Chapter Seventeen

The Debris of Caribbean History

Literature, Art, and Archipelagic Plastic

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Ever since 310 BC, when Greek philosopher Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor in the Peripatetic School, set sealed bottles afloat to prove his theory that the waters of the Atlantic Ocean flowed into the Mediterranean Sea, drift bottles have been used to chart ocean currents. As conveyors of messages to strangers on faraway coasts, they have long been part of the allure of the sea, whose currents—predictably for the likes of Theophrastus and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, yet unfathomably for so many—were central to the exchange of peoples, goods, and biota that so deeply marked the history of the Caribbean archipelago. The currents swirling around the Caribbean region "in Van Gogh–esque grandeur" (as we can see in Figure 17.1; see Nelson 2012)

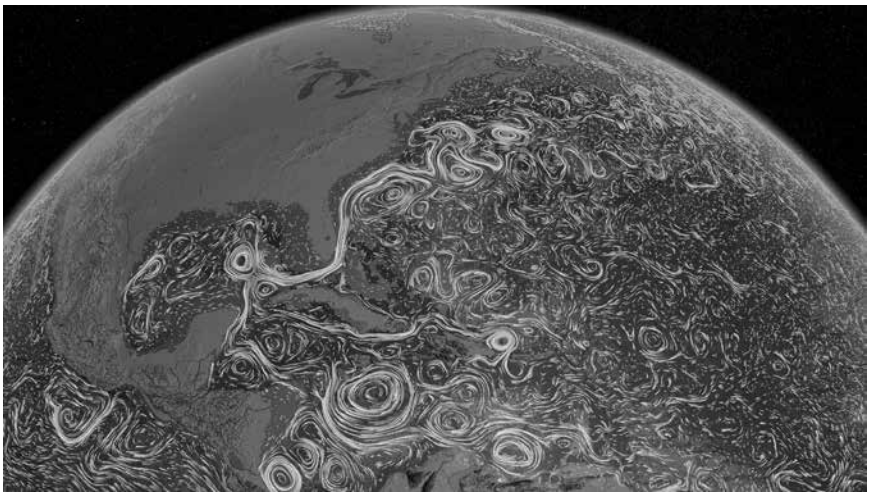

Figure 17.1. A still from the 2012 NASA/MIT video *Perpetual Ocean*.

give the archipelago a distinct current-driven identity, proposing archipelagic connections through winds and water flows that uniquely embrace the islands, "framing" them as a group.

These stunningly beautiful Van Gogh–esque swirls—visual renditions of a painterly sea—now sadly bear swarms of unwanted (and most decidedly nonalluring) drift bottles in the form of floating plastic debris that reaches the coasts of the Caribbean islands from far-flung places in the world, offering a plastic "frame" that once again embraces the islands as an archipelagic unit. The very currents that led Columbus and his vessels to the Caribbean Basin, making it the cradle of pan-American colonialism and planting the seeds for the significant environmental revolution that followed in their wake, now bring to the Caribbean shores a plethora of pollutants, from solid waste (mostly plastic waste) to sewage, hydrocarbons, and agricultural runoff. These pollutants, as Alice Te Punga Somerville has argued about the Great Pacific Patch, embody, as waste, a complex set of natural and cultural processes bound with colonialism and empire: "proximity, movement, disposability, invisibility, history, excess, destruction, reconfiguration, giant multimodal currents, and their life-changing effects on marine as well as human life" (2017, 324).[1] The result is that, according to the 2004 GIWA Regional Assessment of the Caribbean Islands, "pollution of aquatic ecosystems, including sensitive marine and coastal habitats, is the most severe and recurrent transboundary environmental concern in the region" (Villasol and Beltrán 2004, 36). I would read "transboundary," with its postnational implications, as "archipelagic," given the power of the pollution to join the territories of the Caribbean in yet another sea-driven cluster.

Ramón E. Soto-Crespo, writing about Jean Rhys and the Sargasso Sea—the portion of the North Atlantic region where ocean currents form a gyre that now contains a high concentration of nonbiodegradable plastic waste—describes it as "a living archipelago of unanchored trash forms" (2017, 309). Rhys herself, writing about waste in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)—before developments in chemical technology allowed for mass production of plastic in the 1940s and 1950s—proposed a "grotesque bilge theory of subjectivity" rooted in a preplastics understanding of the inevitability of ocean pollution (Zimring 2000, 227). Her protagonist, Sasha, speaks of the mind as a space where all memories of love, loss, and death wash about "like bilge in the hold of a ship . . . not in water-tight compartments . . . [but] all washing around in the same hold" (227). Hers is a "theory of the mind . . . as liquid, polluted and polluting . . . a deep container of watery garbage" that can be released into a psychological sea (227). Eighty years later, worrying about ocean contamination from bilge waters seems almost quaint, since "unanchored trash" now threatens to cover the Caribbean archipelago's

shores, redefining coastal landscapes and turning the sea itself into a "living garbage heap" that bridges the islands (Soto-Crespo 2017, 310). Worsening the "perfect storm" of marine debris are the ever-growing challenges of garbage disposal in the small island territories (where most plastic ends up in the rivers and ultimately the sea) and waste and sewage discharges from hotels and countless cruise ships, all of which contribute to making the cumulative weight of waste on the fragile island ecologies significantly worse in the Caribbean than elsewhere in the world.[2]

