

## SEVEN

# THE GLOBALISED GARDEN: JAMAICA KINCAID'S POSTCOLONIAL GOTHIC

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### Abstract

This article examines the tension between the pleasures of gardening and the colonial legacy of botany in Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*: arguing that her work involves an uncanny worlding that haunts the present, speaks of forgotten violences and demonstrates a common ground between vegetal, animal and human lives in the Anthropocene.

### Plant Thinking

Are plants doomed to self effacement as perpetual stand-ins for something else be it the material basis of industrial development or romantic love? How can literature disentangle life from its symbolic means and 'go back to the plants themselves'? Michael Marder & Patricia Vieira (2013, 44)

Jamaica Kincaid's dialogue with the landscape of the garden in *My Garden (Book)*: (1999) and her account of searching for seeds in Nepal in *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*, (2005) involves a confrontation with the perpetual "standing-in" for other things of plants themselves. Her writing on plants is marked by a profound ambivalence, both an enthusiasm for being a gardener and a constant negotiating with botanical history. The thoughts

of a postcolonial writer and gardener whose reflections on the relation between human and plant extend to explore the legacies of the globalised movement of plants might be termed a kind of “plant thinking”: a thinking with and about plants in which a kind of vegetal thought narrates the haunting of what I will argue is a globalised gothic garden. I have borrowed the term “plant thinking” from the philosopher Michael Marder’s extensive and fascinating work on plant life in philosophy and poetry. In *The Philosopher’s Plant* (2013), Marder explores the workings of a particular plant on the thinking of philosophers throughout Western history, discussing the little acknowledged presence of plants and trees in philosophical thought, with offerings such as Heidegger’s Apple Tree, Hegel’s Grapes and Kant’s Tulip. These short essays enable Marder to argue for a series of philosophical failings around thinking with or about plants, where “plants themselves have been forlorn as they were supposed to point to a reality beyond themselves, ranging from Ideas to Spirit. The forgetting of the growing trees, herbs, or flowers corresponds to and stems from the forgetting of being in the midst of various attempts to name it” (p. 39). By examining a single plant and its role in the thought of an established philosopher he creates ways of teasing out and deconstructing the founding concepts on which different concepts rest.

In their essay “Writing Phytophilia: Philosophers and Poets as lovers of Plants” (2013) where Marder and Patricia Vieira trace the role of plants in Rousseau’s philosophy and the profession of a “love” of plants in Western Metaphysics—they comment, “with very few exceptions metaphysical philosophers have not been phytophiles and so were incapable of loving being as a whole” (p. 39). They suggest that Rousseau was one of the few, who referred to himself as a botanophile:

Rousseau’s love of plants was not the product of a naïve yearning to abolish the distance that separates humanity corrupted by civilization from nature. This would be impossible, as Derrida notes in *Of Grammatology*, both signification and representation are supplements of presence which they actually constitute investing it with meaning – as such these supplements could be trimmed down or brought back in touch with their purportedly natural foundations but never completely eliminated. (p. 39)

Their problem is “how to resist on the one hand the metaphysical instrumentalization of the flora and on the other hand its fetishizing mystification” (p. 39). Rousseau’s love of plants requires an attempt to see them as they truly are, not to impose anthropocentric ways of reading or using plants. “Rousseau passionately desires to lose himself ‘like an insect’ among the grasses of the meadows, being true to plants would be a kind of melting into the world, a certain detachment from the self then, a depersonalisation, that tries to see the plant as it really is, whilst acknowledging this can’t even really happen” (p. 39).

As they acknowledge, plants “as such” will forever elude us as our understanding of their being is necessarily mediated through human senses and perception, scientific knowledge and the long cultural history of human vegetal interaction. It is this uncanny eluding that I would

argue characterises Kincaid's struggle to think the significance of her relation to the plants she tends and attempts to nurture, as well as the plants that interfere in different ways with her thinking. In the spirit of Marder and Vieira's association of specific plants with particular philosophical modes I would propose a productive reading might be made of the significance of a number of plants in *My Garden (Book)*: (1999), in very different locations: the Wisteria in her Vermont garden, the Breadfruit Tree, and the Rubber Tree in the glass house in the Botanical Garden in Antigua. Whilst there are many moments of reflection alongside different plants in her text that are also discussed for example, these represent two differing dynamics and trajectories. They point to the tension in trying to see plants as they really are, in the face of supplementary forms of representation and signification that mark human-plant interactions. Opening with a discussion of Wisteria and closing with an account of the Breadfruit and the Rubber Tree this discussion will reflect on Kincaid's exploration and archaeology of entangled histories of nature.

