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Animals, beaches, stars and spirits:  
A more-than-human approach to Caribbean ecologies

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Abstract

This Exploration highlights recent and emergent themes in the study of Caribbean ecologies across the social sciences and humanities. It draws particular attention to the field of black ecologies, which extends a longstanding engagement with the socio-ecological legacies of colonialism and plantation slavery, foregrounding the racialized nature of environmental harm while also underlining the various forms of worldmaking and freedom afforded by Caribbean ecologies. After sketching the main concerns in existing analyses of Caribbean ecologies, it explores how such approaches might be connected to new avenues for research, through four subsections that focus respectively on animals, beaches, stars and spirits. In so doing, it outlines the possibility of new conversations between Caribbean, black and more-than-human theory, demonstrating how Caribbean ecological thought and practice involve explicitly political post-humanist approaches. *Keywords:* Caribbean, ecology, Black ecologies, (neo)colonialism, non-human agency, queer studies.

Resumen: Animales, playas, estrellas y espíritus: un enfoque más que humano a la ecología caribeña

Esta exploración resalta temas recientes y emergentes en el estudio de las ecologías caribeñas en las ciencias sociales y las humanidades. Presta especial atención al campo de las ecologías negras, que amplía un compromiso de larga data con el legado socioecológico del colonialismo y la esclavitud en las plantaciones, poniendo de relieve la naturaleza racializada del daño medioambiental y, al mismo tiempo, subrayando las diversas formas de construcción del mundo y de la libertad que ofrecen las ecologías caribeñas. Tras esbozar las principales

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preocupaciones de los análisis existentes sobre las ecologías caribeñas, explora cómo estos enfoques podrían conectarse con nuevas vías de investigación a través de cuatro subsecciones centradas, respectivamente, en los animales, las playas, las estrellas y los espíritus. Al hacerlo, esboza la posibilidad de nuevas conversaciones entre la teoría caribeña, negra y más que humana, demostrando cómo el pensamiento y la práctica ecológicos caribeños implican enfoques poshumanistas explícitamente políticos. *Palabras clave*: Caribe, ecología, ecologías negras, (neo)colonialismo, agencia no humana, estudios *queer*.

## Introduction

Caribbean scholarship has a long tradition of critically assessing the role of ecologies in the region's sociocultural life and political economic formations. A first, enduring interest has been in the role of colonial and neocolonial relations in causing environmental degradation, dispossession and exploitation. This has involved emphasising the region's physical transformation, brought about by colonisation and plantation economies. Plantation agriculture not only introduced the dehumanising system of racial slavery to the region; its reliance on monocropping also devastated Caribbean ecologies (Grove, 1995). In the post-abolition and post-independence Caribbean, the importance of plantation agriculture has declined, but the political, economic and ecological logic of the plantation can still be identified in the economic sectors that have gained precedence. In particular, scholars have highlighted how Caribbean tourism and mining are similarly accompanied by the degradation of natural environments and by exploitative labour regimes, while economic gains often accrue mainly in Europe and North America (e.g. Tramm, 1977; Pattullo, 1996).

Another, related emphasis has been on colonial, neocolonial and anticolonial ways of knowing and imagining Caribbean nature. Environmental historians have demonstrated the key role played by Caribbean ecologies within imperial geographies of knowledge production, from the early modern formation of scientific knowledge onward (Drayton, 2000). Scholarship tracing Euro-American environmental imaginaries of the region across the centuries has shown how the trope of tropical paradise has often justified colonial or elite interventions, from the "rendering productive" of land and people through plantation agriculture to more recent conservationist practices of dispossession (Sheller, 2003). However, Caribbeanist ethnographers have also shown how imperial and scientific ways of knowing and valuing nature, land, and landscapes have never been totalizing. For instance, while land has always had an important economic function, its spiritual, emotional and political meanings have also always been evident (Besson & Momsen, 1987; cf. Beck, 1977 on the plural meanings of the sea).

