

FROGS AS FORTUITOUS CANARIES IN
OUR COAL MINES: SILENCE AND
AMPHIBIAN EXTINCTION IN MAYRA
MONTERO'S *IN THE PALM OF
DARKNESS* AND EDWIDGE
DANTICAT'S *CLAIRE OF THE SEA
LIGHT*

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In *The Sixth Extinction*, Elizabeth Kolbert serves that amphibians “enjoy the dubious distinction of being the world’s most endangered class of animals” (17), which is one of the reasons to make the representation of amphibian extinctions in fictional accounts one of the foci of this paper. The search for a frog that is notably absent in Mayra Montero’s *In the Palm of Darkness* brings to the forefront ecological, political, and economic issues, three remnants of colonialism as well as postcolonialism. The same issues are also present in Edwidge Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*, where amphibians inhabit the contact zones between humans and the environment and thus offer a way for the characters to be actively engaged with them. Discourses that write extinctions and absences by moving away from using animals as mere metaphors and instead ascribe them agency encourage an investigation of the contact zones between humans and animals in fictional texts. In addition, the vanishing amphibians mirror the oppression and silencing of women. This shift of attention on the absence and silences of women and animals in narratives can benefit and challenge our own understanding of our place in the Anthropocene.

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Akira Mazuta Lippit notes that animals “exist in a state of *perpetual vanishing*” (1; italics in original). Despite animals’ seeming ubiquitousness in our culture and society, for instance as pets or in advertising, they are disappearing both in a literal sense through mass species extinctions, as well as figuratively because we fail to acknowledge their value and prominence. Discourses that write extinctions and absences by moving away from using animals as mere metaphors and instead ascribe them agency encourage an investigation of the contact zones between humans and animals in fictional texts. Both, Mayra Montero’s novel *In the Palm of Darkness* (original: *Tú, la Oscuridad*) and Edwidge Danticat’s novel *Claire of the Sea Light*, emphasise the connection between colonial practices, globalisation, and amphibian extinction while simultaneously contributing to ongoing debates about portrayals of the non-human in literature and the concurrent silencing of women and animals.

The search for a frog that is notably absent in Montero’s *In the Palm of Darkness* brings to the forefront ecological, political, and economic issues, three remnants of colonialism as well as postcolonialism. These same issues are also present in *Claire of the Sea Light*, where amphibians inhabit the contact zones between humans and the environment and thus offer a way for the characters to be actively engaged with them. Populations of amphibians have decreased by more than 50% since the 1950s. As Elizabeth Kolbert observes in the Pulitzer-Prize winning *The Sixth Extinction*, amphibians “enjoy the dubious distinction of being the world’s most endangered class of animals” (17).

The two novels share similar themes: resilience, silence, and hope. While the tone of Montero’s older novel is markedly not hopeful, Danticat’s more recent novel displays a progression and development of themes and tone toward hope and resilience. The elusive and threatened *grenouille du sang*, or blood frog, is at the center of Montero’s 1994 novel. Montero is a Cuban-Puerto Rican writer who has published a number of fiction and nonfiction works in Spanish that have later been translated into English. *In the Palm of Darkness*, a novel set in Haiti, has been called the first environmentalist novel of the region (Paravisini-Gebert 192). Even though an important part of the novel deals with the political and social situation and crisis of Haiti in 1992 and 93, the “political and social content is placed within a broader context of ecological collapse” and the search for the blood frog stands out as a leitmotif (Boling 61). The frog does not have a (dominant) role in the novel and is only looked for out of scientific curiosity and pride. Nevertheless, the novel’s treatment of the disappearance of this frog and interwoven passages about global amphibian extinctions offer a valuable contribution to giving animals a voice in fiction and “unsilencing” them. *In the Palm of Darkness* intertwines three narrative threads: (a) the life

and history of Victor Grigg, a North American herpetologist who comes to Haiti to find the last *grenouille du sang*; (b) the life and history of Thierry Adrien, a Haitian guide who teaches Victor and the reader about the political situation and mythical background of Haiti; and (c) brief scientific descriptions of worldwide amphibian declines. The character constellation complies with the trope of the western scientist traveling to a developing country and being guided by a local. Even though the novel starts out with a strict dichotomy between Victor and Thierry, colonial object and postcolonial subject, the progression of the plot indicates a blurring of this boundary, especially between the Haitian guide and the disappearing and silenced frogs.

