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## Deforestation and Decolonization: Lafcadio Hearn's French Antillean Writing

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Looking outside at my breadfruit tree reminds me how European colonialism shaped Caribbean landscape through the genocide of indigenous peoples and colonization of their lands, followed by the theft, commodification and dispersal of indigenous plants and botanic knowledge. Furthermore, these processes were accompanied by the production and hierarchization of race and the enslavement and exploitation of African and Asian populations. As Elizabeth Deloughrey, Renee Gosson, and George Handley note, 'there is probably no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation and settlement than the Caribbean'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, our ability to detect ecoimperialist activities by reading Caribbean landscapes is hampered by 'the ever-expanding and ambitious imaginative symbolism' through which the colonizers constituted the islands as tropical paradises'.<sup>2</sup> As Deloughrey explains, 'at the height of the process of altering and damaging island landscapes, tropical islands were interpellated in Edenic terms, removed in space and time' and segregated from human agency.<sup>3</sup> This interpellation, still active in today's tourism advertisements, naturalizes the altered landscapes, thereby effacing the violent ecological history of the Caribbean plantation economy.

Describing the French Caribbean, Édouard Glissant proclaims 'landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history'.<sup>4</sup> How, then, do we expose this history beneath not only the rhetorical layers that overwrite landscape but also landscape's transfixing aesthetic appeal? Decadent environmental writing about Caribbean settings might help us with this recovery. What might we notice when we pay more attention to the ruined garden or paradise lost in accounts of landscape written when colonial withdrawal is underway? Robert Stilling describes the development of one type of these scenes: 'landscape once depicted by nineteenth-century naturalists as a new, tropical Eden became littered with the ruins of

abandoned plantation houses, sugar mills, and colonial forts [...] tropical paradise began to look more like the Roman Forum'.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, decadent no less than romantic mythology is a colonizing projection onto the natural world: if there is no true Eden, there is also no true Waste Land. But as Alex Murray reminds us, decadence's 'reactionary, conservative accusations of a cultural fall' no matter how baseless, make 'temporality a pre-condition of Decadence'.<sup>6</sup> Decadence might restore temporality to natural history, allowing us to perceive more clearly how nature has been acculturated over time, or how certain histories rely on invocations of nature in order to be told. Furthermore, if as Murray argues, decadent landscape writing foregrounds the 'stylistic and the formal', allowing place to become 'secondary to the means and modes of representing it', the ostentatious self-reflexivity of decadent landscape writing might signpost for us where, why and how colonialist rhetoric invokes Caribbean paradise then its fall.<sup>7</sup> Thus informed, we might move to a decolonized assessment of what Caribbean landscape might afford us if it is no longer burdened with being paradise *or* the fallen garden.

The travel writing of Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) exemplifies how decadent writing can expose the conflict and social inequalities materialized through people's environmental interactions. In 1887, Hearn sailed to several Caribbean ports, eventually settling in Saint-Pierre, Martinique. He would remain on the island until 1889, exploring its environments, recording the orature of its people, and observing their lifeways. His impressions of 'divine, paradisaical Martinique' informed several sketches he published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1888.<sup>8</sup> In 1890, he supplemented, revised, and published those dispatches as the travelogue *Two Years in the French West Indies*.

As scholars such as Stefano Evangelista and Catherine Maxwell have demonstrated, Hearn is a cosmopolitan conduit of decadent culture.<sup>9</sup> His translations of Théophile Gautier and Gustave Flaubert brought those authors wider circulation among American and British audiences while his journalism about New Orleans's Creole culture helped define that city as a centre of decadence in America. Despite Hearn's intermediary role, critics of decadence have published little about his

Caribbean sojourn, leaving unexamined how colonial conditions affected his sense of decadence as a literary style or a fin-de-siècle attitude towards contemporary life. Furthermore, although Hearn revises almost every paragraph of his *Harper's* sketches for *Two Years*, scholars have overlooked how these variations reveal developments in Hearn's thinking about decadence. Adjectives and nouns are changed; catalogues and site descriptions extended or truncated. Illustrations are reordered and recaptioned, suggesting new ethnographic and environmental foci for readers. Most changes follow no theme, but Hearn most significantly alters his text's tenor when he adds and deletes anecdotes that consider regime change in France and colonial race relations. These landscape-based reflections are prompted by Fort-de-France's Parc La Savane and Saint-Pierre's Jardin des Plantes. By examining Hearn's treatment of the latter, this article helps address the critical lacuna mentioned above.