This established legacy of work on Caribbean ecologies has traced the entanglements of nature with the political, economic, and epistemological dimensions of colonialism. More recent work, often situated under the rubric of Black Ecologies, brings the racialised contours of these entanglements into sharper focus, deploying blackness and racial capitalism as critical frameworks for understanding political ecologies. Black Ecologies examines how race is inextricably

woven into extractive economies and ecological degradation (Hosbey et al., 2022) and advances two key interventions. First, it foregrounds how ecological harm is unevenly distributed along racial lines, demonstrating how colonial violence and global capitalism are materially embedded in landscapes and resource regimes. Here, ecological degradation is not merely a contemporary crisis but the ongoing expression of colonial extractive logics, with racial injustice at their core (Baptiste & Rhiney, 2016; Moulton, 2024). Second, *Black Ecologies* interrogates the co-constitution of race and ecology, demonstrating the specific and analogous ways in which the Earth, as well as other-than-white bodies, have been rendered extractable and expendable. This reflects a colonial ontology that hierarchizes life – human and nonhuman – according to regimes of value (Yusoff, 2024).

Researchers bringing these often US-derived insights in direct dialogue with scholarship on Caribbean ecologies highlight the everyday forms of resistance that emerge through Black mobilisations against extractive systems. Building on Caribbeanist traditions that emphasise ways of knowing nature otherwise, ecological knowledge itself becomes a mode of resistance. Practices such as maroonage, slave rebellions, peasant uprisings and spiritual movements like Rastafari offer alternative ways of relating to land and more-than-human life, challenging colonial authority and asserting autonomous ecological relations (Ferdinand, 2022; Baptiste & Rhiney, 2023; Moulton, 2023).

Rooted in a rich intellectual tradition that values creolization, hybridity and “archipelagic” thinking (Glissant, 1997), this contemporary work on Caribbean ecologies also seeks to trouble the rigid categories imposed by dominant colonial-capitalist ecological frameworks. Instead, it emphasises the fluid, relational character of these boundaries, between human and nature, land and sea. For example, Sarah Vaughn’s (2024) interrogation of the water-shore divide in Guyana and Andrea Baldwin’s (2024) exploration of the potentialities of brackish water – those liminal, in-between spaces where fresh and saltwater meet – underscore how Caribbean ecologies invite us to think relationally, fluidly, and beyond inherited dualisms.

In this brief exploration, we contribute to this expanding scholarship on Caribbean ecologies by bringing together four seemingly diverse themes: animals, beaches, stars, and spirits. These themes draw on our respective research projects – Rivke Jaffe’s ongoing research on security dogs in urban Jamaica,<sup>1</sup> Wigbertson Julian Isenia’s extension of his previous research on queer intimacies (Isenia, 2002) to the beaches of Curaçao and Jamaica, Alana Osbourne’s project on the colonial continuities of extractive endeavors from mining to space travel,<sup>2</sup> and Olívia Gomes da Cunha’s research on Surinamese Maroon ecologies in the Plantationocene<sup>3</sup> – which employ different methodologies but share a common commitment. Together, they outline the possibility of new conversations between Caribbean, Black and more-than-human theory, demonstrating how Caribbean ecological thought and practice entail longstanding, often explicitly political, posthumanist approaches that unsettle fixed boundaries and resist dualisms such

as animal/human, terrestrial/celestial, and life/death. While the connections between these themes are not always made explicit here, our focus on the fluid, overlapping and agentic qualities of animals, beaches, stars, and spirits highlights the porosity of categories often treated as neatly bounded and distinct. Accordingly, while these themes focus on distinct entities that offer specific entry points into Caribbean ecologies, they are each part of larger, complex entanglements that continue to constitute Caribbean political ecologies.

