

THREE

ROOTSTOCK OR SCION: GRAFTING RADICAL DIFFERENCE IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S *SEE NOW THEN*

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Abstract

Through the paradigm of grafting, this article examines intertextual and generic complexities in Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then*. It considers how the author produces literary and subjective nourishment by harnessing anger as a creative force while offering up one form of resistance to the bad life.

Published as a novel in 2013, the non-linear narrative *See Now Then* portrays the birth and eventual disintegration of the Sweet family. Reviewers immediately seized upon autobiographical elements (names, roles, places, events) of the work, pigeonholing the book as thinly disguised vengeance for the author's real-life divorce, a tale of "hell-hath-no-fury-like-a-woman-scorned." In interviews with *The American Reader* and *Guernica*, Jamaica Kincaid dismissed these readings for their lack of critical substance and leveled charges of racism against critics who qualified the

novel (and, indeed, the body of her work) primarily as “angry” (see Alleyne, 2013 and Loh, n.d.). “People only say I’m angry because I’m black and I’m a woman,” Kincaid told *The American Reader* (Loh, n.d., para. 14), questioning why white authors escape the labels “angry” and “autobiographical.” At the risk of contradicting the novelist, I would argue that the reviewers were correct to pick up on anger in *See Now Then* (and other works), for each of the family members harbors anger towards the others. These initial readers nonetheless failed to do justice to the author’s aesthetic and ethical use of anger, intentionally sidestepping critical engagement with a longstanding tradition of women’s (auto)fiction. I’ll argue here that, like Kincaid’s previous works, *See Now Then* harnesses and redirects anger as a creative force by using complex intertextual and generic grafting to demand truths be told *and* heard.

Grafting in the Novel Garden

For Kincaid, writing and gardening are interconnected. “Even when I’m not writing, *I’m writing*—often while I’m weeding my *garden*,” she confided in a 1990 interview with *Harper’s Bazaar* (as cited in Bouson, 2005, p. 190). Seven years later, recounting her brother’s dying and death, she equated writing with personal survival in *My Brother* (Kincaid, 1997, pp. 195-196). In keeping with this dual vision of writing as gardening and writing as survival, I would like to associate reading and gardening through the paradigm of grafting. In the garden, the scions of prized fruit varieties are selected and adapted for fruit propagation, combining the need for sustenance with the will for pleasure. Viewed in this way, Kincaid’s writing emerges as a form of both subjective and literary nourishment in which literary grafting is used to propagate fruits on which to survive, but also on which to thrive. The secret to thriving lies in the diversity of fruits produced as well as in the capacity of the garden or the novel to sustain health. I’ll use R. J. Garner’s *The Grafters’ Handbook*, an authoritative reference on plant grafting for gardeners and agriculturalists since 1947,¹ to guide my thinking on how diversity is achieved in *See Now Then* and to comment upon some of the novel’s generic and intertextual complexities and their meanings.

In a short glossary, *The Grafters’ Handbook* defines the verb *graft* as follows: “to prepare and place together plant parts so that they may grow together” (Garner, 2013, p. 24). Yet the seeming simplicity of this definition is undermined from the first chapter of the manual, “Grafting in Nature and Antiquity,” which explains that certain plants growing in close proximity may join together “naturally,” i.e. without assistance from human hands. Affirming that grafting with detached scions can be traced back to the earliest gardens of Mesopotamia, the author is left to speculate that early grafters learned their craft from plants themselves: “It seems reasonable to

suppose that artificial grafting followed upon observation of natural grafting . . . ” (Garner, 2013, p. 36). Grafting is then an in-between craft (neither “natural” nor “artificial,” between occurrence and practice) for liminal, productive spaces, such as novels² and gardens.

