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Vernacular soundings: Poetry from the Lesser Antilles in the aftermaths of hurricanes Irma and Maria

Christina Kullberg

The noise my leaves make is my language

Derek Walcott (2005)

Hurricane is a word derived from an extinct vernacular Caribbean language, Taino. This natural phenomenon is indeed quintessentially Caribbean. Most early modern European travelers to the region tell about storms so forceful and unimaginable that though they had plenty of models in literature for describing tempests, they needed local knowledge and words to make sense of them. In one anonymous French pirate's account from 1620, *hurákan* is even mistaken for a toponym, as if the islands were one with the storms that ravaged their shores (Moreau 2002: 116). The native Caribs noted changes in the cycle of hurricanes after over a hundred years of European intrusion: the number of hurricanes increased. Two old Carib men presumably explained this to a Monsieur Montel, according to Charles de Rochefort, a protestant travelling in the Caribbean in the middle of the seventeenth century (1658: 380). Interestingly, the Caribs, who might, of course, be fictive, linked the change in natural forces with a process of cultural transmission: as the Natives assimilated European practices, nature changed, too.

These Carib voices, even if they have a slight European tenor, give a rare early indigenous perspective on something that we might call climate change; they express a consciousness of an impending ecological crisis. Today, hurricanes hit the region harder than ever in a locally felt consequence of global warming, attributed to centuries of what Rob Nixon described as a "slow violence" that the rich inflict upon the poor through colonization and global capitalism

(Nixon 2013; Watts 1987). In the wake of the 2010 earthquake that hit Haiti, and hurricanes Irma and Maria, both category five, that devastated the islands in 2017, Caribbean poets in particular have engaged directly with the hard-felt effects of slow violence. To name a few, James Noël (Haiti) responded to the earthquake in *La Migration des murs* (2012) and through his editorial work with the journal *Intranqu'illités*, and Ana Portnoy Brimmer (Puerto Rico/New York) has written and performed several poems about hurricane Maria (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019). From the Lesser Antilles Richard Georges (Tortola) published *Epiphaneia* (2019), Lasana M. Sekou (St. Martin) came out with *Hurricane Protocol* (2019), and Celia A. Sorhaindo (Dominica) with *Guabancex* (2020). These works testify to a vibrant creativity in contemporary Caribbean poetry, which has not gone unnoticed in the global field of literature. Yet, in this context, that creativity tends to be leveled out through generalizing categorizations such as “hurricane poets.” The label no doubt shows the force of what Elena Machado (2015) has described as a “market aesthetics,” which extend to poets from peripheral places who publish with local and/or independent publishing houses.

Such labeling captures a dilemma in the theorization of world literature. On the one hand, we are complicit in reducing literature from small marginalized places to recognizable categories. From distant readings and systemic approaches to attention to circuits of translation and reception, the conceptualization of the literatures of the world is dictated by (Western) centers. On the other, an important conversation within world literature is precisely about rethinking it from peripheral spaces (Müller and Siskind 2019: 16). As Elizabeth DeLoughrey puts it, thinking about global phenomena, be it literature or environment, would gain from being “*grounded* by engaging specific places such as postcolonial islands” (2019: 2; emphasis in original). However, the question remains of how to read and incorporate literature from an archipelagic region such as the Lesser Antilles into world literature without absorbing it into the center–periphery divide that determines so much of the critical discussion within the field.

In this chapter, I will use an ecocritical approach, not necessarily to resolve this dilemma but at least to explore how we can think about global effects of literature. Following Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett’s suggestion that we need to think through “Caribbean ecology from the perspective of aesthetic practice” (2017: 11), I will investigate on a textual level how three poets from the Lesser Antilles—Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo—mobilize vernacular

sensibilities by working with sound and resonance in poems that have emerged out of natural catastrophes.¹ Indeed, the massive cultural response in recent years to natural catastrophes would call for a pan-Caribbean and intermedial approach to works from all of the languages and art-forms in the larger creole cultural region. Likewise, insisting on the fact that hurricanes start on the sea, DeLoughrey suggests that they convey a transoceanic imaginary (2018: 9). Yet, the limited space of this chapter prompts me to focus my analysis on these three anglophone poets from Dominica, St. Martin, and the Virgin Islands. And the choice is not entirely contingent on the economy of the chapter. There are reasons to focus on the archipelago and the small islands of the Antilles as a singular space in this larger hemispheric and oceanic continuum.² More than other creole contexts, proximity between the islands has historically increased processes of mixing between languages, cultures, and ecologies. The islands have been subject to radical transformations due to the transplantation of crops, plants, and animals as well as landscaping, from the establishment of plantations in the seventeenth century to today's destruction of mangroves and coral reefs for the tourist industry. In a way the Lesser Antilles are like laboratories proving Timothy Morton's now classic point that nature and culture are inseparable (2009). In these precarious spaces culture/nature is never strictly local but points to other places and times across the planet.

What is particularly interesting from an ecocritical and world literary perspective is the ways in which the poets operate through the globally dominating English language, not to convey the "untranslatability" (Apter 2013) of local experience but, rather, I argue, to make a different kind of sense by creating a world of soundscapes. As Eric Doumerc points out in his review of *Guabancex*, language becomes the ultimate "resource to address the trauma and shock" (2021). In this regard, it is noticeable that Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo include very few direct instances of vernaculars, at least not in the

¹ I discovered these collections of poetry thanks to a discussion between Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo organized by the Bocas Lit Fest 2020. The discussion was entitled "The Strength of Islands" and was moderated by Naila Folami Imoja. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT6Q5Udg3Mg> (accessed May 24, 2021).