### **Animals from symbols and resources to agents**

While non-human animals have not always been a prominent theme in Caribbeanist scholarship on ecologies, the emergent conversation between Caribbean studies and broader work on human-animal relations appears highly generative (Derby, 2011; Dominguez, 2016). Such a dialogue highlights the symbolic roles of animals and the ways they are commodified and exploited. It also emphasises that animals are more than symbols and resources – they are agentic beings in their own right. At different historical conjunctures, particular animals, through their biological and cultural specificities, have played critical roles in Caribbean socio-political formations. As with other ecological relations, histories of colonialism and plantation slavery have shaped human-animal relations in violent and exploitative ways, entangling interhuman and interspecies hierarchies. Yet at the same time, more-than-human forms of care and kinship demonstrate the enduring significance of animals in anticolonial or decolonial Caribbean ecologies.

Across Caribbean contexts, the cultural, symbolic meaning of animals is often entangled with histories of racial thought and associated taxonomies of mankind underpinning the colonial project of plantation slavery. Specifically, enslavement involved various forms of dehumanisation, with colonial powers not only presenting white Europeans as more civilised but consistently drawing on legal instruments and discursive forms of racialised animalization to characterise persons of African descent as less than fully human (Bulamah, 2023). The legacies of such discourses linger, with references to “animal-like” traits or behaviour continuing to underpin raced, classed, gendered and sexual hierarchies (Gosine, 2021).

In addition to mobilising animals as symbolic tools of dehumanisation, in the colonial Caribbean, certain animals sometimes enjoyed more care and legal protection than enslaved humans, or, in the case of dogs, were used to track down and torture those who managed to escape the plantation (Boisseron, 2019). Such colonial histories pitting animals against humans also inform present-day tensions. The differential valuing of human and animal lives, for instance, resurfaces in Caribbean struggles over conservation or animal welfare, where interventions aimed at protecting animals are at times interpreted as competing with, or infringing on, the well-being and rights of Black populations (Beckett, 2017). This has sometimes compelled Black Caribbean people to engage in what

(referring to the Jamaican term *smaddy*, or somebody) has been called “smadditization” – processes of asserting their humanity and their status as persons (Mills, 1997) – by actively positioning themselves as distinctly different from, and superior to, animals.

Yet as both ethnographic research and literary criticism have highlighted, the Caribbean has also always harbored worldviews and ways of interacting with animals – informed by creolized African, Asian, European and indigenous cultural traditions – in which personhood is not necessarily restricted to humans, and indeed may be extended to a range of non-human species or individual creatures (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015; Pasierowska, 2021). Such perspectives and ways of living recognise animals as agentive beings with cognitive, emotional and communicative capacities – as knowing, feeling, caring subjects with whom we must share the world, sometimes companionably and sometimes less so. Indeed, Caribbeanist scholars, too, increasingly recognise that we should take seriously the role of animal agency in shaping the region’s histories and present-day environments (Lambert, 2018; Jaffe, 2024).

### **Beaches as queer and multispecies ecologies**

Caribbean beaches are key ecologies where human and non-human animal lives intersect vividly, although such intersections have not been a clear focus in Caribbean studies thus far. There is, however, a longer tradition of studying how the region’s famous beaches are characterised by coastal degradation, unequal labour regimes and neocolonial fantasies. Such research on Caribbean coastal ecologies highlights the ecological damage mass tourism inflicts on the same beaches it relies on (Pattullo, 1999). In addition, existing research unpacks how colonially derived racialised imaginaries situate beaches as paradisiacal escapes for white European and American visitors. Meanwhile, especially on islands where public access to beaches is not guaranteed, Black Caribbean men and women are either denied access or included in a hypersexualised fashion, depicted as part of an enticing, exotic landscape to be explored and consumed (Kempadoo, 1999; Sheller & Urry, 2004; Thompson, 2006).

