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5 Love and Loss: Corals and Cultural Sustainability in Caribbean Popular Romance Novels

Coral reef ecosystems in the Caribbean are in jeopardy as a result of human impact such as global warming, pollution, overfishing, tourism, military activity and marine traffic. Coral decline remains a perpetual environmental dilemma while, at the same time, popular romance writing set in the Caribbean frequently utilises corals and coral reefs as important plot and setting points; the romance usually turns in and around water, where activities such as snorkeling, diving, swimming and boating are just some of the action elements needed by the plot for the romance to develop. Corals and coral reefs feature heavily in this chapter's corpus of popular romances taking place in the Caribbean.[1] Some are more explicitly linked with corals and marine life, like Nora Roberts' *The Reef*, whose whole plot develops around underwater life.[2] Other texts barely mention corals despite taking place in a seaside environment, making coral reefs visible by their absence. The analysis mines the use of corals and marine life in popular romance fiction booming on the electronic literary market.

As Sarah Brouillette notes, "Mass-market romance is a dominant publishing niche" and therefore a major arena on which trending topics are raised, oftentimes decided upon in a cartel-like fashion by writers themselves.[3] Corals are collaterals of this, as exotic Caribbean paradise locations abound in romance writing. The overall aim in this chapter is to put a seemingly apolitical genre of literature into conversation with environmentalist concerns and hence develop sustainability vistas in connection with popular literature's trending topic, corals. The chapter argues that genre literature's subtle interaction with environmentally threatened

1 See the list of primary sources in the bibliography. Novels consulted but not explicitly cited are omitted from the primary sources, but remain a part of the overall material informing the reading here. All of the novels chosen for closer discussion are contemporary popular romance novels in English. The corpus includes novels with unique thematic relevance based on the appearance of corals within the story. However, no comprehensive coverage was sought, as the sheer volume of popular romance titles set in the Caribbean would make such a feat impossible. The thematic corpus is therefore rather selective in nature, but as the objective was to discover corals as a thematic element to probe their function within the frame of romance, such a mission was accomplished by this limited selection within the scope of the chapter.

2 Nora Roberts, *The Reef* (New York: Jove Books, 1998).

3 Sarah Brouillette, "Romance Work," *Theory & Event* 22 (2019): 453, 456.

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natural phenomena, like corals in the Caribbean, play a part in sustainability matters, whether consciously or not. This interaction is important for developing the cultural dimension of sustainability, where the role of humanities is essential in determining what counts for "the good life" and how to sustain its existence.[4] In considering this, the coral reef and popular romance literature – the natural phenomenon and human activity – are seen as interrelated and mutually symbiotic, not separate entities. In such a view of literature and cultural sustainability, as Hubert Zapf notes, we see "a potentiality of texts that only comes alive through its ever new actualisations by ever new generations of readers, within always changing historical, social and individual conditions of living across different periods and cultures".[5] Literary expression is deeply embedded in ecology and ecological concerns by (re)generating images and understandings of nature, and it is up to its readers to elicit those meanings regardless of genre or (lack of) environmental agenda. Romance writing, in other words, is open to this task like any other form of fiction, not least thanks to its propensity to enchant readers and explicitly titillate them; emotional responses are always potentially rife with political and ethical ones even when not obvious at first glance.

Of the small selection of romance novels set in the Caribbean under analysis in this chapter, Roberts' *The Reef* is a particularly interesting case of how coral reefs play a major role in the development of a romance narrative and how the romance narrative helps develop vistas of ecological interrelationships and interdependencies between humans and nature. The novel is a romance adventure set mostly offshore in the Caribbean (around the island of Nevis mostly), where the story revolves around historic shipwrecks and rival marine archaeologist/treasure hunters' bid to recover their bounties from underwater. The novel's romance involves Tate and Matthew, two young US American treasure hunters, who are kept apart by the evil plot of Silas Van Dyke, the man responsible for murdering Matthew's father, James Lassiter, years before in Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Tate's family, the independently wealthy, but down to earth, Beaumonts, are amateur divers and marine archaeologists, who spend their leisure time in the waters of St Kitts and Nevis onboard their ship, the Adventure, looking for underwater treasures. In particular, they are in search of the wrecks of two Spanish ships, the Santa Marguerite and the Isabella, indicated by their own research efforts to have sunk with a bounty of treasures in the region in the 1700s. The novel's diving sequences feature colourful

4 Torsten Meireis and Gabriele Rippl, "Introduction," in *Cultural Sustainability. Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Torsten Meireis et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 4.

