kinds of qualities without models or genres. And then there are eyes without eyelids, dissipated in clouds where amniotic showers brew. (...) There are nine hairy waves of terror. And then suffering flesh that he seems to know. He thinks he has gone mad and tries to tear off his blindfold. But the prospect of the dawn’s radiance holds him back, as does the idea of opening his eyes to these unknown trees. He quickens his pace, stirring up a jostling of hallucinations. Clicks and bangs. Rolls and tumbles. Moans buried under wicker baskets and agonies that shatter mirrors. Clear vitality and languor of gentle nursery rhymes. Debates of hate. Rains of bloodletting and seeds. Broken shells, religious shame, how many emotions of women, of huge milky breasts, of very unmanly murky desires, how many delightful sins, how many infectious innocences. How many intimate breakdowns to the point of the worst broken hearts? All this frightens him without being foreign to him.”

The physical and dreamlike worlds intermingle, as can be seen in this (intentionally?) ambiguous sentence: *“He quickens his pace, stirring up a jumble of hallucinations.”* Firstly, we understand that taking steps in the physical world acts as a trigger for the dream. But we cannot help but wonder if this *“scramble of hallucinations”* is not also a personification, placing the hallucinations in a position to collide, to make us move and tip from one world to another. We are in the heart of a storm, a chaos of images, sounds, repressed desires that are amplified by the enumeration and punctuated and given rhythm by the brutal noun phrases. In this dreamlike sequence, memories, fantasies and heightened emotions mingle with tangential elements such as the movement that is struggling to find its balance and the disturbing noises, all in a totally phantasmagorical atmosphere of blood, broken shells, sperm and milk. The whole scene is described as a sensory as well as a moral tug-of-war, as it is saturated with oxymorons that reveal the state of total dismemberment of both body and mind experienced by the old man-slave: *“very unmanly troubles, delightful sins, infectious innocence”*; as if the boundaries between masculine and feminine, good and evil were momentarily abolished. The vision seems to be straight out of a nightmare, soon mingled with resurgences of traditions, tales and characters from culture:

“The hallucinations ebb back under this sovereign force, like a primal voice in some biblical land. The hallucinations form an image. He sees a black-skinned woman with a devastating gaze, dressed in a silky foam that opens up a corolla around her body; she carts souls in an oxcart pulled by a single shoulder; her footsteps panic the dust and she hobbles on goat hooves deforming her ankles; he sees, clinging to three acacia trees, sorrowful-eyed children who become enormous until they crush what supports them. He sees clumsy horses on the horror of three-legged animals. He sees living coffins that lead bacchanalia to the four-crossed of

the third roads. He sees devils in shops in cheese shops with three dear livid chabines, dressed up in papillotes or braided seaweed (...) He falls. As it is. Overwhelmed. He wakes with a start, with fear.

The excess of light plunges the old slave into an agonizing darkness that forces him to walk through the Large Woods while, at the same time, he walks through his own mind before tipping him into a totally different space-time. Hallucinations, dreams in which characters from Creole tales such as the three-legged horse, a she-devil, and quimbois rituals cross paths: his dream is a violent and sulphurous concentrate of magical-religious culture. He is a terrified and powerless spectator who cannot help but be fascinated.

The anaphora “*he sees*”, repeated more than twenty times in this sequence, has two effects: first, it indicates that the diverse and diffracted world unfolding before our eyes and in the old man’s head is given to us to see, to observe, and to contemplate. Then, and above all, the objective seems to be to make us wonder: in this maelstrom, what does he really see? Is he hallucinating, as stated at the beginning of the passage; is he dreaming, as we are told at the end; or is he living in an unknown space-time throughout this sequence? Does he “see” like the seanciers² whose quimbois offers them knowledge of the affairs of the afterlife? Must he see or simply feel? This magical dimension is reinforced by the use of synesthesia, which associates sensations belonging to different senses and contributes to creating an unstable world, in perpetual transformation, where the laws of reality are suspended.

Throughout the work, the natural world is perceived as baroque, unstable, in perpetual motion despite a facade of immobility. Small clues to this assumed instability are slipped in here and there throughout the story: “*The leaves were numerous, infinitely green, ochre, yellow, brown, crumpled, bright; they indulged in a hell of a mess*”.

