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Disaster and Hope in the Comic Universe of *Gardening in the Tropics*

I wrote this essay as a dispatch from my native Northwest Florida. It was my first spring there in more than a decade, and I found myself riveted by the blooming process unfolding after a brief and mild winter. The dogwoods were the first to bloom, then the azaleas exploded in color; the pecan trees were last, staying spindly and bare far into April. Alongside this natural blossoming, I planted bulbs and herbs and rejoiced as my little garden sent out shoots.

Plants grow well in Northwest Florida — there is rich, non-sandy soil, and an excess of sunshine, warmth, and rainstorms to feed everything that grows. These conditions help plants that one might want to grow in profusion, as well as those one might not. Pulling weeds is a near-daily activity and nature — plants, insects, weather patterns — constantly encroach on human creations — plans, hairstyles, infrastructure.

Driving on a country road one day, I noticed a handful of construction trucks lining the roadway. I slowed a bit to see what they were doing and noticed they were aggressively trimming back all of the trees from the power lines. The heavy machines sawed at the upper limbs, leaving the trees bare, with jagged cuts in their bark. This happened up and down our country roads over the next two weeks. At the same time as this was going on, I was reading Lawrence Buell and Joseph W. Meeker's theories on environmental criticism and musing about this brutal management of nature as a first-hand view of human domination over the landscape. Nature, it seems, requires constant attention to fit anthropocentric desires — I'd be willing to bet

that in a battle between plants and infrastructure, the plants would win in mere months if left to their own devices.

The management of nature to align with human preferences is not a novel practice; since the dawn of human existence, humankind has, to varying degrees, modified the world around them to meet their needs. In recent centuries, however, the practice of ruling over nature has become so unbalanced that it has led to an overuse of the Earth's resources and a warming climate that threatens humankind's ability to survive in this way for perpetuity.

In the following paper, I will explore ideas of dominion and how Western canon has helped propagate ideas of human domination of the natural world. Using Joseph W. Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival*, I will trace a line from the advent of the literary tragedy to the climate crisis. To contrast, I will use his idea of comedy as the antidote to domination — a way of thinking that might inspire collaboration with the natural world. I will explore the comic with, predominately, Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics*, alongside Jamaica Kincaid's gardening studies and Mona Lisa Saloy's essay on environmental destruction. To conclude, I will consider how the comic style might help mitigate the worst effects of the climate crisis, if humanity — specifically the small percentage of folks who do the bulk of the consuming — should choose to adopt this mindset.

The ability to create literature is a transformative skill that sets humankind apart from all other biological life: "Human beings are the Earth's only literary creatures . . . It is generally assumed that this unique literary talent bestows upon humanity a special dignity not enjoyed by other animals" (Meeker 4). This ability to record in writing is at once a means of perpetuating ideas of humankind's superiority over the natural world, as well as standing as proof of such supposed superiority. But, further than that, the written word has the power to reflect and

influence culture and, by extension, create a culture that can determine acceptable ways for humans to act toward the world around them. Included in canonized or widely read literature, these ways of acting become a cultural touchstone. Literature allows presiding cultural standards to become repeated; these then become cultural norms against which all humans are measured, and either accepted or othered. Literature reflects and creates reality, revealing so much about humanity and cultural values through its patterns, tropes, and themes.

Human-ecological scholar and author of *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic*, Joseph W. Meeker goes so far as to consider that literature has directly informed the cultural ideals that have contributed to climate change: “Philosophical ideas defining the relationship between humanity and nature are often expressed or implied in literary works, revealing a history of human beliefs about the meaning of natural processes, and *also revealing the cultural ideologies that have contributed to the modern ecological crisis*” (7, emphasis mine). The cultural ideologies he is referring to are, specifically, those embedded in the tragic tradition, which is characterized by, among other things, the superiority of humanity over all living creatures.

The tragic has roots in the Greek literary tradition and, later, the Old Testament of Judeo-Christian dogma. At the center of these works is a main character who lives in a world “in which the processes of nature are relatively unimportant and always subservient to human interests,” specifically his own individualized interests (Meeker 30). In tragic works, the human drama is at the forefront and the world around the main character is either mere background or a cog that helps move the story along in service of the central actor.

The tragic is not concerned with the interconnectedness of all living beings; humans — specifically one exceptional, individualized human — reign supreme. The “humanistic

individualism” at the center of tragedy “has encouraged people to ignore the multiple dependencies necessary to the sustenance of life” in favor of the central human’s desires, which are seen as of the utmost importance (36). The story is a triumph if that person succeeds, even if an entire universe has to bend to meet their needs.

In their highly readable book on literary criticism, editors Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle use *The Day after Tomorrow* as an example of a tragic plot line. In this movie, climate systems have been upset and humanity teeters on the brink of extinction. A father risks everything to save his son from collapsing NYC. It’s not necessary to have seen the film to understand the theme of individualized survival, however, that of the “liberal humanist idea that individual human life (rather than populations, rather than the biosphere or ecosystem) is the ultimate and finally the only value. . . . The survival of a single unique individual allows redemptive closure (and a happy ending) regardless of how many others get wiped out along the way” (169). In this case, if the son survives, all is well, and viewers leave the theater happy; one happy outcome allows the viewer to overlook the deaths of millions of others.