Among the most eloquent voices inviting action against the seemingly insurmountable problem of accumulating plastic debris in the Caribbean have been those of regional and international artists whose waste-focused projects have brought attention to plastic contamination and proposed actions to mitigate or eliminate its impact. Through waste-based installations and wastescapes—which represent the antithesis of what Krista Thompson has called "the Caribbean picturesque" (2007, 27)—these projects intervene in the reimagining of "landscape" as it has been understood in the European/colonial/tourism imaginary while giving voice to deep concerns about the health of the region's coastal environments. Many of these projects offer excellent examples of postcolonial environmental-justice eco-art, artistic work that in addition to the goals of environmental art (the expectation that environmental art should help us "re-envision our relationship to nature, proposing new ways for us to co-exist with our environment" and restore ecosystems in deliberate and often aesthetic ways) also "takes on issues of race, class, gender and eco-colonialism in the unequal distribution of environmental problems and benefits within the US and around the globe" (Environmental Justice Cultural Studies, n.d.).

Eco-activist art, moreover, seeks to *change* the environment for the better, moving beyond "witnessing" or condemning environmental deterioration into specific, community-driven engagement with a clear path to environmental restoration or mitigation. Environmental work stemming from the Caribbean and addressing regional problems—whether produced by Caribbean or international artists—can aim, as T. V. Reed ([1997] 2010) explained in "Environmental Justice Ecocriticism: A Memo-Festo," to "bring to the fore the invasive, pervasive effects of corporate capitalism" on the creation of environmental pollution and "the racial-class dynamic" that has fostered it. Reed argues that the focus of ecocriticim on the "aesthetic appreciation of nature has precisely masked the effects of environmental degradation affecting the poor, protecting the privileged from seeing the toxic danger in front of them and allowing them to envision the 'airborne toxic event' as something that happens only to others, to lower class people in ghettos and such."[3] The projects discussed below explore the impact of environmental degradation

and pollution through the prism of the class and racial categories imposed by capitalism and colonialism on the Caribbean. Their plastic wastescapes are deeply embedded in colonial and capitalistic global routes and currents, underlying the centrality of sea routes and winds in the history, the creativity, and (as I argue here) the very identity of the region as an archipelago. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has argued that "islands and their inhabitants are paradoxically positioned as contained' and 'isolated' yet this belies the consistent visitation by colonials, shipwreck, anthropology, and tourism" (2019, 301)—and, we must add now, plastic debris.

The projects I analyze here address plastic debris not as an isolated "tropical island" concern but as evidence of the archipelago's engagement in networks of global distribution and consumption that bring the "unnatural" to archetypal tropical landscapes.[4] In an installation deeply engaged with the suppressed history of slavery in Martinique, like Jean-François Boclé's *Tout doit disparaître/Everything Must Go* (2014), the use of cobalt plastic shopping bags as artistic material links environmental pollution to the pernicious and lasting impact of the institution of slavery, connecting global consumer exchanges and the disposal of trash to the discarding of African lives during the Middle Passage and colonial history of racism, thus inserting human exploitation into the critical discourse on imperial debris. Another group of artists working with plastic debris, like Cuba's Tomás Sánchez, is particularly concerned with bringing attention to the visual and ecological pollution stemming from the failure to adequately dispose of solid waste in small island nations like those of the Caribbean. Sánchez, known primarily for the idealized forest landscapes through which he captures his flawlessly detailed renditions of the tropical sublime, has also produced hyperrealistic paintings of seascapes marred with accumulations of domestic garbage mixed with plastic flotsam. These photorealistic wastescapes juxtapose "pure" Edenic landscapes with the pollution represented by plastic bags overflowing with the debris of consumerist accumulation resulting from the region's engagement with global markets. Mexico's Alejandro Durán has focused instead on plastic debris as an international problem whose solution requires deep systemic changes in how we approach our understanding of the earth as a shared ecology. He has gained international attention for his *Washed Up* project, a multilevel artistic and eco-educational undertaking aimed at engaging the local and international communities in efforts to reduce the ever-increasing plastic-waste contamination coming to Mexico from countries as far away as Japan and Indonesia. His *Washed Up* series consists of photographs of ephemeral installations constructed from plastic trash collected by the artist from the shores of what should be an archetypal tropical Edenic landscape, the UNESCO World Heritage site at Sian Ka'an in Yucatán, Mexico. *Washed*

Up highlights the irony of fighting globalized plastic "colonization" of a landscape chosen as a UNESCO World Heritage site precisely because it is a remnant of the pristine landscapes inhabited by New World indigenous populations before the advent of colonialism.

Jean-François Boclé's *Everything Must Go*'s engagement with plastic debris is firmly anchored in the ideas of Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant, especially in their shared preoccupation with the impact of colonization and African slavery on Caribbean languages, identities, spaces, and histories (Figure 17.2). The installation, made entirely from a sea of blue supermarket plastic bags "animated" by pumped oxygen, is envisioned as "a quasi-memorial to lives lost at sea during the transatlantic slave trade" (Bonsu 2015), a plastic ode to absence and loss. In this striking work, installed in a pristine white room against which the tomb-like mound of cobalt blue bags appears as a massive force, the ubiquitous plastic of daily consumer interaction reminds us of the bags' original purpose as carriers, containers, objects with a capacity to hold "content" and meaning. Boclé's choice of plastic reminds us of the undisposability of seemingly disposable materials, of networks of exchanges and those consumed in the process of capitalistic enterprise, from the trade in human beings to the present reality of Martinique, its cementification (*bétonization*) and marked environmental degradation.