Having understood how the author strives to make nature literary and a driving force in the narrative, it is impossible to ignore the significance of this nature-character and the author’s motivation for making it a key element of the eco-poetics of his work.

4. Nature’s Missions

“Through the concerns for the preservation of the planet, biodiversity and resources, stories and histories are to be written! These written or oral environmental narratives in the Caribbean today, a region of the world where stories were silenced by colonization and slavery, have a decolonial significance in that they reveal the forms of association and the links between the inhabitants, human and non-human, and their environments. They bring out the memories hidden behind these trees and mountains, these rivers and cane fields. The putting into words of

²In Martinique, a séancier is considered a practicing sorcerer, the guarantor and master of a magico-religious practice: quimbois.

these multiple non-humans, this saying through these literatures, testifies to the necessity of thinking about the postcolonial emancipation of the Caribbean people with their relationships to their landscapes, their lands and their ecologies." Malcolm Ferdinand.

4.1. Revelations and Birth to Oneself: Poetry of Ontophania

"I am possessed of an indestructible life (...) My saliva tastes of dawn." Patrick Chamoiseau, *L'Esclave Vieil homme et le Molosse*.

From Cadence 3 onwards, the old man walks continuously, except in the middle of the race when he meets the Unnameable and at the end of the race, near the Stone, after breaking his ankle: we are in the midst of a quest in search of thrills and sensations, a physical and mental journey, a physical and literary birth. Indeed, the more the old man walks and the more he gains in freedom and understanding of the world, the more he paradoxically learns to turn inward; the whole journey being nothing but initiation and preparation for the final birth: that of a man.

The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff is, above all, a story of births: birth to oneself, symbolic birth, spiritual birth, with a 7-day cosmogony in the background. We have already seen that culture allows Nature to write another genesis. Water and Stone also play this role. Light, in the physical, poetic, and metaphorical sense, is omnipresent at all stages of the story and also plays the role of a trigger for physical birth, inseparable from spiritual birth:

"Light was a wound. An iron (...) Light led transhumances within it. It dissipated its innocence. High candour crumbled under lucidity to wounds. Densities dissociated, he felt himself multiplied and demultiplied a number of times. The rest is impossible to describe in this language, as I am brought sounds and ancient languages, plural vowels, tonal sheaves and effervescent connections, I am leading a construction site to new genesis. Yes, light led to transhumances within him."

All the births in this story take place through the agency of Nature. That is why the action of the dog becomes useless. Life, more powerful than death, has gone beyond the limits of the tangential, the material, the carnal envelope, and the sayable; even the dog has understood this, and it is what seals his defeat.

The power of water, once again, is not to be neglected. We have previously seen how water acts as an active force. But to this action of the aquatic element we must add its ontophanic dimension. Water, present from the first pages and throughout the extended metaphor of birth, is depicted as a vital force, capable of regenerating and transforming, a vector of transformation, a symbol of purification and rebirth, a source of life and renewal. Thus, it can be purifying: the shower scene, where the character is subjected to a deluge of water, marks a turning point in his journey:

"The water dripping from the leaves gives him uncontrollable energy (...) After a frantic race, his body, lost, disoriented, unaccustomed, no longer feels anything,

feels calm, placid (...) he had the feeling of having become water in the water of the patient leaves.”

The succession of intense water-based sensory experiences frees him from his impurities and prepares him for a new birth. Water is also associated with rites of passage, such as baptism, which mark the entry into a new life, with, as always in *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*, the impression that the character and nature are one and the same. The character, as he dives into the water, is reborn to himself and moves from exteriority to knowledge of himself and of the Nature that surrounds him. It is the famous passage from the “it” of exteriority and exteriorization to the “I” of interiorization and personalization of experience. Water therefore plays an essential role in this transformation, enabling the character to free himself from his past as a slave and become a free man, aware of his dignity. Water therefore has the power to transform the slave into a Man: after having been mineral and vegetable, the old man finally acquires Humanity. It is through Nature that Man comes into the World.

Another place of water, “*the fantastic spring*,” is a mythical and sacred place, a space of purification and regeneration. Several thousand years old, it symbolizes the origin of all life and represents a return to the beginning, even if crossing it is painful and perilous, and almost results in death.