The idea of one over all is a bit nauseating, even as, I’d imagine, most film viewers have cheered for this central hero at one point or another. However, considering that individualized survival in real life has brought about cultural atrocities, it’s a relief to know there’s an alternate mode of thinking — the comic way. In the comic tradition, the outcome for the human players holds as much weight as the outcome of the world they live in; their fates are interconnected. In comedy — which is not funny *per se* but can be a search for joy — the point of living is to belong in an interconnected system. According to Meeker, “comedy is . . . rooted deeply in evolutionary history. It is a way of life that seeks congruence with whatever dynamics are at

work . . . When disruptions or threats to living processes occur, the comic way is to restore normalcy” (9–10).

Within comedic literature, actors have the following characteristics:

Organisms must adapt themselves to their circumstances in every possible way, must studiously avoid all-or-nothing choices, must seek alternatives to death, must accept and revel in maximum diversity, must accommodate themselves to the accidental limitations of birth and environment, and must prefer cooperation to competition, yet compete successfully when necessary (Meeker 20–21).

Opposing writings of the Greek and Judeo-Christian persuasion, *Gardening in the Tropics* is characteristic of the comic. In this poetry collection, the narrators coexist with nature. They are joyous, have a strong connection to the natural world surrounding them, and use that connection to endure hardship and ensure their survival. The human players are not individualized but are part of a symbiotic universe.

The narrator of Senior’s “Advices and Devices” is the embodiment of the comic. This person is a successful gardener whose guiding rule is “Live Right and Do Good.” That they are nameless and genderless creates equality between the narrator and Earth, and it’s through their collaboration as equals with the Earth that the gardener can bring fruits to bear.

As in reality, there are many in this gardener’s purview who do not live right and who would do bad to the garden. These are either the “ones who / take advice from the government man / and use a whole heap of sprays” or “the bad-minded / two-footed wearing pants, who will / do things to harm,” but the gardener does not let these dramas detract from the joy of working

with the Earth to make things grow (111). Their opinion of the government man and those who wish to do harm also highlights the comic as a response to follies and misdeeds: “The comic view demonstrates that people behave irrationally . . . [to] reveal their essential ignorance and ridiculousness in relation to civilized systems of ethical and social behavior” (Meeker 15). The government men and evil doers may appear to be adhering to established systems of ethical and social behavior, however, in their overuse of pesticides and their unnatural farming practices, they show their essential ignorance. The gardener, by contrast, has common sense, which is comic.

The narrator does not seek fatal revenge on these ignorant people — their way of dealing with others is “a strategy that will resolve problems with a minimum of pain and confrontation” rather than “a heroic undertaking . . . No great truths are unveiled in the process, and no triumph over evil is won” (Meeker 14–5, 17). When they do enact a bit of vengeance, it is with cleverness and wit. The narrator sprinkles a special recipe on the ground around the garden that causes the harm-doer’s “whole foot-bottom, his whole body / . . . to itch and tremble” (112). The comic gardener is not trying to fight a great war but, rather — with as little friction as possible — maintain a fine plot by living right and doing good.

Perhaps if all of humanity had adopted this same mindset, the worst effects of the climate crisis could have been mitigated. However, comic literature was not the literature disseminated by the rich and powerful, tragedy was. And as tragic literature was disseminated, so was the idea of the superiority of a select group of humans over their natural environment or, as Meeker calls it, “traditional human anthropocentric smugness” (23). Tragic literature has “consistently chosen to affirm those values that regard the personal self as the pinnacle of all worth, and that regard the world as humanity’s personal property” (23). Without the ideas that the human is the superior

and divinely ordained master of the natural world, “neither tragedy nor environmental crisis could have developed as they have” (24). It’s difficult to imagine that someone who lives in sync with the natural world would use the world’s resources to the brink of exhaustion; it’s not difficult to imagine a tragic character doing it.

Because the Christian religious tradition is markedly tragic, adherents of this widely spread faith may even go so far as to see ruling over the natural environment as a divinely ordained right. This entitlement is informed from “the opening chapters of Genesis, the first book in Hebrew and Christian scripture”; these lines can be seen as “the root cause of western technodominationism: God’s mandate to man to take ‘dominion’ over the creatures of the sea and Earth and ‘subdue’ them” (Buell 2). Of Adam’s God-given dominion over all life, Meeker writes, “Whether ‘dominion’ is to be interpreted to mean responsible stewardship or wanton exploitation is an old debate . . . Adam and his progeny have felt themselves licensed to use their dominion to their own advantage” (24). Adam and his progeny could be considered all of humankind if the Biblical origin story is to be believed; however, more usually this “progeny” is any human being who is born into or converts to the Christian tradition. Others are merely a part of the natural world to be subjugated, as evidenced by colonization’s takeover of indigenous lives and lands and the transatlantic slave trade.

The tragic has modeled a worldview that privileges those who look out for themselves and permits taking without asking — a grab that is often at the expense of other human beings and the world around them. It’s clear to see how such an ideology has passed through colonialism and the slave trade, as well as how the tragic-individualistic mindset has informed racism, sexism, and classism. The tragic historically shows up as “the myopic search for personal

identity and self-fulfillment [which] has overwhelmed human responsibility to our own species and to the other creatures with whom we share the Earth” (Meeker 36).