Hearn's Caribbean writings in *Harper's* and *Two Years* can be seen as an extended effort to define how politics, culture and geography shape the causes and signs of Caribbean decadence. Although he employs Edenic terms to characterize the Caribbean, they often are voiced as if in hindsight, in memory of 'the paradise-life of the old days'.<sup>10</sup> As Stilling notes, 'from roughly 1830 to 1880, the West Indies were diminished in the popular imagination to the remnants of a once-great civilization'.<sup>11</sup> The emancipation of the enslaved, competition from Continental beet sugar, the loss of protected markets and slow adoption of modern technologies made Caribbean sugarcane plantations unprofitable. Disinvestment and white creole emigration accelerated. To travel through the Caribbean in the aftermath of emancipation was to witness the demise of white creole civilization:

Many of the British islands have been almost deserted by their former cultivators [...] Tobago is a ruin [...] St. Christopher is crumbling; Grenada has lost more than half her whites; St. Thomas, once the most prosperous [...] of West Indian ports, is in full decadence.<sup>12</sup>

Hearn notes that 'economical, climatic, ethnical [and] political' reasons have all been suggested for the decadence he observes, but that none of these reasons alone can explain it.<sup>13</sup>

Noting that Hearn's Caribbean travel writing was meant to 'satisfy the hunger for exoticism among middle-class Americans', Jacqueline Couli downplays its political investment, claiming it 'concentrates on the picturesque and cultural aspects of Martinique'.<sup>14</sup> Yet Hearn's citation of white creole authors from the colony alerts us to his awareness of Martinican political conflicts. Couli contextualizes these tensions, which arose from the attrition of privilege that white creoles experienced during the last third of the nineteenth century. As she goes on to detail, the 1880s were marked by the white creoles' reactionary and racist resistance to political reforms that empowered black and mixed-race people. They 'opposed the governor [...] a Frenchman who defended the inclusive vision of republicanism and supported the bourgeoisie of color'.<sup>15</sup> They protested the actions of Republican politicians of colour, using journalism to decry white victimization and to ascribe motives of white genocide to people of African descent.<sup>16</sup> If, as Couli suggests, Hearn focuses on 'the marvels of Martinique' because political 'life in Martinique was anything but a source of exotic escapism', we should not suppose that his travel writings are devoid of political implications.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Hearn's sketch of the Jardin des Plantes, described as 'one of the wonders of the world', exemplifies how he uses the marvellous to examine the political aspects of decadence.<sup>18</sup>

As his periodical sketches evolve into their final forms in *Two Years*, Hearn complicates his rhetorical treatment of natural landscapes. Initially, he presents tropical nature as a vector of decadence itself; the fecund Caribbean flora decomposes the man-made forms that signify civilizational order. Moreover, nature enables decadent transmutations, 'melting and reshaping living substance [...] within the same awful crucible'.<sup>19</sup> These figurations of nature reject anthropomorphism by fostering what Dennis Denisoff calls 'open ecology [...] disruptive interfusions among the natural, cultural, spiritual [...] individual and collective'.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, in Martinique's forests, there exist 'plants that have fangs' while 'man feels here like an insect; fears like an insect'.<sup>21</sup> Animist sensibilities drive the colonial population to 'talk to imaginary beings, and to the trees, the clouds, and the eternal hills, like the women of the Kalevala'.<sup>22</sup> Thus juxtaposing

Martinican and Finnish paganism as ways of respecting the environment, Hearn's *Harper's* sketches suggest the relevance of colonial ecologies for comparative studies of how decadent writers engage with their environments. Indeed, analysis of Hearn could provide a supplementary chapter for Denisoff's *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910* (2021). Unfortunately, this article lacks space to further examine Hearn's meditations on nature's influences on humanity. Instead, it examines how the final version of Hearn's travelogue develops and foregrounds concerns about man's influence on nature, concerns that only occur as an afterthought in his *Harper's* work.

As *Two Years* resorts to descriptions of forest clearance to suggest Martinique's anthropogenic ecological degradation, the colony's native flora becomes legible not as a figure for decadent agency, but as an object subject to decline, a text through which symptoms of decadence can be detected and an etiology for decadence derived. The textuality of this decadent treescape makes it an index to post-emancipation power struggles between Martinique's white creoles and its black and mixed-race population. White creoles resented black and mixed-race people as they surmounted racial barriers to new social and political opportunities such as elective office and quality state-sponsored education. Hearn channels the dispossession felt by white creoles, converting their political grievances into concerns over the management of the arboreal landscape. Thus, under the guise of mourning 'the destruction of trees older than the colony itself', Hearn can decry the 'negro-radical régime', the political alliance between Republicans and black Martinicans that he deems responsible for that deforestation.<sup>23</sup> Representing the decadent landscape as the result of barbaric motives and processes, he can rhetorically abject Martinicans of colour from their reinstated place as citizens, blame Republicans for fostering a utilitarian view of nature, and reflect nostalgically on France's First and Second Empires.