Even when it leads to death, water is synonymous with life, or rather resurrection, as in the passage where the old man, who has fallen into the spring, thinks he is dying. In this extract, water is the bringer of death, but the wisdom with which it innervates the body and mind paradoxically allows him to stop panicking and let go. It is this wisdom that allows him to remain serene in the face of this chronicle of an accepted tragedy that certainly announces death, but a death surpassed by the conquest of Freedom, a kind of adaptation of the religious view of death as not being an end in itself. The Stone, meanwhile, is the materialization of the past, long before the arrival of Man, and of the future, perhaps long after: bearing traces of the Amerindians, it materializes, carries within it, and on it the forgotten civilizations, *which have disappeared*, as Glissant would say:

“I think I see groups of men in anxious migrations, crossing deltas, facing high seas on hollowed-out trees, bouncing on strings of islands. They gobble up shells and treat them like jewels, they spear fish-waliwa or trap chatrous in wicker jaws. When the welcoming shores open onto falling bottoms, they plant cassava wood, dig up roots, and smoke beautiful birds, agoutis and iguanas. They are from the Great Lands and the islands. They have seen the world with narrower seas and their feet have trodden the stone of the abysses of the present. They leave as one breaks a destiny, traveling in the footsteps of the lost gods and the paradise that their legends maintain (...) La Pierre is Amerindian. They had inhabited this country for such-and-such a time, and thus carved stones in the Grands-bois. I had known of their extermination. (...) They had whispered to me their hopes and despairs, unreal laments, mummified liturgies, useless memories, shattered knowledge.”

The Stone, just as the Caribbean had done before the old man discovered it, had taught the old man in his youth to know Nature and to live alongside it, in harmony with it. Preoccupied only with survival, he had not understood the importance that the Amerindians placed on their past. Faced with this Stone, he remembers and understands better. The author's choice of the Stone—a recurring motif in his works—is obviously no coincidence when we know the petroglyphic habits of this people, one “*of the peoples of which only it remains*”. *Their only memory, the envelope of a thousand memories. Their only word, full of all words.* In addition to being a poetic and anthropological leap into the past, this Pierre allows us to return to the reality of contemporary Caribbean literature. It is a piece—partially fictional—but a piece all the same of the life and imagination of the Amerindians, a people long forgotten—intentionally or not—from the history, culture, and representations of Martinique. But while it bears the traces and the memory of the Amerindians, it is also the stone repository of all the words and evils of the peoples who have trodden the soil of this land:

“It is—I understand then—a volcanic bomb, fluttered in very ancient times. A stone. I touch it. Cold. Warm. Vibrating in the distance of its heart. The ages have covered it with a real skin, shivering beneath my feverish fingers. No doubt I have gone mad: I believe I am slumped on a living stone (...) It is the Stone, the Stone that dreams (...) Yes, our dreams intertwine, a tangle of seas, savannahs, Great Lands and islands, attacks and wars, dark holds and migratory wanderings over a hundred thousand times a thousand years. A junction of exiles and gods, of failures and conquests, of subjections and deaths. All this, grandiose, heaped up, swirls in a movement of life-life in life on this earth. The Earth. We are the whole Earth. (...) The Stone is of the peoples (...) The cry of their cries.”

The Stone, another element of the supernatural, magical, fantastic universe, is both mineral and living. The relationship between the old man and it is established exclusively through touch, which makes it a living being that experiences sensations and even dreams—an activity perceived as oh-so-human. We go from any old stone to the *special* stone: it comes from the earliest times and is from the very heart of the island, since it is a volcanic rock. It is therefore also a memory stone that holds within it the landscapes, peoples, histories, and cultures. This stone, whose incandescence is imposing to those who approach it and which seems to have a life of its own, is none other than a magical totem that speaks of perpetuity and survival: like bones, it is proof that the death of individuals is not important in the eyes of History and that only traces matter.