5 Hubert Zapf, "Cultural Ecology and the Sustainability of Literature," in *Cultural Sustainability. Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Torsten Meireis et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 143.

depictions of underwater life, including corals, fish and other treasures such as the sought-after shipwrecks that the protagonists discover one by one.

Coincidentally, the self-made (but considerably poorer than the Beaumonts) young man Matthew Lassiter and his uncle Buck are in similar pursuit on their own ship. The ships' crews decide to join forces in search of the treasures, and a romance develops between the two young people, Tate and Matthew. After their summer romance, the story continues after years of no contact due to a misunderstanding – a hiatus required for both parties to mature. Tate, now a professionally trained marine archaeologist working on her PhD, and Matthew, a down-on-his-luck yet resilient and resourceful diver, reconnect in their pursuit of the sunken treasures. While doing so, they must fight the evil forces of Silas Van Dyke, the manipulative, evil tycoon in search of the lost medallion, Angelique's Curse, at any cost. The story naturally ends in the conventional happily ever after, where evil is punished, the good rewarded and order restored, but the story leaves behind questions regarding the fate of coral reefs, one of the major environmental concerns in the Caribbean and in the centre of the novel's marine setting.

In the hand-picked selection of popular romance novels set in the Caribbean, corals function as a way to mark characterisation and character development, as well as interpersonal relationships in an effort to foreground the "good" and "bad" traits of each character. Corals function as a dialogic third party, or a silent interlocutor, in this negotiation of who is who in the narrative. The story relies on an interaction between humans and corals to achieve its purpose of showing if not telling the layout of dramatis personae. In the case of showcasing a character's good nature, like in the case of the protagonist, Tate, in *The Reef*, corals are portrayed as aesthetically pleasing and vulnerable in the character's mind, be the mind focalised in the third person or first. In the case of ruthlessness and malignant rivalry, corals are the collateral damage marking the havoc wreaked on the wronged characters' property and psyche. Looming in the background, but never voiced in overt detail according to genre conventions forbidding too much political discourse, is an overall sense of jeopardy and loss towards coral reefs in the narratives when depicting the attitudes of the "good" characters. The villains, such as Silas Van Dyke in *The Reef*, naturally, show no concern for the environment, further highlighting their irredeemable qualities. Love and loss, in other words, go hand in hand in these romantic narratives, highlighting the precarious and vulnerable nature of romantic love but also the environment in and from which the narrative emerges.

Looming Loss: Corals and the Caribbean

Beyond the touristic paradise discourse, the Caribbean can be characterised as an environmental "hotspot" susceptible to the negative effects of climate change including rising sea temperatures, hurricanes and coral reef decline.[6] The "ghost" of colonialism continues to haunt the region; the imperial project's modus operandi was exploitation and extraction, sowing the destructive seeds for many of the changes we can observe today. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert summarises this haunted nature of Caribbean environments in the following manner:

> With scant care for the welfare and development of the local population, the territories fell into patterns of exploitation that paid little attention to their impact on local inhabitants or environments. As many plants and animals fell victim to earlier forms of environmental misuse (the plantation, mining, deforestation, overfishing), the region's newest form of resource exploitation – tourism development, particularly on our coasts – threatens mangroves and other coastal fisheries, oral reefs, seagrasses and their dependent species, turtles who have seen significant losses in access to former nurseries, marine mammals like the West Indian manatee dependent on coastal habitats, migratory birds dependent on disappearing coastal watersheds, and countless remaining species.[7]

Paravisini-Gebert goes on to explore literary accounts of environmental challenges (such as the extinction of the Haitian Creole pig or colonial deforestation in Suriname) in the work of authors as far apart historically as Aphra Behn and Derek Walcott in an effort to demonstrate how writers imagine large-scale environmental devastation and extinction in the region. Ultimately, environmental issues such as biodiversity loss bear upon literature directly; what is possible to express depends largely on what there is to draw from.

While it is understandable that animals like parrots, monk seals and red macaws as a part of "Caribbean megafauna" garner most global interest, larger, more invisible biodiversity challenges are at hand in addition to the number of endemic species in jeopardy.[8] One such challenge is the decline of coral reefs throughout the Caribbean, where human impact thanks to overfishing, pollution and global warming threatens coral reef ecosystems. While challenges have been acknowledged by natural scientists from the 1960s onwards, when the discussion focused on overfishing, we can see a gradual discourse shift in the past 30 years from a more cau-

6 Mimi Sheller, *Island Futures. Caribbean Survival in the Anthropocene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 11.

7 Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "Extinctions: Chronicles of Vanishing Fauna in the Colonial and Postcolonial Caribbean," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 344.