Colonization, an example of actions counter to such a responsibility, upset the peaceful balance between humans and the natural world within many indigenous cultures throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. To contrast Judeo-Christian religious mythology, Mayan religious traditions show a closer connection between humans and nature and are, therefore, comic: “Mayan mythography represents the gods as fashioning human beings after several false starts from corn gathered from the help of already-created animals, thereby symbolizing ‘the collective survival that must exist between humans, plants, and animals’” (Buell 2). In this brief, it’s clear that the Mayans viewed human beings as of the natural world and as an interconnected part of it. In this mythology, all beings — humans included — are intertwined and are constantly developing and evolving together. Under colonization, however, these sophisticated civilizations were marginalized and eradicated. They were viewed as inferior and subjugated to the level of nature — or, to the level where it would be permissible to use them to satisfy the desires of tragic-minded individuals.

Such othering was typical of colonization, which was also fueled by ideas of externality, or that “there is an environment elsewhere . . . available for exploitation. . . . typically a colony whose natural resources can be exploited for the economic benefit of the colonizers regardless of the effect on the indigenous population (whether human or not)” (Bennett and Royle 164). This expanded the area upon which powerful societies could impose their existing systems of personal gain and reconfigure the world for their own purposes. In the Caribbean, this was accomplished by imposing ideas of ownership and forcing existing populations into systems that worked to satisfy consumptive greed.

Gardening in the Tropics stands up against the tragic tradition by peacefully drawing attention to it and offering an alternate worldview to show the absurdity of the tragic me-over-all mindset. In her poems, life is not self-aggrandizing and upsetting to the natural order, and that which is viewed as ridiculous. Instead, Senior sees the purpose of life as the search for balance and coexistence between all living things on Earth. It's pro-survival, and a way of life connected to the natural ebbs and flows of the environment. This comic way "moderates healthy relations among people, and between people and the Earth's natural processes. It connects us with other species through shared evolutionary history, and through present play that crosses species lines. Comedy is a contributor to survival, and a habit that promotes health" (Meeker 11).

These characteristics span her 51 poems, divided into four sections — "Travellers' Tales," "Nature Studies," "Gardening in the Tropics," and "Mystery." Each poetic vignette reflects different life experiences as lived in the postcolonial Caribbean, focusing on human relationships with nature, Western civilization's imposition on the Caribbean world, and humankind's resilience after destruction — both natural and human-wrought. The human characters in these works model positive relationships with nature and with one another, and display resilience and perseverance in overcoming crises.

Peppered throughout the book are allusions to Christianity and native religions, nature destruction and worship, community building and rending, and the roles of men and women and the ways they relate to the Earth. Much like our universe, Senior's is a complex palimpsest where each layer can be seen through the ones before it. No history is erased, but instead respected as a part of the now. In her universe, nature is an ally, not a benefactor; her narrators are rarely given names, which further demonstrates their equality with the natural world.

Senior's collection offers a view into the Caribbean world but is also a world unto itself. *Gardening in the Tropics* is much aligned with literary scholar Angus Fletcher's "environment poem." "Such a poem," Fletcher explains, "does not merely suggest or indicate an environment as part of its thematic meaning, but actually gets the reader to enter into the poem as if it were the reader's environment of living' . . . The poem is itself to be taken as a world" (qtd. in Buell 50).

The first poem, "Gourd" works as the ceremonial gateway into this world. It is arranged in the simple but recognizable shape of a gourd — the only poem in the collection to have a graphic shape. The simultaneously humble and divine calabash is exalted in the poem as it is in Taino mythology. In this tradition, the gourd holds the entire universe. When it was broken, it let out a flood of water, which created the Caribbean islands (Wilkinson 306). Now, the heavens and the earth are held together by a sacred serpent: "The cosmic snake (it is said) / strains to hold you together for what chaos would ensure if heaven and earth parted!" (7).

The poem's rhythm shakes the "heavenly rattle, the sacred Mbaraká" to welcome the reader to a ceremony that opens onto the alternate plane of this collection (7). "If we dance to your rhythm, / knock-knock on your skin, will we / hear from within, no matter / how faintly, your / wholeness / resound?" (7). The reader is knocking at the door to a parallel universe, asking for permission to enter. The world contained in the ensuing pages is similar to ours, yet different enough to put the reader into a different headspace where their own belief system and worldview can be teased and questioned in a gentle way.

Following the ceremonial entrance into the universe, the reader gets an introduction to its complexities, sophistication, and contradictions. "Meditations on Yellow," the second poem in the collection, acts as a creation story of the modern Caribbean. Though the poem is about

Jamaica — the reference to Bob Marley at the end could situate it nowhere else — it could easily be read as a history of any Caribbean island that shares a similarly complicated colonial past with Jamaica.

The poem offers a dark — and at times darkly witty — commentary on colonialism and how this violent overtaking has shaped the environment and people of the Caribbean. The time-setting starts with the arrival of the first Europeans on Caribbean shores and weaves through the modern day. “At three in the afternoon / you landed here at El Dorado,” begins the poem, referencing the City of Gold and the lust for this precious metal that powered the beginning of the exploration/exploitation of this part of the world (11). The narrator, as if speaking with a retrospective gaze of the atrocities to come, says, “Had I known I would have / brewed you up some yellow fever-grass / and arsenic” (11).

But there was no way to know what was to come, the indigenous narrator maintains, and so they approach the foreign powers with a calm acceptance — “we were peaceful then / child-like in the yellow dawn of our innocence” (11). Unable to go back in time to stop the colonization, the narrator accepts that they reacted in the best way they knew how, knowing what they knew then.