The brief interwoven passages of global amphibian extinctions offer an essential link to the globality of the problems the protagonists face in the locality of Haiti (Boling 317). One such passage, referring to amphibian extinctions in Puerto Rico, reads:

Studies carried out since August 1989 indicate that three species of frog of the type *Eleutherodactylus*, commonly called *coquí*, have disappeared from the rain forests of Puerto Rico.

Eleutherodactylus jasper (the golden *coquí*), *Eleutherodactylus karlschmidt* (the palmate *coquí*), and *Eleutherodactylus eneidae* (the Eneida *coquí*) are considered extinct.

Eleutherodactylus locustus (the little hammer *coquí*) and *Eleutherodactylus richmondi* (the Richmond *coquí*) are on the verge of extinction. (Montero 98)

These passages mimic the detached tone and style of scientific reports. Additionally, they repeatedly disrupt the narrative flow and force the reader to leave the fictional world created by Montero and face the reality of global amphibian extinctions. Since “writing extinction involves not simply the problem of representing absence, but also the difficulty of narrating ongoing systemic crises within intrinsically individualising forms such as [...] the novel” (Garrard 157-8), Montero’s creation of this hybrid genre manages to overcome this dilemma. The absence of amphibians is at times palpable and creates a portentous and prescient atmosphere. It is particularly noteworthy that Montero already wrote about

declining amphibian populations in 1994—before extensive scientific studies were conducted, especially in Latin America.¹

During the search for the blood frog, Thierry explicitly attributes the power to intervene in the status quo to the frogs: “Some extinctions begin this way, first the females disappear, vanish with their wombs full. Where do they go, what is it they fear, why the hell do they run away?” (Montero 45) Thierry asks these questions, as Victor is mostly interested in finding and preserving the last specimen of the blood frog and not necessarily in the reasons for its vanishing, which is paradoxical considering that Victor is the herpetologist. The way Thierry formulates these questions demonstrates how much agency he ascribes to the frogs. Female frogs, with their wombs full, apparently make the conscious decision of running away, hiding, or even dying intentionally. Thierry’s father Papa Crapaud also used to look for frogs and after finding a toad that was particularly hard to find, he explains that “[y]ears later, the animal disappeared, it just left, vanished like so many others” (Montero 81). Thierry and his father are the two (Haitian) characters that recognize the agency of the amphibians. Their persuasion concerning the question of agency is juxtaposed to Victor’s, who as a western scientist, does not share this opinion. Through this constellation, Montero acknowledges the different stances on animal agency and the politics of knowing.

The search for the frog stands out as a leitmotif in the novel and the question of where the frogs go, and this includes other species of frogs as well, is asked repeatedly; however, the question is never actually answered in a satisfactory way. A number of possible explanations for the decline and vanishing of the frogs are given, both from a western-scientific and a mythical-Haitian point of view. The mythical-Haitian perspective encompasses the presence of a black Caribbean, where African-based traditions, like Vodou, are still significant. Thierry explains to Victor that one of the reasons for the amphibian decline is the disappearance of the females because they “vanish with their wombs full” (45). The image of female frogs that vanish in such a way points to the importance of women for reproduction, a trope that appears repeatedly. Dr. Emile Boukaka, “a surgeon and amateur herpetologist” (Montero 91) offers Victor more interpretations of the decline. He explains, “[t]hey’re leaving or they’re hiding, [...] [o]r they’re simply letting themselves die.’ [...] They say that Agwé Taroyo, the god of waters, has called the frogs down to the bottom” (94-5). After offering his local knowledge explanations that relate the disappearance of frogs to Vodou deities, Boukaka goes on to denounce western-scientific reasons: “You people invent excuses: acid rain, herbicides, deforestation.

¹ 1990 marked the year that the alarm about amphibian declines was sounded. However, most studies that investigate declining amphibian populations only began in 1997.

But the frogs are disappearing from places where none of that has happened” (96). This last statement clearly shows the conviction that western science does not necessarily have all the right answers for these kinds of environmental issues. Dr. Boukaka is an interesting, though minor, character because he represents the intersections between both western-scientific and mythical-Haitian world views. In the end he admits that, “[w]hat I’ve *learned*, I learned in books,’ [...] [b]ut what I *know*, everything I know, I took from fire and water, from water and flame” (97; emphasis added). The juxtaposition of these two world views emphasizes the fact that there is no single answer to the question why the frogs disappear at such rates. Conversely, these contact zones between western and Haitian perspectives also illustrate the political and economic factors that drive the plot and the search for the frog.