² The contextual differences between the larger islands and the Lesser Antilles are significant. Most smaller islands became independent well after the Second World War or remained in some kind of dependent relationship to colonial powers (Guadeloupe and Martinique being French overseas departments, for example) even if there are signs today of coming change. At the same time, they are not, like Puerto Rico, part of an empire, or, like Cuba, an important player in international politics, or like Haiti, dependent on international aid. Comparisons between these different contexts would be fruitful but falls beyond the scope of this study.

poems studied here.³ We are, in other words, far from a prose saturated with vernaculars that we can find in Jamaican Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (see Chapter 8 in this volume for an analysis of James). Yet while they are not exploring vernacular language *per se*, they do forge vernacular sensibilities in English. This particular aesthetics of language can be read through the lens of Kamau Brathwaite's famous talk about "nation language." He situated the Caribbean poet's aesthetics in a postcolonial double bind position of having been taught an English that does not correspond with the reality of the archipelago. The problem is not vocabulary or even language but form and style: "we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of snowfall" (1984: 8). "The hurricane," Brathwaite said, "does not roar in pentameters. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience?" (1984: 10). At the basis of nation language lies the idea that poetry mediates the way we live the environment. Drawing on this insight, Brathwaite argues for the necessity of creating a "nation language" within another language by altering the language's rhythm, timbre, and sound. In similar terms, Édouard Glissant—quoted in Brathwaite's talk—speaks about Martinican cultural expressions as "forced poetics" that emerged out of a situation where one's language is not able to express the surrounding world. "Forced poetics," Glissant writes, "exist where a need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression" (1989: 120). For Glissant, coherent meaning has become impossible in situations of extreme inequality, which permeate Caribbean societies. Nevertheless, expressive possibilities remain entrenched in noises, screams, and pitches that camouflage the process of making meaning into "one impenetrable block of sound" (1989: 124). Sound then is meaningful as effect or affect rather than of signification or representation. Meaning is created indirectly, hidden in folds and layers, in noise and rhythm, which Glissant ultimately reads as a form of counter-poetics. It is an active way to eschew understandability while actively seeking to express the world.

My approach also takes its cue from recent attempts by Sarah Phillips Casteel (2020), Eric Hayot (2016), Pheng Chea (2016), and others who look at

³ The linguistic context of the region is complicated. On most islands a (colonial) language is used for official purposes. This dominating language exists alongside other languages, often spoken, used in the daily life of people: either Creoles or Papiamentu (characterized as languages), or *patois* (dialect). Particularly in the Lesser Antilles colonial languages tend to be fluid: on St. Martin English, Dutch, and French have dominated alternatively; St. Lucia is highly influenced by French, and so on. These linguistic contact zones have historical and geographical explanations, and the different languages continue to influence one another (Michaelis et al. 2013).

texts in terms of world-making in order to shift the attention from circulation of literature as a commodity to exploring how literature actively intervenes in the world. Following these scholars, I propose that the sonic fabric of the poems can mediate other relationships between world and work, relationships that often escape world literary debates. I will consider how Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo use the vernacular in terms of sound grounded in layers of local geography, history, cultures, and literatures in order to create what we may call a sound-world of hurricanes. Such soundscapes emerge from a locality (be it a place or the speaking body) but are not fixed to it. Rather they seek to explore an uncertain spatiality, an unstable way of being in the world that recalls Wai Chee Dimock's claim that the sonic fabric of a text releases a temporal instability, especially when displaced and read elsewhere (1997: 1060). Dimock argued that the aural dimensions of a text can be read in terms of frequencies, which have a shifting quality, "moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places" (1997: 1061). There is arguably something about paying attention to sound that, as suggested by Shuangyi Li, can help us rethink not only comparative modes of reading, but also the relationship between text and world (2020: 400). This is what we see in the poems by Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo. The sonic fabric appears as a means to search the ravaged island space and this sensory exploration turns into an uncertain world-making that reaches beyond the archipelago. My contention here is that whether these poems are characterized as world literature or not does not necessarily have to do with determining to what extent they circulate in the world. Their "worldliness" can be captured by analyzing the ways in which they produce echoes of sensory experience that re-sound in other places. I will start by discussing the intersections between world literature and eco-criticism, and place the Caribbean within these conjectures. From there I will move to the readings of the poems, looking first at how the play with sound and naming channels an intimate experience of the hurricane. Finally, I will examine how the poems use the sonic fabric to create a poetics of resonance to make sense of an unstable world.

Vernacular sounds between ecocriticism and world literature

World literature, with its attention to global movements, has contributed to rethinking ecocriticism in terms of what Ursula Heise calls "environmental cosmopolitanism" (2008). Her discussion of how texts "negotiate the juncture

between ecological globalism and localism” makes it clear that ecocriticism shares many of the stakes and challenges raised by world literature (2004: 126; 2013). Yet even if Heise refers to a global ecological imaginary or consciousness that does not restrict itself to a eulogy of place, the idea of “environmental cosmopolitanism” has different connotations in 2020 than when her *Sense of Place and Sense of the Planet* was published in 2008. During the past decade, we have witnessed the rise of a grassroots movement promoting radical measures to save the planet initiated by young upper-middle-class Europeans and picked up by adolescents across the globe. We have also seen an increasing commitment to environmentalism from the liberal uber-rich: celebrities fly on private jets to conventions organized by Google to raise climate awareness; multinational companies like Amazon showcase investments made in sustainable resources while they, at the same time, own large shares in the oil industry. Indeed, it is difficult not to be cynical today when evoking “environmental cosmopolitanism.” Heise is of course aware of the problem of a mainly Western and white perspective on environmentalism as she quotes postcolonial researchers’ astute reservations about the good will of those engaging with the humanitarian and natural concerns of remote places (2013). A type of global environmental consciousness may be well-intentioned but it implies a particular vision of global connectedness and a particular relationship to place and to the world, which should not be taken as universal. As underscored by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015), following Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez Alier (2013), the full-bellied and the empty bellied environmentalisms do not necessarily have the same perspectives on or the same solutions to the current crisis (Hunt and Roos 2012).