The Wisteria, which features in the opening chapter of the book, offers an anxious and excited gardener a chance to contemplate the wilfulness and incomprehensibility of nature. Kincaid's account of her excitement as a new gardener is immersive and overwhelming:

Oh, how I like the rush of things, the thickness of things, everything condensed as it is happening, long after it has happened, so that any attempt to understand it will become like an unravelling of a large piece of cloth that had been laid flat and framed and placed as a hanging on a wall and, even then, expected to stand for something. (p. 24)

The image is that of a mesh, interconnected and inscrutable, coloured by images of thickness and condensation, which Kincaid embraces precisely because there is a pleasure in this incomprehensibility. The Wisteria eludes Kincaid, it appears to have a mind of its own, to flower at the "wrong" time and to upset her knowledge of gardening. Kincaid's response to this unreadability of the Wisteria is the repeated refrain "what to do?" When Kincaid asks "What should I do? What am I to do?" there is a pleasure in the inability to decide how best to respond to something out of her own control. She comments, "how agitated I am when I am in the garden, and how happy I am to be so agitated ... Nothing works the way I thought it would, and nothing looks the way I had imagined it" (p. 14). Whilst the Wisteria remains inscrutable and defeats her own desire for control and authority, the delight of engaging with the plant on its own terms as unknowable and answering to another mode of existing is intensely enjoyable. Kincaid's account of this experience is resonant with Marder and Vieira's comments: "The inaccessibility of plant life does not mean we should relinquish attempts to relate to plants on their own grounds—even to learn from their specific mode of existence. What is it like to be a plant, imagination is a vital entry point into the lives of plants" (p. 40). For Kincaid the garden is filled with awe, and whilst practical gardening has a role to play, it is doubts, amazement and awe that are the true gifts of the garden: "I know the practical, it will keep you breathing; awe, on the other hand, is what makes you (me) want to keep living." (1999, p. 16).

However, if the opening chapter is a paean to the strangeness and otherness of plant life, subsequent chapters in the book reflect on the multiple ways in which historical legacies of violent transplantation, radically transformed landscapes, offer a drastic intervention in the potential of Kincaid to think with, or through, plants.

### **The Globalised Garden**

I am not in nature. I do not find the world furnished like a room, with cushioned seats and rich-coloured rugs. To me, the world is cracked, unwhole, not pure, accidental; and the idea of moments of joy for no reason is very strange (p. 124).

Jamaica Kincaid's garden writing might be understood as offering a way to explore some of the current cultural and historical dynamics that make up what Rob Wilson (2007) calls "uncanny world dwelling" as she deliberates on the ethics of "taking care" and the uncanny effects of "making the world horizon come near" through acts of disorienting imagining in the globalised garden (p. 217). In such a reading we could approach Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*: as a text that might be drawn into a broader canon of postcolonial ecocritical literatures, thinking through the role of writing about plants as a vital part of Kincaid's writing life. *My Garden (Book)*: is an act of earth remembering but is fraught with pitfalls and a kind of emotional repulsion from the history that accompanies the pleasures of tending plants so significant to Kincaid as a gardener. This essay will ask if we might go further and see Kincaid's archaeology of plant histories as a kind of thinking with and through plants, where vegetal life is narrated in ways that enable the Anthropocene to come into view.

It is potentially a risky endeavour to apply a set of themes conceived in (over)developed nations to those postcolonial locations where other histories and ways of resisting imperialist power have developed. There is as, DeLoughrey et. al. (2005) note, a long history of cultural and ideological mismatches between first and third worlds where intellectual imperialism is enacted by academics in other places, only too familiar with imperialist methodologies, blind spots, wilful amnesia and outright denial, of the previous histories and power relations. It is with this concern that they ask whether the emerging field of ecocriticism can be brought into dialogue with Caribbean writing whilst being mindful of the contradictions and pitfalls of such a project. As the introduction stresses, they are alert to accusations of "grafting" ecocriticism onto the Caribbean, offering a critique of the introverted focus of North American ecocriticism as it was then taking hold in the academy. The essays in the collection propose to take up the challenge to move ecocriticism beyond nature writing, acknowledging the very serious ideological difficulties of seeking critical insights through ecocriticism as it then manifested. In "Worlding as Future Tactic" Wilson (2007) argues that the study of culture in the era of globalisation involves exploring how reading "texts of contemporary being and uncanny world dwelling can become a historical process of taking care and setting limits, entering into and

making the world horizon come near, and become local and informed, situated and instantiated as an uneven/incomplete process of world becoming” (p. 217). Wilson comments further,