8 Paravisini-Gebert, "Extinctions," 343.

tious assessment to full-blown crisis in the reporting on coral reef decline in scientific language. For example, in a piece of research from 1994, the tone is still cautious, stating that "many reefs around the world are increasingly threatened".[9] Twenty years ago, in 2003, the discourse denoted an even bigger certainty of the coral reefs' dire situation: "It is becoming increasingly acknowledged that coral reefs are globally threatened".[10] More recently, in 2021, a discussion on Caribbean coral communities and their transformation began with "The mass die-off of Caribbean corals", coldly stating the fact before moving on to chronicle the types of changes happening thanks to anthropogenic stressors.[11] The simplification of the reefs' make-up leads to their inability to tolerate rising sea levels, and biodiversity loss will mean fewer fish and invertebrates and decreased self-recovery for the reefs.[12] Human activity leads to temperature gain, acidification and other stressors, resulting in damage to and decline in coral populations.[13] Boat anchoring is another source of damage to corals in the Caribbean, some byproducts of which include sewage, littering, antifouling paint and interaction with other stressors.[14] All these factors naturally lead to unthinkable losses well beyond the obvious; in the literary imagination, there hardly is anything left to write about, when the environment imagined is dead.

Yet, coral reefs provide a rich underwater habitat for literary and other imagined, artistic takes on Caribbean nature. As Ann Elias notes, "Over centuries, the coral reef has figured as a mariner's nightmare, a scientific problem, the source of myth, a visual object, a touristic landmark, an Indigenous heritage, and for explorers, an underwater frontier."[15] In Elias' discussion of early twentieth-century underwater photography in the Bahamas and the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, the reef came to stand for the imperial project: a reflection of the ever-expanding

9 Terence P. Hughes, "Catastrophes, Phase Shifts, and Large-Scale Degradation of a Caribbean Coral Reef," *Science* 265 (1994): 1547.

10 Toby A Gardner et al., "Long Term Region-Wide Declines in Caribbean Corals," *Science* 301, no. 5635 (2003): 958.

11 Katie L Gramer et al., "The Transformation of Caribbean Coral Communities since Humans," *Ecology and Evolution* 11 (2021): 10098.

12 Gramer et al., "Caribbean Coral Communities," 10108.

13 P.J. Edmunds, "A Quarter-Century Demographic Analysis of the Caribbean Coral, *Orbicella Annularis*, and Projections of Population Size over the Next Century," *Liminology and Oceanography* 60 (2015): 840.

14 Rebecca L. Flynn and Graham E. Forrester, "Boat Anchoring Contributes Substantially to Coral Reef Degradation in the British Virgin Islands," *PeerJ* 7 (2019): 11.

15 Ann Elias, *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 1.

and discoverable, conquerable world, resulting in a "coral empire".[16] The uncanny spectacle of the coral reef provides titillating opportunities to discover hidden treasures and underwater miracles waiting to be found by the adventuring Western subject. In this sense, the coral reef is also an affective space; on it a "whole gamut of human emotions could be projected" because of its promises for aesthetic, technological and imperial developments.[17] There is also a voyeuristic dimension to the sea, as underwater wonders are gazed and marvelled at through the lens of photography and on the pages of mass media products such as *The National Geographic* and other magazines devoted to the world's marvels. In the early 1900s, like in Elias, but also today, as evidenced by this chapter's argument, the coral reef is a phenomenon thoroughly imagined, fetishised, and exploited. The coral reef, in other words, is "a stage for a modern spectacle",[18] here including the romance novel as will be discussed next.

Corals and Romance

Nora Roberts is probably the best-known contemporary American romance writer. According to an interview in *The Guardian* on January 30, 2020, she is the author of over 200 books and has sold over 500 million copies worldwide. Active since the 1980s, it is safe to say that Roberts is the leading contemporary romance writer of the past decades. One of the key requirements for success in the literary market of popular romance is to keep rediscovering the winning formula of romance each time, one that varies sufficiently yet stays within the comfort zone of one's intended audience and customer base.[19] According to An Goris, what is unique to Roberts's success as an author is that in her novels, the love story completes the individual's unification of mind and body, perhaps the driving force behind her success as an author.[20] Authors are constantly looking for inspiration from social

16 Elias, *Coral Empire*, 7.

17 Elias, *Coral Empire*, 21.

18 Elias, *Coral Empire*, 230.

19 The plot has to be sufficiently complicated, but familiar enough to be credible and distinguishable as a part of the Roberts brand. On familiarity as helping transportation into the story-world in reading the romance, see Maleah Fekete, "Confluent Love and the Evolution of Ideal Intimacy: Romance Reading in 1980 and 2016," *The Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 11 (2022): 4. Accessed February 2, 2023. https://www.jprstudies.org/2022/05/confluent-love-and-the-evolution-of-ideal-intimacy-romance-reading-in-1980-and-2016/.