As a backdrop to these postcolonial warnings about the predicament of environmental thinking, Heise seeks to “model forms of cultural imagination and understanding that reach beyond the nation and around the globe,” as well as to investigate “the question of how we might be able to develop cultural forms of identity and belonging that are commensurate with the rapid growth in political, economic, and social interconnectedness that has characterized the last few decades” (2008: 6). These challenges are not new to the Caribbean, which might explain why the region is important, not only for Heise, who turns to notions such as hybridity and mixing, intrinsic to the Caribbean context, to connect to place without lauding it, but also for other ecocritics. If the current ecological crisis is symbiotic with the capitalist world system, the Caribbean with its long history of colonization, extraction, and human displacements becomes a

crucial site for thinking about both the politics and the aesthetics of ecocriticism as Campbell and Niblett (2017; Niblett 2012) have argued. There are several examples of this. Lawrence Buell (2005) along with Huggan and Tiffin (2015) cite Derek Walcott's writing as an example of a "global sense of place." Nixon finds in the Black Atlantic a good starting point for examining his notion of slow violence (2013). Similar to the idea of "slow violence," Mark D. Anderson argues in *Disaster Writing* that catastrophe is part of everyday life in Caribbean and South American societies and not lived as a new consequence of the Anthropocene: disasters are the "culmination of historical processes that have resulted in certain populations living in a state of heightened vulnerability" (2011: 21). Similarly, Niblett argues that natural violence is part of the Caribbean cultural identity (2009: 62). DeLoughrey, too, underscores that from the perspective of marginalized and precarious places such as islands, the Anthropocene is not conceptualized in terms of newness but, rather, as in continuity with a long history of exploitation, which changes not only the way it is lived but also how the Anthropocene is conceptualized (2019). Drawing from Caribbean thinkers, DeLoughrey further points out that the history of slavery and colonization entails a dispossessed relationship to land. Consequently, the way Caribbean literature conveys a sense of place does not replicate the regionalism or anxiety with regionalism that can be seen in the United States, Canada, or Europe. Writing nature/culture takes complex manifestations in Caribbean literary history and is constantly being revisited and reactualized.⁴ Often used by authors as a means to explore the silenced past of slavery, it is linked to aesthetic experimentation and to rethinking local identity in relation to the world (DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley 2005; Casteel 2007; Deckard 2017).

There is an interesting contradiction in the ways in which Caribbean thinking is included in the conjunction between world literature and ecocriticism.

⁴ On the French islands, for instance, literary movements' struggle to preserve local languages (Creole) has turned into green activism. The disclosure in 1993 of the uses of chlorodyne on banana plantations in Martinique prompted writers to call for sustainable biodynamic agricultural practices. The devastation of the island after hurricane Dean in 2007 further propelled an ecocritical approach. Glissant and Chamoiseau published co-authored manifestos in *La Tribune des Antilles* and on the website *Potomitan*, and appeared on television to argue for an ecofriendly way of being in the world. Interestingly, these initiatives come from on the one hand a reflection on literary language in its relation to place and, on the other hand, from a reflection on an alternative globalization, what Glissant and Chamoiseau call a "alter-mondialiste" movement, which had been theorized by Glissant notably in *Traité du Tout-monde* from 1997. In this regard, they forward an ecocritical argument that Martinique should enter into global relations and not only interact with or through France: "Le monde, et non pas seulement la France, est à notre horizon," writes Chamoiseau in a text called "Manifeste pour un projet global" (2000). See Ferdinand (2017).

Whereas a number of household poets—Brathwaite, Glissant, and Walcott—are quoted in works on world literature and ecocriticism, questions of form and aesthetics are often sidelined in favor of a focus on theme and on the form of the novel, perhaps as a result of its centrality in world literary studies. Disaster writing in particular has mainly been theorized in relation to the novel and in extension of questions around nation formations (Anderson 2011; Deckard 2017) or apocalyptic revelations (Munro 2015). This seems to have led to a kind of critical engagement that opts for a straightforwardly political reading of the novels and appears driven by a desire to define a sub-genre that taps into other literary discourses around ecocriticism and chimes in with theories of the “global novel.” Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, for instance, classifies natural catastrophe as a world literary theme (2008: 103). The tendency can also be found in Heise’s analysis of the “environmental epic” (2012), Huggan’s idea of postcolonial rewriting of Romantic nature writing (2009), or in DeLoughrey’s examination of allegorizations of nature writing in the Caribbean (2019). Such emphasis on narratives is no doubt accurate, especially concerning storms. Sharae Deckard, among others, has shed light on the long literary history of hurricanes in the region, where these natural phenomena have been used as symbols of societal upheavals and have served as the backbone of narratives of nation and cultural identity in various constellations (2017: 26, 40). In the case of world literature, however, storms are no longer symbols for particular nation or group formation. Quite on the contrary, they become “universal”: if natural catastrophes are a “world literary theme” it is because they spur that sense of solidarity, which is at the basis of environmental cosmopolitanism. After all, an earthquake such as the one that hit Haiti in 2010 is a “planetary event. It belongs to everyone,” as Haitian author and seism survivor Dany Laferrière states and ironically predicts a “race to write the great earthquake novel or the major essay about reconstruction” (2013: 139). Such a novel would give Haiti a spot in the contemporary literary world market. Only this form does not necessarily adhere to Haitian life since the novel “demands a minimum of comfort that Port-au-Prince can’t offer; it’s an art form that flourishes in industrialized nations” (2013: 139).⁵