Gerard Genette (1997) affirms this in *Palimpsests* when he writes: “Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (p. 5). Like a scion grafted onto rootstock, the hypertext must bear its own fruit in the new, liminal space of the text. I’d now like to consider Genette’s definition alongside a passage from *The Grafters’ Handbook* explaining the reasons for grafting:

Plants may be grafted in a multitude of ways and for many different reasons. The art may be exercised merely as a pastime, but grafting is usually employed to gain one or more of the following objectives:

1. To propagate, or to assist in propagating, plant varieties not otherwise conveniently propagated.
2. To substitute one part of a plant for another.
3. To join plants each selected for special properties, e.g. disease resistance or adaptability to special conditions of soil or climate.
4. To repair damage, to overcome stock/scion incompatibility, and to invigorate weakly plants.
5. To enable one root system to support more than a single variety or one branch system to derive from more than one root system.
6. To elucidate problems of structure, growth, and disease. (Garner, 2013, p. 28)

Through intertextual and intergeneric grafting, *See Now Then* achieves similar aims. Inspired by Kincaid and Genette, I’ve reworked the excerpt from the manual for literary purposes (in bold) to make this clear:

Texts may be **g/crafted** in a multitude of ways and for many different reasons. The art may be exercised merely as a pastime, but **textual g/crafting** is usually employed to gain one or more of the following objectives:

1. To propagate, or to assist in propagating, **textual** varieties not otherwise conveniently propagated.
2. To substitute one part of a **text** for another.

3. To join **texts** each selected for special properties, e.g. disease resistance or adaptability to special conditions of **cultural** soil or climate.
4. To repair damage, to overcome **hypotext/hypertext** incompatibility, and to invigorate weakly **texts**.
5. To enable one **cultural root** system to support more than a single **textual** variety or one **cultural** branch system to derive from more than one **cultural** root system.
6. To elucidate problems of structure, growth, and disease.

As with Genette's classifications of transtextual relationships, these reasons to graft overlap and intersect.

Propagating Multiple Shoots

The parallel between botanical and literary grafting is apparent early in the novel, with Jamaica Sweet—writer, dutiful wife and mother—portrayed lying in the Shirley Jackson house, surrounded by seed catalogues, the *Iliad* and *The Library of Greek Mythology*. She is both bereaved by the death of the much-loved handyman, Homer, and beleaguered by conflicts between her son Heracles and his father, Mr. Sweet, a composer who disdains taking his son bowling in the city of Troy. While the athletic and hyperactive Heracles spends a great deal of time in the garden playing with plastic Myrmidons from McDonalds, his sister Persephone is often stolen away by her father for music lessons, much to the distress of Mrs. Sweet, a modern-day Demeter, who mopes about daughterless in her garden. But the life Mrs. Sweet leads is not one of conflict and grieving alone. There is also time to socialize and laugh with neighbors like Cadmus and Harmony Arctic. These references to Greek mythology and literature illustrate how Kincaid simultaneously calls on and calls into question the Western literary canon, using ancient texts as rootstock for the novel. But in *See Now Then*, she topworks the familiar old tree, that is to say, she shears off its branches and grafts the remaining structure with multiple scions.

The seed catalogues mentioned earlier make up just one group of the many textual scions embedded into the novel's rootstock. Jamaica Sweet's bedtime readings to her children splice in numerous English-language children's classics, including titles like *Goodnight Moon* (1947) and *The Runaway Bunny* (1942) by Margaret Wise Brown and *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) by Maurice Sendak. It is, of course, worth noting that the wild things are not so much wild as cultivated within the liminal garden-novel space. Of particular interest are the rabbits, described in the novel as "rodent[s] much loved by children and hated by anyone with an unfenced vegetable garden" (Kincaid, 2013, p. 134). In this passage as in others, Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit scampers through the diegetic space (I shall return to Potter later in this article), crisscrossing the paths of

the oddly anthropomorphized rabbits of *Goodnight Moon* and *The Runaway Bunny*. In the latter, mother rabbit pursues baby bunny in a series of mutations that end in a becoming human, before the bunny decides it would be just as easy to remain a rabbit than to try and outwit the rather overbearing mother rabbit. Grafted into Kincaid's novel, these titles appear as more recent shoots of ancient myths and literature in which metamorphoses and family drama raise questions as to what it means to be human. As these scions bind themselves to the novel's rootstock, they act to breakdown the cloister that would separate high literature from children's literature, showing them to be compatible in "nature."