Our own time of world globalisation is a destitute time in which the man of capital logic has all but forgotten the nature of being, the very worlding processes of ‘dwelling’ or ‘building up’ and ‘worlding’. Caring for literature and the humanities in this oblivious time of Earth forgetting can become an ex-static way of attending to language as a site of the historically determinate disclosure of the world horizon as such. (p. 216)

One area that might fruitfully be explored is the rise in postcolonial gothic and tropical gothic that has recently considered the ways in which Oceanic and Caribbean landscapes are haunted by buried traumas of invasion and genocide that underpin unsettled settling and bear witness to buried or disavowed histories of the plantation culture, resource extraction that were and still are the machines of the colonial and imperialist project. Arguing for the term “tropical gothic,” Justin D. Edwards and Sandra G. Vasconcelos migrate the term from its usual geographical domiciles, to suggest tropical gothic works to “tropicalize” the gothic, such that it performs with an intercultural and bidirectional dynamic, by reviving gothic images and themes in ways that mobilise and reuse dominant gothic tropes (2016). The concept of circulating images and tropes rather than the transfer or expansion of them is vital, if one is not to reduce this to a structure that reiterates unidirectional flows from centre to margins. Rather the postcolonial writer might be seen to deploy gothic as a mode of interrogating the silences of the present or of official histories.

Where the effects of globalisation and postcolonial experiences of violences done to self, nation and land converge or collide with intimations of globalised ecological catastrophe, further gothic forms proliferate. It is unsurprising, then, that ecogothic literature and criticism have arisen out of what Jason Moore (2015) terms the “world ecology” of wealth, power and nature of global capitalism—where ecological thinking is absent or repressed and the gothic is a culturally significant point of contact between criticism, postcolonial and ecocritical theory. Coming from a different critical space, we might also be able to read this form of de-distancing as a kind of unnatural or unsettling grafting, any kind of connecting up that unsettles distances between things or categories, which results in a changed perspective on the world. One such space where this seems to chime with contemporary ecocritical thought is the work of Timothy Morton, whose work on uncanny extreme intimacy also addresses the difficulties that attend to thinking globally about a localised vision or experience. In *Dark Ecology* (2016) he comments:

[W]hen massive entities such as the human species and global warming become thinkable they grow near. They are so massively distributed we can’t directly grasp them empirically. We vaguely sense them growing out of the corner of our eye while seeing the date in the centre of our vision. These hyperobjects remind us that the local is in fact uncanny. (2016, p. 11)

Isn't Kincaid's garden haunted after all? The garden is full of death, the woodpecker and the robins are poisoned, the house walls are being attacked, rabbits are invaders and Kincaid fantasises about killing them. Death stalks the garden, despite its association with nurture, and the garden itself must be made from the ruins of the garden that went before. Kincaid comments, "every garden dies with the gardener" and she is meticulous in her memorialisation of the previous owners of the house and their gardening, as she narrates her own labours, refusing to be seen to be working on a "blank" or empty space, acknowledging the lives and work that have preceded her own occupation of house and land. In her introduction to *My Garden (Book)*:, Kincaid recounts the origins of her creation of a garden from the remains of what had been left by the previous owner in her Vermont home, alongside her attempts to learn about horticulture. Asserting that every garden has a history, in her opening chapter, Kincaid recounts her earliest attempt to do something she thinks of as gardening. She takes her garden to be a blank, empty canvas, and she has paid a gardener to regrade the lawn of a house she has moved into whose previous owner, Mrs. Govern has died. Soon after she sees a series of maroon leaf sprouts pushing up in patches across the lawn and she is considering complaining about the job done in her garden to the neighbour who kindly points out that this is not a "lawn problem" but the shoots of peonies that Kincaid had no knowledge of. The uncanny sprouting of the previous owner's flowers from the ground beneath the overlaid lawn, points to the garden as palimpsest that an amateur gardener/reader cannot fully navigate. There will always be unburyings, uncanny interruptions of a controlled or overlaid new landscape, where a history of concealed actions and traces of others' lives still remain deep in the soil, that may reveal themselves, uncannily, not uninvited guests to the property, not invaders, but ghosts, original or preceding inhabitants, introduced to the garden by other owners and gardeners, whose legacy must be reckoned with. This opening up of the garden to being something other than itself "beside itself," stages the garden as having "always already" been uncanny. To an extent Kincaid hangs onto these legacies, stating that she was "firmly living in Mrs. McGovern's house (or the Yellow House, which is what the children came to call it . . . )" (pp. 6-7), as if the previous owner were merely hosting her.