Boclé's allegorical installation "proposes a wasteland . . . rooted in the question of postcolonial consciousness and collective history" (Bonsu

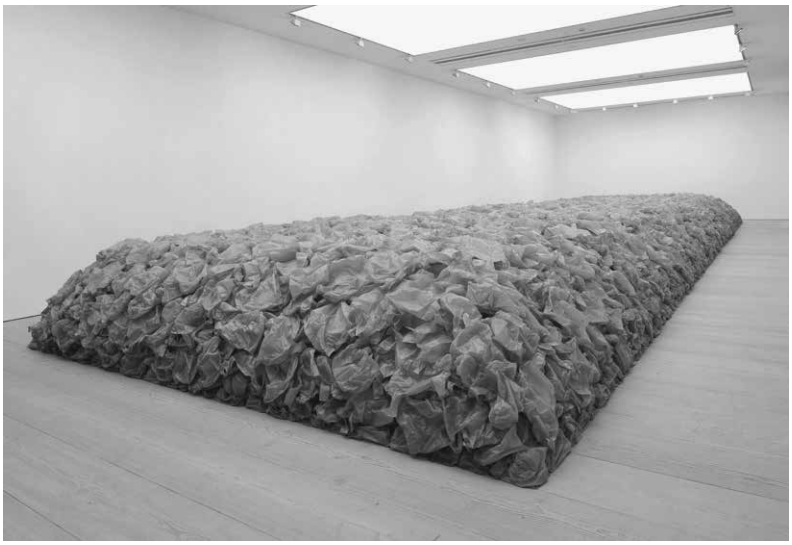

Figure 17.2. Jean-François Boclé, Everything Must Go (2014) Copyright holder Justin Piperger.

2015). His "vertigo of blue"—the image of an ocean made/replaced by plastic bags—inserts itself into a Martinican environmentalist discourse put forth by the proponents of the *créolité* movement, Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau, who have repeatedly argued for an understanding of the island's marked environmental degradation as the most disturbing result of France's continued political control, as the disturbing byproduct of enduring colonialism (Gosson and Faden 2001). This shared postcolonial environmental anxiety bridges the gap between the local specificity of their movement's concerns and the increasing interconnectedness brought about by intensifying globalization, which Glissant (1997) wrote about in *Poétique de la relation*. Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé identify the environmental problems facing Martinique as those same issues confronting the rest of the Caribbean archipelago, as well as other archipelagoes around the world: acute food insecurity (Martinique produces only 2 percent of the food its population consumes); the building of hotels, supermarkets, shopping centers, and other tourism infrastructure at the cost of agricultural land; pollution of land and rivers with fertilizers and insecticides (some of them substances banned elsewhere); the problems of disposing of larger quantities of garbage than the island can absorb; and the destruction of mangroves and the wildlife they support.

Everything Must Go—sea, swimming pool, mass grave, abyss, vertigo, flood, *black (plasticized) Atlantic*—is above all "an accumulation of a serial sameness building out of an architecture of air" (Benítez Villanueva 2016), which in its repetition seems to approach infinity, while proposing a redefinition of the surrounding Caribbean Sea as "invaded" by the plastic of unleashed consumerism. This infiniteness resonates against the permanence of plastic, a malleable and seemingly vulnerable material that holds pockets of negative space ready to briefly bear objects of consumption and whose ubiquitous presence reminds us of its indestructibility, of the uninvited arrival of plastic debris to Caribbean shores bearing the sea air, the sounds of the sea, the voices of those submerged by history, the knowledge of the waves. It is the submersion of which Kendel Hippolyte writes in his poem "Night Vision," where he invokes

> The millions of Africans contorted into writhings of black coral on the sea floor,
> And the survivors living the other death, from the first lash of sunlight
> Till the cool, blessed dark dried out the whip and cutlass
> While they unburied, nightly, the still-warm, holy, undying dream. (2005, 36)

The permanence of plastic reminds us of the impossibility of keeping the violence and trauma of Caribbean history submerged forever, its indestructi-

bility echoing the futile nature of attempting to clean up the mess of colonialism through submersion, the thankless task of trying to tidy up the debris of history, the toxicity of the slave trade, by amassing it in plastic carrier bags that are eminently floatable, whose nature compels them to rise to the surface.

This element of recovery and unveiling has been central to Boclé's collaboration with fellow Martinican composer Thierry Pécou in a project titled *Outre-mémoire* (Beyond/Besides Memory, with its play on *outré*/enraged), which has sought to create an audio and visual memorial to the black Atlantic. In this ongoing collaboration that began in 2004, the audience is invited to experience the two forms (music and art installation) separately while moving between the two, like mirroring events with the same conceptual current flowing between them. It is a collaboration in which the blue plastic of Boclé's installation is not forgotten. In one of his compositions, "Mulunga," the musicians produce sound by rubbing together a cobalt blue carrier bag like those that form Boclé's installation.

Boclé's work is best understood in the context of other Glissant-inspired installations in Martinique's recent artistic production that focus on debris as a metaphor for a history of slavery and human exploitation. His work inserts itself in this "conversation" about ways in which we can come to terms with a suppressed history and separates the project, despite the emphasis on plastics as materials and debris as a prominent focus, from the goals of what is normally recognized as eco-art.