The Jardin des Plantes was an acclimatization garden, one of the nodes in the botanical network through which plants were transferred across the French colonial empire. As an example of the 'garden as constructed natural landscape' it obscured the boundaries that demarcated it as a man-made space from the old-growth forests.<sup>24</sup> Hearn suggests it is representative of the entire

natural landscape of the island, stressing to his readers that ‘the grand mountain forest itself’ was used to form the garden, and assuring readers that its ‘greater part [...] is a natural formation’ where ‘nature has accomplished [...] infinitely more than man (though man has done much)’.<sup>25</sup> Located less than a mile from Saint-Pierre, it was ‘for promenading and recreation as much as for science’.<sup>26</sup> Winding stone staircases and bridges guided visitors through different levels of the garden where they could enjoy high vistas and experience varied microclimates suitable for particular species of plants. Between the time of the garden’s establishment in 1803 and its destruction by the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902, travel accounts routinely mention it as a highlight that distinguished Saint-Pierre as the Paris of the Antilles. Both as a signifier of civilization and order and as a microcosm of the entire island’s arboreal landscape, the garden is an apt site to consider the rhetoric of colonial decadence.

Let us begin examining Hearn’s sketch of the Jardin des Plantes as it appears in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. He strives to make his reader experience its features with immediacy. Therefore, the sketch withholds his botanic impressions, instead adopting a second-person address that interpellates readers as sightseers. It concludes:

You are alone, you hear no human voice, you see no human face, but you observe all around you the labours of man in stone being gnawed and devoured by Nature – broken bridges, sliding steps, fallen arches; and your nostrils are filled with a pungent odor of decay. This odor, omnipresent and sinister, this stench of the vast chemistry of dissolution everywhere in operation, unpleasantly affects the aesthetic sense. It never ceases to remind you that when Nature is most puissant to charm, there also is she mightiest to destroy, to transmute, to obliterate forever.<sup>27</sup>

The sketch’s closing sentences focus on the depths to which human accomplishments may sink: ‘the broken bridges, sliding steps and fallen arches’ all reveal the downward trajectory of the garden’s architecture. Hearn describes this decline with the metaphors and syntax of decadent style. Nature, consuming those architectural structures that connect, is personified as a *femme fatale*, full of seductive power that she may also use ‘to destroy, to transmute, to obliterate forever’.<sup>28</sup> As the final sentence of the sketch comes to its conclusion, it strives to enact that omnipresent dissolution being described. Asyndeton banishes conjunctions, leaving the infinitives atomized and

seemingly functioning as synonyms for one another. The etymology of the triad's final verb hints at the disintegration of words themselves, as their individual letters are struck out.

Hearn's portrait of decadence in the botanical garden recalls another site he visits: St George, Grenada, the 'senescent city' that symbolizes full West Indian decadence.<sup>29</sup> In its silent mouldering streets, 'melancholy [...] abandoned dwellings' and greening, slimed buildings there is the 'suggestion of what any West Indian port might become when the resources of the island had been exhausted, and all its commerce failed'.<sup>30</sup> In St George, under the assault of 'luxuriant, evergreen, ever-splendid Nature', all

surfaces and angles are yielding to the attacks of time, weather, and microscopic organisms; paint peels, stucco falls, tiles tumble, stones slip out of place, and in every chink tiny green things nestle, propagating themselves through the jointures and dislocating the masonry.<sup>31</sup>

Nature is a decadent agent that decomposes and tumbles forms.

Hearn's idea that nature itself was hostile to colonial efforts to maintain civilization in the Caribbean conforms to prevailing thought at the time. As Christopher Church notes, the French Antilles seemed particularly vulnerable to tropical diseases, dangerous flora and fauna and natural disasters: 'The geography of the Caribbean presents a unique confluence of dangers. It is atop an active plate boundary, riddled with volcanoes, perpetually menaced by hurricanes and tempests'.<sup>32</sup> It would be fitting, therefore, for the sketch to conclude by reflecting on nature's destructive powers. However, the expected closure of Hearn's sketch is ruptured by an odd footnote. In it, he ceases his second-person address, for the first time presenting readers with his *own* reportage of the Jardin des Plantes:

The beautiful garden had been sadly neglected before I saw it. Storms and torrential rains had greatly damaged it and no attempt had been made to repair the bridges washed away, or the grottoes that had tumbled in. Still neglect alone would not have totally ruined the loveliness of the place; barbarism was necessary for such a devastation. And since the above lines were written, I was shocked to learn that under the negro radical rule orders had been given for the destruction of trees a hundred generations old; marvels that can never be replaced were cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of the *lycées*.<sup>33</sup>

The change in focalization foregrounds a gap between the pleasing vision Hearn wishes his readers to experience immediately and his own more conflicted perception. The body of the sketch makes



readers visualize the old-fashioned but undiminished allure of the botanical garden. Despite the decaying architectural structures described near its end, as a whole the garden is ‘very quaint; it suggests an art spirit older than Versailles, older than Louis XIV, but it is unutterably beautiful’.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, although Hearn’s footnote begins discussing ‘the beautiful garden,’ he soon undercuts this description. Decrying not only an indifference but also a barbarism that have ‘totally ruined the loveliness of the place’, he etymologically conveys the total evacuation of aesthetic charm: ‘devastation’ stems from the Latin roots *de-* ‘completely’ + *vastare* ‘to lay waste’, ultimately tracing to *vastus* ‘empty, desolate’. What do these representational oppositions reveal?