Following the landing, the narrator reminisces about how the colonizers immediately imposed their ideas of civilization and ownership on the native islanders, trading “a string of beads / and some hawks bells” for “a string of islands / and two continents” (11). The colonizers from the Western world took advantage of those who lived in the Caribbean and their lack of ownership and claim to the world around them. Evidence of this is in the narrator’s perception of the exchange, calling the trade “fine by me personally / for I have never wanted to possess things” (11). This disputes the idea of ownership that characterizes tragic themes of dominion;

these lines also characterize the native islanders as a society living in a symbiotic way with the natural world. Those who lived on the islands did not view the environment as *their* environment. Instead of being owners of it, they were a part of it. This is characteristic of the comic way of life.

The poem traces that history as Western powers took over the land, forced the native inhabitants into servitude, and brought Africans to work as slaves — all of this done in an effort to further the colonizer’s economic prosperity. The narrator is a foil to these colonizers. As decidedly comic, they take all of these developments in stride. There are many instances of “there was fair exchange” and it’s OK, “I have never wanted to possess things” in response to the colonizers’ theft and violent uprooting of native flora and fauna. The narrator perseveres under this system, providing labor and knowledge to the benefit of the colonizer. The narrator survives, even as they’ve given up everything and become further removed from their self-sufficiency and coexistence with the natural world.

However, even a comic narrator has their breaking point, though this is a mere admission of fatigue. “Though I not quarrelsome / I have to say: look / I tired now // I give you the gold / I give you the land / I give you the breeze / I give you the beaches / I give you the yellow sand / I give you the golden crystals / . . . / I can’t give anymore” (12–13). Those oppressed within the colonial system gave up everything — from their way of life to their land to their vitality. Yet they persevere through these atrocities, as is memorialized by this poem’s narrator. Instead of playing a martyr, a tragic trope, the narrator simply and matter-of-factly says, “I am tired.” This is another characteristic of the comic way — that one can adapt to circumstances outside of one’s control and evolve to live more peacefully within new parameters.

The narrator does that by taking everything in stride, although they've been forced into a system where they must give up their autonomy and way of life. They accept the world around them instead of fighting against it. They also recognize that, though all else has been taken, the oppressor cannot take their lifeforce: "you cannot tear my song / from my throat // you cannot erase the memory / of my story // you cannot catch / my rhythm // . . . // you cannot comprehend / the magic" that their world has (Senior 17). The narrator finds an occasion for joy even amongst all of the brutality of their life under colonialism.

This narrator, much like others in the collection, does not focus on revenge and self-aggrandizement, but instead, takes a comic attitude as "a strategy for dealing with problems and pain" as well as "the loss of equilibrium and its recovery" (Meeker 12, 16). The undeserved pain heaped upon the narrator in "Meditations on Yellow" is dealt with using wit, as expressed in the initial desire to have poisoned the colonizers. Then, rather than wishing the history away, the narrator simply accepts it and attempts to reclaim some of their autonomy by asking to be treated as an equal human being. Moreover, the narrator maintains their essential lifeforce — their magic, song, memory, and rhythm — which provides strength and resilience in response to outrageous circumstances.

Senior's cast does not live comically solely in response to the human-created destruction of colonization, though that's central to the collection. The universe also features natural disasters —hurricanes — and their effects on the island's inhabitants. Considering these poems from the vantage point of our current climate crisis — where massive hurricanes capable of leaving near-complete devastation in their wakes are happening annually — all can understand the importance of seeing comically and hopefully through devastating events. This post-disaster

resilience is a central theme in “Travellers’ Tales,” but, specifically, in the poems “Hurricane Story, 1903” and “Hurricane Story, 1944.”

In Senior’s “Hurricane Story, 1903,” Grandmother and Grandfather — so-named as to be anyone’s ancestors — secure their valuables against the coming storm: “he opened his / tin trunk, took his good clothes out / and packed the corn in. Granny topped it / with cassava bammies and chaklata balls” (19). The couple understands that living beyond the storm hinges on protecting valuables, things that would improve their chances of survival. So, food, not material goods, should be protected.

Before the storm, the warning that was delivered by a “telegraph to Postmistress” failed, never arriving to warn the couple and their family of the impending storm (20). This small detail shows the failure of our humanmade systems in providing information about the natural world. Instead, Grandfather was able to prepare for the storm directly by communicating with the natural world and respecting its warnings. He “could read signs / and interpret wonders,” and that’s how he and Granny knew to protect themselves from the hurricane (20). Senior draws the connection between this warning and the couple’s survival as if to ask humanity to listen to nature in order to know when to change course or get to higher ground. Technology can fail us, she seems to say. Meanwhile, nature’s distress calls — increased intensity of hurricanes, increased incidence of drought, crop failure, fires — can be read loud and clear for the warning signs they are.

As the storm of 1903 batters the house, the grandparents and their grandchildren ride out the storm, singing while being tucked away inside (20). They emerge the next day, intact, with the sun shining. Granny goes into the yard and, as her grandchildren look on, “searched / the blue skies for a sign as Noah’s wife did. / She found it when her missing sensay fowl and favourite

leghorn rooster turned up safe / but ruffled, having spent the night together” (21). In these lines, the comic is seen in the playful act of singing through a storm, as well as in the strange coupling of the birds. One of the grandchildren exhibits an early understanding of comic survival by mentioning how the two birds, even in a hurricane, continue their lineage by reproducing. Looking on, the grandchild remarks that they are “dying to be / the first to see the strange bird fated / to be born out of that great storm” (21).