4.2. Inhabiting the World and History

I inhabit a sacred wound

I inhabit imaginary ancestors

I inhabit an obscure desire

I inhabit a long silence

*I inhabit an irremediable thirst
I inhabit a thousand-year journey
I inhabit a three-hundred-year war
I inhabit a disused cult
between bulb and caïeu I inhabit unexploited space
I live in basalt, not a flow
but lava the tidal bore
that rushes up the valley at full speed
and burns all the mosques
I make the best of this avatar
of an absurdly failed version of paradise
- it's much worse than hell - (...)
Aimé Césaire, *Calendrier lagunaire in Moi, laminaire**

The organization of space in the work is a very strong indication of its eco-poetic dimension (Pépin, 1999). It is indeed a question of knowing how to inhabit the world because, as Patrick Chamoiseau himself says: “*The deep desire of every man, every people, every community, whatever it may be, is to be free, to feel his genius splashing its place and inscribing it in the world.*” (Chamoiseau, 1999)

The Habitation reveals the logic of physical and symbolic representation of the power of the Master and the materialization of colonial domination, designed to monitor and control the movements of the slaves. The buildings are arranged to provide an unobstructed view of the plantations, while the fences materialize the boundaries of the authorized space.

The plantation is thus much more than just a place to live: Nature is tamed, and the predominant crop is that which allows for economic yield, to the detriment of Man: cane. The detailed description of the plantation, with its buildings, fields and tools, reveals a meticulous organization aimed at maximizing the exploitation of natural resources and human slavery. The slave lives in a structured and hierarchical space where the master exercises his power and clearly materializes the social and racial gap through the position of the cane fields, majestic when they extend towards the hills and when they come to remind us of their existence right up to the doors of the black people huts:

“The sugar cane fields surround the Habitation and then roll out to the swell of the humped hills. Above, they fade into the mist of the heights with a shimmer of molten metal. Below, they end gracelessly against the wall of woods, in a swarm of muddy straw.”

The Habitation is also a symbol of wealth and power: its sumptuousness and the lifestyle of the Master's family contrast with the sometimes extreme poverty of the slaves' huts. It is the visible sign of the wealth accumulated through colonial exploitation. Finally, it is a place of violence and submission: it is the scene of much physical and psychological violence, a place of dehumanization where individuals are reduced to the status of objects and where the desires and mistakes of

animals—dogs in this case—take precedence over those of humans.

It is a space where Nature has only the place that is given to it and is only valued for its profitability, and where harmony—abundance, freedom, and the expansion of flora and fauna—has no use or meaning. Habitation and Grands Bois are clearly separated geographically and are obviously the materialization of the social and racial gap between the colonial habitat and the Maroon space.

“The settlement is located in the north of the country, between the flank of a volcano-mountain and very thick woods—woods with ravines, bristling with the ruins of a forgotten era, a symphonic forest of water in the interlacing rocks, a forest of singing trees, populated by opaline she-devils who stir up fear in the circle of the night with their bedtime stories. Fields of sugar cane surround the house, then roll away to velvet the swell of the humped hills. Above, they fade into the mist of the heights with a shimmer of molten metal. Below, they end gracelessly against the wall of woods, in a boiling muddy straw. (...) The dwelling is small but every stitch of its memories is lost in the ashes of time. The bite of the chains. The red of the whip. The tearing of screams. Explosive deaths. Famines. Exhausting fatigue. Exiles. Deportations of peoples forced to live together according to the morals and laws of the old world.”

The description is first of a referential nature, then leaves this mode empty to tip over into the imaginary and into memory. The Habitation is located in the heart of nature that is paradoxically wild and welcoming, inhabited by flora, fauna, and beliefs long before its construction. An enclosed, autonomous place, an island within an island, it is anchored at once in a palpable and identifiable geographical territory, in a marked and striking cultural place, and in an impalpable and violent symbolic historical space.

Alongside the codified, fragmented, enclosed living space, designed in a geometry of control and domestication, we find the Forest, the Low Woods, and then the Great Woods, spaces of resistance and emancipation. In opposition to the Settlement, the forest represents the space of freedom, transformation, movement, resistance, and emancipation. It is the refuge of the fugitives, offering them protection and a place where they can hide and recover physically and morally, symbolically, humanly, culturally, and biologically.

The boundary between the settlement and the forest is much more than a simple geographical separation. It represents a deep divide between two worlds: the world of domination and servitude, and the world of freedom and humanity; the world of death, confinement, and the destruction of the spirit, and the world of freedom, escape, and salvation, particularly through the imagination. The forest, taking the literary work as a pretext, thus proposes a new way of inhabiting the world, without seeking to constrain or contain its spaces, to hierarchize, to geometrize, or to tame Nature. On the contrary, in these times when the question of colonial living is so prevalent, it offers an alternative, a way of preserving the harmonies that still exist between man and nature, between the old man and the earth, his earth.

