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JAMAICA KINCAID AND OLIVE SENIOR GARDENING THROUGH HISTORY, CULTIVATING RHIZOMIC SUBJECTIVITIES

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Abstract

This analysis of texts by Jamaica Kincaid and Olive Senior focuses on their representations of landscapes and their re-envisioning of the scarred lands historically cultivated by their African enslaved ancestors. Gardening through history is a process of feminine resistance, a genuine metaphor for plowing into one’s land and repossessing one’s body.

Ancestor on the auction block

Across the years
I look
I see you sweating, toiling, suffering
Within your loins I see the seed
Of multitudes
From your labour
Grow roads, aqueducts, cultivation
A new country is born
Yours was the task to clear the ground
Mine be the task to build (Vera Bell, 1948).

Jamaican poet Vera Bell draws a link between the scarred lands historically cultivated by her enslaved ancestors and the writer's task to re-explore this land in order to rebuild and create new spaces. Part of the African diasporic woman writer's task thus consists in re-exploring and re-envisioning the land in order to achieve self-recreation. The imagery of gardening through history is used as a process of feminine resistance and a genuine metaphor for plowing the earth, repossessing one's land and reclaiming one's right to self-definition. Traditionally, the land is linked to femininity and in this respect, Ben Heller's questions in "Landscape, Femininity and Caribbean Discourse" are highly significant: "How does one write from the Caribbean as a woman, when Caribbean landscape and culture are themselves metaphorized as feminine? Will a woman writer be better able to 'savor the meaning' of her land because, on a metaphorical level at least, she is that land?" (p. 3). What this paper proposes to demonstrate is that Kincaid and Senior develop an umbilical relationship with their land, which is omnipresent in their work, and how the reconstruction of their diasporic female subjectivities may depend on gardening and digging into this land. The following analysis is centred on Jamaica Kincaid's non-fiction book *My Garden (Book)*: and Olive Senior's poetry book *Gardening in the Tropics*, so as to explore the two authors' representations of the garden and their experience of Edouard Glissant's model of "complicity of relation" to the land (1997, p. 147), "a model that is flexible enough to bring together places linked by history and geography" (Deloughrey, p. xi).

Beyond its universality and the numerous thematic perspectives it offers, the garden imagery appears to encompass a deeper meaning in the works of Kincaid and Senior. The archetypal garden is undoubtedly the Garden of Eden, but mythical gardens include the Garden of Eros and Psyche and the Garden of the Hesperides in Greek mythology, or the biblical Gethsemane Garden, among many others. The garden offers several levels of interpretation: it is considered on the one hand as a cultural, spiritual and peaceful space where humans can achieve harmony and self-fulfilment, but it is also a space of temptation, boredom, and rebellion, and a place where good and evil, feminine and masculine, nature and culture interact and overlap. The garden is also linked to a sexual dimension; for instance, Haitian writer René Depestre celebrates the garden-woman in his *Alleluia pour une femme-jardin*, thus intrinsically linking the garden to the feminine space. This connection between woman and garden is reminiscent of the numerous representations of human beings transformed into plants in classical mythology; the garden can become a space of recreation, transmutation and cross-pollination. The idea of cross-pollination is essential, as the pollen is transferred from one flower to another, just as cultures meet to create new cultures. It is this process of cross-fertilization in space that Kincaid and Senior appear to associate with the production of discourse.

Gardening through history is a genuine process of cultural transplantation, one that is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the "rhizome" (1980) and Glissant's creolisation (1990), in which the root is not conceived in terms of singularity anymore, but in terms of plurality and multirootedness. Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as an "antigenealogy," and as an alternative to the single root that implied fixity and 'pure' origins. The rhizome is indeed "a means of propagation which operates underground, without hierarchies, connecting multiple points, places and identities" (p. 21). Through Edouard Glissant's poetics of 'Creolisation,' Caribbean identities themselves are specifically depicted as fluid and multi-rooted; "the concept of the rhizome maintains the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root" (1997, p. 11). For their rhizomic identities to flourish, Olive Senior and Jamaica Kincaid need to relocate the site of the historical and transform gardening into an intimate activity through which digging into the earth becomes a way of investigating one's past and redefining oneself. Senior's poem "The Knot Garden" foresees environmental fertilization within a mixture of various species: "Gardening in the Tropics, / you'll find things that don't / belong together often intertwine / all mixed up in this amazing fecundity" (Senior, 1994, p. 88). Kincaid particularly embraces the concept of the rhizome when she describes the gardener figure as an unstable being: "that gardener, any gardener, is not a stable being; that gardener, any gardener, is not a model of consistency" (Kincaid, 2001, p. 224).