The most iconic of these projects is the *Anse Cafard* monument, the work of sculptor Laurent Valère, installed in 1998, which commemorates the lives lost when a slave ship was wrecked against the rocks near Le Diamant in 1830 (Figures 17.3 and 17.4). Located on a slight promontory above the Atlantic a few kilometers south of Le Diamant, Martinique, fifteen massive statues forming a triangle rise from the earth, as revenants determined to step into the waves to march across the Atlantic in search of home and old roots. The large permanent installation was one of the earliest interventions in transforming the coastal landscape of the Caribbean into a site of historical memory and cultural significance. Referencing the triangular trade, the cast concrete figures stand at an angle of 110 degrees directly in line with the Gulf of Guinée, exposed to the winds and salt air, open to continued transformation by the elements. An early site-specific coastal monument, it sought to "re-landscape" the promontory through the incorporation of the massive figures growing out of the land itself. The monument addressed multiple levels of the history and culture of Martinique, echoing the efforts of historians and artists seeking to bring attention to the untold stories of slavery and the triangular trade as they had impacted the island's development. One of these,

Figures 17.3 and 17.4. Anse Cafard monument by Laurent Valère (1998). Photo: Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert.

Patrick Chamoiseau's "Man vs Mastiff," an excerpt from his 2018 novel *Slave Old Man*, speaks to the narrator's rejection of the sea as a place of escape and freedom, given the sea's power to turn the bodies of young black men and women into jetsam washed onto the shore. In this complex short story, a young slave pursued by a relentless mastiff toward death or the killing sea ponders his limited options:

> Loads of times I had, on buoyant bois-flot rafts, faced high waves to deliver barrels or casks of sugar to merchants' ships. Heading into the waves, negotiating them exact, using their opposing unleashed energies to head up and across. An ancient intoxication found again there, intact in the depths of those Great Woods. My boutou-bludgeon in hand, I'd wound up a hunter. Back to me came attack cries on bright savannas. Many bled-out elephants and wild beasts roaring. Tracking crocodiles in exhausted mires. Dances for the courage of the brave. A blogodo-hullabaloo of peoples and very angry gods. A dementia of four million years illuminated by towering flames. I was going back toward the monster. I no longer saw any of the earlier impediments. I felt myself a warrior. (n.p.)

Valère and Boclé invoke the language of ruination and the specter of solid-waste and plastic pollution in ways that link exploitation in the name of global markets and capitalistic currents across the centuries. The transport of merchandise across the seas, whether human cargo or consumer products whose built-in obsolescence and resulting debris represent a new form of market enslavement to former metropolitan centers, as their work argues, connects their preoccupations with the suppression of the history of slavery in Martinican culture and literature to an emerging conversation on the role of waste and/in postcolonial ecologies in an increasingly archipelagic reformulation of what constitutes Caribbean art.

We normally do not associate the name of Cuban artist Tomás Sánchez (b. 1948) with garbage, as his landscape work is sought primarily for its spiritual focus on "the forest as a site of holiness, a place of energy and power" (Sullivan 2014). Frequently compared to the German Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and the painters of the Hudson River School (particularly Frederic Church, 1826–1900) for his idealized landscapes that conjure images of a lost paradise, Sánchez fluctuates between painstakingly (re)created pristine and luminescent landscapes he imbues with deep spiritual significance and his equally realistic but significantly more disturbing images of steaming garbage dumps and seashores covered in metal and plastic flotsam. Once considered a "virtuoso of hyperrealism," he has turned its techniques to laying bare "his profound longing for vanished landscapes, the virgin forests, the natural state before the arrival of the Spaniards, the destructive action of mankind on nature and the preservation of the environment as the motif of choice for his creations" (Montero 2010).

Sánchez "thinks" garbage from a different conceptual perspective than that of Boclé—as a locally produced consumerist accumulation that is slowly drowning coastal landscapes. His focus is primarily the archipelagic Caribbean's seashore landfill, where the debris of global consumerism and built-in manufacturing obsolescence meets the archetypal tropical landscape that is already the site of accumulation of floating international refuse, highlighting environmental degradation as both a local and international problem.

In Sánchez's landfills and coastal dumpsites, the debris is different from what we see in Boclé's installation and what we will see in our discussion of Durán. Here plastic debris (floatable and transportable by sea currents) is mixed with weightier postconsumer garbage, heavier rusting metal household appliances, construction and packaging materials, metal cans and discarded glass bottles. This accumulation of garbage precludes thinking of islands as isolated, remote locations, forcing a reconsideration of notions of "islandness" as pristine other-worlds to which we can escape as tourists in search of a Robinson Crusoe experience, since such fantasies of escape involves committing the islands to globalized flows of tourists demanding increasingly more complex "authentic" island experiences that perpetuate the local population's exploitation and poverty at the cost of the sacrifice of their ecologies. Sánchez's *basurero* (garbage dump) paintings are focused precisely on the twenty-first-century island as a place flooded with debris, no longer "entire of itself" but as one with the debris-bound first-world continents, as "parts of the main." Sánchez's work fits perfectly into Elizabeth DeLoughrey's "tidalectic" approach, one that, following Kamau Brathwaite, "considers the relationships between lands and sea, settlement and migration, indigeneity and displacement, nation and diaspora, in short, between 'roots and routes'" (L. Thompson 2017, 62). Brathwaite is, in fact, the poet to turn to when acknowledging debris as a new expression of colonial trauma. In "Trench Town Rock" (1992), which follows the ordeal of an armed assault on his house in 1990, Brathwaite returns to the devastation caused by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 to describe the trauma of facing work turned into debris: "my room like the sea—the debris and litter all over the beaches—bibliography files and my poetry manuscript folders—all trampled and curled by the breakers—books hit by like a hurricane—what more can I tell you?" (188).