This perfectly exemplifies what Meeker considers to be the playful act of survival, or the evolutionary need to create offspring to continue living even during difficult times. “Successful participants in it [life] are those who live and reproduce even when times are hard or dangerous” (Meeker 20). Even during a dangerous storm, the rooster and fowl carried on their lineage, and life continues. The main concern of the comic way of life is to carry on “to affirm the human capacity for survival and to celebrate the continuity of life itself” (Meeker 16).

In “Hurricane Story, 1944,” the reader can see this capacity for survival as it contrasts with the tragic folly in turning one’s back on nature to depend on worldly goods. The narrator of this piece is the child of a worldly man and an earthly woman. The narrator describes his father as the “dandy,” the “pride,” and the “hope” of his family. The father has risen up beyond his “barefoot country brothers” to work as assistant at “Solomon’s Drygoods and Haberdashery” (24). He takes pride in being a white-collar worker and wears the trappings of one, including “his straw boater / and pens lined up in pocket” (24). He takes to his bicycle to ride into town and back home to his family in the country. The bicycle here represents how he must travel between two worlds and balance to stay on this path. It also illuminates how precarious it is to stay this course and turn a back to one’s history and connections to one’s roots.

When he marries the narrator's mother — described as “dark” and “plain” to show how she works outside — the father's own mother frets that this woman will “cause him to turn down”; however, it's by the new wife's income that the couple can afford a home to raise their family in (25). The wife earns her living from the Earth and does so with a song. When she needs money to provide for her family, “She turned back to the soil / . . . / My mother who hardly ever spoke crooned hymns in the garden” (25). Her husband, meanwhile, looks down upon this, as he “never wanted to turn back / to that life he'd escaped from / never wanted (in public) / to acknowledge this rooting / in the soil” (25–26).

The mother is already set up as comic here, in contrast to the father. She shows joy through her singing and connects with the ground to help bring its fruits to the surface. She praises God and the soil in conjunction, seeing the two as blessings. She survives through hard work, hard times, and a hard marriage.

The family gets along well until the hurricane of 1944 strikes and “it all came unstuck” (26). One of these losses is the father's job — Mr. Solomon closes his shop. Without hesitation, the mother, in a great display of comic survival “clapped her hands and / ordered us children” to salvage nearby ruins to rebuild their decimated home; she urges her children to “come into the garden” and help, for their survival comes from the Earth (26). In all of this, she tells them to “thank the Lord each night” for what they did have (26). Instead of being toppled by the storm, the mother resiliently rebuilds her family's life. She does not make a ceremony of it, nor does she make it a tortuous task. True to a comic spirit, she simply moves on so that she and her progeny might survive.

Meanwhile, the father, after losing his job, cannot find another that is “worthy of a man of his abilities.” He becomes a tragic character who “couldn't turn back to the muck / . . . / he

coasted downhill” (27). He took the money his wife gave him, and “went to the Unity Bar and Grocery got drunk / came home and beat her” (27).

And yet, even through the abusive bad marriage, she doesn’t falter; she gets up again and “Sunday she went to church and sang” (27). The mother shows a comedic personality through her ability to adapt to a new reality. She doesn’t leave her decimated home, she rebuilds; she doesn’t leave her abusive husband, she perseveres in order to keep her family together and ensure the stability of their domestic life. Her ability to survive contrasts the father’s giving up on life. She took the comic way, which “illustrates that survival depends upon our ability to change ourselves rather than our environment, and upon our ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting us” (Meeker 21). The father takes the later tack, cursing his fate and falling prey to his own self-imposed limitations. In other words, the father “suffers or dies for ideals, [but] the comic hero survives without them” (Meeker 15). The mother does not suffer under constraints, but works simply to survive, not to prove anything to anyone.

Senior’s narrators may use connection to Earth as a way of working through bad times, but poetry — another comic play — is the poet’s way to understand and work through dark events that created the Caribbean as it now exists. Meeker writes that “storytelling is one of the healthiest activities of the comic way. . . . [as] essential to the comic purpose of affirming and perpetuating the normal conditions of life” (Meeker 114–15). Poet Mona Lisa Saloy also sees prose as the way through pain and devastation, specifically by hurricanes and other storms. In an essay on natural disasters included in Camille T. Dungy’s *Black Nature*, she writes, “Poetry can unseat catastrophe with comic relief in a stark rendering of a horror so natural and so overwhelming only the story of it reminds us of our vulnerability and ability to continue” (180).

Saloy — who, as an African American, is not a stranger to a violent heritage — writes that poetry is a healing force in traumatic events — events that are familiar to Senior and those who live and have lived in the tropics. Poetic prose is particularly moving when exploring and reimagining painful events as it “vividly narrates the unsteady reality” that disaster causes and does so in a more poignant way than, say, journalism or nonfiction (181). In *Gardening in the Tropics*, the poetic form is especially captivating and transformative, showing the reader a new universe that models a comic view of life past trauma.