To Jamaica Kincaid, the garden is the wider garden of the earth; her conception of a borderless and fluid garden space innovatively turns into a space of memory. At the beginning of *My Garden (Book)*:, when the female narrator does not manage to grow flowers from seeds because of an unprepared soil, she underlines the necessity to plow the land, and sees gardening as "an exercise in memory, a way of getting to a past that is [her] own" (Kincaid, 2001, p. 8). Kincaid's unexpected garden metaphors have not always been sufficiently taken at face value by critics.

In the penultimate section entitled "The garden I have in mind," the narrator states:

I first came to the garden with practicality in mind, a real beginning that would lead to a real end: where to get this, how to grow that ... but in the end, I came to know how to grow the things I like to grow, looking – at other people's gardens. I imagine they acquired knowledge of such things in much the same way – looking and looking at somebody else's garden.

But we who covet our neighbor's garden must finally return to our own, with all its ups and downs, its disappointments, its rewards (pp. 219-220).

This passage illustrates Kincaid's need to develop a representation of a garden beyond normative limits, hence beyond linear definitions. Seeing space and representing one's own space participate in constructing one's identity beyond borders. Looking at one's neighbour's

garden is depicted as a necessary initial activity in order to transcend one's individual borders, but one cannot content oneself with imitation, as one must always return to one's own original garden space. The gardener is therefore depicted as an individual in need of self-construction and self-discovery within the very space of the garden. While the importance of history is underlined throughout the text, disappointments and rewards, ups and downs, must still be embraced in order to grasp a genuine sense of the very garden; it is a liminal garden which is described by Kincaid, one which allows individuals to teeter between spaces and recreate themselves while gardening through history. In this sense, compared to the environment depicted in Kincaid's well-known essay *A Small Place*, the space of the garden in *My Garden (Book)*: appears much broader and expandable. The garden that the narrator has in mind is an imaginary garden, a limitless space which is not static. In fact, the narrator questions the gardeners' wish to remain within "the borders they cultivate, the space in the garden they occupy" (p. 217). This phrase works as a leitmotiv in the text; the narrator repeats it so as to emphasize the necessity to transcend borders and shun limited spaces. The garden is described as a limitless geocultural place, and a space of memory which influences identity construction: "Memory is a gardener's real palette; memory as it summons up the past, memory as it shapes the present, memory as it dictates the future" (pp. 218-19). Kincaid's garden is at the crossroads of time and histories; in her garden essay, the narrator's personal history mingles with collective History. The recurrent allusions or comparisons inserted between brackets throughout the essay allow the reader to get an insight into the configurations between the space of the garden and the female emotional space, whether it is frustration, envy or something else.

In *My Garden Book*:, the imagery of the plant embodies the complex identity construction for African diasporic women, and the mother figure, a noted Kincaidian obsession, has a strong, if subtle, presence throughout:

We come to it with a blindness, plus a jumble of feelings that mere language (as far as I can see) seems inadequate to express, to define an attachment that is so ordinary: a plant loved especially for something endemic to it: (it cannot help its situation: it loves the wet, it loves the dry, it reminds the person seeing it of a wave or a waterfall or some event that contains so personal an experience as when my mother would not allow me to do something I particularly wanted to do and in my misery I noticed that the frangipani tree was in bloom). (p. 220)