In *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*, the proximity between the two spaces generates an imaginary world that oscillates between a territory marked by the harsh reality of slavery and suffering, and another, dreamlike or even chimerical, one where the imagination allows the spirit to escape to an in-between place between the real country and the dream country. The description of the Habitation is clearly marked by a geography that sets boundaries and limits, whether physical, mental, or social. But, at the same time, it is also paradoxically marked by the proximity offered by the Forest, opening up the imagination and thus a field of historical and cultural possibilities.

When the issue of marronage is addressed through the character of Nature alongside the characters of the old slave and the molosser, the challenge is to (re)give historicity to the Grands Bois, legitimacy to the Maroons, and dignity to the slaves.

The large space given over to Nature is a way for the author to give it back the place it has lost, both in reality and in the imagination. Totally ignored by the slave and colonial system if it does not allow them to make profits, it is therefore ipso facto ignored by the slaves. When the old man enters the woods, he meets a stranger, a person unknown to him. When we consider the close relationship that Africans had with nature before the slave trade and slavery, we understand the gulf created by the Master. This is why *The Slave, the Old Man, and the Dog* is a work of reconciliation, of (re)discovery of past bonds. Rediscovering Nature, being reborn through it, means rejecting the distance and indifference generated by colonization.

Moreover, in the incipit of *The Old Man and the Dog*, the narrator begins by stating “*We are not very interested in stories of slavery.*” The gamble taken in this story is to use an unconventional approach to criticize the impacts of colonization. While the slave, the old man, the hound and the Master are there to carry the narrative and deal with slavery and the escape of slaves, the main role of Nature is to point the finger at the indifference of the Martiniquans towards it, the lack of interest in history, and the loss of collective memory. Patrick Chamoiseau proposes a solution based on the life given to Nature and the re-enchantment through aesthetics.

4.3. Symbolic and Ontological Dimension

“*What is a Memory Trace? A Memory Trace is both collective and individual, vertical or horizontal, community-based and trans-community, immutable and mobile, and fragile. The meanings of Memory Traces are constantly evolving, in diffuse ramifications, in inter-retro-reactions.*” Patrick Chamoiseau

“*Does the World have an intention?*” This is the question that begins *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*. Patrick Chamoiseau has already provided some clues to the answer to this question: Relationship and poetic intention are what we find in this story. Nature, by virtue of its anchoring, which is not closure, by virtue of its diversity, by virtue of the aesthetic it generates, by virtue of the traces

of the Peoples left throughout the story and along the way, inscribes this work in the World while making language the path and the vector of a word as *beautiful as nascent oxygen*.

Nature is the guardian of memory; nature, which in its branches, in its traces, in the cries of animals, retains what the memory of men has not been able to or known how to preserve. In *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*, this trace is omnipresent. Whether material (bones, paths) or immaterial (memory, history), the imprints left play a fundamental and often primary role in the construction of collective identity and in the transmission of the past. Much more than simple vestiges, traces in the novel are guardians of the collective memory, allowing the characters to situate themselves in time and space.

This is why he moves from words to actions and draws a realistic fiction necessary for peoples and their memories to be attached to the great history, so as not to lose the essence of things, words, tales, and memories, and to anchor in speech the lost memories of the Land before and of this one. Nature thus assumes the role of guardian and hoarder of words, images, and raw energies:

“These great woods that knew the Before, that concealed the host of a past innocence that still vibrated with the forces of the beginning, now moved him. These great woods had fascinated runaway black people.”

The great forests embody several elements: freedom, of course; resistance to slavery, in that they are a place of escape; but also because they represent the strength and beauty of the wilderness, in contrast to colonial civilization and its desire for control.

The spring, in addition to marking rebirth, symbolizes the struggle against the progressive loss of identity, the loss of collective memory.

But these two places also allow for reminiscence, a dreamlike return to the stories and legends that haunt memories and construct narratives, fears, and collective aspirations.

These places are also symbols of the complexity and richness of Creole culture, spaces where African, European and Caribbean influences intermingle.