Sánchez's concern with the overwhelming quality of garbage besieging the archetypical island paradise, a frequent subject of his more conventional landscape paintings, is eloquently illustrated in *Mirage* (1991). Here the "sea" of garbage threatens to drown a deeply forested island, the lost primeval paradise of the pre-Columbian Caribbean. The viewers in each case are forced into complicity in this postcolonial invasion, as the wave of debris dominates the foreground of the painting, providing an uneasy bridge of hyperrealistically detailed postindustrialist, postconsumerist garbagescape between them and the *mirage* of a lost environmental wholeness that collapsed upon contact with colonialism and incipient capitalism and consumerism. The apocalyptic image of the destruction of the Caribbean's Eden also conjures the vision of an archipelagic invasion in which waste replaces the sea as the connecting element that gives the region archipelagic continuity.

Figure 17.5. Tony Capellán, Mar Invadido (detail), 2015. Photo: Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

Installation artist Tony Capellán's concern with notions of "invasion" of the sea through the proliferation of local plastic debris in his native Dominican Republic focuses, however, on the "narratives" embodied in plastic objects as "evidence" of the loss and sorrow of poverty and economic marginalization (see Figure 17.5). The focus of his installations, from *Mar Caribe* (1997) to *Flotando* (2013) to *Mar Invadido* (2015), is debris he recovered from the beaches of the capital city of Santo Domingo, especially from those near the mouth of the Ozama River, the location of the city's bustling port. Santo Domingo's poorest, most marginalized populations, pushed by rapid urbanization to the most vulnerable riverside land, live in substandard housing in overcrowded *barrios* along the Ozama. "These severely polluted waterways," as Sletto and Díaz argue, are consistently represented as "decaying," "filthy," and "dangerous" (2015, 1680). Persistent flooding from heavy rains threatens lives and property and brings residents into dangerous contact with the river's highly polluted waters, bearing harmful bacteria and toxic concentrations of metals like thallium. The bed of the Ozama, moreover, is below sea level, so as tidal flooding and coastal erosion from storm surges grow ever stronger due to climate change, the sea penetrates deep into the Ozama's watershed, its saltwater infiltration adding to the population's vulnerability to flooding and further contaminating the already deeply compromised freshwater supply. The Dominican poor living along the Ozama are, as a result, among the

world's "most endangered people." Capellán's work engages these lives lived at the mercy of the tides amid clear indications of rising sea levels as—in Stefanie Hessler's own reading of Brathwaite's *tidalectics*—"dissolving purportedly terrestrial modes of thinking and living, attempting to coalesce steady land with the rhythmic fluidity of water and the incessant swelling and receding of the tides" (2018, 31).

The objects Capellán collected and arranged into what he called "stories, metaphors, visions" are those washed away by floodwaters from these endangered people's homes into the Caribbean Sea, where the currents return them to its shores at high tide, its "gift" to the artist. They first claimed his attention because they were not (like the plastic debris featured in Sánchez's paintings) the kinds of objects you would put in a plastic trash bag but "useful" objects dragged away by the floods—perhaps beloved objects whose loss could be felt, objects perhaps missed, mourned, but now indistinguishable from other plastic objects thrown away after a single use. Through their incorporation into Capellán's installations, these "eloquent materials" become "visions about the reality of these people, but also visions that encompass many countries, many situations similar to those of the Dominican Republic, in the same geographical area" (Capellán 2015). Capellán's work, as a chronicle of the plight of the people of the Ozama, acknowledges a dialogue with Domingo Liz—a painter known as "the magician of the Ozama"—whose paintings capture the accumulative complexity of the history of the slums that grew along the river's banks in the second half of the twentieth century, chronicling the transformation of a once-green riverside belt into a precarious pile of tumbling houses.

For Capellán, the proliferation of plastic debris on the beaches of Santo Domingo speaks as eloquently to the viewer about environmental pollution (of which his audience is aware) as about the environmental vulnerability of a population that has been doubly displaced; he described the flip-flops that make up *Mar Caribe* as encompassing the stories of those who used to wear them—"farmers without land who migrated to the city where everything has been taken from them and sealed off by barbed wire" and who live now at the mercy of a river and a sea who invade their makeshift dwellings at will, taking away meager possessions and needed everyday implements: combs, buckets, cups, plates, toys. As art, they "reaffirm and deconstruct our idea of the Caribbean" (Capellán 2015). As Elizabeth DeLoughrey has written about Capellán's *Mar invadido*, "Turning to Caribbean allegories of waste, we can interpret Capellan's installations in terms of creating not a colonial archive but, rather, a site of witnessing, rendering the 'secret' of wasted lives visible to the more privileged classes who benefit from the labor and the sacrifices made by the undifferentiated poor" (2019, 121). Capellán, like Sánchez in his rising sea in *Espejismo*, addressed the growing impacts of climate change

in the Caribbean region in his awareness of the tidal nature of the increasing vulnerability of the Dominican poor and its connection to rising sea levels.

As the discussion above suggests, artists working with plastic debris throughout the Caribbean region are responding to a broad variety of motivations and conceptual imperatives. I want to turn here to a project conceived primarily as an environmental intervention "to raise awareness and change our relationship to consumption and waste" (Durán 2016), as it is one of the salient examples of eco-art in the Caribbean engaged in a consistent relationship with a specific site set aside as a biosphere because of its natural beauty, a vulnerable community with few resources for cleanup and management, and a belief in the power of art to propel international environmental change.