⁵ The seism that struck the island in 2010 confronted Haitian authors with the issue of how to account for the earthquake at the same time as images of the devastation spread internationally, propelling NGOs and Hollywood celebrities to rush to the scene. Incidentally, this also became a world literary event. That second week of January 2010, Port-au-Prince hosted a global literary festival called *Étonnants voyageurs* (the initiators of this ambulant festival coined the term *littérature-monde en français*, a French version of or response to world literature). The catastrophe thus imposed world literary responses that exposed complicated questions of the role of literature in the world and of belongings. Laferrière’s notes, taken just moments after the earthquake struck, were quickly published in major newspapers across the globe and ultimately turned into a book.

While recognizing the global response to the earthquake, Laferrière points to the inevitable fact that suffering triggered by natural disaster exposes global inequities, which poses serious questions about the idea of the natural catastrophe as a globally shared experience in a basic, almost banal way: how a catastrophe is lived cannot be mediated directly through language. What kind of representation does a natural disaster require then? Is it not a most local experience that would resist both world market circulation and political allegorization? After all, most of the immediate artistic expressions following hurricanes and earthquakes do not enter into for example art institutions or print-culture but take the form of street art painted on vehicles and walls, and story-telling and performances at church or at home, in schools or in community buildings. It seems to me that in the wake of the catastrophes of recent years the poems by Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo seek alliances with these kinds of direct responses and turn away from transforming the hurricanes into political symbolism and from appealing to environmental cosmopolitanism.⁶ Sekou writes that he explicitly wants to block out both international and local news after the hurricanes because they politicize the event, wiping out that sense of intimacy that the poems seek to restore. It is as if turning a deaf ear to news reports is necessary to respond to the hurricane. And if there is any epiphany in Georges' poems it is the absence of revelatory meanings or dramatic endings: "No useful predictions. The prophets / are all mealy-mouthed and impotent. There is only this ball, / madly spiraling through space—and that is the most reassuring thing" (34). It is here that an attention to aesthetics in terms of expressions of a sensible experience of the world may open up for rethinking the connection between ecocriticism and literatures of the world. The point is that locally felt events are expressed in ways that escape coherent narratives in general and world literature in particular. So, while the poems might draw world literary ecocritical attention, they also remind us of the limitation of that understanding. Sorhaindo, for instance, explicitly refuses to narrate the disaster as she opens her poems by addressing the expectations of an (un)implied reader:

im not going to sit here and paint a heavy hurricane picture for you to
visualize in pretty clever metaphor words will never carry you to what

⁶ The dilemma of how to escape turning writing of the hurricane into an idealization of catastrophe was discussed by the poets at the Boca Lit Fest.

its like actually lets just leave it like that words cannot ever take you
 there at all ...
 go out and experience it for your self
 metaphor the world however you want

The address goes to an outsider, presumably a North American or European reader (like myself), who here is both implied and excluded. The speaker of these lines knows that there will be readers from the outside as she explicitly states that she does not write for them. In so doing she takes control of what she knows too well: the centers for world literature in Europe and North America assume to have the privilege of interpretation and categorization. The refusal to metaphorize and narrativize “a hurricane picture for you” can be read as a resistance to being romanticized, pitied, or neatly categorized as a “hurricane poet.” She questions the ocular interpretative bias, which has and still holds primacy in European and North American cultures (Dimock 1997: 1061), and calls for another sensible way of understanding the poems. Instead of using words that pretend to take the reader “there,” her poetics recalls Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conceptualization of minor literatures in which “language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or limits” (1986: 23). It is a scripture that moves from visual intelligibility towards a sensory way of representing where the auditive plays a crucial role, as we shall see in the readings.

This is a strategy of writing that transforms into a different kind of global environmental connectedness that, I suggest, singles out these three poets from the Lesser Antilles. They break not only with a visual tradition in poetry and literature studies, but also with the politically charged symbolism of storms, which has dominated South American and Caribbean writing (Anderson 2011; Deckard 2017; Fonseca 2021). In so doing they inscribe the hurricanes in a different Caribbean literary continuum that foregrounds sound and rhythm as representative mediums. We see it in Sorhaindo’s address to the reader as she sketches out an aesthetic of the un-representable that works with language to sound out rather than visualize a turbulent world. I would call this poetic investigation a search for resonance in two senses of the term. First, Dimock’s idea of literary resonance, according to which paying attention to the sonic textures of literature opens for alternative modes of reading comparatively, although, in the case of Sorhaindo, and also Georges and Sekou, auditive dimensions appear as ways to look for entangled temporal continuity in relation to a particular landscape as will be shown in my readings. Second, moving from

visual intelligibility toward an auditory way of making sense is a strategy to express an intensely local, sensible experience of the hurricane and the ravaged landscape it leaves behind. This leads me to turn to a sociologist understanding of resonance as a way to make sense of the world: natural catastrophes challenge our being in the world, our “ontological security” that the ground upon which we walk will hold us, as Hartmut Rosa suggests (2019: 47). In Rosa’s theorization, the modern idea of resonance is very much a search for harmony. However, Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo do not search for resonance to make the world speak and confirm the subject. They display a more investigative approach in their poems in which sounds create vibrations and evoke responses; the world is not there to be revealed, the poems relationally vibrate with the surroundings. Nevertheless, Rosa’s theory is useful for conceptualizing how the poems seek to transfer the turbulent experience and the transformed landscape into living sound, delineating a new soundscape in the aftermaths of the hurricanes, rather than to work through representation.