Reader and writer Jamaica Sweet is also passionate about cooking, consulting and commenting upon a wide variety of recipes. Tellingly, the names of the authors—Marcella Hazan, Paula Peck, Elizabeth David, Edna Lewis, and Nika Hazelton—or unmistakable references to their person—Julia Child, rather than the titles of the cookbooks, appear in the text. Implicitly, these cookbooks send out new, productive growth from the stock, and a clear connection is made between reading, writing and nourishment, confusing the literal and metaphorical meanings of the term.

Calling attention to these writers, exclusively women and all cultural icons, elevates women's culinary contributions as worthy of cultural or literary attention, highlighting all the while the often unsung role women play in providing nourishment to their families and communities. Marcella Hazan transmitted Italian cooking traditions to English-speaking audiences (see Sipress, 2013), while Nika Hazelton shaped thinking about food across North America (see O'Neill, 1992). Edna Lewis, interestingly, was also a restaurateur whose Café Nicholson was frequented by celebrities and a dressmaker who copied designer creations for the New York elite. She was known for her own African-inspired creations (see Lam, 2015). Calling on Lewis and her cornbread recipe through Jamaica Sweet, Kincaid indirectly conjures up her own short story, "Biography of a Dress," published in 1992, in which a yellow cotton poplin dress for a two-year old child is compared to yellow cornmeal. The story establishes clear linkages between what is available to eat, making the dress, and the family's economic situation: "But I was then (not so now) extremely particular about what I would eat, not knowing then (but I do now) of shortages and abundance, having no consciousness of the idea of rich and poor (but I know now that we were poor then) ..." (Kincaid, 1992, para. 1). The familiar temporal adverbs "now" and "then" are evidence that Kincaid is connecting *See Now Then* to earlier writings through an investigation of time that spans the body of her work

Several references to works from "then" have been embedded into the "now" of *See Now Then*. For example, Mr. Sweet is described as hating Mrs. Sweet entirely, "especially her

enthusiasms,” which included “growing species of rare flowers from seeds she had gone hunting for in temperate Asia” (Kincaid, 2013, p. 92), a reference to Kincaid’s travel narratives, *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005) and *My Garden (Book)*: (1999). “The Dean and Mrs. Hess,” published as a short story in 2011 in *Little Star*, has been fully integrated into the novel. Though told to Heracles as a bedtime story, within the greater context of *See Now Then*, the story reads much like a geological creation myth, bringing us back to Kincaid’s claim that “Eden is never far from the gardener’s mind. It is the Garden to which we all refer, whether we know it or not” (Kincaid, 2005, p. 189). Deceivably familiar passages from Jamaica Sweet’s writing (Kincaid, 2013, pp. 28-32, pp. 166-167, pp. 176-178) that read like excerpts from *Annie John* (1983), *Lucy* (1990), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) or *Mr. Potter* (2002) also appear between quotation marks but are “imitations.” The first of these “false” citations, which describes a character we presume to be the young Mrs. Sweet, recounts how a young girl’s mother gives birth to her a second time by teaching her to read in the public library in Saint John’s, Antigua (Kincaid, 2013, pp. 30-32). This could be the library immortalized in *A Small Place* (1981) or it could be a reworking of scenes from Kincaid’s other works. It might also be a grafting device used to connect *See Now Then* to other Caribbean women’s narratives. Mrs. Sweet’s depiction resonates strongly with Audre Lorde’s (1982) biomythographical recollection of her own coming to literacy, a rebirth that came when the young, visually-impaired author first acquired glasses (Lorde, 1982, pp. 21-25). After all, in Mrs. Sweet’s words, the precocious girl who, like Lorde, knew how to read before she went to school “could see things within the book that [she] was not meant to see ...” (Kincaid, 2013, p. 31). Furthermore, by seeing things both then and now, Kincaid, akin to Lorde, “challenges that split between writer and theorist” (Boyce Davies, 1994, p. 54). Kincaid’s scions disseminate textual varieties that are not easily propagated within the literary establishment. Whatever the author’s reasons may be, these are pastiche shoots for parodic rootstock.