Mexican "retired poet" Alejandro Durán's photographic series *Washed Up* addresses plastic pollution reaching the UNESCO World Heritage site of Sian Ka'an on the Caribbean coast of Yucatán, Mexico's largest federally protected reserve, from at least fifty nations around the world. Sian Ka'an (Maya for "Origin of the Sky") covers roughly two thousand square miles of an area of great importance during the pre-Columbian and early colonial period. Its early abandonment after the consolidation of Spanish power over Mexico due to frequent flooding and poor soil quality allowed for centuries of regeneration of its ecosystems and habitats. The reserve, inscribed into UNESCO's program in 1987, is home to more than twenty pre-Columbian archeological sites and to a remarkable vast array of flora and fauna (more than 100 documented mammal and 330 bird species) and the world's second-largest coastal barrier reef. The biosphere's rich habitats include tropical forests, mangroves, a complex hydrological system featuring *cenotes* (deep sinkholes that serve as habitats for endemic fauna), and (most importantly in our context) a complex coastline harboring richly diverse ecosystems with a wealth of marine life.[5]

Sharing the coastline with this flora and fauna are thousands of cubic feet of plastic deposited on its shores by ocean currents. Sian Ka'an is unfortunately located in an ideal geography for the deposit of marine debris, a reality not lost on Durán and which played a role in his selection of the site as the focus of his work. From his perspective, the "continental" site of Yucatán is archipelagic in ways that connect his project with Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel's definition of the archipelago as "integrating the study of seemingly disparate island chains (and their corresponding networks of ports, fortifications, plantations, and cities, as well as their social, cultural and productive systems) to complicate our conceptualization of the Caribbean in conversation with other regions that share a similar set of conditions" (2017, 155). Sian Ka'an illustrates perfectly the interconnectedness of the Caribbean Sea and the rest of the planet.

The route of the Caribbean Current (see NASA/MIT illustration in Figure 17.1) shows the vulnerability of the Sian Ka'an coastline to floating plastic debris riding the region's sea currents. This oceanic circulation in the Caribbean Sea is largely caused by trade winds that flow from east to west. The main surface circulation, the Caribbean Current, runs from the southeast near Grenada, St. Vincent, and St. Lucia until it reaches the Gulf of Mexico, where some of the current forms the Gulf's loop current and the rest creates the Florida Gulf Stream (Rivera-Monroy et al. 2004). The northwestward running Caribbean Current deposits water into the Gulf of Mexico through the Yucatán current. Wind currents also aid in the spread of plastic debris in the Yucatán Peninsula, playing a significant role in the spread of light plastic debris and other floatables. Studies have shown that beaches exposed to the wind, like the beaches of Sian Ka'an, receive larger amounts of foreign plastic debris and higher levels of contamination.

I linger on the flow of the currents here because Durán's project is inconceivable without an understanding of how the Caribbean archipelago cannot be disconnected from the water flows that first linked the Spanish global empire and now continue to hold the region in its vise. His project focuses on the depiction, primarily through the photography of the ephemeral sculptures and installations he had constructed with marine debris on the beaches of Sian Ka'an, of a landscape tainted by plastic being brought by sea and wind currents from far afield. The work originated during a visit to Cancún in February 2010, where the artist was struck by the volume of plastic garbage on the beaches of "one of the most beautiful places in the world," believing at first that the community was using the site as a garbage dump before learning from residents of the largest coastal community in the area, Punta Allen (population five hundred), the extent and source of the problem. His response, his "instinct," was to create art, to work on "landscapes" that would draw attention both to the global problem of ocean plastic pollution and to the specific vulnerabilities of small, resourceless coastal communities (many of them communities of fishermen dependent on the health of the reefs for their livelihood) to a problem created in an "elsewhere" that implicates all of us. As he has explained, "One of the main pillars of the project [is that] the material that I am using is all of our material. We are all implicated in this. If you ever drank water out of a plastic bottle then you're implicated, so it's basically every one of us. It's not about pointing fingers at one particular person or one particular corporation, it's humanity that's causing this" (Durán 2016). His aesthetic response has been to work with light and composition to create ephemeral sculptures made through blurring the separation between natural and unnatural elements in a process he calls "alchemizing the ugliness." The main concept behind the project is that "these synthetic objects are infiltrating and mimicking nature," and the work should

reflect the process through which the plastic is washed up on the shore by the currents. His work has also led him into the role of archivist, since in taking inventory of his "harvest of refuse," he notes the country of origin and nature of the debris. His conceptual work is mirrored by a growing archive of straightforward photographs of individual cans and bottles from distant countries, which Durán records in situ.

Durán claims British artist Andy Goldsworthy, whose ephemeral installations have made him the "master of anthropocentric beauty" (Weintraub 2012, 185), as a "huge influence." Goldsworthy's work is praised for its ability to convey the transient quality of natural beauty through the imposition onto the landscape of an ephemeral, conceptualized form achieved through the skillful (some would say virtuoso) manipulation of naturally found materials that will revert to their natural form after the work of art is achieved and photographed. This "arranging of unstable elements in precarious patterns within ever-shifting environs" has become the characteristic mark of his art (Weintraub 2012, 186).