Hearn’s periodical sketch hierarchizes two portrayals of the relationship between decadence and nature. In the main text, nature is personified as the devouring *femme fatale* whose ravages are shown in the ruins of humanity’s work. However, beneath the text, readers are also presented with the ruin of *nature’s* work by man. In the footnote, the depiction of decadence ceases to be just one of timeless cycles of dissolution wrought by meteorological and organic attacks; it acquires a specific historical cause tied to human agency: the barbarism of negro-radical rule. Although this spatial ordering encourages us to overlook Hearn’s note as superfluous to the text, the footnote is actually supplemental in the deconstructive sense, foundational to understanding that Martinique’s decadence is caused by the racial dynamics of its contemporary political scene. But what exactly is ‘negro-radical’ rule? It is no neutral term.

The import of Hearn’s political reference is only apparent from the sociological viewpoint that he adopts in his Antillean writing. As Couti notes, although Hearn’s texts are shaped by local informants from a range of Martinique’s ethno-classes, his interpretation of local events is formed predominantly by the authorities he cites: ‘white Creole writers from Martinique’ and ‘white travellers or missionaries’ from France.<sup>35</sup> This ‘*bibliothèque coloniale*’ establishes the French Antilles as a tropical Eden from which the descendants of the original French settlers are being expelled by black Martinicans.<sup>36</sup> Thus informed, Hearn laments, ‘[i]n the island paradise of Martinique in 1848 there were 25,000 whites; now, against 160,000 blacks and half-breeds, there are less than

8,000 creoles left to maintain the ethnic struggle, and the number of these latter is annually growing less'.<sup>37</sup> By the time he wrote these words, Martinique's white creoles had lived through forty years of change in a fallen paradise. As Hearn notes in *Two Years*, "The universal creole belief is summed up in the daily-repeated cry: "C'est un pays perdu!"<sup>38</sup> What caused these feelings of dispossession? In 1848, slavery was abolished in the French colonial empire, an act perceived by white creoles as a betrayal by metropolitan Republicans. Dreading lethal retribution from the emancipated, many white creoles fled Martinique. Those that remained found their socioeconomic power shaken by the loss of enslaved labour, their political power threatened by universal manhood suffrage. Nevertheless, with the rise of the Second Empire in 1852, white creoles were able to figure abolition 'as a tropical storm – intense, destructive, but also of limited duration'.<sup>39</sup> Under Napoleon III's regime, the newly emancipated had their voting rights curtailed. Additionally, their freedom of movement was restricted by vagrancy laws and a system of work passes. These factors limited the employment prospects of the freed to the very plantations they had abandoned, largely maintaining the unjust social relations experienced during enslavement.

Unfortunately for white creoles, the reactionary period ended in 1870 when the Third Republic succeeded the Empire and restored full citizenship rights to Martinique's non-white citizens. Beginning in the 1880s, as the newly enfranchised majority of black and mixed-race men sought political representation, white politicians were gradually marginalized within local government and as Antillean representatives to the national French legislature. It is this new political situation that Hearn disparages as negro-radical rule, an unholy alliance of metropolitan Republicans and the majority formed by non-white Martinican voters.

Why does Hearn insist that under 'negro-radical rule' irreplaceable trees were 'cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of the *lycées*'? The primary purpose of this odd footnote is not to introduce facts about the state of the Jardin des Plantes. Indeed, no locatable historical source even confirms the tree-harvesting Hearn describes – it may entirely be a rhetorical device.<sup>40</sup> Rather, the work performed by the footnote is ideological, race-defining. Confronted with the legal

equality and social ascendancy of black Martinicans, Hearn seems to want to find an evaluative system through which he can still distinguish them from their white creole compatriots as equal citizens of the French Republic. Presenting his readers with a wondrous landscape that has been degraded, Hearn inextricably links the ruin of the environment to a black-Republican regime that finds no aesthetic, symbolic or historic value in natural beauty. Under this ‘negro-radical’ order, marvels like ancient trees can serve only the most basic material ends for institutions intent on incorporating black people into the nation. Hearn works to make his readers share his anger and shock towards this gross abuse of nature, an abuse that renders its perpetrators barbaric, the antithesis of cultivation and lawful order. In order to understand the claims advanced here, we must examine the state of public education in the fin-de-siècle French Antilles.