Silence and absence are tropes that characterize Montero’s environmentalist novel, where frogs are almost completely absent. In the novel, the blood frog is hardly ever heard and seen even less often. The reader learns about the frog primarily through Thierry’s anecdotes; actual encounters with the blood frog are rare. This absence circumvents the difficulty of representing a frog that does not really exist, that is the blood frog (*Eleutherodactylus sanguineus*) is a fictional creation. Whereas other frogs in the *Eleutherodactylidae* family, such as the coquí (*Eleutherodactylus coqui*), exist, the blood frog does not. At the same time, this technique renders the frog all the more alluring for the readers and the protagonists. Thierry’s accounts reinforce the absences, and he explains that, “I always keep track of the ones in the background, the ones who disappear for no reason, the forgotten ones” (Montero 12). By making Thierry the main medium through which the reader learns about the blood frog, Montero accentuates the fact that there is (a) an undeniable connection between Thierry (standing for Haiti) and the frogs and (b) that a literal or metaphorical conversation about animals necessitates a *human* medium to convey information. A concentration on absences furthermore illustrates a subversion of western storytelling, where traditionally, those in the background are simply forgotten and or silenced.

The narration of the absence of the frogs is an effective method to raise the readers’ (dormant) ecological and planetary consciousness. Christopher Manes observes that “nature has grown silent in our [western] discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object” (17). Montero’s depiction of the blood frog, though mostly silent, is a powerful tool in shedding light on this environmental issue and on how silent nature’s discourse has become. The silence in the novel is an uncanny kind of silence—the fact that so many of nature’s voices have been

silenced and Montero's vision in the novel is ultimately apocalyptic. Victory, Thierry, and the *grenouille du sang* all die together in the end—the ultimate act of silencing.

Finally, there is an unmistakable parallel between the silence of the frog(s) and the silence of women in the story. Both appear only marginally and are hardly ever permitted space on the page and even then, they are limited to the background of the novel. There are no female protagonists, and the few female characters often leave the men or are (considered) crazy. The female voice is curiously absent in the novel and the environmental deterioration of Haiti is “portrayed via the destruction of the feminine, a sterility and death often portrayed in the novel in terms of the male oppression of the female” (Boling 62). The few female characters “waver between madness and monstrosity, between obsession and oblivion” (Boling 63). Through flashbacks, the reader learns about an event in Thierry's life where he went to Caseteches Hill, not to find a frog but to find a madwoman. Thierry is hired by a German to find his wife, who apparently had gone mad. Thierry immediately remarks that, “[y]ou can't imagine how many women go out of their minds as soon as they set foot in Haiti” (25). This remark illustrates how women and nature are frequently associated with insanity and madness. The woman, who tellingly remains unnamed, and is only referred to as “woman” and “she” by Thierry, is silenced on the page. Even when he recounts this episode and discloses that she “said a few words” (36), those words remain silent as Thierry does not share anything she said. Thierry, then, who is so frequently silenced by Victor and circumstances, too, perpetuates the act of silencing the other, this time a woman. During his search for the woman on the mountain, he hears the song of the blood frog. This instance, where the frog is not silenced, is the only reason why Thierry shares this story with Victor, thus further emphasising the oppressive conditions women find themselves in. The description Thierry provides of the blood frog that he encounters and the woman he eventually finds, is strikingly similar: The frog was “as red as the heart of an animal” and the woman “stood there, naked, her whole body streaming water and blood, water from the rain and blood from who knows where” (30-1). The voice of the frog and the woman are likened as well: “Later she moaned again, and from time to time a putrid bubble boiled up from deep in her throat, it was like the song of the frog” (37). In equating the appearance and sound of the woman and the blood frog, Thierry reinforces the otherness of both, the essentialising position that likens women and animals, as well as the association of female madness with animals. Becky Boling argues that even though Thierry is a man that is also oppressed and fails to understand women in the novel, “the complex narrative layering of Montero's novel recalls the hierarchical strata of patriarchal power and exhumes the buried voice of the feminine” (70). The “mad” women in the novel should rather be seen as women who are haunted by patriarchal and national violence and

silencing.

The structure of Danticat's novel *Claire of the Sea Light*, though very different from *In the Palm of Darkness*, similarly reflects related themes, including violence and death, and how they are implicated within local environmental crises that are linked to colonial and postcolonial practices. Although Danticat's novel is not as environmental in its scope as Montero's, it nonetheless addresses a number of the environmental problems Haiti faces in the twenty-first century. These environmental problems include, but are not limited to, species extinction, deforestation, and overfishing.