If the garden is uncanny it is because the previous owner of the land has the ability to "return" through her plants. But it is not just the local ghosts of past owners that haunt. Kincaid's garden is full of colonial ghosts, brought to mind through the naming of plants. This is suggestive of a ghoulish grafting of colonial explorers' names onto the plants in the garden that conjures the ghosts of these explorers and their missions, as if their heads had been grafted on to stems where flowers should be. Bougainville looms over the garden, the legacy of his circumnavigation of the world written into every pink blossom. His voyage, which was the first by a Frenchman, was also the first to take naturalists and geographers aboard, which enabled his claim to a plant named after him by the naturalist Philibert Commerçon. Facing the garden and learning about plants is also a confrontation with other histories:

It would not be at all false to say that just at that moment I was reading a book and that book (written by the historian William Prescott) happened to be about the conquest of Mexico, or New Spain, as it was then called, and I came upon a flower called marigold, and the flower called dahlia and the flower called zinnia, and after that the garden was to me more than the garden as I used to think of it. After that the garden was also something else. (Kincaid, 1999, p. 6)

It appears that the historian of plants cannot fail to unearth stories of colonial devastation and appropriation that intrude onto the illusory peacefulness of the flower garden. It produces a double vision, looking with two eyes, one phenomenological and one semiotic, where the garden is at once raw, alive and corporeal, timeless and also where all is a sign, a code that leads to a vertiginous dizzying set of unfolding and unending narratives of conquest, exploitation and disaster. Kincaid must trouble the archive of gardening, and rail against its complicity with the colonial underpinning of gardening itself: “*The Oxford Companion to Gardens* (a book I often want to hurl across the room, it is so full of prejudice)” (p. 121). She comments, “the garden for me is so bound up with words about the garden, with words themselves, that any set idea of the garden, any set picture, is a provocation to me” (p. 7).

Kincaid’s text suggests that the gardener needs to develop a competence in “reading,” orienting themselves as with a key to a map, in order to navigate the meaning of the plants in the garden. Kincaid notes that the names of plants perform a historical assault on her as a Caribbean gardener, even in Vermont, “One day, while looking at the things that lay at my feet, I was having an argument with myself over the names I should use when referring to the things that lay before me. These things were plants. The plants, all of them—and there were hundreds—had two names” (p. 160). In that it signals the complex intertwining of the violent histories of forced transplantation and settlement, human, and botanic, that render the landscape of the Caribbean as Wilson Harris states, “a landscape saturated by traumas of conquest” (1962, p. 8). Kincaid reflects on this as she makes her own garden and comes to the realisation that she has produced a map of the Caribbean. She continues:

I do not tell this to the gardeners who had asked me to try to explain the thing I was doing, or to explain what I was trying to do; I only marvelled at the way the garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (the Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings) (p. 8).

In this apprehension Kincaid is paradigmatic of DeLoughrey et al.’s thoughts about the ways in which “the history of transplantation and settlement have contributed to a sense of place and an environmental ethic in the Caribbean” (2005, p. 135). Kincaid’s meditation on the demands to think through how the ruins of extractive colonialism and plantation culture can be lived in the present shares Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s (1996) assertions that living in the wake of

colonial botanical histories means that “the sense of belonging in the Caribbean is conditioned by an always incomplete knowledge of natural and human histories, which necessitates recreating a sense of place in the present.” (p. 20) At the end of Part II of *My Garden (Book)*:, Kincaid’s chapter, “In History,” opens and closes, or rather doesn’t close, repeats its refrain a second time, in a repeated image of the open wound of history: “an open wound with each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over” (p. 153). This chapter opens onto the complicity between Imperialism and Botany, one that goes to the heart of Kincaid’s crises and questioning as a gardener and a person. Although the focus of this discussion is Kincaid’s account of her garden, her later work *Among Flowers* (2005) also offers a fascinating counterpoint to the excavation of gardening in its account of her seed hunting travels, in that she undertakes a walking adventure that places her at least alongside, if not retracing, the steps of the explorers and botanists she takes on in *My Garden (Book)*:.