As in Rosa’s theory, voice plays a crucial role here as a way to respond to the hurricane. In the aftermath of Maria, the killing of metaphor evoked by Sorhaindo corresponds to a materialization of words into sounds. Simultaneously, it is a resistance to letting writing turn the hurricane into a symbol. “Words are all we have left,” she writes. Words are like debris and not like *metaphora*; they are not a means of transport for the reader. Literature, then, Sorhaindo states over and over again, cannot substitute for lived experience, particularly not in a situation of unequal power relations and racisms: “in a billion years i dont / want some reader to come here think / this world of words was literal think / this blank ink represents black feeling / or that this white page feels any thing” (1). Yet, even if words cannot render the experience of natural disaster, they do seem to hold the promise of relationality: “let’s just leave it like that words cannot ever take you there at all although to be fair Mum is always saying kannót is a boat” (1). The vernacular homonym *kannót*, a creole word derived from Taino (English: canoe), seems to open a crack where the words do something else than what they say. Cannot/*kannót* is at once a refusal to speak and an opening up towards other shores. Together with the bodily sensibility of voice and hearing, it produces a “literary frequency,” in Dimock’s words (1997: 1061), which is at once directly related to the moment and place of experience yet also to other undefined and undecided places and bodies of reception. What does this imply in regard to ecocriticism and world literature? In the following sections, I propose that reading sound and noise as modes of the vernacular in the poetry of Georges,

Sekou, and Sorhaindo will enable us to trace how the poets work through the ecological crisis created by the hurricanes. What is fascinating is that they try to respond to the natural forces, put them in relation to history, place, and lived experience. In this work they reimagine the conditions for their poetry in the world, forcing the reader to relate to the experiences of the hurricanes without relying on prefixed forms and meanings.

Naming and intimacy

In his notes from the 2010 earthquake, Laferrière remarks that the challenge for literature is to restore a certain “intimacy” that got lost in the global clamor around the tragedy (2013: 140). The emphasis on the intimate is striking in light of the amount of criticism focusing on the larger political dimensions of writing in the wake of disasters. Laferrière is not alone. In an essay written shortly after the seism, Edwidge Danticat detects a similar search for intimacy and lets it emerge in the act of naming the catastrophe (2011: 161). The people she meets ascribe agency to the earthquake and seek ways to talk about it by naming it. Should you have no name to give it, you would simply call it *bagay la*, “the thing,” in Haitian Creole. Her relatives draw from their own life stories: one uncle calls the earthquake Ti Roro after a boy who used to bully him at school; another calls it Ti Rasta for the same reason (Danticat 2011: 168). Laferrière too cannot name it, yet he knows its effects are insidious, affecting both mind and body: “You can’t have experienced it and go your way as if nothing had happened. It’ll catch up to you one day. Why do you say ‘it’? Because ‘it’ doesn’t have a name yet” (2013: 39). After a few days the earthquake enters into culture and language: “‘Goudougoudou,’ the sound the earth made as it trembled ... What does Goudougoudou want?” (2013: 135). The name is a sound that calls for interpellation rather than explanation. This is why “the thing” has not one name but many, drawn from Haitian Creole (*bagay la*), onomatopoeia (*Goudougoudou*), and personal experience (the names of boys who were bullies at school). Creating a juncture between an exterior world of turmoil and the personal and collective intimate experience of the disaster, the play with sound makes it possible to relate to the names given to the earthquake without ascribing a fixed meaning to the event.

These are not performative acts of naming to impose power, as is the case usually in places marked by colonial history. Instead, naming is here

deeply immersed in the life of the individual and the community. Naming has a particular function in the cultures of the African diaspora in terms of identitarian reappropriation (Bousquet 2013), meaning that the trope of naming orients the reading of natural catastrophe toward intimacy. Instead of ascribing symbolic meaning to the event, both Laferrière and Danticat use the sonic fabric of orality to seek out vernacular experiences that call into question attempts to universalize the earthquake. We could call this work an aesthetic strategy where naming turns into a performance of resonance, not to make the world fit neatly into language but rather to release complicated histories. This is precisely what we see in poetry from the Lesser Antilles about the hurricanes of 2017. Celia Sorhaindo's title *Guabancex* invokes the name of the native Caribbean word for the supreme female deity associated with all natural destructive forces. Richard Georges's *Epiphanea* could be placed within Derek Walcott's tradition of the Caribbean as a New World Mediterranean. The title comes from ancient Greek and refers to "a glorious manifestation of the gods, and especially of their advent to help," as the epigraph states. Here as in Sorhaindo's work, the hurricane is supra-human but also, through the evocation of ancient words, connected to gods. The use of Greek plunges the poems into the historical deep time of the Caribbean by working through the European components that have determined the islands. With his choice of words and soothing sounds, Georges softly takes the devastating experience of the hurricane and links it to centuries of violence and exploitation. He evokes villages stoically standing, even after the hurricane, where one still feels, "the centuries of molasses still thick in the nose" (41). Saving objects from the hurricane reverberates with a long history of oppression but also with resilience: "We said our prayers with tongues swollen with language, / gripping our lies like lines, that our bodies were still not bodies / that every part does not speak its own corrugated talk / that navigates the brutal architecture of light and still sound" (41). In line with what Sharae Deckard (2017: 29) observes in Brathwaite's poetry, a consciousness of the multiple temporalities of the Caribbean emerges out of the storm in Georges' poem. The Greek name of the title finds anchor on the islands, sounds out to Africa and the Mediterranean and then connects to personal, detailed observations of the hurricane aftermaths.