The one animal that also stands out in Danticat's novel is the frog. In *Claire of the Sea Light*, a whole chapter is dedicated to and titled "The Frogs." Most of the frogs here are dying as well and Gaëlle Cadet Lavaud, the owner of a fabric shop, is intimately connected with them. The whole chapter is a flashback to ten years before Claire, the child-protagonist, ran away, a time when Gaëlle was expecting her own child:

It was so hot in Ville Rose that year that dozens of frogs exploded. [...] The frogs had been dying so quietly that for each one that had expired, another one had taken its place [...] each one looking exactly the same and fooling [Gaëlle], among others, into thinking that a normal cycle was occurring, that young was replacing old, and life replacing death, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. (Danticat 42)

The description of the death of the frogs is full of imagery related to death. At the beginning, people thought that a normal cycle was occurring because on the surface, that is what appeared to be happening. People do not immediately notice, because they pay no attention to the frogs. There is nothing natural about the rate at which the frogs die, though, thus subverting the idea of a balanced yet dynamic ecosystem, where change happens but at a moderate rate. Even though life and death are simply a part of life, when frogs die at such a rate and some of them so violently, this makes a larger underlying problem more explicit. Reading amphibians as canaries in our coal mine, the quoted passage evidently illustrates that we might have already reached a tipping point in terms of climate change and species extinctions.

The descriptions of frogs in Danticat's novel are predominantly anthropomorphic, which indicates a close human-animal relationship and porous boundaries. One night, frogs haunt Gaëlle's dreams, where "frog carcasses slither [...] into her mouth and down her throat" (42) so in the morning, she decides to go outside to look for frogs:

[S]he noticed a green-horned frog that looked like a leaf with horns. Its legs were like a chicken's and it seemed to be almost frowning. Soon after, she found a brown dwarf jungle frog, which had the more ordinary look of a frog, except for what seemed like a long middle finger on its hind legs. The third was a tiny scarlet koki, whose melodious staccato song was believed to lull babies to sleep. [...] All three frogs, she saw, were dead, though of a more natural-seeming death than the frayed remains she'd seen in recent days. The three dead frogs were in crouching positions, as though frozen mid-jump or –crawl. (43-4)

The anthropomorphic descriptions encourage the character's interaction with the frogs. One frog is frowning, one has a middle finger, and the third sings lullabies. Furthermore, through the use of simile to describe the frog that looks like a leaf with horns, this creature, which usually does not receive a lot of attention, is made familiar. It is remarkable that these dead frogs here are described as "more natural-seeming" considering that they appear to have died "mid-jump or –crawl." The frogs appear to be static, frozen in that moment, which symbolises the current state of Haiti: trying to move forward but somehow stuck.

The link between frogs and mad women is also explored in Danticat's novel. Some of the inhabitants are glad that so many frogs died. Elie, a car mechanic in the town of Ville Rose, "[k]new a crazy woman once. Would catch small frogs by the river, throw them in her mouth. Smaller and more colorful they are, more poison frogs have in them. Woman died from this, everyone said so. Better for [...] for crazy people the frogs are not around" (54-5). This scene is reminiscent of Montero's inclusion of the trope of the mad woman and the connection to frogs. In Danticat's novel, the trope is not explored further but it is again a man who recounts this story. The reader's knowledge is limited to Elie's presentation of events and as a result, the woman is silenced here as well.

Like in Montero's novel, a herpetologist visits Ville Rose, thus complying with the trope of the outsider. The inhabitants of Ville Rose discuss the French herpetologist when they read an article in a newspaper about him and his research into the decline of amphibian populations. According to this herpetologist, who is never named, the frogs died due to a fungal disease, "given his studies of the condition of the frog carcasses and the dirt and water samples he'd taken of their environment, and given the climate and blistering temperatures in Ville Rose that summer" (Danticat 55). Here, an unnamed outsider, this time from the former colonial power France, arrives in Haiti to research the extinction of the frogs. There is no indication that the herpetologist collaborates with Haitians to examine

the events. Instead, the inhabitants of Ville Rose only learn about his research through an article in the town's weekly newspaper. While Montero's outsider-scientist, Victor, experiences Haiti with its people and environment and thus has the possibility to acquire local knowledge; Danticat's outsider-scientist does not and thus remains on the outside.

Claire of the Sea Light and *In the Palm of Darkness* both give expression to the centrality of amphibians and function as important fictional records of their extinctions in Haiti, where they function as canaries in our coal mine on a warming planet. In their respective novels, Montero and Danticat contribute to giving a voice to the postcolonial animal, in particular the liminal amphibians, who are mediators between water and land, and concurrently draw the reader's attention not only to their extinction but also to the porousness of boundaries.

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