20 An Goris, "Mind, Body, Love: Nora Roberts and the Evolution of Popular Romance Studies," *The Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 3 (2012): 18. Accessed March 15, 2023. https://www.jprstu

phenomena of their time, as evidenced by the rise of BDSM romance in the wake of the bestselling *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy by E.L. James. Furthermore, recent topics in romance writing, like royalty, zombies or stepsiblings, quite clearly reflect audience expectations and changing social fabrics. Because true love is fragile and always threatened by obstacles and loss, the plot structures need more padding than merely parental disapproval or other traditional obstacles heightening the romantic excitement. Romance novels today need several plot complications and this means that both audiences as well as texts have designs on each other; a mutually satisfying contract needs to be built in and by the narrative for readers to keep buying titles and, hence, for this commercial genre to flourish.[21]

One crucial design of the successful romance novel is the characters. A typical Roberts heroine in the novels is "hardworking, reliable, and efficient", all traits pointing towards a successful future marriage with the hero, who is either a businessman or a warrior type; he is self-reliant and a dependable, traditionally masculine, yet sufficiently emancipated man.[22] As readers generally seek more sexual content from their reading than in the past, the hero needs to also be an experienced alpha male in need of transformation. Fekete sums up the requirements that the hero needs to fulfil, which applies neatly to *The Reef*:

> The stoic, emotionally detached, and sexually promiscuous hero provides emotional comfort and care in which he has never done before and reacts aggressively and protectively when the heroine is threatened, often using his physical strength to defend or save the heroine.[. . .] The heroine is emotionally vulnerable but strong. She is valued for her love-skills as a caring, unique, beautiful woman who is incidentally sexually persuasive. The heroine uses these love-skills to transform her hero from a promiscuous "alpha male" into an affectionate and caring "lover boy".[23]

True love, in other words, is always transformative; it changes the hero, but also the heroine.[24] True romantic love is a profound experience, not unlike an encoun-

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dies.org/2012/10/mind-body-love-nora-roberts-and-the-evolution-of-popular-romance-studies-by-an-goris/.

21 Elina Valovirta, "No Ordinary Love. The Romantic Formula of Stepsibling Erotica," in *Thinking with the Familiar in Contemporary Literature and Culture 'Out of the Ordinary'*, ed. Joel Kuortti et al. (Amsterdam: Brill, 2019), 174–75.

22 Carolina Fernández Rodríguez, "Nora Roberts's Boonsboro Empire: Boosting Business through Romance, Invigorating Romance with Affective Capitalism," in *Romantic Escapes. Post-Millenial Trends in Contemporary Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Irene Pérez-Férnandez and Carmen Pérez Ríu (Bern: Peter Lang, 2021), 105.

23 Fekete, "Confluent Love," 9–10.

24 Lynne Pearce, *Romance Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 1.

ter with natural wonders in a paradise setting, as is the case in the Caribbean romances under scrutiny here.

As the Caribbean is synonymous with hedonistic leisure and pleasure, several seaside activities fill the pages of romance novels, as the story needs activities and settings in which to develop. One could dismiss corals and their existence within the romance genre as a mere backdrop, as a story very well must take place somewhere, but this chapter argues, that they cannot take place anywhere. It is no coincidence that the Caribbean coral reef features prominently in the novels by Roberts and others; the setting is not merely a backdrop, nor are corals simply an inanimate background against which the stories unfold, as if on stage. Instead, they are oftentimes a catalyst, a force and an important turning point for characters and the plot. At the same time, they are collaterals of the romance industry and story fodder in dire need of serious consideration to participate in solving global challenges to the environment from all angles.

Characterisation Through Coralline Encounters

Tourism in the Caribbean is subject to varying degrees of "academic suspicion", as posited by Jocelyn Guilbault.[25] Similarly, romance writing is oftentimes dismissed as mere trash.[26] We can easily demonise romance literature and its use of exotic locations for its fodder, as well as the regressive gender stereotypes it oftentimes reproduces, but perhaps it is more fruitful to place these fantastic and phantasmatic encounters with corals, people and romance, in conversation with concepts that allow their serious scrutiny. Such concepts include the idea of cultural sustainability mentioned in the introduction, but also that of "emotional economies" at the heart of the tourism industry.[27] Furthermore, in such scrutiny, we may avoid reductionist readings doing no justice to the immense richness of the underwater world and the way that we project meanings on it beneath the surface – both literally and figuratively.