The title of Lasana M. Sekou's poems points in the opposite direction from the divine presence in Sorhaindo and Georges. These are not poems; they are "protocols" that record and take note of the hurricane. Yet he too turns to the longer history of the region as if to inscribe the personal in a broader shared experience. The poems are accompanied with drawings copied from the Maya

Codex as a tribute to the native languages and cultures that gave the word to denote tropical storms. Sekou, known for his politically committed writing, testifies in the preface that the hurricane forced him into another kind of writing. He calls the poems “sketches” made with resistance. Facing a completely reshaped island space, he says his writing became “personal,” conveying intimate experiences that he was in fact reluctant to write. Naming is part of this movement toward the personal. In one of the poems, Sekou lingers on naming as a practice of grounding that is, at the same time, shifting.

before it name irma there was grand case
 there was rio grande
 before it call maria there was barbuda
 there was la habana,
 ayay was there before
 yabucoa was there, before
 the road town and the valley,
lontan avan ou té vinn konnèt lapwent,
antes de punta cana,
 and before the mayaimi too once,
 there was huracan to name it
 so that though it came first,
 movingallovertheplace,
 it had to have a name
 to be known for what it is. (27)

Naming can activate the geographical and environmental dimensions of a text by grounding it in the local. Here the grounding is itself a palimpsest, not only because of the diasporatic vernacular sensibilities unleashed by names in the colonial context of the Lesser Antilles, but because the hurricanes force a rethinking of grounding. The poem establishes horizontal relationships between islands embodied in the typography and in the languages present in the writing, recalling what Anna Reckin (2003) defines as Brathwaite’s “sound-scape”: it reverses the power dynamics inherent in naming and releases its relationality. Colonial and indigenous toponymies are juxtaposed with French Creole and Spanish. The English is incomplete or open (*before it name ...*), or merging as if the syllables recreated the intensity of the hurricane (*movingallovertheplace*). Naming is linked to history, but rather than reaching across the Atlantic and to the Mediterranean as in Georges’s poems, Sekou’s poem works within the multiple histories of the Antillean islands. The archipelago’s diversity can be seen

in languages and names, but whereas the Christian names given to the 2017 hurricanes appear as sequences in history, there is an eternal resonance in the name *huracan*. In an ultimate act of defiance of colonial practices of possession, the storm seems to name itself. Ultimately, the poem renegotiates the meaning of the hurricane by trying out names that resonate with the intimate experience and with the place after it passed.

A similar exploration of horizontal relationships appears in one of Sorhaindo's poems, suggesting a kind of weaving between the outside world and an intimate sphere of experience. The only time the name Guabancex appears in her collection is in relation to a mad homeless woman:

There is a toothless guabancex-grinning woman
called Mad Maria, living under a bus shelter in a
now bare-bone village. She spins
out skeletal arms and cackles
when they still tease, call her name,
relentlessly.
I gifted my daughter the family name
Maria. She struck on her 13th birthday.
She sang hauntingly with eyes closed the
whole crashing night till dawn. I did not know
her words but metronomed with shak-shak
teeth and knocking knees. (2020: 17)

Social injustice, place, mental illness, motherhood, coming of age—the intimate and the social merge with the force of the hurricane through names. The toothless mouth of the woman named Maria grinning opens up the abyss of history. Her answer to the scorn to which she is subject is simply to make noise. Through the sound and the name Maria, this woman is intimately linked to a young woman, a daughter, who entered into maturity when the hurricane hit. Her answer to the winds is to sing. The rhythm of the sound she makes while singing rejoins vernacular instruments (shak-shak) with the body: “guabancex-grinning” Maria’s skeleton arms join the young Maria’s “teeth and knocking knees.”

Interestingly, in these poems naming appears as a way to make the hurricanes resonate; it is a calling out to the world. By working on temporal and spatial scales simultaneously, naming here becomes an exploratory practice that does not reify the world but shifts and changes, seeking without necessarily finding the right words and sounds. As a means to face a turbulent world that cannot

be but needs to be expressed, it can be read in terms of a Glissantian forced poetics that opens up relationality (Glissant 1997). And it is here that intimacy is restored: the uncertain investigation which relates the outside world to the personal unfolds layers of history and sounds out the devastated landscape.⁷

Turbulent soundscapes

Naming as an intimate sound that unfolds and connects to a collectivity, to the past, and to the shock of the event and the disaster-struck landscape, stands in stark contrast to a concern with silence expressed by all three poets. While international news spread about the hurricanes, the local experience was that of isolation from the rest of the world. Power was out. No internet was working, making it impossible to reach loved ones at home and abroad. Another world of sounds occurs and the poems listen to the silence after the catastrophe. Sorhaindo calls it a “brutal wake-up silence, this downsidetippedup / outsidenowin we are deciphering” (7). The world is smashed to pieces, and as the landscape is brutally affected by the hurricane, so is the soundscape. Sorhaindo writes, “we hear nighttime noises we don’t recognise / we don’t hear tree frogs we don’t hear crickets we hear generators” (25). The silence of nature seems frightening, as if it materializes the idea that people will now exist differently in the world.