Saloy might imagine this as true to the form itself: “Through poetry, human beings can relive trauma, injury, catastrophe, whether it is physical, mental, or emotional, real or imagined, and reacquaint ourselves with our most inner resources, our ability to regenerate and manifest as whole again” (183). The act of creating poetry is comic — it’s playing with language to fit a rhythm, rhyme, and shape to inspire meaning in someone else. Senior shows how her poetic reimagining of life in the Caribbean is itself a comic act and a catalyst for healing in the wake of hurricanes and other devastation.

One of those spaces of devastation is the garden, which connects to many complex feelings for those who live in the post-colonial Caribbean. The tropical garden is a window into a painful colonial past at the same time as it is a beautiful site and an occasion for joy.

Gardener and essayist Jamaica Kincaid considers the complexities in her long-running *New Yorker* column. “The way you think and feel about gardens and the things growing in them — flowers, vegetables — I can see must depend on where you come from” (“Flowers of Evil” 154). Like Senior, Kincaid was raised in a former British colony: Senior is Jamaican, Kincaid is Antiguan. But even islands apart, the two writers share similar experiences and reflections on the human relationship to the natural world, influenced by the lingering effects of colonialism on the

landscape. Both Senior and Kincaid would understand the Caribbean garden as both a beautiful display of tropical flora and also a reminder of an atrocious, violent history. They see that the garden is a metaphor for the Western ideals of human domination over the natural landscape: “Gardens are not images of nature, but of the human management of nature” (Meeker 57).

The garden itself — as a space where plants are cultivated by human hands — is noted by both Senior and Kincaid as a foreign concept. In “Seeing the Light,” Senior writes: “Gardening in the tropics nowadays means / letting in light . . . / Before you came, it was dark in our garden, / that’s true. We cleared just enough for our huts / and our pathways, opened a pinpoint in the canopy / to let the sun through. We made the tiniest scratch / on Mother Earth (begging her pardon)” (95). This reminds the reader that in the pre-colonial universe, the inhabitants of the tropics lived in concert with nature, changing the environment just a little to suit their needs, and then thanking Earth for the privilege. This starkly contrasts the colonizers’ use of the Earth for their own benefit, use that wasn’t preceded by asking permission and wasn’t followed by giving thanks.

Kincaid’s series of gardening essays reflect on these different cultural attitudes toward gardening, and she suggests that perhaps some people are happy with their environment as-is and feel no need to modify it for their own pleasure or advancement. She mirthfully considers such an idea, reflecting on the pre-colonial inhabitants of the Caribbean: “What if the people living in the tropics . . . are contented with their surroundings, are happy to observe an invisible hand at work and from time to time laugh at some of the ugly choices this hand makes; what if they have more important things to do than make a small tree large, a large tree small” (“Alien Soil” 51). Here, Kincaid praises a relationship with the natural world that’s marked by contentedness, an attitude that allows the environment to conduct itself as it wishes, without restraint. The

colonizer (in this specific case, the British), on the other hand, relishes owning and dominating the natural landscape to please their own tastes.

Returning to “Seeing the Light,” Senior follows up with: “We never took more than we needed. Always gave back / (to Earth) our thanks and our praises, never failed / to salute the gods of the rain, the wind, the sun, / and the moon in her phases” (95). Packaged within this symbiotic relationship with the Earth is an understanding that “There was enough / in the jungle to provide gardens for everyone,” a stark contrast to the overlords’ land-tending for personal gain: “You / set it alight, you disemboweled it, you forcefully / established marks of your presence all over it” (96).

One mark of the colonizer’s presence, which carries through Kincaid’s essays, was the replacement of many indigenous plants by imports from other parts of the world. These transplants took over and changed the native landscape beyond recognition. Kincaid calls into question what, if anything is even left from the pre-colonial period: “What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time another famous adventurer — Christopher Columbus — first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua now will not supply a clue” (“Alien Soil” 48). Even the mango, the seemingly quintessential Caribbean fruit, is not a native product of this region, being instead of Asian origin (“Alien Soil” 48). This supplanting also shows up in Senior’s “Meditation on Yellow” when the narrator says of the colonizer’s arrival, “after you came / plenty of bananas / oranges / sugar cane / You gave us these for our / maize / pineapples / guavas” (12). The narrator does note that “there was fair exchange” (12). However, this “fair exchange” replaced indigenous species with cash crops and other cultivars and left the Caribbean unrecognizable.

Kincaid offers other examples of plants brought during colonization — bougainvillea (South America), hibiscus (Asia and East Africa, depending on the species), tamarind (Africa) — as well as cash crops like tobacco and sugar cane unfamiliar to the native people (“Alien Soil” 48). These plants not only upset the lives of those who lived on the islands and those brought to the islands to work these crops, but it also displaced native plant species and upset the delicate biome. Sometimes the displacement of the natural flora had devastating and long-lasting consequences: “Soon after the English settled in Antigua, they cleared the land of its hardwood forests to make room for the growing of tobacco, sugar, and cotton, and it is this that makes the island drought-ridden to this day” (48). The idea of manipulating the land in this way is decidedly tragic, as is raising plants beyond what one could reasonably use. In the colonies, the natural environment was upset to benefit the colonizer and earn him riches, riches gained at the expense of the land and those who were forced to work it.