Hear, Hear: Telling it Like it Was

Therefore, when Genette seeks to define parody in *Palimpsests*, there is a very familiar ring to his words: “First, the etymology: *ode*, that is the chant; *para*, “along,” “beside.” *Parodein*, whence *parodia*, would (therefore?) mean singing beside, that is, singing off key; or singing in another voice—in counterpoint; or again, singing in another key—deforming, therefore, or *transposing* a melody” (Genette, 1997, p. 10). The novel has been cleverly orchestrated, taking on the characteristics of an experimental composition, with the voices of the Sweet family members responding to one another, almost simultaneously telling the family tale. When composer Mr. Sweet is not silently berating his spouse for her loud, verbal *faux pas* (Kincaid, 2013, pp. 170-171), he is lamenting Jamaica Sweet’s singing, which is often off key (p. 86). Described as growing

up in the era of Lord Executor, the Mighty Sparrow and other calypso stars, the fictional novelist belts out old Motown hits, recites rap lyrics from Outcast and Eminem and sings folks tunes from her native island to her children. Mrs. Sweet's musical repertoire is firmly rooted in the traditions of the African diasporas of the Americas, cueing readers into the harmonies and counter-discourses of modernity that Paul Gilroy (1993) designated as forming the Black Atlantic.

But though Jamaica Kincaid has deftly grafted popular musical intertexts from African-American and Caribbean traditions onto literary rootstock, she has also embedded her work with classical music references from European and Russian traditions, from the Baroque period to the 20th century, with a particular focus on atonal music. This works to undermine the hierarchy dividing "popular" and "serious" music. Mr. Sweet plays the music of Dmitri Shostakovich,³ is sought out by his student-turned-lover for his thoughts on Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and is equally praised for his knowledge of Igor Stravinsky and Alban Berg. This body of twentieth century composers of atonal music also reveals much about Kincaid's grafting process.

Atonal music is organized around patterns and references to previous compositions rather than a tonal center or key (see "Atonal," 2017). Like Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, the novel is written in free counterpoint, playing with known literary forms and shifting from the perspective of one family member to that of another as the marriage disintegrates. Mr. Sweet busies himself composing a series of nocturnes on the theme of a dead marriage and is distracted by the "sound of the washing machine washing the clothes of his infernal family" (Kincaid, 2013, p. 21), which becomes the "dunning sound caused by the washing machine and the clothes dryer and the hub-hub of the household beyond" (p. 22), and is later rearranged and extended to "the spinning of the washing machine and then the sharp whirl of the clothes dryer, and doors banging shut, not in anger but thoughtlessness, and the screams of the children from pain or pleasure, and that bitch singing" (p. 164). An incident in which Mrs. Sweet fails to pick her children up from the bus stop on time is also repeated, in varying detail (Kincaid, 2013, pp. 127-135; p. 166), and Heracles sees through his father's hypocritical epitaph, referring to Mrs. Sweet as "my beautiful wife," in at least two passages (p. 99; p. 162).

The playfulness of these (re)arrangements is not, however, purely a matter of pleasure or intergeneric grafting. *See Now Then* also makes rather explicit reference to and use of serialism, a method of composition initially developed by Schoenberg and adopted by students "... in which a fixed permutation, or series, of elements is referential ... Most commonly the elements arranged in the series are the 12 notes of the equal-tempered scale" (Griffiths, 2017). Persephone sings out the contents of the Delia's catalogue to her mother and brother:

Her voice at the same twelve pitch and then in a row that might be familiar and then unexpectedly not, or so it seemed to poor, benighted Mrs. Sweet's ears ... how cruel to make you love one thing twelve times and then change to something else and make you love that and then change to something else and make you love that too and then make the thing you loved new and not tell you and then you love that too and then change to something you had forgotten and make you love that too and then change to something you know and loved then and love now and make you think you don't know it at all. ... [S]he thought that the twelve pitches arranged in a row and then repeated over and over again and then changed unexpectedly might be as beautiful as trees arranged in rows of five diagonally placed and evenly spaced and therefore called a quincunx ... (Kincaid, 2013, pp. 133-134)

This passage brings another prominent emotion of the narrative, love, into focus and links trees and the arrangement of trees (something between “nature” and “nurture”) to musical composition.