As Kincaid reflects on how she is positioned by the account of Christopher Columbus’s encounter with and naming of Antigua, she comments that Columbus names the island after a church, and ‘empties the land’ of the people he finds there; “it is when the land is completely empty that I and the people who look like me begin to make an appearance, the food I eat begins to make an appearance, the trees I will see each day come from far away and begin to make an appearance;...” (Kincaid, 1999, p.159).

Kincaid is interested in the provenance of “nature,” its history. It is here perhaps that Kincaid’s text might engage with and offer nuance to widely deployed concepts Anthropocene and agrilogistics, both of which have produced numerous qualifications and interventions in current ecocritical discussions. One particularly useful intervention is Donna Haraway’s (2015) account of the formulation of the term Plantationocene, as a collectively generated name for the devastating transformations of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations relying on enslaved labour and other forms of exploited alienated and usually spatially transported unfree workers. “Moving material semiotic generativity around the world for capital accumulation and profit—the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings and all other names and forms of part organism and of deracinated plants, animals and people—is one defining operation of the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, Anthropocene taken together” (2015, p. 162). Her proposal of the Chthulucene seeks to address the ways in which she argues “no species acts alone, assemblages of organic species and abiotic acts make history—the evolutionary kind and other kinds too.” Haraway’s ‘making kin’ with human and non-human is made differently by Kincaid as she thinks through her own relation to extractive plantation cultures.

I do not know any of the plants in the place I am from (Antigua). ... The ignorance of the botany of the place I am from (and am of) really only reflects the fact that when I lived there, I was of the conquered class and living in a conquered place; a principle of

this condition is that nothing about you is of any interest unless the conqueror deems it so. (Kincaid, 1999, pp. 119-120)

Kincaid signals the haunting of the garden by the words that overwrite the plants she is tending to as she recounts the ways in which the history of plant naming went hand in glove with the Imperialist project. Kincaid insists on demystifying the Linnaean taxonomy of plant names as neutral or universal, asserting that Linnaeus too has a history embedded in the Imperialist project. Kincaid explains that Linnaeus found specimens of plants in George Clifford's greenhouse and invented a system of naming, that even she is forced to use:

The invention of this system has been a good thing. Its narrative would begin in this way: In the beginning, the vegetable kingdom was chaos, people everywhere called the same things by a name that made sense to them, not by a name arrived at by an objective standard. But who has an interest in an objective standard? Who needs one? It makes me ask again, What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? And if so, what should history mean to someone who looks like me? Should it be an idea; should it be an open wound, each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again, over and over, or is it a long moment that begins anew each day since 1492? (p. 166)

She comments:

In almost every account of an event that has taken place sometime in the last five hundred years there is always a moment when I feel like placing an asterisk somewhere in its text and at the end of the official story making my own addition. This chapter in the history of botany is such a moment. (p. 165)

Kincaid deploys the asterisk as a way of identifying the lacunae, the suppressed, occluded histories buried in this botanical landscape. Kincaid's unburying of plant histories, serves as a reminder of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's (2011) argument that "historicization has been a primary tool of postcolonial studies—in order to engage with a historical model of ecology and epistemology of space and time, entering what Wilson Harris suggests is 'a profound dialogue with the landscape'" (p. 75). The Linnaean system, as Mary Louise Pratt comments in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* "epitomised the transnational aspirations of European science ... Linnaeus deliberately revived Latin for his nomenclature precisely because it was nobody's global language. The fact that he was from Sweden a relatively minor player in global economic and imperial competition undoubtedly increased continent wide receptivity to his system" (p. 19). Pratt argues that Linnaeus and his assistants set in motion a project to be realised in the world in the most concrete terms possible: 'a secular global labour,' a totalising classificatory schema that she argues demonstrated a planetary consciousness. It was one, however, that saw the link between naming and owning, between the concrete

exploration and classification of plants with geographical and ideological power and appropriation.