It follows that instead of the garden drawing feelings of leisure, it draws the opposite: “They do not lead to little feasts; they lead to nothing or they lead to work, and not work as an act of self-definition, self-acclaim, but work as torture, work as hell” (“Flowers of Evil” 154). The labors of slaves and indentured servants gave their overlords plenty of leisure time, but the workers were left out. Leisure time for gardening was reserved for those of a higher socioeconomic stratum, or “the ones who had some money and could live in houses of more than one room” (“Alien Soil” 47). The privilege to have a garden containing flowers only “made it even more apparent that they had some money, in that all their outside space was devoted not to feeding their families but to the sheer beauty of things” (47). Cultivating a garden for sheer aesthetic enjoyment was another privilege that the Caribbean people lacked under colonialism — not to mention, the Earth provides plenty of beautiful displays without the help of meddling

hands. As mentioned previously, the indigenous inhabitants may not have felt compelled to rearrange the landscape in a manicured way — instead of mastering the plants, they allowed them to live and grow freely in their own manner.

So, for Kincaid, the garden as the byproduct of colonization is beautiful but tainted: “I am not in nature. I do not find the world furnished like a room, with cushioned seats and rich-colored rugs. To me, the world is cracked, unwhole, not pure, accidental; and the idea of moments of joy for no reason is very strange” (“Flowers of Evil” 159). Rejecting the very idea of garden would be an understandable reaction coming from people whose relationship to the land had been distorted and recreated in service to or in the standard of the colonizer, and Kincaid cannot disconnect the Caribbean garden’s beauty from its history, which she sees as having been subverted past the point of enjoyment. Although Senior’s collection relates the ugly and violent aspects underlying its beauty, in her garden, there are many occasions for joy.

In “The Tree of Life,” Senior explores traditional mixed gardening against Western cash-crop gardening by exploring the myth of how plant varieties came to be. This origin story of the cultivated landscape takes place in a time after the Great Fire and before the Flood when the Mighty One “took pity and planted / deep in the interior a tree so / ubiquitous it bore on its branches / food of every different kind” (93). The tree was so deep in the interior that it remained hidden until finally it was discovered, first by Mapuri, a wild pig, and next, Rat. Both animals tried to keep the food source secret — though there was enough to go around.

This can be viewed as a metaphor for land use under capitalism. There is enough for everyone, but greed, like that of Mapuri and Rat, has led those in power to stockpile abundant natural resources for their own personal benefit. In the poem, however, the other animals find the Tree of Life, and all beings are able to enjoy its fruits.

The Tree becomes the source of all plant varieties when the animals are ordered by the Mighty One to “Cut the Tree Down!” They do and then take the cuttings and plant them around: “And that is how we / acquired crops for cultivating” (94). The narrator of the poem uses this myth as proof that “mixed farming” is the most practical way of cultivating the landscape. In a mixed garden, one would cultivate all plants, herbs, and medicinal varieties needed to sustain themselves and their families. However, outside influences come through in order to change the system.

In the poem, (which, I’d imagine, reflects reality) the narrator is encouraged along with neighbors to leave the mixed gardening system behind in favor of one-crop planting. “I’ve / noticed the agricultural officers / . . . / have been coming around to try / and persuade us to chop everything down / and plant only one crop. They say we can / get more money that way — from exporting” (94). Though those who plant in this way drive nice cars, build nice houses, and send their children to school, the narrator reflects on the folly of planting just one crop to be exported: “But let / them wait till drought or blight / comes round. What will they eat?” (94).

The narrator here takes the comic approach. Instead of bemoaning their lot in life or coveting their neighbors’ belongings, they take the path of survival, “I’m sticking to the plan / of having all my food, my seasonings and / medicines mixed up in one ground” (94). The narrator shows a dedication to working in cooperation with nature and taking only what is needed. Preserving the land and the fruits of the Tree of Life is preferred over changing the landscape for success in the eyes of humankind. What is the worth of money when the land is so depleted that it cannot produce things to eat? Those who overwork the land may profit in the short-term but may suffer in the long-term. This poem and the Tree of Life story connect to the idea that within the comic way, people and the Earth’s natural processes are connected and respected. It is this

way of cultivating — with thanks and moderation — that supports health in the ecosystem as well as in humankind itself.

“The Immovable Tenant” is another reflection on development, uprooting, and staking claim to land. When the narrator’s neighborhood is facing development, one woman refuses to budge. By withstanding this developmental progress, the woman is maligned by her neighbors, who wish to sell out for profit. The “crazy woman,” as her irked neighbors call her, not only resists selling out, but enlists nature as her ally against developers. “Strangers may occupy my house and land,” she tells her neighbors who are urging her to sell, but “I will always repossess it, inch by inch. / With the help of the steadfast tropical / sun, wind, and rain, with the help of the / termites, the ants, the wood lice, and / the worms, I always reclaim” (Senior 106).

At face value, “that crazy lady” is a person who lives in harmony with nature. She has the same hold on the land as the small insects that share her plot. The tropical climate is something that human development will constantly have to work against, but this woman has found a way to work with nature. Instead of dominating the natural landscape, she sees nature as a part of her existence and an important ally. Adhering to the comic way, by staying connected to the natural world, the woman finds her strength.

Read metaphorically, “that crazy lady” might be Earth itself. Her resistance to development and her warnings that she will reclaim whatever is built by humankind stands as evidence that the Earth will reclaim its hold over whatever humans create. Given enough time, the Earth will win out against encroaching development. Trying to develop the landscape and manage its growth is a constant battle against natural processes or a “contest among warring camps” (Meeker 14).