Kincaid uses serialism to tune references to atonal music into the history of slavery and colonialism and to continue her career-long critique of the Enlightenment project. This is perhaps most evident in the repetitious recollection of Mr. Sweet's jab at Mrs. Sweet (Kincaid, 2013, p. 23; p.77; p. 122; p. 125):

... Mr. Sweet had said to her that she looked like the actor Charles Laughton when he portrayed the captain of a ship, sailing from the South Pacific with a cargo of saplings, in which the crew mutinied. Mrs. Sweet knew the movie very well, for the cargo of the ship at the time the crew mutinied was the breadfruit, a staple of Mrs. Sweet's diet when she had been a child, and it had been a staple of the diet of children born for generations before hers and all those children hated this food. (p. 74)

Mr. Sweet's comment may have been tongue-in-cheek, and *See Now Then* certainly metes out ample and often below-the-belt criticism of his physical appearance, comparing him at one point to a Mesozoic rat (Kincaid, 2013, p. 24), and of his upper crust upbringing. But like the “ships in motion” Paul Gilroy (1993) chose as the “organizing symbol” for his study of the black Atlantic (p. 4), the Mutiny, set sail anew in *See Now Then*, and the breadfruit issue an imperative to remember, an imperative to tell truths about how and why trees travelled, about the fruits trees bear and about what eating them means.

Hence, though Persephone's mother is said to have “untutored and Third World-attuned ears” (Kincaid, 2013, p. 134), the telescoping of Mrs. Sweet and Jamaica Kincaid makes a mockery of the slight. She instead shows herself to be a master grafter set on embedding multiple fruit-

bearing shoots into the rootstock of *See Now Then*, watching the intertextual and intergeneric grafts disrupt time as they branch out in new directions. For the grafter plays with time, making old trees bear new fruits and young rootstock grow scions of fruit-bearing trees of the past. Beholding the grafted tree is seeing time defied, at once seeing now then and seeing then now.

Repairing Damage: from Grafting to Crafting

In addition to propagating textual varieties to bear diverse fruits, *See Now Then* also uses grafting to repair damage. This demonstrates that in the novel, like the garden, grafting “is the healing in common of wounds” (R. J. Garner, 2013, p. 33), a way to recover and sustain health. In *My Brother*, Kincaid portrayed her writings as an attempt to restore beloved books tossed into the fire by her mother: “... it would not be so strange if I spent the rest of my life trying to bring those books back to my life by writing them again and again until they were perfect, unscathed by fire of any kind” (Kincaid, 1997, pp. 197-198). *See Now Then* emerges as yet another hypertext of the writer’s dearly departed copy of *Jane Eyre* (1847), a reworking of Charlotte Brontë’s Caribbean wife, a spouse betrayed by her wealthy, cultured and, in this most recent rendering, American husband. In the words of Mr. Sweet:

... I don’t love your mother anymore, I love another woman who comes from somewhere else, another woman with whom I have been talking about ballroom-dancing lessons and we talk about Mozart ... I don’t love your mother, you know, we were always so incompatible, for she did emerge from a boat whose main cargo was bananas, and she is strange and should live in the attic of a house that burns down, though I don’t want her to be in it when that happens, but if she was in it when the house burned down, I wouldn’t be surprised, she is that kind of person. (p. 159)

However, the destinies of the novel’s spouses have also been altered to fit new purposes. The madwoman in the attic has been recast as a mad writer with a voice, a garden, a set of knitting needles and a room all her own “where she communes with the world before 1492” (p. 145). There, she sits thinking of and through her Antiguan mother, much to the chagrin and mockery of Persephone, Heracles and Mr. Sweet. With a pen for secateurs, Jamaica Sweet, like Jamaica Kincaid, grafts her own tales onto old and ancient literary rootstock, and one might muse as to whether or not Woolf would have taken Kincaid’s writing to task, as she did Brönte’s. Would she, like the initial reviewers of *See Now Then*, have called out some supposedly false note in Kincaid’s writing, accusing the novelist of “writi[ng] of herself when she should be writ[ing] of her characters” (Woolf, 1989, p. 70)? Or, does Kincaid’s literary crafting ring true to Woolf’s

definition of literary integrity, that is to say, as conveying the conviction of truth (Woolf, 1989, p. 72)?