More recently, Caribbean queer studies have drawn attention to Caribbean ecologies as sites for nonnormative forms of sexual and romantic engagement, challenging confluences of nature and heterosexuality (Gosine, 2021; Agard-Jones, 2012). Centring same-sex intimacies in analyses of beaches, such insights allow us to understand how shorelines may function as queer ecologies – charged spaces where heteronormative and same-sex desires, labour and leisure, nature and culture converge.

One way in which such critical analyses might be extended is to engage more directly with the other-than-human entities that also dwell in, or constitute, the beach. Focusing more explicitly on both living organisms, such as beach animals and plants, and inanimate beach components, such as sand and water, can help elucidate how colonial legacies, tourism infrastructures, and embodied

performances of sexuality and species difference intersect. Attending to the multispecies dimension of the social, economic, and erotic dynamics afforded by the beach can involve foregrounding animals' and plants' affective force and agency, as they actively enable or indeed co-produce intimate encounters (Whitaker et al., 2024; Lincoln, 2020). Focusing on the inanimate components of the beach, we can recognize how Caribbean materials such as sand act "as a repository both of feeling and of experience, of affect and of history" (Agard-Jones, 2012, p. 325), for instance as archives of invisibilized sexual histories, while also materializing the beach's liminal, queer geography as neither land nor sea.

If we take seriously how more-than-human landscapes afford homoerotic intimacies, this allows us to understand Caribbean beaches not as passive backdrops for social and political life, but as dynamic ecological theatres in which both human and nonhuman bodies entangle in ongoing negotiations of power and pleasure (cf. DeLoughrey & Flores, 2020, on reading the Caribbean sea along related lines). To briefly elaborate on an example of beach animals and watery matter, Curaçaoan archival images from the 1930s to the 1960s depict Black fishermen posing with fishnets, iguanas, and fishing spears. Captured by white or light-skinned amateur photographers, these images show muscular, water-slicked torsos, with glances and stances that convey a sense of intimacy (cf. Lawrence, 2020). In these photographs, fish and iguanas – celebrated locally as both sustenance and aphrodisiacs – are positioned alongside the fishermen, their gleaming skins mirroring the fishermen's shiny torsos. Such historical images and performances enrol animals into racialised erotic tropes, but simultaneously highlight their agency and affective presence within social, economic, and erotic formations. Reimagining beaches as queer ecological co-productions prompts a rethinking of intimacy, agency and desire beyond the human.

### **Ecologies of celestial (de)coloniality**

If beaches have long functioned as charged contact zones where bodies, desires, and ecologies intersect, then turning our gaze skyward reveals another crucial, more-than-human dimension of Caribbean ecologies. Contemporary techno-scientific imaginaries increasingly frame the Caribbean as a strategic gateway to outer space, adding a complex new layer to the region's ecological and geopolitical significance. This vision builds on the Caribbean's historical role as a focal point of European imperial ambitions and the birthplace of modernity (Scott, 2004). Today, Caribbean territories serve as launchpads for Euro-American expansionist dreams, a role enabled by the region's proximity to the equator. This location allows rockets to harness the Earth's rotational "slingshot effect," a manoeuvre that boosts spacecraft velocity by leveraging the planet's momentum. Favourable weather patterns further support this function, as evidenced by the establishment of launch sites operated by the Caribbean Space Agency and the European Space Agency (ESA). However, beyond these geographic and climatic factors, the enduring presence of space infrastructure in the Caribbean is

inseparable from deep-rooted colonial histories that continue to shape the region's political and ecological landscape.