Because genre literature relies on convention and intuition, it is important for the reader to glean each character's main features from the outset (except for

25 Jocelyn Guilbault, "Sound Management: Listening to Sandals Halcyon in Saint Lucia," in *Sounds of Vacation: Political Economies of Caribbean Tourism*, ed. Jocelyne Guilbault and Timothy Rommen (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 161.

26 On romance as trash, see Rodríguez, "Boonsboro Empire," 116.

27 Matei Candea and Giovanni da Col, "The Return to Hospitality," *Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute* 18 (2012): 12.

the hero, who is bound to give a conflicting impression to catch the heroine's – and the reader's – interest).[28] In most of the narratives analysed in this study, the characters' "good" nature is revealed through their encounters with corals and their wish to admire and protect them. Both Tate and Matthew's fathers in *the Reef* are first introduced to the reader by way of their underwater exploits featuring corals. In the opening scene of the novel, Matthew's father, James, dies on a dive in the Barrier Reef, when the villain Silas Van Dyke tampers with his diving gear. Embarking on a dive, James' thoughts about the wonders of the underwater world are revealed, and "He caught himself reaching out to stroke a spine of coral as though it were a cat".[29] This tenderness foregrounds the magnitude of his loss and subsequent thirst for revenge in his son, Matthew, then 16. Tate's father, Raymond, is equally revealed to be a kind-hearted, environmentally oriented individual in a scene where the father and daughter duo are diving together in the Caribbean: "She glanced toward him now, watched the way he examined a low ridge of coral. However much he dreamed of treasure made by man, Raymond Beaumont loved the treasures made by the sea".[30] These small mentions essentially reveal in a nutshell what these two fathers are like: gentle, capable and good for the environment.

For the main characters, character development likewise happens underwater, where naturally there is no dialogue. Instead, silent observation on their dives reveals how each interacts with the surrounding marine life and thus imparts information about the love interest's character. On one of their dives, Tate is depicted as studying her surroundings with admiration and awe, while Matthew studies her in turn: "Like a kid in a candy store, Matthew thought, as he watched her,"[31] and admits to feeling similar appreciation for the underwater life. Besides characterisation, this moment serves to advance the tension developing between the two, as the oblivious Tate is observed in her natural habitat, unknowingly ticking all the right boxes for Matthew.

On another dive, corals are once again in the spotlight as Tate examines the ocean floor for treasures, enjoying the natural wonders: "As far as she was concerned she was home again, with the fish as both audience and playmates. Every lovely sculpture of coral pleased her eye".[32] In this scene, we get the sense of Tate once again belonging in the water, having a relationship with the marine life and being at one with it, one again highlighting human-marine relations as central to

28 On familiarity and intuitiveness of romance narratives, see Fekete, "Confluent Love," 4.
29 Roberts, *Reef*, 8.
30 Roberts, *Reef*, 11.
31 Roberts, *Reef*, 29.
32 Roberts, *Reef*, 257.

the romance narrative. Matthew, for his part, is "always close at hand to share some small delight with".[33] In this unionised view of underwater living, a shared set of values in the form of profound appreciation for all things underwater becomes established despite their differences caused by his arrogance and her stubbornness on dry land and aboard the ship – again required for plot complications which benefit from the novel's changes of scenery.

In the underwater soundness of the two minds working in unison, we have another paralleled character feature materialising in the way the two work meticulously. In addition to appreciation of underwater life, characterisation in *The Reef* showcases Tate's perseverance in the way she documents her findings: "She examined a formation of coral, fanning sand away. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Matthew tucking conglomerate into his lobster bag. She started to smile at him, the way she reserved for herself when she knew he wasn't looking".[34] In this passage, a connection is made through a connection with the environment, when a mutual understanding of the importance and joy of what they are doing takes over her – the requirement of advance audience knowledge of the blossoming romance means that he is not expected to be privy to the true nature of her feelings.

In the same vein, the novel makes explicit how capable Tate is at her craft of documenting underwater archaeological phenomena. Here the point is to show how she has matured over the years (and thence is more ready for romance in the later developments of the narrative): "She began to make note of the landscape of the seafloor, knowing her assignment was to sketch it carefully. [. . .] Science was exacting, she reminded herself even as she watched the dance of an angelfish duet".[35] No longer a college girl, but a budding scientist, the emotionally mature Tate is now able to appreciate the underwater seascape with all the skills she has acquired, including a stronger sense of professional self, yet another feature required from the properly love-skilled romance heroine.