As Kincaid's text moves between the autobiographical, local, historical and the global, none of these categories is stable, and one is constantly found imbricated in the other. As Jana Evans Brazier (2009) notes, Kincaid's work is marked by "the entanglement of autobiography with history" (p. 3). It is precisely this spectral presence of Linnaeus that makes Kincaid's book insist on a kind of uncanny world dwelling that thinks the role of writing about plants as vital to a revisiting and remobilisation of the open wound of this history. Looking at nature Kincaid sees culture, and the traumatic histories that mark her own diasporic routes:

What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time another famous adventurer (Christopher Columbus) first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua will not supply a clue. The bougainvillea (named for another restless European, the sea adventurer Louis de Bougainville, the first Frenchman to cross the Pacific) is native to tropical South America; the plumbago is from southern Africa; the croton from Malaysia; the hibiscus is from Asia (unfringed petal) and East Africa (fringed petal); the allamanda is from Brazil; the poinsettia (named for an American ambassador Joseph Poinsett) is from Mexico; the bird of paradise is from southern Africa; the Bermuda lily is from Japan; ... The breadfruit is from the East Indies. This food, the bread fruit, has been the cause of more disagreement between parents and their children than anything I can think of. No West Indian that I know has ever liked it. It was sent to the West Indies by Joseph Banks, the English naturalist and world traveller, and the founder of Kew Gardens, which was then a clearing house for all the plants stolen from the various parts of the world these people had been ... . (p. 135)

Kincaid's uncanny outlining of unnatural nature shares Natasha Tinsley's (2005) observations on Caribbean nature, when she asks "What is natural to the Caribbean? 'Nature' itself is not" (p. 169). Nestling amongst the list of plant species introduced to Antigua is the detested breadfruit. In Elizabeth DeLoughrey's (2008) seminal account of the cultural and political implications of the movement of breadfruit to the Caribbean from Tahiti by the British in the eighteenth century, she outlines the ways in which the transportation of breadfruit trees served to produce colonial discourses of benevolence towards slaves, as providing much needed nourishment, at a time when antislavery sentiment was increasing, such that the breadfruit was deployed as a tool to sustain a brutal slave economy in the name of a "natural and sustaining food" from Tahiti. "The provision of breadfruit for the slaves was an attempt to displace a growing abolitionist revolution with a scientific one derived from the new knowledges of tropical botany" (p. 1). As DeLoughrey notes, the diaspora of plants has been obscured in studies of globalisation despite the fact that their multiple uses have been crucial to the processes of modernity and its colonial projects. For Kincaid, this unnatural nature, that stories the vast scale of colonial expropriation and distribution, its theft and also its crimes, is written into the

landscape by the flourishing of the bread fruit, which materially signals to and mirrors the violent uprooting and exploiting of people. She comments in *My Garden (Book)*: (1999):

And yet the people on Antigua have a relationship to agriculture that cannot please them at all. Their very presence on this island hundreds of years ago has to do with this thing, agriculture. When they (we) were brought to this island from Africa a few hundred years ago, it was not for their pottery-making skills or for their way with a loom; it was for the free labor they could provide in the fields. . . . It seems clear to me, then, that a group of people who have had such a horrible historical association with growing things would try to make any relationship to it dignified (agriculture) and useful. (pp. 139-140)

Although Kincaid addresses the breadfruit as a loathed legacy of slavery, she has a more extended contemplation of the significance of another plant connected to plantation labour and resource extraction as a site where other subaltern stories can emerge. In the chapter “The Glasshouse,” she recounts her own memories of visiting the Botanical Gardens in Antigua, where she meets foreign plants that are symbols of imperialist botanical mastery, displaying the ease with which transporters such as Joseph Banks could move plants around from one tropical region to another, and the complicity of botany with extractive colonial practices. It is here that she recounts her relationship with the rubber tree, which occupies only a relatively short but nonetheless vital childhood memory in the text (pp. 145-148). This focused memory from her time growing up in Antigua, rather like the asterisk she offers to history, offers a point of entry to a revisiting and reclaiming of unacknowledged and actively denied histories of the plantation as multiple forms of exploitation and considering how to live in the ‘wake’ of ecological, social and psychic plantation devastation. It offers a route to comprehending and making meaning in the present. In the glasshouse and under the rubber tree, Kincaid shows how the tree itself acts as a signpost for a globalised present. It is here that her father passes on the story of his own life, experienced as a kind of haunting under a tree. The tree chosen by the father is silent witness to the instrumentalization of both indigenous and transported populations and flora and fauna globally, signalling an uncanny worlding in the present in the Botanic Garden.