Readers familiar with non-fiction works like *My Garden (Book):* and *Among Flowers* might recognize the writer cloaked in Mrs. Sweet, eating oranges in a hot bath to fight off the New England winter or admiring the neighbor's peonies. A famous photo of Kincaid from her early days at *The New Yorker* might be called to their mind's eye when Mr. Sweet recollects his wife's

... naturally black hair, thick and coarse as ropes that were usually found in the hands of stevedores, cut off so short that she might be mistaken for a stevedore himself, the color of her hair was the color of new rope in the hands of a stevedore—blonde; her eyebrows removed with a razor and in their place a line drawn in ... colors ..." (p. 88).

As parody, *See Now Then* reads against *My Garden (Book):* and *Among Flowers* almost like, taking Genette's lead once again, a "... text, preserved but turned inside out like a glove." (Kincaid, 2013, p. 14).

However, no one-to-one correspondence should be made between Kincaid and Mrs. Sweet, an avid knitter who darns the family's socks and creates tunics for Heracles. This reminds us that grafting is also an old synonym of knitting ("Grafting, n.", 2017, 3.d.), which speaks to the historical co-development of food cultivation and textile production for clothing (see Mazoyer & Roudart, 2006). As humans mastered the art of agriculture, they produced more and more textiles from the plants and animals they raised. And so, the same Mrs. Sweet who grieves her daughter like Demeter, who uses dressmaker Edna Lewis' recipe for cornbread (Kincaid, 2013, p. 63) and who wears "a lovely brown dress made by *Lilith*" (p. 179, my emphasis), also knits, purls and drops stitches, weaving literary and mythological threads into "the garment that had been her own life" (p. 164).

[T]he hem of this garment had become undone, ... and from time to time it made her trip over her own self ... the hem needs to be mended thought poor Mrs. Sweet, the hem needs to be made more secure, for the elbows and knees and forehead, these were just the parts that were visible, all the parts of her that the unraveling garment caused to be bruised could not be seen (pp. 164-165).

Perhaps this unraveling of her life is what inspires Mrs. Sweet to take up the task of knitting an Aran sweater, like those worn by Irish sailors of the Aran Islands, another of the world's small places. This image is particularly fitting, for the novel and for the body of Kincaid's work, as the stitching of the Aran sweater was said to be family-specific, allowing loved ones to identify deceased sailors washed ashore by their sweaters (Mayorga, 2014, pp. 15-16). This brings to mind

another meaning of grafting—the ornamental weavings of nautical ropes (“Grafting”, n., 2017, 3.a.), and another critical metaphor, that of writing as a craft (i.e., an art and a small boat). In her analysis of Olive Senior’s *Gardening in the Tropics*, Allison Donnell offers up this smaller, lightweight boat as an alternative to Paul Gilroy’s chronotope of ship, one better suited to understanding how Senior’s and, more generally, Caribbean women’s writing (Donnell, 2005, pp. 94-104) navigate the cultural waters of the Black Atlantic.

As the representations of Mrs. Sweet knitting multiply, so do her doubles. At times, she appears as Demeter or as a fictionalized Kincaid. At others, she might bear a closer resemblance to Arachne, weaving a tapestry portraying less flattering stories of her family and less savory moments in history. Perhaps she is one of the Fates, spinning the thread of life at arbitrary lengths and deciding when a life’s time is up. Or might the crafty grafter be more of a trickster, a master of disguises? The numerous references to writer Beatrix Potter certainly suggest as much. The Englishwoman’s characters were, of course, inspired by the African-American folktales of Brer Rabbit compiled by Richard Chase and retold by Joel Chandler Harris in 1855 in *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* (Harris, 1983). This rich folklore, which originated in West Africa, is a shared heritage of the African diasporas of the Americas, with stories taking various twists and turns in their migrations (see Walker, 2001). Might Mrs. Sweet then be an Aunt Nancy—half-woman, half-spider—hiding just out of site (see “Brother Rabbit doesn’t Go to See Aunt Nancy” in Chandler Harris, 1995, pp. 865-867)? Shanna Greene Benjamin (2005), who spotted Aunt Nancy in the “web and weaving imagery” (p. 51) of Paule Marshall’s (1983) *Praisesong for the Widow*,⁴ explains,