As people of colour challenged racial segregation in Martinique, white creoles sought enclaves such as private schools where they could maintain separatism. Hearn knew the agitation the issue of education raised in the colony:

No white creole would dream of sending his children to a lay school or a *lycée* – notwithstanding the unquestionable superiority of the educational system in the latter institutions; – and, although obliged, as the chief tax-paying class, to bear the burden of maintaining these establishments, the whites hold them in such horror that the Government professors are socially ostracized.<sup>41</sup>

This withdrawal was inimical to Republican ideals of racial unity and assimilation. As Matthew Potolsky notes, by the late nineteenth century, all industrialized Western European nations were instituting systems of universal public education. By ‘bringing together children from all social levels, the school sought to create a sense of national purpose that transcended social, economic, ethnic, religious and racial differences’.<sup>42</sup> This nationalist project also extended to the Antillean colonies, where in the early 1880s, the Third Republic mandated free, compulsory and secular primary schools. Before emancipation, education for people of colour, especially the enslaved, had been restricted in ways that would uphold the order of the plantocracy. Government-sponsored education, available equally to children of all races, enabled people of colour to better realize their human potential, enjoy their civil rights and fulfil their civic responsibilities and duties.

While public primary education was meant to ameliorate the lives of the greatest numbers, Republican officials introduced the secondary school or *lycée* to train an elite bourgeois professional class. *Lycées* were expected to ‘alleviate the impact of a potential confrontation between former slaves and former slave owners’ and disseminate Republican ideals.<sup>43</sup> Even though only a small percentage of the colony’s children would actually graduate from the *lycée*, in principle, its ostensibly merit-based admissions policies and mixed-race and black alumni demonstrated that Martinique’s people of colour had been assimilated by the state as full citizens. They were worthy to serve not merely their island but the entire Republic as administrators, educators, and bureaucrats.

Public education disrupted the hierarchical order of the plantocracy by promoting an egalitarian ethos and equipping Martinicans of colour to work outside the plantation system. For these reasons alone, the state school was a harbinger of decadence for white creoles. The anti-educational antipathy discussed above is doubtless a factor that affects Hearn’s rhetoric concerning schools.<sup>44</sup> When he complains that ‘marvels that can never be replaced were cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of the *lycées*’, he indicates the quotidian material processes required to sustain a student body; the charcoal mentioned is most likely cooking fuel to prepare school lunches. However, by yoking the image of the state-school with that of a botanical garden deforested to make charcoal, by ascribing that ecological mismanagement to barbarism and ‘negro-radical’ rule, Hearn encourages his readers to calculate the worth of the Republican educational project and to find the judgement of the black municipal authorities wanting. What is worth the loss of those irreplaceable trees? Is their sacrifice forgivable? As Marcus Winkler reminds us:

The lexeme *barbar-* is [...] used as a self-evident concept that fits incomprehensible heinous acts whose perpetrators, to whom it is applied as well, are to be considered as excluded from the civil society and even from the human species.<sup>45</sup>

There is irony here – the trees are cut to support the education which ostensibly confirms the colony’s mixed race and black citizens as citizens, but the very felling and burning of the trees marks those citizens as unassimilable Others.<sup>46</sup>

I have been explaining the way Hearn's footnote registers colonial decline as a process that can be understood ecologically; discussing the decadence of the botanical garden allows Hearn to question the value of the inclusive processes that make black Martinicans full citizens, equal to their white counterparts. However, while in its periodical form this way of reading the landscape is an afterthought rather than a fully developed idea, in Hearn's book, the increased importance of his new interpretive approach is evident in the way it rises from its prior peritextual position to be augmented and incorporated into his sketch's body as a conclusion. In addition to this, Hearn threads images from the original footnote through new sections he writes for the expanded travelogue. By comparing the periodical and book versions of his text we can fully appreciate Hearn as a manipulator of decadent rhetoric; he is not unconsciously reproducing the attitudes of his creole interlocutors but *developing* aspects of their worldview in a narrative of Martinican decline that deepens in complexity across his sketches' variants.

In *Two Years*, indiscriminate deforestation for the purpose of making charcoal returns repeatedly as a signifier of colonial decline, creating a network of references that connect blackness, barbarism and environmental destruction. Take for instance Hearn's apostrophe to Jean-Baptiste Labat, the French missionary who played an early key role in settling the French Antilles:

Eh, *Père Labat!* – what changes there have been since thy day! [...] the grand woods thou sawest in their primitive and inviolate beauty, as if fresh from the Creator's touch in the morning of the world, are passing away; the secular trees are being converted into charcoal.<sup>47</sup>

The postlapsarian rhetoric here is obvious. In another sketch about mountain ecosystems, Hearn complains:

There are rare and remarkable trees here, – acomats, courbarils, balatas, ceibas or fromagers, acajous, gommiers; – hundreds have been cut down by charcoal-makers; but the forest is still grand. It is to be regretted that the Government has placed no restriction upon the barbarous destruction of trees by the *charbonniers*, which is going on throughout the island. [...] to-day the island exports no more hard woods: it has even been found necessary to import much from neighboring islands; – and yet the destruction of forests still goes on.<sup>48</sup>