Chamoiseau also likes to blur the boundaries between nature and culture. The traces he describes are both natural (bones, trees) and cultural (paths, stories). By asserting that nature and culture are not opposed, Chamoiseau creates what some, such as Bachelard, have called “the epistemological fault line” and calls into question the foundations of Western thought, which tends to separate man from nature. Everything in the description tends to show that legend and history are two facets of the same reality. Legends, like scientific history, are narrative constructions that give meaning to the world, one based on the imagination, the other on science, and both, in any case, on subjectivity.

In *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*, mineral, vegetable, and animal matter leave traces and are themselves traces. The paths are not only material traces; they are also metaphors for individual and collective journeys, historical markers, and philosophical and ideological perspectives. This is why the presence of bones is

fundamental, cardinal. These enigmatic bones run through the work from beginning to end, both on the periphery, before the text, and in the final cadence, cadence 7. These enigmatic bones carry stories, legends, and messages: as the ultimate traces of life, they certainly refer to death, but also to transmission. They are both historical markers and objects of memory:

“I often return to this Stone. In my dreams. Above these bones. In my dreams. After days of confusion, my dreams are full of them. In these dreams, I lean against the Stone. I contemplate the jumbled pile of bones. Who could it have been? (...) Those bones were heavy. A silent scream with no way out. I felt it without being able to express it. What did they have to tell me? And why did they come back so often in my dreams? We have so few intact memories. They were worn out, tangled up in drifts, and were never catalogued; there was a reason why those bones disturbed me. They could have been any of us. Amerindian. Black people. Béké. Kouli. Chinese. They spoke of an entire era, but one open to total uncertainty. I shouldn't have touched that relic. (...) Brother, I shouldn't have, but I touched the bones.”

The narrator chastises himself because he does not wish to take charge of the story of suffering, but this mission is imposed on him because he is paradoxically possessed by an unspeakable fascination with this painful and fantastic story, which he even sees in his dreams.

Chamoiseau, using poesis to describe this element of physis while also appealing to fiction, does not seek to establish a rigorous scientific history. Rather, he proposes another vision of history, collectively subjective, a potentially lived history, made to be transmitted from generation to generation alongside the official history. Moreover, the return to the final future, if we can put it that way, sheds light on the rest of the work. In this metalepsis, we even discover that these bones are both the starting point and the culmination of this work, in a temporal loop, or rather a cycle of (re)cognition of man to himself, of the reader to the narrative. The story began because the bones were touched, but at the same time, if these bones exist and have come down to him, it is because the story existed long before the time of the Word Marker. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

5. Conclusion

“The gestures, the habits, the trades, the silent knowledge, the bodily knowledge, the reflex knowledge, the symbols, the emblems, the words, the songs, the Creole language, the landscape, the ancient trees, the mutual societies, the cane fields, the neighborhoods... so many Traces-mémoires that we will have to learn to recognize, list and explore today, with the aim of patiently weaving the open complexity of our Creole heritages.” Patrick Chamoiseau

The Place has a history, even a legacy, in Caribbean literature, in Martinican literature (Curtius, 2014). It has experimented with exotic doudouism and essentialist and passive regionalism, then Negritude, in which the Place is essentially

African, Antillanité, which refocuses on the surroundings, and Creolité, which is carried by those who inhabit it (Chamoiseau & Confiant, 1999). With eco-poetics and the idea that there are necessary interactions between people and their Place, the connections broaden and are woven with the world (Simasotchy-Bronès, 2004).

The representation of nature in Patrick Chamoiseau's *The Slave Old Man and the Dog* is distinguished by its active and symbolic role, where nature becomes a character in its own right, an ally of the old man in his struggle for freedom. This approach is echoed and varied by other Caribbean authors who integrate ecological themes into their works.

In Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* (Crossing the Mangrove Swamp) (Condé, 1989), for example, the mangrove swamp allows for the exploration of the complex links between man and his environment; nature is thus both a source of life and of danger, as in the Chamois story. In Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (Schwarz-Bart, 1972), nature explores the intimate relationship with Guadeloupean women; it is a source of strength and healing. As in *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse*, Nature is lush and is a place of life from which the characters of Fonds Zombi draw their strength. In his work, Edouard Glissant develops an almost philosophical ecological thought linked to creolization and the relationship between man and his environment. He explores the themes of memory, identity and the relationship to the land, highlighting the diversity of the landscapes. In *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse*, the philosophical dimension is less present: Chamoiseau places more emphasis on the relationship between Nature and the memory of collective tales and stories. It should be noted, however, that in the field of Caribbean fiction, authors generally share a vision of nature as an essential element of Caribbean identity, steeped in history and memory.