The rubber tree from Malaysia (or somewhere) is memorable because in the year my father and I were sick at the same time (he with heart disease, I with hookworms), we would go and sit under this tree after we ate our lunch, and under this tree he would tell me about his parents, who had abandoned him and gone off to build the Panama Canal (though of course he disguised the brutality of this). (p. 120)

Kincaid’s account is somewhat less “metaphorical” than that of Benítez-Rojo who famously commented, “Antilleans . . . tend to roam the entire world in search of the centres of the Caribbeanness, constituting one of our century’s most notable migratory flows. The Antillean’s insularity does not compel them toward isolation, but on the contrary, toward travel toward exploration toward the search for fluvial and marine routes. One needn’t forget that it was men

from the Antilles who constructed the Panama Canal” (1992, p. 25). It is under the rubber tree that Kincaid’s father speaks of his own family’s dispersal to Panama, to work on the Panama Canal. His individual story passed on to her under the sign of transplantation, a rubber tree, signifies the post-emancipation diaspora that produces a huge trans-Caribbean migration, a demographic tidal wave, the largest in Caribbean history leading to the establishment of Afro-Antillean Panamanians who settled in Panama. The transplanted tree, in the Glasshouse becomes a ritualised place for Kincaid and her father as they set out together every afternoon during their convalescence from different illnesses: “It was in the shade of the distorted branches of the rubber tree (though this distortion is perfectly natural to the rubber tree) in the botanical garden of St. John’s, Antigua, a garden that was the creation of the most ambivalent of people, that I came to know important things, though I came to understand them only long after” (p. 147). It is under the tree that the father can speak of the devastation of his own family, the fate of his ancestors at the hands of Imperialism and where Kincaid experiences the objectification of her father: “It is possible that, in a way, a very human way, my father, when sitting under a rubber tree in the botanical garden, was in the presence, the atmosphere, the shrine of Possession, and that he himself was an object, a mere thing within it.” (p. 148)

Reflecting on this moment Kincaid has to perform a kind of thinking and remembering of self that echoes what Christina Sharpe (2016) calls “wake work,” a way of reflecting that “avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world.” (p. 22) It is necessary I would argue, to read the significance of her father’s story in the glasshouse that Kincaid feels, as a sudden and uncanny worlding, a moment that produces an apprehension of the gothic nature of the globalised landscape of Antigua. The rubber tree, itself also transplanted, haunts. It signals for Kincaid, the “people of the mysterious Far East,” who “like the people native to everywhere, were workers; that is, they worked in the fields where they cultivated the plants native to their place or the plants that had been made native to their place” (p.145). Kincaid’s belated epiphany (she reflects back on this event and recognises its significance as an adult), under the rubber tree, attempts to signal the effects of multiple violences on those ideologically “distant” geographical locations, where drastic degradation and aggressive resource extraction happen but evade visibility and hence admissions of responsibility. Such an experience of structural myopia is connected to an inability to render, imagine or connect the often invisible structures of global exchange and economy as they impact on specific places. The ecogothic moment of the text insists on linking the plants of one’s own garden, grown and tended lovingly, to the longer history of colonial resource extraction and plantation cultures, and the socio-ecological crises that result from this.

Kincaid’s uncanny experience under the rubber tree with her father is one of recognition of the interlinked and enmeshed fates of multiple species whose fates and histories cannot be comprehended in isolation. The transplanted tree, that is displayed as a trophy of plantation culture’s ability to move peoples and ecologies, speaks, as the father recounts his own multiple

dislocations, the legacies of different moments of forced migrations, of false liberations and continued movements across and between Caribbean locations. If the Anthropocene is to come into view, it is at this moment, at the edges of the child's vision, where the ghosts of the individual life, of the personal story suddenly open into the history of the world itself.

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