Here Hearn employs what Laura Brown calls the ‘rhetoric of acquisition’ where ‘the mere act of proliferative listing [...] and the sense of an incalculable quantity’ present the prospect of untold riches to be obtained through imperialist enterprise.<sup>49</sup> He enhances the sense of his catalogue’s special value by presenting the trees only through their defamiliarizing Creole names. The exotic diction emphasizes the wondrousness of the trees by foregrounding them not as living organisms but as a set of word-ornaments, a decadent collection of rare vocabulary that can only be fully appreciated by the discerning traveller or connoisseur of language. Yet evoking the value of the trees serves primarily to underscore the outrageous wastefulness described. These precious woods will not be exploited for their singular virtues, rather they are destined for the charcoal-maker’s kiln.

Charcoal makers were understood culturally as outlaw figures in a condemnatory pan-Caribbean discourse that colonial authorities wielded against charcoal producers and sellers.<sup>50</sup> Although they were essential because they made the primary domestic fuel in the colonies, they were regarded ambivalently.<sup>51</sup> Firstly, as Hearn indicates, their indiscriminate woodcutting caused environmental devastation, altering the landscape and destroying species that were valuable exports. Secondly, they routinely evaded paying licenses and taxes for the right to make and sell charcoal.<sup>52</sup> Though the *charbonniers* are not explicitly racialized above, their wasteful abuse of the arboreal landscape and the failure of government to restrict them elicits once more the charges of barbarous behaviour that Hearn originally linked with ‘negro-radical rule’. The *charbonniers* too are abjected beyond the bounds of civilized behaviour.

Hearn continues to link the politics that leads to decline with an inability to appreciate Martinique’s natural beauty. While Hearn’s original footnote in *Harper’s* registered decline by focusing on local politics in Martinique, his revision of the note expands its purview to the metropole, for the first time directly linking the decadent landscape to the collapse of the Second Empire and the rise of the Third Republic:

The beautiful garden is now little more than a wreck of what it once was; since the fall of the Empire it has been shamefully abused and neglected. Some *agronome* sent out to take charge of it by the Republic, began its destruction by cutting down acres of enormous and magnificent trees, – including a superb alley of palms, – for the purpose of experimenting with roses. But the rose-trees would not be cultivated there; and the serpents avenged the demolition by making the experimental garden unsafe to enter; – they always swarm into underbrush and shrubbery after forest-trees have been cleared away.... Subsequently the garden was greatly damaged by storms and torrential rains; the mountain river overflowed, carrying bridges away and demolishing stonework. No attempt was made to repair these destructions; but neglect alone would not have ruined the loveliness of the place; – barbarism was necessary! Under the present negro-radical régime orders have been given for the wanton destruction of trees older than the colony itself; – and marvels that could not be replaced in a hundred generations were cut down and converted into charcoal for the use of public institutions.<sup>53</sup>

Hearn ties care and respect for the natural world to aristocratic order. In both white Creole and metropolitan French texts, Martinique was often presented as a ‘tropical version of ancien régime France’.<sup>54</sup> The persistence of pre-Revolutionary culture on the island was demonstrated in white creoles’ status as ‘the land-owning class whose plantations predated the First French Republic and recalled the Old Regime’.<sup>55</sup> Appropriately then, in all variations of Hearn’s sketch, the Jardin des Plantes joins the plantations in generating these anachronistic royalist associations, even though it was constructed after the French Revolution. Notably, in *Harper’s*, Hearn tells readers the garden’s ‘art spirit [is] older than Versailles, older than Louis XIV’.<sup>56</sup> This claim is emphasized in *Two Years*: ‘It is of another century, this garden [...] it is very quaint; it suggests an art spirit as old as Versailles, or older.’<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the site is linked to other retrograde monarchical signifiers. When Hearn invites his first readers to identify with explorers who have toured the space, he directs them not to their contemporaries but backwards to a famed figure of nostalgia, the Martinique-born first Empress of the French. ‘Did Josephine ever rest upon that shadowed bench nearby? She knew all these paths by heart: surely they must have haunted her dreams in the aftertime’.<sup>58</sup>

Hearn’s evocation of Josephine Bonaparte is fanciful; the Jardin des Plantes was established after she finally left the Caribbean for France. However, Hearn’s romanticized revision of history makes sense when we recall that in Martinique, beginning in the period of the Second Empire, commemoration of Josephine became a ‘powerful symbol for white claims to political,

social and moral authority'.<sup>59</sup> She was well known for her love of botany and horticulture, famed for her gardens. Yearning for the Jardin des Plantes in exile, she serves as an exemplary figure of care for Martinique's arboreal heritage that sharply contrasts with Hearn's charcoal makers and black politicians. Furthermore, as wife and grandmother respectively to emperors Napoleon I and Napoleon III, Josephine embodies the centrality of white Antillean *créolité* to French imperial glory, reminding white creoles of the time that they were not marginalized by the metropole. Perhaps most importantly, as Laurence Brown has argued, for white creoles, the recollection of Josephine served as an implicit justification of slavery and benevolent paternalism. Remembered as sympathetic and generous, she embodied 'the moral virtues of the white plantocracy without direct reference to slavery' even though she was a slave-owner.<sup>60</sup>