One of Georges’ poems is called “A Mixtape for Tortola,” linking the storm directly to music (notably dub and hip-hop). Time is intensified and the turbulence creates “bodiless voices,” “guttured, gaping houses,” and “still bleeding wounds” (51). The poem evokes helicopters cutting through the sky and the spinning of the cyclones. Yet the collective voice in the poem cannot make sense of the noise of devastation. They listen but can only hear silence. Listening appears as a theme in Georges’s poetry. His lines are inhabited by an explorative uncertain *I* who turns his ear both outside and inside. The difference between human and material, nature and culture, seem blurred. In one poem, entitled “Listening,” the lyrical “I” turns inward while relating to deep-time:

⁷ The idea of unfolding names is, of course, indebted to Roland Barthes’s famous analysis of proper names in Proust. However, in Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo, names are much more slippery, and the tonal qualities of their sounds are linked to a history of violence as to aesthetics. Moreover, they are actively naming; it is a practice of subjectivation to relate to the outside world, not subjugate it under language.

What could I have known of the easeful ways
of sliding through this world? A dew drop
descending the petal's sloping splendor;

this same moon that rose over giant beasts
and effervescing pools now rises
over your back's prickling flesh and—

there is only so much matter, bodies
with obligations to other bodies.
For instance, death need not be

Such a final, final thing. The days
heave along at a lazy pace.
If there were still leaves in this naked place

they would be still too, or at least listening
for the sighing tides of the Atlantic
for the shuddering clouds' fearsome report,

for the cyclic storms of trauma tracing
the exhausted courses of our ancestors,
for the chanting sky's low hollow sound. (2019: 42)

Time is leveled out, as are differences between species, all belonging to one world. The waters produced by the hurricane resonate with the water in our bodies: "there is only so much water within us, / yet we are all pooling through our bodies, / pretending to be solid masses" (42). In this altered land- and soundscape, bodies and water merge, as matter relating to matter. The poem then shifts perspectives and depicts nature in the process of listening. It plays with the anthropocentric perspective in giving agency to leaves: like humans they listen, or they would listen had they been there. The voices they listen to belong to the oceans and the sky. Working to inscribe the singular event into a continuum of Caribbean aesthetics and experience, Georges again alludes to a long traumatic, cyclic history of soundings, linked to the un-representable. The "sighing tides" recall the Middle Passage, as the hurricane approaches from the Atlantic, thus speaking to an oceanic imaginary that draws from Brathwaitean "tidalectics" (DeLoughrey 2018). Brathwaite famously defined tidalectics as a kind of Caribbean dialectics modeled after the constant turbulent movements of the ocean, proposing a chaotic yet unified notion of time and space: "instead of the notion of one-two-three, Hegelian, I am now more interested in the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic, I suppose,

motion, rather than linear” (Brathwaite in Mackey 1995: 14). In Georges’ poems too we find temporal discontinuity and tidal movements as if the oceans continued on these islands. Here the absent leaves listening creates a trembling moment, a stasis containing spatial orientations. While working through the violent history connecting nature and culture, the poem conveys the softness of sound and rhythm. Thus, we are far from the realm of hurricane roaring evoked by Brathwaite. Georges’ nation language can rather be described as a kind of nature language that seeks out signs and signals beyond hegemonic language use. There is language and agency in listening, too, he seems to suggest, a hearing through upheaved times and spaces.

Rather than insisting on the hurricane as an eradicating force, Georges’ poems explore how the turbulences have moved or blurred frontiers. They urge us to rethink space, time, and language. He lets his poems “linger in doorways” (2019: 35) and search the in-between spaces in nature, culture, and languages, spaces created by the uproar of the hurricane. What lies in front of the people after the hurricane is a lesson in continuity: “I’ve begun to learn that *devastated* does not mean *dead*, / that ruin can be resplendent, / that what has been emptied can be filled” (34). The poems search an in-between situation of destruction but where life prevails and it is this in-between world that demands other types of resonance. One poem, “The Transmutation of Grief” (45), depicts a bored boy who takes to drumming to make time pass. His beating on hollow tree trunks fills the valley, and it responds to him. Hope imbues the poem in the sense that the boy makes the hurricane-ravaged valley resonate anew. The silence abounds with sound. There is no revelatory meaning in the communication between the boy and the valley. Instead, a relationship has been established through the drum, allowing for resonance to begin.

Many poems by Sorhaindo and by Sekou evoke a similar process of seeking resonance. It is clear that Sorhaindo’s poetry is very much about finding oneself after Maria in a flooded landscape. People sing while holding a door to resist the water, but it ignores all frontiers and slips into the most sealed spaces. They push and chant, as if looking for ways to make the water resonate: “There are endless loud cracks, crashes—I see myself / lifted, flung, flying across the room, landing head first / into bookshelves; imagine this hysterical poetic ending” (2020: 6). The subject in the poem listens to the hurricane and hears sounds that make her imagine an ending. In the midst of the traumatic turbulence she seeks her own “resonating words” to resist the forces unleashed by the winds: “So now I push and push, chant and chant, over and over. / Ajai Alai ... Aganjae Alaykhae,

Ajai Alai ... Aganjae Alaykhae" (6). The chanting is a way to resist but also relate to the force of the hurricane. It is not the meaning of the words that matters but the cadences echoing in the trembling bodies of the people living through the hurricane. Much like the daughter Maria in the poem quoted earlier, the *I* experiences noises of the hurricane at first and then uses her own voice to address her inner fears as well as the flooding waters.