To provide another example from a best-selling romance novel on how characterisation works in connection with corals, the protagonist Stella in the African American hit novel and subsequent movie *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* is depicted on a snorkeling expedition. Here she becomes characterised through corals and her treatment of them as she, an independent middle-aged professional woman, is on holiday in Jamaica where she meets the new love of her life, Winston, a Jamaican college student working in hospitality for the summer. On her swim, Stella encounters Jamaica's natural wonders with an ethics of care:

33 Roberts, *Reef*, 257.
34 Roberts, *Reef*, 257.
35 Roberts, *Reef*, 263.

> I snorkel snorkel and snorkel some more. The fish are beautiful and the coral reefs are unbelievable which is of course why people snorkel. [. . .] I want to touch the plants because they are swooning and swaying and look as though they are reaching up to the surface of the water but we are not supposed to touch the coral because some of them, most of them, are still alive and could die from being handled by human hands and I think it's pretty fucking amazing that you can touch something so beautiful in alovely way and it could like just die.[36]

Because the novel is an age-gap romance (Stella is 42 to Winston's 21), the heroine must be depicted as non-predatory and likeable. Not only is she a hard-working single woman, who takes good care of herself, her son and her finances, Stella's character needs integrity in terms of the holiday environment where her romance and love interest emerge. The snorkeling passage takes care of this requirement by portraying Stella's conscientious attitude towards the corals she admires. She is careful not to touch them and her thoughts are presented to the reader in an effort to make clear her cognisance of the delicate situation she is in, both underwater and on the holiday. Her treatment of the young man, Winston, becomes paralleled with the corals; both are natural wonders eliciting gentle care.

In another novel, Shelby Black's *His to Own*, set in the waters of the US Virgin islands, the protagonist Caroline proceeds to fall in love with Jackson, the self-made billionaire on his yacht. On a beach stroll during one of their stops at Turks and Caicos, they witness a natural phenomenon, the green flash – a brief, unique moment at sunset, when the setting sun flashes a green spot outside its perimeter. Along this once-in-a lifetime experience as a special moment, like the discovery of true love, Jackson's knowledge of the natural world as he explains the green flash to her serves as a catalyst for Caroline to decide on the man as trustworthy. During this shared experience, Jackson's attitude towards the sea shells on the beach they are walking on is conscientious: "We hold hands and stroll along the beach for what feels like miles, stopping to admire a small seashell here and there. Jackson tells me it's not legal to take the shells here, to protect the wildlife and reefs. I love that he knows and respects something like that".[37] The relationship between the two lovers, in other words, advances by way of his respectful relationship with the surrounding nature, which makes the heroine deem him trustworthy. The protection of vulnerable natural elements such as the reefs also signals to the reader that this would-be lover comes with earnest intentions.

The Caribbean holiday romance as depicted in these novels is oftentimes constructed to develop through shared leisure activities, such as parachuting, diving, snorkeling and strolling on the beach. Romance readers are clearly conscious of

36 Terry McMillan, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (Berkeley: Random House, 1996), 204.
37 Shelby Black, *His to Own: The Billionaire's Captive* (Self-published, 2021), 48.

real-world concerns as evidenced by, for example, the explicit mention of condoms and safe sex at moments of erotic intimacy throughout the genre.[38] Another such instance is the acknowledgement of the economic disparity between the local man and tourist woman in Leigh Morano's *Caribbean Romance*, where the narrative needs overt monetary negotiation in order to be credible. Activities like snorkeling at a coral reef provide an opportunity to not only develop the romance, but also to characterise the male love interest as earnest and dependable instead of money-hungry and thus a short-term companion. Morano's novel is mostly set in St. Maarten, where Vanessa and Marcelo, the budding couple, are dealing with Marcelo's unwillingness to be paid for when undertaking marine activities. Leigh ponders upon his chivalrous nature:

> Most men would protest, but allow in the end if a woman insisted on paying her own way. Marcelo was acting as if it would be an assault to his honor were she to pay for anything. [. . .] She forgot about her intentions (of teaching him to accept her gifts) for a while as they explored the beautiful coral and were stunned by the amazing sea life that swam past them. Snorkeling was more fun than she had ever imagined it could be . . .[39]

In this passage, the coral reef expedition acts as a bargaining arena of economic relations, which Marcelo – despite his more modest earning potential as a resident of a developing country – has a hard time accepting as uneven. Vanessa, as the liberated Western woman typical of a contemporary romance heroine, is willing to pay for him, whereas Marcelo, the steadfastly proud, old-fashioned man, is unwilling to take her money (although he is later revealed to come from a wealthy family and would not need her money in any case). This signals to the reader that the romance is true; no casual beach boy lover would turn down free money, but true love would, as true love is inherently redemptive. The admiration of sea life is both the catalyst and the antidote for an economic dilemma to resolve itself but also testifies to the pseudo-obstacles the contemporary romance needs for its plot twists to keep titillating its readers.