In this passage the blooming vegetation comes in contrast with a restricted female nature and a disciplined female body through the constant motherly presence, even though it appears between brackets, in ways reminiscent of Kincaid's short story "Girl" in *At the Bottom of the River*. The sacred and healing symbolism of the blooming frangipani tree cannot be fully perceived by the narrator, whose senses appear to be restrained by the spiritual presence of her mother. Contrasting with the female body, plants are allowed to exist in contradiction, having

their needs and desires respected, whether it is through fluidity or drought; they bloom beyond restriction. However, sound and vision appear as altered, and the narrator concludes that language cannot capture the emotion inspired by the garden, as though imagining new textual and cultural geographies would require a special language. As Gwendolyn Henderson puts it in her 1989 essay “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” diasporic women writers may well have to develop a specific tongue which “transforms soundlessness into utterance, unity into diversity, formlessness into form, chaos into art, silence into tongues, glossolalia into heteroglossia” (p. 36). Jamaica Kincaid truly entices the reader to a discursive voyage through her own garden but it remains an unsatisfactory garden, as she concludes that “a garden, no matter how good it is, must never completely satisfy. The world as we know it, after all, began in a very good garden, a completely satisfying garden – Paradise – but after a while the owner and the occupants wanted more” (Kincaid, 2001, p. 220).

Kincaid’s denunciation of the shortcomings of human beings finds strong echoes in Senior’s iconic poem “Meditation on Yellow,” in which the poetic voice cannot bear the greed of colonizers and eventually gives up the land and entire nature: “I give you the gold/ I give you the land/ I give you the breeze/ I give you the beaches/ I give you the yellow sand... I can’t give anymore” (Senior, 1994, p. 15-16). While Senior’s poetic voice is highly critical of the hegemonic figure of the colonizer as dispossessing Jamaican natives and original gardeners, Kincaid’s *My Garden Book*: depicts a gardener who embraces multiple identities. In her section entitled “The Garden in Eden” (Kincaid, 2001, p. 221), the gardener is a female God-like figure imposing the specific “layout” of a garden which is not satisfactory to its occupants, Adam and Eve. Kincaid uses the original garden to illustrate the necessity to position oneself in space and further rejects stable spaces. Both gardener and occupants are therefore described as unstable human beings as “any gardener is not a model of consistency” (p. 224). To Kincaid, it seems that claiming the right to garden one’s own space and cultivate one’s own patch of land is a metaphor for cultivating one’s own identity beyond limited spaces, beyond normative gardens. Above all, it is the right for complex and unexpected beings and spaces to exist which is claimed: “Eden is like that, so rich in comfort, it tempts me to cause discomfort; I am in a state of constant discomfort and I like this state so much I would like to share it” (p. 229). This final statement further highlights Kincaid’s refusal of stable and comfortable spaces, perhaps because the diasporic female experience of space is one of instability and discomfort, one that she wishes to share with others through discourse. This very discomfort is also historical as it is linked to the original displacement of black women expelled from their African garden.

Kincaid’s ‘discomfort’ finds strong resonances in Senior’s poetry, in which gardening is not pictured as a peaceful activity; one never knows what can be found when digging into the earth. In fact, at the beginning of her poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics*, Senior’s poetic voice warns us about the remains of the past that may be found while gardening in the

tropics: “Gardening in the Tropics, you never know what you’ll turn up. Quite often, bones” (p. 85). Senior’s poetic language is reminiscent of Edouard Glissant’s “language of landscape” (1989, p. 145), as the Caribbean flora is constantly personified through the device known as pathetic fallacy. A mixture of Jamaican Patois and Standard English, Senior’s *Gardening in the Tropics* epitomizes the author’s hybrid language and counter-exotic meditation on landscape. In these collections, the Caribbean flora is personified through her multiple pigments, her capacity to resist, to reproduce and cross-fertilize under all circumstances. Just as in Kincaid’s *My Garden Book*, Senior’s re-envisioning of the land is not static, as her symbolism is often ambivalent. In the poem “Plants,” the poetic voice portrays plants as “deceptive” and personifies them as invaders and conquerors of space. The five opening stanzas develop a depiction of the plants which reads as an allegory of colonialism through adjectives such as “exhibitionist,” “prolific,” “imperialistic,” “invasive,” “explosive,” or through the use of present participles like “clinging,” “anchoring,” or “colonizing” (p. 63). However, Senior does not limit herself to the classic colonial imagery, but rather invites her reader to go beyond apparent meaning and consider a different form of colonisation, one that no human being can control:

Maybe you haven’t quite taken in the
 colonizing ambitions of hitchhiking
 burrs on your sweater, surf-riding nuts
 bobbing on ocean, parachuting seeds and other
 airborne traffic dropping in ... (p. 63).