The movement between intimacy and the outside world is also a tension between individual and collectivity, a personal and a shared sounding that must remain differentiated. The poem that ends the book is like a long litany built around contradictions.

we sing out loud loud we beat our drums play our jing ping instruments
 we play our shakshaks we cannot
 we lose our voices we cannot speak we do not want to speak
 (2020: 30)

Again, instead of the translation of a hurricane experience that would appeal to the sentimental reader is this "Hurricane PraXis (Xorcising Maria Xperience)" as the poem is entitled. Natural catastrophes symbolize nothing, Sorhaindo seems to suggest. They call for action, practice, as a mode of survival and rebuilding. Within the communitarian "we," a number of voices resonate and emerge in contradictions. They are torn between things they do then cannot do, feel and do not feel, and so on. The poem's rhythm is in these morphing tensions that in their repetition create a sense of waves, rocking you but sometimes crashing, throwing you around. Creole rhythms come through in lines where the same word, often an adjective or an adverb, is repeated, as in "loud loud," enhancing movement and sound. Voices respond to each other, expressing the hurricane experience in dialogue and polyphony. It is a song sung by one single body containing many individual bodies, a choir in which voices sing in harmony, addressing one another. The singing and playing are themselves answers, reactions, but they become restrained. To have a voice is not guaranteed. It can be lost; it is lost. But then the loss of voice turns into a choice: "we do not want to speak." The refusal to speak is not to stop resonating; it is to find another type of resonance in the silence and devastation. The blank spaces, inscribing the silence in the poem between lines and words, create an auditive effect in the visual act of reading.

The importance of sound and noise clearly affirms Deckard's suggestion that the hurricane takes on a "material representation" (2017: 42). On the middle spread of Sorhaindo's book, a poem entitled "Invoked" covers both pages and reads vertically, like strong winds coming in from the side. The words become

the mangroves, mauled, and things
 that had brazen up and flush down to wetlands
 float and sink
 and currentless posts are lumbering well after
 their lifeless veins, entangled alone and along
 the roadside

dans la rue

in het steegje

à l'impasse

we are a world.unwired. (10)

The poem suggests a devastated landscape with trees swiped off the hillsides, mangroves turned upside down, and wetlands spreading out. Modernity, too, has been destroyed and, in the process, negatively animated, wires hang like “lifeless veins.” The lines in French and Dutch perform a type of localization. The English says on the roadside, the French, on the street and in the cul de sac, and the Dutch, in the alley. The poem thus sounds off the changing landscape by means of other languages breaking through the English-language poem. Voice and space often converge in Sekou’s poetry: “as i turned, without a sound; / to see the confusion, the catastrophe, / the clearing on the path / the path became a voice too. / it turned into me.it spoke” (23). Rosa says at one point that projecting voice into a “nature” separated from “culture” is an expression of late modernity’s objectification of nature (2019: 270). Here we have a subject who tries not to master but to navigate in the world after the catastrophe. There is human activity—clearing on the path—though the people involved are absent; only the activity remains. The subject in the poem merges with the path, which, in turn, addresses him. The difference between the subject and the landscape is not erased, but they are closely linked. The movement of the poem suggests a search. From the first line where voice is negatively evoked to the last two lines where the path addresses the subject, a process of resonance has taken place.

In their poems, Georges, Sekou, and Sorhaindo emphasize vernacular responses and experiences of natural catastrophes by working with sound, noise, and rhythm. It is this aesthetic practice, rather than a “disaster genre” or allegory of social upheaval, that marks their inscription in the Caribbean continuum. The question is, what does this tell us? How can such writing, which frankly does not seem to care about global consecration or the circulation scene at all, be read as world literature? Should it even be read as such? What would such an approach bring? Coming to the end of this chapter, I would

like to consider a different perspective. These texts contribute to rethinking world literature not because they are about hurricanes with the world literary system at the horizon but because they seek, in different ways, to make the devastated island space resonate beyond its borders. Sound, Anna Reckin writes in her analysis of Brathwaite, is concerned with “a sense of relation that is expressed in terms of connecting lines, back and forth, not only across the surface of the ocean [...] but also in the form of airwaves and ‘bridges of sound’ (radio broadcasts and sound recordings for example) that connect colony to colony and colony with metropole, often enacting tidalectic echoes” (2003). By actualizing sound rather than meaning as a way to make sense of the world, the poets investigate a relational approach both inwards (intimacy, collectivity) and outwards (the world). The reason sound, noise, and rhythm are central to Caribbean aesthetics is, according to Glissant, because these modalities form a counter-poetics in that their meaning is “camouflaged” so that the Master could not understand it (Glissant 1989: 124; Munro 2010: 12). If the Anthropocene is a consequence of the capitalist world system, it finds its roots in plantation economy and colonial system thinking, which were the basis for Glissant’s analysis of counter-poetics. It seems, in fact, that Sekou, Georges, and Sorhaindo in these poems relate to world literature in a similar way. They are acutely aware of the economic and cultural capital of the literary centers but choose aesthetic strategies that speak to the archipelagic region they inhabit. Following Glissant, such strategies do not imply isolation, but the forms of relating to the texts will differ depending on the reader. The radical proposal here is that we can read into the poems and their world-making without claiming to understand them. We do not have to reduce them under a universalizing system of thought or of economic exchanges in order for them to resonate in the world. According to this line of thinking, the world literary reach of “nation language” or “forced poetics” is not about enhancing a specific vernacular as an embodiment of the local, but a way of operating in and through language with noise, rhythm, and sound. It is on these premises, not as an ecological “world literary theme,” that the poetry of Sorhaindo, Georges, and Sekou make noise (sense) elsewhere.

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