During the Middle Passage, however, Ghanaian Ananse experiences a “sea change” that altered not only his name, but also his function in diasporic society. In Ghana, he was a “creative culture hero” while in Jamaica (and other parts of the Caribbean) he became a “trickster-par-excellence”. In the United States, he becomes she: Aunt Nancy the healer, the master mediator, and revolutionary transitional life force. ... Half woman and half spider Aunt Nancy’s physical hybridization typifies the ideological doubleness particular to her depiction in nineteenth—and early—twentieth-century literature as she who mends the mind/body disconnect among African American women. (pp. 50-51)

In the spider’s web, graft and craft meet. After all, these creatures “view the world suspended in the liminal space between heaven and earth” (Greene Benjamin, 2005, p. 54). The web spun by Jamaica Sweet in *See Now Then* is also the crossroads at which Aunt Nancy tends to Medusa.

Resisting Disease

The angry Mr. Sweet often imagines his spouse's severed head sitting on the yellow kitchen counter, her body scattered to the four corners of the earth (Kincaid, 2013, pp. 9-10; pp. 13-14; p. 85):

But what if a surprise awaited for him just inside the door, for even a poor unfortunate man as he, for so Mr. Sweet thought of himself, unfortunate to be married to that bitch of woman born of beast; the surprise being the head of his wife just lying on the counter, her body never to be found, but her head severed from it, evidence that she could no longer block his progress in the world ... (pp. 9-10)

Yet Mrs. Sweet persists in singing off-key, her head fixed upon her shoulders, and rather than send readers into sobs, the narrative as parody often sends us into fits of laughter. The many mythical embodiments of Mrs. Sweet as a weaver who is to be understood in relationship to stories of multiple cultural origins, speak to Carole Boyce Davies' (1994) affirmation that "multiply articulated" discourses of identity can be understood as working simultaneously, as being braided or woven together (p. 56). They may also lift an ancient curtain to reveal a Medusa laughing (see Cixous, 1976) at anger, a woman writing whose ever-changing body might just be stock for a g/crafted text: "... her torso like a very old tree—a silver maple—whose curiously twin trunks were all that remained after a violent storm that cut a broad swathe through a hillside, a dale, a meadow and such ..." (Kincaid, 2013, p. 86). And so, Kincaid's literary grafting and crafting emerge finally as a resistance to disease, the disease of monoculture or deathly unicity.

In repairing damage and resisting disease, Kincaid's novel reveals itself to be as much about roots as it is about shoots. Just as the intertextual and intergeneric grafts discussed earlier reach up and out in new directions, the work's multiple roots burrow deep and wide. R. J. Garner (2013) notes that natural root grafting can enable trees that have sustained damage to survive by drawing on resources from the shared roots of distant neighbors (p. 35). The first definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* of "radical" reads "of, belonging to a root or roots; fundamental or inherent in the natural processes of life, vital" ("Radical", 2017, A.1.a.). In *See Now Then*, we might, therefore, call the root grafting and crafting that feeds the novel through Ananse/Aunt Nancy and Lilith, Medusa and Brer Rabbit a manifestation of life-sustaining radical difference.

Focused with Precision

To conclude, I would like to come back to the question of survival, and more specifically to what writing to save one's life has to do with anger. Speaking about the novel in her interview

with *Guernica*, the author commented, “[T]he important thing isn’t whether I’m angry. The more important thing is, is it true?” (Alleyne, 2013, para. 36). And here is an old, or rather an ancient question: where or what is the line between fiction and truth? What does that line tell us about the people we are, the people we can or cannot become, the good or the evil we are capable of and the meaning of being human? Can we lead good and truthful lives?