The above stanza suddenly opens a different perspective as it suggests the unavoidable fecundity of plants through the motif of the seed (‘burrs,’ ‘nuts,’ ‘seeds’), as well as through the semantic field of motion and displacement, which is omnipresent in the poem: ‘running around,’ ‘dispersal,’ ‘hitchhiking,’ ‘surf-riding,’ ‘parachuting,’ ‘dropping in’ (p. 63). The choice of verbs further denotes the author’s wish to cover every possible type of transportation including land, air or water transport, as if to force the reader to consider the global nature of the seed. The seed then becomes a natural coloniser that no one can prevent from reproducing itself in any time and space, and in this respect, perhaps Senior’s poetic vision of the seed may appear to embrace her representation of the native people of Jamaica, the Tainos. Despite historical extermination and brutal colonisation, the Taino people and, by extension local Jamaicans, are subtly allegorised as constantly moving, thus reproducing and flowering. The many occurrences of the word “seed” in the poem come to underline the importance of the process of reproduction, regeneration and cross-pollination.

... And what
 about those special agents called flowers?
 Dressed, perfumed, and made-up for romancing

insects, bats, birds, bees, even you –

don't deny it, my dear, I've seen you
 sniff and exclaim. Believe me, Innocent,
 that sweet fruit, that berry is nothing
 more than ovary, the instrument to seduce
 you into scattering plant progeny. Part of
 a vast cosmic program that once set
 in motion cannot be undone though we
 become plant food and earth wind down.

They'll outlast us, they were always there ... (pp. 63-64)

The assonances in [i] reinforce the link between the 'berry' fruit and the 'ovary,' the female reproductive organ; 'berry' and 'ovary' not only rhyme, but also establish a link with the planted grain, and notions of fecundity, fertility and maternity. The berry imagery also has historical resonances with Christopher Columbus's first exchange with the Tainos and the Shakespearian scene between Prospero and Caliban where the first offers the latter "water with berries" in order to win his help. Barbadian author George Lamming's novel *Water with Berries* (1971) rewrites the colonial encounter and refers to this scene in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where Caliban rebels against Prospero.¹ The word 'berry' designates a fleshy fruit producing many seeds and as a suffix, it has given birth to a variety of names of fruit. Senior's focus on the berry certainly denotes her wish to enhance the power of hybridization of the berry/ovary and the cultural process of multiplying and grafting objects/subjects onto the same root. In the last line quoted above ('They'll outlast us, they were always there'), the reader is reminded of the eternal nature of plants and vegetation, which will always precede humanity and resist through the power of their seeds, hence through the continuous pollination process.

The significance of the seed is surely an omnipresent motif in Kincaid's *My Garden Book*; from the very start when she mentions that her husband's gift for Mother's Day included some flower seeds that she immediately planted in a patch of land that had never been cultivated, but "nothing grew, the ground was improperly prepared, it was in the shade of a big oak tree and a big maple tree" (Kincaid, 2001, p. 4). The oak tree and the maple tree seem to be personified as vegetal hegemonies in Kincaid's text, these two trees whose resistance has prevented her first seeds from growing. In Senior's poetry, the embodiment of resistance is found within Jamaican biodiversity as the immutability of a number of natural elements of the Caribbean flora is emphasised. For instance, the bamboo becomes a symbol for resistance and immortality, perhaps a reference to history, memory and generational transfer. As for the pineapple and the papaya, they both represent potential dangers. Apparently welcoming, juicy and sweet, the eyes of the pineapple are actually spying; this is perhaps another reference to traditional Caribbean societies, where young women are constantly watched and expected to

behave in certain ways, echoing Kincaid's authoritarian mother figure. In the diasporic context, the pineapple may also be the allegory of North American societies where Kincaid and Senior have relocated, both welcoming and threatening, both regenerative and oppressive.