The final poem of the section, “Advice and Devices,” has been mentioned before as characteristic of the comic way. The comic comes through in the joyful wisdom: “I just / smile and say: Live Right and / Do Good” (111). Instead of dominating the landscape and carving it up on a whim, the narrator recommends working with nature to provide the right conditions for planting. “Once you find the right spot” — the very concept of *finding* is opposite from conquering, by which a gardener might *make* a spot — “before you fell / a tree or pull a weed, be sure / to ask pardon to dig” (111). Respect the land and your role in the biome, in other words. The narrator envisions the land as an active participant in the gardening process, an entity that provides the land and should be thanked for doing so, instead of dead ground from which things can be taken.

The gardener narrator finds joy in living alongside nature and in conjunction with the natural cycles of growth and dormancy. They take pity on those who think the Earth is a cold, dead thing for humankind’s use, and, comically, they approach them without anger or ire. Those who rely not on natural wisdom but on the “government man” and the technological advances he brings “are the / chief ones in need of your wisdom, / for their fields (with / all that fertilizer and spray) / will never stay healthy” (113). Instead of berating those who do things differently, the narrator offers advice on the right way to create a garden — by nurturing a symbiotic connection between cultivator and Earth. Their methods for enhancing a crop are benevolent not forceful or chemical. For instance, to grow a strong pumpkin crop “ask a pregnant lady / to walk all over it to make the / fruits set and grow full” (113). This shows a connection to a natural, generational wisdom and an overall wish to work in conjunction with nature to make things grow.

To the narrator, forcing nature to do humankind’s bidding upsets the harmony and health of the natural environment; it may work for a bit, but it will not lead to long-term success in the

garden. Believing that it will is willful ignorance, and the misguided should be smiled upon. The narrator understands that natural processes will settle the score and that those who work against the natural way of things will not prosper.

Through her narrators, Senior makes the point that using the Earth beyond what is needed to sustain life robs the natural world of its vital quality. It's only by living in conjunction with Earth can humankind cultivate long-term survival. The comic universe of *Gardening in the Tropics* offers such wisdom in how to live and be a part of the Earth. Whereas Meeker sees literature as potentially dangerous and "capable of destroying most of what it has created and much that it has not," Senior sees it as a vehicle for offering hope and sharing ideas and a way of life that might have the power to rescue humanity from the brink of extinction (5). Art like hers acts as a push-back against the tragic Western ideas of human superiority that may contribute to environmental destruction; *Gardening* and comic works like it hold the power to share ideas and hope that will see humanity through environmental degradation and its associated trauma.

While working on this paper, I returned often to Albert Einstein's quote, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them" (BrainyQuote). It may be an oversimplification to say that shifting from a tragic/egocentric mindset into a comic/ecocentric one will stop and reverse the doomsday clock. Even Buell acts as a bit of a devil's advocate on this subject, writing that "there is something potentially noble about human attempts to speak ecocentrically against human denominationism" — or, going against the tragic grain — but, at times, "arguments about curbing species self-interest boil down to setting limits you mostly want to see other people observe" (8). It's clear that not all human beings contribute to climate change at the same level; but all human beings can participate in either preserving a

working sustainability system or curbing their consumeristic tendencies to create a working sustainability system.

In Senior's collection, individuals and their communities do exemplify such a sustainable system; however, she also shows the pervasiveness of greed and consumption and unless corporations adopt this same mindset — whereby businesses might think of reducing their environmental impact instead of increasing their profits — accomplishing the bulk of the preservation work will be impossible.

Even if all human beings adopted a more inclusive and interconnected mindset, it's difficult to imagine that human management of nature will go by the wayside anytime soon. I can't imagine a Florida garden that's left to run amok or utility companies being OK with their electrical lines being taken over by tree branches and vines. Many abuse the Earth for the sake of convenience, profits, or, even, pure aesthetics, and feel entitled to the privilege.

I am guilty of such entitlement. Although I consider myself an environmentally conscious individual, I have trimmed limbs, pulled weeds, and planted nonnative plants. I have sought refuge from Florida heat in the comfort of my air-conditioned cottage. I've asked nature to bend to my desires for tidy aesthetics and out-of-season fruits. I have ordered nonessential items that I could have gotten from the store — though that would also have required me to drive, as my current living situation in the country puts many things out of reach. I myself am culpable of the kind of tragic mindset that I have spent thousands of words admonishing.

Even so, I can change. I believe that awareness is the first step toward eradicating the negative behavioral patterns that come with such grave consequences. I see literature as the way toward awareness and powerful enough to shift negative patterns on a grand scale. Texts outside of the tragic canon might provide the new perspective that would help such guilty parties as

myself see the errors in an anthropocentric mindset and associated destructive tendencies. As illustrated by Senior's poetry, literature by those who have not been historically empowered can reveal a more comic way of living and offer a model of sustainable collaboration with nature. Literature offers "models of human relationships with nature," and by modeling a more comic relationship, it "may thus influence both human perceptions of nature and human responses to it" in a positive way (Meeker 7). Giving comic literature a platform may help change how humankind relates to nature and might be the first step toward shifting away from prevailing ideas of domination and overuse into a more sustainable relationship. Idealistically, I hope that literature can change the world in such a positive way; stranger things have happened.

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