Kincaid’s novel raises these questions about truth and about anger, and in so doing, *See Now Then* formulates a literary response to a question of capital importance, one rephrased by Judith Butler in her 2012 Adorno Prize lecture as, “Can one lead a good life in a bad life?” Butler reaffirms, following on Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, that to live a good life means more than just surviving because “... life, as much as it requires survival, must be more than survival in order to be livable. ... So, an overarching demand must be precisely for a livable life — that is a life that can be lived” (p. 15). A bad life, on the other hand, is a life rendered unlivable, to any varying extent, by the unequal distribution of precarity, inequality and forms of effacement. Though each of us leads an individual life, our lives are socially interdependent. As such, we collectively uphold the powers of inequality, are subject to the bad life and are vulnerable to effacement, to becoming ungrievable (i.e., “not worth supporting and protecting as a life by dominant schemes of value”, Butler, 2012, p. 10). And so, to live a good life, we must actively embody practices of critique; “... there must be resistance to the bad life in order to pursue the good life.” Resistance to the bad life, she explains, like birth, may involve suffering, but that suffering can “bring about a new way of life, a more livable life that opposes the differential distribution of precarity” (Butler, 2012, p. 18).

I would like to suggest that *See Now Then* is a literary practice of critique and, therefore, of resistance to the bad life. In the essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” Audre Lorde (2007) writes, “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (p. 127). Kincaid has focused anger with precision, using the aesthetic and ethical practice of literary grafting as a means to resist forms of effacement. Boldly pruning back the branches of the canon, she successfully undermines conventional literary hierarchies. Her grafts bring women’s crafts to the fore and show how they tell us truths, turning anger into love through parody and laughter and reminding us, borrowing again from Lorde (2007), that “*Everything can be used / except what is wasteful / (you will need / to remember this when you are accused of destruction)*” (p. 127).

As the novel draws to a close, Mrs. Sweet contemplates her life:

Oh Now, oh now, said Mrs. Sweet to herself, for she was then looking into an abyss, but that would be literature; for she was now looking into the shallow depths, a structural depression, but that would be geology; and at the bottom of this metaphor or just a true representation lay her life, the remains of it, the facts of it, the substance of it, the summation of it, the finality of it, the good-bye for now and see you later maybe of it, she had loved her life so much; and this was a surprise to her, that she had loved her life so much (Kincaid, 2013, p. 173).

Her thoughts ring like an echo to Judith Butler, “It may be that the question of how to live a good life depends upon the power to lead a life as well as the sense of having a life, living a life or, indeed, the sense of being alive.” In *See Now Then*, Mrs. Sweet is poised in just such a position as to take some measure of a life lived and of a life loved.

Kincaid’s literary answer to Butler necessarily questions the line between fiction and truth, reminding us that certain truths are sweetest when told by fiction. In as much as the novel creates confusion between Mrs. Sweet and the author herself, it reminds us that as writers and as readers, we take subjective sustenance from the fruits of literature. The author encourages us to sympathize with the devil. For if Eden is long gone, and paradise lost, we still have resistance, we still can love life and, as long as we resist by tending to what sustains us, like at the end of the novel, spring will come again, with new fruits to survive and thrive upon.

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Endnotes

¹ Interestingly, *The Grafters Handbook* is currently published by Chelsea Green out of White River Junction, Vermont, the state Jamaica Kincaid long called home and where she keeps the garden readers have come to know from interviews, pieces in *The New Yorker* and *My Garden (Book)*. The manual was originally published in 1947 in London, England, just two years before the author's birth.

²See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, originally published in 1994, for more on the novel as a liminal space. For Bhabha, cultural objects like novels are inherently ambivalent spaces that may authorize or efface minority voices. This ambivalence is echoed in Kincaid's writing on the garden. For her, gardens are sites of pleasure, but also of discomfort and anxiety. They are spaces in which to map out the Caribbean, but also sites that are bound to the history and consequences of colonialism.

³ Significantly, Dmitri means follower of Demeter.

⁴ As Greene Benjamin asserts, Aunt Nancy is implicitly present in Paule Marshall's novel through weaving imagery that reconnects protagonist Avey Johnson to her personal and cultural history. *Praisesong for the Widow* makes several references to thin threads that stretch from Avey's navel and heart to others, creating community and bringing healing to Avey. See, for example, p. 160, pp. 190-191, pp. 249-250.