Given the temporal, racial and political associations Hearn reinforces with his account, it is unsurprising that he correlates the garden's deterioration with the transformation of relations between metropole and colony when the Second Empire fell. The shift between imperial and republican regimes is presented as a divestment of care from the motherland, a rejection of creole aristocratic culture and again a turn to a new deficient system of valuing the natural world. From its inception, the Jardin des Plantes was designed to be equally a place for recreation and a site for agronomical experimentation and advances in the plant sciences. Yet although these two purposes might be understood as interdependent, Hearn's text underplays the garden's scientific aspects. Rather, the aesthetic appeal that renders the site exceptional for leisure is foregrounded and insistently explained as anachronistic – 'quaint'. By contrast, through the 'experimenting with roses' Hearn criticizes here, the scientific and economic mandates of the Jardin des Plantes irrupt back to prominence, reminding us of its role as a station in the worldwide network through which newly discovered plants were taxonomized, transplanted, bred and commodified. Hearn's *agronome* links the Third Republic to an outrageously progressive science whose focus on innovation destroys the beauty of a long-established conservative order. Furthermore, the impersonal description of the palm-demolishing *agronome* establishes him as some interchangeable cog in the



machinery of imperial bureaucracy, a government functionary who cannot or will not understand the cultural specificity of the colony he has been dispatched to administer. As Mimi Sheller reminds us, because ‘palm trees in particular deeply informed initial European impressions’ of Caribbean flora’, the palm becomes ‘a key symbolic icon representing the entire Caribbean region’.<sup>61</sup> The tree also had strong associations with plantocratic order; in marking approaches to plantations and boundaries between estates, allées of palms were signs of property’.<sup>62</sup> Thus, in Hearn’s passage, palms serve as emblems of white creole particularism, disrespected by metropolitan bureaucratic indifference.

Hearn’s regret that acres of old and beautiful trees are sacrificed for an uncertain horticultural experiment is clear from the rhetorical strategies he employs to push his allegedly factual account towards what seems like an ironic revision of Edenic myth. Animated by pathetic fallacy, Hearn’s vengeful serpents and wilfully quiescent roses invest Nature itself with the power to resist and protest the garden’s redevelopment, a power that Hearn and his readers, too late to the scene of the outrage, cannot have. The experimental garden parodies the primeval Biblical one; as in Genesis, we are left with the image of a snake-infested garden that cannot be entered safely. Ultimately, however, the destruction the agronomist initiates cannot be checked; the passage *still* concludes with its incendiary end. In this revised account, the word *lycées* gives way to the term ‘public institutions’. While the rewording may be intended to make the description more readily comprehensible to anglophone readers, it also suggests a greater menace posed by the negro-radical regime. Although the new terminology preserves its reference to a more inclusive educational system, it suggests any number of institutions which may now be open to Martinique’s barbarous citizens of colour.

Praising Martinique’s ‘Eden-summer’ and ‘Hesperian magnificence’, Hearn might seem just another purveyor of the myths that constitute the Caribbean as timeless, free from the histories of violence, exploitation and inequality that have affected the region’s insular ecosystems.<sup>63</sup> Yet Hearn’s histrionic and evolving representation of decadent landscape disrupts the ahistoricity of

paradise and makes discerning those histories possible by foregrounding two notions of temporality. The first is the passage of time that makes the environmental decline discernible as a state of decadence. The second is the passage of time linked to revision. The variations between the periodical and book versions of Hearn's sketches highlight the ways in which all access to the natural world is through rhetoric, mediated by aesthetic, ideological and cultural values. Although this rhetoric is most visible through the representation of the wrecked landscape in the Jardin des Plantes, it applies equally in Hearn's paradisaical representations of Martinique, revealing their construction from the 'ambitious imaginative symbolism' that aided settlers to colonize the island first through discourse, then physically.<sup>64</sup>