Thus, in *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff*, the topography in the works becomes significant and takes on biological, literary, symbolic, and even philosophical meaning, making this story a kind of precursor to eco-poetics in these literatures, torn between expressing the reality of the territory and (dis)writing the wonder of the Place. In doing so, Patrick Chamoiseau, throughout this initiatory journey, does what he, together with Raphaël CONFIAINT, himself urges us to do: invent and/or follow the paths of literary marronnage. This is why this story does not directly align itself, either in form or in substance, with the mainly militant demands of global ecological commitment, even if it is, in literary terms, a fictional work that makes it possible to (re)place in perspective the subjects and issues that will be taken up by a current such as decolonial ecology. While this work is, of course, about respect for nature, it is at least as much about fictional, aesthetic, and poetic play.

In *The Slave Old Man and the Hound*, Patrick Chamoiseau invites us to immerse ourselves in a world where nature, far from being a simple backdrop or referential illusion, is a true actor, shaping destinies and identities. In the end, the old man, the dog, and the master are all encompassed, swallowed up in this nature

that digests and transforms them. Multiple forms, diverse textures, bursting colors: Nature offers a total and kaleidoscopic experience. The common thread of all the cadences, their description, which is perceived by all the senses, is cleverly staged. It goes from a simple referential, or even decorative, geographical space to a poetic landscape staged and to a silent but oh-so-speaking and powerful subject. Omnipresent and omniscient, it is a landscape-memory, offering journeys that are sometimes regressive, sometimes dreamlike. Culture, which cannot be dissociated from Nature in this work, is always present in the background. A cartography of presence-absence, this Nature above all allows the place to be inhabited, even centuries after the death of the characters, as the Stone and the bones testify. A dream country, a landscape of memory, Nature in this work is neither a victim nor passive, but a character in its own right—the only female character—who is, who knows, who can, and who uses poesis to tell the world in her own way, in a language of her own.

By exploring the different facets of this omnipresent nature, we were able to observe how it becomes the driving force of the plot, the reflection of the characters' souls, and the creator of a universe that is both familiar and dreamlike. Édouard Glissant affirmed that the uncreated world: "*It is a world to be created and of which we do not yet have, shall we say, obvious knowledge. Consequently, it is a world that can only be approached with the powers of the imagination and poetic intuition*" (Glissant, 1991-2009). In this vein, Patrick Chamoiseau anchors his story in the environment and in the minds of his characters, connecting them to the genesis of their nature and their country, thus offering a story that mixes realism and fantasy, death and wonder, where the beauty of nature rubs shoulders with its darkest aspects. This tension between the unbearable and the uncompromising beauty of the world, dear to Glissant and Chamoiseau, is at the heart of the work.

By developing an eco-poetic vision of the Caribbean ahead of its time—an eco-poetics of identity?—Chamoiseau, as early as 1999, anticipated contemporary ecological issues and invited us to rethink our relationship with nature. *The Slave Old Man and the Mastiff* is much more than a simple story. It is an invitation to re-read history in order to reflect on our relationship with the world. By making nature a character in its own right, Chamoiseau offers us a rich and complex work that resonates with the concerns of our time. For, beyond the literary and aesthetic aspects, this work raises fundamental questions: what is the place of the individual in the great cycle of nature? Implicitly, it is always the same eternal question that Chamoiseau asks: what is the purpose of literature—literature, what is it for? And how could nature be a vehicle for reflection, development, or even emancipation? Perhaps by moving from the virtual to the real, from literature to the land, from books to associations, by teaching, organizing conferences, and writing articles to remind people of the importance of the land and biodiversity in the development of human beings and societies, and also by reading. The main thing is to never forget, and this is the first lesson of *The Slave Old Man and the Dog*: that man and

nature are not two separate entities but are of the same essence and the same future, as Césaire proclaimed in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Césaire, 1939):

“As everything died away
I expanded, I expanded—like the world—
And my consciousness wider than the sea
The world unravels—but I am the world.”

Conflicts of Interest

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

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