Not all encounters with corals proceed the plot towards it romantic conclusion; they also have a role to play at a moment of loss. When Silas Van Dyke ransacks and destroys the excavation site of the Marguerite in Roberts' *The Reef*, the ravaged site mirrors with Tate's feelings towards Matthew, with whom she has reconnected

38 The existence of safe sex within the erotic romance as a commercial genre means that this is what the reading audience expects. On the omnipresence of condom use in popular romance, see Elina Valovirta, "Repeated Pleasure. Reading the Threesome Ménage Romance as Digital Literature," in *Powerful Prose. How Textual Features Impact Readers*, ed. R.L. Victoria Pöhls et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021), 55.

39 Leigh Morano, *Caribbean Romance* (Self-published, 2012), 45.

after eight years apart. Tate, heartbroken at the loss of the ship and its treasures, tries to take in the natural beauty, which previously served as the arena in which her romance developed: "There was still beauty surrounding her. The coral, the fish, the waving plants. But it didn't touch her now as she recorded the scene that had once been the stage for such great joy. It was fitting, she supposed, that it had been ruined, destroyed, neglected. Just like the love she'd once offered Matthew".[40] The beauty and the destruction mirrors with the loss of love, as the novel's more dramatic mood sets in. In the subsequent exchange, Tate equates the destroyed shipwreck with the remains of her relationship with Matthew: "I understood something when I was down there, looking at what was left. There is nothing left, Matthew. The ship, that summer, that girl. All that's gone".[41] The destroyed seafloor and the remains of a joint past are now both gone, together creating the illusion of a total loss, which naturally in the frame of romance is to prove short lasting, as it always regenerates itself towards the conclusion. Plot complications require the occasional loss and heartbreak, but the way these relate to coral loss and sustainability as a literary phenomenon remains a matter to be discussed further in the following.

Towards Cultural and Literary Sustainability: The Force and Uses of Coral Reefs in Fiction

As we can glean from this foray into the ways in which corals feature in Caribbean popular romances, the sea and the underwater world are vital to literature and literary production. Coral reef biodiversity and its jeopardised nature in the Caribbean context forces us to think not only about human-sea relations as a literary theme, but also about how all literature exists in interaction with the environment it depicts; this is at the centre of the idea of cultural sustainability, a fairly recent phenomenon in literary studies (and an even more recent one in popular romance studies).[42] While it is easier to produce environmental readings of literature, which quite explicitly features environmentalist concerns and agendas, it is nevertheless important to see popular literature (with its primarily commercial agenda) as a part of the same discourse of literature in direct relationship with the environment it utilises for its thematic fuel. This is a crucial endeavor if we wish to interrogate the ways in which Caribbean land and seascapes are used and romanced in and by fiction.

40 Roberts, *Reef*, 245.
41 Roberts, *Reef*, 247.
42 Zapf, "Cultural Ecology," 141.

In such romancing of the Caribbean and its waterways, we can see how water serves as a uniting factor, something capable of housing genres and modes of being regardless of literary quality. Caribbean romances utilise water as their central element and beg to consider the global web of relations between humans, our cultural production and the sea. Water in the Caribbean context, when it is used for the romantic imagination, naturally associates with the beach, hedonism, getting away from everyday life, wealthy lifestyles and time off, yet it has an element of the uncanny as it operates here in the turning of a romance as always inherently mystical and otherworldly, like a fairy tale.

The uses of water and Caribbean seascapes for the purposes of these commercial fairy tales meant for popular consumption invite us to consider water as a commodity, something used for capitalist purposes like the tourism and cruise industries. Popular romance is quite clearly a part of that framework: we consume water, we use it for romance, making it an investment, a piece of property and a commodity. Romance is a wealthy genre in the sense that it is read mostly by middle class readers and it depicts well-to-do lives (usually wealthy segments of Western society), so we need to also meditate on the repercussions of our use of the Caribbean sea and landscape for our reading pleasures.

Literary materials are not "eating the ocean" in the literal sense as in Elspeth Probyn's *Eating the Ocean*, which looks at human-fish relationships in our consumption of marine life (such as sushi, tuna and omega 3).[43] She denotes the inextricable link between water and food, but a similar case can be argued for "the creative economy" of literature,[44] where a web of relations between the sea and the book also exists. The books are figuratively romancing the Caribbean seascape for the use of the literary and tourism industries, meaning that we exist in a global web of relations between humans and the sea. We "eat the ocean" by using it as romance fodder, its fuel and nourishment.