Their work, indeed, has many points of correspondence, from its commitment to restoration ecology to its engagement with landscape as one element of a larger ecosystem. Like Durán, Goldsworthy is a photographer whose central subjects are his own site-specific sculptures and installations. Goldsworthy, however, works solely with natural materials, while Durán has focused on the invasion of the natural landscape by "unnatural" plastic. They are also separated by the extent to which Durán wants his artistic process to be apparent in the photographs. Speaking of Goldsworthy, he has said that although the British artist has had a great influence on his work, his work is anthropocentric: "In a lot of his pieces you see the hand of man. You can tell there is an artist working with the materials, whereas my work, although I organize materials by color and form, really mimics nature," prompting people to ask if the objects he has photographed "were found like that." Durán would like us to look at a composition like *Mar/Sea* as the work of the sea currents themselves (if the currents were able to select cobalt blue plastic and compose it accordingly) (Figure 17.6).

Blue exceeds all the other colors of plastic washing up to Sian Ka'an, a fact that gave birth to *Mar/Sea* (Figure 17.6), the first piece Durán conceived. The piece, so central to the developing concept of the project, responded to two key influences for Durán, both of them poets, or more precisely, poems: Elizabeth Bishop's "The Monument" (1955) and John Ashbery's "The Painter" (1956). Durán, who holds a master of fine arts in poetry writing, links the conceptual genesis of the project to Bishop's description of an artwork made of wood that projects its image on the rest of the physical world, turning everything, sea and sky, into wood. Bishop's focus on constructing an artwork out of a humble material like wood resonated with Durán, whose available

Figure 17.7. Mar/Sea (2013). Copyright holder: Alejandro Durán.

material was the humblest—plastic in the process of degrading upon prolonged contact with the sea—and whose interest was centered on a desire for art to mirror natural forces in their natural configuration. Bishop's poem is concerned with the moment humble materials transform into art through the viewer's perception, the alchemy that turns materials into art. For Durán, the first test shot for the composition of *Mar/Sea* became a galvanizing moment in which he saw in his image echoes of the totalizing power of wood in "The Monument," a moment in which all the elements of his composition, shore covered in plastic debris, sand, sea, and sky, "became plastic":

> It is an artifact
> of wood. Wood holds together better
> than sea or cloud or sand could by itself,
> much better than real sea or sand or cloud.
> It chose that way to grow and not to move.
> The monument's an object, yet those decorations,
> carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
> give it away as having life, and wishing;
> wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.
>
> —Elizabeth Bishop, "The Monument," from *North and South* (1955)

For Durán, the process of gathering the blue plastic, organizing the composition, and facing in his first photographic image the extension, through color, of plastic onto the natural elements (blue sea and sky) turned into the moment he conceived his series: "Everything became plastic, either the plastic becomes the sea and the sky, or vice versa, but it all became this one material, all is one. All the materials reflected each other, symbolized each other" (Durán 2016).

Ashbery's "The Painter," included in *Some Trees* (1956), ponders in turn an artist's path toward creative independence and echoes Durán's embrace of visual art when first confronted with the need for a form from which to speak of the environmental degradation of Sian Ka'an.

> Sitting between the sea and the buildings
> He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
> But just as children imagine a prayer
> Is merely silence, he expected his subject
> To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
> Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.
> . . .
> How could he explain to them his prayer
> That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?
> . . .
> Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
> In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:
> "My soul, when I paint this next portrait
> Let it be you who wrecks the canvas."

Durán responded to Ashbery's painter's desire for the sea to "usurp his brush, to paint the canvas for him" by experimenting with gathering plastics (blues, primarily, at the onset of the project) and leaving them on the beach for the sea to rearrange during the night, hoping for compositions that reflected minimum impact on his part as artist, letting the ocean—the currents responsible for bringing the plastic to the shore—create the sculpture, which he would then photograph. Like Ashbery's painter, he sought a collaboration with nature, a conversation, leading him to want "to create works that looked like they have been created by nature" (Durán 2016). Since that initial "collaborative" moment, Durán has returned to his own manipulation of the materials instead of simply capturing the debris in its unadulterated state, seeking instead to "mirror what is happening in nature." The abandonment of the brief "collaboration" with the sea prompted deep reflection about the nature of the materials he was working with, as "one of the main pillars of the project is that the materials I am using are mimicking nature," and his mirroring of nature's processes through in-site installations and photographs has as a goal the spread of the message that "the world is being covered with this junk."

If Durán's conceptual conversation with Ashbery and Bishop provides a foundation for conveying the fraught links between currents, coastlines, and invading plastic, his art is also committed to exploring the creative alchemy through which the images created from ephemeral sculptures could bring attention to the environmental quandary facing the land and people of Sian Ka'an. For Durán, "the photos demonstrate something a documentary photo can't"—the aesthetic power to draw the attention of viewers who could become interested, and potentially also engaged, in helping address the plastic problem in Sian Ka'an. As a self-described "interventionist and advocate," Durán sees his art as a first step in fund-raising to bring awareness to the plight of Sian Ka'an and to create environmental awareness projects for the children of local communities to enhance efforts to clean the ocean debris, in recognition that the local authorities lack the funding necessary to emphasize the cleaning of the beaches in a sustainable way.[6] A secondary goal is that of underscoring through his work the shared responsibility of those using and discarding plastic—regardless of their location in the world—for the situation in Sian Ka'an. His photographs, striking and engaging as one may find them, never lose sight of their central aim of bringing attention to the larger issues of "our stewardship of the planet and the consequences of convenience" (Durán 2016). His work is that of a serendipitous artist—he discovered art through his search for expressing the realities of Sian Ka'an—whose art is committed to the eco-art goals of denunciation and education. Durán has captured, through his attention to surface and wind currents as a factor in the plastic pollution in Sian Ka'an, the complex connections between science, environmentalism, and community goals so central to environmental artist/educators. Durán's concern with the provenance of the plastic materials that ride the world's currents to gather on the shores of Yucatán recognizes the interconnectedness between islands, archipelagoes, and continental shores far and wide as established through currents, colonial histories, and, most recently, the debris of continental consumerism.

PRACTICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Disruptive of old theoretical parameters for examining the environmental crises facing vulnerable island nations as strictly local, archipelagic approaches invite us to inscribe the threats to islands and archipelagoes brought by climate change—from rising sea levels and the intensification of storms to floating debris—materially and metaphorically, as belonging to newly acknowledged multidirectional flows of oceanic forces. In "Archipelagic Accretions," Paul Giles argues that "if postcolonialism focused on the power structures,

and transnationalism on power exchanges of one kind or another, then the archipelagic imaginary might be said to involve a more fluid system, one that disrupts solid foundations and reinscribes them as ontologically evanescent" (2017, 432). Giles's concern with gradual accretion and "relational flows" is central to the analysis of the work of the Caribbean artists discussed above in their response to the local impacts of planetary forces that have become erratic and unknowable in the Anthropocene. The archipelagic imaginary, as seen in the work of these artists, from Boclé to Durán, allows us entry into the seemingly endless possibilities of reading plastic debris as a multivalent material through whose relational flows we can access the ways in which histories, geographies, ocean currents, and environmental quandaries overlap and echo against earlier representations and obsolete values.

Durán's work—with its focus on plastic bottles blown to the Caribbean from far-flung geographies by wind and sea currents that have moved large masses of water around the world's oceans since the last ice age—has brought us quite far from Theophrastus's original drift bottles. Not very far, however, from the focus on wind and ocean currents that cemented drift bottles and their messages in the popular imagination. For Durán, as for the other artists discussed above, the Caribbean archipelago is defined through the currents of wind and ocean that flow through it, currents that brought us, among other problematic flotsam, European conquerors and the horrors of the Middle Passage and now countless pieces of plastic debris that remind us of our connection to a global capitalism that began with the global enterprise that was our discovery by Spanish sailors. In the scourge of plastic—as tide-wrack on our beaches, pollution in our ecosystems, and a threat to our marine fauna—we have a daily reminder that our archipelago and its history have been bound by ocean currents, framed by the swirling Van Gogh–esque flows that define and embrace the islands of the Caribbean in a twirling frame. Now that arabesque is marked by plastic, offering plastic debris as a new form of archipelagic unity resisted by artists across the region.

NOTES

1. Most notable among the artists bringing attention to the Great Pacific Patch is British photographer Mandy Barker, whose eye-catching images capture plastic debris as suspended in ocean waters; New Caledonia's Ito Waïa, a multimedia artist and poet whose project *Eau, Centre de l'Ocean* speaks to the need to protect the Coral Sea Natural Park; and Māori sculptor George Nuku, whose *Whale Skull Cube* is constructed from plastic bottles, Plexiglas, and polystyrene. For a literary response to the Pacific plastics crisis, see Guam's Craig Santos-Pérez's poem "The Age of Plastic" (2017, 164).

2. Dominica, Grenada, and the Bahamas have announced the banning of single-use plastics by 2020 as part of a green initiative focused on addressing the problems of management and disposal of solid waste. Throughout the region, only 40 to 50 percent of all solid waste (including plastics and other floatables) reaches official landfills or dumpsites, with the rest being openly dumped onto river banks, into ravines, or onto the seashore, from which it washes into the sea, leaving the islands "swimming in excessive garbage" (see Coe and Rogers 1997).

3. Recent Caribbean literature, like Rita Indiana's prescient 2019 novel *Tentacles* (*La mucama de Omicunlé*), posits a world where the poor are threatened by sea-level rise, devastating viruses, rapid desertification, and crippling food shortages.

4. The commitment to art as the means to engage audiences with the plight of threatened archipelagos around the world is not unique to the Caribbean, as we've seen through Tuvalu's entry in the 2013 Venice Biennale, *Destiny. Intertwined*, or Kirivati's 2019 pavilion, *Pacific Time-Time Flies*, both of which draw attention to climate change and the fragility of small island nations. Drawing on Plato and seeking to engage the potential disappearance of the archipelago and the nation founded on it, the 2019 Kiribati Pavilion underscores how "in contrast to the impermanent nature of our world and objects within our world, forms and ideas are permanent" (see http://institute-ergosum.org/kiribati-pavilion-2019).

5. In early 2018 it was revealed by archeologists using a revolutionary technology known as LiDar (Light Detection and Ranging) that what had been previously thought to be "virginal territory" hides the ruins of more than sixty thousand houses, palaces, and other complex infrastructure hidden under the jungle for centuries, revealing a sprawling pre-Columbian civilization just beginning to be studied.

6. Durán's project engages the community, particularly the children, through workshops and an annual project called the Museum of Garbage, which he describes thus: "I want to empower the youth of the region to have their voices be heard and enable them to express themselves through co-created plastic installations. . . . It is my hope that the children's messages will bring about greater respect for individuals who are unjustly bearing the weight of other nations' pollution, encouraging change and social responsibility" (see http://www.alejandroduran.com/museo).

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