Authors examining Caribbean ecologies engage with critical conversations emerging within the social sciences of outer space to highlight how colonial legacies and futuristic technologies remain deeply entwined. The rhetoric surrounding the contemporary “space race” often mirrors colonial narratives of conquest, invoking legal and conceptual frameworks such as *terra nullius* and settler-colonial claims to territory (Smiles, 2020). Within the Caribbean context, these narratives overlap with histories of land dispossession, ecological transformation, and the racialised control of bodies – from plantation economies to the disciplining of Black populations. For example, Peter Redfield's (2000) analysis of the Ariane rocket program in French Guiana links the brutal containment of bodies in the penal colony of Devil's Island with the symbolic projection of technological progress embodied by the Guiana Space Centre. Building on this, scholars have traced similar dynamics across Dutch and Hispanophone Caribbean territories, showing how these spaces have been transformed into strategic sites for international and private space enterprises (von der Dunk, 2011; Korpershoek, 2023; Keates & Maremont, 2021; Roulette & Mindock, 2023). These studies reveal how Caribbean lands and extraterrestrial ambitions remain deeply enmeshed in European colonial projects, particularly in non-sovereign territories.

Central to these ventures is the intimate connection between terrestrial subsoil and extraterrestrial ambitions: the extraction of minerals and ores from Caribbean lands directly underpins the technologies that enable space exploration. Outer space mining is frequently framed as a remedy for terrestrial resource scarcity, thereby positioning space as a new frontier for extraction and capitalist accumulation. It is therefore imperative to critically examine how terrestrial extractive industries materially sustain these spacefaring technologies. Key minerals, such as bauxite – essential for aluminium production – constitute a foundational resource of trans-planetary mobility and space exploration (Sheller, 2014). These extractive practices are deeply embedded in colonial and capitalist legacies and have produced enduring ecological degradation, exemplified by Surinamese waterways contaminated by gold mining and Jamaican landscapes depleted by bauxite extraction. Such environmental consequences underscore the profound costs implicit in the Caribbean's role as a strategic launchpad for imperial and capitalist expansion. Attending to these terrestrial extractive ecologies elucidates the entanglement of earthly matter with celestial ambitions, demonstrating that landscapes and skyscapes are not inert backdrops but active sites of ecological convergence. Here, subsoil and celestial bodies intersect, co-constituting and transforming Caribbean environments across both horizontal and vertical axes.

While analysing the material entanglement of soil and sky draws our attention to enduringly colonial processes of socio-ecological harm, these same interconnected materialities also inform decolonial projects of Black worldmaking.

Providing a counterpoint to elite techno-utopian dreams of new settler colonies in outer space, Caribbean spiritual and aesthetic movements have imagined forms of celestial fugitivity that speak directly to ongoing land-based struggles. Where research on the coloniality of the Caribbean's enrolment in outer-space technologies, travel and extractivism remains urgent, it is also important to attend to existing African-Caribbean imaginations of outer space, which propose different terrestrial-celestial futures. From Rastafari visions of alien rapture – where descendants of the enslaved return to distant galaxies rather than Africa – to Caribbean forms of Afrofuturist art that reconfigure colonial racial and ecological categorisations, these perspectives offer alternative routes to the stars. Rather than relying on technocratic systems or physical escape, they enact the skies as spaces of possibility, freedom and fugitivity that always also push us to imagine more just ways of living together on earth.

### **Spirited ecologies**

Understanding Caribbean ecologies as extending beyond earthly materialities and as involving distinct cosmologies also draws our attention to the role of spirits. In recent decades, for instance, ethnographies on Maroon histories and political engagements have sought to understand how other-than-human, sometimes transcendental beings not only participate in but also transform socio-ecological relations. Spirits and agentive “natural” beings enabled the first Maroons both to escape slavery and to create new societies constituted by gods, animals, earth, plants, and dead and invisible forms of existence (Price, 2008; Johnson, 2007; Thoden van Velzen, 2022; Strange, 2021; Gomes da Cunha, 2020). Such approaches can also be furthered by drawing on ethnographies of Amazonian and Andean indigenous peoples that have critically reconsidered the reductive language often employed by the social sciences to depict their engagement with invisible, immaterial presences. This allows us to understand how spirits transcend the realms of religion and imagination; through their articulation and forms of agency, they become instantiations of a “supernature” (Viveiros de Castro, 2024, p. 53). Viveiros de Castro's assertion that Amazonian kinship involves “a heterogeneous multitude of Others, both human and non-human” (2001, p. 23) can be extended to other Latin American and Caribbean contexts with distinct more-than-human socialities.