Restoring temporality to our consideration of the landscape, Hearn channels decadence's capacity to detect and evaluate change. The full story of decadence as an ecologically informed artistic response to Caribbean history is untold, but Hearn's texts suggest that the environmental losses borne in order to modernize the Caribbean, that is to settle, govern and extract resources from it during the colonial period, may well be the major subject in any decadent literature that arises within the region. In his negrophobic condemnation of the *lycée*, after all, what he is protesting is the ecological cost of assimilating blackness into the nation. The deficiency of Hearn's sketches is that their critique is not wide-ranging enough – their increasingly overt embrace of racism and reactionism obscures the true origin, effect, and scope of the ecological disaster they lament. Witnessing ongoing environmental degradation in the Caribbean today, much of it caused by colonial and neocolonial factors, we might identify with Hearn's sadness over arboreal loss. However, it is not Martinique's black Republicans, *charbonniers*, or students who should disproportionately bear blame for the island's deforestation. Where is the history that links mismanagement of the island's natural resources to the plantocracy, sugar plantations and colonial underdevelopment? Informed by the siege mentality and white supremacist nostalgia of his creole interlocutors, Hearn will not provide us with a comprehensive contextualization of the ecological mismanagement he sees unfolding – we must supply it ourselves.

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- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renee K. Gosson, and George B. Handley, 'Introduction', in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, ed. by Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renee K. Gosson, and George B. Handley (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 1-30 (p. 1).
- <sup>2</sup> Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, 'Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures', *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 95 (2004), 298-310 (p. 305).
- <sup>4</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse. Selected Essays* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Stilling, 'Warramou's Curse: Epic, Decadence, and the Colonial West Indies', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43.3 (2015), 445-63 (p. 451).
- <sup>6</sup> Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 7.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Bisland, *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, 2 vols (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), I, p. 414.
- <sup>9</sup> See Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle: Citizens of Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) and Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1890), p. 292.
- <sup>11</sup> Stilling, p. 451.
- <sup>12</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, 'A Midsummer Trip to the West Indies: Third Paper', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1888, p. 631.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 630.
- <sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Couti, *Dangerous Creole Liaisons: Sexuality and Nationalism in French Caribbean Discourses from 1806-1897* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 128.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, 'A Midsummer Trip to the West Indies: Second Paper', in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1888, p. 338.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- <sup>20</sup> Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 32.
- <sup>21</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', p. 336.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.
- <sup>23</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 63.
- <sup>24</sup> Clarissa Kimber, 'Le Jardin Colonial des Plantes of Martinique', in *Islands, Forests and Gardens in the Caribbean: Conservation and Conflict in Environmental History*, ed. by Robert S. Anderson, Richard H. Grove, and Karis Heibert (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2006), p. 89.
- <sup>25</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', p. 338.
- <sup>26</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Architecture and Urbanism in the French Atlantic Empire: State, Church and Society, 1604-1830* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), p. 321.
- <sup>27</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', pp. 340-43.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- <sup>29</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Third', p. 627.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Christopher M. Church, *Paradise Destroyed: Catastrophe and Citizenship in the French Caribbean* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), p. 65.
- <sup>33</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Second', p. 343.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.
- <sup>35</sup> Couti, p. 131.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Hearn, 'Midsummer Third', p. 631
- <sup>38</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 335.
- <sup>39</sup> Laurence Brown, 'Créole Bonapartism and Post-Emancipation Society: Martinique's Monument to the Empress Joséphine', *Outre-mers*, 93 (2006), 39-49 (p. 40).

- <sup>40</sup> Even if he were informed of any culling, it may be that he misunderstood, or more probably embellished, some routine aspect of forestry. For instance, in her history of the Jardin des Plantes, Clarissa Kimber mentions the ‘cutting down of introduced species grown large’ in the late nineteenth century (p. 107).
- <sup>41</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 179.
- <sup>42</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 104.
- <sup>43</sup> Véronique Hélénon, *French Caribbeans in Africa: Diasporic Connections and Colonial Administration, 1880-1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 27.
- <sup>44</sup> Hearn also is also hostile to the homogenizing effects of French language instruction that public education will bring, fearing that it will doom Martinican Creole to extinction. See Lafcadio Hearn, ‘West Indian Society of Many Colorings’, *Cosmopolitan*, July 1890, p. 339.
- <sup>45</sup> Marcus Winkler, ‘Theoretical and Methodological Introduction’, in *Barbarian: Explorations of a Western Concept in Theory, Literature and the Arts, Vol. I: From the Enlightenment to the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Stuttgart: B. Metzler, 2018), p. 1.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>47</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 182.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- <sup>49</sup> Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 43.
- <sup>50</sup> Bonham C. Richardson. *Igniting the Caribbean’s Past: Fire in British West Indian History* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 88.
- <sup>51</sup> Clarissa Kimber, *Martinique Revisited: The Changing Plant Geographies of a West Indian Island* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1988), p. 123.
- <sup>52</sup> Richardson, p. 89.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- <sup>54</sup> Church, p. 80.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>56</sup> Hearn, ‘Midsummer Second’, p. 340.
- <sup>57</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 61.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>59</sup> Brown, ‘Créole Bonapartism’, p. 49.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>61</sup> Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 194.
- <sup>62</sup> Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 37.
- <sup>63</sup> Hearn, *Two Years*, p. 183.
- <sup>64</sup> Grove, p. 5.