Contrasting with the resistant natural elements, Senior's poem "Discovery" depicts a fragile landscape through the imagery of the mangrove swamp, which constitutes a fertile tropical habitat sheltering a number of species in its breast:

Always
 Like the futile march of crab-armies
 From mangrove fortress to the beach
 Always
 Like the palm-fringe waiting
 to be breached

 Already I know, the moment you land
 I become islanded

 In the shadows of the rain forest
 I wait in submission

 Amidst the trembling of the leaves
 I practice hesitant discourse

 Always
 my impenetrable heart. (Senior, 2005, p. 44)

The homophony of the words 'breach' and 'beach' reflects the fragility and fragmentation of a feminized landscape and the sea. The mangrove and the river are linked throughout this process of fragmentation. Caribbean space is depicted as fragile in Senior's poetry in which the land is fragmented and is still being deflowered by neo-colonisation. The rape of the land is compared to the deflowering of the female body, thus resonating with an ecofeminist poetics. Often revealing a certain feminisation of the land, Senior's poetry exploits the 'I/(s)land' imagery to link the shaping of Caribbean landscapes to the construction of the physical and discursive body/self. The female characters that Senior depicts in her poetry as well as in her prose often blend into the Caribbean landscapes and despite the hardships of life, they demonstrate great capacities for resistance and self-recreation. Senior's "Discovery" betrays normative expectations as it announces the degradation of the land through processes of colonisation and tourist activities. Mocking the tourist who comes to visit the island, the poet ironically points out the fleeting effects produced by Jamaican landscapes. She overtly criticises tourism as a neo-colonial enterprise through the poetic voice's ironically inviting the tourist to enjoy for the very last time the beauty and virginity of rivers, mountains and seas,

before they are invaded and degraded by the excesses of modern progress. To Senior, identities appear to grow as plants, that is to say that even though they are damaged, the roots remain and can be grafted, replanted, and fertilized into a transcultural being; this suggests the immortality of African Caribbean memories and identities. Through Senior's verses, the planted seed becomes the symbol of spatial invasion and of transplantation, and its hybrid crop comes to feed the memory of the Caribbean people and contribute to the pollination of the text. Senior's landscapes are at times connected and at others detached, they symbolise the diasporic identities that transcend national barriers and promote a transnational conception of spaces made of fragments of cultures and discontinued histories. As Stuart Hall explains, "identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture" (1996, p. 115).

Gardening through history occurs within a non-linear time, which allows the Caribbean subject to start anew and transcend space and time, as St Lucian poet and Nobel laureate Derek Walcott puts it: "The Caribbean sensibility is not marinated in the past. It is not exhausted. It is new. But it is its complexity, not its historically explained simplicities, which is new" (p. 124). Kincaid's work is an embodiment of this constant renewal, as she explores these historical complexities, remaps new spaces that are expandable and non-linear. To Jamaica Kincaid, the garden is a fluid space which 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 [her]" (Kincaid, 2001, p. 7). As a matter of fact, both Senior and Kincaid see the garden space as one that allows fluidity and transcends preconceived definitions of the self. To these two diasporic Caribbean writers, recreating and reimagining the land entails the creation of specific discursive and poetic environments where natural and transcultural elements are in constant dialogue and in communion with the diasporic mind. Kincaid and Senior use the garden imagery to enhance the existence of boundless cultures and alternative conceptions of history, space and identity. Through their specific representations of the garden, Kincaid and Senior express their need to cultivate new female identities and allow the growth and fertilization of new cultures. In Stuart Hall's words, "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall and du Gay, 1996b, p. 436), and the two authors' discursive gardening through history emphasizes their interest in the mystery of identity construction, in defining who they are. Their writings foreground the very complexity of diasporic female subjectivities that are situated at the very heart of their transcultural and borderless gardens.

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Endnote

¹ “This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,/ Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first/ Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me/ Water with berries in't, and teach me how/ To name the bigger light ” (Act I, sc. 2).