Spiritual beings or presences are everywhere and have the ability to assume the appearance of other beings: they are apparent in a range of material forms that reveal their traces, transmuted into natural elements, traversing landscapes like breath or wind, capable of passing through lifeforms or artefacts, penetrating the flesh of humans and other-than-humans and entering into interspecies communication. With their multiple forms of being, spirits evade capture by the modern categories that associate them with religious cosmologies in which they are “interpreted” or “translated”. As part of an ambiguous supernatural world, such spectral creatures, “ethereal agents,” and “ways of knowing the world” (Khan,

2004, pp. 102-103) have long constituted and transformed socio-ecological worlds. Across the Caribbean, such spirits are known by various names, including *wenti* (Price, 2008), *obeah* (Handler & Bilby, 2004) or *simi dimi* (Khan, 2004) and manifest as agentive beings and forces that can protect, care for, heal and watch over human and other-than-human beings (Palmié, 2006; Strange, 2021) by imbuing material forms with “supernatural” powers.

What do these different actants have in common? Their elusive modes of existence compel us to refuse binary categories such as nature/culture, life/death, immanence/transcendence, subject/object, and to recognise other landscapes and “spirit geographies” (Johnson, 2007; Forde & Hume, 2018). As beings whose appearances and forms of presence defy reductive concepts such as animism, they do more than inhabit different ecologies; they also exceed, transgress and transform them. Such forces afford new modes of existence through crossings, co-participations, and mutual transformations, reconfiguring relations of kinship, affinity and alterity, and creating alter-realities.

### **Concluding thoughts**

As we have briefly sketched in this Exploration, Caribbeanist research on ecologies, in conversation with the broader Afro-diasporic field of Black Ecologies, has made important contributions to political ecology. Such studies have highlighted the various socio-environmental legacies of colonialism, including entanglements of race and nature. While there is a clear need for more research on Indo-Caribbean and indigenous Caribbean lifeworlds and landscapes, the ongoing engagement with Black Ecologies has drawn important attention to the racialised nature of environmental harm and to the many forms of socio-ecological resistance, repair and re-worlding that have long existed across the region. By connecting these insights more explicitly to a range of more-than-human entities – animals and plants, sand and water, rocks and rockets, spiritual presences and their material manifestations – we have explored additional ways that Caribbean ecological thought and practice can trouble dominant, often colonially derived categories and ways of knowing, by blurring and unbounding established divisions such as those between nature and culture or human and non-human.

Bringing Black Ecologies’ attention to race in relation to more-than-human entanglements – a conversation that spans the social sciences and humanities – requires imaginative combinations of research methods and a willingness to cross or unbind disciplinary boundaries. As our discussion of the themes covered in this Exploration has suggested, developing an explicitly more-than-human approach to Black Ecologies is strengthened by combining archival research, ethnography, cultural analysis, and indeed ecological and geological methods. Just as the four projects brought together in this Exploration illustrate, researching Caribbean ecologies beyond the human yet with an attentiveness to race – and sensitivity to the porousness, limits, and fragility of categories – demands methods that reflect the fluid, overlapping, and agentic qualities of animals, beaches,

stars, and spirits. In insisting on the porosity of boundaries between the human and the non-human, nature and culture, and the material and the spiritual, such an approach has the potential to identify modes of socio-ecological address and, indeed, redress.

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- 2 The project Grounding colonial continuities: From museums and rocks to outer-space, based at Radboud University Nijmegen and funded by an NWO VENI grant.
- 3 Entre a Plantation e o Plantationceno: Teorias etnográficas sobre os refúgios e as rotas de fuga, based at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and funded by FAPERJ and CNPq.

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