In such a reading framework, a seemingly apolitical genre like the consumer product of a romance book becomes politicised and makes us susceptible to consider, among other things, questions of sustainability and human impact on the sea. When we see the sea and water as intrinsic to the ways in which we romance the Caribbean, we must also consider the price paid by the environment. It is clear that in this context, literary readings can hardly elicit direct policy changes or lessen pollution or coral reef damage. But by examining the kinds of images produced about the Caribbean coral reefs and human activity surrounding them,

43 Elspeth Probyn, *Eating the Ocean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

44 Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

what they can do is help elucidate how and what meanings we create about or around the sea. What is the language of (un)sustainability like?

Caribbean writing has long proceeded to document the effects of colonial "slow violence" to the region's environments, as Paravisini-Gebert reminds us.[45] In the same vein, Stacy Alaimo points out how, in relation to the sea, "the arts and humanities are essential for understanding the scientific the scientific captures and dissemination of particular narratives, tropes, and styles across science, literature, art, popular culture, and activism".[46] Making sense of how we assign meaning carries political significance, as water and its inhabitants like corals are omnipresent globally; water seeps into our lived lives, experiences, and remains a shared, uniting and dividing factor not only engaging with our senses, but also our belongings and identities. It is a non-static, fluid space asking to be taken seriously even in the context of non-serious, popular literature. This is what the framework of the "Blue Humanities" can do, to elicit conceptual change in developing sustainable tourism and overall cultural and social sustainability.[47] It can educate and enlighten audiences invested in romancing the Caribbean in the form of cultural products or tourism to envision Caribbean seascapes in a different mindframe and, perhaps, become more conscious consumers and globe-dwellers.

But the question of reading corals and the seascapes in which they exist in tandem with human activity and impact remains more complex than humans as independent agents in the sea, doing things to it as they wish, by their activities like snorkelling, treasure hunting or aquatic sports. In this discussion, matter and text are intertwined, and corals are a good example of that. Material ecocriticism investigates "the interlacements of matter and discourses not only as they are re-created by literature and other cultural forms, but also as they emerge in material expressions".[48] Matter, in other words, is a text to be read and interpreted, as I have done here with corals, which is the contribution of the materialist paradigm in ecocriticism. The primacy of human agency is undone in this frame, where we recognise other, impersonal, material forces and relations working agentially, such as natural forces like hurricanes or corals. According to Iovino and Oppermann, ecological crises "are tangles of natures and cultures that can be unravelled only by interpreting them as narratives about the way humans and their agentic partners intersect in

45 Paravisini-Gebert, "Extinctions," 352.

46 Stacy Alaimo, "Introduction: Science Studies and the Blue Humanities," *Configurations* 27 (2019): 431.

47 We can also refer to the preoccupation with water, the sea and the ocean as hydrocriticism, the oceanic turn or the blue humanities, which Alaimo chooses. Alaimo, "Blue Humanities," 429.

48 Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter," in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 6.

the making of the world".[49] The point regarding corals here is not about an attempt to prove their agentic nature per se, but to show how they act in relation to and in interaction with humans and other bodies. Water, for instance, has agentic force when it can wash over or drown you. Similarly, corals living with and in that water have force to enchant, enliven and incite responses in other bodies around it. Those responses may well be environmentally motivated should we want them to.

Coral reefs are vital to the biodiversity of marine life in the Caribbean as well as to the narratives of popular romance fiction. As Elias notes, "Corals have always been a physical and cultural force".[50] Their force in popular romance fiction set in the Caribbean is harnessed for the purposes of romance, which as I have demonstrated, interacts with corals powerfully in this chapter's selection of novels. Readers, of course, glean meanings about them through the medium of literature, and because of this mediated nature of marine life, it makes sense to discuss how those lives are represented.[51] In fact, literary encounters with marine phenomena may in fact "themselves be forms of entanglement that may motivate concern for marine conservation".[52] Despite concern for the harmful effects of "ecoporn" as a consumerist endeavour like we see in popular romance, the accessibility of popular literature offers us a unique vista to environmental concerns. In it, the potentiality of love and loss amidst corals may well produce something enduring, when we learn to think of literary texts as "ecological metanarratives of their culture" and therefore think sustainably across artificial boundaries between humans and nature or low and high brow literature.[53]

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49 Iovino and Oppermann, "Stories," 10.

50 Elias, *Coral Empire*, 16.

51 Stacy Alaimo, "Feminist Science Studies: Aesthetics and Entanglement in the Deep Sea," in *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 191. Accessed March 16, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199742929.013.014.

52 Stacy Alaimo, "Feminist Science Studies," 192.

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